**Summary**

The third and final story in my bloodborne trilogy, this takes place after Sing a Song of Saw Cleavers and is shaping up to be a five point perspective 900 page monstrosity of a thing. We'll follow familiar characters like Fwahe and Frigga as well as introduce some new friends and foes exploring what happens when our fair Lady Hemlock tries to maintain control of Yharnam. There is an uprising in the Executioners, the Powder Kegs explore the powers of blood gems, and so many other things I haven't quite figured out yet. It's going to be a long story, so buckle up dear readers.

**Notes**

As always, please let me know what you think!

See the end of the work for more notes.
“Just tell me what’s going on.” Templeton pleaded. “I can’t see.”

“The better you can’t.” I muttered.

“What?” she asked.

I rolled my eyes. The good one still rolled anyway. She wasn’t paying attention to that either, craning her neck and trying to see over the backs of the denizens in front her. Every time I looked at her it seemed like she got a little smaller. Templeton wasn’t particularly short but there was something in the stoop of her shoulders and the shine of her eyes that conspired to make her ever more diminutive. It had prompted me to call her Littleton a few times. She was not a fan.

“Ladies and Gentlemen please make room! Make room for all now, you’re not going to want to miss this.” The sound of someone louder than the crowd turned heads.

He was taller too. There was a stage now. God’s almighty there was a stage, a procession of executioners and a crowd. A flurry of church robes, doves, and the action swelled. The devout poured into the city trying to secure the best positions which had already been taken by the Yharnamites. Some surrendered their space, others didn’t. I expected a few scuffles to break out, give us some more time to get out, but everyone was too excited to fight. They wanted blood of a different kind.

“Fwahe what’s happening?” Templeton asked.

“Will you shut up?! I barked.

I didn’t mean to, but sometimes it was all that worked. She cowered, shying away like a kicked puppy. I hated that. Why she thought I would hurt her was something I didn’t know. I fed her, sheltered her all year long. I went hunting to bring back enough for the both of us. I stole her money, candles, books everything she needed and she still thought I was going to turn around and beat her.

Ridiculous.

“Ladies and Gentlemen please, make room. Make room, you wouldn’t want him to get out and bite you.” The man on stage said.

We were pushed closer. Close enough for me to recognize him. The blonde curls should have been enough to give it away, but there’d been an increase in fair-haired people as of late. Something in the water.

The blonde man smiled as he directed the crowd, letting the white robes bleed through the weathered gray, making two aisles along a narrow but clear path.

The liar.

He introduced himself as Executioner Alfred and I felt my lip curl. I couldn’t remember why I hated him but there was something deep inside that assured me I did. All Executioners were to induce wrath, but him especially. He always smiled as he spoke, even if it was in apology.
Everything he said came slinking through his teeth laced with undertones and overtones that exuded contempt.

Nauseating.

As the crowd figured itself out Templeton and I ended up sandwiched between a man who reeked of fish and a pile of small children. The fish man pressed against me while the little rats brushed their sticky fingers against Templeton’s coat. Both were the greater and lesser of the two evils. If the repugnant man scraped his gnarled fingers against me one more time I would be forced to threaten their removal.

A shriek dropped everyone to silence.

I had seen a few Executions happen before. Sometimes there would be a dim recollection of a name or a face, calling to the person I was before I was Fwahe. I wasn’t sure if that was something to hold close or cast away, but I had chased it all the same. Usually there were cages or coffins, and every Vileblood I’d watched be put to death went with high-bred Cainhurst arrogance until the bitter end. They didn’t crumble or beg, at least not until they bled. I forgave them that. When blood comes out of you in sickly-silver-red rivers you are allowed to let your dignity die.

This was the first to start begging before he bled. There wasn’t a wiff of Cainhurst about him. He was young too, even for our ilk he looked young. They’d taken away his shirt and you could see the scars they’d carved in stark relief to his snow-white skin. The tone was not the dusty sand of noble ancestry.

Also there was the hair. The hair was wrong. Templeton hadn’t been Cainhurst-bred so the ridiculous tomcat-orange had stayed in her curls. Everyone else had been silver-haired. They’d murdered us for it, the color enough to invoke criminal charges. It had been that way for awhile, until the inevitability of breeding happened. Their never able to control their urges. Bastard after silver haired bastard had to be explained away, until the crime of the color was laid to rest. This boy had black hair.

Templeton was the only newly-made Vileblood I’d been aware of, but clearly things had changed. Somehow someone had made another.

Not that he would live very long.

His hands were bound in front of him, encased in ropes from wrists down to elbow, palms bent outward opposite each other. He was dragged along by these bonds, pulled along by a helmeted Executioner. There were several on each side, but they lowered their wheels so the passing crowd could see him. An army of them came behind him, using everything at their disposal to get the boy moving if he stopped.

He stopped often, and I didn’t need to be close to hear his words. They were the words of every man led to the block who is not ready for the sword to swing. I was used to doing the swinging, having little care for the man. This time was different. His eyes were large and constantly in motion. They were lost boats desperate for lighthouses. I avoided his gaze.

“Please!” He cried. “I didn’t do anything I swear!”

“Your crime is written all over you.” Spoke the liar. “Spill his blood and make it known.”

Glad to oblige their master of ceremonies one of the preceding wheel-weilders removed a knife from his belt. One swift slash bought forth the incriminating flow. The Executioner dipped gloved
fingers in the wound as the Vileblood winced. The Executioner showed no sign of caring, but broke off and paraded closer to the edge of the crowd holding out his hand for the inspection of denizens. The smell of blood was enough to overpower the stink of fish.

I thought I could hear Templeton’s stomach growling. She turned her eyes away when the Executioner passed us by, a flicker of lashes to try and chase the hunger away. She was always craving it, and though I was sickened that her addiction extended even so far as our own kind was concerned, I understood it. She had starved herself a fraction from insanity and had never been able to recoup the losses. No matter how much I gave her she was always this way. Two years and still no signs of improvement.

As lost a cause as the simpering Vileblood led past us.

“Please!” He begged. “You’ve got to let me go! Please!”

Black hair to match his grim future. He tried to dig in his heels, swung his arms back to try and pull free of the ropes. He was shoved onto the ground. The crack was sickening. He came down hard enough to break human bone, but we had more resilience in our composition. No one would’ve known it from the way he cringed.

I was dimly aware of a desire to tell him to save his screams. This wasn’t anything yet. He’d no idea what those wheels were capable of. They wouldn’t stop until he was dead beyond dieing. Templeton didn’t need to see this. I looked behind me, at the mosaic of fascinated faces. None of them were going to let us pass. I didn’t dare to grip her any tighter, that would draw blood and be just as dangerous as losing her.

She looked up at me.

Her eyes wanted to do something.

Mine shut it down. There was no saving here. Standing silent witness was all that could be done, unless we wanted to join them. All the protection we’d been afforded wouldn’t be enough to stay the hands of those caught up in bloodlust.

She shivered and looked on. She could play the part. We weren’t the only ones silently watching. The Executioners had yet to rally the crowd to their cause. They didn’t have an uphill battle, like the one my love had begun for my safety, but there was still a distance. Frigga’s methods and attention to detail had created a more efficient city patrol and the frequency of beast attacks plummeted. There were hardly any these days. The denizens had lost their toleration for bloodshed.

I would never lose mine, unless I wanted to let my mind go along with it.

They’d dragged the Vileblood boy onto the stage. Most of the effort was accomplished by the Executioner pulling on the ropes. At first glance it hadn’t stuck out to me, but as he put himself in the spotlight the wind whipped up his robes. He was hardly more than stretched skin over brittle bones. Why would they let someone that close to death represent them?

The way the helmed man yanked his prisoner around you’d never know it. As pathetic as the Vileblood boy appeared to be he was no doubt imbued with the superior strength of our species. He should have been able to throw a guy like that to the ground without the slightest problem, even with the hunter’s physiology taken into account. Why wasn’t he fighting back?

“Ladies and Gentlemen, you wouldn’t want this creature endangering your families, your children, your livelihood, now would you?” the liar asked. His blonde curls bounced as his head swivled
from side to side. He was trying to speak to every person in the crowd. Once more we had to drop our eyes. I didn’t want him seeing us.

Templeton didn’t need to be instructed to do this. She was more afraid of the Executioners then I was. This was the first time she’d been this close to them since her change, wisely avoiding them like the Ashen Plauge whenever possible. She may not have seen an Execution before. They were a rarity at the best of times, as Vilebloods were not particularly common.

“Can we go?” Templeton asked me.

The fading sunlight reflected in her glasses, landing directly in my eyes as she turned to question me. I kept looking straight ahead, watching as thin but powerful Executioner’s wrists stretched the Vileblood boy’s hands above his head. Another Executioner stepped in and secured them to a post. Cuffs on ankles. No fighting back from the boy, just begging. So much begging. I was sympathetic, angry and ashamed all mixed into one. I don’t imagine that Templeton would fare much better if she were in his place.

If they caught me I wouldn’t give them the satisfaction, Kos hear my vow. He wouldn’t stop saying please. He said it so many times that its meaning evaporated. The word became a string of endless sound. I almost wanted them to shut him up.

Alfred’s legion filed on the stage, marching in time with each other. They acted like soldiers going to war rather than butchers circling the next piece of meat. All of them had wheels, freshly polished. You could smell sweat and wood polish coming off them in waves. Blood overbore it all. It wasn’t blood spilt or still in veins but the blood about to come. I scented in the air in the same fashion as approaching snow and rain, hard to distinguish but there all the same.

“Don’t watch.” I hissed to Templeton.

She heard me, there was the flash of words being processed in her eyes, but she didn’t listen. She swallowed and shivered but kept her eyes fixed straight ahead.

When the boy was secured, restraints all tested Alfred began the speech I’d heard so many times before. It buzzed in my ear like an insect, one you couldn’t squash. I didn’t need to hear the words to grasp their meaning. First would come the list of crimes, some real, some fabricated but all of them incriminating. The severity of the infraction didn’t matter, not so long as the boy’s blood ran silver.

Then there would be the mock trial. This was when the crowds were rallied. They’d scream for blood enraged once they’d heard what the boy was supposed to have done. He seemed thin to me, but not blood crazed. It appeared he hadn’t eaten much but wasn’t going mad from a lack of nutrition. Mad from panic maybe, but even I could not blame him all too much for that.

Whenever the crowd got louder Templeton inched closer. I don’t know how she found the space for it, but each time there was a little more of her pressed against me. Infuriating, but I couldn’t afford to cause a scene.

“Are there any opposed?” Alfred called to the crowd, “Any who would speak on this Vileblood’s behalf?”

His eyes were flaming beacons, signaling for help. No one signaled back, the Promenade gone quieter then it had ever been before. So much death was had hear. I could hear it echoing in the silence, screaming from the stones. When the Executioner raised the ominous wheel into the air and the shouts of the crowd once more filled the air, I was relieved. They banished the silent sound
of death and dulled the odorless smell of future bloodshed. Those senses I could stand to have dulled, at least while all my others worked at full capacity. Irreverent to my wishes they only increased their potency, and I struggled with them further.

I could’ve tried to save him. Anyone might have said anything, but as a Vileblood under the Patron Huntresses’ protection there was a chance I might’ve gotten both of us out alive. A slim impossible chance, but there nonetheless. If there was a duty I was supposed to feel towards my kinsman it had gone dormant. I looked on without a word. My life was worth more than the boys.

The sound that came when those damn wheels hit their target was sickening. We of the silvered blood had thick skin which did not buckle easily, a blessing in fights but a curse on the block. He was going to die and now these fortifications just made it worse, turned a death sentence into torture. Prolonging the inevitable.

This wasn’t justice.

Never was, never had been, never would be. There violence was an endless cycle just like their wheels. How long would it be until I ended up there? How long would Frigga be able to keep me safe?

The dull thuds turned to crunching bones. Each snap was slightly louder than the one before. The broken bones brought blood, coughed up, staining his throat metallic. The scraps of clothing that remained went soggy with stains that would never wash out. They’d be compounded into pulp along with the boy who wore them.

But then there was a snap to end all snaps. Denizens screamed and covered their ears, my own ringing with the sharpness of the sound. It hadn’t come from the stage and heads whipped around as we collectively sought the source. After the shock wore off many realized they’d heard the noise before. A single gunshot, nothing that should shake a group of steadfast hunters. It was just so drastically different from the wheels, in that moment it had become unfamiliar.

It had come from one of the Executioners. This one wore the hood instead of the golden helm. The Vileblood boy had been shot through the eye from a decent distance, nowhere close to the stage. If not loosed from an Executioner it was a shot I might’ve admired. It was a shot that Alfred hated. His whole face creased inward, wrinkled brow, narrowed eyes. His hands tightened on the brass handles of his blood-stained wheel. The black-haired boy was dead, by the hands of an Executioner but not half the way Alfred had intended it. This was not how these things went, and it seemed he wouldn’t stand for it.

The crowd parted for the blonde, the liar, as he stalked towards the sharpshooter. The hood was ripped off along with a clump of the Executioner’s hair, all of it wrapped into a knotted fist. The face he revealed, contorted in pain, was too young. A young Executioner who had slain a young Vileblood. How much the world had changed while I was away.

“What in Kos’ name was that?” Alfred bellowed.

The pain left the Executioner’s face. His eyes burned with hatred, the kind I hadn’t seen in his ilk before. He wrenched his hair, silver-grey hair, the wrong color for an Executioner, away from Alfred’s grasp. Several strands didn’t make the trip.

“That was justice.” He spat, loud enough for the whole Promenade to hear. “If the Vilebloods have to die and it falls to us to kill them then why not just end it? It’s inhuman to make a farce like this out of something—“
“Inhuman?” Alfred roared. His mouth never seemed to close, staying wide like a yawning cat, spewing each angry syllable at the defecting Executioner. “Those Vilebloods are the very definition of the word. It is our job to dispose of them completely and we rely on the methods of our revered Martyr Logarius!”

“He’s dead he died a million years ago! This is barbaric, we’ve better ways now!” The young one argued.

Alfred threw him onto the cobblestones. He hit them hard, the gun falling from his hands. Alfred kicked it away.

“Executioner Savoy-“ Alfred started.

His victim corrected him, mixing words into blood from his newly split lip “It’s Strix.”

“Executioner Savoy I would be very careful if I were you.” The Liar warned. He rested the edge of his Logarius wheel on Strix’s throat. Eyes widened as the weight of the wood set in. “The next time you take it upon yourself to question the teachings of our great leader you will find not a modicum of mercy left in me. I will deliver you to Kos personally. Have I made myself clear?”

“Yes.” He replied.

“Pardon?” Alfred asked, “I think I ought to have heard something a bit more respectful coming from a repentant Executioner who wishes to atone for their mistakes.”

Not a request. A display of power. A sad one too, if he had to coax submission into his own people. Everything was wrong and changed. It bothered me, Frigga might be different. Changed. As much as I wished to preserve her in perfect condition, stored safely as a porcelain doll, I could not bare it. She was alive just as the sharp shooter, and living things went towards growth and change with magnetic attraction. I could only hope for stagnant sameness, despite knowing better. Things never stayed as they should.

“Yes, Executioner Alfred.” Strix amended, voice full of false contrition.

It was enough for the Liar. He removed his wheel and the Execution continued. The ones who remained on stage continued beating the lifeless boy down to nothing. The crowd didn’t see any glory in it, butchers revealed for what they were. The magic was lost and they cringed as flecks of flesh and blood coated the ground. A few of them watched as the outspoken Executioner was taken away. I was sure he would find himself suffering for his actions, no good deed unpunished. He had done me one favor, and that came in the dwindling crowd. No one wanted to watch this. I grabbed Temp and we flowed out, seamlessly mending with the crowd like air, like water. I’d set fast paces before but this one was a half-step away from a run as fast as I dared to go in Yharnam. Templeton struggled to keep up, slipping on the snowy cobblestones and bumping into several people along the way. We never paused long enough for her to apologize.

The lights of the refurbished theater turned the snow to sparkling gold. Vilebloods didn’t need warmth the same way that humans did, but it would be nice to get out of the cold all the same. Templeton’s ears and nose still turned red in the cold and I worried she was a little too human for her own good. The handle of the theater door depressed itself before my hand had time to lock around it.

The doorway opened and there she stood, wreathed in theater lights. Her smile could melt the snow, and when her arms locked around me I never wanted them to release. Kos, the smell of her
hair, like lavender and warm vanilla. As beautiful as she was.

“I missed you.” I said at the same time she was telling me she loved me. Then we laughed and switched sentiments. Then did it again. She held me impossibly close.

The little scholar was assaulted by Cato, all jangling teeth and missing fingers. He pounded on her back as she tried to shuffle inside. The theater was a grand place, and they’d worked to revert it back to something comfortable. Frigga was constantly working to chase out the bad memories with beautiful decorations. To me they lived in eternal Yuletide, the smell of pine, cloves and ginger permeating the room while swaths of red velvet draped the balconies. Wreaths were everywhere and Frigga swirled about in the middle of it all, the angel taken down from the highest bough. How had a demon managed to win her affections?

“There was an Execution today.” Templeton said, once Cato had broken his hold.

“Oh they caught another one?” Sterling asked.

“Other one?” I wanted to ask. I didn’t. Asking would draw out the conversation, distract Frigga from our reunion. There were rooms that needed closed doors and private moments. I had waited for them, survived the long summer and endless autumn so that I would be able to return to the woman I’d risked everything for.

“Other one?” Templeton asked.

Kos damn her. That was my question and my choice to hold it in. She was messing everything up again. Like always.

“There have been a lot lately.” Sterling said, “I’ve been trying to keep a record.”

“Really?” Templeton asked.

“I’m sure I’ve misspelled everything.” The boy sighed, scratching at his rumpled hair.

“You’ve been practicing?” Templeton pressed.

He nodded. The scholar couldn’t resist anything that was marked on paper and fortune finally felt fit to smile upon me. The novice hunter led her away to inspect his scrawled parchment. Lists of dead people. That was what had sparked her interest. She was so easily swayed.

That list was a waste of time. I took her all over the world so she could pick through waterlogged libraries and look for a cure. She should be applying herself to that. The Executioners weren’t going to wait forever. Every year we came home without successes was more wasted time.

He hand on my cheek took me away from my worries. Ladies hands were supposed to be soft, supple things untested by labor. Frigga’s were not ladies hands. Fingers long and elegant had nails clipped short to better wield weapons. There were hardened callouses on her palms from gripping the hilt of her threaded cane. The Patron Huntress would not let her skills dull. They fit into my hands like a sword in its hilt, perfect and precise. They were warm, pulsing with human life that recoiled slightly from the cold. My skin was ice, I should’ve thought to draw near a fire or keep my hands in my pockets before touching her. Even chills were far too much pain to cause the woman I loved so dearly.

“You’ve been away so long.” Frigga sighed as she led me away, towards the stairs.

I found it strange that I could miss both a room and it’s occupant in almost equal quantities. There
was no end to my affection for the Patron Huntress and her constellation eyes, but this room, its silk hangings, soft bed and sweet smells was the paradise choirs sang about. Safety, how rare that was to come by in my occupation as both ranger and Vileblood alike. This room was the last haven on earth. Of course it belonged to her, and of course she would see fit to share it with me.

I walked around the world for this. I dreamt of return always, from dark nights on stormy seas to the moment my foot left the confines of the hallowed space. I longed for it every moment I was away. Stranger still was the sense that grew as the snow melted and spring drew nearer, the sense that even while inside the place and with the person I could still miss them. I started the process of being lonesome early. The days were always numbered, and winter never lasted long enough.

“Something on your mind?” Frigga asked.

I blinked and slapped on a smile. I didn’t want to worry her with my worries about visitations ending when they’d barely begun. I shook my head, “Nothing. It was just a long journey.”

Her eyes shone with sympathy. “Did Templeton find any leads?”

“No this year.” I sighed.

She shrugged. “There’s the whole world for the searching, don’t give up just yet.”

“We don’t even know that a cure is out there.” I argued.

Frigga was quick to chase all that away. She ran her fingers, thin and long, the kind musicians envy, over my shoulders. She fiddled with the toggles of my cleric beast cloak and the pure poetry of the perfect motions of her perfect hands was enough to chase away the doubts I harbored. Crossing the world for her was nothing. What had I to lament?

She let the cloak fall from my shoulders, then pressed her face to my chest. Her hands gripped the fabric tightly, balling it up into wrinkled clumps. The shirt was already stained beyond washing and had creases so deep no iron would ever fix them. Scented soap couldn’t hide the smells it carried, but still she pulled me closer, burying her nose in the soiled cloth. I wrapped my arms around her and pressed her even closer.

“Sometimes I think you’re never coming back.” She said, so softly I could hardly hear it. Her body shook, and I feared she might cry. She’d done it before, and I hated it.

I brushed her hair away and planted a kiss on her forehead. “I will always return to you. I promised, remember?”

She nodded. Her whole body nodded. “You promised.”

She was shaking again. I bit my lip, while guilt’s ugly seed stretched its roots through my body. The noxious feeling reminding me of every time I had broken that promise. There were many times where the world made it impossible for me to return to her, there were places to remote and dangerous to traverse in a year. Worse still, I did not know about them until I was waist deep in their sewage, trapped in their crumbling buildings breaking promises anew every day.

“I know. I promised.” I said again.

I would say it a thousand times if it could keep her from crying. She had a will forged from steel and was quick to collect herself. No tears stained my shirt. When she returned my gaze she was smiling. I was unable to determine if it was genuine or forced, but it didn’t matter. We spent a long while with each other before someone ruined it.
Of course, it was the scholar. Her fascination with the novice hunter’s list was not endless. She had questions and Kos help anyone who tried to stop her from asking them. One way or another she was going to have to go looking for answers about the Execution. No one gave her the good sense to settle in and unpack before she began taking on new problems. There was always something for her to be worried about.

“Sorry to interrupt.” She said, from beyond the door. Apology first, then the knock.

She wasn’t really sorry or else she would’ve left us alone. No one in the history of man has ever said they were sorry to interrupt and meant it. She was eager to interrupt because her query was more important than our reunion. That was the truth of it, though Frigga and I did not care to face it. We exchanged a glance, shared a sigh then she got up to open the door.

“What do you need, Temple?” Frigga asked.

Templeton swallowed, and took off her glasses. She rubbed them on the hem of her shirt, smearing new old dirt on top of old old dirt which smeared the grime all over the glass rather then clean it. She had been so eager to speak until the moment the door open. Lived with Frigga for years and still she clammed up when confronted with reporting to her commanding officer.

“Fwahe and I…we got caught up in a crowd today.” She started.

Frigga shifted, her shoulders raising slightly, hands tensing. She knew what this was about. She hadn’t expected us to uncover this development so quickly. She made a slight retreat leaning back into her room. Templeton was ready to make an advance, having spent so many night snarling questions at unresponsive parchment now there was someone who could answer back. Something to capitalize on.

I just wished it didn’t have to be so soon. No amount of pleading would separate the scholar from her investigation. She took a step forward taking up the space Frigga hadn’t yet fully ceded. She didn’t stop talking, not until her deluge of words had run its course.

“There was an Execution…and a black haired Vileblood. I thought all Vilebloods had silver hair, like wasn’t that a huge scandal for awhile? Before our time I guess but even in my travels I have yet to see mention of Vilebloods with different hair colors. Then again they wouldn’t call them Vilebloods everywhere so I might have just looked it over, in any case certinaly no record of a black-haired Vileblood in Yharnam.”

She started to trip over herself after those first few sentances, slurring words together like a drunk. Templeton got like this when she felt she had something important to say, but the mispronounced words and strange sputtering of syllables made her sound stupid when she should’ve been serious. Frigga listened with all the attention she could manage, but it was clear from the tired glaze in her gaze that this wasn’t new information. No shock registered on her fine features. Her eyebrows raised but not to the degree fresh information would’ve caused. This was concern, not shock. She knew.

She’d known.

Frigga let Templeton continue until she was finished. Her spectacles as well as the eyes behind them glistened with the hunger for answers. One way or the other she’d never be sated. One of Temp’s hands fished around in her pack, scrounging up a wrinkled scrap of parchment and a piece of chalk in case there was something she needed to make note of. If only she could be this prepared for fights.
“There’s been a few executions since you were last here.” Frigga admitted, “Of a variety of hair colors.”

Templeton was quick to follow up, asking the question I was about to before I had the chance. “Where are they coming from?”

Frigga pushed a strand of hair from her eyes. “We’ve been trying to investigate. The Executioners looked into several leads but all were exhausted.”

“Annihilated.” I corrected her.

Frigga sighed, “They were the ones most likely to yield fast results, but even with the enthusiasm they displayed there’s been little to go off. It is clear however that new Vilebloods are coming into the world at an alarming rate.”

“The Executioners seem to have grown.” Templeton noted.

Frigga nodded, “There has been a lot of interest in that branch of church hunting. Healing Church hunters have started to disagree with their elders.”

She stopped speaking to roll up the sleeve of her dress. The shimmering mark she’d sustained after her battle with the Abbot and his machine caught the light. The church was quick to attribute it to the arcane, their god and more specifically the divine touch of Kos herself. So long as they held it in their minds that Frigga had been hand selected they didn’t question her choices.

“Many of the dissatisfied youth have been accepted as apprentice Executioners. Their numbers grow more and more every day, and most see it as a good thing. The amount of Vilebloods swells so too should those who specialize in hunting them.”

“And doesn’t that concern you?” Templeton asked.

“Yes.” Frigga said, “But there’s no way I can openly oppose it. Executioner Alfred has no problem expressing his disdain for my plans. If I were to take steps against the growth of his group of hunters he’d oppose me at every turn, accusing me of negligence because of…well…you two.”

I sighed. Things were never simple. We navigated the ravaged terrain of the crumbling world and she took to the complex and uncharted territory of hunter’s politics. Both were full of danger and sure footing was hard to come by.

“I’m sorry that we complicate things.” I said.

The small scholar nodded her agreement.

Frigga waved us off, “I knew what I was getting in to. The Healing Church and the Woodland Hunters are enough to overrule the Executioners if anything is ever put to a vote.”

The stoop of her shoulders and the slump of her stance were all I needed to realize how weary this conversation made her. Frigga was far more worried about this then she made it seem. Templeton on the other hand was fooled by the illusion and let out a sigh of relief. That was one thing she could mark off her endless cascade of concerns. A trade off, as it now became my top priority.

“Could….I mean…” Templeton started, then thought better of her question and killed it halfway through.

“What?” Frigga asked.
The scholar swallowed. “You said the Executioners did all of the investigating right?”

She nodded.

“Are there any…I c-could speak too. Maybe I can solve this…well…at least the hair color thing.”

Frigga shook her head. “Absolutely not. You have your books to go over and your research to compile. You’re a ranger looking for a cure, that’s your task. This can be investigated by others, and frankly a Vileblood in Executioner’s territory is a bad idea no matter the reason.”

“I’m sorry.” Templeton said.

“It’s fine.” Frigga said.

I wasn’t sure that it was.

She didn’t seem to want to give it up, but Templeton trusted Frigga beyond measure. I did too, and watched the reluctant relent of the scholar’s questions. Frigga gently shut the door, blocking out the concerns of the world to buy a little more time for the both of us. She shouldn’t have done that. As much as I tried to let the worries fade away and let the hours fill up with time spent together I couldn’t. The calm just wouldn’t come.

Frigga could sense the restlessness and did all she could to calm me down. She put braids in my hair and told me about the drudgery of her days when I was gone. I tried to do my part, and describe the mountains Templeton and I had traveled through that year. I told her about the reclusive mountain hunters we’d met. It wasn’t hard to pass for normal hunters when we had too, especially when we didn’t speak the same language. Templeton tried to learn on the fly, much to the mountain hunter’s amusement. She ended up accidentally proposing to their chief instead of thanking him for a meal. They were understanding and good-humoured but after that Temp couldn’t look any of them in the eyes and it was time to move on. She was getting hungry again, for food the mountain hunter’s weren’t signed on to provide.

I hadn’t told her where the next supply came from, but I’d had to take down one of the people we’d shared time with. Those were the tough choice to make. Alone I could’ve risked traveling through the mountains further, let myself go hungry but she hadn’t learn to master it yet. Blood had to come from somewhere. We didn’t go back through those mountains when it was time to leave.

I left the part about killing out. I had forgotten it when I started the story, only meant as a humorous anecdote. Something to get her to laugh that lovely laugh. It worked and she need not know about the blood shed that came after.

“Is everything alright?” she asked.

I nodded.

She kept asking it. We were stuck on a cycle. Tell a story. Ask a question. Nod. Repeat.

Conversing but not a conversation. She could only take so much. Neither of us preferred to stand on ceremony, and she was painfully aware of my woeful impatience. She said she had to go prepare for communion. It was early, but not that early.

“You sure?” I asked. It wouldn’t do for me to let her get away that easily.

Frigga was already up, fixing her clothes and draping a blue caplet about her shoulders. “I like to be there before anybody else. Sometimes I find other people have been sitting in my seat.”
“What?” I asked.

A flash of anger, my first genuine emotional exclination in our entire exchange. Frigga noticed it too. She fiddled with the caplet’s fastening and adjusted the decorative armored shoulder pieces before replying.

“They’re just boys, two young Executioners. They’re twins and frankly I can’t tell the difference by appearance.” She explained. “They’re just messing about.”

Of course they had to be Executioners. “If you say so.” I said.

“I do.” She returned, “Don’t worry about it love, they’ve still yet to master their wheels. They’re juniors, haven’t even been outside of Yharnam. I can handle them.”

“I’ll come with you.” I said.

Frigga shook her head, “Better you didn’t. Not this one anyways. I need to tell the hunters you’re back first. You can come next time, I promise.”

I sighed.

She smiled.

She had to warn people about me. That’s what it came down to in the end. Caution: Vileblood, ye be warned, or maybe beware, toxic, could kill you. She might as well have stitched them into my clothing.

“When will you be back?” I asked.

She kissed my forehead in response, “It’ll be awhile yet, especially if there was an execution just yesterday. Why don’t you just get some rest. We’ll have time together tomorrow.”

I nodded again. I wasn’t planning on resting, and whatever time we did have would be measured with a complete start and end. Scheduled romance. That was how it had to be with the Patron Huntress. There was a lot of times where I just missed her from before, when she was less important. It was easier for her to look after ten hunters instead of tens of hundreds. Yharnams population had only grown, and they all needed looking after.

It was silly to be this way, we both knew it. Coming back after a journey, it could take us awhile to find how we fit with each other again. No matter how much I opposed it, things changed as time went by. Frigga made her choices, and they were often for the good of the hunters in opposition to the good of herself. I couldn’t ask her to be selfish, but Kos I wish she were.

I was left in her room, and after hearing the successive closing of every door that led out of the theater I knew she had gone. I wasn’t alone per say, I could bother any of the Valkyeries that remained. Cato would be good for a laugh if there were any to be had, but I wasn’t in the mood.

After fiddling with the toggles for a few minutes I opened my pack and began to half-heartedly remove the various objects that I’d picked up along the way. Packets of tobacco, for the doctor. I took both off dead men. There were a few vials of blood, but more were empty glass. It wasn’t going to be enough to last the winter. I’d have to go hunting.

That was something I could take care of tonight. There would be less hunters on the streets during Communion. Additionally I’d be spared the silence, which slowly filled the room. I began to siphon things out of my pack in haphazard handfuls. I left the full bottles behind, packing my bag
full of empty ones. I wrapped them in what I referred to as cleaning supplies, that being rags for soaking up blood and cakes of strong soap to wash out the stains. I had to be careful here or they’d catch me. People had to disappear without a trace, or I had to make it look like one of the beasts had done it.

I hated doing that.

My nails could rip through flesh as well as any monsters if I truly wanted too. I tried to choose people who deserved it. That was nonsense talking. No one deserved this, but I had to keep myself going. I had to keep Templeton going.

Once I had my pack ready I grabbed my sword by its bone hilt and went dashing for the window. The metal cross charm that hung from the end pressed into my palm, leaving a familiar imprint. A weapon with two forms, I hadn’t needed to call upon the swords additional properties since Frigga came into power. Even on our ranging there was never a problem that demanded the rays of holy light that I could call upon to service me.

Why the gods had chosen to imbibe a Vileblood’s weapon with their strange powers, I didn’t know. I remembered not being the first person to wield this blade but the memories of the person who had come before me swirled into the same would soup the rest of my mind stirred. Holding anyone or anything in focus for too long brought on tremendous headaches. I ran a finger down the blade. Just a fingertip, but I could feel the power bristling behind the tempered metal. I didn’t want to risk running into Frigga and having to explain myself. She wouldn’t stop me or be angry but it was so much easier for the both of us to just pretend these things didn’t happen.

Wind whipped the slow-falling snow into skeletal structures of invisible things. Yellow shafts of light fell from windows and doorways as I looked down on the city. Everything seemed to be open, but no one was out on the streets. They were clean as could be, without so much as a single hunter patrolling. I looked over my shoulder for crows but they were absent from every rooftop. The accumulated snow didn’t expose any tracks. Nothing had come here, not even the most blood-starved lycan.

The growing group of Executioners had me worried but they must have been doing their secondary job quite well. I could find no reason for the hunters to find complaint with Frigga’s methods, unless the lack of prey was causing blood shortages. That had been troublesome before. The logical balance between a ministrated blood supply and happy denizens had been a heated topic in the past. I trusted Frigga would handle the issue just fine.

If not I would deal with her opposers personally. They could find themselves disappearing, sponged out with lye soap and rags.

It shouldn’t be like this.

Something had to happen on the streets.

It seemed as though Kos had been listening. Across the street the door of a tavern swung open and several robed persons stepped out into the snow. I recognized their garb even from the rooftops. The robes would’ve been enough, but each carried on their shoulders the enormous wheels of their order. There was a bit of trouble navigating the cumbersome weapons through the tavern doorway.

In better times I would’ve chuckled.

Tonight I was faced with the real possibility of taking down a party of Executioners as a food source.
That’s stupid.

“I know.” I hissed back at the sword, crushing my hand around the handle tighter. No amount of squeezing could shut its voice out. They were words that no one else could hear, so it was better not to speak about them. My mind was sound enough to know that swords didn’t speak, but every so often when I held the blade it would whisper. Sometimes it sang, but as it did I couldn’t make out the words.

All the same it was right.

There was blood still at home. There was no reason to attempt something so desperate. I watched more of them come through the doors, and was glad of the caution. There were six in total. The sixth and last emerged more easily from the tavern then his traveling companions. I recognized him from the Execution and was reassured I was correct in my assumption due to the absence of a Logarius wheel. He had a gun strapped on either hip, and the silver hair dappled with snow cemented his identity.

It was Strix, or Savoy depending on who was talking. The one who angered the liar. I was relieved I hadn’t killed him, he appeared to be one of the least terrible Executioners. He was being talked too excitedly by a female Executioner who rolled her wheel through the snow rather then carry it. The other members of their party had fanned out ahead. Strix glanced around, looking for a means of deflecting conversation as they pushed on through the streets.

If anyone was going to be able to provide information on the strange Vilebloods it would be Executioners. Templeton was right about that, just as Frigga was right not to trust her going near them. I was far more skilled then the scholar, and though I was sure she’d oppose my venturing I was sure I could extract something useful.

The rooftops in Yharnam were fortunately crammed against one another. The band of junior Executioners made their way through the snow with relative quickness, but the rooftops allowed me to keep pace. I had to tread lightly, there were plenty of pockets of uneven snow, and I didn’t need to send them plummeting to the ground. No reason to let them know I was watching.

Their voices echoed through the empty streets, even over the creaking sound of the wheel being pushed through snow.

“I mean- that must’ve been some demonstration for Executioner Alfred to put you on the bench for a solid month.” The Female said, pressing her shoulder against the weathered wood of her weapon.

Strix leaned in, and together they shoved it past a particaurly unyielding bit of ice.

“All the better I say.” Strix replied, “If I were free to hunt they’d send me away. Executioner Alfred makes the mistake of thinking I want field work.”

“Well doesn’t everyone?” She asked, “Traveling to exotic places, hunting down arcane monsters, protecting townspeople? That’s our calling.”

He chuckled. “No Audrey. That might be some Executioners calling but the roving life isn’t for me. They make it out to be a grand adventure but do you really want to traipse around for months on end in the same bloodstained robes?”

“Well…it’s not really about the clothes Strix…” Executioner Audrey said, her voice rife with concern.

He was about to make his reply when their party came to a sudden halt. I had been following them
so closely I banged my forehead into a chimney. Ramming into a rusty pipe head-first was not ideal. I bit my lip to hold back a torrent of swears as I observed the hunters below.

“What’s wrong?” Strix asked.

The largest of his companions pointed to the rooftops. My heart all but leapt out of my chest as I ducked behind the chimney I’d just rammed into.

“Thought I saw someone.” The big Executioner bellowed.

They all started to scan now. I looked behind me, searching for a sign that would give me away. I’d been careful. None of the footprints I left could be seen from the street. Nothing visible was marked in any way. I couldn’t think how he’d noticed me, the white fur of my cloak was a perfect blend with the snow.

I let them look around for several minutes before I peeked beyond the pipe. Somehow the big one had seen me without my knowledge. I wasn’t comfortable with that.

His eyes were too good. I would need to remember that. I let them establish a much bigger lead before continuing on.

“You were saying?” Audrey asked.

“Right. Right.” Strix continued, “You’re right I mean. It’s not about the clothes, but that is a plus. For me it’s a bout staying here in Yharnam. All of the executions happen here. If Executioner Alfred sends me away then I wouldn’t be around to do what I did today.”

Audrey nodded. “It was proper heroic.”

“It was just being a human. I know their beasts Audrey, but somewhere down the line I have Cainhurst in my roots.”

He grabbed a clump of his hair and pulled at it, stretching it for better visuals. As though she hadn’t already noticed. She laughed.

“What’s that matter?” Audrey asked.

“It means somewhere down the line one of my ancestors either found something to love in the Cainhurst refugees or committed unspeakable sins with one of the Vileblood beasts. Either way there is cause for sympathy, for atonement. The things we hunt need to die but they don’t need to suffer. Executioner Alfred and others like him just can’t see that.” He replied.

“Are you sure about that?” Audrey asked, once more pressing her full weight against the wheel. “I mean Alfred was there at the Cainhurst massacre. He knew Martyr Logarius. For centuries he has taught others that this is the proper way to stamp out the monster’s souls.”

Strix sighed, “You’ve got think a little larger then that. He’s been doing that for years and instead of lessening the number of Vilebloods in the world, we’ve increased it. Whatever methods we’re currently using they aren’t working.”

“You’re nutty, Savoy.” The large Executioner barked. “Just nutty. Zip it, and do as your told by your elders and betters. That way we won’t get yelled at and put on patrol duty on communion night. Your little stunt cost us all you know.”

“And I’m sorry, Clarkus.” Strix replied.

He didn’t sound it.
“Sorry doesn’t keep me from freezing my ass off.” Clarkus growled.

“Well I couldn’t just do nothing.” Strix mumbled.

“Why not?” He asked, “Everyone else was. The whole damn city was content and you had to go and spoil things. You’re not special just because you’re great great grandad fucked a Vileblood to give you silver hair!”

Strix’s hands hovered over his guns. The Executioner next to Clarkus let out a burst of laughter and clapped him on the back. Even Audrey joined in laughing and merrymaking with the rest. The next time she hit a block of ice Strix did not lend his aid, but plowed on doggedly, silent and sulking. The base of operations for Executioners wasn’t a destination I’d planned on visiting, but now that the opportunity presented itself I wanted to at least mark its location for later reference. It was a scouting mission. A safety measure, a place I needed to be sure to steer Templeton away from.

Even though she never left her makeshift library.

Even though she had grown up in Yharnam and probably knew about these places. I had to be sure, lest Frigga fear I was failing in my sworn duty to protect her scholar. That was justification enough to continue.

Their progress was slower now that Strix had stopped helping Audrey. She was falling behind. The big one didn’t notice and didn’t adjust his pace once. This caused the others to string out behind and bridge the distance. Instead of a group they became a segmented line with plenty of space for beasts to steal up behind and cut them off. It was horrible formation, riddled with amateur mistakes.

Yet they suffered no repercussion. Cleansed streets did not allow monsters to take advantage of bad form. Without a prowler in sight they continued to walk their districts. One of the pack kept breaking off to look in store windows, or lingered in the entry ways of taverns straining to catch a few notes of a bard’s song. He never hung back long enough to fall behind Audrey but Clarkus started to take note and grow annoyed.

“Jossam!” he bellowed.

“Right-ho sir!” the Executioner returned, tearing himself away from a butcher’s shop. His eyes had been glued to the cured meats hanging in the window seconds before but he left them easily and jogged to his summoner’s side.

“Swear to Kos if you keep lollygaggin’ behind we won’t come back for you.” The big Executioner threatened.

“Aww c’mon Clarkie don’t be like that.” Jossam whined, “You know I don’t be knowin’ my way ‘round these streets. Lived ‘ere all my life I ‘ave sir n’ I still don’t know me up from down. Ya can’t go screwin’ a poor bloke n’ leavin ‘im lost n’ penniless on the mean streets o’ Yharnam.”

Clarkus let out a bellowing laugh turning around to the girl at the head of the party, who was nearly as big as himself, “Mean streets of Yharnam. You hear that Matta?”

Matta looked back at the two of them. Her hair was long and black, part of it twisted into a knot near the back of her head. Her whole face narrowed as she delivered her response, completely unimpressed with the antics of her fellowmen. “They were dangerous. They used to be.”

“Now they’re far from it.” Clarkus argued, “He’s got no cause to be crying about it. Even if he did get lost the chances of him getting hurt are the same as running into Martyr Logarius next
communion. Ain’t gonna happen.”

“Executioner Alfred and many others carry the belief that our founder lives on.” Matta sighed, “And despite the condition of our streets it is best to exercise caution. Jossam you’d do well to learn where you’re going. There could come a day when you need to find your own way home.”

“And when it does try listening to your heart instead of your stomach!” Audrey shouted coming in late to their conversation.

Clarkus and Jossam burst into good natured laughter, even the downtrodden Strix cracked a smile. The only one who hadn’t spoken was firmly fixed in the middle of the pack, hood pulled over head, robes buttoned tightly. I couldn’t discern anything about his or her appearance, easily making that particular Executioner the most dangerous.

They left the only footprints in the street. If they really had left the excitable Jossam behind he wouldn’t be lost, he could follow their trail. No effort was made to obscure them, another rookie mistake that could easily lead to death when the beasts came out.

If the beasts came out. There still wasn’t the slightest sign of them.

They hardly stopped moving, continuing on their circuit through block after block. I expected that they’d run into another set of footprints but whomever had laid out the system of patrols had done so expertly. From my rooftop position I could see the tracks left behind by other parties as we got further into the night but the Executioners never did.

“I think we should be heading back now.” Matta said, “We’ve made our rounds. We ought to pass the relief patrol on the way back.”

The others followed her lead, and I was thankful she’d decided to change course. The Executioners were going to end up killing me due to boredom if the circular routes hadn’t ended soon. Now we were getting somewhere. The path back home circled the Promenade, a place that was bristling with sinister energy. The six Executioners traveled through it without noticing, but it was as clear to me as the snow on the ground. I took a longer path around it. Couldn’t afford to risk moving through the skeleton trees in the empty courtyard. They’d catch sight of me for sure.

They were just about to pass through the gates on the opposing side when Clarkus whipped around. Our eyes locked, and they were strange, filled with more red veins then they should’ve been. Even from this distance I could see them, too many of them. They caught me off guard, as did the knife he spent spiraling my way.

I rolled to dodge it, and a clump of snow fell from the building, attracting the attention of the rest of the party.

“Someone’s up there!” Clarkus shouted.

Audrey strained to pick up her wheel, barely able to hold it at the ready. Strix had his guns loaded, the rest fiddling in pockets and pouches for their sidearms. Wheels wouldn’t do much good from the ground.

I had ducked down flat, half-concealed behind a stone gargoyle. I could see them but I seriously doubted they could see me.

“Right-ho Clarkie. We believe you.” Jossam said. He was holding a fist full of pebbles. I wasn’t worried about them. Sticks and stones as they say.
“Who’s up there?” Matta shouted.

“Show yourself, you coward!” Audrey added.

They waited. I waited.

Neither of us were good at waiting. The Executioners cracked first.

“Suppose one of us goes up to investigate eh?” Jossam asked. “Don’t fancy sittin’ ‘round freezin’ to death.”

“I’m all for it.” Clarkus put in. This was joined by a shrug from Strix and a round of enthusiastic nods from Audrey. Matta and the one who I had yet to see didn’t seem to have a strong opinion one way or the other.

“Well who’s going to go?” Audrey asked.

“Not it!” Jossam shouted.

This launched a chorus of similar sentiments from Audrey, Strix and Clarkus. Despite having the plan of attack it seemed Clarkus had no desire to follow through. Matta sighed and indulged them with a “not it” after a few seconds pause, leaving the one who had yet to speak as their victim. The most dangerous one.

Of course.

I was faced with the choice between running or staying put. I wasn’t confident I could beat the lot of them, but if they came up one by one it would be simple enough. Still, Frigga wouldn’t be pleased if I came to blows with a group of hunters. It was smarter to run. Much smarter to run.

So I stayed.

The unnamed Executioner started to scale the building. Gloved fingers found their way between bricks, ignorant of ice and snow. The ascent was progressing much faster then I’d anticipated. I tightened my grip on the shingles, nails scraping ice, scraping old wood and stone. The wooden Logarius wheel was brought up as well, strapped across the Executioner’s back.

“Come on! You can do it!” Audrey shouted from below.

“Watch out for ice.” Matta cautioned.

“Don’t think about falling!” Jossam and Clarkus chorused together.

Nothing they said elicited any response from the climbing hunter. Progress remained the same. The unnamed Executioner was going to be on the rooftops soon.

“Can you still see it up there?” Audrey asked.

Clarkus took a vial out of his pocket and squeezed a few clear drops out of a pipette and into his too-red eyes. His companions waited expectantly.

“It’s a….is something with antlers…or wearing antlers.” Clarkus mumbled as he squinted at me.

“Antlers?” Jossam asked.

He nodded, “Antlers….and its got a gold eye.”
I shut my eyes. He should not have been able to see that closely at all. It felt like there was a whirlpool in my stomach, tension and fear throwing themselves into a twisting vortex. I turned away from them, coat sweeping around to conceal the rest of me. Was it better if they thought I was a beast or a Vileblood?

To Executioners that was probably one and the same.

I went to leap onto the neighboring roof. A gun shot cut me short. The sound of it stopped me dead, though the bullet hadn’t hit me. I ducked my head down just in time to avoid a second shot. I made it back behind the gargoyle. He shot faster then I could run.

Another burst from the gun shattered the gargoyle’s horn. Rubble rained down on me, the shattering stones stung. The pain registered in a distant way, delayed because of a more pressing issue. The unnamed Executioner’s gloves were gripping the side of the roof. I was going to have another problem to deal with in a matter of minutes.

“Can you see it?” Audrey shouted from below.

“Take your time!” Matta cautioned.

There was the sharp triangular jut of an elbow as an arm scratched its way onto the roof. The hood and the other hand followed. Legs would be up any second. I pivoted just enough to check if the sharp-shooter was still focused on me. The bullet that clipped the tip of my cloaks’ antlers proved that he was.

There was a thud as the wheel was slung off the back of the Executioner. It shook a miniature avalanche off the roof. My attacker was up the moment after, coming up onto the roofing in one energetic swing. I picked up my sword, the Executioner took up the wheel. The roof groaned.

“Get it!” Jossam shouted from below.

The Executioner took a step towards me.

I tightened my grip on the sword.

“What is it?” Matta asked.

The Executioner finally spoke, a voice that seemed rusty and old, like the words were pushed through a pipe. “Dinner.”

Before I had a moment to be confused the wheel came smashing towards me. I braced myself as best I could on the icy rooftop and met old wood with old metal. He pressed his weight, though I now realized there wasn’t much of it, and I started to slip. I grimaced focusing on his grip, trying to find some way of breaking it.

I recognized those wrists, thin almost skeletal. Skin over bone. This was the same Executioner who had pulled the black haired Vileblood through the streets. The whirlpool inside me spiraled deeper and I started to slip backwards across the snow.
Nothing to Effect the Taste

Chapter Summary

We check in with our next perspective to see through the eyes of an Executioner on patrol.

Chapter Notes

As always, please let me know what you think! Your feedback is most welcome.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ezra

The end of a drought. That was what she was. Staring up at me with eyes that didn’t match and straining for all she was worth against my wheel. None could best it, though many had tried. The Executioners cycle was unyielding and stopped for no one, and how fortunate I should find another kill so soon. The black-haired boy just hours ago, and now another one for the posts.

She was Vileblood. Oh you could just see, just smell it. If only her hood was slip enough that I could confirm it. I had to be sure. You had to check for the mark, look for the letter “V”. I’d made the mistake too many times for them to trust me without proof. Like it could be helped. Sometimes they just smelled wrong and you had to take your chances.

She was, I feared as we continued, the special Vileblood. The queen’s whore. That’s what they had taken to calling her, and I did not argue. Lady Frigga was no queen and she didn’t parade as royalty but demanding we accept her monstrous companions was in direct opposition to our order. They took it to heart. I was neutral, when all was considered but it suited her better than a name. Give them a name and they became like a pet. They were harder to kill.

Nameless things were better. Easier.

Should I fall, and should we truly fight I wanted to make things harder for her. An introduction, to benefit me. Doubtless my greeting would go unreturned. Her bare feet squeaked as they slid across the slick surface. I bored down on my wheel further, pressing the advantage. I had the high ground.

“My name is Ezra Kelfazin, and I shall be your Executioner for this evening.”

The way her eyes widened in fear was delightful. There was a greater satisfaction in this, the hunting of Vilebloods then going after beasts of mere instinct. They did not cower, for they hadn’t the brains to know that death was coming for them. The beasts didn’t know they were dead until their skulls had shattered and their claws ceased to rend flesh from bone. How delicious to be rewarded with someone who understands their situation.

Not only that but the wheel was in my hands now. I had suffered their humiliations, patrolling empty streets with the junior Executioners. Kids who had barely passed their basic training.
Audrey couldn’t even lift her wheel and they had her out in the field. As Lady Frigga’s methods of cleansing Yharnam of scourge became more and more effective the standards for Executioners plummeted. Everyone was admitted, they hardly had to apply.

Testing for Executioners used to be a rigorous process. You essentially had to be selected and trained from birth, and while that was not the way I had come into my position there was a good deal more honor in my achievements then my juniors. My own indignities I would save later, as they would soon be obliterated from memory as the triumph of this kill overshadowed them.

“Do you know who I am?” The Vileblood snarled at me.

I pushed her back another inch. The fear was gone in a blink and she shoved her rotting sword against my weapon. The old steel wrapped in stale, blood stained bandages should’ve crumbled to dust long ago, but it was wielded as reckless and strong as any modern manufacture.

“The Queen’s Whore, if I’m not mistaken.” I returned.

Her eyes narrowed. She pulled the shades to her soul, angry light strangled in its attempt to leak through the cracks. I shoved again, counting on her burst of anger for distraction. She did not slide, both feet having come to rest on snowy patches, shifting powder easier to grip then slick ice.

“You will call be my name, louse.” She hissed. “I am Fwahe of the blood of Cainhurst first Ranger to the Lady Hemlock and you will put down your wheel!”

Her shouts were loud enough for the others to hear. They began to mutter. I withdrew my wheel, lowering it as it swung about me, feigning surrender. Her sword dropped an inch or so, and I grinned, continuing to swing the weapon around to come at her for a side pass. A flash of recognition of impending doom in her eyes. Too late. She was too late.

And then I was too late, thrown off course by a ball of ice and snow. It hit me in the jaw, hard enough to knock me back a step. The wheel smashed into air and then shattered shingles, nothing more. Nothing solid, nothing of bone.

“The hell do you think you’re doing!” Strix shouted from below.

Of course it would be him. An Executioner of principles.

She had her sword at my throat the very next second.

“I am performing the duties of an Executioner.” I shouted down to him, “And eliminating all signs of the scourge.”

“Anything more out of you and I will paint the rooftops red.” The Vileblood snarled.

“We mean you no harm!” Strix shouted, “You have Lady Hemlock’s protection.”

“You call this no harm?” She snarled.

She sent my Logarius wheel plummeting to the snow-covered streets. It landed with a thud. The owners of this particular house would not be happy with us. Somehow I sensed the Executioners incurring the debt for reperation, and the Vileblood suffering no consequences. A biased verdict sure to come from a biased leader.

“He does not speak for our order!” Strix pleaded.
“I am your seior officer!” I reminded him.

“This is not your mission.” Matta said, stepping in. “I was put in charge of this patrol. Seior you may be, Executioner Kelfazin but leader you are not. Lay down your arms, we mean the Patron’s Ranger no harm.”

Disgusting. They threw their wheels into the snow, carving up the pristine coating with polished wood. It sickened me, standing down in the face of our enemy. We had the numbers, we possessed the upper hand. The time to strike was with us. All it would take would be a finger on the trigger, one shot and Strix could blow her brains out. His aim was that good, even with her blade on my neck I had no doubt of him missing.

Even as they stepped away from their weapons she kept a firm hold on me. Louse she had said, and as lice she must see us. More back every time no matter how many her hideous bloodline sought to kill. A plague on Vilebloods, the insult should have been a happily acquired title. I derived no pleasure from it, had we not exchanged pleasantries I may yet have surprised her. Quicker to action and she might have been dead.

Could have said it was an honest mistake. That would surely incur Lady Frigga’s wrath, enough so she might even take it upon herself to kill me. Should she my purpose would be served all the same, for no hunter could stand to have one of their own slain as retribution for a monstrosity. They would not stand for it, and the other Vileblood would be stamped out as well. Permanently.

“Go on Executioner Kelfazin. You’ve made a mistake and I’ll have you apologize for it on behalf of our order.” Matta commanded.

Fwahe’s grip loosened, letting me loose to make a proper apology. No longer afraid. All the terror was gone from her eyes. I had a way to make a glimmer of it reappear, terror at best, but disgust as a standard. I turned to face her, tearing away my hood as our eyes met.

A flash of anger.

That was new.

I was no dashing hero to be viewed as a champion of Executioners. A face that was burnt in youth to a severe degree has never healed to the fullest potential. It pained me to speak, mouth always spiked into half a smile on the effected side. Webs of scars did little to soften the features, and my right eye was to blame for it all. The pupil had started to split in my youth, a sure sign of impending beast hood.

Unsure of what to do, my mother and father thought it was something you could burn out. I was held against flames, screaming for several villages over to hear. A doctor had chastised them, diagnosed my eye to have been naturally occurring, not part of the infection. Ignorance had sought to provide my visage as an additional weapon.

“Fwahe I would-“

She held up a hand stopping me before I started. Both eyes focused on her fingers, with nails too long and too sharp to be human. Nails weren’t always a sure way to tell, blame lady’s fashions for that. Sharpening their nails and growing them out long, just to confused a proper Executioner. Ladies on Red Street sinned enough, but now one had to tag on doppelganging to the list of crimes.

“On your knees, louse.” The Vileblood said.

“Excuse me?” I returned.
“I am the Patron’s Ranger. You will apologize to me as you would the Lady Hemlock. On. Your. Knees.”

Snow soaked through my robes. It was an inelegant stumbling process to drop to my knees on a slant in the snow. She derived satisfaction from my struggle. The loathsome wretch. She gave me a nod when she deemed me sunken low enough, then bid me proceed.

“Fwahe, on behalf of my fellow Executioners I apologize for my actions tonight.” I said. It was laced with insincerity which did not escape her. She could demand lots of things, bring me to kneel in the snow and utter words of contrition but no command from any person present could make me mean the words I said. They had no teeth behind them.

“That’ll do.” Fwahe assessed.

Neither of us came away satisfied. She looked on as I climbed down from the rooftops. As our party continued to travel homeward I checked over my shoulder, glancing in all the shadowy places for the spike of her antlers, the flutter of her cloak. She was watching still, of that I could be sure. Out of sight but always with her sights on. I would not be caught unawares again.

“What in Kos’ name were you thinking?” Matta snarled at me. “Didn’t you know who she was.”

“A meal denied.” I muttered back.

“What?” Matta demanded.

“Nothing Executioner Matta. I knew who she was, I just didn’t care.”

She huffed, tightening her grip on the wheel. For a second it seemed she would throw it at me, but I didn’t fear violent opposition. Matta was not prone to outbursts of that nature. “You can’t afford not to care. This isn’t your choice to make. We’ve sworn loyalty to the Patron Frigga Hemlock and like it our not we’re duty bound to honor it. There are other Vilebloods to hunt in this city and we’ll come under fire from everyone for what you’ve just done.”

“They are monsters.” I said, “I’m just fulfilling my hunter’s pledge.”

“Fufill it on your own time.” Matta said, “I’m not having my wheel taken on your account.”

“She doesn’t even know our names.” I said, “Don’t go worrying about problems-“

“Just shut it. Both of you.” Strix said. “We’re just wasting breath. It’s cold and I’ve a mind to get some rest someplace warm.”

The peacekeeper. The principled one. Always working towards the good of the many. He’d never get that good, for I represented myself and the needs of the few would outweigh him still. He’d called off my attack, made this unspoken rift tangible. A schism would grow and Strix Savoy would surely find himself standing on the wrong side.

He went back to helping Audrey with her wheel. It left an easy track for the Vileblood and her ancient sword to find. I dropped behind the others, breaking a pine bough to smudge out the wheelmarks. An old method, no longer taught to incoming hunters. They raised their eyebrows at me, but all was dropped the instant I returned the stare. Raising my right brow twisted face, mouth and neck firing off muscles that no longer worked together properly into twisted semblances of their former behavior. Soon they didn’t so much as glance back to ensure I kept pace with them.

The Yharnam base for our operation was not the first. Martyr Logarius had created others before
championing himself here where blood ministration and beast hunting were at their richest. He hadn’t chosen a building for blending in, as many other hunters had but rather something impressive, austere and rarely used nowadays.

In the days before the hunt no coin was stronger then those minted in Yharnam, backed by a system of sound bankers with good sense our silver dollars authenticity was never doubted. The hunt bought the downfall of commerce. The many banks of the city, dwindled to a one, and it is in one of the disused banks that Logarius had settled.

It was a towering thing, the inner lobby lined with marble collums and a fountain which still bubbled. Every other water fixture in Yharnam had dried up, leaving most to rely on wells or pumps, but this one sprang eternal. It depicted the Mother Kos cradling a ship heavy with cargo. Water poured from her open mouth, down through her hair, spilling over the ships decks, past her hands and into the lower basin. Even in sweltering summer the fountain ran cold, many convinced it was a blessing from the gods themselves.

I fell in line behind the group as we went to check in at one of the old bank teller windows. Several of our fellow men and women were set behind the brass bars, directing ingoing and outgoing parties and seeing to various other tasks. The duty of a glorified secretary, I dreaded when our rotation was stationed at the windows. It was about as humiliatingly dull a task as one could prescribe.

We stopped in front of the window furthest right. Matta dropped into a curtsey, which Audrey mimicked while my brothers and I bent over into bows. Sussex, the Executioner on duty returned them with a tip of his head. Barely acknowledged. Another insult. He was supposed to stand for a proper Executioner, especially one of my ranking.

Still better to let it slide then call him out on it tonight.

“You’re late returning.” Executioner Sussex observed.

“Complication.” Matta replied, “But suitably dealt with. No additional measures are required, we’ve seen to everything.”

“Is that right?” Sussex asked.

Matta nodded.

“Very well.” He said, “The follow-up patrol will inspect your route and make sure you haven’t neglected any of the tasks we set for you. At ease for now.”

“Thank you Executioner Sussex.” Matta said.

Formalities dealt with we were each freed to our own tasks. Strix and I, though of different minds on method were similar in our post-patrol routine. We both broke off from the others and headed to the barracks for bed.

Offices, storage closets and even the immense underground vault system had all been utilized for the sleeping quarters of the Executioners’ Order. We’d had to continue expanding them into smaller and smaller rooms, a few cots were even set out in some of the larger hallways nowadays. We were getting too big for this place, but tradition demanded we stay. Clarkus and a group of overcrowded juniors had offered to build an addition onto the back of the bank for sleeping more hunters, but the elders shot it down. Alterations of any kind were frowned upon, thought to be in direct opposition to Martyr Logarius’ wishes.
I was fortunate enough to have a room with a door. A moderate office space, which used to house two counting desks now housed too beds. My roommate was an insult as well. He and I never fought, but the vow-taker was beneath me. A boy of strange habits, and freshly out of training he should’ve been sleeping in the hall with the others.

I was fairly certain he wanted to be in the hall with the others. I detested the Vow-takers. Speaking was a pain for me, in order to sound correct I had to consciously map out the position of my tongue. Silence was all too expected of me. He had a mouth that worked as well as any other and had chosen not to use it.

Many times I had tried to question his reasons for the vow, but Executioner Patience Hastings would not speak in the slightest. He was capable of reading, as I often saw him perusing the Annointed Texts. I’d shoved paper in his hands, bruised hands bearing wounds that never seemed to fade yet never seemed to be given. He dropped it like it was a hot coal. He was quick to stash his reading away if he saw me coming. He thought I never caught him, but I did.

When I returned he was awake, like always. Patience never slept before I did, always waiting until I’d drifted before he even got in to bed. Another one of his strange habits that would’ve made sleeping in the halls difficult. He bowed to me, but I didn’t return it. The vow-taker wasn’t worth greeting. Sleep came to me without trouble. I may have dreamt before, but those fantasies had been chased away by the flames. I existed only in the waking world, one of few blessings the gods had bestowed.

Many hunters were plagued by nightmares, not a one was blamed for their night time screams. The common horrifying dreams caused some to scream in their sleep. I was awoken by others, but never Patience. He was just as silent when asleep, not so much as a snore.

“You’re supposed to be out there patrolling, not me.” I told him, settling on the end of my bed in order to slide off my boots. They were a size to small and bit at me, but there were no spares to be had. Another indignity I endured.

A blink instead of a response.

“You’re a junior Executioner right?” I asked.

Patience nodded. It was a ridiculous gesture with his sporadically cut half-and-half hair. The mother, Sister Some-such lightened it with lemons. She wanted to conceal his origins, desperate to turn black to blonde. His roots showed their true color faster then it could be chased away, and even if fully banished there was no solution for the eyes. They were the angular almonds of the East, impossible to have come by if one kept themselves to men born of Yharnam.

“You haven’t even been blood-cut have you?” I asked.

Again another nod. Head dipping or shaking, the only communication he made. Ridiculous. It was pent-up rage from the encounter with the Queen’s Whore that made me like this. A Vileblood with the nerve to call me names. Despite the strain on weathered lungs, I coughed up enough to spit at him before lying back on my bed.

The thin matress and wobbling wood were little in the ways of comfort. I thought that I might be tortured by own mind as it played back her angry gaze and sharpened sword, but it too was ready to rest. I was asleep, and then awake. Another fresh night, a new round of patrols.

Patience fell asleep after me, and was awake before. He came in as I was rolling over, rubbing the sleep from my good eye. It was hard to see right upon waking, my vision took a few moments to
kick in. Carrying in breakfast trays like always.

Bringing me breakfast I never ate.

We shared that. The desire to eat alone. He took his outside, preferring to catch the last rays of sunlight before darkness truly set in I expect. Tanned skin looked strange on a hunter. He should’ve been pale and proper the color of the moon. Hair stained light and skin tanned dark. What a mess. He set down my bowl and bowed in greeting, serving me first. Executioner Patience Hasting saw fit to observe seniority, though coming from him it didn’t mean anything. He scooped up his bowl and left before I had made up my mind on weather the vow-taker deserved acknowledgement on this day.

“Executioner Kelfazin?”

“You speak?” I muttered.

It wasn’t Patience. There was someone else in the door way. The serviceman from before. Executioner Sussex was blocking Patience’s path to the sunlight. He bowed, and stood aside bidding him enter our room. The bowl of porridge shook in his hands.

“Come with me.” Sussex growled.

It was not a request. I walked with bare feet and crooked clothing through the hallways. Executioners in various degrees of dress stumbled past or hastily stood aside, heavy-lidded eyes not yet fully awakened. All so new. All so sluggish. Where were the standards?

“What’s this about then?” I asked.

“Last night.” Sussex informed me.

I rolled my eyes. I was going to be lectured again, lectured for doing my job.

The rest of them were waiting as I expected they would be. Matta was an earlier riser, so she looked as she always did, hair brushed and robes cleaned. In perfect contrast was Clarkus who wore an open robe, but no shirt and had a streak of honey across his cheek. Several crumbs of toast clung to it. Jossam’s hands wouldn’t stop moving and Strix Savoy’s hair looked like a bird had built a nest in it.

Audrey appeared to have her pants on backwards, boots on the wrong feet. We were not making a good impression.

Standing with them was the perfect copy of the Executioner who had summoned me. Sussex’s twin brother Essex who was every bit the model of a perfect hunter. There were modicums of respect for him, he was meticulous if nothing else. Had he been in our party things would’ve been spotted much quicker. Chance would not have decided who took to the roofs, and Fwahe would have been spotted from the start. He was the caliber of hunter I was supposed to be working with.

“Finally decided to join us?” Clarkus asked.

“No one told me we were meeting so soon.” I returned.

“Shut it.” Sussex snapped.

“Temper, temper.” Essex cautioned.
“You’ve got our attention now.” Matta said. Her voice hitched, clearly filled with a fear she’d no desire to let them see. “What did you want us for?”

“Your presence was requested.” Executioner Essex replied, “Please follow me.”

One twin leading, one twin bringing up the rear we were herded between them. We got a lot of stares as we were taken through the nicer halls of the bank, the pricier offices and the lines upon lines of vaults. The doors had to be left open so they could be used as rooms, lest the sleepers inside suffocate. No one had the keys any more. What had once been a meeting room or a counting room, something that could’ve held lots of people was cleared aside and mostly empty. A few chairs facing a grander one, almost a throne. This was where the lead Executioner would’ve hosted meetings had we one of our own. Yet to be appointed, none approved in these past two years.

The source of the problem was seated in front of us, silver hair braided with blue ribbons. She wore a caplet with armored shoulder guards, half wardrobe half armor completely ridiculous. Essex was the first to take a knee and we all followed suit, giving the respect that was due to England’s Patron Huntress. Frigga Hemlock sat before us, looking each of our party over before dipping her head and bidding us stand again.

Kisser of Vilebloods.

I could not keep the hate from my gaze, and I was sure she saw it. Her eyes didn’t linger, she’d seen me before. Scars and malformation must not be the sort of thing that bothered her considering the scarred condition of the one she willingly took as a lover.

“Please be seated.” Lady Frigga said.

“Thank you Lady Hemlock.” Strix said.

We all mimicked him, some with less contrition then others.

“I was told you had an encounter with one of my rangers last night.” She continued.

“Ma’am it wasn’t us it-“ Matta began.

“Please don’t interrupt me.” Frigga cautioned, rising from her seat ever so slightly. Now both of her hands rested on the arms of the chair. Snaking across her skin was a shimmering scar, somehow elegant and horrific all at once.

Executioner Matta looked as though someone had slapped her. She turned bright red, and Clarkus, seated next to her suppressed a chuckle.

“Sorry ma’am.” Matta said.

Frigga waited, ensuring she had the room’s attention once more. Meeting each of our eyes again before she spoke. Once more, mine were not shied from. She must have prepared herself for this.

“I was told you had a run in with one of my Rangers. Executioner Kelfazin knowingly launched an attack on Fwahe. She was also fired at by Executioner Savoy.”

“I didn’t know it was her!” Strix shouted.

Her fingers tightened around the chair’s arms. “Once more I ask not to be interrupted. It is becoming evident to me why last night’s events transpired. There seems to be a lack of capacity for following orders with this particular group of hunters.”
Strix bit his lip so hard it started to bleed. I could smell the iron in the air. He was doing all he
could to hold back words of retaliation. It would take control beyond his years, though I feared the
reprecussions of a third outburst. I had seen Frigga Hemlock fight for her life in former Abbot
Minimus’ tournament trial by combat. She was a whirl wind of decimation. Assited by the twins
there would be no stopping her.

“When I claimed my right to England’s throne I made it clear that anyone who sought to harm my
Rangers would suffer severe consequences, death chief among them.”

She watched us, surveying faces for terror. Audrey and Jossam were the first to show signs of
panic, eyes darting for a place to run too. Strix was just getting angry hands curling in to tighter and
tighter fists. Clarkus tried for all the world to look above this, uncaring and apathetic. It would be a
harsh trip to the Beyond, doomed forever with a smear of honey and a coating of crumbs. Not a
good day for any of us to die.

“However, considering everyone came out of this event entirely unharmed I’ve decided to set aside
the harshest of measures. None of you ended the life of my Ranger, thus I will not be taking in any
in retribution. All the same I cannot allow the chance for this behavior to repeat. I must ask each
and every one of you to hand in your hunters badges. You are herewith dismissed from our sacred
order.” She proclaimed.

Tensions flared like sparking fire. Clarkus’ chair fell over he was so quick to stand. I joined him
seconds later and decades more dignified.

“Ma’am this is unreasonable!” Matta argued. “I had no hand in any of this! I told them to lay down
their weapons!”

“I only shot when I didn’t know who it was. The second I saw I stopped. I told everyone to stop.!”
Strix said.

“You can’t just kick us out like this!” Audrey cried.

All of their voices swelled and mixed together churning like a storm. Booms of thunder as they
shouted. Flashes of lighting when their faces twitched, nostrils flared. I stood but did not shout. The
pointed fingers turned to me, ready to blame so that they might be delivered. I would not deny the
Patron’s accusations. I had been doing my job and would not apologize or grovel and pretend that I
felt a sliver of regret. Given the scenario anew I would perform the same.

Frigga requested silence and it was given instantly.

“All hands point to you Ezra Kelfazin.” Frigga said, “Would you care to explain why.”

“No.” I returned.

“Clarification.” She demanded.

“No I would not care to explain Lady Hemlock.” I said. “I did my job. What more is there to say?”

“You job is to kill my trusted companions?”

“My job is to hunt Vilebloods. That is the sacred duty of every Executioner and has been since the
days of Martyr Logarius. He’s locked in eternal struggle with the wretch who birthed these
thousand abominations, the corrupted Annalise. They must be slain to a one, he was adamant on
that as was every other Executioner who followed him. What right have you to change a thousand
years of tradition?”
“Both Templeton and Fwahe have proven their loyalty to me and to all other hunters.” She returned.

“Last night we were stalked by your trusted friend.” I spat. “Stalked by the Vileblood Fwahe, who pursued us from above like a beast stalking its prey. She fought back against me, held a knife to my throat. My brothers took up arms against a beast who sought to end my life, how can you fault us for that?”

“I was told you launched the attack.” She replied.

“You are misinformed!” I snarled. “Would you really take the word of a soulless monstrous creature over an ordained hunter? Of course she’s going to say I attacked first! Why believe her? I have witnesses Lady Hemlock. All of them will swear to you I only defended myself against her as would any other hunter.”

“This cannot be true.” Frigga said.

“It is, your ladyship.” Jossam said, “ ‘Onest to Kos it is. Ain’t that right lads? Our Ezra wouldn’t never attack first! ‘E acted only in self defense.”

It was a pile of lies but I knew they would tell them. They would lie for me to save their own positions, keep their own wheels. Clarkus and Audrey joined in first. Even Matta crumbled, nodding the truth of their fabricated story. It became more and more skewed as they carried on, adding details and changing them at random when the ridiculous tale past between mouths.

“There you have it then Lady Hemlock.” I said, “I did nothing wrong. Have you any evidence to support the contrary?”

“Mr. Savoy is yet to give an account.” Frigga said. “Won’t you tell us what happened that night?”

“I’d rather not.” Strix muttered.

“This is not a request.” She informed.

“I didn’t think it would be.” He replied.

“You might consider yourself on trial here Mr. Savoy.” The Patron Huntress suggested, “Best to tell the truth and carry on. Surely if what your companions say is true you will have no problem matching their story. I will admit my wrong doing and make full Executioners out of the lot of you. My Ranger will be punished in your stead and made to apologize for the lies she’s told.”

The others’ eyes all sparkled with hope. The rewards before them were no joke.

“I doubt very much that will happen Mr. Savoy.” Frigga continued, “For I trust Fwahe above all things. I am ready to admit a mistake if I’ve made one. Tell us what happened and let the ears of the gods bear witness to truth’s testimony.”

She held her scared hand to her heart, swearing an oath. The way the scar sparkled you didn’t doubt there was an otherworldly nature too it.

“I’d still rather not.” Strix sighed.

Essex and Sussex each took a step closer to him, anticipating commands that Frigga failed to issue. She sat back in her chair, eyes calm, shoulders relaxed. “We will wait.”
Truth or a lie. The choice was his and I had been betting against him. Surely he wanted to remain an Executioner and continue his training. He had just been talking about how he was needed in Yharnam. He wanted to change the way we went about exterminating the Vileblood menace. How could he expect to do that without a wheel and a position on the council?

“Just tell her already Strix!” Matta hissed. “We all did.”

He closed his eyes, taking blinks that were far too long. He licked his lips, clearing away the blood his silence had bought him. He took one glance at us, then started to speak.

“My lady, they are lying to you.”

He was surrounded by glares. Frigga was the only one who seemed pleased with his response. The twins were rather annoyed. They had to take up their wheels in anticipation of fighting a crowd instead of a single man. Strix had created a divide and Clarkus seemed likely to kill him for it. I would not forget his betrayal either. Executioners lived and died together, it would stand to reason we told the truth or lied as a unit. He was the outlier.

“Their story is a shoddy fabrication riddled with inconsistancies, and what’s more it’s shameful. My status as an Executioner or not aside, we were raised as hunters. To stand boldly in the face of the unforgiving and terrible.”

Matta cringed at his words. Ashamed. Wrongfully so. He was betraying us. She should’ve been infuriated.

Strix continued, “The truth is neither and to shy from it would be a greater sin then I’m ready to commit. Executioner Kelfazin launched an attack on your Ranger. We were unsure of her identity at the time of the attack, thus did not prevent it and assisted in the advance. As soon as I sighted Patron’s Ranger Fwahe I stopped shooting. I would never fire on your trusted ally, Lady Hemlock. That is the truth.”

He knealt when he was finished speaking, awaiting her judgement.

“He’s lying!” Clarkus roared before Frigga could pass judgement.

She stood up, swinging the chain from her threaded cane out as she rose. It wrapped itself around Clarkus’ neck in an elegant coil.

“ Former-Executioner Clarkus Opson I have made it known to you multiple times that I am not to be interrupted. Please hand your badge to Executioner Sussex and leave the room immediately. You are not fit to be an Executioner, not while I am England’s Patron.”

Clarkus’ nostrils flared, lip curling upwards to let loose words that would further condem him, but Lady Frigga waited. She held him there for several seconds until we were all made mildly uncomfortable as onlookers. When the chain was finally loosened and unwound there wasn’t an ounce of fight left in the former Executioner. He ripped the gleaming silver badge from his neck, slamming the miniature metal logarius wheel into Sussex’s palm.

“Executioner Strix Savoy please rise, your contrition and apology are well received. I believe fully that you were unaware of my rangers identity at the time you fired my gun. Your status will not be revoked and I will have you promoted to a full Executioner.” Frigga said.

“Lady Hemlock, if you please I would rather not.” Strix said.

“Excuse me?”
“I’ve no desire to miss any of the important training all novices are supposed to have. I do not know all of the things I need know for proper field work. If you would please consider reinstating Executioner Matta, Executioner Audrey, Executioner Jossam and Executioner Kelfazin in to our order in lieu of promotion I would consider us even.”

“You ask a great deal of me Executioner.” Frigga returned.

“You were ready to take a great deal, Lady Hemlock.” Strix replied. “You must also be willing to give a great deal.”

“You think to instruct me?” She asked.

He dipped his head, “Never Lady Hemlock. Merely to suggest the tempering of wrath with indulgence.”

“My Ranger tells me that Executioners are glorified butchers, yet you speak like a poet.” She told him.

Complimenting the betrayer. I had never feared that having a woman as a patron would lead to such easy charming but now I was rife with concern. Was the first man with silver hair and noble mannerisms going to bend her to their will. The dangers of having such a fickle person in charge could be overwhelming and disaterous.

“My apologies, Lady Hemlock.” Strix said.

“Indeed.” She returned. “Yet you’ve spoken true. I cannot forgive your fellow man for the insults he has born me and the lack of repentance but if your other companions offer apologies I will overlook my previous ruling.”

Jossam, Audrey and Matta were on their knees in seconds. They’d say anything to get their badges back. Insincere words heaped at the feet of a smug queen with a killer for a concubine. This world was falling apart and it was no longer due to the beasts that plagued it. Frigga Hemlock was a scourge more insidious then the Ashen plague. There was no cure for this. Matta had the nerve to cry. What rubbish.

“And you Executioner Kelfazin?” Frigga asked.

I rose from my seat and came forward, standing before her throne. She didn’t shy from my face, not even at this close range. That was remarkable. She was not.

“I apologize for rash actions.” I said.

She didn’t seem particular about the position in which I said it. Her consort demanded I kneel but she did not, just as content to take an apology at eye level as being looked up too. If she was irritated with me it did not show.

“Continue in your duties and serve me well.” She said, “You will never be given another chance like this. I suggest that you thank Executioner Strix Savoy and don’t make a habit out of hunting down my trusted allies.”

“Yes your ladyship.” We all chorused.

Because we had too.

She smiled and nodded. Essex and Sussex led us away. They put us on teller rotation, no more
patrolling. The last thing we needed was an opportunity to hunt and make another mistake. We sat behind the barred teller windows doing a job I despised. Glorified traffic director. We watched Clarkus outboarding. Most of his things were taken from him. He was not allowed to keep any of his trick weapons. Clothes were switched. Now his were useless, not spelled to deter beasts or stitched with silver charms. We didn’t speak to each other. We barely spoke to the people who asked us questions.

After a few hours they sent in lunchtime relief.

I took Strix by the collar. He jerked away yet I held firm.

“Why did you betray us?” I snarled.

“I didn’t!” Strix growled back.

“Let him go, Ezra.” Matta said.

“You’re no longer in charge.” I returned.

She tried to step between us, but I had the strength to shove her aside. Bigger then me, sure but less learned. No technique, no balance. Strix was even less so, bulky in the shoulders but not anywhere else that counted. I had been called a twig, a stick, and a thousand other various dimwitted insults but every ounce of what remained of me was strong and battle tested. Experienced where she was not. Strong in ways she couldn’t imagine because I’d been through things she couldn’t dream of.

“I can fight my own battles.” Strix said.

He couldn’t. I shook him, rattling him right to the bones. “Why did you betray us?”

“I told the truth. You lied. I did what an Executioner is supposed to do. I upheld the law and-“

I pressed him into the wall. His speech stuttered. Not so bold when facing a threat directly. Never so bold when facing a stronger opponent. Elaborate words and fancy phrases would not dissuade me. I demanded justice. “You allowed your fellow man to be sacrificed. Clarkus is now an outcast because of you!”

“I didn’t make him interrupt!” Strix spat. “He brought that on himself.”

“He wouldn’t have had to if you stuck to our story!”

“If you hadn’t attacked Fwahe we wouldn’t need a story!” He shouted.

We got stares. I had to put him down or face consequences. The hallway was crowded. I left them and hastily collected my lunch. Patience was in the room eating his own food. I took his apple, because he didn’t protest and slipped it into my pocket. Strix Savoy had ruined my appetite. No breakfast, no lunch and no trust. Everything had been stolen.

“Do you want it back?” I thought to ask, before heading back to the teller’s booth for an additional series of hours and questions only to be alleviated by the dinner bell.

He made no response.

“I asked you a question!” I barked.

He flinched, dropping the scraps of his sandwich and racing out of the room. Great, no we were going to get ants and fail inspection. I wasn’t going to pick up the mess for him. Silent and messy,
what a bunk mate to be stuck with.

The order of our seating changed after returning from lunch. Matta saw fit to place herself between Strix and myself. Doing now what she couldn’t before. Jossam and Audrey sat on the other side of Strix. For the moment they were afraid, and fear was fine. The two of them swayed their loyalties to whoever was supplying them the best promises, the shiniest oppourtonitiy. I could always promise more.

“Did a delivery of flowers arrive?”

I looked up from my musings to find Executioner Alfred at my window. He seemed unreasonably well groomed and somewhat nervous. A romantic engagement I expected, though he seemed more married to the church then the skirt-chasing type.

“Someone special in mind?” I asked him as I flipped through the received mail list.

“Yes, but not in the way you’re insinuating Executioner Kelfazin.” He replied. “For a gravestone.”

A sigh of relief. That suited him much better. Everything was not suddenly turned on its head. Executioner Alfred was just the type to take flowers.

“No record of incoming bouquet.” I said and then added “sorry.”

The last part I didn’t mean, and Alfred responded with a brisk nod turning quickly on his heels and stalking away mumbling about late deliveries on anniversaries and the nerve of expensive florists. I would hate to be the flower shop who had wronged him.

Funny.

Always so funny to me how some people could have their days completely derailed and yet others carried on down their routines without the slightest deviation. No one had threatened to revoke Alfred’s hunting badge. Patience had not had to kneel before Lady Frigga Hemlock and make apologies. So distant and strange.

I took Patience’s apple out of my pocket and rolled it back and forth across the counter, from one hand to the other. Strix had always despised noises like this, repetitive and unessecary. The rolling of smooth apple skin across weathered wooden counter top did not make much of a noise, just a quiet rattling. The fruit shuffled papers when it traveled across them.

Strix wasn’t close enough for me to see but I was sure he could hear it. In classes and examinations if someone wanted to fail him all they needed to do was tap against their ink well. His concentration would falter, he’d question himself. Small repetitive sounds, what an inconvenient weakness for a hunter. In the heat of battle he might be distracted by the shuffling feathers of a crow and end up taken down because he couldn’t focus.

They never would’ve allowed him to become an Executioner if he was tested the same way I was. He never would’ve felt the weight of a wheel or the satisfying thud of a hunter’s badge thumping against his chest while he ran through the streets of Yharnam. Grevious injustice that he and I should hold the same position. Compatively equal to such a radical. They couldn’t dream a way to insult me more.

Essex came by, asking for his nightly ration of quick silver bullets. That was a thing that happened like clockwork. Always another neatly folded cardboard box with a 20 bullet magazine slid behind the bars. It was hard to know how he went through them all. I hadn’t fired a single bullet over the course of the last seven months when I’d had patrol duty. Essex ate them like candy going through
hundreds in mere weeks.

He also worked closely on the order forms for supplies. Essex counted and cataloged funds for the Executioners. If we were spending too much on bullets he never told anyone, and no one went over the papers close enough to tell. Twenty a day, pushed through the bars and into his pocket.

And roll the apple back and forth.

And time for dinner.

Another relieve brigade. We were finished for now. I didn’t know how long teller duty would last, but I was willing to bet we were in for more of the same tomorrow. The dining hall was too crowded and I didn’t want to wait in line. I could’ve eaten the apple but after rolling it across the desk it had collected ink splotches and dust specks and wasn’t enticing my appetite.

I’d steal some of whatever Patience brought back.

The sandwich crusts were not on the floor when I returned, but Patience was in his bed. I heard the crinkling of paper as he turned towards me. He was hiding a book. He stood up in a fluid but practiced motion, swiping one of his hands behind him to push the book from under a pile of blanket to under his pillow. He thought it would be safer and less noticeable because the second he was on his feet he was bowing. Respect wouldn’t distract my attention.

He didn’t need to keep his literacy secret from me, yet he constantly strove too. What a weird kid. As usual I didn’t return the vow-keeper’s greeting.

“And have you eaten?” I asked.

He nodded.

Useless.

Another glance around the room betrayed no dishes or trays. His mother must have come to visit. They would dine in the hall like the others. Dinner was given up as well.

“Well…what are you staring at me for?” I growled.

He gave another bow, this one much deeper and got back into bed. He laid down, staring at the ceiling stiff as a board. Sometimes he closed his eyes, other times they stayed open. I knew he wouldn’t sleep until I did.

I couldn’t stay in the room. The vow-keeper made me uncomfortable.

“You’re the worst roommate, you know that?” I asked.

Patience Oliver Hastings did not reply. He was pretending to be asleep. I knew he had heard me. I left the room and slipped down the crowded hallways. Early dawn was one of the rare times that being this thin came with a whole slew of unique advantages. I was able to slide past the cots of slumbering Executioners without bumping into their feet and waking them. I could slide through gaps in squeaking doors without having to inch them open any further. Stairs didn’t buckle at my weight. Wooden boards didn’t creak. I could stick to shadows and not be illuminated in lighted doorways.

In short I could go about a bank full of observant hunters unseen. I sought the rooftops and the sunrise. The unyielding cycle of rising and setting was a constant in this abysmal cesspool of
uncertainty. The celestial bodies themselves, if not their gods were friends to me. I was grateful for 
their ridged conformity. They, unlike the Executioners did not change. The sun was the sun. The 
moon was the moon. The cycle was unyielding. The wheel ever-turning. Retrospect brought with it 
new revelations. Savoy had condemned us, and that would not go unpunished, but he also extended 
the hands of redemption. One virtue was no enough to cancel out the crime, but it surely counted 
for something. The degree to which his suffering stretched was yet to be determined. I’d need to 
gain control of our party if I was too see it happen.

Morning was drawing near. Lazy Jossam was already snoring and nothing could be done with him 
tonight. Audrey was another matter. She was the type that couldn’t sleep if something bothered 
her. Tonight that something would be me.

Bidding the rising sun goodbye I slipped back down the halls. The girls dormitory was even more 
cramped then the boys. They seemed to be less organized, or posses more detritus. Whichever was 
true they were harder to get past. Additionally I had never visited Audrey before and finding her 
was a bit of a trial. I was even chased out of a few rooms when the occupants noticed I did not 
belong. Matta was one of the chasers-out. Her room smelled like alcohol and her eyes were red 
with tears. That or she was experimenting with the same potions Clarkus and the younger 
Executioners favored.

I found Audrey a few rooms down, hers was a cot tucked into a dark corner. She was shuffling and 
reshuffling a deck of cards. I was certain the darkness of the hall was too oppressive for her to see 
the cards she was drawing, but she kept at it. Hands in constant motion.

“Audrey?” I asked.

Both for confirmation of identity and to announce myself so my presence wouldn’t be a sudden 
terror.

Her attention snapped towards me with the automated speed that two opposite magnets did.

“It’s me, Ezra.” I continued.

She would know of course. I was not the type to be easily mistake for someone else, especially 
when wearing the standard issue pajamas Executioners were provided with. Ladies in striped 
nightshirts, gentlemen in button ups and roomy trousers with identical stripes. Even their smallest 
were too big for me.

“What are you doing here after hours?” Audrey asked.

I had never been here during hours. Was the time of day really relevant?

“I wanted to make sure you were doing alright. You seemed a little shaken.” I explained.

“I’m fine.” She said, snapping her playing cards back into their box. “I was just going to bed.”

“What were you playing?” I asked. She gave me a confused huff. I pointed to the cards, “With 
those I mean.”

“I wasn’t.” She said.

“Oh.” I said, “I’ve never owned any myself so I thought it might be some sort of game.”

“You’ve never played cards?” She asked.
Of course I’d played cards. She needed to feel useful. Smart. So I lied. “No, never.”

The box was opened and the hearts, spades, clubs and diamonds came pouring out. They were well worn, several had creased corners and stained edges. No regulation matches would allow cards in this condition, but that was all too the good. I could ensure Audrey’s victory with this deck.

“They’re nothing particularly special.” She said, inviting me to take a look.

I grabbed a handful, studying them with all the false confusion I could muster. Audrey launched into an explanation of the suits and face cards coaching me through the basic rules of several games. We started to play, and I strived to let her win the first few hands. She seemed happy to be winning, and I played the dull role of polite loser.

“Ah, you win again.” I said.

“You’ll get the hang of it soon.” Audrey assured me, “Just keep trying.”

“Thank you.” I replied, “You know if you’re ever having trouble with things- I’d be glad to reciprocate. I’ve noticed you struggle with the wheel.”

“Rude of you to notice.” She huffed

“Yes- but”

“And ruder still to mention.” She insisted.

I had to suppress a snarl, “Forgive me.”

She collected my cards and tallied her points before accepting the sentiment. “I only meant to assist you in becoming a better Executioner, I am fully fledged after all. I see potential in you, even the potential for apprenticeship.”

“Really?” Audrey asked flinging her cards down and showing her hand. A loosing one, as I’d expected.

I nodded, then bid her goodnight and headed back to my own sleeping quarters. She called after me once, twice but then no more. There was no need to wake the others. I slipped past the slumbering Executioners and retreated to my room. Patience was lying in exactly the same position, pretending to be asleep.

“That act doesn’t fool me you know.” I said kicking one of the bed posts. It shook the rickety frame and his eyes jolted open.

I climbed into my own bed, and did all I could to suppress the days roiling emotions. I pulled up the sheets. I flung them away. Face up, face down, turned to the left, turned to the right. I used one pillow, then two, then none at all. I braced my back with one pillow and folded my arms under the other, always with eyes squeezed tight shut.

My stomach bellowed.

I flopped over and ignored it, squirming like a slug, and dragging my bedding with me to switch from sleeping with my feet at the footboard to the headboard. Reversal did nothing to sate the aching hunger either.

I got up, and I was sure the vow-taker heard me but it didn’t matter. It wasn’t like he could tell
anyone I was out after curfew. This has happened several times before, and I admit, I’d been hungry. I’d gotten greedy. There were getting to be too many of these midnight feasts. Someone was going to notice if I kept at it.

This morning provided a perfect opportunity and a chance to try a new technique. I left the room, grabbing my robe and hastily flinging it on over my pajamas. No time for shoes. If she didn’t need them I didn’t need them. Out the service exit. They’d be watching the frontward one.

It always surprised me how busy the streets were when the moon had closed its great white eye. Denizens sprung up out of every corner and crack, going about their quaint little lives. We did so much for them, and they still shied away. They were afraid of hunters, and gave me a wide berth owing to the robe. We were there protectors and they remained terrified. It would be hilarious to see them face to face with the beasts of the days before Hemlock’s reign.

There were kids on these streets who’d never once seen a lycan or heard the caw of a carrion crow. Innocent little babes. They had no idea what was coming for them. It was not the innocent I sought. Never did I allow those kinds of people to fall prey to vicious appetites. Insatiable Vilebloods devouring innocent men were deplorable.

A starved Vileblood in noble dress culling the weakest of the herd was a different matter.

I had a weakling in mind.

Clarkus hadn’t gone far.

They never did. For some reason the outcasts always held with the belief that they were going to be allowed back in. They lurked and waited, but were never given the time of day. Clarkus wouldn’t ever be allowed back in the bank. None of the denizens knew him, and none of the hunters would speak to him again. He was as good as invisible.

Removing him would go without notice. He would provide one final service to the Executioners before moving on to make peace with the gods.

I wanted to hunt him down the same way she had. The rooftops were as good a place to prowl as any, and reaching them without drawing attention an easy task. The little people below me where so wrapped up in their own problems that one hooded man drew no second glances. If I had let my face be seen, perhaps problems would arise, but it was astounding what cloth could cover.

I found him while standing on the roof of a butcher shop. You couldn’t ask for a more poetic location. He leaned half-asleep, half-awake against a barrel of stinking fish guts. His hair was plastered to the weather wood and his forehead alike, stuck with sweat and dirt. The clothes he’d been provided hardly fit him.

If that wasn’t enough to be sure it was my former brother at arms the anger radiating off him was all the confirmation I could ever ask for. The butchers were all inside. Clarkus might have tried to beg off them earlier, and been chased away. You couldn’t ask for hand outs from men with storefronts. Those kind never had a scrap of sympathy in them.

I dropped in front of him.

What should’ve come as a shock only managed to register dimly. The knowledge that something was happening but a lack of visual clarity. The bottle in his hands was to be held accountable for that. Bought or stolen he’d sought the solace of liquefied hops and barely before sating his appetite.

How unbearably human.
“Ezra?” He mumbled.

His head was a spinning top, sure to fall if it lost its momentum. It made gentle circuits to keep his world in focus.

“I’ve come to complete the cycle.” I said.

“Thank Kos. They saw that stupid bitch was wrong. They want me back.” Clarkus said. A lopsided smile spread across his face and he shakily rose to his feet. One lumbering step towards me brought him back to the ground, down on one knee. A perfectly willing sacrifice.

I took out my knife, the same one I ate every meal with. Wheels were great for butchering, but I didn’t feel like playing with my food tonight.

“What are you…” Clarkus muttered.

He was faster to catch on then I expected. He broke the top of the emptied bottle off and slashed at me with sharpened glass. I was a second short and took a slice across my cheek, fractured rubbish narrowly missing my eye.

Clarkus’ too-red, too-blurred eyes widened in horror. “Your blood’s the wrong color!”

He shouted it loud enough that I chanced a glance over my shoulder. A rowdy drunk. They’d pay him no mind. He took another dive at me, seeking to spill more of the sickly silver. I caught him by the wrist in one hand, bringing over a slice with the knife from the other.

A severed artery.

Dinner.

“You’re bloods the wrong color! You’re bloods the wrong color!” Clarkus kept shouting, waving the busted bottle back and forth.

They were stupid last words, but they did nothing to affect the taste.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
Vices and Virtues

Chapter Summary

Frigga gets to have a lot of conversations with a lot of people and I realize I may have written way too much dialogue for one chapter.
Oh well, I hope you guys enjoy it anyway!

Chapter Notes

As always, please let me know what you think!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Frigga

I often wondered if she realized how selfish she could be. A night on the town for her was a mountain of headaches from me, and now it had resulted in a banished Executioner. I was sure to hear clever remarks from Executioner Essex and Executioner Sussex at every council in the next month due to the rash action. He shouldn’t have tested his patron’s patience so, but all the same I was a little ashamed of how I’d acted. This wasn’t a matter to be met with snap decisions but rather approached with cool rationality.

Fwahe just made it so hard to be rational. Pieces of her past were missing as were fragments of her mind. I assumed this was typical given the amount of strife she’d endured in addition to her unusually long lifespan. She could be uncharacteristically wise about somethings, and completely ignorant of others. When Kos had made Fwahe she’d forgotten to tap out all the air bubbles, and her unfilled pockets announced themselves at the worst of times.

I found her in my room, on my bed after returning from the bank. She wasn’t asleep but didn’t seem fully awake either. Her eyes had the far-off glaze she got when thinking about the places she only half remembered and the people she’d lost contact with. A city that smelled like sugar-sweetened cherries and a boy with feathers for hair. She tried to tell me about them, but spoke like describing a dream. The words were too fragmented to make sense to anyone but the dreamer.

I cleared my throat and closed the door behind me, using soft noises to ease her out of that distant place. She heard the door shut and turned towards me, in a sparkle of silver hair. She usually kept it lopped off above the shoulders, but hadn’t gotten around to cutting it in a while. I never wanted to cut mine again.

“You’re back early.” She said, “I thought you’d have a council meeting.”

“No.” I said, “I cancelled mine for today.”

She grinned, mistaking this as a thing done for her as opposed to because of her. “I had to go speak with some Executioners. The ones you met on your night out.”
Her cheeks flushed and she looked at her feet instead of at me. She could feel the weight of that she had done. I did not want to increase her guilt, but the weight of what I had to say couldn’t afford to be tempered with mercy. I had no desire to hurt her, never, but she was no child.

“I had to exile one of them.” I said.

Still she was silent, avoiding eye contact. This wouldn’t work, it needed to be a conversation. I called her name and she looked up, turning back to me. A glance over the shoulder that could turn my iron will to melting butter when I was in the mood.

I couldn’t afford to melt tonight. “Fwahe. I had to exile that poor boy.”

“He must have deserved it then.” She said.

“I wouldn’t exile him without cause, but cause wouldn’t have been had if you’d listened to me. Why did you go running around the rooftops? I know you bring a supply with you and Templeton didn’t seem on the verge at all.”

She slumped down, then rolled over, arms and legs lolling over the bed. She swung her legs as she spoke desperate to remain playful childish and distant. This wouldn’t do. She patted the space on the bed next to her but I remained standing.

I still had the capelet with armored shoulders that I wore when acting as England’s Patron. The garment weighed heavily on my shoulders, but it was nothing compared to the problem’s I dealt with while it rested there.

“Well?” I asked, tapping my foot for emphasis, “An explanation if you please.”

She shrugged, “What do you want me to say love?”

“Oh no.” I scolded, “None of that love stuff.”

She batted her eyelashes, attempting to be angelic for all she was worth. “I’ll say anything you like.”

“I don’t want you to say anything I want.” I sighed, “I want you to explain yourself.”

“I didn’t even do anything. The ugly one just attacked me, I told you all of that already. I told you when it happened so that you’d know he was unstable.”

I could’ve scoffed, and called her unstable, but she’d stolen my heart and I’d cast things like pettiness aside, replacing it with patience. “Some of them say the same about you. I don’t believe them of course, but I can understand their position. When you go running off with no warning it gets very hard to justify your actions, so I just want to know what got into you.”

She sighed, mirroring my own distant mannerisms. “I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“You went against your Patron’s orders.” I argued.

“Were they really orders?” She asked with a playful raising of the eyebrows.

“Can’t you take this seriously?” I sighed.

“It was just a stroll…then I saw them and I don’t know…after the Execution I was just, concerned. That’s all it was, just a dumb decision that ended badly. You exiled the crazy one so I don’t see why we have to talk about it anymore. You solved the problem love.” Fwahe said.
“You misunderstand.” I said, “Executioner Kelfazin was willing to apologize, albeit begrudgingly so. I was swayed to pardon him.”

“Then who did you exile?” Fwahe asked.

“Clarkus.” I replied.

“The big dumb one?” She shot back.

I sighed, “I suppose that’s one way of putting it.”

“He was dumb for trying to fight me.” She said. Before I could reply she laid her hand on my cheek and brought her lips to mine. When she pulled away she finished her thought, “But dumber still for disrespecting you.”

“That may be, but-"

She tried to kiss me again. I had to push her away. “That may be, but someone being unintelligent is no cause for violence.”

“You sure about that?” Fwahe asked.

“Stop trying to be funny!” I said, “This is serious. Your life, Templeton’s life…my life. Fwhae you put them all at risks when you do selfish things like this.”

“I had it under control.” Fwahe insisted, “That louse couldn’t touch me!”

“You were up against six Executioners and-“

“And I’m fine.” She snarled. This wasn’t getting anywhere. I sat down on the end of the bed, running tired fingers through tangled hair. Fwahe probed herself up on her elbows and put a hand over mine, pulling the fingers close and kissing them gently. She amended her words “I’m sorry.”

I took her hand and kissed her back, just barely. I couldn’t help it, withholding affection was a childish ploy by coy schoolgirls. It would not be befitting of a woman of my stature to do the same. “I know.”

“I won’t do it again.” She said.

She’d say anything if it meant I would drop the matter regardless of truth. My lover was extremely faithful but a pathological liar. She really couldn’t take the people she held close being angry at her, yelling and harsh words never lead to rational discussion.

“I just barely managed to smooth things over with all the hunters.” I said.

“Of course you managed. You’re the clever one.” She praised.

Dexterous fingers worked their way around my shoulders unclipping the heavy velvet and iron guards. She took off my armour for the day and cast it onto the floor. I was exhausted, so I let it happen. It was dangerous to let serious issues drop so easily, but it had been clawing away at me all day. Now different claws took that space as Fwahe went to work on my shoulders, kneading them expertly with deft hands, rubbing until the strain was unfelt. The occasional prick of her claw-like nails was worth it.

“Did the Powder Kegs bother you again?” Fwahe asked.
She did listen when I spoke, more often for who might be a threat then for any admirable relational devotion. Protective, to put a word too it.

“You know those Lupei boys.” I told her, “They are always arguing both with the entire council and each other. I’ve half a mind to band them entirely, but the one of them is basically blind. I can’t exile a junior Executioner, and then ban the visually impaired in the same week.”

“Wasn’t Aditya the one who threatened to blow up Odeon Chapel?” Fwahe asked.

“He was drunk that week.” I said, offering a defense for the rather spirited representitive of the bombastic section of church hunters. The Powder Kegs were rowdy but they made incredible weapons, we needed them, but also they needed to calm down. I couldn’t deal with the threat of imminent destruction at a moments notice.

“Powder Kegs are drunk every week, even when it isn’t the Lupei brothers. You’re always complaining about them.” Fwahe replied.

This was true.

“They’ve as much right to drink as anyone. The hunt brings the worst out of people.” I replied.

“What hunt?” She asked.

I chuckled, “The streets have been pretty clean since I reorganized things.”

“Their spotless.” She spat.

I turned towards her, straining my neck and causing her nails to press into me. It was important enough to need eye contact. “Why are you angry about that?”

“You called those hunters junior Executioners. Since when was that ever a thing? They used to come fully fledged. They don’t know how to hunt or cover tracks or anything. You’ve got broken-winged birds prowling the streets where there used to be a thousand vultures.”

“All the same reports of beast are down to near non-existance.”

“Yes, I suppose that’s a good thing.” Fwahe muttered.

“Denizens have never been happier, and even though it’s hard being at all these meetings and trying to appease everyone the pay off is undeniable. If more of the hunting organizations adopt methods similar to mine we could make some serious strides towards beating back the creatures.”

I carried on about benefits until I grew tired. Her massages had that effect, pressing the energy right out of me. It was so relaxing, I couldn’t help but yawn. I reclined into her shoulder, and she leaned back onto the bed. At least this way I’d wake up if she tried to sneak out on me.

“Good night, love.” She whispered, soft lips tickling my inner ear.

My heavy eyelashes fell, dragging me into a deep sleep before I could parrot the words back to her.

It was incredibly difficult to find time for myself during the day. There was so much to be seen too, that sleep became my one true respite. On the distance shores of nonsense I could rest without a care in the world. The illusion crashed upon waking, but I was ever glad to let it resume on the next night.

She hadn’t moved a muscle by the time my eyes reopened. In those few seconds between sleep and
dreams, responsibilities began to swirl, scratching to bring down the thin peaceful veil of slumber. That never took long. The curtain collapsed and the day began.

Sleep was something to be rubbed away and covered up. I disentangled myself from Fwahe. I’d no idea if Vilebloods really needed sleep or not, but she and Templeton seemed to retain the desire to rest at the end of the day. She slept now, but I know she could go days without it when she needed too. I tried not to disturb her as I rose and went to get things in order for today.

A lot of hunters let themselves grow ragged and unkempt. I didn’t mind being around such people but after my internment in the asylum I’d retained a strong desire to look my best at every oppoutronity. Papery-gowns and shorn hair left lasting impressions. I chased the image away with every swipe of the comb, and coating of powdered pigmentation. Painted lips, darkened lashes, it was all a comfort to me. I decided to pin my hair up today, because it took longer and I found weaving the ornamented pins into my curls soothing.

I also wanted Fwahe to wake up before I left, see if anything I’d said last night had sunk in. Morning brought with it fresh thoughts.

Before she came too naturally there was a knock at the door.

“Come in!” I called.

“Just bringing you two breakfast.” Cato announced. He had a tray of food balanced between his one good hand and his elbow. He walked in backwards, pushing the door open with his foot and then shoving it the rest of the way with his back.

He glanced at Fwahe, still asleep on the bed and grinned a wicked grin. Cato had always been like this, immature in the extremes. It was easier to put up with when he had your back in a battle, for he could fight as well as he could flirt. Nowadays though I was just used to his mannerisms and focused on keeping him occupied with anything but battles. Losing his fingers had reduced his strength and I wanted to avoid further injury.

“Avoid your bawdy questions.” I advised.

He laughed and set the tray down on a foot stool. “What happens in your bedroom stays in your bedroom, Majesty.”

“Thank you for breakfast.” I said, changing the subject before he could ask any questions. We were after all, still in the bedroom. “How bad is it today?”

I’d tasked him with keeping my schedules. He was happy to take any position involved with running the Hunter’s council. It kept him further from the fighting, and though he was hopeless when it came to secretarial duties I’d rather keep him safe. Cato fumbled in his pockets for a scrap of parchment. Before he could find the crumbling paper he removed a pipe, a lump of soap with several hairs sticking out of it, a few coins and a bullet casing out of his jacket.

“I know it’s in here somewhere.” He said.

All of his shuffling roused Fwahe from her sleep. She seemed very displeased when Cato’s face was the first she woke too.

“Eyes up sleepyhead.” Cato said.

She growled and threw a pillow at him. Cato threw up a hand to catch it, but it was his bad one, and he only managed to bat it weakly with his open palm.
“The list?” I asked.

He cleared his throat and shuffled a few more jangling objects around before finally producing the task list. “There you go.”

“That’ll be all.” I told him.

“Right then.” Cato said. He readjusted his jacket and grabbed the pillow off the floor. He threw it at the drowsy Vileblood then ducked out the door before she had time to launch a counter attack.

“Get back here!” She snarled at him.

Cato had nothing to fear. She lacked the drive to leave the comforts of bed to chase him. She looked over at breakfast while I read over my daily appointments. It looked like I would have to revisit the Lupei brothers as I was due at the Powder Keg’s quarters to inspect a new weapon they were developing. As usual I had my standing appointment to dine with the Executioners once a week, but the evening would be free.

“Fwahe?” I asked.

“Mmm?” She replied, picking through the bowl of dried fruits Cato had brought in. She’d take whatever was the sweetest.

“I don’t have anything down for tonight. Would you like to go out with me, some places stay open for hunters nowadays.”

She usually denied my invitations to go into the city. She just wasn’t able to adjust to a place like Yharnam now that it bustled with denizens. Nightlife was new to her, so I thought. It might have been an old thing, something suffered in her past that she wasn’t ready to relive. I loved her but she was still mostly mystery.

“Where would we go?” She asked.

“Anywhere you like, there’s a garden you might fancy. It’s withered mostly in winter, but some things still bloom. I know you’ve a fondness for flowers.” I said.

“I’d like to just stay here with you.” She said.

I sighed, “If I’m here you never want to leave, yet if I go off you get restless. What am I supposed to do with you?”

She laughed, “Isn’t it obvious?”

I shook my head, but left my hair half-pinned to join her for breakfast. I sat on a cushion on the floor while she laid flat on the bed, grabbing at the food with her hands instead of silverware. She was being especially childish this morning.

“Just love me, as I am.”

I bit into a piece of bread and had to swallow before smiling back at her. “Of course.”

“So who is it today?” Fwahe asked.

“No one important.” I told her.

No need to get her worried about the Powder Kegs or the Executioners, two of her least favorite
groups. Every hunting group seemed to be her least favorite, but these ones she detested in particular. I couldn’t expect to be England’s Patron without facing occasional opposition but the Executioners were regular protesters. I wasn’t looking forward to dining with them, but Fwahe need not know it. If she followed me from rooftops things would not end as well as they had the night she encountered Ezra Kelfazin.

“If their not important then why do you have to see them at all?” she asked.

I pressed my palms to either side of her head, holding her face steady and gazing right into her eyes. She tensed slightly, but didn’t shy from my touch. I titled her face down and kissed her forehead.

“Because it’s not all about you, darling.”

We finished breakfast, discussing nothing in particular. She warned me about the evils of the Executioners, and I informed her I dealt with them just fine during the rest of the year when she was vanished from Yharnam. It carried on until I figured it couldn’t afford to any longer. I arranged the last of my hair and slipped into something more suited for the day’s business, long skirts and long jackets to keep out the cold. I felt the chill though Fwahe was numb to it. I promised to return to her as soon as I was finished with my appointments and in return she swore to stay out of trouble. I could only pray she kept her promises.

The path to the Powder Keg hunters was a long one, and I decided to give Swift some exercise. With the affluence of my position I’d been able to build her a proper barn and didn’t worry about her succumbing to frostbite. Some of the other hunters who had mounts kept their animals in the same barn. Scarlett waved at me as I came in. She and Imogen enjoyed working with the gentle creatures and could be found in the hayloft more often than not. They liked the idea of having their own little home away from home and I wasn’t one to begrudge them of it.

Swift was glad at the chance to walk the streets, prancing about and snorting into the wind. I was of the mine she enjoyed seeing the little plumes of fog that rose from her nostrils due to the chill in the air. Her long legs deftly navigated the snowy streets and I was warmed by her proximity.

The Powder Kegs had taken up residence in the old train station. The rails didn’t run anymore, not since the hunt began. There was no way to clear the tracks of danger and the decision to shut down city-to-city transport was supposed to have halted the spread of infection. Refugees still came in from all corners, no amount of limiting options would stop those in search of safety.

The train station was a good ways away from the theater, placed closer to Old Yharnam then anyplace else. Old Yharnam was teeming with beasts but Djura, a respected hunter and part-time participant of the Powder Keg argued quarantine over extermination. Former Abbot Minimus had allowed it, possibly as a place to harvest beasts for experimentation and I had not yet had the chance to look into clearing it. I could hear the creatures scraping at the walls, desperate to get out.

Swift’s ears flicked up straight and I patted her on the neck, reassuring her that she would come to no harm with me at the reigns. She trusted me and forged ahead. I could see the train station in the distance, a steepled clocktower it’s most signature feature. The rusting train left on the tracks served as both living quarters and workshop for the energetic hunters. Shoddy fortifications blocked my entrance, a crude trench of spiked wooden poles and gnarled clumps of barbed wire.

“Oi! What are you bloody prancin’ about ‘fore? We don’t want no visitors, none of you carpetbagging traveling salesmen. We have all we need, now off you get!”

I recognized the voice that accosted me. The younger of the Lupei brothers, Viorel, who knew full
well that I was no salesmen.

“Viorel I am your patron Huntress. You would do well not to mistake me for an unwanted visitor.” I called to him.

“Oh just because you’ve got all of England scrapin’ and bowin’ you think ol’ Vio’s got to do it to, eh?” He shouted.

As he spoke he waved his hand, motioning me over to a bridge. It was nothing more than a few pieces of plywood nailed together and bound in leather straps, but I trusted the inventive hunting groups engineering. Swift let out a snort of disapproval and required some urging, but made her way over the bridge just fine.

“Oi, is my path not fancy enough for your ugly cow?”

“She’s a horse.” I said.

“Horse, cow what’s the difference. They’re both big stupid things with hooves, don’t know why you bother with the distinction.”

I don’t know why I bothered with the conversation.

“I’m supposed to meet with someone, in regards to a new weapon?”

“Yeah I know why you’re fucking here.” Viorel spat.

“If you knew why I was here why did you turn me away like an unwanted lover?”

He wiped his nose on his sleeve, then snuffled a large clump of snot and mucus back down into his throat. “This way your ladyship.”

His tone ensured my knowledge of his disrespect.

“And you can tie your cow up wherever you like. I won’t be cleanin’ up her shit if it gets inside.”

I dismounted and found a post to hitch Swift to. She gave me another snort and I patted her neck once more. “Sorry girl, I won’t be long.”

I took a few more seconds to scratch behind her left ear and stroke her nose.

“Oi! You comin’ or stayin’ our here n’ freezing your tits off? I won’t be loosin’ a finger just ‘cos you can’t say goodbye to your cow.”

“Horse.” I muttered again.

“Whatever.” Viorel Lupei said.

Viorel led me up a set of stares and onto the train platform. The place was littered with steel poles, scrap metal and warped wood. Powder Keg hunters dragged sheets of metal across the platform, retrieving more raw material for their many projects. The younger Lupei brother didn’t slow himself down on my account, navigating the home of the weapons-makers with practiced ease. I picked my way carefully around things he opted to leap.

He came to a stop at one of the trains many box cars, pounding on the sliding door.

“’Ditya! ’Ditya open up!” Viorel shouted.
“Shut your fuckin’ mouth I’m coming! Wait for two goddamn seconds!” came the reply.

“Ditya!” Viorel barked.

The Lupei brothers would end me. When I was sure I could tolerate their yelling no longer, the boxcar door was wrenched open. Viorel stepped inside, removing his hat and casting it to the floor. It was then I noticed, the only thing the two brothers shared in appearance was their lack of hair. Two olive-tone eggs in the same carton, but dressed as differently as could be. Viorel fell into all the hideous pitfalls of uncultured youth dressing in outlandish half-capes and decadent brocade. He seemed to have pried his clothes out of a painted portrait, dragging the dust and outdated styles with them as they came. It was further clear that he didn’t take very good care of what he owned. The hat on the floor was one thing, but the state of his attire was another. It was coated in a variety of stains some of which I feared were blood and some of which I worried weren’t.

Aditya was in direct contrast. His clothes were of the workmen’s sort, the overcautious workman at that. They were oiled leathers, well kept in peak condition. His boots were worn but cleared of dirt. He had a scarf slung around his neck which could be pulled up over the nose and mouth to keep out both cold and infection. His laces were pulled even and his gloves were not worn through. It gave the implication that he was more logical, which I knew from experience couldn’t be farther from the truth. He was as bad as his brother.

“Oi, would you pick your fucking hat up? I’m sick of you leaving your shit all over my floor.” Aditya barked.

“Ain’t your floor. It ain’t even your fucking room…that is unless you do get to fucking in-“

“Gentlemen please.” I interrupted.

“What’s she want?” Aditya asked.

“She’s hear about the weapon, gâscă!” Viorel replied. He continued to shout despite being indoors. “Did you forget that you set up that meeting already?”

“Right.” Aditya said, “Well take her to the Mantis then. What the hell did you bother me for?”

“I already brought her in and tied up her stupid cow, why do I have to go showin’ her around?” Viorel whined.

Aditya spat, a big glob of saliva landing in a splatter on the wooden floor of the boxcar. “I guess you’re still afraid of baggage claim then?”

Irate, Viorel attempted to spit back at him, but unpracticed he only managed to further mar his stained cravat.

“Now get the hell out.” Aditya ordered.

Viorel slammed the door behind us, so hard it rocked the boxcar. I heard the clatter of shifting objects as they crashed inside, and muted foreign profanities spilled through the air. Viorel laughed at the misfortune he’d brought down on his older sibling before briskly starting towards the train station.

To say the place he led me too was ill-lit was an understatement. The stairs that led to the bowels of the train station were overflowing with waterlogged partials, old mail bags that the Powder Keg hunters still hadn’t seen fit to clear away. Untidy children the lot of them, it was going to get someone killed. I found myself wondering which stair would be the last, but there always seemed
to be just one more. That was until there wasn’t and I found myself on the floor, though calling it solid ground would be a bit of a stretch. It was littered with papers, nut, bolts, screws and what looked to be sticks of dynamite. A single lamp burned in the far corner making it hard to see.

“Oi!” Viorel shouted into the darkness, “Ya down here Mantis?”

In lieu of a response an old boot came sailing through the air. Whoever had thrown it possessed incredible aim and some serious strength. Viorel gave a gasp of pain. I heard a thump as his knees hit the floor.

“I told you not to call me that!”

“You knocked out my fucking tooth!” Viorel wailed.

“And you better not bleed on my floor.”

It was a ridiculous request. He could’ve had his arm chopped off and it wouldn’t have made enough mess for anyone to tell the difference.

Viorel’s assailent stepped into view carrying a lantern with her. She had a wrench in the hand that wasn’t holding the lamp, poised to throw it if Viorel had any more names for the calling. Perched on her head was a pair of googles with enormous lenses.

“Quit your cryin’ n get up.” She growled at him.

“I cleared my throat.

“And you didn’t tell me we had a guest.” She sighed. The wrench was dropped and she hastily wiped her now free hand on an apron, offering into me. “Nice to meet you, I’m-“

“We call her Mantis.” Viorel piped up, one hand pressed to his mouth. Wether the lost tooth was a fraud or not he’d chosen to commit to his story. “Cos of her big ol’ praying mantis glasses.”

“Their goggles.” She snapped.

“You know what a praying mantis is, but you called my horse a cow?” I asked.

Viorel shrugged, and the girl with googles laughed.

“He’s dumb as a box of rocks, and his brothers only slightly smarter. Dumb as a smaller box of rocks if you’d allow the allusion.” She chuckled. “I don’t much care for either of them or their little jokes. The wolves aren’t supposed to come into my basement, but it seems this one had a reason today. Now that his job is done of course, he’ll be going.”

“Yeah yeah, didn’t want to stay in this bloody awful place anyway.” Viorel mumbled climbing back up the stairs. Much like his brother there was muted cursing that faded as the distance between us increased.

“Really they’re intolerable…but they’re more tolerable then some of the other Powder Kegs.” She said.

“I find that hard to believe.” I replied.

“Well, at least the Lupeis will tell you if they don’t like you. Others will just try and sabtaoge your work.”
“You’re kidding.”

She shook her head. “I’ve had weeks worth of work ruined by pranks. Of course I went right back and blew up there stuff too. I’ve had my hair pulled, my notes burned and my materials stolen but it’s all part of the process. The best inventions come from spite, I tend to think and getting those little sons of bitches back is a great motivator. Though for serious work I tend to lock up down here. It’s one of few locks the others haven’t managed to pick.”

She led me further into the back, occasionaly dipping her lantern down towards a pile of trash of a collection of random objects I’d do best to avoid. It was helpful, but only mildly so, like a friend who offers you an umbrella after you’ve already gotten soaking wet. There’s only so much you can do. I still tripped a few more times then was dignified, but the girl nicknamed Mantis did not comment. There was a large iron gate, behind which the postmaster or baggage claim head would presumably hold lost items or things of particular value.

The weapon-maker removed a key from a pouch at her hip and fitted it into the keyhole. “The names York by the way, short for Yorkshire.”

“Isn’t that a town?” I asked.

“My parents weren’t particularly creative about naming their children. I got a brothers called Essex and Sussex, all of us named for the towns we were born in. They did a lot of traveling.” She explained.

“Your brothers are the Executioner twins?” I asked.

“Yes.” She said, “But we don’t talk much anymore. They seem kind of cut off from things. Then again I stay to my workshop mostly.”

York led me into the back office of what was essentially a glorified lost and found. There were a lot more lanterns and I could see diagrams on the walls, books open on the benches, and the beginnings of guns starting to form on the floor. There was a haphazard kind of organization to it all. The space reminded me of Cato’s room, which others saw as a trainwreck but he had organized by reality of convience. He knew where everything was, and had not the slightest care in the world if other people nearly killed themselves falling over objects to retrieve something from his space. There was the same sort of mentality in York’s weapons workshop.

“Do you have to deal with my brothers too?” She asked.

“Sometimes at communions.” I told her.

“I swear to Kos, there’s not one tolerable set of them in all of Yharnam.” She said.

“What did you want to show me?” I asked, eager to get away from the Powder Kegs and all their sets of siblings.

York motioned me over to a bench that looked more like a scientists lab then a weapon maker’s area. There were beakers and vials and strange jars full of red rocks. A small fire burned over an iron pot with bubbling red liquid inside. I took a sniff and scented the coppery tang of blood.

“Oh you won’t want to smell it!” York warned, a little too late.

“What is exactly is that?” I asked.

“It’s part of what I’m working on.” She said. She passed me a jar of the red crystals. “They’re
called bloodstone gems.”

“What are they?” I asked.

“They are a way of improving ones power. Ministrated blood is where we get our strength, a hunter cut with blood is stronger then they’ve ever been before. I think it diminishes over time and I wanted to prevent that from happening. If crushed and inhaled, they provide the user with fresh power.”

“You’re manufacturing drugs?” I asked.

She shook her head, “They aren’t drugs. From the tests I’ve done there aren’t any side effects and-“

I cracked the end of my cane on the floor, no desire to hear this carry on any longer. “You are wasting valuable resources making some sort of dangerous concoction that is not needed by any of us. This is not some prank you get to carry out and play off as a joke on your fellow hunters. Blood shortage is a serious risk that many hunters have known. Our stores may be full now but they won’t stand that way forever and I can’t afford to have wasted supplies.”

“Lady Hemlock please, this could severely reduce the need to take in blood vials.” York argued. “All of my research indicates that-“

“No.” I said. “Please dispose of these crystals and focus on creating actual weapons.”

“This could sate your Vilebloods!” York shouted.

This couldn’t help but grab my attention. She pressed the jar of blood gems into my hands. “Have them try it. This could cure them Lady Hemlock, or at the very least sustain them. You would face no oppositions from my brothers if the Parton’s Ranger no longer had to hunt down denizens.”

I felt the weight of the jar in both my hands and my mind. I wanted to reject it completely, shove it back across the table and reaffirm my demand for it’s destruction. Instead I pocketed it.

“Do not make any more. Not a single one.” I told her.

“Yes Lady Hemlock.” York replied, but there was a smile on her lips that spoke volumes of uncertainty.

I stumbled out of her studio before I thought better of it. Every inch of the Powder Keg Hunter’s home filled me with impending doom. From now on I would be sending emissaries and not making another personal visit. This inner sabatoge and playful mentality between weapons-makers needed to end. I could not allow these things to continue.

I trapsed through a light dusting of snow, ignoring offers of escort and returned to Swift. She had taken refuge under an overhang but all the same seemed glad to be sharing some warmth. I took a blanket out of her saddle bag and draped it across her.

“Sorry girl, I didn’t mean to be so long.” I said as I climbed onto her.

The rickety bridge was left as it was and I crossed it without hesitating. Several times I glanced over my shoulder, reassured to see the train station receding as I road away. The jar of crystals rattled in my pocket as Swift trotted across the frosty streets, bouncing in my pocket. We passed over a bridge and I paused to consider throwing it into the slush-filled river below.
Red was such an ugly color.

I couldn’t seem to drop it. This could be useful, perhaps if not to me then to Templeton. I could at least get her to study them to see if what York said had even so much as a scrap of truth too it. I couldn’t just go trusting a substance made to be used on Vilebloods by someone with ties to the Executioners.

The Executioners it seemed I would be late to my lunch with. I clicked my heels urging Swift to do what she did best. If I trusted anyone to beat the clock and arrive in time it was the spirited mare beneath me. Bent low against her we raced across the snow, churning up clouds of white powder in our wake.

She made it in record time, though we did knock a denizen or two off their feet. Racing through the streets like this I felt invincible. I’d seen fit to challenge a few other hunters to races of this nature when the barn for Swift was first constructed. Their horses were noble beasts but none could approach my mare to make even close to decent competition. She seemed to know that she was a champion and had taken to holding her head high and prancing instead of running the last few lengths of the races.

The party I was to dine with was waiting for me on the stairs to the bank. The twins that were kin to York were there, as I knew they would be. They stood shoulder to shoulder with a blonde haired Executioner who I would’ve mistaken for Alfred if not for his short stature. Lurking behind him was a Sister of the church. Executioner Alfred whom I’d expected was not among my welcoming party.

“You brought your horse with you?”

“Yes Sister.” I said as I dismounted.

She snapped at the tiny blonde. “Patience, find a place to detain the Patron Huntress’ animal.”

He bowed deeply to her and then deeply to me. What a deeply unfortunate name.

“Thank you, Executioner Patience.” I said, handing him the reigns.

He led Swift away, and oddly she did not protest being taken from me. He patted her neck and stroked her nose but spoke no words.

“A vow-taker.” Sussex explained.

“And my son.” The sister put in.

“Will he be joining us?” I asked.

The twins exchanged glances, but it was the Sister who spoke. “Yes. He is part of the deal we plan to offer you.”

Negotiations over church food. I nodded to her and stepped inside the bank navigating its maze like halls to their dining area. I recognized the faces of Strix Savoy and the band of executioners he’d rescued from exile in the teller windows. They pretended not to notice me, but I was sure my presence was felt by all of them as I walked by.

You tend not to forget a woman who nearly uproots your entire life. The hallways we passed through were crammed, which spoke to the overcrowded nature of the Executioner’s bank. Rooms overflowed with bunk beds and hallways with rickety cots. There were even a few hammocks
strung up between support beams where it was judged the structure was strong enough. Surely they must want to expand, having seen this I knew that there was no clear path from lobby to dining hall. Had there been any way of avoiding the clutter they would’ve used it, and kept up appearances.

The dining hall was plain, understated save the velvet hangings emblazoned with the shining silver wheel which served as standard, sigil and weapon alike. I expected large groups of dining parties considering the popularity of the hour, but we were alone. The twins offered to retrieve trays for us which left me alone with the unfamiliar sister.

“I’m sorry, I don’t think I caught your name, Sister.” I said.

“It wasn’t offered.” She huffed.

If she wanted me to apologize for asking, I refused too. Every hunter in England knew my name. I waited for my question to be answered.

She sighed, as though I’d asked her to carry something heavy and then provided her information. “I am Sister Moira Anne Hastings.”

If my questions were going to be taken to like burdens I would continue to inquire. I wasn’t usually of the habit of making myself a nuisance but Sister Moira Anne was already making my life more difficult then it needed to be. “Which church did you study at?”

Her eyes narrowed. “It was no church in England, if you must know. My mother and father were missionaries. I did my lessons abroad.”

“What church were they affiliates of?” I asked.

“Odeon Chapel, of course.” She snapped.

“Well then you are a member of the English churches then.” I corrected her, “Just a foreign extension. Your home base is in this very city.”

“I am aware of that, Lady Hemlock.”

“I am sure you are, Sister Hastings.” I replied.

“Sister Moira Anne, if you’d be so kind.” She corrected, “I have no fondness for the man I wed. It was a marriage born of duty to produce strong hunters for the church. I prefer not to dwell on it.”

“You must be proud of its result.” I said, “A vow-taker for a son.”

She gave a derisive sniff but offered no further comment. The twins returned moments later, trays in hand. They were graceful even when over encumbered by the food, managing to make it back with enough for all present and a spare for the Sister’s son. He must be having a hard time finding a place for a horse in the middle of the city. Had I more time or fewer responsibilities I might have returned her home before arriving, but necessity beggared the imposition.

“The best we have to offer, Lady Hemlock.” Essex said as he placed a tray down in front of me. Simple fare and poorly seasoned as was typical. Food that tasted good was apparently a sin these days, especially in the post-Yule winter when spices were at an all-time low. Stock would not return until spring.

“Thank you for inviting me to dine and sharing what you have with me.” I replied.
“I find negotiations tend to go better over food then on empty stomachs.” Sussex said. His stomach growled to punctuate his point and I had to suppress a chuckle.

They appeared quite eager to dine, but none of them made a move to pick up their silverware. The twins even went so far as to remain standing, waiting for the last of their representatives to arrive. He came in shortly after the trays had been set down, bowing his apologies.

“We’ve all been waiting on you.” Sister Moira Anne admonished.

Patience bowed once more and stood before the empty seat. He sat down with the twins in one solid motion, like a piece of machinery. Everyone folded their hands in unison. I joined them a second behind, my Valkyries rarely preyed before meals.

“Would you do the honors, Lady Hemlock?” the sister asked.

I had to take a moment to filter through the prayers I still recalled while seeking an appropriate verse. The twins eyes focused on me, but Patience kept his turned down and closed. It made his wordless praying seem more fervent then the others.

“Kos above, Odeon below,
More strength then we could ever show,
Bless us to your best extent,
Til the day the beasts relent,
What we harvest from the earth
Used to fight with all we’re worth
Swords that guard the common man
It is all by your command”

It was not a prayer I was excruciatingly fond of, but one I had known since I was a girl. Atlee, Templeton and I were taught it and had said it over many a meal. Sister Moira Anne seemed suitably pleased, perhaps even surprised I knew something traditional. My choice of company may have been unorthodox but my upbringing was as traditional as any other hunter’s. Suitable words now spoken

Sussex tore into his food without hesitation, often breaking apart bread with his hands rather than sullying his knife. Everyone else was more reserved.

I let them take a few bites, but business was business. I had not come to waste time. “So, what it is you have asked me here for?”

Executioner Essex dabbed his lips with a napkin. “Surely you must know. We would not insult your intelligence with base explanations.”

“I was not briefed before coming here.” I informed him.

Executioner Sussex choked back a laugh. He tried to cover it with a cough but I knew that trick, and was not fooled. “Is a briefing even required for something like this?”

“Something like what?” I asked, setting my cup down on the table. “If it is so obvious, please
allow me to feel stupid once it has been brought to my attention, but I insist on being informed.”

“Very well.” Sister Moira Anne said, “If you want it put in plain terms it is no trouble for me to say. The recent attack should make it obvious but we can no longer allow your lover sanctuary in the city of Yharnam. The recent attacks and influx of Vilebloods make it obvious that she is not keeping in line with the rules of the treaty.”

The grip I had on my butter knife tightened.

“We understand however-” Essex began, “That the junior Executioners as well as Executioner Kelfazin were partially to blame. We cannot negate that aspect, but we have a few..amendments of our own to propose to ensure this doesn’t happen again.”

Sussex choked down a mouthful of food before adding his own content, each speaking in turns. It made this feel like a practiced piece. I was treated as an audience to a play, all of the choices were already made. “We’ve got to make sure that one of your Vilebloods isn’t the one responsible for all the newly minted little hell raisers that keep popping up.”

“I can assure you Fwahe and Templeton spend the winters abroad.” I countered.

“Your word only goes so far.” Sussex retorted.

“Was I not-“ I began.

Sister Moira Anne had the nerve to cut me off, “We have no doubt of your word, or your mark. It is the younger hunters who raise objections, those who do not yet understand the demands of the job nor the significance of Kos’ touch in you. They need more appeasement or we fear they may be driven to violence.”

“Which is expressly forbidden.” I reminded them.

“We’re not advocating for a lift on that ban.” Essex said, “Merely just instituting some kind of insurance.”

Dancing around in implications was exhausting. “What exactly are you proposing?” I sighed.

“We need a guard stationed at your theater, to keep an eye on the Vilebloods while they are in Yharnam for the season.” Said the Sister.

“Absolutely not I-“

She cleared her throat to silence me, “We’ve done everything in our power to make this as unobtrusive as possible, which is why we’d recommend Patience take the position. His vow will prevent him from audibly interrupting any of your daily routine and he has been disciplined and taught by the finest the Executioners can offer. Of course we also ask that you induct him as a full-fledged Executioner before allowing him to leave us for this duty.”

Patience looked up when his name was mentioned. He seemed as though he’d been fitted with an Executioner’s costume as opposed to being the genuine article. The lightened hair spoke to its true nature at the roots. It was horrendously cut, chopped too short and left too long simultaneously. His eyes were angular, and dark, not something born of Yharnam. He had sun in his skin, not moonlight. He hardly resembled his mother at all, who was clearly of the pale-skinned light-haired Yharnamites. She wanted him to look like her.

“You’ll do as your told won’t you?” Sister Mary Anne asked.
Patience nodded vigorously, head flung so far back and forth I thought he might unintentionally dunk his face in his soup bowl.

“Really it’s nothing more then a formality.” Essex said, “To put the minds of our hunters and our denizens at ease.”

“This will not be readily agreed too.” I said, “The Patron’s Ranger is unlikely to take to intrusion kindly.”

“She’s your subject is she not?” Sussex asked.

I shook my head, “She’s sworn me her loyalty but I am no queen. I do not have subjects.”

“Call them allies, call them subjects, call them whatever you wish. The point is they follow your commands, and she will too.” The same Executioner concluded.

He wasn’t wrong, but it didn’t infuriate me any less. I’d been upbraided by the Powder Kegs and pushed around by the Executioners in the same day, if not the very same hour. I was at my wits end. The way they circled in on me, each presenting a separate and well-reasoned facet of their argument was snake-like. They were winding their coils in the hopes that I wouldn’t notice before they’d stolen my breath. You had to cut off its head to stop the winding, but a butter knife made for poor butchery among pleasant company. Perhaps the snake could be distracted.

“Are there no other vow-takers?” I asked.

This threw them off their train of thought. Essex was first to collect himself.

“We do have a few others-“

“Then why not one of them?” I interrupted, “It seems, and I know you’ll forgive the accusation Sister Moira Anne Hastings, but it seems a bit unfair to submit your own son for consideration if there are others who fit the same profile. Some who are no doubt full-fledged Executioners as opposed to novices.”

She swallowed, glancing around the dining hall for some source of deliverance. She didn’t find it, but Sussex did.

“We thought the Vileblood might-“

“Her name is Fwahe.” I asserted.

He rolled his eyes, then seemed to realize who he was addressing and cast them down. “We thought Fwahe might be more comfortable with someone of less experience. Someone who hadn’t actually done any slaying.”

“And you do not fear incompetency on his part?” I asked.

“He wasn’t raised to leave his duties half-finished.” Essex advocated.

Sister Moira Anne was talking to me but looking right at Patience. He seemed far more fearful of his own mother then myself or his fellow Executioners. “He knows better than to fail. “

Patience swallowed and then nodded, with less vigor. A small dip of the head. Very frightened, not at all what I expected the Executioners would want to send to act as guardian of a set of Vilebloods. Better him then Executioner Kelfazin, so it seemed.
“I will need time to consider your proposal.” I told them.

“We will give you twenty four hours.” Sussex said.

“You will provide me with as much time as I deem necessary.” I corrected, “For you would not
your Patron Huntress making any hasty decisions, now would you?”

“Of course not Lady Hemlock.” Sussex said, straining to keep his tone dry and even.

They had ruined the meal for both parties. Now that we were at odds with one another the bland
food was impossible to enjoy. Patience and Sussex were the only ones who continued to consume, one
looking to cure his appetite and one just looking to avoid eye contact. Essex made a few half-
hearted attempts at conversation and while I felt an obligation to respond to his words, Sister Moira
Anne jumped to end all inquiries as quickly as possible.

Sussex’s spoon clicked against the bottom of his emptied bowl. He let out a belch and that seemed
to be the end of things.

“Patience, take our Patron to her mount.” Sister Moira Anne said. “We will look forward to hearing
from you, Lady Hemlock.”

“Good day, Sister Hastings.” I said.

Patience stood up in a rush and held the door of the dining hall open for me. He seemed
uncomfortable taking a lead position, opting to walk beside me instead. He was often a step
behind. Patience walked like he was wearing shackles, both hands wrist crossed over wrist, in front
of him, though I could see no chains. I kept turning towards hallways we weren’t using. After
reaching for the wrong door knob yet again I clicked my cane on the floor.

Patience cringed at the noise, but didn’t hesitate to turn towards me and bow. I sighed and dipped
my head back at him. Every one of these gestures was a wasted instant, keeping me from talking
out this situation with Fwahe. There were also the strange crystals to consider.

“I don’t know where we’re going.” I told him, “So you ought to just walk ahead so I can follow.”

He blushed, bowed again and took the lead. Fwahe was going to eat him alive. Figuratively.

It seemed the only place capable of holding my horse had been a narrow alley between the bank
and a disused building. There was a small pile of apples on the ground next to her, though she
hadn’t touched them. He looked disappointed at this.

“Thank you.” I said.

Another bow.

I climbed on top of Swift and looked down at him. I felt like warning about Fwahe, her moods and
her sharp words. If he’d been startled by the click of my cane there’s no telling what my paramour
would do to torment this poor boy. I couldn’t entirely blame her. No one likes having the church
breathing down their neck.

Sister Moira Anne’s offer was entirely too civil. The Executioners were no doubt up to something,
but I had to admit their concerns were valid. If hosting the vow-taker would allow us to clear
Fwhae’s name and allow us to prove she had nothing to do with these strange new Vilebloods, it
could lower some tension. Getting her to agree to something like this would be anything but easy.
“I’ll be seeing you.” I said.

Swift and I took off for home. I felt no need to check behind me, I was sure he’d given yet another bow.

The streets streamed by without my usual watchfulness. I let Swift have her own head and only offered muttered apologies to the denizens we streamed past. If she galloped fast enough I was sure I could leave my problems behind, just for a moment and have a clear head. No matter how fast we went, the worry stayed with me.

The tension refused to relent, even as I removed Swift’s saddle and brushed her coat. I put all of her tack back in its box. I checked to ensure the water in the animal’s troughs hadn’t frozen. It was still dark liquid, and I caught sight of myself in the stagnant water. I was pleased to find the strain of the day did not show, aside from a few stray hairs. I adjusted them and continued on.

My Valkyries never failed to charm me. I opened the doors, stepped through the lobby and found them accosting Callum, our resident medic. I had asked him to make a visit a few days past as the Vilebloods would be coming and I would have him treat whatever wounds they’d picked up. He was the only one who would treat the wounds they picked up. His timing couldn’t have been better, for now I could get his opinion on the crystals as well.

“Poke me with one more needle and you’ll loose an eye.” Fwahe snarled.

“Gouging my eye out won’t keep you from getting tetanus, this shot, or I don’t know…wearing shoes might help.” Callum growled right back.

She stuck out her lips in a pout and the onlookers launched into giggles. The two of them put on quite a show. I’d never seen someone as truly and unabashedly unafraid of Vilebloods as Callum. He was a strange character even among hunters. He refused to tie himself to anyone, yet did not claim to be a loner. He gave the same quality of care to beggars as to barons, though he was paid very differently by each. Some would simply hand over cold coins, but he’d been known to accept home-cooked meals, knit scarves and, his truly preferred method, tobacco for his services.

“You should be fit to survive the winter now.” The medic said, passing his final judgement on the subject of my lover’s health.

She didn’t thank him, but slid a black velvet pouch from her pocket to his hand. He pulled the drawstring eagerly, taking a sniff of its contents. He smiled, packing the dried leaves into the well in his pipe and scraping through his pockets for a match.

“Thank you for accepting my invitation.” I said, both greeting to the medic and announcement of my presence. Fwahe wiggled her toes, then hopped out of her chair and wrapped an arm around my neck.

“Doc says I’m healthy, but I think I could use a bit of bedrest…” She whispered in my ear.

I laughed, and followed her upstairs. Better to indulge one last time before laying out the unfortunate proposals and strange scenarios that would deeply effect our time together. One last good night, for posterities’ sake. If we talked about it within twenty four hours then the Executioners won. There was time for a small victory, the kind best celebrated behind closed doors.

Chapter End Notes
Thank you for reading!
Thankless Job

Chapter Summary

A day in the life of Callum, favorite medic of outcasts and Vilebloods alike.

Chapter Notes

As always, please let me know what you think!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Callum

I had to choose to be a medic. There were higher callings surely. There was always the siren song of the church, and for a time I’d honed my craft within its incense-soaked walls. That might have been where the love for smoke came from.

Even if it wasn’t the church there were other things. The world needs ditch diggers too. The hilarity of that thought would be enough to send a crowd into hysteria. I could hardly shift a shovel full of dirt, let alone dig a trench. Unlike many of the others who’d received a significant boosting to their natural strength when imbibed with ministrated blood, I’d remained the same. There was no intoxication, no rush of emotions or energy. When I’d been cut I hadn’t changed at all.

I’d found a few other cases like this. Without proper equipment and a controlled study I could only assume the cause was some rare bit of recessive genealogy. I was lucky to have it, or I might have been an early candidate for a blood-drunken hunter, met my end at the hands of the Holy Crows. They’d dropped their church association a while back, and were Hunters of Hunters now but I clung to the older terms.

Even fish-mongering could’ve been a nobler cause then this. Without proper equipment and a controlled study I could only assume the cause was some rare bit of recessive genealogy. I was lucky to have it, or I might have been an early candidate for a blood-drunken hunter, met my end at the hands of the Holy Crows. They’d dropped their church association a while back, and were Hunters of Hunters now but I clung to the older terms.

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There was no such illusion with Lady Frigga. The hunters gossiped about what went on in her bedroom endlessly. They thought to ask me all kinds of lewd questions, assuming that since I performed examination I was an expert in hunter to Vileblood relations. If she had, as some of the woodlanders suggested, a secondary set of teeth down below, I didn’t know about it. There would be no evolutionary advantage for such preposterous suggestions, and I told them so. They’d just laugh and think of some new ridiculous inquiry to present me with.

“Do you have too?”
I turned towards the shier of the two Vilebloods. She always asked, every time. There was no other way to check on her scars except to look at them, but the scholar’s embarrassment was unending.

“Yes.” I told her.

She led me to her orchestra pit and I followed, lugging my doctor’s bag along. Kos forbid we do anything out in the open where it would be convenient. Now I had to wait while she cleared space and adjusted her gas lights. Everything down here was covered in dust which tickled my nostrils in a most irritating way.

Additionally I was not allowed my pipe in her basement confines. That was the worst of it all. For fear the books would catch flame, a suggestion so rational I could not find it in myself to resist complying. She had many ravaged volumes scoured from far shores but amongst them were things of rare beauty with marbled covers and supple leather bindings. She had a drawer full of silk ribbons which were used to exhaustion as bookmarks, color coded to a system that only Templeton was privy too.

When she finally allowed me to take a look at her scars, I was able to give her good news. When I had first seen the marks I was afraid they’d cause her deathly infection. Whoever had done the carving had not bothered to disinfect the instrument which wrought the abysmal destruction. Her wounds were severely infected when I first examined it. The fabric of her shirt had to be cut away, it had fused with the drying blood and made everything much worse.

That had been in years ago. Fearing future infection, she was always careful to clean it and replace any relevant bindings. She didn’t need to bandage it any longer, but she was over worked and over-worried. She’d told me that the winding of cotton bandages calmed her the same way my dried leaves did.

“Everything looks good.” I told her, “Like I said before, the way you take care of it I really doubt it’s going to get infected again. I just like to be sure.”

She nodded, “I don’t want it to get bad again either.”

“My other injuries?” I asked. The Vileblood duo usually picked up something in their travels. The rigor of running from hunters, or beasts or in the reverse sense hunting hunters or beasts often lead to hasty actions. Hasty actions brought on stupid injuries.

“I rolled my ankle earlier, in midsummer.” Templeton said, “But we had your field guide with us and followed the instructions. Fwahe tried to get us to leave before it healed but I showed her the print and she said she couldn’t argue you with you when you weren’t there.”

“She can’t even argue with me now.” I muttered, “But I’m glad the book came in handy. Straining injuries only makes them worse.”

“Speaking of books!” Templeton cried, hastily mis-buttoning her shirt as she sprung out of her seat. She rummaged through her traveling pack before producing a thin weather-stained journal. She passed it to me. The pages were flaking, its red color once bright, now dulled.

“They’re a catalog of the medicinal plants from that very same mountain range.” Templeton explained.

I flipped through the first few pages. It was written in English, unlike some of the books she’d brought me and its author had rendered watercolor illustrations of the various plants in painstaking detail. It was a shame the binding was in such poor condition and that the pages were so old. None
of the drawings were familiar to me, and it would be another dusty object, disused on my shelf but I was content with it anyway. Some form of payment was better than none at all. It was pretty enough that it could be sold, if it came to that but I got the sense that I would keep the useless book anyway.

“Are you spending the night?” Templeton asked.

“Go outside, on the night of a hunt? I don’t think so.” I said.

“Frigga says the streets are clear nowadays.” She said.

I placed the book in my bag and clipped it shut, “Frigga also sleeps with a Vileblood. I don’t trust her judgement on every subject.”

“You sho-“

“I shouldn’t talk about my patron that way?” I finished for her.

She nodded.

“She’s not my patron. Everyone loves to forget this but I’ve sworn no loyalties. My services are the kind that you pay for, and that is the extent of it.” I said, “Right now Frigga is in charge of the hunters, and that’s fine with me. She’s got a lot more sense then Minimus ever did but she’s another monarch. Mark my words, Templeton, monarchs never last.”

“She rejected the title of queen.” She quipped.

“Only to replace it with Patron Huntress.” I replied, “A monarch is a monarch no matter the title. Your companion Cato has it right, calling her majesty all the time. It’s what she’ll become, if that’s not already what she is.”

It was obvious that the scholar wanted to disagree with me, just didn’t know how. I left before she could put the pieces together, climbing out of the dusty orchestra pit and back into the cavernous theater.

“What’s the prognosis Doc?”

Cato and his fingerless boyfriend had been waiting for me, legs dangling off the edge of the stage. The two of them were a breeding ground for diseases. You could practically see the flies buzzing around their heads, hunters who never remembered to clean off the blood. I tried not to curl up my nose. Showing them any sign of contempt would be taken for weakness and their inquiries were sure to get worse.

“She’ll live,” I replied, swallowing my pride enough to give them a theatrical wink, “but just barely.”

They breathed mock sighs of relief. Cato’s eyes re-focused on my pipe. The stem was held between my teeth and I’d gotten halfway decent at using only one side of my face to talk so that the other could clamp down on it. The calm stillness of the city just made my anxieties grow. I’d had to open up shop during the day, for the first time in years. The clean streets had driven me to be as available as possible. Months gone by without a single attack from beasts. My professional skills didn’t seem to be of much use in Yharnam anymore.

A fact that was bittersweet. I was going to have to leave this city. I couldn’t be happier to find it cleansed and care for, it’s denizens with all their needs met. Had I only been a fish-monger I
could’ve relaxed with everyone else in town and enjoyed myself. There would be glasses of hard cider and heartier meals as the possibility of opening the gates for trade with neighboring cities as discussed.

Instead I was reminded of how useless a medic was whenever the crisis I cursed for happening subsided. This profession was one that carried with it a permanent state of unrest and unhappiness. A safe city was never the kind I could live in. Even the slums here had become to clean. This spring would mean packing my bags and moving from one leaky one-room apartment to another. Maybe I could try for a storefront this time. My name was well remembered by many hunters who had been at the Hemwick Charnel Lane tourney.

“Won’t you spare a minute to take a look at my fingers?” Rook asked.

“Sure, what’s wrong with-“ I started before realizing this was a farce.

They burst out laughing at their own joke. I gave them the smallest smile I could manage. My skills were something to be taken seriously, but at least they’d gotten comfortable with their loss of limb. They used to badger me about false fingers and mechanized replacement parts. Jokes at my expense were the logical next step.

“Can’t believe you fell for that Doc!” Cato howled.

“You don’t have a lot of fingers left to loose. I’d suggest you stop making a fool of yourself.” I said.

They scurried off in a fit of cackles and squeaking boots. Their laughter echoed through the theater after they were gone, bouncing around until it became creepy and off-putting. I hated big empty places like this. They took me back to things like throne rooms, things that were best not to think about. I made frequent visits to the theater, so I felt no awkwardness at being teased by its occupants, nor did I have any hesitation at raiding its kitchen.

Coffee and sweet smoke were a winning combination. Frigga had made extensive studies into the Vileblood’s ability to taste, and while most foods didn’t register in the slightest things of the most intense variety were enjoyable eating for her companions. There was always some degree of sickening sweetness hidden in the cupboard if one had the gumption to search for it. I put on the kettle, boiling water for my drink while searching for an appropriate accompaniment.

There’d been thin times where the cabinets hardly held more than dried fish and stale bread but now they overflowed with sweetened fruit preserves, chunks of raw chocolate, dried fruits, candied nuts and all other manner of leftover Yuletide goodies. It was not for lack of trying either, I had received an enormous basket of similar fare delivered to my lodgings on the first day of the Yule season. A card covered in Frigga’s elegant handwriting detailed her thanks as well as its contents, but as money was thin I’d already devoured the luxuries in their entirety.

“Midnight snack?”

I whirled around to find Imogen coming through the kitchen door. I must’ve been a sight, posed the way I was with one foot on the floor, one on the counter and a hand in the cabinet. I was the portrait of the proverbial kid with his hand in the candy jar.

“Cup of coffee.” I returned.

Imogen’s eyes flicked to the copper canister which stood out prominently on the counter. “Grounds are right there.”
I stepped down onto the floor and dusted my hands off on my apron. “Must’ve missed it.”

She chuckled, “Those big ol’ glasses, just like Temp’s and they still passed right by you?”

I glared at her, “So maybe it was a midnight snack. Can’t a guest of the so beloved Patron Huntress have a meal now and again?” Imogen shrugged, “Help yourself I guess.”

Now I just looked like a thief, piling my arms full of food and shifting jars around, searching for hidden treasures. I could feel her eyes boring into me, burning holes in the back of my shirt. No matter what I grabbed it seemed to be the wrong thing, something that would incur the Valkyerie’s judgement for my having consumed it.

I was still shifting through the cabinet when the kettle began to screech. Imogen made no move to stop its high-pitched whistle. I momentarily set aside my pantry exploration to take it off the heat. I mixed hot water with ground beans until I’d worked up a bitter black-brown sludge. In finer times I took it with sugar, but now I’d gotten used to the raw uncut flavor. It wasn’t that I preferred it, but black coffee was a meal I was accustomed too in winter months.

“Ugh, how can you drink it like that?” Imogen asked. “It’s so thick its practically glue. You need some milk and sugar.”

For an answer I took a nice long sip, making sure to produce a pronounced slurping noise. Her nose wrinkled in disgust. I worried Frigga’s hunters might be going soft, had they always been so particular about the taking of their coffee?

“You get used too it.” I told her.

She shrugged, “I prefer tea in any case.”

Weaker stuff, with less caffeine. Delicate things like watery broken down plants were useless to me. That wouldn’t keep you up all day and all night.

“What did you come in here for?” I asked, changing the subject in the hopes that whatever brought her here was a problem quickly remedied. Once she left I could get to searching again.

“Same as you I guess. Snack time.” Imogen said.

She slid past me and opened a few drawers, pulling out the makings for her extra meal. Chunks of dark brown bread, tinned fish and several spreads with labels I didn’t recognize. She was a fiend when it came to dishes, using a different butter knife for each of the three spreads instead of rinsing off the same one.

“You want one?” She asked after her sandwich concoction was complete.

Better this then nothing. I nodded and she dirtied three new knives, leaving seven lying in the sink. Wasteful was what it was. The strange sandwich wasn’t even worth the excess silverware. Its flavors were in gross imbalance with one another. There was no semblance of balance or palette sophistication anywhere. Culinary genius, Imogen was not.

As if I were one to complain. I hadn’t tasted a dish that was truly worth tasting since before most of the hunters here were born. My memories hadn’t dulled and cracked like Fwahe’s, I could remember times spent at Cainhurst. I did not belong to any of the northernmost noble families but the Prestwick name carried dignity and wealth with it, so we welcomed most anywhere we went. I had spent summers in the castle of the Vilebloods, when I was young enough to be ignorant of blood corruption. Everything was simpler when you were kept stupid.
I didn’t regret leaving that place and the rest of my family behind me, but the catered meals were worth missing. They had been a constant of childhood as common place as lessons and family prayers. I would become immersed in the good flavors in a way not dissimilar to smelling a childhood blanket or reading an old book. Instantly you became innocent and whole once more. Unshattered by the weight of the world, hands cleaned of their crimson.

I had more to wash off then most. It was true that hunters actually went out and slayed the corrupt, often catching up the innocent in their sweeping gestures for the benefit of the all-knowing all-watching greater good, but my sins were deeper and worse. I had been born into bloodstains. From the second I was wrapped in cloth I was covered in the corpses of the dead and injured. The money for silken swaddling clothes acquired from generations of child labor, exploitation and slave labor. I ate thanks to the unending suffering of thousands of nameless people and had enjoyed every bite without a thought.

Who was I to be complaining about an amateur’s sandwich construction. I took another bite of the fish and bread, too salty and soggy. She hadn’t toweled the oil off the fish before taking them out of the tin. I brushed palmfuls of it off onto my apron. The stains would wash out easily, nothing could cling to the rubbery fabric longer then I allowed it.

“It’s good.” I lied, drowning out the strange flavor profile with bitter dregs from the tankard.

“Thank you.” Imogen said, licking the last of her meal from her fingertips.

“How are things with Scarlett?” I asked.

“She’s doing pretty well. It was hard for her to take a break from hunting but she’s adjusting to it.” Imogen explained. “She’s afraid for when it starts to show. She doesn’t want to be fat.”

I gave the obligatory chuckle. Women concerned with things like this at times like those. “It’s kind of an inevitably.”

Imogen nodded, “We’re both really excited though.”

Horrified would’ve been a more appropriate emotion. They were insane to want to bring a child into a world like this, so unforgiving and cold. The blood ministration sometimes led to strange effects and I’d delivered more stillborn children then live ones. So much to worry about and people still wanted to create more life, breed more problems. Worse because of the extra steps Scarlett and Imogen had had to take to craft something like this. Accidents were understandable, and people had hearts to weak to slay what they’d unintentionally created. That I could forgive and attend with interest.

I listened to her carry on, making my way to the sink to scrub at the dirtied knives and crusty plates that had been left there. The water was cold at first, but it was a common occurance. These days I melted snow for my baths rather than pay for the tap. The Valkyrie’s water warmed before long.

It was the ones who wanted it I couldn’t fathom. To have to find a volunteer and make plans of raising something, hoping that the little life would be born with the strength to hunt. These were impossible wishes for times like these. Even with the streets cleansed and the infection subsiding it was a hair-brained idea.

No one asks my advice until after there’s a problem though. That much hasn’t changed since the earliest days of my profession. Medics are there to clean up the messes not prevent their happening. It was a fact I found to be true time and time again.
“Most people are.” I said.

“Hmm?” She mumbled.


Imogen nodded, “We’ve been looking into a few different things. Scarlett can’t seem to decide if she’d rather stay here or find a place for just us. It’d be safer here with everyone around but I don’t know, and I guess she doesn’t know if we want Vilebloods around the kid.”

I took another slurp of the coffee to wash away her distasteful comment, “Fwahe would never harm your child. She probably wouldn’t even go near it. If I remember correctly she hates children.”

“That’s not the one were worried about.” She returned.

I nearly spat my coffee into the sink. “You’re worried about Templeton?”

“She’s always got this hungry look in her eye.” Imogen explained.

I turned up the water and scrubbed harder at the dwindling pile of dishes. I was counting on the turbulence of flowing water and scraping rags to make enough noise to drown out her comments. I didn’t want to hear them, I’d dealt with enough already. The worst part was there were grains of truth in Imogen’s argument and while I was usually ready to accept those, favor logos above ethos, this was an exception. She was too shy to let people near her scars, I didn’t see her working up the nerve to kill an infant in cold blood.

“I’m tired.” I announced cutting Imogen off mid-conversation.

Her stream of words turned off like the stream of water. A twist of the spout, then all was ceased. She nodded, “Of course.”

I excused myself, stomach starting to churn with the unfamiliar food and went to find a place to rest for the night. The Valkyeries kept guest sweets, sticking them in wherever they could. Most were modified dressing rooms or backstage areas. I favored one dressing room in particular. It was small and narrow, and all of the mirrors had been taken out of it. I didn’t know the cause of such furniture-shifting but I was thankful for it.

Personally I didn’t ascribe to many superstitions but I had an abhorrence for mirrors that leaned heavily towards paranoia. If it was at all to be avoided I would refuse to sleep in a room with one. There was something unnerving about looking at them, though from a scholarly perspective there wasn’t anything out of the ordinary. I couldn’t shake the feeling that there was something wrong about them, about the exactly-the-same-but-reversed version of the world that was shown through on the other side.

A long time ago, my older brother Titus had told me I had come from that mirror world, where everything was wrong way round. I had believed him, as all younger brothers are want to do for their elder siblings. He terrified me with tales of black hands sprouting from shattered glass, coming through to drag me down and take me home. Titus spoke of a mother waiting for me there, one who had claws for hands and mouths where her eyes should be.

In a world filled to the brim with monsters it wasn’t so far from believability. His stories went on that if I ever broke a mirror I would be stolen away. He shattered one right in front of me, I screamed and ran to my older sister, Alexandrine for trouble. Thirteen of us Prestwick heirs, plenty of people to flee to for comfort and I had made a poor choice. She called me stupid and told Titus
right off. I still believed him, and continued to for years afterwards.

Childhood fears stuck with you. I serviced grown men afraid of needles. There were plenty of shadows that stuck with you, long after the years of maturity should’ve banished them. Fwahe had her own demons, and I regularly provided her with potions to chase out the strange people she swore she saw, someone called Tom. Then there was the sword which could talk, and regularly gave her advice. I’d suggested a new blade might be hopeful, her current one appeared to be corroded a great deal anyway. She’d refused in the most explicit and uproarious terms. The subject was never approached again. I let her keep her safety blanket, her talking sword. I strained to keep what I could of her sane.

We were both of the north, before the fall. There were days where I slept in feather beds, but now I unfolded a canvas hammock and fitted coarse rope through steel loops in the wall to make my own place to sleep. Feather comforters exchanged for rough spun wool. Some of the other dressing rooms had beds but this one was too narrow. The hammock stretched diagonally across the room, with just enough space to hold taut.

I climbed inside, trying to banish the thoughts of mirror monsters and the past places they’d originated. No use dwelling on it. The dressing room had no windows, but I didn’t need the changing skies to wake me up. Sleep came in short bursts these winter nights. I could rest for an hour, be up for two, sleep another three then be unable to return to the restful realms again.

I didn’t even try to use my own sleeping draughts. A schedule like this was beneficial in my profession, when things were busy. It seemed a little much for peaceful Yharnam but nevertheless it was a habit I tried to keep. I got up and went back down several times.

When at last I smelled fresh coffee and new meals being made I decided to investigate. I was pleased to find Lady Frigga was the one in the kitchen, and she seemed pleasantly surprised to have me join her.

“Good morning, you were just the person I was hoping to see.” She said.

People rarely hoped to see me.

“What can I do for you?” I asked.

She held up two fingers.

“Two things actually.” She replied. She pushed a cutting board brimming with root vegetables and salted pork across the counter. “First of all I need you to help me make omelettes. Secondly I need to know everything you have learned about blood gems.”

The term was not a familiar one and thus both favors were easily done. I took hold of a knife and began peeling skin from carrots. “Well that is an easy one, I’ve never heard of a blood gem before.”

Her lips, which were painted red, pushed themselves into a pout. “That’s most unfortunate.”

“Perhaps I just know of them under a different name.” I said, ever trying to be of use.

She mused on it while I sliced onions. They used to sting my eyes to a terrible degree but the days where vegetables produced tears were long behind me. I piled their layers of thin wrapping to the side and made cuts with the precision that only practiced chef and learned surgeon could manage. All in years of well-worked wrists.
She made up her mind as the bacon began to brown. Reaching into her jacket pocket, Frigga produced a bottle of small crystals. She rolled it across the counter towards me, and I adjusted my glasses to get a better look. Fearful of damaging them I did not uncork the bottle but kept them behind the glass.

“Have you ever seen anything like them?” Frigga asked.

I had to concede. Their appearance was entirely unfamiliar to me. “Where did these come from?” I asked.

“The powder kegs.” She replied, “Those Lupei brothers invited me to see some new weapon, but their engineer had made this instead. A girl called York, if you’ve heard of her.”

Another shake of the head, “Those bothersome brothers I know well enough but the girl’s name does not ring any bells. Are these crystals weaponry of some sort?”

“York seemed to think so. Something about inhaling them for additional strength.” Frigga replied.

She grabbed the cutting board while I turned the jar around, watching the crystals tumble around inside. The vegetables sizzled and spat when they hit the hot pan, adding the appetizing scent of caramelizing onions to the kitchen.

“Most unusual.” I muttered.

“What’s that?” Frigga asked.

I hadn’t meant for the remark to travel beyond my ears. All the same I cleared my throat and spoke over the sizzling food. “It’s odd, these crystals must’ve been made in different batches. They all came out with different structures which suggests different formulas were used to create them. It’s odd they were placed in the same jar.”

“I have to disagree with you there.” Frigga said, “York was making a batch while I was there and they appeared to come out in different shapes all on their own.”

“How did she make them?” I asked.

Frigga shrugged pouring the egg mixture in with the partially cooked vegetables, “She was using blood, but I’m not sure what other things were happening. I was kind of perturbed as I’d been expecting a gun or a sword or something. Instead she had more of a mad scientist’s lab going on.”

“May I take these for further inspection?” I asked, “I have better equipment back at my own residence. You can investigate those.”

A trip out to the Powder Kegs was the last thing I wanted, especially with knee-deep snow. The strange curiosity was hardly worth it, but I knew it would nag me to know end if I let it be. The preposterous Lupei brothers were another headache I didn’t need. Their own comrades must tire of them, as either the older or younger if not both was routinely put on guard duty. No one could stand to be around such offensive accosting hunters for extended periods of time.

I’d had to patch them up more then once and every time they talked a big game but shied away from the needles and syrups that would fix them. Aditya Lupei was only marginally less resistant despite the years that separated him from Viorel. Neither were patients I cared to have, nor if they could at all be pushed onto another medic I was the first to pass them along. In these thin times, I
almost wish one of them had done something stupid to the other. Powder Kegs paid well, if nothing else, and they paid in solid silver.

“Sounds fine to me.” I said.

“Can you toast some bread, I’ve got to go wake the others. Cato will sleep all day if I let him.” Frigga asked.

Certinly I was being asked for a great many favors this morning. I set the crystals down in exchange for a bread knife and set to slicing. I used the whole loaf, slicing off thick chunks and spreading them with a sizeable layer of butter and then tossing them onto a skillet. I took up a spatula to keep the omelette mixture from burning. It was fast crumbling into scrambled eggs. I was by no means a chef.

The Valkyries began to traipse into the kitchen one by one. Fwahe was first up, eager to respond to Frigga’s beckoning. I watched her retrieve her daily intake of blood, which she stored in vials capped with corks covered in yellow wax. She jerked her chin towards me as she pried wax away from the edges.

“Morning.” I returned her greeting.

She took a swallow from the vial, then poured the rest into an empty tankard. Rifling through the Valkyries supplies she filled the remainder of the vessel with milk, stirring both together with her finger. The drink inside became a mottled pinkish color. She didn’t taste it, beyond licking a drop off her lips and recoiling at the taste.

Her curious behavior was explained when Templeton stumbled in. She had a quilt over her shoulders and her tangle of orange curls was even messier then before. She sat herself down on one of the counter’s many stools, resting her chin on the wooden surface.

“Breakfast.” Fwahe informed, pushing the cup towards her.

Templeton shook her head. Fwahe tapped the cup against the scholar’s cheek, repeating the process until Templeton let loose a long sigh. She picked up the cup and drained the blood and milk mixture in one long dreg.

“More?” she asked when she was done.

Fwahe shook her head, “Not until I go hunting again.”

“Plus Frigga has…well Frigga and I have prepared breakfast.” I said. The eggs had browned a little more then I’d prefer. I scooped them onto slices of toast and laid bacon, over top. Open face sandwiches for all. Neither Vileblood accepted, and I took theirs for my own.

Fwahe was quick to clean up the blood dregs before Scarlett and Imogen came in.

The two pairs of wakened women did not greet each other. Imogen left a seat inbetween her and Fwahe, Scarlett sat on the other side. The counter had a slight curve too it, making it seem like the empty seat was a gap tooth in an otherwise standard mouth. The bane of any good dentist. An uneasy silence flooded the kitchen.

High tide didn’t last long. Cato stumbled in a few moments later, filling the empty space. A yawn, followed by his growling stomach soon broke the overbearing soundlessness.

“Didn’t know you could cook.” He said, grabbing a sanwhich with one hand and rubbing the sleep
from his eyes with the other.

“It was mostly your patron’s doing.” I told him.

“She’s your patron too.” Imogen said.

I sighed and took my time chewing toasted bread, warm eggs and cooked mushrooms before I returned my reply, “I’ve sworn no loyalties too her. I’m a medic. I don’t have patrons, only patients.”

“But surely-“ Scarlett started.

“Surely a learned field medic can make up his own mind.” Frigga said, making her return with Sterling and Mouse behind her. Both had done a great deal of growing in years previous and were now as viable a hunter as any. Frigga was exceptionally proud of the both of them.

I nodded and handed her a plate.

“If this is all settled I’ll be on my way.” I announced, “The Powder Kegs are better dealt with on a full stomach.”

“What are you going to them for?” Templeton asked.

I changed a glance at Frigga who gave the slightest shake of her head. A secret to be held between us then. “I’ve been requested.” I lied.

She nodded her understanding. One of the few advantages of my position was that I fit in wherever I might be. Rich or poor, practiced or headstrong anyone could get injured. There was comfort in having a doctor, even an unfamiliar one on the premises.

“Nothing serious, I hope.” Scarlett ventured.

“With those hunters, who knows.” I sighed. “I’m off.”

I gathered my things, and Frigga drew up a note for me to bring to the Powder Kegs. I took long enough to pack that everyone had finished their breakfast and collected in the lobby to see me off. It was a mite too drastic for me. I wasn’t hard to find. If they were loathe to part with me the boarding house where I roomed was simple enough to find.

They voiced a gaggle of goodbyes as I vacated the theater. Outside the weather was worsening. Snow accumulated from previous days made walking the ground closer to walking a minefield. Sleet fell in my face, the cold slush soaking right through day-old clothes. I routinely had to wipe clumps of it off my glasses, a permafrost of frigid condensation marring my vision.

The legs of my pants started to soak up all of the snow. It threatened to worm its way past cheap leather to bite at my socks. Wet wool was liable to stay that way for a long time and I could only hope the shoes would hold a little longer. The trek was anything but a pleasant one, though I seemed to be the only one struggling with it. Red-cheeked children ran through the streets lobbing balls of snow at one another, getting a few last rounds of competition in before they were called indoors for the night. Little fiends. They had no idea that there were hundreds of stillborns in their wake. No one got it right on their first try anymore, and the healing church urged denizens to try and try and try. Making new hunters was a priority, at least before the streets got cleaner. I wasn’t sure what the church stood for nowadays, but whatever changes they made it brought less people to me for help.
I was thankful and irritated at the same time. Frigga’s note was all that filled my pocket. Not so much as a copper coin. My matches were soiled the second I took them out to light my pipe. The only source of warmth I had, rendered useless.

The decaying train station was hardly visible in the snow, covered over with so much white that nothing seemed the same. A hundred or so traps were buried in the snow, the off-putting hunters had built their home up like a fortress. Beasts were one thing, and I could see the need for a net or a few trip wires. These hunters had dug a moat, spiked pits, bear traps, and a whole mess of other insanities. They were prepared for an invasion rather than a few mangy monsters.

“Hey!” I shouted.

The whistling wind was all that responded. I’d need to be much louder if I was going to attract their attention. Such a hassle.

I cupped my hands to my mouth and put all of my remaining breath into the echo of my first call.

“Shut up! I heard you the first time!”

The good part was that I wouldn’t be left out in the snow. The bad part was I recognized the voice. My morning headache personified, Viorel Lupei popped out of the snow. He reminded me of a peacock, the way his clothes were always caked with decorations.

“Then why didn’t you say anything.” I muttered.

On his way to reaching me, Viorel tripped over one of his own wires and bumped his knee on the edge of a metal cage. He swore at both of them, breath coming out in smoke-colored clouds.

“The fuck do you want?” He growled at me.

I rolled my eyes and gave him the paper that Frigga had given me. Clumps of falling slush threatened to smear the ink. Viorel narrowed his eyes, putting the paper far too close to his face for a comfortable reading distance. The boy probably needed glasses, but I was no optometrist. It was either that or he couldn’t read, but either assertion was sure to result in a punch in the face from the hot-headed hunter.

I figured I would expedite the process, “Frigga wants me to visit with your war engineer. The same one that she saw yesterday.”

“Mantis?” Viorel asked.

“I believe her name is York.” I said.

Viorel started walking back towards the station, note in hand. I followed directly in his footprints, easily done thanks to the snow. He cursed at me and the snow, and the building, a never-ending flow of insults.

The interior of the train station was full of thick air and dry dust. Everything smelled like gasoline, strongly enough to burn nostrils. This could not be good for their brains, though it did explain a thing or two. The basement was a dark place with a singular advantage, which came in the form of a shoe. It was thrown with force enough to send Viorel scampering away.

“I come in peace!” I called down to the projectile-launcher.

York came out of the shadows, with a second boot in her hand. She looked me over, and her hand
relaxed. The boot was tossed to the ground with a dulled thump. “Who are you?”

“My name is Callum. I’m a medic.” I said, a standard introduction.

“Last name redacted?” She asked.

“Harsh assessment for a lady who is yet to introduce herself.” I said.

“Yorkshire.” She replied, “Yorkshire Downey.”

It seemed like a fake name, but I wasn’t willing to reveal my family name either. It had been a long time since I’d last spoken it. I do wonder what had become of the last person who knew, that boy I had pulled from the rubble during the fall of Yhar’Ghul. He had been one of the only survivors. I’d seen faces that were familiar, but never a good enough look for confirmation.

“Well Miss Downey, I’m here on behalf of Frigga Hemlock.” I said.

“Really?” she asked.

I reached for the paper, then remembered what had become of it. Snow-soaked and ravaged with wrinkles from the Powder Keg’s hands. “I had a paper, but…Viorel ruined it.”

“He always does. Aditya is worse if you can believe it.” York said, “It’s just Lady Hemlock was not very receptive to what I had to say the other day. An emissary is not something I expected.”

“I wasn’t planning on coming here either, but your work intrigued me.” I explained.

Her face broke into a smile, and she waved me back deeper into the basement. “Come on, come see for yourself.”

I could understand Frigga’s confusion, the set up certainly leaned more towards the chemical then mechanical side of the inventing spectrum. I took glances at the labels on York’s ingredient storage cabinet. Coldblood flower seeds, tomb mold, sages fingers and other strange ingredients I’d only read about in my more arcane remedy books. This was the stuff of old blood and bone magic which had fallen completely out of practice when the church came in to power. After the discovery of blood ministration these methods were no longer needed.

“This is some ancient stuff you’re working with.” I said.

“You wouldn’t believe how hard it is to find.” York replied, “Stuff from the Phthumetian days.”

I let out a low whistle, “That’s a word I haven’t heard in years. You know your history. Color me impressed.”

“Well I’ve studied. I see you have too Mr…?”

There it was again with the last name inquiries. Holding off any longer would just prompt more questions. I gave her the same alias as anyone else who was persistent enough to require it.

“Ferguson.” I said.

“Mr. Ferguson.” She said, “I have much more then dusty old bones and foul-smelling powders. Come on and let me show you my real work.”

This work took place on a literal work bench, an old church pew that had been refashioned into a desk. York either had to bend over it, obscuring the whole desk with her broad shoulders and doing
horrible things to her posture or else sit down. The cushions that littered the floor showed she opted for the latter option. She seated herself, and I knelt nearby.

The blood gems, as she’d referred to them were laid out on metal trays along the desk. She used a pair of forceps to dig through them, just like a jeweler with gemstones. York was rather brash and violent with her digging leading me to conclude that these were not fragile things, as I’d first assumed. Many of them had webbing between their points, resembling the unique formations of snowflakes. The delicate tendrils were not a concern of the weapons-maker.

She picked out one with a crescent shaped tool, one that looked like the hooked claw of some small beast.

“This is one of the less common varieties.” York said, “These kind of curved ones, they don’t pop up as often. “

“Are all these shapes from the same batch?” I asked.

York shook her head, “Same blood but different mixes. I usually group them by sample, but perhaps sorting by shape could have its merits as well. I want to test for potency, but haven’t determined suitable subjects.”

“Rats or mice are common for first-run tests.” I offered, taking the forceps from her and holding the blood gem up to my eye. A tiny thing really, no bigger than a thumbnail but intensely captivating. The more I looked it over the more it drew me in. It almost seemed like it had a pulse, a whisper of a heartbeat. I was sure I saw it one moment, but then I’d blink and it would vanish.

“These are the ones that happen most.” York said setting the curved gem down and picking up a triangular one.

I glanced at it, then peered at the tray. She was right, of course. There were hundreds of the little triangles littering the metallic surface. They varied in size and color, but not by much.

“What exactly are the purpose of these crystals, Miss Downey?” I asked.

“I can show you.” York offered.

She removed two crystals, of the common triangle variety and placed them on the table. Taking a nearby mallet she pounded them to dust, shaking beakers and rattling the trays as she attacked the little stone.

“Kos above.” I muttered.

When they were pummeled to a dust fine enough she scraped half the powder into a glass pipe.

“You seem to prefer smoke.” She said, “Though it’s not as strong that way.”

“You intend for me to smoke this?” I asked.

For answer she pressed a finger to one nostril and inhaled the remaining powder herself. A series of snorts and snuffles followed, and as I observed her I noticed a faint lilac glow emitting from her eyes. More sensible to leave something like this well enough alone, but the tobacco supply was drying up. Frigga had asked me to investigate. One puff to learn what I was working with. It could only hurt me so much.

The world became a lake. Everything liquefied and pooled around me. The gelatinous malleable
world was nothing to my hands. I leaned against a corner of the table and it broke, splintering into soft spikes. They fractured my hand like mosquito bites. They didn’t hurt yet but I could see the wounds. I had broken the table, or had it broken me?

Liquid then frozen. That’s how things happen. One blink for water. Two blinks for ice.

It started to snow, piles of it coating the crystals and the floor. The flakes made noises when they hit the ground like tinkling bells. Once the ground had accumulated the multitudes you could hear a symphony, and I was the great timpani drums. A wave of my hand and I could crack a building in half, punctuating the crescendos with blistering bombasts of shattered wood.

Marvelous. I felt the rush of strength and stars that some hunters preached about after receiving the first of their blood ministrations. This was why people came to me inebriated and blood drunk. This is what had the hunters of old banished across the Black Salt Sea when their vision went red and the cosmos itself whispered terrible things in their ears.

“Mr. Furgeson!”

The shout sent back the sea.

I was standing over York. She was on the ground, though three times my size. The workshop was not frozen, but there was a sizeable chunk ripped out of the table. Blood gems and a warped metal tray littered the floor.

Scapel in hand, no idea how it got there. Blood on the floor, and I didn’t know whose it was. I let the knife drop and ran a hand through my hair. It was sticky. I held it front of my face and it was red.

“My…apologies.” I muttered trying to stitch together a sensible explanation.

York let out a relieved sigh. “You went quite a ways farther than I expected you too.”

She was on her knees picking up the gems. There was wood missing from the table, and there were splinters in my left hand. Kos above I was trying to cut them out with a scalpel while I was seeing things. A decision I would think myself having always condemned and never condoned, yet there I was awash with the evidence. I was relieved I hadn’t taken up the knife against York, if for my only solace.

“Went away?” I asked.

“Everyone kind of drifts on the stuff…some people babble or like get fidgety. You tried to stand up and your grip broke right through my table. Then your eyes went purple and you sort of half-sat half-stood. You weren’t looking at what you were doing, but you tried to pick out the wood.” She struggled to find the appropriate description as she scooped up fallen equipment. “You were like an automaton.”

“I broke the table?” I asked.

She nodded, placing two halves of a broken beaker back on the bench. “As easy as breaking off a bit of chocolate from the bar. You just flexed your wrist, and snap.”

“I’m sorry.” I said, “I didn’t mean to break your bench.”

“It’s fine.” York grinned, waving me off, “It’s fine. I’ve never seen anything like that.”
“And you never will again.” I said, rooting through my bag for some gauze. I hastily wound it around my hand, to stem the immediate loss of blood. Even with cleaned streets, leaking fluids was dangerous. “I’m sorry to have troubled you. I think I have all I need Miss Downey.”

“No, no come on.” She said, “Results like that are unprecedented. You’re a-“

“Good day.” I repeated.

She was so caught up in convincing me to stay that she was looking at the wrong place. Focused on my face and not my hands. Gauze wasn’t the only thing that was placed back in the medic’s bag. I took a handful of the blood gems, their pointed edges poking into my palm as I shoved them in alongside various bottles and bandages.

York was still protesting as I headed upstairs. She badgered after me all the way to the border of the Powder Keg’s station. Viorel was changing watches with his brother, and the both of them grabbed me by the arms.

“Unhand me this instant.” I spat.

“The fuck is York running after you for, mate?” Aditya growled at me. His scarred face was worse then Fwahe’s. The cuts placed over her eyes were purposeful, medical and precise. There was a sensibility to them. Aditya Lupei had been ravaged by an explosive mishap. Shrapnel hadn’t a care where it landed nor what it destroyed leaving him a semblance of what he used to be.

“She wants to experiment on me. I’ve no desire to be used as a test subject.” I replied, remaining calm despite the ever-tightening grip. Aditya on the left, Viorel on the right. Both would be armed to the teeth. I tried to wrench away from them, but the brothers held fast.

“Too good for our Mantis?” Viorel asked. “Where’s a prick like you get off thinking he’s all high-class? My cock’s been inside fancier people then scum like you’s ever seen.”

“You couldn’t possibly know how ridiculous you sound.” I said.

“What did you say to me?” He snarled, leaning in close.

His breath was worse than his brother’s face. I pulled away and Aditya shoved me back, closer. Viorel’s chin brushed against my cheek. Who knows the last time he’d washed it, or the number of germs I’d just picked up. Cost of water be damned, I was bathing tonight.

“Leave him alone.” All three of us turned to see Yorkshire, crestfallen but no jailer. She would not hold me captive, “He’ll come back.”

“It’s no trouble.” Aditya said, “We’ll rough him up right good for you.”

She shook her head. “Leave him alone, he didn’t do anything.”

“He’s bleeding.” Aditya observed, He grabbed the collar of my shirt in his fist, lifting me off the ground entirely and holding my forehead against his. “I swear to Kos if you think you can hurt us-“

“I said put him down!” York squeaked, rushing over and pushing down on Aditya’s shoulders. He was strong enough to lift me, likely strong enough to resist York too, but not both at the same time. My boots crunched into the snow.

“It was an accident.” I explained, “And a wound that was self-inflicted. I didn’t lay a hand on anyone.”
Aditya spat, a wad of saliva landing on my chest. Definitely showering. “Watch yourself, doctor.”

Unbelievable. I’d saved both brothers lives more times than once, and I got spat on. A fish monger would never have to deal with this level of contempt.

Aditya Lupei’s threats bounced around in my head as I headed home.

“Watch yourself.”

I was sure he had just meant it as one of those ominous vague things that every bad villain in vaudeville productions says to sound impressive. In these cleansed streets it was a more a reminder of the ghosts of what used to roam here than anything malicious. A reminder to look over your shoulder every now and again lest something unsavory be trailing you. Trudging through the snow was worse the second time through. Why did no one shovel these pathways?

I was calculating the price and relative hassle of renting out a sled-dog team for the winter as I unlocked the door to my small quarters. There was a soggy pile of mail outside the door that I stumbled over on the way inside. I raked the water-logged packages in with my boot then shut and locked the door behind me, pulling the chain across for good measure. It struck me every time how small this room was. There were no separate doors or rooms, everything all mashed together into one unit. The bathtub was inches from the stove. I set my bag down on the kitchen table, then turned on the faucet for the bath. Copper-tone water began to pour out of the faucet, and I let my dollars slip down the drain while I waited for it to clear. It took its time and my money but soon decided to run as normal water. It was horrendously icy, no matter how far to the left I forced the hot water handle.

It was safer for my constitution to ignore hygiene then bathe in water this cold, but I couldn’t shake the soiled feeling from the Powder Keg’s place. I wanted to rise that off even if left chunks of ice in my hair. The winter wind was barely kept out by the boarding houses’ thin walls, but I could put on more layers. I would sleep in several hats, pairs of pants and jackets if it meant feeling clean again.

At first I couldn’t feel anything, my limbs gone numb from chill, but they came back to me. The bar of soap I had was a sumptuous thing, a deeply scented cake with bits of black sand embedded every few centimeters to make for superior exfoliation. The sand’s grit seemed to scrub away the feeling of being spat on. It may not have been a long bath, but it was an effective one. After its completion I donned several sweaters and set about making something suitable to tide over my aching stomach. Whatever those gems had done to me had increased my appetite tenfold.

Increased appetite and pantry supply had no correlation. My shelves were just as barren as they had been before, and no business would be open to sell me something at any rate. I had to go with the emergency stuff, which in this case was a sack of half-molded potatoes shoved under my bed. I took them to the table and began to cut away the more rotten bits, siphoning out that which was edible from that which was not. I peeled and cut them with a spare scalpel which I reserved for culinary preparation. The surgeons’ tools fit my hands better than any knife. Even with the bad portion removed they still had the potential to cause sickness. Cures I had in triplicate, other food options I did not.

They were put on a pot to boil, while I attended to the crystals. I spread a cloth on the floor and unpacked my bag item by item, for later repacking. Once everything of considerable size was removed I turned the bag wrongside up and shook it out on the mattress. The formidable crystals had made it through the journey, all but one which had been crushed. I considered the pinkish powder on my mattress carefully before scraping it onto the floor and scraping it under the bed. Once in a day was plenty.
The others though, I looked over more carefully. I hadn’t seen what I’d grabbed from the trays but now I got the chance to survey my ill-gotten gain. They were a much deeper red than the batch that York had crushed up for us. In total I had grabbed five, four of which were the triangles. The last was like a drawing of the sun, circular but with spokes coming off of it. A solar sunflake. This must have been one of the rarer ones that York had mentioned.

While the potatoes bubbled away on the stove I looked over my bookshelf for something that might offer some insight into the strange little jewels. Then I remembered that most of my old books were gone. Selling books was an arrangement between me and Mr. Coney, the bookseller. He would hold onto my old leather bound volumes for as long as possible, stashing them in the back of the store and paying me more than they were worth as long as I saw to the care of his daughter. She had run off with some lover or another who treated her poorly. She refused to leave but visited me for bruises, scrapes and the like. I never charged her, and Mr. Coney held onto my books. I always meant to buy them back but there were rarely funds.

All of my arcane tomes, the best ones, from the Cainhurst library were somewhere on his back shelves gathering dust. My most used books, things like common cures, police instructions and surgical diagrams were neatly stashed on the shelves, but they’d be of no use. Still I looked over them anyway and found nothing. It passed the time until the potatoes were done.

I siphoned out some of the hot water, re-using it for a weak tea made with the very last pinch of my supply. It was mostly stems and seeds, but it would have to do. I still had some salt, thank Kos, which I stirred in with the water and potatoes. Everything turned into a lumpy porridge which, was if nothing else, easily swallowed. I forced grainy globs of it down while I pondered the problem. It became increasingly clear that my research options were limited.

I could try trading back one of my books to Mr. Coney, but I’d weeded the collection as far down as I was willing to go. He wouldn’t give me anything for Templeton’s flower book. Frigga was sure to give me money for research if I asked, but that meant another visit to the theater and an explanation of what I required the money for. She’d tasked me with this, so it wouldn’t be out of the question to inquire for additional assistance.

Still I wouldn’t have it. There was a streak of old Prestwick pride in me that only reared its ugly head at the worst of times. I was a mess of conflicting ideals. Bland slush slid down my throat, catching in the back of it and tickling until it produced coughs. I took a startled sip of weak tea and sputtered from the temperature, scalding the tip of my tongue. Painful, but the rush of burning tea was enough to halt the flood of coughs.

I wiped my chin off on my sleeve and scooped the final bit of potato mush out of the bottom of my bowl. The tea I left to cool, while I turned to the diagram of a skeleton tacked to the wall. The rendering served a few purposes, sometimes as study reference, other times as a comfort to clientele that I was an experienced doctor. It had another use though, one known only to me, and that was for concealment. I took the pins out of the plaster and let the poster fall to the floor. Behind it was an indentation, a built-in shelf.

The research conducted at Mensis by Minimus had been extensive. After he had been dethroned and slain at Cainhurst Castle, we had to take apart his other workshops. The cult he’d collected offered to help and Frigga had put together a task force of hunters and followers a like. Many of Minimus’ loyalists found new hunting parties to join, and very few of them remained together. A girl called Elizabeth had walked me through Mensis’ many levels and layers. We were supposed to eradicate anything with the potential to be dangerous.

I was no good when it came to killing things, but I could point out dangers. Elizabeth and her new
fellow hunters took care of the rest. Still, something had quite literally spoken to me, asked not to die. It was small and strange, definitely something that ought to have been ignored, but I’d never seen anything like it before.

Sitting on the shelf, having been stolen from mensis was a fleshy entity in a glass jar. It had seven eyeballs whose pupils dialated in the light. The thing called itself a brain and preferred to be kept in the darkness. When I’d picked it up from Minimus’ old lab It had been small enough to fit in a pill bottle, but now the candy jar I’d placed it in was getting too small. Much like a plant it grew and then had to be repotted. Several times I felt it best destroyed but it knew things I did not.

“Hello.” I said.

The response was heard in my head, rather than spoken aloud. From what I had observed of the Brain of Mensis, it had no mouth.

“Felicitations Callum Prestwick.”

“I have a question for you.” I said.

“And I am sure I have an answer”

“Can you tell me anything about blood gems?”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
Ribbons

Chapter Summary

We explore the mind of our silent Executioner.

Patience

“You better not mess this up.”

It was the sentence she used most often. I had already spent most of my morning trying to make myself look presentable, which was a difficult task with my haircut. Vanity was a sin according to my mother, so she’d made sure the cut was choppy and uneven, nothing to be proud of. There was a whole patch missing from the side of my head and spikey regrowth had only just started. It grew in black too, whereas most of my hair was something verging on blonde.

I tightened my grip on the pack I was to take with me, and gave her a firm nod. My hands stung as my grip grew tighter, palms and knuckles regularly sliced open by thin rods. No matter how many times the rod fell it never dealt enough pain, drew enough blood to atone for what I’d done.

“It’s bad enough that you’re a murderous little fiend but I won’t have you making trouble for the Executioners.” My mother scolded. “You’re going to be stationed in that witch’s house, facing all kinds of temptations and deviance. Kos above, I fear you’re not strong enough to resist it all.”

I tried to stand taller, squaring my shoulders in an effort to make my silhouette a more imposing one.

“You’ve remembered to pack everything?” She asked.

I nodded.

I’d been over the pack ten times, cross referencing with a list of required items. Her eyes darted down to my bag and I tensed, fearing she’d look it over. It wasn’t forgetting something that I was worried for, but her finding something additional. Wrapped inside of my travelingcloak was a gift from my father, carried here from his homeland. The term for it tasted foreign and strange on my tongue. Áo giao lĩnh, that’s what he’d said it was, a garment softer by far than the scratchy worsted wool and weather-treated burlap of novice robes.

Executioner robes they were now. Frigga Hemlock, who I’d only met the one time had waited forty eight hours before agreeing to my mother’s proposal. I suspected her mind was made up that first day but she had to conform to her own time lines. She seemed an exceptionally strong person, and that worried me.

“You won’t get a second chance at this.” She reminded, “So are you sure you’ve got everything.”

I nodded once more.

“I will be making regular visits, so don’t think you can leave the scourge behind and be exempt from atonement.”
I wouldn’t dream of such things. I nodded again, dipping my head into what just verged on a bow. I
couldn’t go too far, or she’d be angry. It would be too much of my father’s formalities. I was quite
fond of his mannerisms, from what I could recall but it had been years since I saw him.

“You’ve got to prove your worth now.” My mother said, “You won’t get another chance. You have
to prove your worth seven in one, Patience Oliver.”

I just wanted to leave. She wouldn’t stop talking and she was going to make me late. There would
be no way for me to explain myself if I showed up late. I already had to get face to face with one of
the more terrifying Vilebloods in recorded history. I would at least like to be on time for that
nightmare.

“Very well, off you go.” She said.

There were no good byes in our family.

I hadn’t been shown the way to the theater, and would be expected to navigate the streets on my
own. My mother had given me verbal directions to it, and if followed to the letter I would be able
to find my way. She called Yharnam a disgusting cesspool of ungrateful degenerates, but the
description seemed a bit harsh. When I lived with her at Odeon Chapel, they sent the novices on
errands around the city. I had become fast friends with the baker, a round sweet sort of woman who
never minded the fact that I never spoke.

Her shop was on the way to the theater, and despite my mother keeping me, night had yet to fall
over the city. There was time to stop in. The lamplight filled the bakery windows with a warm
honey-colored glow and the smell of sweet rolls and raspberry jam filled the air. Miss Liolette’s
thumbprint cookies were to die for, and the jam was sunshine condensed and preserved.

I couldn’t stop though. There wasn’t so much as the jangle of two pennies in my pocket. I had been
given enough and nothing more. Lady Hemlock had agreed to grant me room and board, whatever
that consisted of. I’d already chanced enough carrying around the áo giao lĩnh, more frivolities
would be unseemly. I went right by, pausing for a glance through the window. I caught sight of
Miss Liolette rolling out dough, and smiled. That was enough.

I was getting pretty cold by the time my knuckles met the doors of the theater. The new gloves and
bracers I’d been given were strong things but they weren’t the best for keeping out the cold. The
der door opened and I was met by someone I didn’t expect. He was one of Lady Hemlock’s Valkyries
of course, and I’d seen him at communion once or twice. For the life of me I couldn’t put a name to
the face, but it hardly mattered. I started to bow, but before I’d even dropped my shoulders he
turned back to the theater and shouted for all he was worth.

“Frigga! The Executioner they sent over is ‘ere!”

“Let him in, Mouse!” the Patron’s voice called back.

The warmth of the theater was intoxicating. Mouse led me through the lobby and past the ticket
booth. It was a glorious place, and I had to wrench myself away from pouring over its sumptuous
details. There were elaborate oil paintings everywhere, and more filigree then I’d ever seen in one
place before. Some god had dumped out the world’s jewelry box into the theater’s interior. I was
dazzled.

The Valkyries were waiting for me, some sort of welcome party. It was an akward thing and I
could sense it. The anger bristling off the Patron’s First Ranger, Fwahe was a buzzing living thing,
an ever-present fly. I knew this was definitely a place for showing respect, and decided to do it in
the grandest manner I’d been taught. I dropped to my knees and extended my right arm, curling 
over in the traditional sign of deep respect that was reserved for kings and queens. A relic from 
times before mine, times of Cainhurst.

The First Ranger snorted, and Lady Hemlock shushed her.

“Wellcome to our home, we’re honored you’ll be staying with us.” Frigga said.

She was doing her best to be genuine and I appreciated it, sugar coating all of her words so I’d feel 
like one of them. I rose from my bow and gave her a nod and a smile.

“We’d be happy to show you around, but I thought you might want to meet everyone first.” Frigga 
said.

“Do we really have to do pleasantries with an Executioner?” The First Ranger groaned.

Frigga shushed her, “Don’t mind Fwahe. She’s always like that.”

“I’m not always like this. I’m like this when you bring an Executioner- a murder into our home!” 
She snarled.

“You promised to be nice.” She pouted. The Patron Huntress of all of England actually pouted, 
sticking out her bottom lip and calling tears to her eyes. The same signature pout that I’d seen lots 
of young children perform when they wanted a sweet. Just like the children her pout worked 
perfectly and Fwahe forced a smile onto her face.

The smile was too harsh, like wrinkles in crumpled paper. There was no way to restore the original 
condition, to infuse the genuine emotion. I didn’t mind, I hadn’t expected her to like me very 
much. I wouldn’t if I were her. It seemed almost insulting to be standing in front of a Vileblood 
dressed like an Executioner.

“It’s good to meet you Patience, I’m Templeton Kingsley.”

This was the scholar, the one my mother had warned me to be careful of. She had an appetite 
beyond her small stature. Looks were often deceiving, yet still I didn’t sense any ill intent. I bowed 
to her and she smiled. It was still a false one but closer to genuine then Fwahes.

“And you’ve already met Mouse.” Lady Hemlock continued, “Next to him our Scarlett and 
Imogen, behind them are Cato and Rook, the Altered Boy. Down at the end there is Sterling, the 
most recent Valkyrie I’ve taken on.”

So the Downey twins had counter correctly. Lady Hemlock had not allowed anyone new into her 
circle since the fall of Holy Abbot Minimus. She was hesitant to trust, and I would have to find 
some way of gaining hers. The twins had made it seem a difficult task, painted her a cold person 
but as I was led deeper into the theater their report seemed grossly inaccurate. The whole party 
stayed as one as Lady Hemlock led the tour of her home.

“This is where you’ll be sleeping.” She informed me, opening the door of one of the old dressing 
rooms. It was magnificently large, four of me could have stood shoulder to shoulder across it either 
way. There was a bed, singular no bunk too it. The sheets folded on top of it seemed clean. In the 
far corner they’d provided a mirror and a wash stand.

I couldn’t suppress a smile as I stepped inside. A room of my own. This was something entirely 
new.
“We’re working on finding a spare dresser.” Imogen said, “But we didn’t have much time. We’ll have to get you one in town.”

I shook my head. The offer was kind but pointless. The two sets of Executioner’s clothing I had spare would fit neatly folded under the bed. If they got me a dresser it would be a barren thing, I didn’t own enough to fill it. I put my pack on the bed so that Imogen could get the size of it.

“Light traveler.” She muttered.

“A murder’s job is done with a knife, it doesn’t take up much room.” Fwahe growled.

“Executioners kill with wheels.” Templeton said, “And you haven’t brought yours have you?”

I shook my head.

“He’s here as a sentry not as a solider.” Frigga reminded them. “He’s not here to kill anyone. He’s here to set the Executioners and concerned denizens. He is a result of your impulsive night on the town, and we’ve been over this several times. No more.”

With no way of easing the tension the others excused themselves so that I could unpack. They actually closed the door. There was a lock on it too. I could shut them out if I wanted too. A room with a lock and a singular bed. Luxuries given away, with no concept of their rarity. The Executioner’s bank was packed full to bursting, but here they gave their guards guestrooms.

I hadn’t very much to unpack but I did all the same. My extra clothes were folded and stacked neatly under the iron bed frame. I unrolled my traveling cloak, and the robe from my father was still there. No reason why it shouldn’t be, but I had worried I’d lose it somehow. Under the cloak were the other items my mother had insisted I bring along with me, the ones she had to ensure I wouldn’t forget.

Of the four things she’d listed, the first I pulled out was biggest and heaviest. She’d begun it the day I was born and kept at it until I turned eighteen and was accepted into the Executioner faction. The thick leather-bound book was the only thing she’d allowed me to read apart from copies of the Anointed Text in church. It was a list of every wrong I’d done, so I’d remember what needed correction.

The next item went hand in hand with it, of course. Common practice in the old church to carry small things like these for self-punishment. It was a custom largely out of style but she’d made it very clear that the small three-tailed scourge was a means to purification. Each lash flung over the shoulder was one scar closer to sanctity. In all this time it still hadn’t lost its sting. I flung it under the bed as far as I could. I didn’t want to have to think about it in such a beautiful place.

The other two things were new and unfamiliar. I was only dimly aware of their purpose, but I had been assured that instructions on their application were to follow. One of the items was a jar of red crystals. Each was shaped like a crescent moon and just barely fit into the jar so that they stacked up very neatly and did not rattle around. It was resting in a case made to look like a book, and next to it was the fourth item, a syringe. I was no doctor but I knew they were used for injecting medicines. Everyone here seemed healthy, I couldn’t imagine what use it was supposed to be.

I put the two books on the wash stand, then went about setting up the bed. The sheets were clean, and there was a beautiful quilt as well. It was covered in patterns of stars, pale yellows and soft blues. I could see the careful stitches that pieced the fabric mosaic together. The work must have been painstaking, and now I would be able to stay warm thanks to someone else’s patient hands. I folded my hands, kneeling in front of the freshly made bed, and prayed for them, wishing the best
of fortune to the craftsperson.

There was the sound of knuckles rapping on the door. I got up and opened it, finding Fwahe on the other side. She was alone and I felt my heart catch in my chest as she stepped inside. Her shoulders hunched forward, hands an inch away from fists and footfalls heavy. Executioner Ezra Kelfazin strode into rooms like that when he was looking for something to hit. I imagined a Vileblood would hit a lot heavier than my former room mate.

“So you don’t talk.” She said, plopping herself down on the bed, making wrinkles in the quilt.

I nodded.

“So you have no way of telling anyone what I’m about to say.”

I took a step away from her, glancing at the door. The syringe was in my bag, its sharp point the only viable weapon I had with me. I hadn’t packed any of the weapons I was loaned as a novice. I hadn’t been asked too. She sprung up when I had affirmed her inquiry. My collar was wrapped in her fist a moment later, and her eyes became narrow slits, stabbing daggers into mine. The Vileblood’s grip made it a little hard to breathe. I had to suck air in through my nostrils while she interrogated me. I had expected her to smell worse, like the beast corpses I helped nail to crosses for bonfires and proper disposal. She smelled normal, not even bad breath.

She clearly wanted me to be afraid, so I widened my eyes and stopped blinking until they began to water. They got bigger so I got smaller. It was better to appease angry people than oppose them. Alone opposition was futile, you needed a crowd to make a proper stand and I didn’t have one.

“You should be praying to your gods and thanking your lucky stars, because I’m going to play nice around you, boy. Frigga wants me to behave so I’ll play the part, but I’ll clue you in.” She said.

She was speaking in an even tone, a low almost-whisper that was a tone only used by the deadly serious. There was no mistaking it, every syllable was meant as a threat. I tried to swallow and felt it catch in the knot of fabric at my throat on the way down. I let out a strangling choke, which pushed her python hands to strangle me tighter. I could feel sharpened nails pressing their way through thin cloth.

“I’m not falling for this, a liar’s puppet that’s all you are. Don’t even have a voice of your own so if I kill you no one’s even going to scream. I know where you sleep, where you eat. A locks not going to keep me from bleeding you dry. Are we clear?”

I nodded, and she released her iron grip.

The First Ranger pasted on a smile dripping false sweetness. The whispering threats moved from main attraction to supporting act, overtaken by honeyed words and higher pitches. “Lady Frigga has invited you to join us for dinner. Come along now little puppet.”

She held the door open, unwilling to turn her back on me for so much as a second. I went out, into the hallway full of dressing room doors. Fwahe barked directions in my ear and followed after me. Should I move too slow to be satisfactory, I felt something sharp at my back. It was either a knife or her nails, but I didn’t think turning back to get a good look was a good idea.

We continued to navigate the backstage area of the theater. It was as opulent and fascinating as the main chamber, just in an unusual way. It was the aftermath of some great party, with rope garlands and bags of sand for decoration. The enormous set pieces were piles several deep against the wall, trees towers and archways all mixed together. They’d been living here for years and still hadn’t
found a better place for things like that, old world entertainment. I’d been told a few things of the theater by my father. He’d been to ballets in the far north, farther north then Cainhurst Castle. There were still places where dancers trained and performances held. He had wanted to take me with him, over the mountains. I’d been so enchanted by his descriptions, but my mother forbade it.

He never opposed her. When she’d wanted him to change his surname from Hoàng to Hastings he hadn’t refused. When I was small he’d spoken in foreign phonetics to me, until my mother caught on and put a stop to things. I was to be a proper Yharnamite, and she refused to let him ruin it. By and by he went on longer and longer journeys. As I grew older I saw him less, he worked so diligently in the far east buying, selling and manufacturing gunpowder for our firearms. He was prominent with the Powder Kegs, but the cold steel weapons they provided never brought him to mind. This theater did.

“Thank you for showing him the way.” Frigga said. We had reached their dining area now, a second floor space that used to serve drinks and provide a relaxing lounge for the theater’s patrons before the show began. Now the small tables and various seats had been shoved together to form one large dining table, positioned near the balcony railing. You could glance over and see the whole theater. We were closer to the painted ceiling, enough that I noticed some of the ceiling had been repainted. Someone was adding new stories in the architectural cosmos.

I bowed to the seated Valkyries and then took the empty chair I was offered, sparing glances at the paintings wherever I could. There was a beautiful rendering of Lady Hemlock pulling Queen Aspen the Hearteater out of the mud during her trial by combat. An island watched over by a bird-god that I didn’t recognize.

“I forgot to ask what foods you prefer.” Frigga noted.

I looked down at the table, which was covered in more food then it seemed possible for so few of us to eat. The Valkyries were serving things that weren’t even in season. They had pears somehow, a dozen or so, halved and piled on silver trays. The meat pies and roasted meats were the sort of things that were only served at Yuletide celebrations. Once a year meals.

“He prefers somethin’ that’s not Fwahe’s horrendous cooking!” Cato shouted, reaching across the table and ripping the legs of a roast chicken.

Mouse laughed, “She nearly burnt the kitchen down too.”

“The potatoes betrayed me.” Fwahe snarled.

It seemed that Vilebloods preferred a diet as well-rounded as any pampered lord, both of them piling sweetened fruits and bread spread thick with butter and jam on their plates.

“Go on, no need to be polite about it.” Imogen encouraged. “If there’s something you can’t reach just ask.”

I narrowed my eyes and frowned.

She covered a laugh by dabbing her lips with a napkin, “Sorry. I mean you can just point at it. We’ll get it for you.”

A nod from Lady Hemlock, to affirm the truth of her statement. All of the Valkyrie’s plates were filled. I folded my hands together and took a moment to thank Mother Kos, for a chance in such succulent surroundings, then filled my plate. No matter how many times we passed the silver and spoons and ladles around the banquet hardly seemed to lessen. It was only when we were all filled
to bursting that I noticed empty pools of sauce and bones where cooked birds used to be. Were we to dine like this every night?

“Scarlett you’re something else.” Sterling said after letting out a rather undignified belch.

“Well we had a new guest, bad food just wouldn’t do.” She replied.

“Thank you very much!” Mouse said.

I nodded my head to echo his sentiment.

“Sucks for whoever’s on dish rotation.” Cato said.

“Oh, that’s you darling.” Rook said.

We all watched Cato transition from confidence to confusion to condemnation. “Kos damnit.”

The table burst into laughter. Imogen and Scarlett stood up in the same moment and placed their plates on top of Cato’s. He gave them a pleading look, but they disappeared down the balcony stairs, smiling all the while.

“Won’t you take pity on a poor cripple? How am I supposed to wash dishes with so many missing fingers?” Cato argued.

“You’re only crippled when it’s convenient for you.” Fwahe said, “Whenever they ask for volunteers to go hunting suddenly you’re very capable.”

He sulked further, but the Vileblood just followed the actions of the two Valkyries placing her dish on top of the growing pile in front of Cato. She sought revenge for her insulted cooking. I wanted to help him, but I had to keep watching the Vileblood so I set my dish down, bowed and trailed after her. Frigga too rose, her silk dining dress billowing soft chiffon clouds around her as she delicately took Fwahe’s hand in her own. Their grips were perfect opposite, soft hands in callused palms. My mother had such a relationship was indulgent and toxic, sure to poison everything it touched but all I could see was two hands surrounded by the last beauty Yharnam had to offer.

A conclusion I was going to have to punish myself for.

“He’s following us.” I heard the Patron’s Ranger whisper.

“It’s his job.” She shot back.

Follow them I must, so follow them I did. They were heading to Frigga’s room.

“You’re not coming in.” Fwahe barked at me.

I had to. I wasn’t supposed to let them out of my sight. If only I were able to apologize for the intrusion. The Vileblood tried to close the door on me, but Frigga stepped inbetween, nails digging into weathered wood and prying backwards. The struggle was a short one, with the willpower quickly sapped from the Patron’s Ranger.

This time Frigga didn’t make false apologies. It didn’t seem as though she wanted me in her room either, and I hardly blamed her for that. She’d see me as a boy in the private space of two girls. I saw the situation very differently, but I doubted I’d convince either to see it my way.

Frigga struggled to lead Fwahe aside so I could come into the room.
“So what, so we just let him stand here and watch us? Is he going to watch us sleep? Are we prisoners now?” The Vileblood said.

“I’m sure he doesn’t want to be here either, love. I don’t want him here but until things cool down we just have to deal with it.”

“You’re their leader!” Fwahe shouted, “Just tell them no! Send back their puppet, and spit in their faces!”

Frigga rubbed her fingers over her eyebrows, pinching and massaging her temples. “Please, can we give it a rest, just for tonight?”

“How am I supposed to rest with an Executioner in the room!” Fwahe growled, “Can’t he go stare down Templeton or something?”

“Templeton isn’t the one who went on a night time stroll and picked fights with Executioners.” Frigga quipped.

“It was one time.” Fwahe returned.

They continued to bicker for several more minutes. The room they were arguing in had been converted into the theater’s crown jewel. The walls were painted a deep navy, layered over with white bark-trees that spread their branches up to the ceiling which was covered with painted leaves. She had been making her renovations in here as well. The only messy place in the room was a vanity, a table with a large mirror dripping in pearls and products. Lady Hemlock owned all of the secret poultices and powders that people used to make themselves beautiful. A silver hairbrush lay on its side and hair pins and ribbons were crammed into a drawer so full it wouldn’t shut.

The rest of the room was neatly kept. There were a few standing screens with patterned paper set in them that sectioned the canopy bed off from the rest of the room. She must’ve had it built in the room, there was no way that behemoth of a bed was going to fit through the door. The canopy above it was gathered in a dome shape, looking so much like a little crown hovering above the bed, pouring a blue silk waterfall over the thick winter blankets. Sitting on it would make you feel like a princess, and Lady Hemlock seemed the type that was liable to feel something so small as a pea under all the layers of goose down.

I turned back and it seemed like they’d forgotten me entirely. Lips were on lips and hands were on thighs. I definitely should not have still been in the room but I had made a promise not to let them out of my sight. I tried my best to ignore them and continued to survey the room, there was plenty to look at. Frigga’s wardrobe was bigger than some of the bank’s bunkrooms. You could’ve slept four in the carved pine wardrobe. Stars and trees were carved into the polished surface.

My nose itched and the sneeze it produced brought things back to normal. They both turned to me. Frigga’s face went red and she tucked a silver curl behind her ear. Her First Ranger bore no shame, glaring at me for having interrupted.

“He’s supposed to be silent.” Fwahe snarled.

“Love, he sneezed. It was not a personal attack.”

I tried not to make another sound for the rest of the evening, but I had already ruined things. When the sun began to rise in the sky, my eyelids usually began to feel exceptionally heavy but today they were anything but. Frigga had long since fallen asleep, but Fwahe was alive and angry. Her
golden eye glinted in the darkened room like a cat’s. She cradled her sleeping patron, but stayed at the ready.

Hours passed and the rising sun filled the room with pink and orange light. The warmer the room got the harder it was to remain standing. There were plenty of chairs in the room but I feared that any attempt to move would’ve been taken as a hostile advance. I opted to lean against the wall.

It was not a smart choice, I hit the painted surface a little harder then I’d meant to, sliding back and slipping on one of the overlapping rugs that coated the floor. In my haste to steady myself I grabbed at the nearest solid object, bringing a brass candleholder down with me. Frigga’s head shot up at the sound of the crash and before she’d even opened her eyes Fwahe had crossed the room to loom over me.

“What happened?” Frigga asked. She lit a candle by her bedside table and came over to inspect the scene. The candleholder had landed on top of me, several of the wax candle sticks having cracked in half.

“He tried to attack us!” She snarled.

She came over and there they both were, standing over me. Three blue eyes and one gold, reflecting candlelight that might as well have been hellfire. I closed my eyes and tensed for a slap to the face.

“Patience?” Frigga asked.

I looked up. Her hand was extended, offering me help up. I brushed the candle holder away, it was going to bruise. Another candle broke in the transition and I winced. I took her hand and she pulled me up.

“You weren’t attacking us were you?” She asked me.

I shook my head.

“I didn’t think so.” She said.

“Well…he..” Fwahe started.

“No no.” She said, “That’s enough. Come back to bed darling. Patience why don’t you go get some rest, you’re no good to anyone asleep on your feet and I daresay my candelabras won’t survive you in exhaustion. I’m awake now and surely you trust the eyes of your patron.”

Drowziness filled my mind like an overgrown field. I couldn’t see through the vines to proper judgement so I gave the Patron Huntress a weak nod. It was never going to be possible to watch the Vilebloods every moment of every day, even my mother couldn’t demand that. I was allowed to take breaks at my own discretion, especially during the day where rooftop escapades were less likely to occur.

I remembered the way to my room and recorded the days sins in scars. I slept on my stomach so they wouldn’t sting, and I didn’t want anything staining the quilt. I didn’t sleep for very long, and when I woke the theater was still. I could see the sun shining in through the windows, they hadn’t boarded these ones. I stepped outside, soaking up the dying sunlight. Even through the cold of the Yharnam winter it warmed me right to the bone. My skin would never be the milk-bottle white of a son of Yharnam, and I was fine with that.

I stayed outside until I couldn’t stand the cold a second longer. I didn’t want to live my whole life
under the night sky, so I took my day time strolls where I could find them. I daren’t leave the stoop of the theater for fear of getting lost or disturbing someone with footfalls and crunching snow.

I went to take a post outside of Frigga’s room. The Patron was an earlier riser, leaving her room while the final streaks of sunset were in the sky.

She let out a gasp as she pulled the door behind her.

“You startled me!” She said, then quickly regained her composure. “Good morning Executioner Patience.”

I smiled and bowed to her. That’s all I ever did to anyone in the mornings. Smile and bow. It was a choice my mother had made for me, taking the vow of silence. Much like my father I had not opposed her and she was satisfied with my efforts. I hadn’t spoken since I was very little and I thought, wrongfully and privately that she even regretted the fact that I learned base phonetics. When I’d been allowed to attend school I’d excelled both in writing, reading and the sciences.

That last part I got from my father, I was sure of it. My mother couldn’t hardly make coffee without a catastrophe but I’d been fixing minor malfunctions with hunter’s blunderbusses before I knew what a real weapon was. Father had let me play with his tool kit, shown me the tiny wires used to clean gun barrels. He taught me to tighten a screw, polish wooden gun stocks and the basics of engraving. I wanted to follow in his footsteps and become a Powder Keg Hunter.

My father had gone away but had promised to come back for my birthday, eight was an important year for a young hunter. I spent months working out the kinks on my invention, doing it during the day when all good hunters were asleep. I worked in the hot sun on church rooftops where no one would come looking for me. I thought if I made something marvelous I’d be pledged to the Powder Kegs.

Alas mother caught me one day. She screamed to Kos in heaven that I’d somehow gotten a demon in my fingers turning me away from honest work to silly tricks. She said I was a disgrace and insult to the six lives I’d taken if I expected to become a Powder Keg charlatan rather then a man of the church. My invention had been tossed from the roof and my hands were laid across the hot shingles and given a solid pound with a Kirkhammer. Most of my bones broke and had to be re-set. In a fit of screaming, pain and passion I had said angry things to my mother.

She said I’d never talk like that again, and after the hammer on my hands I never wanted to mess with machinery again. When I was seven, about to turn eight I said the last words I’d ever say to my father. They were ones I regret, but he understood and was proudly standing in the audience the next day as I took my vow and pledged myself to the church. I’d done it all with bruised hands, discoloration that never faded from my knuckles. Years later it was still there, a reminder not to stray to far and follow my own selfish desires. I had to honor the lives I had taken and atone for their murders. Selfishness was unthinkable. I had stolen life, and that was enough already. To want happiness as well was blasphemy

But mornings made me think of him. It had been four years since his last visit, and I missed him terribly. Mother said he was never coming back, but she always said that. He always came back.

“Did you sleep alright?” Frigga asked.

I nodded.

“The fall didn’t hurt you did it? I should’ve asked last night, I admit but I was rather dazed having freshly awoken.” She continued, punctuating her sentence with a stretch and a yawn.
I shook my head, a lie but a harmless one. The bruises were nowhere visible and there was no reason to alarm her.

“Oh good, glad that no damage was done. Really if you get that tired you can just sit down you don’t have to stay on your feet all night.” Lady Hemlock said.

I bit my lip. How to explain that if I had moved I would’ve been at the mercy of a spiteful Vileblood. To be fair, I hadn’t moved and I’d still ended up at the mercy of a spiteful Vileblood so inaction didn’t seem to have made much difference. Lady Hemlock rocked back and forth on her feet, unsure of how to proceed.

It was the same spirit of feeling for me. The whole point of a vow of silence was to lack communication which was such an essential component of human nature. No one was supposed to want to make conversation, so that vow-takers could better focus on their duties. We had to rely on others to think of us, lest we be unable to ask when a hunt was happening or when blood ministrations or meals occurred. It was essential that a vow-taker make themselves useful. We couldn’t afford to be forgotten.

I was useless in a conversation. They typically happened around me, or were spewed at me but I was never cast as an actor in them. The vow of silence pushed me backstage to douse lights and pull ropes as the leading ladies and gentlemen required them. Frigga was trying to shove me into center stage without lines. The audience was going to laugh at me.

“I’ll set aside a chair for you.” She said. “You can pick out whichever you like, we have quite a few.”

Quite a few was downplaying it. The third and fourth balconies still had every one of there theater seats. While the main floor and second tier balcony had been cleared for living space the higher ones appeared to be hardly used at all, retaining their former splendor. It shouldn’t been a beautiful place but without barons and baronets packing the velvet cushions it felt empty, haunted. The only persons who frequented the upper floors were painters.

She started to head off, presumably for the kitchen and I lingered at the door. Indecision underscored with hunger despite the previous days enormous meal. It didn’t seem possible that I’d have room enough for anything more, yet I proved my perception wrong. Duty before dinner, a refrain of my mother’s echoed in my head. Duty before dinner and bitches before breakfast.

Wrong to think that of the Vileblood. Using vile language was frowned upon but if it wasn’t actually used, if it was only thought did it still count?

I didn’t think so. Bitches plural was far too harsh, I held nothing against Frigga Hemlock, and though I desperately tried to be tolerant of her choice of companion but it was hard when she was so ready to kill me. I was supposed to be the one at her throat. Kos knows the rest of the Executioners were. Ezra Kelfazin had tried to convince me to bring him back a vial of her blood. I’d decline of course, not only was it forbidden to work with the leftover bits of pulp that Vilebloods left behind, I personally found it disgusting.

Executioner Alfred had been firm about what to do with their remains. He came in and taught his lessons to all the novices, showing them how to properly scrape things into buckets for burning. He supervised each and every one of us while we practiced scrubbing blood out of wooden planks, the sort used to construct stages for public executions. We’d practiced with other things, stuff that wasn’t Vileblood remains but as the strange new beasts started to pop up in the city, Vilebloods not of Cainhurst we applied ourselves to the real thing.
Their silvery blood did not wash out of anything easily, and there were times I was sure I’d worn my fingerprints clean off. Alfred had commended me and pointed to me as an example of what the other should strive to achieve. Audrey hadn’t been too happy with that, but she was quick and careless. She left blood behind. I shouldn’t have done her work for her, but I couldn’t very well point out what she’d missed, so more often than not I found myself cleaning up after her as well. It was better not to take risks, last time an Execution hadn’t been properly cleaned up beasts rampaged through the city growing several times their normal size.

Alfred had told us about that too, thought it had happened many years ago and wasn’t a part of our curriculum. In his eyes I could see him straining to recall specific names and dates, things he ought to have known but had somehow slipped from his memory. He would get lost in these bygone days and have trouble regaining his composure.

I was lost in thoughts as I waited for the First Ranger to get out of bed, so lost I nearly missed her. She was always barefoot, though I’m sure there were thousands of pairs of boots piled in Frigga’s wardrobe that she could’ve worn. Her steps were silent and light, she startled me. There was a noticeable grin spreading over her lips when she caught my eyebrows raising and my eyes widening.

“Boo.” She said dryly.

I rolled my eyes.

“Did you just…” she started.

My face quickly returned to blank innocence, its default setting. She squinted at me, studying my eyes for another flicker of disdain. I swallowed, worrying my blinking would somehow give me away. With one final sneer she relented, heading off to go find Frigga. I let her get a few steps ahead of me before trailing after.

We were ambushed on our way to the kitchen by Cato and Rook. Both of them hadn’t combed their hair or made the addition of shirts, socks, or boots to their wardrobes. They grinned in their threadbare pants making jokes with the Vileblood.

“How was it with an audience in there?” Cato asked, “I know that Rook doesn’t mind a few observers now and then.”

The Altered Boy’s face went red and he rammed into Cato with his shoulder. It only widened the Valkyrie’s grin.

“First of all, it is none of your concern. Secondly this sickened invalid spewed snot everywhere then tried to kill us in our sleep which ruined everything.” Fwahe explained.

“But you don’t sleep.” Rook pointed out.

She gnashed her teeth at him. “I sleep plenty.”

“These walls are thin.” Cato said, “And from what we can hear you and Frigga stay up all night every night just-“

Her fist shot out for what would’ve been a sucker punch right to the jaw, but he swerved to the side. It would’ve ruined his smug grin if he hadn’t seen it coming, but this appeared to be routine to them. Rook gave me a sympathetic smile and tugged at Cato’s arm trying to get him to break off the mounting war with the Vileblood.
“Come on Cay, I’m hungry.”

Seems everyone’s stomach was on a timer around here, no matter how much of a banquet they served. I watched a Vileblood drink for the first time. She had brought a vial of blood dregs with her to the kitchen, sipping directly from the glass tube. Fwahe didn’t wipe the excess off with the back of her hand, as I’d seen her do with sweetened wines at dinner. She licked up every last drop of the portion she’d drunk. The container was still half full. She grabbed a mug from the cupboard and poured the rest into it.

Fwahe left it on the counter and went searching for something else. I leaned over and looked inside. The blood inside was thick and dotted with something that looked like strawberry seeds. Occasionally one of the little seeds would twitch. I’d never seen anything like them before, the strange manifestations that occurred in hunter’s blood. There was a process that caused it to change from blood drained to blood dreg.

“Hey!” Fwahe barked, “Get away from there!”

I withdrew instantly as she slammed a bottle of milk down on the counter.

“Oh, leave him alone.” Frigga sighed.

“He was trying to poison Templeton!” Fwahe argued, snatching up the mug and pouring milk into it. The colors swirled together, red then white then pink. So the smaller one took her drinks mixed.

“No he wasn’t I was watching him.” She replied, “You can’t just accuse him of murdering people every time he moves.”

She gave a derisive snort but didn’t argue things. She stepped on my foot and shoved me out of the way with her shoulder as she went to put the milk back. Frigga didn’t notice and I wasn’t going to make a case out of things, not with the promise of a good meal not far off.

Templeton came in shortly after Fwahe had fixed her breakfast. It was as if she could smell it, just like I could smell the bacon in Frigga’s skillet. She winced when it was passed to her.

“Are we that thin?” She asked.

“Drink it.” Fwahe barked, “You can complain when you’ve contributed to the supply.”

The scholar-turned-Vileblood licked her lips and nodded, taking the cup in both hands. She pressed it to her lips, guzzling it down the same way a man dying of thirst might approach a bucket of water. Pinkish liquid leaked from the corners of her mouth, collecting and threatening to drip from the bottom of her chin. Unlike the First Ranger, she wiped them away with her sleeve when she was done with the drink.

“We aren’t running low are we?” Templeton asked.

Fwahe’s eyes flicked to me, then back towards Templeton. “We have enough.”

Templeton nodded and took a seat at the counter, drumming her hands on the empty tankard.

After everyone had their fill, Imogen, Mouse and Sterling departed for a hunt. Scarlett sat by the lobby window, alternating between polishing weapons and embroidering a piece of pink fabric. Cato’s dish rotation had ended and the duty now fell to Fwahe who complained about soap and water like it was boiling oil. She flung bits of soap and crusty food all over the counter, scrubbing violently at a pan slick with grease.
She would wreck their entire kitchen if she carried on in this manner. I came up alongside her, and as she was preparing to spit an insult I dove in and took the rag from her hands. I held a plate up, catching running water so she could clearly see I wasn’t fishing for a knife and accuse me once more of trying to murder her. I began to clean the china with more care, no longer fearful it would break.

She stepped back to give me more room, and I fell into it easily. The water was cold, pumped in from outside where the night winds howled. I could feel it right down in my bones, a familiar sting. Church novices and junior Executioners alike had done their share of winter dishwashing.

“I prefer to dry anyway.” Fwahe said.

The first few times I offered her one of the cleaned dishes she’d wrench it out of my hands. I even feared she was going to break my wrist at one point. She stopped when she noticed the discoloration in my hand for the first time. I was holding out a spatula to her.

“Did I do that?” She asked.

I shook my head.

She took the spatula from my hands delicately, like picking up an egg. She rubbed it with her towel, keeping her eyes on my hands as they dipped back into the water. She must’ve seen a bruise before, and mine weren’t special. I kept them submerged working old food out of a pan for a lot longer than I needed too. When I went to hand her the next dish I made sure the cloth was covering my knuckles so she wouldn’t be troubled by them.

Finally she took the things I offered from her normally without sympathy or malice. We finished up the dishes, and I cleaned the counters while the sink was draining. The stovetop needed some attention too, but the Vileblood had went off in search of other entertainment before I could make a start at it. Frigga was sitting at the edge of the stage, reading a book and swing her legs back and forth beneath her like a child on a swing. Fwahe climbed up beside her and gave her a kiss on the cheek. The Vileblood laid silver hair on freckled shoulders and turned Frigga’s pages for her.

I hung back a fair distance performing my guard’s duties from the back of the room to give them as much privacy as I could possibly afford. They were content there until Frigga closed the book. The theater was designed to carry conversation, in the main auditorium it was impossible to have a private discussion.

“Will you come with me to communion?” Frigga asked, “It’s getting to be about time.”

“Are you sure you want to bring a Vileblood with you?” She scoffed.

“I’ve been doing it for years.” Frigga said.

“I suppose that means the Executioner has to come along.” Fwahe said.

Frigga nodded.

That was an exciting proposition. It had been quite a few months since I’d attended one of the meetings hosted by hunters for hunters. Generally those who commanded respect or afforded good positions were the ones who were permitted to attend. Of course everyone had to go at some point, either to receive their hunter’s bells and be inducted into the fellowship or to find a faction to apprentice with. Promising novices were taken to be shown off, or if their mentors felt it valuable for them to meet other hunters. My mother sometimes asked for me to attend when a particularly interesting decision was scheduled to be made, so I could watch as those with voices decided what
our lots in life would be. She thought it an important process, but I failed to see how I could be of much use to her at communion.

Most of the time I just found my fellow vow-takers and stood on the sidelines with them. All the same I was excited to go, there were always interesting things happening. After a few moments of discussion between the Patron and her Ranger, Fwahe came over and told me what I already knew. Frigga was right behind her, and she looked me over with pursed lips.

“I really wish there was something we could do about that hair of yours Executioner Patience. Whoever cut it did not take very much care.” Frigga said.

She reached out, hands hovering above my head, before I nodded and permitted her to have a go at it. Thin fingers with long nails combed gently across my scalp. I was more than a little ashamed of my hair, which was grossly uneven.

“It’s gotten so discolored at the top.” She muttered, “You’ve got raven roots. Dark hair would look dashing on you, very handsome.”

After a few moments of more commenting and her attempts to smooth my hair into something respectable she stopped trying. All the uneven clumps simply sprung back into place, or flopped down over my eyes. It was no use.

“I’ve got just the thing for this.” Frigga said.

“You said we had to get going.” Fwahe whined.

“Oh hush, you never let me fix your hair.” Frigga said, “It will only take a moment.”

“At your vanity, a moment is actually an hour.” Fwahe muttered, but followed after nonetheless.

I sat on a quilted velvet footstool while Frigga rooted through her drawers and read the labels on several glass bottles. I didn’t know where to look, so I stared myself down in the mirror. I’d pictured myself in spaces like this one before, but the only mirrors they had in church novice dorms were cracked and weather worn, coated in dust that could not be cleaned off. You were better off looking at your reflection in a bucket, but here not only was there the tri-fold mirror in front of me, but several hand mirrors and shiny trays on the table, reflecting me from several different angles.

I wasn’t supposed to be sitting in a seat like this, surrounded by beautiful things. I certainly wasn’t supposed to be enjoying it, but I couldn’t keep the smile off my face. The Patron Huntress didn’t explain what she was doing, though I wish she had, she just began to work things into my hair. She didn’t use any of the brushes or powders that other girls used, didn’t dust my face or lips with anything. She was only trying to get my hair to look respectable after all. She opened a drawer and held several ribbons up alongside my face, trying to choose a color.

Despite Fwahe’s protests the process was a quick one. She soon had my hair combed back and tied into a very small pony tail with a navy ribbon. I could feel my bangs straining to burst from their new positions, and took care to keep my motions minimal so that the style would stay.

“That will have to do for now, until we can bring in a proper barber.” She said. “Really it’s best we do, all of my Valkyeries are looking a little worse for wear.”

“I am not!” Fwahe protested.

Frigga looked her up and down. Barefoot, wearing the weather beaten skin of a cleric beast and
hardly anything else Fwahe’s side of the argument would be hard to justify. Her hair was cut almost as poorly as mine was, slashed into uneven angular chunks. The style spoke of inexperience and a knife used in place of proper scissors.

“Whatever you say darling.” Frigga returned, “But I’ll send for one anyway. Sterling could do with a trim, and Cato too. He can’t cut his own as he used too and forgets to until it hangs so far in his face he might as well be blind.”

The Vileblood gave a light-hearted smile, and tried to smooth herself out when Frigga turned to put away the extra ribbons. Beyond her own personal satisfaction I could see no difference from before and after the Vileblood’s frantic scraping.

“She should we take Cato with us?” Frigga said, waving her hand to signal me to stand as she began to head for the door.

“Didn’t he try and kiss an Executioner last time?” Fwahe asked.

“It was on a dare.” Frigga nodded, “And you’re probably right. Three’s already company enough.”

“Two was company enough.” Fwahe said.

It needed to be four. We had to bring the other Vileblood two, but I couldn’t find a way of explaining that. Really, choosing me for this job was not the smartest move the Executioners had ever made. They were deeply satisfied with it, for whatever reason. Essex and Sussex were in total agreement as was my mother and several others.

Frigga turned back to glare at her, just a sharp narrowing of the eyes before her ever-jovial demeanor returned. She waved me out the door, and Fwahe after me, closing things up as we exited the theater.

We stopped so she could talk with Scarlett in the lobby.

“Are you going to be alright here?” Frigga asked.

“Is Templeton coming with you?” She asked as she pulled the needle she was working with down through the fabric, finishing off the veining of a leaf.

“She does so hate communion.” Frigga said.

Perhaps she didn’t want to show up with two Vilebloods. Scarlett set her needlework down and looked to the freshly polished weapons that littered the remaining space on the lobby’s window seat.

“She does, but you wouldn’t want the young Executioner to get in trouble for leaving her behind.” Scarlett said.

“I hadn’t considered that.” Frigga admitted.

After a little more hesitation we went over to the orchestra pit and summoned the scholar. She adjusted her shirt and suspenders as we were heading out the door, taking care to thrown on an oversized coat against the winter chill. The beasts weren’t supposed to be able to feel the cold, but I knew something of Templeton Kingsley’s case. She was special in her elongated attempts to retain her humanity, nearly every other record of Vilebloods observed them feeding at the first opportunity. She had instead, starved herself, and a few of my fellow Executioners were of a theory that it had permanent side effects.
Strix Savoy was one of those who enjoyed theories. When the newer Vilebloods started to pop up he’d volunteered to help catalog them and worked closely with Executioner Essex for the time. He had really only wanted to help so he could get a peek into some of the more restricted personal journals of Executioners, and was quickly discovered and assigned to another project. Subtly had never been Strix’s strong point.

I often wished to talk to him, for he seemed to suffer my same plight. We both had a burning desire to learn more about the side of our families we were supposed to forget. I wanted to know of the east, he of the north but really the feelings were all the same. He was lucky to not have a mother like mine breathing down his neck and changing his hair color. Wrong to think that though, she was only doing what was best for me.

We arrived along with several other hunter’s parties. I recognized Lord Gaines of Byrgenwerth among those already in attendance. He was reading over something, discussing it with one of his officers who never seemed to stop nodding. I did a quick scan for my mother but didn’t see her amongst any of the parties settling in. She was typically a late comer and tonight didn’t seem to be any different.

Frigga was quickly hounded by groups of hunters desperate for her attention. They bombarded her with their problems hoping to win some of her favor. She smiled at each approaching petitioner, and listened to their concerns as they prattled through seemingly endless lists. Fwahe loomed behind the patron huntress, glaring and taping her feet as to let them know that they were not welcome. Many noticed and ended their conversations quickly before hurrying off for refreshments or to talk with weapons makers.

Still more did not understand her subtleties or feel her aura of malice. They drew Frigga away and thus the Vileblood retired to a corner, where she could lean against a podium and look over all of the gathered hunters. Cold stone against her back, protecting an attack from the rear. I stood next to her, on her left while Templeton hovered on her right. I wasn’t sure if she considered us shields or obstacles but I doubted I’d be the one she opted to protect should anyone launch an attack.

“Young Brother Patience, so nice to see you here.”

The three of us swerved our heads to greet Executioner Sussex. It was always odd to see one without the other, but Essex was elsewhere. I bowed, Fwahe cursed and Templeton spoke a stammered greeting.

“Excuse me for misspeaking, it must be Executioner Patience now. How wonderful to have another full-fledged member in our order. I came to see how you were getting on.” He said, “Settling in with your new…charges.”

“Charges my ass.” Fwahe muttered.

I smiled.

“What was that?” Sussex asked, “Speak up won’t you? Or do you stutter like the bookish one.”

"I don’t take orders from Executioners.” Fwahe said, but spoke up all the same.

“Indeed.” He replied, “Your mother’s sure to be looking for you, why don’t you go off and find her. There’s plenty of good hunters about to keep an eye on these two. Not even Executioner Alfred himself could contest that.”

I was hesitant to go. Something about the way he looked at Fwahe and Templeton made me think
of a cat with a mouse. I wasn’t sure if Ezra or Fwahe had been the one to start the fight that landed
me in this mess but I was nervous for a second one. The whole council would have it out for me if I
failed in my duties and something went wrong. My mother could come and find me, better to stay
put. I shook my head.


“G-good Evening.” Templeton said as he turned on his heels and disappeared into the crowd.

Fwahe swallowed her cache of spit. Little by little the room began to fill in. The Altered Boys
came up to us, spinning Templeton around in hugs and doing some sort of elaborate hand-shake
type greeting with Fwahe, who seemed to abhor embraces that did not come from Frigga. One of
them asked after Scarlett and Fwahe gave a half-hearted mumbling of a reply. Templeton tried to
do better but in truth neither of the Vilebloods had spoken with her very much.

Just as they were starting to ask questions about me, our groups entire attention was turned towards
a woman in white all but stampeding towards us. I hung my head, for I’d no doubt it was my
mother and my previous decision to remain alongside the Vilebloods had been incorrect.

“Don’t look away from me Patience Oliver!” She barked.

Fwahe chuckled, “What kind of Executioner gets told off by his mom.”

Her whispered insults made the Altered Boys chuckle, but I was in no mood for jest. My mother’s
hand went to my chin, turning it up to look into her eyes which blazed with blue-grey stormclouds.

“Who do you think you are to say no to a superior’s command?”

Technically it was a request, and technically now that I’d been inducted we were both of the same
rank. My mother wouldn’t have listened to those technicalities even if I could present them as
defense. The Vilebloods and hunters surrounding us took a step back, more out of secondhand
embarrassment then genuine concern.

My mother’s eyes looked me over and I cringed, I knew it was coming.

“And what have you done with your hair? Such vanity! One day away from your church and you
forget everything I worked so hard to teach you!” She carried on. With her free hand she grabbed
the ribbon Frigga had worked so hard to tie my hair up in. With a yank she pulled it free and
crushed it under her boot. “Frills and ribbons! You know better, such things are for girls- and
spoiled ones at that.”

I looked down at it, the instance my eyes flickered down to the floor she squeezed my chin harder.

“Unhand him at once.” Fwahe demanded.

Nails into skin, cheeks seconds from bleeding my mother looked up at the Vileblood who dared
issue her a command. There was a tense moment between the both of them, but Templeton and the
others took small steps forward. The Altered Boys puffed out their chests emphasizing the crosses
painted in coal that they were known for. She let go of my chin.

“I shall speak to you later.” She told me, “And don’t let me catch you with another ribbon in your
hair.”

She made a point to grind the strip of velvet into the ground with her heel. Ribbons were for girls,
of course. They were for girls and I was a boy. I’d been through that more times then I cared to
count. Things were for girls and I was a boy. Over and over again, trying to get it to sink in.

It never did. No matter what I still wanted to be what I wasn’t, what I wished I was. Only when I was sure she was gone did I pick the ribbon up and slip it into my pocket, concealing it just as my personal wishes. I was fortune enough to have been born at all, I should be satisfied with the anatomy I was given. But oh how dissatisfaction nags.

I couldn’t shake the feeling that Mother Kos in her infinite wisdom had made a mistake. I wasn’t met to be this way. I was meant for ribbons.
Chapter Summary

Now things start to get interesting. And bloody. Also a note, I have written some accents into some of the characters in the latter part of this chapter. I do this because I so enjoyed Brian Jaques' accent-writing when I was younger, and still today. It's never meant in an offensive way but should anyone think it inappropriate please alert me so that I can correct it. I firmly believe it adds to the story but I have a limited perspective and could easily be wrong.

Chapter Notes

As always, please let me know what you think!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kane

I had returned to my homeland weeks after its decimation, years before this day, this morbid anniversary. Who could've known that disgrace and exile would end up saving my life, sparing me the crushing pressure of the Executioners and their mighty wheels. Vile creatures who called us Vile creatures. I had suffered at the hands of several of the surrounding parties, as I spent days trying to find a survivor, find any sign of my fallen house or dear sweet sister.

Alois, where are you now?

She was sweet like rotting fruit, sweet like tangled fraying ribbons and the multicolored skin of poisonous animals. Deceptive, selling me out in front of the entire court of Cainhurst nobles and other visiting families. I’d scrambled to explain myself and must’ve come off like a frazzled lunatic. She’d surprised me and I hadn’t regained my composure.

The Piper is coming for you sweet sister.

Somehow, I knew she hadn’t died in the massacre. Alois Hirsch was a knight of the first order and so long as there was a sword within reach no man or woman could cut her down. Her skills were legend but more famous were the rumors of the many maimed suitors that painted her bedsheets scarlet. There were songs about it, poems by poets who wrote their words then lost their tongues when they were found out. We pummeled it out of the minds of the peasants but music is like the very woman I sought, unkillable.

The Piper is coming and he’s got the rats at his back.

The plans and passions of my youth were ridiculous in retrospect. Even if proud Cainhurst still towered and the Executioners had not stained the snow with fleshy pink pulp they would not have let me in. I brought them the broken body of a hunter of hunters, draped crow feather cape about
my person and prepared to proclaim that I was a Vileblood among Vilebloods. What better proof then the corpses of those who were unlike us, who did not share our appetites and filled our corrupted stomachs instead?

And his rats are hungry.

There was no glory for me, no honor just the corpses of the people who had failed to speak in my defense. In a way it was justice, served up on silver wheels by the only god who’d ever shown me favor. Death himself, the one to whom I had sent screaming sacrifices. Everything Alois accused me of I had surely done, there was nothing innocent about me. The rage came from disbelief when I pointed out that she had done things much the same, her bedroom as bloody as mine. They said I was just pointing fingers, panicked and desperate, but oh how I remembered. She came to me when the first accident happened, when her hunger outweighed her reason and she’d ripped out the throat of a serving boy without meaning too.

They have counted up your debt, your ledger leaking red letters.

I had helped her hide it. She had come to me a few more times, then she learned how to do it herself. In retrospect, always now, I lived in retrospect and wondered if she had ever genuinely needed my help or if it had been a set up all along. Had the bodies she’d sacrificed to learn my ways just become new threads to twist into my noose?

And everyone knows, that when it comes time, you’ve got to pay the Piper.

How many decades, perhaps centuries had it been since I’d seen another one of my kind? One by one I heard of their deaths, recorded and then paraded here and there by the Executioner’s heralds. I had to cross them out one by one from the Vileblood Registry. Oh what solace that book brought, to know that I could count and catalog the victims to ensure she was still out there, still breathing somewhere. Alois Hirsch could not lie low forever.

She had lain low too long, to the point where I suspected any Vileblood of being Alois, female or male. She could pose as either with determination and the right haircut. I had posed as whatever I had needed too to get where I was going. The rules of the world hadn’t changed even after having your life turned inside out, a pretty face still bought favors. Beauty was currency, even in troubled times.

For years my hair was dangerous, so I was forced to mar it with ink but people changed their minds. So many Executioners had their way with battered nobles, and sullied the bloodline with their bastard heirs. The sullied blood made my clean veins boil, but at last I could look myself.

Disgrace and shame made amble bedding, and I lay down in them each night. It would be like this forever until I caught up with my sister and wrenched her still-beating heart out of my chest. The woodlanders ate hearts, took them in pieces to gain their strength. I didn’t care if the stories about strength were true I was going to eat it so she couldn’t return. Boiled in stomach acids and turned to shit, that would be the fate of the heart of Alois Hirsch. I had sworn such things to Death.

The woodlanders and I had come to a symbiosis with each other. They were unaware of me, and I did not make myself known to them. The Forbidden Woods were big enough for the both of us, lush with pray and unexplored territory. None of them could know it all, and I was careful to blend in. The cape of a hunter of hunters was useful for camouflage as a carrion crow. I stuck to the branches, like they did. Made a nest in trees and slept amongst the top most boughs, whenever I was too weary to stay on my feet. Lost travelers became meals for me, and so long as I was quick to attribute the corpses to other beasts there was no reason for anyone to catch on.
I was always careful. I dumped bloodied bodies into the pits of the giant snakes. I fed their babies and they left me alone, unsure of my scent. I was not man and I was not crow. The beasts showed me their respect, and they weren’t the only ones who had come to know me as I was now. I heard stories when I went into towns, made up like a threadbare Yharnam, heard stories of the man called the Bloody Crow of Cainhurst who stole naughty children from their mothers.

Children were all well and good. Their feet were slow, their blood was pure but they didn’t hold very much. I preferred the creeping tales of harrowed travelers who weren’t sure if the thing they had glimpsed in the woods was me or a carrion crow. For fun I’d let one or two go so that the fear would spread. I wanted Alois to hear of me and know that her days were dwindling to nothing.

There were a lot of things to do for fun in the woods. I had found that after the first few hundred days of being alone, there was no feeling of lonesomeness. In the halls of Cainhurst I had to masquerade, play parts and spend dismal hours withering my youth away in order to become the diplomat my mother expected of me. Seren Hirsch whose skull I’d found crushed next to my brothers. It seems that in his final moments she’d decided to love him. How quaint.

The only meetings in the Forbidden Woods were on the battle grounds. There were beasts to hunt if boredom came gnawing, and the spiraling vast landscape was left mostly wild. I sometimes went weeks without seeing any kind of buildings, finally allowed to be a ranger.

It did get hungry though.

There were tedious distances between one meal and the next, they weren’t served up in silver cages like at Cainhurst. Here there wasn’t so much as a sniff of a servant, you tended to your own needs. Sometimes the hunger was almost too much, and I would fear a touch of madness was close at hand, but then opportunity always came knocking. Death provides for his devoted son.

And oh how he had provided today. I was not in a ways to need it, there had been lots of good eating recently but turning away a meal just wasn’t polite. This one couldn’t have been an easier set up.

Looking down from the trees I watched them coming through the woods, thoroughly lost at this dark hour. The path had disappeared long ago, but they didn’t seem to want to admit defeat. There were two in total, one tall and lanky the other was a small child. There was the dull notion of a third somewhere, I always worried after one more, but after a brief search there were no more lights in the dark. Two travelers, and one of them young. Couldn’t have had very much blood in those youthful bones but oh, oh, how every drop counted when you were given a treat from your god.

The tall one was scratching his head and looking at a map, but acted with false confidence whenever the child turned back to him. He didn’t want the young one to worry, how sweet. I would give them something to worry about.

“How much longer?” The child asked.

“Ermm…not far I think.” His keeper replied. “You said you were going to Yharnam right?”

“Yessir.”

The man brought his lantern closer to the map, and I knew this was the time. While he was squinting at the parchment I dropped from the trees. The little kid screamed and the man, flustered threw up his hands and sent both map and lantern flying through the air.
“Goodness gracious!” He exclaimed, “You gave me quite a fright.”

“My apologies.” I replied, “I couldn’t help but notice you seemed a little turned around.”

He chuckled nervously, “Well, I think we just missed a turn. I’m on my way to Byrgenwerth College you see, and the child is a foundling.”

“I ain’t no foundlin’!” she cried indignantly. She took a moment to adjust the tilt of her hat before continuing on her explanation. “ ‘Tares is comin’ back for me. They’s taking me to Yharnam.”

“Of course they are, little one.” The man said giving her a pat on the head. He flashed me an apologetic smile, and was completely unaware when the kid glared at him.

“Yharnam? Why you’re very lost indeed, you’re walking the wrong way.” I informed them.

She gasped. “That must be why they haven’t found me yet.”

“Well come away with me, I’ll take you on the right path.” I said, extending my hand to her.

She reached forward but hesitated to take it. There was a lot to fear from my hands, the nails were long and sharp. They’d become like claws.

“We’ll get on just fine by ourselves!” The man insisted, “I don’t think that strangers who drop out of the trees are-”

I closed one hand around the child’s wrist and snapped the man’s neck with the other. Her eyes went wide and she struggled, trying to pull away. My hold was stronger than any child could break, but she wriggled and squirmed like a fish on dry land. All the while she screamed.

“Antares!” she hollered into the empty woods. “Antares help me!”

I leaned over her, something so delicate could just be bitten in half. Before I could sink my teeth in, she bashed the fallen lantern over my head. Glass shattered and hot wax dripped down the back of my neck. In the shock of the moment of attack my grip loosened and she fled, scurrying into the woods without any regard for direction.

I wiped away the molten remains of the lantern’s candle than raced after her. She was screaming and small and easy to track.

“Antares!” she kept crying.

Then there was a howl.

Wolves in these woods weren’t uncommon, but the packs muted their presence. This also wasn’t the right kind of howl for a wolf, it was too clear, too intelligent. This belonged to a monster, an abhorrent beast. Excellent, something to blame the corpses on.

I thought she would turn away from the beasts cries, and altered my course slightly, to cut her off. She kept on dead ahead and I had to readjust. She was running towards the howling sound. Why on earth would she be going towards the howling?

In a clearing we came crashing together. The girl in the middle, myself on one end and far across the grass the mangy silhouette of the monster.

“Little girl!” I cried, “That beast will eat you up. Come back with me, I will take you to Yharnam!”
She didn’t so much as turn to consider, and the wolf on all fours was hurtling towards her. She didn’t even slow down, still shouting “Antares!”

Then the creature spoke. “Get behind me, gosling.” It growled.

The monster wasn’t coming for her it was coming for me. I was not afraid of wolves, and if this one wanted to take a meal from me it was going to have to do a lot more then charge. The folded steel blade, an heirloom of Cainhurst, the Chikage, was all I needed. The weapon was made to slay beasts, in the hands of proper hunters but I found there was not a shred of distinction between man and beasts. The Chikage worked for Vilebloods just as well. The wolf-creature came thundering towards me, in great leaps and bounds. The motions were oddly delicate and human despite the power with which the creature propelled themselves. It was something like a deer fleeing a gun shot, efficient and purposeful but with a deadly need to the action. Forsaking the weapons of man, the creature came at me with claws.

Arms that became paws slammed against the flat of my metal blade, pushing down with inhuman force, ungodly strength. The beast wasn’t the only one who was beyond the scope of a regular hunter. I shoved back, the both of us working against each other until my blade started to quiver. For a moment I feared it might break, as such swords had been said to do under excessive strain.

I managed to tilt the handle, just a flick of the wrist, and the cutting edge of the blade rose slightly upward, enough to cause the pads of those paws pain. Their teeth gnashed in pain, horrible sharpened beastly things that were too big for the mouth they were set in. The corruption people allowed themselves to succumb too. Say what they will of Vilebloods, but our maladies were not disfigurements and we could maintain glorious appearance worthy of our noble heritage. This was just a disgrace.

Broken away from my sword the creature dropped to all fours and we began to circle each other. Yellow eyes glued to mine as they matched my every motion, stepping slowly closer and closer together. I didn’t care for this vultureish behavior, they might call me the Bloody Crow of Cainhurst by I was no scavenger. I would step forth and claim what was mine, collecting on defaulted deaths. I had claimed the lives of that lost wanderer and his childish charge, this beast couldn’t steal from me.

I broke the circle, lunging for the side, a strong stab between the ribs was enough to fell most anything. My opponent was quick though, jumping back and delivering a swipe with those beastly claws as they went. They scratched across my metal bracers, threatening to rend the metal in two. The wolf was a lot bigger and stronger then they’d first appeared.

“‘Tares I’m scared!” The little girls squeaked.

And then the creature didn’t seem so strong, for surely a child unfit to fight was the kind of weakness that killed you. The ground would be soaked with blood tonight, beast and babe alike. Oh how delicious.

Antares prepared themselves for another swipe at me, leaning back on two legs, in the same manner a lumbering bear might. Before the crushing weight of the blow could be leveled at me, I rolled forward, evading the swiping paws and sprinting towards the other side of the field.

“Not today, crow.” My opponent snarled.

Claws ripped into my cape, catching on the crow feathers and stopping me dead. Antares smiled as they wrenched me backwards their inhuman strength coupled with momentum to much for me to stand against. The element of surprise was fully utilized by this aberration, even in their fully
realized transformation. I sailed through the air, and hit the ground hard unable to pivot while aloft. I landed in an awkward position. The sword went sailing elsewhere. I hadn’t been able to maintain a proper grip and now Antares was making another charge.

No matter the lost weapon, I had more than one blade to rely on. It may not have been fine in maker, nor come from extensive heraldry but I had killed for these armaments. The back-up weapon of every diligent hunter of hunters, taken from the same one who I’d robbed of their black cape, the twin blades of mercy. Such an ironic thing to call so vicious a weapon. They were little more than butchers knives, slightly curved and wickedly sharp. Unadorned, but to be certain butchers relied on their knives for a reason, they got the job done.

Just another piece of meat that needed carving, as they careened towards me, I turned aside, raking my stolen blades across their ribs. The charge was made down on all fours, and once more I hadn’t properly accounted for the size of the creature. The knives were easily bounced aside by the protrusion of their shoulder, barely leaving a scrap. I was going to need to reclaim Chikage.

The moonlight made it easy to find things of metal, things like blades. It laid in the dampened grass a few feet from where I stood. A quick decision was required, and if nothing else the diplomacy bred into me from the days of Cainhurst allowed for me to make it quickly. I cast my die and took the risk, lobbing one of the blades of mercy behind me as I sprinted for the sword. Splitting up the blades was something the hunters of hunters hated to do, like so many they were locked in tradition and could not change with the times. The ritual of sky burial and commitment to false bird gods were just as useless and foolhardy as the Healing Church and their dedication to the old Great Ones.

So many false gods. A thousand false prophets, for only Death could deliver on the things they prayed deliverance from. Why beg an eldritch horror for salvation from the plague when you could burn a candle and stave off the reaper. Humans and their small minds, small bodies and stupid beliefs. The faith of the faithful was so sad and desperate it was amusing.

There was a beautiful howl of pain to confirm that I’d landed the knife in my target. My gamble had paid off two fold, injuring my opponent and returning my blade to my hands. The beast pried the knife from their shoulder, the sweet smell of blood pouring out into the crisp night. I licked my lips and adjusted my grip on Chikage.

Then came another choice. The beast or the girl. My first attempt at charging for the more vulnerable of the pair had not ended well. Attempting the same manoeuvre twice was foolhardy, but Antares had no measure of my intelligence. I would play to their assumptions, and feign attack on their precious charge. Lure them to a trap.

I started to run towards the girl. The enemy snarled and charged towards me, drops of blood staining fur and grass as they barreled along. Four legs moved faster than two and it wasn’t long before I could smell their foul breath, just inches from me. I ducked down, coming to a dead stop. Antares had too much momentum and slid over me. I raised Chikage to slice at the beast’s stomach, but they were quicker to counter then I thought, bringing up a rear leg and kicking me aside as they passed me by.

It was an astoundingly painful blow that left the sounds of the fight ringing in my ear. For a few seconds I saw double. Everything is doubled and there are four arms instead of two crashing towards me, to smash my body between their palms. I jumped back in time to evade the blow and clear my head, shake away the double vision. Antares swept their paws at me once more, and I meet them with an upwards swipe, slashing more palms, letting more blood.

Working with this blade was writing in letters composed of only sharp edges and angles. Writing
N’s and Z’s in the air with tempered steel on the practice grounds, how wonderful to have red ink with which to render them now. This was much more satisfying than drills run on fellow noble men. Should my blades have had the chance to cross once more with them I would’ve split them in half. What a shame the Executioners had beaten me too it.

Every little cut is something that draws the girls concern. She screamed from the sidelines as if the injuries happening to the wolf were happening to her. What a subtle yet sweet symphony concern makes. How long since I’d heard one scream on behalf of another? It had been many years, the forbidden woods seemed to breed lone hunters, a dedicated to a single target. It had not been since I killed one of their elders, an old graying crow with a slew of fledglings behind him that anyone had screamed.

What joy was brought with the slash of a lateral cut, even still as it was knocked away by strongest claws. Every strike that didn’t land was a liability and there were lots of them. The beast was quick and often knocked me aside before I could land a hit. I was going to have to dance with them. Antares wanted to push me back, put distance between me and the child.

The abhorrent beast’s fists shook the earth, leaving craters in places where they failed to catch me. A normal human, a normal hunter would’ve been felled after a few of these blows but Vileblood skin was a harder thing to break. Queen Annalise wherever she now resided, had never revealed all of the secrets of our noble lineage. There were no skeevy scientists or wire-rimmed scholars brought in to test and analyze why and what and how we were changed by consumption of corrupted blood. We became stronger and better, what more was there to discover? All the notes in the books of the libraries of Cainhurst could not quantify that which I already knew to be true of myself.

I found Antares and I returned to square one very often, the same paws-to-blade standoff we’d encountered at the beginning of our battle. Antares’ strength grew as the battle progressed, driven by rage and a desire to protect while mine remained ever unchallenged. A thing of breeding against a creature of instinct and circumstance. There shouldn’t have been a contest as to who would come away the victor, yet I found my every attack thwarted.

Then, perhaps noble lineage and traditional techniques were not going to cut it against beasts. I had the lone of the twin blades with me yet. The last drew blood, and this one would now follow its path. A rush of air went by me, as I stepped just inches away from a left-pawed swipe.

The creature couldn’t see the smile that spread across my face as I drove the blade deep, deep into the back of their hand. I want to twist it, but Anatres shrieked and withdrew their hand before I was able too. Damn them.

A high-pitched scream from the girl.

The crescendo of the glorious symphony of death.

Something had the nerve to interrupt it, and distract from their agony-induced harmonies. The glen we danced in was too close to the path to Hemwick Charmer Lane, Anatres and I had attracted the attention of the witches. The girl screamed as one came at her with a pitchfork, off-pitch and maddened laughter chopping up my beautiful sonata. The beast and I both turned our heads to monitor the disturbance, Antares with notably more interest than I.

Despite screams the witch didn’t appear to pose much of a threat to the monster’s charge. No longer a lantern, but now a sort of crudely fashioned spiked club functioned as the child’s weapon, pounding into the arms and legs of the madwoman with all the fury and drive of a proper hunter, screaming all the while. She was terrified but apparently a madwoman is not enough to make her
turn tail and run.

That was an honor reserved for things like me. True horror was watching the throat of a friend cut open in front of your very eyes. The madwoman and the witches were just hazards of the territory.

Antares wanted to watch longer than I did, putting the wolf at a disadvantage when I began to attack again. A girl fighting a madwoman wasn’t going to be a very interesting fight even with age considered. The outcome almost didn’t matter at all. Everyone but me was going to be dead shortly. The god of Death would want his offerings before too much longer, and wasting time wasn’t going to set favorably on my shoulders.

“Come on, dog.” I growled, annoyed with their half-hearted deflections, neck still craned to look after their young one.

Anatares can hold me off without trying. This whole time I’d thought they were fighting in earnest, but now they side step and counter strike while chancing glances behind their back.

“Come on!” I shouted, louder this time hoping to stir the beast from stupor.

It still didn’t work. This one appeared to be immune to mere insults alone. If their gaze was so torn then I would make it difficult for them to gaze at all. I made a quick scan of the ground which was all dying grass dusty clumps of dirt and small pebbles. It was perfect. I shifted Chikage to one hand, the weight of the blade now all on one palm. It was much harder to wield but I had no desire to fight in this manner. With my hand free, I scooped up a handful of the dry dust and pebbles.

I whistled at Antares, a high-pitched thing. I’d heard it once or twice by our master of hounds back at Cainhurst.

“Hey! Come on Fido!” I shouted.

Demeaning Antares to a canine companion was enough to get just a slight turn of the head which was all I needed to fling sand and rocks into their eyes. They scraped at their face as the tiny bits of grit bit at sensitive eyes. Anatres growled and I grinned.

Now it seemed I had proper attention, and set to work with Chikage back in it’s proper two-handed grip. To my astonishment their anger faded quickly, not the average thing you’d see from a beast and after a few mad attempts to pound me between their paws their attention was once more divided between the two fights.

My slashes were made quicker, with greater intent. There were gashes there was blood but still they were torn between the two fights. They gnashed their teeth, snapped their jaw closed and swung their head at me, knocking the wind from my lungs as I was once more cast aside. Flung onto the ground, Antares roared and went on a tear towards the madwoman while I picked myself up off the ground.

The madwoman’s head was squashed like a grape in Antares’ jaws, some of the blood spraying onto the screaming girl. Despite the clear and apparent death of her attacker, the child continued to beat the woman’s legs with her club.

“Let’s go!” she said, grabbing the beasts claws and trying to pull him away into the woods. Away from the glen and away from my fight. I wouldn’t have it.

Once more the beast was torn, the crushed skull and oozing flesh of their kill held limply inbetween sharp teeth. Part of Antares must’ve wanted to swallow it, despite the terrible meal corrupted blood made, to have it so close was nigh on irresitable. Damn their compassion for the
child. The body of the woman fell away as Antares spat out the madwoman’s head.

The both of them turned towards the woods but by then I had closed the distance. They had taken too long to decide a course of action, the classic mistake of the loosing combatant. How foolish to listen to a fearful girl and run away. The beast would pay for such folly. Chikage came down in a vicious cut, from shoulder down diagonally to tail bone a strike more reasonable to have done with a whip then a blade but the cry it produced was nearly identical.

“Run, Gosling!” Antares yelped as they whirled around to face me.

“I ain’t leavin’ you ‘Tares.” She replied, readying her club to strike at me.

How cute.

It seemed like all she needed was a bit of blood lust to turn from terrified child to formidable hunter. Had this really been the same girl who’d run screaming from me before? Now she came at me with raised club, how delightfully fickle and wonderfully stupid small children could be.

“No!” They roared at her, but she just started screaming once more and came at me.

It looked like I was going to get to enjoy my dessert first.

I was poised for a perfect strike, bringing Chikage down towards her with a twist of my torso and firmly planted feet. Antares dove in front of her, catching the strike on their back, while they curled themself around the little girl. The swipe surely stung, for Antares gnashed their teeth and grimaced as it cut.

They didn’t dwell on the pain long, kicking away the kid’s club and scooping her up under one arm. I continued my flurry of swipes while they lumbered forward intent on escape. I wasn’t going to let them get away just like that. I increased the pace of my swipes twofold, sacrificing strength and accuracy for frequency. Antares knocked aside whatever they could with their free paw, taking dents and scrapes every so often.

When I came to close the paw would swipe at me, and several times I was caught, claws raking across my chest. They came away dripping silver blood. My blood, stealing it when I should be the one with blood on my hands. I was knocked aside time and time again, which was harmless in the glen but they reached the trees. Antares’ swipes propelled me into tree trunks. My head rang with the laughter of madwomen and the desperate pleas of the girl who wanted so badly to be allowed to fight.

Another swipe that didn’t land from my sword.

A shove of the paw that did. I hit a tree trunk hard, jostling the branches and cracking the bark. A hissing tangle of snakes fell from the branches and onto my face. There were writhing scales and sharpened fangs trying to cut through my flesh and poison me. I wrestled with the thrice damned nightmarish mutant orboros until I’d dislodged it, but by then they’d disappeared.

I could follow Antares tracks, they were huge and unmistakable while they were a transformed beast, but sooner or later their good sense would kick in and they’d become human and more easily hidden. Tracking them tonight would only end in empty stomachs, but I noted the name. Antares wasn’t a common sort to come across and I would not soon forget it.

I hated fights that ended in draws as this one did, why one could be so determined to avoid having their fate decided in open combat. Loosing would’ve spelled disaster for the beast, I supposed as I followed my own tracks back through the glen. Damn the both of them, the girl and her protector.
All of the fury and excitement of a good hunt was bubbling inside me.

The skinny little traveler was going to make a poor meal now if he wasn’t mostly bled already. I didn’t enjoy stooping to siphoning blood out of the dusty earth, most of the time nothing was had at all. That was a process I reserved for when things became too desperate to be ignored. Starvation led you to suck dried blood off a deadman’s clothes, but I hadn’t yet reached that point. This was just a craving not a hollow-stomached need.

When I returned to my corpse I found it had been overtaken by rats, small woodland vermin not the enormous kinds of things you sometimes saw with dinner plate sized eyes and whiskers you could string a violin with. These were the sort of vermin who went scurrying back to their burrows at the scent of me, knowing they were in the presence of a superior predator. I didn’t want the man after they’d finished with him. His skin was marked by their teeth and most of his blood was soaked into things, dry and unappetizing.

Three meals denied to me. What had I done wrong?

Greed. Avarice. That must’ve been it. Death had delivered me an easy kill and instead I’d chosen to chase after the sweeter meal. Sweeter being a relative term. It was only just retaliation for the hot wax she’d smashed on my head.

Were I human it would’ve surely left scars. I would not let my rage overwhelm me next time. I couldn’t afford these kind of mistakes when I found Alois. Candle wax, clubs or beast-like strength there would be no weapon that would prevent me from overpowering her. All of this loss was on her orders, every misfortune I’d suffered due to her words before the court. Surely she was to blame for the massacre itself, if I had been there to watch over Cainhurst Castle no Executioner would’ve ever made it close enough to set eyes on the portcullis. Damn her.

As I retreated into the upper branches of the trees, I began to plan my next move. Although the Forbidden Woods had provided a safe haven, a refuge and a place to grow strong they were clearly not the home of the hidden Alois. If she were holed down in some burrow or nest in these dark forests I would’ve found her by now.

For some reason I’d given her credit as a sensible creature, choosing to avoid hunters and Executioners in large gatherings. I’d combed small villages, forests and mountain caves anywhere that one could easily hide. There were no options left besides the cities, and the one the child had mentioned, Yharnam was known to be the most dangerous. I’d seen it from afar, even sent in several poisoned halflings into its walls to sound it out, making new Vilebloods to judge the strength of the walled city. Every time they were subjected to Execution.

The longest lifespan had stood at five days.

It would be impossible for someone like Alois to survive there without being put on the block, or so I’d thought. Should the child have spoken true then the abhorrent beast was either welcome in the city or able to conceal themselves there. If that monstrosity could survive in the city then perhaps my kin was clever enough to keep out of sight. There were places a man could go unbeknownst, why not a woman too. Hunters didn’t recall the faces of tavern patrons, beggars and slaughter house boys. I’d had to pose as the lot of them, and come to learn who slipped by without noticed. It was a lesson they didn’t reach in a diplomat’s curriculum, and self-teaching was not without its dangers.

Yet still, a piper must learn how to play.

If I could disguise myself as a commoner surely my sister had learned similar things. No one
remembered the faces of courtesans either. Perhaps she was holed up in a back alley bordello, wrapped in a different kind of red then our proud Cainhurst colors. Might’ve been the only place a woman like her would go unnoticed. Alois would never think to put ink in her hair, and I had cause to doubt she’d cut it. It’s length was a matter of pride after Queen Annalise had paid it a compliment. So vain that one, had her vanity remained intact after the hardships she might have suffered.

No matter. Whatever beauty remained I would come to claim it for my own. The faces of the men and women of Cainhurst were pounded to pulp by wheels she failed to stop. Why should her face remain intact any longer?

So it was that I set in mind my destination and gathered as much of a repose as was possible, sleeping in wooden huts nailed to branches in trees. These were the same sort of structures that children built for play. They made the blank canvases and I was their painter, using the amateur architects to paint the walls red. All that scuffling with the wolf did drain energy and I had a few wounds that could do with some attention. Bandages wrapped tightly to hold a few poultices in place and prevent infection. I had to chew and pulverize the bitter leaves myself, taking best guesses from what was available in the woods. The guidebook I’d taken from an expired physician. Her drawings had not been the best, and her handwriting was riddled with misspellings.

It felt better to do something to urge healing, rather than trust my body alone, in these times of infection going the extra mile to heal wounds was always the smarter choice. No blood tonight, and the wine bottles were empty. The mutilated flowers and roots would help to ease my wounds but nothing could ease the burden of my thoughts which raced together in a jumble of replayed moments of battle and frustrations of fleeing prey. My mistakes so much like the sword of famed Damocles, left to dangle above my head. So much to make amends for, so many phantoms to prove wrong. I would win the Queen’s favor and restore the honor of Cainhurst. A new bloodline would be started and we would reclaim our castle. Somewhere in it’s walls her majesty was held prisoner. I would set her free and then, oh, then we would lay waste to the Executioners.

They were at their highest numbers, their greatest strength but I would trail a string of their heads behind me as I climbed the great steps of Cainhurst. We would fashion hundreds of Golden Ardeo helms to the battlements and outfit our castle with spikes. Glorious, gleaming and golden the treasures of our butchers we would later use as decoration. They would remember and never think to attack us again.

Before I could do that I had to find Alois. Triumph over the murderers would mean nothing if she wasn’t made to answer her crimes first. To bring her back would be to restore infection to those walls. Annalise and I alone could bring back the glory days of Cainhurst.

So much to weigh on my shoulders. It would’ve been enough to stagger most men, but I only derived sweet anticipation from the list of duties. So much blood for the letting. The rusted scent of it, spent months before filled my nose as I struggled to sleep in the reclaimed tree house.

Dawn was sickening, poking it’s orange and pink light through my eyelids and rousing me from sweet slumber. The land of dreams took long enough to get too, but I was pulled away in a blink. Tree houses wanted for thicker curtains. I’d find a place with wool ones in Yharnam, and stay where the sun rarely reached.

I got my heading from above, climbing to the uppermost branches of the tree and searching for the spires in the distance. The city did love its gothic architecture and even the basest places leaked with statues, altars and religion based decoration provided by the Healing Church. They wanted their sanctuary to be a beautiful one, and had taken in artists. Such a silly thing to train in the ways
of sculptor’s brush and painter’s palette these days. Penmanship instead of swordsman ship, imagining such a thing was laughable. The idea of a scribe with a pen going against a beast. Chisels could not kill a cleric nor stave off a carrion crow and yet artists and other nonessentials were said to clog the causeways.

It was another possibility to pose as. The penniless artist, as much a drain on society as anything. I checked my bags before heading out for the walled city, hoping to come across Anatres and their charge again. I would kill them on the way in if our paths crossed. Looking through the items I’d taken off various kills I would not be posing as an artist. Several cups, traveled stained clothing, a handful of copper coins, one silver dollar and a few other trinkets that had caught my eye were all that rested in the canvas sack. None of them seemed to suggest a believable career or purpose of any kind, nothing except the field medics’ guide. There was enough information for me to pose as a novice long enough to get lodging. Much more conspicuous then I would prefer, people had a habit of seeking out favors from doctors but it would have to do for now.

I changed clothes, slipping into the reeking vest and sweat stained shirt of a recent victim. There may have been flecks of blood, but a medical profession was explanation enough for any lingering stains. I rolled up the crowfeather cloak and shoved it in the bottom of my pack, covering it with my shirt, the cups and everything else I had on hand for concealing it. As I came down from the tree I decided a hat was in order as well, taking mine from the lost man’s corpse. It had a nice wide brim that would keep my face hidden from the more inquisitive Yharnamites.

The city was crawling with the little maggots. It wasn’t even a full day’s journey from my point in the woods. If Antares had carried on through the night, they’d made it into the city. I could hardly hope to find them in a place like this. Bustling didn’t begin to cover it. Everywhere on the streets the lesser bloodlines ran about, their young playing games and those a proper age shyly courting each other with all the sickening sweetness of storybook romances. My nose was assaulted by the stink of their sweat, refuse and food. So much food, billowing its aromas to high heaven. Pork pies and bacon grease and baked bread all mixing in with the smell of humans and blood. Blood underscored it all. I licked my lips and felt a growl growing in my stomach.

This wasn’t something I could quell in broad daylight. I would have to observe carefully to find someone who wouldn’t be missed.

I leaned against a streetlamp, watching them pass. The rich and the poor weren’t separated by area here, as at Cainhurst but they were still easy to tell apart. The poor were always the same but Yharnam’s upper class dressed in elaborate things. Ladies seemed to favor light blue with floral patterns and they wore ribbons in their hair. That was summer dress in this winter season and it was off putting. Didn’t they have butlers to help them, someone sensible to have them save their flowers for spring and summer?

I suppose wealth too was realative.

“Hot mince pies!”

“Spare a penny sir?”

“Walking boots and leather goods!”

Every cobble I crossed brought new shouts from new men and merchants trying to grab my attention. These market areas were too crowded. I was in need of residential districts, a place to block out the noise. I walked down a street lit with red lanterns, where ladies leaned out the windows and made enticing offers as I strolled past. I marked it for later revisiting when appetites of another nature would require satisfying.
The streets were all woven together and confusing, not a one laid out with any kind of sense. The rabbits bred and built nests in whatever fashion fit their needs, not having a lick of forethought amongst even the smartest of them.

“Lost sir? For a copper I can take you where you want to go.” A one legged urchin barked at me.

I growled at him, raising my upper lip just enough to flash the pointed canines at the plucky youth. His skin went white and despite his crippled condition he hobbled off down the street like Death itself was on his heels. If only it had been night. If only there hadn’t been so many people.

Biting my tongue and biding my time I carried on, shouldering through the crowds. My hat stood out among them, a foppish thing once I was mixed in amongst the commoners. I ripped out its feather and tossed it to a hungry wastebasket. My hair would’ve stood out more than the hat, and unwilling compromises were the price I paid. Of course nowadays I wouldn’t be killed for its color but I hadn’t sighted many others with the same shade and I had seen a lot of people.

I was walking and looking at the far side of the street when one of these seldom sighted silver haired individuals walked right into me.

“Watch where you’re going.” I snarled as he passed by.

“Excuse me?” He said, turning on his heel and looking back at me. A pipe was perched in the corner of his lip, unlit. No smoke. Glasses too, another blight on the human condition was there subpar vision.

“I said watch where you’re going. Are you deaf?” I said.

He rolled his eyes. There was an oddly familiar cockiness to it. “If I was deaf I wouldn’t have heard you at all and thus wouldn’t have turned to ask for clarification. By all accounts you walked into me, so I would suggest you take your own advice and watch your step.”

He was about to continue on his way, but I snatched him by the collar before he could depart. The cloth came away easily. He was rail thin beneath the cheap material. He had a beautifully hollow collar bone that would’ve collected a dizzying amount of blood.

“You should think carefully about who your insulting, boy.” I hissed.

“And you ought to take a bit more time cleaning your teeth in the morning.” He shot back.

“Why you little-“

“Seriously. Unless halitosis is a regular problem for you, then I can recommend a curative. It’s a common ailment nothing to be ashamed of- unlike that temper which I’m afraid isn’t something they make bottled remedies for.”

I pressed him against the wall of a tobacconist shop, and he cringed with the force of the impact. Such a smart mouth for such a frail thing. There was something familiar about that too.

“I would not make such suggestions if I were you, parasite.” With the last syllable I spat in his face, a wad of saliva dripping down his cheek. He winced.

“Well I-“

I wasn’t interested in conversation, I knotted the fist of clothing tighter, cutting off his air supply. Watching his eye pop and his face go red. They were all the same. He pounded fists against the
bricks and tried to kick at me. He didn’t land a one.

The struggling stopped as his air depleted. He let loose the most pitiful wheezing noises. His eyes started to water. I had seen the same teary eyes before. I was sure of it. This wasn’t the first time I’d crossed paths with this man before. I couldn’t shake that feeling not even as his fingers clawed at mine. Where had I seen him before?

His clothes were not the kind that would’ve been worn in the walls of Cainhurst. They were grey mostly, and wrinkled. An apron over the shirt displayed the equilateral red cross of the medicinal profession. Maybe he had belonged to the medic I killed, the one whose guide was in my pocket.

“What’re you doin’ to poor Mr. Callum?”

I turned my head to see the tobacconist come out to wash his windows. Damn him. I dropped the boy and adjusted my hat, dipping the brim to the man.

“What’veya done?” the tobacconist as he went over to the medic, kneeling next to him in the alley.

I didn’t justify an answer continuing on in search of lodging. I found an inn which would hold for a time a few streets away from the one I’d choked the parasite in. It was filled mostly with sailors and the bar maid was missing a few teeth. The wooden replacements whistled while she rallied off room rates to me. As we leaned over the bar I watched crawl in and out of her hair. She didn’t even swipe one away as it traveled from the top of her widow’s peak down to her ear. I traded the silver dollar for a bunk room with one lumpy mattress, riddled with bed bugs and covered in stained sheets. It’d cost a copper for cleaning them and I seriously considered the expense, but opted for a glass of wine instead.

It was red but it was so watered down I regretted choosing the short-term pleasures instead of a sanitary room. To justify, it wasn’t as though I wasn’t going to sleep there very much. This was just some place to return too, and I got what I paid for. If anyone got wind of what I was the bar maid would sell me out for a few half eaten peanuts and a molding turnip. The lodgings maintained a commoner’s allusion, in addition to being the best I could afford.

There were so many places to start in the city, and I’d yet to figure where to begin. The search would have to be the most thorough I’d made yet, and a map was an absolute necessity. I could go through the many districts one by one until I’d either smoked Alois out or crossed Yharnam off my list all together.

And I’d have to figure out that doctor, Mr. Callum. I needed to remember where I’d seen him and then dispose of him. I just couldn’t have people who might know me roaming freely about the city. It was a liability. Just drinking my wine in the tap room of the Black Octopus Inn I found Executioners. They seemed newly minted, full of youth and vigor. The biggest tell was that they didn’t complain about the wines they drank but complimented their flavor. Attempts at maturity that had yet to grow in.

I watched them from a table in the corner.

“Did you ‘ear they found Ol’ Clarkie’s body and it was all torn up like?” The smallest of the bunch was saying. A chocolate-haired kid who looked like he hadn’t taken a bath in a month. Smelled like it too, I could smell him from here. Almost worse than Antares had been.

“I cannæ believe ya, Jossam.” A sandy-haired Executioner with glasses replied. “Quit fibbin. This is serious.”
"You’re right Strawney. You’re quite right. Without Ol’Clarkie buyin’ how are we supposed to move this stuff?" Jossam said.

The third, final and largest a girl with black hair and a hooked nose attempted to answer his question. “Was zit the Patron’s Ranger who has done zis?"

“Nay. They are sayin’ its someone new. Callin’ him the Ripper.” Strawney insisted.

“The Ripper?” Jossam asked, “Piss-poor name if you ask me. It’s got to be the Queen’s Whore that’s done it. I saw ‘ow she told off Clarkie n’ believe you me it’s her what’s done it.”

Around and around their conversations and loathsome accents went. I didn’t know that the Executioners had become such a diverse crowd. The one with glasses had reddish brown skin, like raw clay, suggesting southern origin but his accent baffled me with its northern cut. Likewise the girls voice was delicate but her build anything but. They called her Nola which seemed far too short for how tall she towered. Jossam was the only one of them who seemed to be built properly. Lowborn Yharnamites were lowborn Yharnamites in look as well as sound. These roaches had to be confusing as well as loud.

“Oi! I dinnae care if it’s ‘er Vileblood or this Ripper. Point is Clarkus is dead n’ we don’t ‘ave a buyer. Downey’s gon kill us.” Strawney said. He slammed his tankard on the table so hard, the vibrations traveled up his arm and past his neck to rattle his glasses.

“Zis we can all agree on.” Nola said with a firm nod.

They both turned toward Jossam who held out empty hands. “Don’t look at me. I never claimed to be the smart one ‘ere. We get the drops, we find a guy we sell ‘um. That’s what Essex told us to do n’ we did. Clarkie was good for it, but then ‘e croaked. We’ll just up n’ tell Essex n’ he’ll understand.”

“Thassnae a good plan.” Strawney said, “We weren’t supposed ta be sellin’ ta Executioners in the first place.”

“No one else was buying.” Nola said, “Between ze three of us we only found ze one buyer.”

“Yeah yeah, we already know all of this. If we can’t tell Essex n’ we can’t get Clarkie’s money we’re just going to ‘ave to find it some other way.” Jossam said, “So come on now, turn out your pockets.”

“Ach, come on now Joss, you cannnae expect me to-“

“Pockets.” Jossam snapped.

The Executioners dipped their hands into their robes, but they were almost as low on funds collectively as I was on my own. Piled in the center of the table were three bits of copper, an iron ring and a brass door knob.

“What’s zis?” Nola asked picking up the door knob. “Zis isn’t a coin.”

“Well…I…” Strawney started cobbling together an explanation.

Nola was impatient, throwing the door knob at his forehead instead of hearing his side to the story. He started yelling at her, concerned she might’ve broken his glasses and incurred further expense.

Their concerns for money and finances raged on attracting the attention of the tavern’s other
patrons. Had they been regular lowborn humans they would have been asked to leave. Owing to their Executioner’s attire however the raggedy bar maid was much less likely to approach them and demand they settle their tab and find somewhere else to drink.

Quite the perplexing party, and not at all what I expected of Executioners I could not restrain my fascination. They didn’t return to the subject, continuing to argue about this Downey character while drinking their thinned ales but they had mentioned a known Vileblood in the city. A Vileblood under the protection of a monarch.

They were the first rats to become one of the pack, though they were not aware of it yet. How the rodents whisper.

When they left the Black Octopus I did too, but the streets were familiar to them and a knotted mess to me. What should have been easy to spot was quickly swallowed by crowds and alleyways until I was completely lost. This wretched place was more labyrinth then layout.

I needed to acquire a map as quickly as possible. Booksellers and map makers were scattered throughout the city but after the first few carts and open doorways I realized the copper coins in my pocket were not going to buy me a damn thing.

Pick pockets were a blight on the city, muggers and thugs even worse. I did not intend to use the same trickery to get what I needed when I’d started my life away from Cainhurst. I had thought one could do things nobly with an air of dignity and refinement. Being high bred would surely be rewarded, I had supposed in days of yore. It had turned out to be as false as anything else. Commoners didn’t take to strangers of any sort, especially not ones asking for favors and the rich and well-groomed saw every commoner with the same sunken face and hungry eyes as the last. No one cared for any but the people with which they were already accustomed.

Thus it came that I of noble blood and proper birth had learned to dip thin fingers in thick wallets, extracting cold coins from warm purses. You could touch someone just about anywhere without their knowledge if you learned how to do it right, and despite the many many locations fine ladies and noble gents tried to conceal their belongings they found a way of fleeing to my hands. I bought a map I might have stolen, and ink to mark it with. Better wine wormed its way into my arms as well and by the time I got back to the Black Octopus I had enough coin for better lodging.

It wouldn’t suit though. Had to stick to the narrative. The paper and ink were easy enough to hide in my pack, but the bottle would not nestle away so easily. The green glass neck stuck out of the top but wasn’t noticed by any of the patrons or proprietors as I darted from tavern room to private quarters. Through the thin walls I was bombarded by the grating sounds of an amateur practicing the violin.

There was no worse crime then a poor musician. I could’ve punched through the crumbling plaster with one hand and ripped the strings right out of his instrument, if not for the sake of keeping up appearances. I had more important work to do then weed out the subpar from the talented. Leave that to the orchestra conductors.

I spread the map out over the mattress and took inventory of the city. Just as I had suspected it was a sprawling nonsensical layout. A drunk man could’ve planned a better city than this one. After considerable searching I was able to find Red Street which I marked for later revisitation. The path to the Black Octopus from the sinful street was a long one and I realized I had gone about it with quite the most diversions, looping back on myself so much I might as well have been blind.

There were a few fortunate things about the city, as I began to examine it the same way a bird of prey might. Landmarks were dappled throughout the entire landscape, a big open promenade and
several huge churches that could serve as hubs if I got turned around. The churches were laughable establishments, claiming to provide sanctuary to those in need while their entire upper echelon was composed of the slayers of our kind. Their mercy was the same sort as the kind my twin blades delivered. Had delivered. I would need to find new ones, which meant killing another hunter of hunters.

Antares would do if they could be found, if not this city was sure to have other hunters. So much prey for the hunting, it was hard to know where to begin. Hard but not impossible. Firstly it was to get information, and find out more about this Vileblood protected by hunters. That meant following other hunters, which meant asking questions.

I hated to do it, especially when it came to a human with the charm equivalent and sexual appeal of a sewer drain but I was going to have to get what information I could from the bar maid. I came down the rickety stairs and she was seated at her podium ready to receive patrons that weren’t coming at so late an hour.

I swallowed my pride and approached her. “Good evening.”

“What do you want?” She asked.

Charming.

I cleared my throat, widened my smile and tried not to breathe through my nose. “I was hoping I might buy you a drink.”

“I don’t drink with customers.” She said, “It’s bad for business.”

“We don’t have to drink here.” I said, “There are several fine establishments we could dine at.”

“What are you anyway?” She asked.

“Pardon?”

“You come in here dressed like a back alley doctor but speaking like a duke or something. What’s your deal?”

“No deal.” I said, “I…just get a bit taken with fair faces like yours. My mother read poetry to me. Ain’t ladies like you supposed to like that sort of thing?”

“Listen mister that might work on your twopenny whores but I don’t buy into that sappy nonsense. You can either get out of my face right now and keep your room, or I can have some of my lads escort you off premises.”

“I..I assure you that’s not nessecary.” I said, “Ain’t nessecary. I’ll be on my way.”

“Mmmhmm.” She muttered, watching me as I turned back to the bar.

The ungrateful wretch. Damn her too. When it came time for me to have my first meal in Yharnam she would find herself much more agreeable to my terms. Even if she protested, a blade to the throat can be so persuasive. Her blood would be of the lowest kind but revenge seasoned even the simplest dishes to make them worth the while.

Slighted, I turned away and headed back to my room. The small space was too loud, the violin screeching, the bugs, the sounds of coughing from down the hall. I couldn’t sit still, couldn’t focus. Snatching up the map and storming past the inn keeper I took to the streets once more.
“Hey mister! What are you doing?” She called after me, “Don’t you know the beasts come out at night!”

Oh yes. Oh yes I knew, and I hoped that they would come and ravage her pathetic excuse for a business. At first I took the cobbles just to get away, but since I was out I decided to investigate the least religious of the landmarks and see if the Promenade had any night life to offer. The lamp lighters had done their duty early, and without the thick mass of market patrons clogging the way everything was much easier to navigate. The map helped but so did the street signs, now made visible because there weren’t swarms of people to block them.

Night wind whipped through my thin clothes, cold enough to chill a man. The hardened skin born from my lineage and the blood ceremonies conducted by her majesty, Queen Annalise had nullified such needs for me. I could’ve been without a scrap of cloth to my name and still felt fine. Winter was the given at Cainhurst and we had no fear of it.

The only people on the street were those who couldn’t afford to go inside. Beggars crowded together in alleyways, discarded fish and meat wrappings piled around them for warmth. A few were still on their corners trying to con the last few coins from the pockets of hurried passersby. They didn’t start to leave until the bells started.

It was just one at first, a little hint of a sound over my shoulder, like a fly seen from the corner of your eye. I turned to look, and found nothing but by and by more bells joined the first one. Soon they were ringing so loud all other sounds were drowned out. I couldn’t hear my own footsteps. They came in all varieties from the dull tired sound of iron on iron to the tinkling of silver jingles one usually associates with the Yule season. Loudest of all were the church bells which tolled their solemn warning throughout the city.

Beasts were coming.

I rounded the corner and was once against bombarded by a hapless human barreling into me. They really did not look where they were going, these simple creatures. This one was younger than the man from earlier, another child. He also didn’t bear the strange familiarity or arrogance.

“Sorry mister.” The kid said. He had blue eyes, wide like the moon in a panic.

“I should think so.” I said.

“You’re not from ‘round here. You’ve got to get inside mister. The beasts are coming.”

“You’re mistaken.” I said “The beasts are already here.”

“Whassat?” He asked.

I sighed, what good was a threat that didn’t land. When the commoners were too stupid to understand my wit it took the fun out of things and this lost boy was clearly a dullard. A dullard unlikely to be missed, but I’d sworn to spill the blood of the bar maid before the blood of this boy. There was a chance he could be of use to me, though with today’s track record I was likely wrong about that. Better to expend the effort and exhaust the possibility then let a lead slip through my fingers.

“The beasts are already here.” I repeated, “I heard there was a Vileblood in this city.”

The boy nodded, “Yeah everyone knows that.”

I was astounded, “And you’re all okay with that? Where I’m from they don’t stand for malfeasance
like that!”

“Mal what?” He asked

“Nevermind.” I sighed, “Do you know where they keep her?”

“Used too.” He said, “But their saying she’s escaped, gone on the rampage. Rippin’ throats left and right n’ leavin’ them in alleyways, mister. That’s why I told ya to get off the streets.”

“How considerate.” I muttered.

“Honestly mister. You’re not from ‘round here! An outsider could get tore to pieces.”

“I’ll take my chances.”

Another grossly unhelpful person to add to the list of reasons to avoid Yharnam. I left the boy and found the Promenade, as they called it. The large clearing must have held a market earlier in the day, there were wheel marks and discarded bits of paper that indicated recent activity. A fence ran the Promenade’s perimeter but it was low enough that most children could leap it. The architecture served no purpose, unlike the formidable battlements at Cainhurst. We had planned and prepared our home for attack while it seems the Yharnamites city planning was closer to the decoration of a cake. Whatever looked pretty.

The further into the center of the Promenade I strode, the greater the sense of my foreboding grew. I looked around and under the light of the full moon could see everything in perfect detail, but there was the unshakable sense that I was missing something. I kept thinking I saw flies, out of the corner of my eye. Great hideous buzzing black things, bumbling around and bumping into each other but when I turned to see them there wasn’t a trace. The invisible swarm turned me around and around in the center as I tried to get a grip on things.

Sitting at the base of a large statue I took a look at the map I’d been given. Red Street wasn’t far and perhaps soothing my troubles would be worth the walk, worth the coin. The ladies there wouldn’t make a dime if they behaved in the same atrocious manner the bar maid had. They’d be out on the street and out of a job, but really I could see myself doing the same to them either way. One location was just a little more concealed then the other.

They’d just be a distraction, the last thing I needed. It was hard enough keeping a clear head in this maze, smoke sex and opium would only further dull the senses. I waited, tasting the night breeze, unsure of why but certain it was the correct course of action. Somewhere deep down I wanted to see the creatures that the hunters went after, and how they differed from those of Cainhurst and the Forbidden Woods.

Beasts varied a great deal and if I were of a scientific mind and lower station I might find cataloging their various forms a decent occupation. There wasn’t a single snake to be found at Cainhurst, nor were there carrion crows. We had similar things, giant tube worms with row after row of serrated teeth or the gnarled grey gargoyles-men whose leathery wings and mottled skin made them blend in with the statues on the rooftops. I’d seen the damage both of those creatures could do, time and time again. Some careless servant would be carried off in the claws of one of the gargoyles, the beast didn’t wait to arrive back at its nesting grounds, most often they would lean down to bite at their prey while in transit, dropping blood and human scraps onto the snow. More often than not the servant who went out to clear away the blood ended up that same gargoyle’s dessert.

The worms were worse, personally because they didn’t distinguish between human and Vileblood.
The gargoyles had the good sense not to attack their superiors, and could almost be considered domestic in a sense. The same way a raven or squirrel returns to a house known to toss them food so too did the gargoyles stay on our roofs, no harm to anyone that mattered. The worms however would latch onto anything with a pulse.

They congregated in dark damp places, gorges and wells mostly. The knights informed me of this, second hand but I saw the wounds myself. One of the overzealous new squires had gone after a runaway human ignoring the calls to return from the rest of his party. The human they didn’t bother to rescue but the knight was dragged away with his foot halfway up a worm’s throat. The beast didn’t let go even after it had died, and the butchers had to try and cut away the teeth which even in death had closed around the squires flesh. They were strong parasites indeed to have cut through and dug into our skin.

The boy lost his leg, becoming an amputee and a pariah. A Vileblood who couldn’t catch their own prey had no place at Cainhurst. I might’ve slit his throat and ended his misery but her majesty, Queen Annalise was more merciful than I. She set him to work in the best position she could’ve and he must’ve lived well enough until being crushed by Logarius and his loathsome wheels. It wasn’t as though he could’ve run from them.

So what things did Yharnam offer that nowhere else did? How did the blood-crazed men and women of the city mutate? I sat back, leaning on the statue’s base waiting to see my first hint of Yharnam’s unique creatures. I waited a long time, longer than was ever proper to keep anyone waiting but the beasts did not come. I heard no screams in the distance, nor shouts nor cracking booms from guns. All was silent and still once the bells had faded.

Perhaps the Promenade was just too open a space for beasts to come. It could’ve been one of those odd tricks of auditory construction which radiated sound in strange ways and prevented it from carrying properly.

The buildings were draped in needless finery even where the detail couldn’t be seen. Iron gates ran the length of rooftops, catching on my clothes. Icicles were wedged in the open mouths of gargoyles. The stone kind, not the living ones of Cainhurst. These roofs were more docile, and they bored me. No crows came for my eyeballs. The claws of a furious wolf refused to scrabble at the shingles in an attempt to chase after me. Where was the action?

Rooftop to rooftop like a bedraggled Saint Nicholas I made my way from house to house. Smoke poured from chimneys, trying to darken my lungs. The taste of burning wood, smoldering sewage and cheap tallow candles coated my tongue. It tasted awful but it wasn’t the kind of thing that could be spat out.

Yharnam from above was jeweled sparkling with gold and red streetlights set in the dark platinum facades of its many structures. Were the world a decaying king this would’ve made a fitting crown, smoldering and sparkling and sucking everyone down to its twisted court of expectation. I was prisoner too it to, Death had set tasks for me to accomplish and would not accept failure.

But where to start. I could cross off the Promenade, the open space would never serve as a proper hiding place for my sweet sister. She would be too clever to set foot anywhere so public. From up here I could see into the dark alleyways. They were full of the poor, the peasants among which she could be hiding. Their snores and chattering teeth gave them away for humans. Alois didn’t snore and surely she would not feel the cold. Like a fall leaf spiraling to the ground I had no planned path and drifted aimlessly from gutter, to gabled roof to domed observatory ceiling.

The incense burned my breath as I scoured as close to the church as I dared. It was horrible, seeping into the sockets of my eyes and forcing them to water and burn in addition to stopping my
breath. There was some doubt as to whether I truly required breath, if our race filtered oxygen in the same manner our prey did. There were no lakes for drowning near Cainhurst and in my time there none of our knights had perished in cold waters. It was possible we were not able to exist with breath, but I preferred to keep my lungs from burning altogether. Pulling up the collar of my short I worked the cheap cotton over my nose to try and filter the air.

It was ineffective and I couldn’t imagine Alois being able to tolerate such a place. There was no way she could’ve been in this area for years without succumbing to the stench alone. As dawn began to taint the sky I had crossed mile after mile off of my map eliminating dead end after dead end. All the small dark places one could hide showed no sign of her.

So perhaps she wasn’t in the dark. As the world bathed in morning rose, ideas bubbled in the glorious cauldron of my mind. If not the shadow then surely the light. I scanned the horizon and burning brighter than any around it, the glorious smoldering ember, the crown jewel of this decadent cesspool was the circular rose window of yet another chapel. This one did not billow incense out of its windows leaving lavender clouds to weep down its stairs. My next target firmly cemented, I descended taking to the ground and joining the earliest scraps of the waking world.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
Adjustment Period

Chapter Summary

Communion played out through the eyes of a Vileblood, and her Vileblood companion.

Fwahe

Make no mistakes about interception on behalf of Executioners. I did not defend those who sought to murder me and my beloved, but the shrill sister had ruined Frigga’s hard work. I’d had to wait and wither while Frigga’s skilled fingers worked through the Executioner boy’s hair only to have it be ruined within minutes of our arrival. To have her work squandered was an insult I didn’t wish to have stand.

The boy had the good sense to retrieve the ribbon while the stuck-up sister scampered off. A half-moon of black and white Altered Boys loomed behind me, all of them knowing better then to accuse me of sympathizing with an Executioner’s plight. At least they’d given me a silent one so I didn’t have to suffer an awkward conversation of half-felt thank yous.

“Are you alright?” Templeton asked the Executioner.

He nodded vigorously waving her away with dismissive hands. No desire to discuss it, and I didn’t want to have to try and understand him.

Frigga was still being swarmed by all the ants that needed her to hold their hands and fix their problems. Communion was going to take forever just to get started.

“Sterling didn’t make it?” Piebald asked. I could remember him, his skin was speckled and stuck out. He was the dappled egg in the carton that some obnoxious market place haggler tried to get a markdown for. He’d also been helpful at the tournament back when Frigga’s life hung in the balance. Cracked, speckled or otherwise he was the only one of the eggs I remembered.

“No, he’s out on a hunt.” Templeton said, “Shall I send your regards.”

“If you’d be so kind too, Miss Kingsley.” He said.

“Of course.” She said, always happy to do a favor for the people who didn’t shy from her. Too many stayed their distance nowadays.

Too many, and then again not enough. I may have had my half-moon of Altered Boys but by and by I noticed the golden spike of Executioner’s helms. Their rough spun robes were dotted through the crowd with increasing frequency. I could feel their eyes on me, judging, waiting. I heard their whispered questions, though they were ignorant of that. So many things they said, so many titles they lavished upon me. Let them think me a whore if they wished, I was already blasphemous, but pity the overzealous overconfident youth who thought to say it to my face. That would be the last thing he’d ever called anyone.

But in these communions, inside of Yharnam I had to swallow urges like that. I’d let restlessness get the best of me and now I had a babysitter and far less time with Frigga. The hunters took
months of the year away from me, now they took the months I had too. All last night, even while he’d been banished to his own quarters I felt Patience’s eyes on me. I had no church-fixed modesty, I had been naked around men and women alike. My form was as it was, and was ready to lay with my lover despite the hindrance of his eyes, and loathsome sneezing sickly body. Frigga was a proper lady. She was resistant and I would never her push her to discomfort.

Closer and closer they packed in, squeezing the air out of the place and bathing it in stale breath. Every word just blew the dry air and foul scent around, making their speech a weapon all its own.

“I hate this.” Templeton lamented.

“You used to enjoy communion.” I said.

“That was before everyone wanted to kill me.”

She wasn’t wrong. There had been a time where I could walk amongst the hunters as one of their own. I always had blood, even in times of shortage and would bring extra supplies to curry their favor and maintain the illusion of unity. It wasn’t always an illusion, sometimes I craved belonging. I’d found a wealth of understanding in the varied personalities of the hunters of hunters, each going out alone at night to do their work as they best saw fit. I could respect that.

I had seen some of them out on the hunt, using methods and weapons that were strange to me, and no doubt unendorsed by the overbearing church that ran this city. I’d seen less and less of them lately, their crowfeather capes did not create false shadows as they once did. The hunters of hunters were thinning, kept in check like wolves and deer. Hunters weren’t going mad so much anymore, in these docile days. The deer weren’t breeding, so the wolves were dying out.

“How long is this going to take?” I muttered.

“You know these things can last until nearly dawn.” Templeton said. In all her time traveling with me she still hadn’t really picked up on rhetorical questions, “And I’m sure that-“

She froze up as he came towards us. The blond one, the liar. He was making his way directly towards us, parting the crowd like an axe splitting a log in two. The hunters naturally seemed to move aside for him, providing little if any resistance. He had committed grievous sins, things done outside the common hunter’s territory. Executioner Alfred thought that no one had seen him steal life from his own ally, out on the moors of Mensis but my eyes had watched it all. Every prayer, every pious dip of the head in respect to gods was a fabrication, born of false modesty. His smile was all teeth and no joy.

“A very good evening to the Patron’s Rangers.” He said, bowing to us, bending over like any son of the church. Lies from behind his lips once more, nothing about this evening was good.

“E-Executioner.” Templeton returned dipping her head politely.

I didn’t so much as click my tongue. Patience on the other hand, bent himself so far in half that his forehead scraped the cobblestone floor, coming away with bits of dust attached. It made it look like he hadn’t washed himself.

“Ah, and the newest of our order is with you. Young brother Patience, how long has it been since you were taken to communion?”

He paused as though waiting for an answer. Patience held up six fingers.

“Odeon Almighty, nearly half the year. I suppose that can only be expected from a devout lad like
yourself. Your mother told me you even abstained from Yule celebration this year and spent the
distinctive season distributing bread to the poor.”

“Sounds like a lot of rubbish.” I whispered to Templeton.

“What?” she whispered back.

I feared her ears were becoming as bad as her eyes. “Nothing.”

“Such a big responsibility, to be keeping the minds of our sweet denizens at ease. Not that either of
these ladies would ever do anything devious, I’m sure.” He continued.

“No, we leave the trickery to your lot.” I said.

He chuckled, “I suppose I can’t blame a Vileblood for her hatred of our order. Surely she’s making
life quite a trial for you, lad. Worry not I will pray for you.”

Patience shook Alfred’s hands with disgusting devotion and vigor. I could tell him the things I
witnessed, but he’d never believe me. No one did, and the memories were foggy and out of
sequence. Were only my life written down like one of the biographical journals in Templeton’s
library then things would be easier. I could sift through false memories and find the real ones.

Life wasn’t words on a page. It was bones and breath, inhaling and aching and an agonizing wait
through a tedious meeting. Communion meetings had made sense before Frigga had cleaned the
streets, when blood ran short and beasts overpowered the disorganized parties that took up arms to
expel them. In those days it had been about resources, give and take, finding a balance. Now it was
just petty squabbling and grabs for power.

Executioner Alfred did not wander far from us, and the small collective of Altered Boys at my back
didn’t seem as big as they had before. I would tear Alfred apart if I were ever given a proper
chance, but I’d seen him fight. I’d watch his kirkhammer, his secondary weapon shatter Frigga’s
leg and knew he was a man of great skill. Begrudgingly admitted, he was the best I’d ever seen
wield the Logarius Wheel, and I had seen plenty.

He was good, but no match for my sword, no match for my teeth and bare hands should it come to
that. I really, really hope it came to that.

Frigga began to call to order the many different hunters, bringing them together until she was able
to silence the conversations and begin to sort out whatever needed sorting.

“Shall we play again?” I asked Templeton.

She nodded.

After our first year long intermission, we’d come back and expected communion to go as it always
had. Templeton had brought her satchel filled with ink and pen and parchment ready to take a
record for Frigga as she’d done previously. In her absence there had been an appointed record
keeper and once she arrived she was privately devastated. I didn’t want to deal with her sobbing
and blubbering for the rest of the year so I’d had to think up something to occupy her time.

Communions became a game between the both of us. I’d tap her shoulder whenever someone had
said something especially stupid and she’d hurry to write it down and craft a rhyme for it. If
something else I deemed appropriately unintelligent was said before she could complete her
couplet then I got a point. If she beat me too it, she’d get one. Templeton nearly always won,
because I was of a mind to let her, but I was never at a loss for stupid things to point out. Her
rhymes sometimes made them better.

The game intrigued Patience, who tried his best to avoid looking suspicious as his eyes darted to our paper. Of course that made him look extremely suspicious and all I had to do was turn slightly inward and lean over Templeton’s page to block his view. I doubt any harm would fall to either of us if he knew what we were doing, but I did not want the Executioners intruding on any aspect of my life that they didn’t have too. He was already stationed in the bedroom. How much more privacy did they need to take from me?

It was as Templeton was trying to find a rhyme for heretics, that things took a turn towards the interesting. Hunters didn’t smell good at the best of times, but the stench that accompanied this particular hunter was incredibly powerful. As if being late to ceremony, reeking of hellspawn and turning heads wasn’t enough, there was a child trailing behind them.

Everyone watched as they drew nearer, cloaked in the cape of the hunter of hunters. Did I know this one? The crowd of hunters surged forward as they strained to get a better look, and I was blocked behind a sea of heads and shoulders. Whoever had entered, did not stop and take their seat but proceeded through the church, making themselves known and coming to stand directly before Frigga.

“Forgive the intrusion, milady, but I have news of grave importance to share with us all.” The hunter of hunters said.

My lover had a short fuse when it came to being interrupted, especially in front of a crowd she was trying to manage. It stemmed from the old days, where Minimus simply spoke louder than groups like the Altered Boys and the Valkyeries and thus got his way. She had to speak for all the unspoken and interruptions were usually just attempts to derail her. This, however did not seem like one of those times.

“You have the floor.” She said.

“Thank you, milady.” The hunter replied. They took of their mask and I realized that I did know this one. Antares, by name they had a cache of secrets not entirely unlike my own. “I have come to inform you of a scourge in the forbidden woods, and a possible answer to these new Vilebloods who have flooded our good clean streets. I was attacked by the bloody crow of Cainhurst.”

The whole room paused, then several sections burst into laughter. It was dominated mostly by the woodlanders. Frigga covered her face with her hand, regretting her lapse in judgement and allowing Antares to speak.

“No, no it’s true!” Antares insisted.

“Did you also see Hari Harel on the way in?” One of the woodlanders chuckled.

“Or maybe the snake priest?” laughed another.

“Look out he’ll turn you to stone!” warned Viorel Lupei. The sarcastic little asshole was another one on my list of throats to remove.

“Oi shut up and listen! ‘Tares is tellin’ you the truth and I saw it myself!”

This voice came from the little girl that was brought it alongside the hunter. I couldn’t tell you the last time a human child had spoken to me. Never had one been allowed in communion before, and certainly if they had they hadn’t spoken.
“Antares who is that?” Frigga asked.

“I picked her up in the woods.” Replied the hunter of hunters, “She says she’s called Goose.”

“Goose?” Frigga asked.

“Yeah that’s right.” The little girl confirmed.

“What’re you doing allowing a kid in here?” Sussex shouted, “This is a meeting for hunters. No denizens allowed, and especially no children! It’s bad enough you let the Vilebloods in but now you’re turning a sacred tradition into a circus!”

“If it’s a circus you’re the bloody elephant!” Viorel shouted.

I tapped Templeton on the shoulder. A break to alleviate the tension. She grinned, his insult made no sense and was equally the dumbest thing we were likely to hear that night.

“Enough, all of you!” Frigga said, cracking her cane on the floor to better make herself heard. “Antares has the floor, and will please, rather quickly explain.”

“The bloody crow of Cainhurst attacked me in the woods. He attacked Goose too and she said he had killed a man earlier. The woods are no longer safe with him on the loose. We need a party to bring him to justice, lest more fall victim to him.”

“The bloody crow is just a story.” Alfred said calmly, “Surely a hunter of hunters isn’t scared by a scuffle in the woods.”

“It was no scuffle.” Antares insisted, “I came across an entire caravan, slaughtered. Goose was the only one I found alive the rest had been drained of their blood.”

“Are you sure it wasn’t Fwahe who done it?”

Every head in the room turned towards the one Executioner who’d spoken. Jossam, one of the ones from Ezra’s party. His face paled, awash with instant regret the moment after the ill-thought words crossed his lips. I took a step towards him. Patience’s hand shot out in front of me, stopping my advance.

“That would be impossible, young brother Jossam.” Spoke Lucian, one of the city hunters. “She has been under the watchful eye of the Executioners. Your skepticism has no place here.”

Jossam bowed his head to Lucian, grateful for good sense and a way out. I wouldn’t be forgetting his words though, not any time soon.

“Additionally, comrades we have no reason to doubt the words of Antares. Have not the hunters of hunters always spoken the truth? What would such a ma—wom—erm individual gain from spreading lies and rumors?” Lord Gaines put in.

“He ain’t no liar!” Goose shouted.

“The child is another matter.” Gaines said, “She should not have been brought here.”

“I thought it best if everyone were warned immediately, there is a chance I was pursued.” Antares said.

“And so you opted to lead this, bloody crow of yours right too us?” Sussex asked.
Antares did not have a ready response for that. In their second of hesistation the hunters launched into disagreement once more. Templeton always seemed to shrink in rooms like these, getting smaller and smaller as people got louder. My assigned Executioner watchdog on the other hand, was all but straining at his leash for a closer look. His head swiveled this way and that trying to catch every bit of conversation flying across the room.

“Enough.” Frigga said again, “We’ll need to investigate this. Lord Gaines speaks true, Antares has given us no reason for distrust. The woodlands can be a dangerous place even with our many valiant woodland hunters to look after them. If the source of these Vilebloods and their killings in Yharnam rests outside its walls it’s our solemn duty to seek it out.”

“Here, here!” Agreed Gaines.

“Thank you, milady.” Antares said. Relief was all across their face and they dipped into a bow.

“You can work with Queen Aspen directly and find some volunteers to search the area from whence you came. Bring back any evidence you find. We’ll also close off the woods to travel as best we can, and if any denizens simply have to go through be sure to escort them.” She directed, “We can’t allow any new Vilebloods to be created.”

“And what of the girl?” Sussex asked.

“She stays with me.” Antares said, “Goose is my charge now, and I’ll look after her properly.”

“You can’t expect to take her on a hunt for a dangerous killer!” Sister Moira Anne gasped. “She’s a child!”

Because she cared so much about the safety of her own, she left him with me. Vileblood hunting indeed. The hypocrisy of the Healing Church was nauseating, pretending as though they didn’t condone sacrifices but raising them by the thousands. Every child they took in was just one more to sacrifice to the jaws of beasts or the hands of gods. It was maddening being the only one who saw through their veils of piety.

“I ain’t leavin’!” Goose said, “Just try and take me!”

She clung to the hunter of hunters cape, digging her fingers deep into the scratchy feathers ignorant of the gore that stained them. She didn’t seem to be bothered by the smell either, but I wasn’t the only one in the room with a wrinkled nose. If all Antares had done was get into a battle with a Vileblood, they shouldn’t have come away smelling that bad but Odeon almighty did it reek!

“It is rather impracitcal to allow a child on so dangerous a mission.” Lord Gaines said, “Why not station her somewhere safe, at least during the investigation. We can take her at Byregenwerth and you can retrieve her after we’ve ensured the woods are safe.”

“Nonsense.” The sister retaliated, “She must be returned to her family.”

“She hasn’t got a family, everyone was murdered. Antares said so.” Lucian reminded.

“I’m not leaving ‘Tares!” Goose said, stomping her foot on the flagstones. She truly believed she had a choice in this matter.

There must have been a time when I was as young as she was. The memories were dim, but everyone began small and fragile. How we all came to learn that the world wasn’t fair and no one was going to give you what you wanted simply because you asked for it, how indeed. She wasn’t the sort stopped by logic and when the church sister tried to lure her away with promises of warm
milk and soft beds she only clung to Antares cloak more tightly.

“Can we get back to discussions that matter?” Sussex asked, “Let the sorting of children’s living arrangements be decided later. The middle of communion is not the time.”

Despite callous presentation it as still the truth. Arguing about Goose was only going to lead down rabbit hole after rabbit hole and delay Frigga’s return to my arms. The Executioner quickly gained the support of the other Executioners and their support swelled with the church’s endorsement. Antares and Goose were pushed to the side as a request for more border patrols around Old Yharnam was put up for discussion.

“Have you ever heard of the bloody crow before?” I asked Templeton.

“Well sure.” She replied, “Everyone has.”

I rolled my eyes. Things that were common to the scholar were foreign to many, but the thought of that never crossed her mind. “Assume someone hadn’t, and then explain.”

She adjusted her glasses and cleared her throat. I’d accidently stumbled into a lecture. Lessons from Templeton were usually fairly boring but they couldn’t be worse than the city hunters and their endless requests for things. They were bad enough that Frigga complained about them, but at least she could be silenced with kisses. The city hunters had to be drowned out with topics that were slightly less boring.

“You of course know who Hari Harel is.” Templeton assumed.

“No.” I said.

She sighed, “Don’t you like...”

She searched for the right term. Get out? No. They kept me fenced in. Talk to people? No. They tended to not want to converse with a Vileblood. She soon gave up looking for a proper term and started herself over.

“Nevermind. Hari Harel is the legendary first hunter of Yharnam. He’s a folk hero.” She explained, “Yharnamites are fond of stories about him. He’s usually portrayed as a rather dim-witted fellow who just sort of stumbles into the right solution either guided by his hunger or pure dumb luck. Some varations of the tale have him grow wiser with every beast he kills others keep him consistently unintelligent. He’s always wearing a pot on his head and is usually drawn with his shoes either backwards or on the wrong feet.”

“Ok.” I said, “What does he have to do with the crow in the woods?”

“I was getting to that.” She pouted.

“Sorry.” I said. I wasn’t really but the apology would save an argument and get her to the point more quickly.

“The bloody crow of Cainhurst was an enemy of Hari Harel. He was said to have ridden to Cainhurst in a carriage with no driver and no horses, which moved as though it had both. Once he reached the castle he found it deserted completely. The only other living thing he saw was a shadowy figure constantly lurking out of the corner of his eye. In the stories it was some kind of crow king with red feathers called the Bloody Crow of Cainhurst. They must be attaching the name to the killers now.”
“So he really is just some fairy tale?” I asked.

“Yes, but a good scary one.” She said.

“Tell me it then.” I replied, “These meetings are boring. Tell it properly, like when you were on about the princess with the glass slipper.”

“Cinderella you mean?” She asked. “Everyone knows that story.”

“Yes. That is now true.” I agreed.

I shoved nudged Patience away from the column so that I could lean against it. Templeton was short enough that I could look over her head and keep an eye on the room, while she looked down and focused at her blank pages. She did this when telling stories even if there weren’t words to read off. Templeton wasn’t the kind of person to look her enemy in the eye. She lost the nerve. With a gun she picked people off from behind, shooting the backs of their necks. In conversation it was more likely the small scholar would recall the shoes her conversational partner wore rather then what their face looked like.

“Hari Harel and the Bloody Crow then?” Templeton asked.

I nodded.

It was hard to hear the beginning of her tale. She didn’t speak very loudly and was drowned out by the petitioners. I had to lean in closer, until her breath warmed my skin with every word. I felt them on me, hot and uncomfortable but it was better than dying of boredom.

“Anyways it was after the Snake Priest and the sand wastes. Hari Harel had made it to the somber moors where only black rabbits and old beetles live. They survive on yellow grass and dance for rain to keep the parched roots of their food source going. It’s said that Death himself lives down under the rabbits burrows and that’s why hardly anything grows there. The rabbits are his ears, listening for the last words of the souls he collects. The beetles are his eyes that see the end of a battle before it happens so he knows who to mark off the list.

Hari Harel was neither eyes nor ears of Death but he had come to the moors anyway. He’d gotten there quite by accident, as being turned around in the endless deserts are wont to do.

“Blimey.” Said Hari Harel.”

She scratched an itch on her nose. “He was always saying Blimey you know, that was kind of his thing.”

“Okay.” I shrugged.

“Also he was like always hungry. That was his other thing.” Templeton added.

“Just get on with it.” I said.

“So Hari Harel said blimey out on the moors of death and then his stomach growled. He sat down in the yellow grass and pulled some of it up, trying to chew the roots and satisfy his stomach. He had not grown up eating food from Death’s soil and could not digest the roots. A beetle landed on his nose and he tried to smash it. The beetle wouldn’t be the first bug he’d eaten but all of them saw his moves before they happened and Hari Harel was not able to catch even so much as a single bug.
He went after the rabbits too but as you might’ve expected they heard him long before he had the chance to attack and were always able to duck out of the way. Hari Harel went without food and didn’t have the strength to journey to a new place to find anything. He laid down in the crinkly grass and tried to ignore his stomach.

But no one could ignore it. Not even death himself who was busy totting up coffins for next months rounds. He couldn’t keep his numbers straight while constantly interrupted by the hungry hero. When Death could stand it no longer he sent a rickety carriage driven by a team of spectral horses and their phantom driver to take Hari Harel somewhere else.

Hari Harel was making bold attempts to starve to death, but it didn’t seem a very quick process. He was taking his time thinking through all the greatest meals he’d consumed, of which there were a great many.

“There was that roast peasant with blackberry sauce.” Said Hari Harel, “And the suckling pig five Christmases ago, with goose liver and roast chesnuts and- Blimey! What’s that?”

Blimey again?” I asked.

Templeton nodded, “I told you it’s like his thing.”

While she found her place in the story again I chanced a glance around the room. There were new people arguing now, but they were still on the same city hunter’s problem. Frigga looked only mildly interested, and I mirrored her expression back to Templeton.

“He saw the carriage coming over the hill, just a carriage moving on it’s own wheels spinning around scaring the living daylights out of the rabbits. Hari Harel could hear horses but couldn’t see them. The carriage came to a stamping halt in front of him. One of the horses snorted in his face, so powerfully it knocked the soup pot right off of Hari Harel’s head.

The phantom stepped down from the drivers seat and opened the door, but to Hari Harel it looked like the carriage had opened for him of his own accord.

“Don’t mind if I do.” Said Hari Harel. He climbed into the carriage and settled himself down on the padded leather seats. The driver closed the door behind him and clicked the reigns of the horses taking them far away from the yellowed moors of death. Death had told his henchmen to carry Hari Harel far far away where his growling stomach would not be a bother any longer. So it was that Hari Harel ended up at Cainhurst

“That’s not possible.” I said, “It couldn’t have happened it’s-“

“It’s just a story.” Templeton said, “It’s not like Yharnamites did research on it they just knew Cainhurst was a place. No one but Executioners had ever been, it’s kind of natural that rumors spring up around places like that.”

“Well it still couldn’t have happened.” I said.

“I know.” She sighed, “That’s why it’s a story. Just a folk tale, a legend. Like Cinderella. She didn’t actually exist, she wasn’t actually alive.”

“She didn’t go to Cainhurst either.” I said.

Templeton ran her fingers through her hair, stopping to scratch at a particularly tangled clump. She flipped her notebook closed, and then back open. The leather cover and paper pages made a semblance of music, the thump of the cover and the flutter of the pages. It wasn’t anything to dance
too but pleasant enough. The hunter’s debate was still going, Aditya Lupei had weighed in on this one detailing his plan for a minefield to be constructed around the city in lieu of a patrol increase. Frigga was of the mind that this might cause more harm than good but Aditya was passionate about his plan.

“Well then what?” I asked, “He gets to Cainhurst?”

“He gets to Cainhurst.” Templeton said. She was glad for the prompting to continue. “And the place is an ice castle, not at all what we saw. In the stories it’s just big blocks of snow and lots of statues and things. All of the water is frozen solid, the doorknobs have to be thawed before they can be opened. Most people would’ve seen it as an abandoned wasteland, but not Hari Harel.

Hari Harel saw a potential meal in the castle. To him it was all just a giant ice box. He breathed his warm breath on the frozen door handles until the ice inside gave in. It took a lot of shoving, and lesser folks without the gnawing hunger of Hari Harel might have given up on the threshold of the great Cainhurst doorways but Hari Harel was not most people. He shoved his way inside and began looking for the kitchen.

Castle Cainhurst was empty, completely devoid of all life. The only sounds were the fall of Hari Harel’s footsteps, mostly hushed by the carpet and the reverberating growl of his stomach. It woke something in the rafters.”

“That’s cheating!” I shouted.

It was a little louder then I’d meant too, and it turned a few heads.

“What do you mean?” the scholar asked.

“You said that the castle was devoid of all life. Then you said something woke up. That’s cheating.”

She rubbed her eyelids, sliding hands to pull cheeks downwards in exasperation. “It’s dramatic irony.”

“It’s cheating.” I said.

“You know if you have so many problems with this story then why don’t you find something else to do?” She snapped.

“No. It’s fine. I’ll be good, I promise. Keep going.” I said.

She raised an eyebrow. “Last chance.”

I promised, holding up my hands so that she could see there were no crossed fingers.

“He had woken up the Bloody Crow of Cainhurst. Hari Harel was looking for food, but the Bloody Crow, who hadn’t seen so much as a spider in months was looking for something to occupy his mind. The Bloody Crow was a cruel man, much like an old battered barn cat who liked to play with his food before eating it.

“Hari Harel.” He called down from the rafters. His voice bounced around the cavernous domed ceiling.”

I wanted to ask how it was that the Bloody Crow already knew Hari Harel’s name but I figured that would be seen as counterproductive and delay the motion of the story. Still, the Yharnamites who
put together these folk tales should have considered their logistics more carefully.

“And then Hari Harel looked for the voice, checking right and left, forward and backward but never looking up. That pot on his head was bad for his hearing and made the source of the sound very difficult to place.

“Who’s there?” Hari Harel asked.

“It’s your guardian angel.” Said the Bloody Crow. “I’m here to help you.”

“Blimey!” said Hari Harel “I didn’t know I ‘ad a guardian angel!”

“Oh yes.” The Crow replied, “And I’ve been watching over you very carefully.”

“Gee, thanks!” Hari Harel said, “If it ain’t too much trouble could you tell me where the kitchen is?”

“Of course.” Smiled the Crow, for this is what he had wanted all along.

The Bloody Crow told Hari Harel to go down the hall and take the fifth right. Hari Harel didn’t know his right from his left, nor could he count past three so he ended up taking the third door on the left.

It led right to the kitchen.

“Thank you!” Said Hari Harel who began looking over the frozen cooking surfaces. A pot of frozen soup was iced-over mid boil.

“You’re welcome.” Grumbled the Bloody Crow, a little annoyed that Hari Harel had gone off course. He clung to the shadows while the hungry hunter filled the stove with wood and lit a match. A hundred year old perfectly preserved soup became a welcome meal for Hari Harel who drank down the whole pot. He took down a few freshly-thawed chickens and got a few bites into a frost bitten potato before he began to feel sleepy.

“Blimey.” Said Hari Harel, “I’m about to clean pass out.”

“Let me tell you where it’s safe to sleep.” The Bloody Crow offered.

Hari Harel thanked him and the Bloody Crow told him to go back down the hall and up the stairs. These were the kind of directions that Hari Harel could follow and the Crow was confident that this would be victory for him. He told the hunter to go in through the green door at the end of the hall. This would have sent him flying down the laundry chute, if only Hari Harel weren’t colorblind. The Bloody Crow watched as he approached the two doors at the end of the hall, one red and one green.

Hari Harel looked between both doors several times before grasping the handle of the red door. Once he had his mind made up there was no changing it. The Bloody Crow didn’t have so much as a second to protests as the hunter opened the door and found himself in one of the nicest guest rooms in the entire castle.

“Blimey! This place sure is fancy.” Hari Harel exclaimed.

“Indeed.” Snarled the Bloody Crow. He looked on from underneath the bed as Hari Harel stoked the fire and warmed the room. Everything was a bit damp from the melted ice but Hari Harel didn’t mind in the slightest. He was enjoying the castle immensely and pretending as though he were lord
“Hello! What’s this?” Hari Harel asked when he caught a glimpse of the Bloody Crow’s cloak from beneath his bed. He ducked down for a better look, but like an eldritch god the Crow melted into the shadows, loosing his form and making the Yharnamite feel as though he’d been seeing things.

“Must have been the soup, it was rather old.” Hari Harel muttered, “Best to just sleep it off.”

“Yes, why not have a nice rest?” The Bloody Crow asked. Surely this would be a task that not even Hari Harel could mess up. What better time for the Crow to pounce on his meal?

“Right then.” Hari Harel said. “Goodnight.”

“Sleep well, Hari Harel.” Smiled the crow.

Hari Harel was not a peaceful sleeper. The hunter’s snoring was louder than his stomach. It shook the entirety of Cainhurst Castle, the rumbling causing icicles to plummet from the ceiling. The Bloody Crow pressed his hands over his ears, more annoyed then Death had been. How could something so small make so much noise?

Every time the Bloody Crow tried to crawl out from under the bed, Hari Harel would loose another deafening snore. Everything would rattle, the old halls threatening to collapse in an avalanche of furniture and stonework. It was unsafe to move and the Crow found himself trapped underneath the bed lest one of the icicles fall and impale him or the room collapses on top of his body.

Hari Harel woke very well rested. The Bloody Crow woke with dark circles under his eyes and a stiffness in his back.


“Yes.” The Bloody Crow agreed, “Breakfast is long overdue.”

They both left the bedroom and went out into the hall. It was in ruins. There were broken statues, furniture and sharp shards of ice scattered throughout the halls turning what was once a grand mansion into a dangerous labyrinth. The Bloody Crow smiled. If he couldn’t trap his prey in this he wasn’t fit to continue hunting.

“Fear not, brave Hari Harel. I will guide you through to breakfast.” The Bloody Crow smiled.

“Thanks!” exclaimed Hari Harel.

The Bloody Crow began to guide him deep into the mass of shattered ice and splintered wood. Hari Harel was following directions perfectly but after having a good nights rest and a full stomach he was a little more on edge then he had been when he first journeyed to Cainhurst.

For the first time Hari Harel got a glimpse of the Bloody Crow, just a shadow over his shoulder. He turned around to see him better, slicing his jacket on the fractured spike of an armchair. He saw nothing behind him, but once more the crow, lingering just out of his forward vision. A phantom who only haunted the corner of his eye. Hari Harel turned and turned, slicing himself several times on the debris. There was the sharp smell of blood. Hari Harel’s breath was a visible thing now, coming out through his lips in cold puffs. He was playing right into the Bloody Crow’s hands.

“I keeping seeing things!” Hari Harel shouted, “I’m sorry Mr. Angel sir but I’m seeing things that aren’t there. I’m proper loosin’ my mind.”
The Bloody Crow smiled, “Don’t worry about it. This is all perfectly normal.”

“No it isn’t Mr. Angel sir.” Hari Harel said, “I ain’t supposed to be seeing like this. I’d rather not see at all!”

So that is just what Hari Harel did. He shut his eyes and let instinct guide him forward. The Bloody Crow tried to shout directions but once Hari Harel shut his eyes his ears kind of came along for the ride until all his senses were suitably dulled. Some said it was a miracle, others insist the hands of Odeon the Formless came down like puppet strings and pulled Hari Harel out of Cainhurst. He got away with a full belly while the Bloody Crow was kept behind hungry and stuck in the shadows of Cainhurst.”

“The end?” I asked.

“The end.” Templeton confirmed.

It was a stupid story, riddled with inaccuracies. Cainhurst wasn’t covered in ice and there were no surprise mazes or frozen soups. Minimus had taken up residence there and everything was livable if shifted. Yharnamites and their small minds.

“That was odd.” I said.

Templeton shrugged, “It’s not one of the best ones in my opinion. I prefer the originals. You can’t beat Hari Harel and the Constables. That’s a Yharnam staple, but that must be where the name Bloody Crow of Cainhurst came from.”

“Is he a crow in the story?” I asked.

“Most of the time I think he’s just a…well a Vileblood like us.” She said, “But you know how folk tales are. There’s plenty of Yharnam kids who just thought he was a big red crow. It’s hard to really know, it kind of depends on who is telling it.”

“That’s confusing.” I said.

She gave another shrug.

Communion dragged on and on. Executioners advanced and receded like the tides around me. Sometimes I saw nothing but the rough spun cloaks and the gold helmets of their order. Other times they were swallowed by the crowd and seemed to have vanished completely. I wanted to glue them down so I could keep an eye on them, but everything moved in these places.

The room was an hourglass full of slow-dripping sand. I hadn’t even noticed it had begun to drain until there were only a few of us left. Time moved differently in this chapel. At last Frigga came away from her post looking so tired I wanted to take her in my arms and carry her home. It would be undignified of course and I didn’t make an attempt to follow through on it.

“Thank you for coming.” Frigga said, ushering Antares out the door. They were making apologies for their interruption and had stayed after others had gone in order to do so. My memory had been correct. Noble.

“That was worse then usual.” Frigga said.

I took her hand in mind, squeezing tightly for a few seconds, then releasing. She squeezed mine back.
“You look tired.” Templeton said, “You should get some rest.”

Frigga nodded. It seemed she’d run out of stamina for speech. We walked home in the silence of an empty night. Tracks from departing hunters heavily marred the snowfall on the steps of the church. As we put distance between it and us the tracks thinned and we walked across fresh white snow.

“It’s pretty.” Frigga said, “I forget that this city is pretty up close.”

I didn’t see anything more than closed windows and slush-filled gutters but she looked into the night as though the streets were carved out of diamonds. Looking at the streets captured in the dark pupils of her bright eyes I could pick out some semblance of beauty but not the sort she was describing.

“It’s something.” I said.

We talked like this, one making a statement and the other agreeing with it. I used to despise this kind of talk but it was different with Frigga. The moments where things could be light and airy like spun sugar were fleeting but treasured. I held our conversation close to my heart and kept it up as well as I was able. I would have as many airy conversations as she liked.

She went right to bed, didn’t even change out of her clothes and was asleep the second her head hit the pillow. When she was especially tired she tended to snore and tonight was one of those nights, little sleepy grumbles coming up as her chest fluctuated with breath. The Executioner was up as well. Sitting down seemed to increase his stamina. Eyes everywhere. Executioners at communion were bad enough, but now I had to bring one home too.

He was only human though and his stamina faded with the setting sun. Frigga woke and he could hardly keep his eyes open. Frigga had meetings to attend. She always had meetings to attend. Meetings were things I couldn’t murder, and the vilest of enemies would not be eliminated. She promised to be back early. She never came back early.

I was left with the boy trailing me. He followed after, yawning and rubbing his eyes. It reminded me of a child who refused to take a nap. And much like that same child he didn’t last very long. The Executioners were stupid sending only the one half-baked kid to watch over me. Patience fell asleep at the breakfast counter. His head rested right on the jam-and-butter laden toast lathering itself into his hair. I left him there. He had intruded on my life and now I thought it high time I returned the favor.

I was certain I would find all manner of secrets locked away in his room. They were locked too. He locked his door. Only people with something to hide did that. I had come across people like that, and had learned how to get around them. The locks on dressing room doors were nothing.

It looked more like a prison cell then a bedroom. He hadn’t brought anything with him. There was nothing to search. Did vows of poverty and vows of silence go hand in hand? I’d never understand things like that, not in all the years I’d lived. Denying oneself the pleasure of simply living all for the sake of an unknowable god. I owed the Ancient Ones nothing, but oh how they owed me.

The only clothes he owned were the odd robes of a vow-taker turned Executioner. They weren’t precisely one or precisely the other. I had half a mind to look through them, they were folded up under his bed but I knew I’d never get them back into their proper creases if I unfurled them. Folding clothes was a waste of time. I always messed them up. Wrinkles were part of my style.

He brought a grand total of two books and zero weapons. Templeton would be horrified at the lack of literature. I hated reading and she still insisted I carry field guides and storybooks in my pack at
all time. She told me they were for when I got bored. Because boredom was a problem when I was out trying to hunt down fresh blood for us. All those books only weighed me down.

I took one down and skimmed it. The words swam around on the page having the nerve to be written in frilly cursive. It was all loops and swirls. The scholar looked at stuff like this all the time. She’d be able to help me. I grabbed the book, peeking into the kitchen as I walked past to check on the boy. Still asleep in the jam.

I brought my foot down several times on the trap door of Templeton’s ramshackle library in the orchestra pit.

“Coming!” She shouted. There were shuffling noises and the swoosh of falling paper. A muted curse word and then feet pounding up steps.

Her head popped out of the ground like a marigold sprouting up for the spring, all messy orange curls.

“Hello Fwahe.” She said.

“Hey Temp.”

She looked behind me. “Is Executioner Patience still asleep?”

“Yes.” I said.

“At the breakfast table?” She asked.

“Yes.” I said.

“Did you leave his head in the toast?” She asked.

“….yes.” I confirmed.

“Odeon Almighty.” She sighed.

“Look that’s not important. I’ll move him later.” I said, “I need you to read something for me.”

“I’m busy.” Templeton said, “And you know how to read. What do you need me for?”

“You do it faster. The words don’t swim when you read them.” I said.

She sighed and climbed back down the stairs waving me inside. The Orchestra Pit was filled with shelves which were filled with books. It got covered in dust when not in use, but the first thing Templeton did upon arrival was dust her shelves, expelling the signs of neglect. A couch at one end was packed with rumpled blankets and several pillows. It had been a pain to move down here. Cato and I wrestled with the fancy furniture for hours trying to fit it through the tiny trap door. Between the lack of space and his missing fingers it was quite the struggle, but better that Temp had some place to sleep. Frigga had extended the offer of a room, but she always ended up falling asleep at her desk. At least now she could try not to become a humpbacked curmudgeon.

“What is so urgent?” She asked.

I tossed Patience’s book down on her desk. The pages fluttered, but the heavy leather binding kept it from opening at random. Templeton made the same careful inspection of this tome as she did any other. First a glance at the cover, then a finger along the spine. She checked for titles and authors, like that somehow mattered. On this book both were blank.
“You know you can sit in on Sterling’s lessons if you have trouble reading. We don’t do them as frequently anymore but—”

“I know how to read.” I insisted, “Just tell me what the book is.”

“You could be nice about it.” She muttered. “You could say please.”

“Tell me what the book is, please.” I asked.

She relented and opened the front cover. She was as taken aback as I was by the tiny intricate handwriting and pulled a candle closer so that she had greater visibility. Sometimes she was down in the darkness so long I thought her eyes would enlarge themselves, or go blind like the mutant rats in the sewers.

“It says,” She read, “A complete catalog of the sins of Patience Oliver Hastings beginning with his birth on December the 8th. Begun by Sister Moira Anne Hastings and continued by the aforementioned.”

Another strange custom of the church I supposed.

“Fwahe, this seems private.” Templeton said.

“I agree. Let’s read it.” I said. I pulled a footstool closer to Templeton’s desk, leaning my elbows on the polished wood and holding my chin in my hands. “Go on.”

“Go on? What do you mean go on?” She cried, “This is private! This is personal!”

“This is gathering information!” I said. “Learning about the enemy and—“

She closed the book, slamming the cover down and sliding it across the desk to me. “No. It’s wrong.”

“But aren’t you curious?” I asked, “You’ll read any other books you find but suddenly get principled when it comes to the one book that could actually help us?”

“This won’t help us find a cure.” She returned

“Well, no.” I admitted, “But it could help us understand, learn his weaknesses. When he decides to fight we can—“

“We’re not going to fight him!” She shouted. Her voice squeaked like a mouse now that it had raised above its usual stifled stutter. Above her library tones. She wouldn’t meet my eyes, turning away and picking her nails but speaking with all the confidence of one ready for debate. I knew I could get her over to my side if I kept picking. She pried at her nails and I scraped away her resolve.

“Of course we’re—”

“No.” She said, “I’m tired of fighting. Why can’t you just sit down and have a peaceful month or three like the rest of us?”

“I was trying to but—“

“No you weren’t. You got bored so you went hunting even though you didn’t have too!” She said, “It’s your own fault that he’s here! I don’t want an Executioner in my house any more then you do, but I didn’t bring him here. You did Fwahe. You did it because your selfish! I thought you cared
about me, about us…even about Frigga but you don’t.”

“What do you mean I-“

“Let me finish!” She growled, gripping the table and looking up at me. Her glasses shimmied. Did she even still need them now that we shared a bloodline? My vision had always been perfect and I couldn’t remember anyone from the Cainhurst days who required glasses. “You only care about her when it benefits you. You only care about any of us when it benefits you.”

“Shut up.” I snarled, “Shut up and think about what your saying, scholar because as I recall I was the one who smashed the throat-slitter’s skull to pieces and got everyone free of Cainhurst. I keep you fed? You think I do that for myself? Me making your meals is selfish its-“

“Get out of my library.” Templeton said.

Calm and even and grim.

She picked the book up off her desk and threw it at me. She threw it with enough force to hit me in the chest and knock me back a step. New strength, I hadn’t realized it until now but she was growing much stronger. How long had she been this strong? Was it new or had I never noticed?

“Temp I-“


“Fine!” I shouted, grabbing the book from the ground and storming up the stairs. I hurled the trap door down behind me, so hard it broke one of the hinges. The slam echoed through the theater.

I had no idea what Templeton was on about, but I wasn’t going to let her words get to me. She would cool off before dinner, of that I was fairly certain. It was probably just the hunger. Low blood rations were hard to adjust to after weeks out on the road where food was easier to find. Thinning it with milk didn’t really help, but I wanted her to have a full cup. I would start giving her two thirds of the vial tomorrow, instead of half. One third was enough for me. Selfish my ass.

I climbed right onto the edge of the stage and lit one of the backlights. What used to illuminate actors and actresses now shed light on the complex scribbling. Going off what Templeton had said this must have been the church sister’s hand, as I highly doubted any baby was born with the ability to catalog their crimes.

It was a heavy book and more than half of the pages were full. OF course they were. I wasn’t falling for that innocent silent act, not for one second. The Executioner seemed to have had bad influences back in his training days. Surely his mother, who seemed unusually bitchy, even for a church woman, had turned him into the same kind of wretched person. Thank Kos he couldn’t speak. I would’ve taken out his throat if he yelled at me like that. The better to have kept it in his head.

That’s the only place that thoughts were safe, and now these pages would allow me to trespass on his private mind. I flipped through the confusing script at the front scanning the text for anything easy to read. I saw Patience’s shakey first attempts at handwriting. I’d never written so poorly before, I was sure. Not even when I first learned how. It looked like he’d taped the quill to a cat’s tail and then gotten a hound to chase it around the page. Not a single word was spelled correctly and there were ink blots everywhere. A few pages further and things became legible once more.

“Mother found me fixing a gun today.”
That was a sin?

I really hadn’t read the holy texts in quite some time.

“Mother found me down at the forge.”

Blacksmiths too were heathens? I admit to having never attended Healing Church ceremonies on the regular. I can’t recall a single one I fully sat through but they had to be stupid to condemn guns and blacksmiths. Church hunters were blacksmiths. Church hunters fired guns. I had to be reading this wrong. Guns must’ve just been a coded message.

Would church kids know about coded messages so young?

Footsteps.

Shit.

Slamming the trapdoor had woken the Executioner up. He’d be in the auditorium any second. I ran backstage, as fast as my legs could carry me. Kos damn it all I had relocked his door too. Soft footfalls echoed behind me, getting closer and closer. Any second now I’d find him on top of me. He would know and I would know and despite the vow I was certain he’d run and tell his precious mother what had transpired. This could get me taken away from Frigga. This could reflect poorly on Temp.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

My hands were shaking as I jostled with the lock. Nervousness and precision skills did not mix together very well. I was finding it a more difficult task the second time around. With one more desperate prayer to gods I didn’t hold close the knob turned and I flung myself inside. I put the book back where I’d found it, and went back towards the door. My heart was pounding, loud enough for me to hear it but not loud enough for it to drown out all other sounds. Every third beat matched up with the sound of a foot step, coming closer and closer. If I bolted then I was revealed. The room didn’t offer much in the way of hiding places, the one and only being under the bed. Everyone checked there.

Everyone hid there because it was the only place to hide. I heard the jangling of his key as he searched for the lock. Everyone now included me as I squirmed around his neatly folded clothes and bumped my head on the bottom of his bedframe. It stung.

He stepped inside, and I watched his boots cross the room. Patience didn’t so much as glance at the bed, making his way to the wash stand. Of course, I would’ve wanted to scrub off the butter, jam and toast crumbs stuck there, as did he. I listened to the cold sounds of water pooling in porcelain. There was the tear of paper, as the Executioner took off the wrappings on a fresh bar of soap. I couldn’t smell it from here but I was certain it would be scented with lavender and lemon. That was the kind Frigga favored.

Patience took his time with washing up, scrubbing his entire face and carefully working the gooey globs of jam out of his hair. Some of it had solidified, the crusty chunks splashing when they hit the bottom of the bowl. I should’ve moved him off the plate.

When the splashing ceased it was replaced by the rustle of pages. He had thrown the book down on the bed, and sat down shortly thereafter. I saw his gloved hand reach around, looking for his pack. He didn’t look over until his fingers closed around it, and when he searched inside there was no glance into the shadowy recesses of the under-bed. He had no idea I was here. He didn’t suspect a
thing. If I could keep my heart quiet this whole ordeal could pass without notice.

Or not.

When I saw what he took out of his bag I wanted to bolt again. Unarmed they said he’d show up. Unarmed my ass. I knew a liar when I saw one and all Executioners were liars down to a one. It was a nasty weapon he had curled up in the bottom of his bag, some kind of braided whip. There were spikes embedded along its many strands, things designed to drain blood. It wasn’t a wheel but it was a weapon.

As soon as Frigga got back I would inform her. We would cast out the little devil and go back to closed doors, pulled curtains and privacy. I would be commended instead of condemned for going out at night. The Executioners would have to apologize to me.

Patience cast the whip down on the mattress and reached into the bag again, taking out an inkwell and a rugged quill. The feather looked like it had been shot several times before being attached to the pen nib. The metal was clean but the feather was a mess, cheap but well kept. He made an attempt to straighten out the ragged thing, but there was no curing it. Resigned to his task he set too it all the same, opening the book and scratching something on to the page. His pen made the same sharp quick sounds that Templeton’s did when she was taking her time to write something legibly. I could only conclude that Patience’s handwriting had improved over the years.

When he stopped he slammed the book closed and sighed. He stood up and put it back in place before taking the weapon in his hands. I tensed prepared for a fight. I wouldn’t be able to see him coming at me very well from this angle. There was nothing underneath the bed that I could arm myself with, but I judged the bedframe to be a suitable weapon if necessary. When he came close enough I could launch it at him, trap him and get away. It was a crude plan but the kind of thing that almost always worked. I had been cornered under beds before.

He didn’t lean down towards the bed. I heard a swoosh of fabric and watched his capelet fall to the floor. The sound of popping buttons and his shirt slid off afterwards. I strained to see and his back was a hideous spider web of crisscrossed scars. It only took me a second to connect the dots, but that whip hadn’t been brought as a weapon. He raked it across his own flesh. The silent boy stuffed a wad of his own shirt in his mouth, filling it with cotton to keep his vows as, for reasons unknown he let the spikes of the scourge cut into him. Four strokes before he stopped.

He stood there for a moment, rocking back and forth on his ankles, biting down on the shirt. Maybe a minute went by before he returned to the washstand, pouring out the old water and filling the basin from a clean pitcher. More soap and water, cleaning his wounds. The wounds he’d given himself.

Was that what the book was for? Some kind of catalog of punishment?

This couldn’t be part of Healing Church practices. There was no way young novices were cloistered in their rooms drawing blood to pay for their sins. I’d ripped apart Executioners before, and I did not remember any having marks like that. They gave those marks, but not to themselves. The whip was a thing for victims not victors. He took just as much care with the weapon as he had with the book, rinsing it off after he’d cleaned himself and drying it with the wash rag. He coiled it up and put it in the bottom of his bag. Patience sat on the edge of his bed, and I thought I heard what could’ve been a sniffle, could have been a sob. Then he took a deep breath, got up and left the room.

His strange actions didn’t fit into my picture of who he must be and that turned my stomach. I waited under his bed for several more minutes than I needed too. I knew he wasn’t going to find
me, but I worried if I looked at him something would pass between us and he would know that I knew. I didn’t want to know anything. It was better to keep the distance, and I strove to put the strange scene out of my mind. Best not to dwell on the habits of Executioners.
Echoes Through the Leaves

Chapter Summary

They say that curiosity killed the cat, but in this case the cat is Ezra Kelfazin and it leads him on a journey into the Forbidden Woods.

Chapter Notes

As always, please let me know what you think!
I haven't really heard much from anyone on this one, if there are readers out there I'd love to hear from you guys!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ezra

“They’re saying there’s some killer out there. Not a beast but a man.” Jossam said, “They say ‘e took down Clarkie which is why we ain’t heard from him.”

“How do you know it’s a he?” Audrey asked.

“We haven’t heard from Clarkus because he was exiled.” Matta said, “This foolishness about a ripper or a Bloody Crow has to stop. We’re never going to restore our reputations if you keep prattling on about it to anyone within earshot.”

“But it’s true!”

I was stuck in the endless looping hell of this conversation. Scrubbing the bank’s floor was a task for juniors. Scrubbing it on hands and knees without the aid of mops was a punishment. Doing it in waking hours with the muddy boots of your kin re-sullying the floor every few seconds was a grievous insult. Yet there I was bent-backed next to the glimmering pillar of virtue himself, Strix Savoy. The duty had been made expressly optional for him, but of course he made the noble choice and suffered alongside us.

“Could you just shut it?” I asked, pushing a soap-soaked rag back and forth over the same boot stain I’d thought I’d removed twenty minutes ago.

“Can’t!” Jossam said, “It’s a disservice to let it go unreported. Folks got to know about the Bloody Crow. Say that’s not a bad rhyme is it…got to know, bloody crow? Ought to make a go at a song, spread the word.”

“I swear to Kos if you start singing not only will we be scrubbing shattered glass out of the floor from your sour notes but you, yourself personally will have something much greater to fear then the Bloody Crow.” I growled.

Jossam and Audrey burst into laughter. Matta hid her face by squeezing the dirty water from her
towel, but I suspected she snickered too. Strix kept his head down scrubbing away. The white knight with silver hair, it betrayed him. There was Vileblood somewhere deep deep within those bones. I could smell it. He wasn’t brimming with it, not enough to corrupt a man and make him a beast, not the amounts of infection I carried around but enough to stir the stomach. Clarkus had not made a satisfying meal, but to overindulge was to give in to the previsions of my species. Vileblood I might be, but I could outlast the hunger. I had to wonder if it was in him too.

“What’s so funny?” I asked.

“You kidding me, mate? I could snap you in ‘alf!” Jossam said. “I don’t even know ‘ow you move. Your skin n’ bones.”

“Joss don’t be like that.” Matta said. She gave me a glance filled with softness and pity. So she believed him too? Gods condemn their sympathy.

“You’d never have the chance.” I growled.

“Enough!” Strix barked, tossing his rag into the bucket. There was a harsh packing sound as the rag hit the water, not a splash just a slam. “No one needs to cause any more trouble. We have a task let’s just do it. We’re allies not enemies.”

“Says the one who betrayed us all.” I muttered.

“You have something to say to me, Kelfazin?” Strix asked.

“Do you really want to hear it, Savoy?” I returned.

He gave me a firm nod and fixed me with a stare. Everything about him was a conglomerate of rejected parts, smashed together into one human. An ugly toy made from limbs of other dolls found in the garbage. His eyes couldn’t even settle on a single color having the audacity to be a mix of brown green and blue. Hazel. They’d even invented a word for it.

“Says the one who betrayed us all.” I repeated.

His lip curled into a snarl, and he sprung like a mad dog. In a second I was on the floor, I hadn’t even felt his hand shove me down, he moved that fast. The impact of the back of my head on the tile floor was sharp and sudden.

“Anything else to say?” He asked.

“First you betray us, and now you attack us.” I said, “Starting a fight with your fellow man in cold blood, you’ve surely gone mad. Isn’t that what you saw Audrey? A crazed hunter, just like his father?”

“Shut up.” Strix snarled. He took a step towards me, and I started to get to my feet.

“Stand. Down.” Matta growled, stepping directly between us. She had a hand on Strix’s shoulder. “Go clean the far end. Ezra you stay over here. Everyone shut up and do their jobs until their done.”

No one argued with her. Strix snatched up his bucket and secluded himself on the far wall, the worst part of the floor to have to clean but he didn’t gawk at the task for a second. Executioners traipsed over his clean pathway again and again and I smiled in private satisfaction as I watched his futile effort. Essex came by within the half hour and deemed our work adequate, dismissing us to relative relaxation. He said we should be on call for additional patrols, but since Frigga Hemlock
had taken office no one had called for backup in ages.

Through the walls of my room, with a cup pressed to my ear resting against the wall I could hear the conversation in the adjacent room. It belonged to Strix, and he had a horribly wonderful habit of speaking loudly when he was angry, loud enough for me to hear every last word.

“You can’t go off like that.”

That was Matta’s voice. She hated angry men and rash actions, but she stepped in for Strix time and time again. A weakness of hers, developed by growing in close proximity. Matta’s sisters had both been taken by the scourge, she was trying to force Strix into their place. She took on the problems of a man half-grown as though they were her own kin’s.

“He knows better than to bring my father into this.” Strix replied, “He was bating me Matta.”

“And aren’t you smart enough not to take the bait?” She asked.

There was a muffled “ow.” She’d probably slapped him upside the head. Only violent in private that Matta.

“Why do you even care about your father Strix?” Matta asked, “Or your mother for that matter? You’re an orphan same as me.”

“My father swore he’d come back. He must’ve gotten killed.” Strix said

Matta sighed, “Your father was desperate to get rid of a silver-haired child. That’s what everyone was doing. The home for foundlings was crawling with you little silkworms.”

“But he told me.” Strix argued, “I know he did.”

“You couldn’t have known.” Matta said, “You were a baby.”

“Kos damnit I know that Matta, but I know it all the same. He promised to come back.”

A fist slammed against the wall, ramming the end of the cup against my ear. I had to readjust myself and dust flakes of old paint out of my hair.

“Well for whatever reason he didn’t. It does no good dwelling on it now. Just settle down and get some rest, things will seem better in the morning.”

They traded goodbyes and I heard Matta’s footsteps disappear down the hall. Strix’s bed squeaked as he settled in to sleep. Before too much longer he was snoring. I put the cup down on the end table and tried to get some rest myself. It was different without Patience here. He hadn’t left any signs of himself behind but I still kept glancing over to his bed. I expecting him to be staring blankly at the ceiling as he always did before I fell asleep. There was only empty space.

Good riddance. I would rest much easier without having to worry about what the little freak got up too when my eyes were closed. I shut them now and tried to will myself to sleep. I could hear Strix snoring through the wall, and the people who roomed above me moving around. Someone in the hall was reading a book and the sound of their turning pages sounded as loud as waves in the sea. An owl hooted outside.

No one could sleep packed this tightly. We were kept like sardines in a tin, even with a bed free there were too many bodies. Humans weren’t meant to live this way. That might have been the singular thing the Vile half of me had gotten right. Cainhurst Castle by all accounts was spacious
and sprawling, the kind of place where one could be truly alone. Deviant creatures had ruled it, and Abbot Minimus had performed his questionable experiments there. I intended to make it my tomb once my noble work was complete and the last of the corrupted blood in the world had been spilled, accounted for and wiped clean.

I was conjuring visions of feasting halls and four poster beds when I heard something else in the hallway. This was not part of the usual nighttime clamor, but was the odd cadence of steps trying to go unnoticed. Whoever was creeping through the halls stumbled often, scuffing their feet on uneven stone floors and plowing their toes into door jams. An obvious ruckus to ears like mine but the rest of the bank seemed to remain asleep. I wanted to know what was so important that it required attending in the middle of the night. Without Patience’s wide eyes to observe my actions I was free to pursue my curiosity and investigate.

A good distance beyond my door was the silhouette of the roused. They were sidestepping cots and slumbering Executioners curled around pillows. Silly how soft everyone seemed when they were dreaming. I kept to the shadows, dropping to all fours, a beast stalking prey just as I’d be seen if they knew.

The sound was so faint I thought I’d imagined it, but the sudden chill and sparkle of sunlight confirmed what my ears only suspected. A door to the outside had been opened, and whomever I was following slipped into the night. My heart started to pound, watching something so similar to my own behaviors. Day was night for hunters, but with drawn shades and closed windows the dark halls obscured time. Shafts of sunlight brought it back to reality.

Careful to avoid the loose stones and squeakier floorboards I made my own way to the door. There was no window to peer through, no keyhole to sneak a quick peek out of. There was not even the gap underneath that some doors had. I was completely in the dark while they were in light. I had to make a choice. I could go back to bed and forget about whatever I’d seen, or take the risk and hope they wouldn’t see me.

Curiosity would eat me up inside worse than the vile hunger did. A roll of the dice it was. I pushed open the door, bracing myself for the squeak of the hinges. In the sustained silence it sounded like the dying scream of a horse before the glue factory. Loud enough to overload my ear drums, yet not a soul stirred. Sunlight poured over the room like melted butter as I slid out into the courtyard. It had snowed since I’d last been outside and the dazzle of sparkling white after dark halls burned my eyes. I blinked rapidly to adjust, watching as strange purple outlines of buildings drifted around while I readjusted. Unseen shapes playing over the concrete ones, a visage only sudden changes could produce. I was like the unseen shapes, effecting things without changing them.

Audrey had nearly come over to my side today. If Matta hadn’t stepped in I might’ve been able to stage my coup. She might have to be dealt with if she continued to pose a problem.

But there were more immediate concerns. I followed the tracks left in the snow, and found that I was following Jossam. He was making a half-heated effort to scale the side of the bank and reach the rooftops. Mostly he was slipping and loosing his grip on stones far too smooth to be useful for climbing. If he’d only cast his gaze a few inches to the side he would’ve seen the ladder half-covered in snow that leaned against the side of the bank. Someone must have left it for him, there were footprints recent enough and the marks like a wheels’ but smaller where the ladder dragged the ground.

I had my own way up, which usually involved using the roof access hatches. I glanced along the roof tops before scurrying up myself. My nails were strong enough to cut the stone where needed, and I ascended without a sound, crouching behind a chimney while Jossam struggled.
He struggled for a long time. The sun changed position enough to shine directly into my eyes with him still on the ground. It was lucky I’d been chosen to go after the Patron’s Ranger that fateful night. Jossam would have embarrassed all of us were he selected.

“Kos almighty Joss, are you serious?”

I peeked around the copper pipe and saw Executioner Sussex glaring down at the junior Executioner from the roof.

“Ain’t as easy as it looks.” Jossam said.

“I put a ladder about three feet to your right.” Sussex informed.

My suspicions were confirmed. Jossam turned his head and located the ladder, quickly making his way over to it.

“Swear it wasn’t there a second ago.” He muttered as he clambered up to the roof.

“Swear all you like, I left it there with ample time. Instead of starting early we’re now several minutes late.” Sussex scolded.

“Not my fault.” Jossam said. Despite his statement it seemed to be, by all accounts completely his fault. “Sides all I’m late for is this conversation.”

“Yes, but I am not.” Sussex sighed, “And you’ll be late for far more after that. Nola informed me that you are somehow out of your entire clientele due to the disappearance of a single person.”

“Well…it’s just that…I mean.” Jossam muttered.

Sussex seemed three seconds away from slapping the remaining excuses right out of him, but swallowed it down. His face was a few shades redder than normal and he tapped his foot on the roofing. He waited as long as he could before interrupting Jossam and making efforts to correct his behavior.

“Would you just stop talking if you don’t have anything to say?” Sussex asked.

It put Jossam in the horrible paradox of wanting to defend himself yet having to quantify if it was a contribution of language worthwhile enough to be considered “something to say”. All of the rusted gears in his long un-exercised brain seemed unable to come to a conclusion. It was close enough to silent respect for Sussex.

“Luckily for you I’ve found a new client. Two in fact.” Sussex said, “My good sister, York came across them a few weeks ago. They were caught in argument over the same strange ingredients in their foul markets. In the end friendship sprouted where there should have been conflict and they may be interested in our products. The eye drops especially, which you did so well at selling before, it shouldn’t be a problem for you.”

“No problem at all.” Jossam agreed. “Anything for a new client. I’m not gonna lie I was right proper worried about leavin’ you ‘igh n’ dry.”

“Great, so I’m sure you won’t mind running to the Forbidden Woods instead of your usual selling grounds.” Sussex smiled.

Sussex nodded, taking from his robes a small satchel, which he pressed into Jossam’s hands. “The Forbidden Woods.”

“B-b-but the Bloody Crow’s out there. T-the Ripper!” He argued.

Executioner Sussex shrugged “Well since selling in Yharnam’s gotten too hard for you..”

“No no you misunderstand. It ain’t to ‘ard. Honest I just wasn’t tryin’. I’ll-“

Sussex shook his head. “There’s a map in the bag, follow the directions, make an introduction and move our product. That’s all you have to do Jossam, the same routine as always. Location is the only change we’ve made. Be sure to be back by moonrise.”

Jossam swallowed nervously, but slipped the satchel over his head. They exchanged a few more words before Sussex excused himself leaving Jossam alone on the rooftop. He glanced all around once the Executioner had gone as though deliverance would suddenly show itself and exonerate him of his duties. It became clear that no such divine intervention was coming. Jossam sighed and navigated over the rooftops, down to the daytime streets of Yharnam. The better he did so that I could follow aloft.

I almost lost him several times. He was not of significant frame or coloration to be set apart from a crowd. He was quick too, once his mind was made up. He dipped in and out of gaggles of Yharnam denizens, weaving between snow shovellers and school children. His quick fingers couldn’t keep themselves from bakers trays and I watched as he piled several strawberry tarts and a loaf of rye bread into his pack. He did it while speaking to the baker, asking the price of various products and dipping into his supply when the back of the large man was turned. He did have one of those voices that sped along so fast as to confuse.

A shame he was so easily confused himself. When he exited the city things were at once simpler and more difficult. There were no crowds for him to become lost in but there were no rooftops to be protected from atop either. Yharnam was surrounded by small farms with sparse tree lines. The area for concealment was negated severely and I worried I might easily be exposed as one of the people Jossam was acquainted with. There wasn’t a particular reason to remain hidden, I had no doubt that I could win a fight with the dim-witted hunter if it came too it, but I would prefer that it didn’t. Better to gather information without anyone’s knowing then advertise my exploits. The poor gambler that showed his cards before due time.

So I took a page from Jossam’s book and snatched a hat for purposes of concealment. His food had come from a seller while my hat was just something riddled with holes and left on a scarecrow but the thievery was still a marked achievement in my book, even if a scarecrow couldn’t call for the constables. The hat was full of holes and old hay and wafted a deeply unpleasant smell over everything. It was no wonder why it had ended up the accessory of a mock-person. It itched too and I found myself scratching away at my scalp while I trailed Jossam. He looked over his shoulder every now and again, but I kept close to the fences of farms and from a distance I judged I blended with the scenery well enough to fool him. His eyes never did more than glance at me before carrying on, further and further from the Yharnam countryside.

This was how it was supposed to be for an Executioner. Out beyond the walled city, doing more than just patrolling for beasts that never showed. Broad daylight was a strange time but there was a freedom to setting one foot in front of the other and having the familiar fade behind. The Forbidden Woods would be unfamiliar and I was liable to lose direction once consumed by the twisting trunks and dense foliage. How marvelous to feel like prey in a world that constantly strove to paint me as predator. This time I would have as much chance of meeting my death as Jossam did, and that was electrifying. I couldn’t remember the last time I had felt this way.
It should’ve been a more common occurance, an everyday rush. I had thought that a Vileblood living amongst Executioners would be a high-stakes tight rope walk. Every day a new mile of eggshells to walk over, not a single one able to bear the weight of cracking lest my cover be blown. Instead it was dull as dishwasher, communal living so packed with mediocre hunters it was impossible to rise through the ranks. I was drowning in the failures of my fellowmen. Overlooked time and time again.

It was beyond my recollection the last time a ranging party had been put together to go hunt Vilebloos abroad. Since Frigga’s rise to power no one had left and the bank was overcrowded. She hadn’t forbidden it, the wanderings but it was clear that if an Executioner mistook her Vilebloos on the road for any others then then punishment would be the same as if we’d shot them in cold blood. Was our order so riddled with cowardice that we could not stand to risk the lives of one or two hunters on a mistake? I would gladly take the fall if only I was not burdened with a greater ability to sniff out the hideous creatures then my fellow men.

By the time the sun showed signs of setting it was clear that Jossam had been lost more times then he’d been on the correct path. He was checking the map constantly. I wasn’t sure he’d ever read a map before though all junior Executioners were supposed to have been instructed in cartography, astral navigation and proper use of a compass. He clearly hadn’t been paying attention but they’d passed him along anyway. Laziness, intolerable laziness.

I didn’t need a map, nor a compass nor the postion of the stars. I had something better than that, a brain combined with the ability to read. There were sign posts regularly placed at road junctions that labeled the many destinations one might be trying to orient themselves too. The woods had formal name, but it had long been blotted out and painted over with “forbidden”. I used to know the true name of the place but it had long been filed away in the realm of the forgotten with so many other useless tidbits of information.

Finally we saw the iron gates that kept that kept the creatures of the forest from entering the city. It tried too anyway. The bars were dented and bent, ripped open by the things they could not contain. The high brick walls that they connected too had clawmarks and huge missing chunks at various intervals. The structure had not been well maintained. Jossam made another glance over his shoulder. I sidestepped into the shadow of one of the outlying trees. This time I really did think he’d seen me. His eyes bore into mine, and I stared back. Then I caught his lips moving and realized he was just praying. This was something I’d never seen Jossam do before, but in the moment before he entered the woods he was the picture of devotion.

We were both small enough to simply slip through the iron gate. It didn’t so much as catch my coat. The woods were dense, overgrown with large shoots of grass, curving ferns and sickly yellow flowers. There was a dirt path leading in, which quickly evaporated into shadows. The trees overhead were so thickly knotted together that they blocked the sun from shining through, obscuring everything to the point of no recognition. I cast the hat aside, leaving it to become the nest of some thrifty creature. I needed it’s cover no longer.

Jossam kept to the dirt path, and I took to creeping amongst the dense grasses. They wove shadows over me, and brushed against my skin in a soothing but startling manner, as though rubbing against the fur of a snarling dog. It was the moment before you knew if it would snap at you or roll over so that you might supply it with suitable affection. Would this grass become home or cause harm?

Jossam’s strategy for the unfamiliar surroundings appeared to be nervous eating. Once the gates back to the city had disappeared due to distance he sat down on the nearest available rock and began to rummage through his pack. He took out glass jars and paper wrapped pill boxes, setting them down in the dirt as his feet while his grubby hands sought the stolen spoils of the
marketplace. The tarts had gone to crumbs and he shoved gooey handfuls of strawberry jam and broken pastry crust into his mouth. He ate like a baby who had yet to learn to use a spoon.

The bread seemed to be in better shape, no doubt made from stronger stuff. It was the more optimal food for traveling. He bit into it just as savagely, at times dipping the end of it into the bottom of his pack and sopping up the last of the strawberry juice. It was not the gorey brutality with which a Vileblood cracked the bones and supped the blood of their victims, but it turned my stomach all the same. He had not it seemed, retained any of the lessons in etiquette we had learned either. Perhaps it should not surprise me, but I had taken to avoiding the dining room altogether. It was hard to watch another fill their stomach while your own lingered in perpetual hunger. The regretful plight of my heinous species.

Once his meal had been ravaged he seemed to grow more and more nervous. Jossam gripped the strap of his bag and plunged deeper into the woods. I began to wonder weather he had taken a weapon with him, only to remember I had made the exact mistake I sought to laugh at him for. I had left my knives behind. Unarmed in unfamiliar territory.

It was Jossam’s fault for waking me in the middle of the night. I had my speed and strength if nothing else, which had me better fortified then the boy. That would be enough if something attacked, I would only need to outrun Jossam. Leave him for the wolves.

I didn’t hear any growls, snarls or sounds to indicate such creatures. Beyond the squawking of an occasional crow there were no sounds of other beasts. I scanned the tall grass for any signs of life, but again there were only crows. They were the massive bloated things that had crowded on rooftops back in the hunting days. Some had fallen through weak roofs or cracked chimneys only to land in the middle of a living room and murder whole families. Wretched beasts, but not the sort to ambush. I passed by their nests without disrupting them and in turn they did not antagonize me.

It became too dark for Jossam to see the map. He lit the candle inside his hunter’s lantern and became an easier target for the beasts, and an even easier mark for me to follow. The landscape became strange as we wound deeper into the darkened trees. Moist moss and piles of mud sucked at my boots. Joss stumbled on roots. The density of the trees waxed and waned, breaking to glens and valleys in some places. Huge tombstones, too big to be believed were mixed into the tree line, becoming almost plants themselves, growing up out of the ground. What was buried there, and who had served as stone mason?

With a lantern of my own I might’ve been able to decipher the names on the stones, but I was left quite literally in the dark. They were exquisitely made, many of them dappled with unlit candles and long dead flowers. Some of them even had small animals, rabbits, pigeons and the like split open at the stomach. Their blood had dried on the stones. Oddly enough they didn’t seem to have been touched by anything but the knife that initially cut them open. The beasts had not come for these sacrifices. Maybe there were frightened of what was buried beneath the headstones. There were enough for the Forbidden Woods to have been the site of some great battle. Whomever fought in it had not gone without memoriam.

As Jossam continued the headstones seemed to have been placed more recently. They weren’t as overgrown or as weather stained as their predecessors. It was likely the person who’d constructed the monuments was still living. A logical conclusion to reach considering the age of the stone, but the scope of the battle was just too large to have passed by recent memory uncommemorated. If there was a slaughter in these woods I would’ve known about it.

Jossam let out a shriek and then began to mutter “oh gods, oh gods, oh gods,” to himself. I peered through the long grass to see him doubled over, retching on the ground. Beside him was a corpse,
which was much closer to the kind of thing I had expected to be stumbling across in these woods. The man was recently deceased, but his neck had been snapped causing it to turn in a direction completely opposite the orientation of his decaying body. The smell was a most foul thing and while Jossam’s tarts made their encore performance I inspected the immediate area.

Many signs of a struggle. Smashed glass, and smeared food prints. A chase had ensued, the man with the broken neck didn’t appear to have been a lone traveler. These woods became dangerous it would seem, once one was deep enough in them. Finally.

He strove to collect himself, but Jossam took his damn time. Every glance back at the body started the whole process over again. I would soon get nauseous myself if I was forced to stay in the putrid stench of rotting meat. The farmer’s hat had been bad enough. I needed to speed him along or it would be well into the next day before we made our return to Yharnam. Executioner Sussex would no doubt find a way to cover for Joss if he returned late but I would not be half so lucky.

I scraped a few pebbles out of the soft earth. One by one I threw them over Jossam’s shoulder in succession as to emulate something sneaking around in the bushes. The desired effect was near on immediate. Jossam’s head shot up and he straightened so suddenly that he nearly knocked his own lantern out of his hands. He didn’t check his map, simply choosing a direction and plowing forward. His strategy appeared to be flee from the imaginary attacker and throw caution and reason completely to the wind. Really he should never have even been admitted to the Executioner program at all.

I was a little amiss we did not choose to follow the strange footsteps so I could track the rest of the battle. Still it was probably for the best that we didn’t. He might lose his nerve altogether if we found another dead body. We just couldn’t have that.

It was a long walk and I completely lost track of the time, but what I could only assume were Sussex’s clients did finally show signs of emerging. Our position was elevated and looked down on a valley a quarter mile or so below us. Thin grey curls of smoke undulated from the dying coals of a cook fire. There appeared to be a sizable encampment below with the living spaces constructed of varying materials. A painted wooden cart was off to one side, right next to crude tents constructed of woven moss, sticks and animal hides. The surrounding trees were dripping with bottles, bones and charms dangling from the knotted branches of the upper canopy. They rattled when the wind blew making a strange music. The little valley was something sprouted straight from a folk tale, a Hari Harel classic favored by Yharnamites. There could be all manner of foul characters inside the structures and foolhardy Jossam was headed directly into them.

He fit the part extremely well, if only there were a soup pan for his helmet and a meat cleaver for his hand. Garbed as he was it would still have to do. Jossam sighted his target and started down the hillside. I followed, watching as he stumbled on branch after rock after root. He was routinely scratched at by branches and thorns but the pain of the wounds wouldn’t set in until later. He was too full of fear to feel, I’d seen it happen to so many others before him. Jossam reached the edge of the clearing and looked in at the circle of structures and the smoke from the fire.

I could smell other humans but I didn’t see any. Strange for them to be inside and asleep in daylight. There weren’t many others who opted for the nocturnal life of a hunter, though in these woods it was impossible to tell. Perhaps they didn’t even conform to hunters’ hours but lived in half and half times, the dawns and dusks of the world.

He seemed unable to enter their encampment. Something inside of him had fixed him in place and would not let him free. He blinked rapidly, fingers twitching, unable to keep his gaze in one spot for more than a second. After a good few minutes of standing on the outside looking in, Jossam
gulped.

“E-excuse me?” Jossam he ventured meekly.

There was a shuffling in the bushes at the far side of the camp. Jossam almost dropped his lantern.

“E-excuse me?” He repeated, “E-executioner Sussex sent me.”

The rustling got louder. Jossam looked over his shoulder, no doubt thinking of turning tail and running for it. Bad idea Jossam, bad idea.

“Come.” Said one voice.

“Closer.” Said another.

Both were gravely things, sounding as though their throats hadn’t been graced with water in a very long time. The second rolled her “r” sounds, stretching the word out longer then it had any right to be. Neither appeared to have Yharnam origins, I could tell that on speech alone.

“Yessir.” Jossam said.

He took a hesitant step into the circle. I heard a clicking noise, and something like the snaking of a chain as he progressed further into the encampment. It happened in a blink, a metal contraption fell from aloft and enclosed Jossam in an iron prison. He let out a high-pitched shriek and was answered by a gaggle of laughter.

“Listen to this one, he screams like a little girl.” The first voice spoke.

“He screams shriller then most girls.” Replied the second, “A boy for sure, and little too, look he’s soiled himself.”

Sure enough the unpleasant stench of urine quickly filled the woods. Jossam lowered the lantern to cover the stain spreading across his pants, but it was a little late for dignity. I was fairly uneasy myself, not enough to spill fluids but I was looking over my shoulder and around the divet in the grass I had nestled in to, I didn’t wish to be secretly captured either. I began to see their triggers. Little wooden circles, shimmering tripwires and a motley assemblage of other devices surrounded the camp. They had the whole place surrounded. I looked up into the highest reaches of the trees, finding shapes far from organic. They were impossible to make out for certain, but some had the hard edges and spiked points of weaponry. Jossam might’ve been lucky to end up in a cage rather the on a pike.

“N-never mind that.” Jossam said, “I’m ‘ere ‘cos of S-sussex.”

“Sussex. Sussex…..mmm…don’t remember any Sussex.” Said the first, “Familiar to you Casaya?”

“Savaii you know I never remember names.” The second admonished.

“E’s an Executioner. Tallish. Sandy ‘air. Bad temper.” Jossam described, “E wanted me to show you some of ‘is products.”


“My eyes.” Said Savaii.

They revealed themselves, one stepping out from the shadows behind the wooden wagon, the other lifting herself out of a pool of shadows in the ground. She wore a cape of mossy material which
blended in with the forest floor perfectly. Completely camouflaged. When she stood it was easier to make out her silhouette out from the rest of the woods, for in addition to the strange garment she was draped with decoration. Strings of beads, the bones and horns of sheep and all manner of rings and charms. Her face was hard to see, there was no spark of light from her eyes and it took a while for me to realize that they’d been covered with rough spun fabric. A strip of it was tied over her eyes and around the back of her head. This was Savaii.

Casaya was dressed a bit more traditionally, though she’d have been the pariah of Yharnam had she crossed the iron gate and entered my city. She was covered in metallic pigment, scaled motifs down her arms and across her face. They shimmered in the moonlight, mirrored back in the polished bangles on her ankles and wrists. Wooden beads, bone charms and other talismans draped themselves, strand after strand around her neck. Casaya’s clothes may have once been the dress of nobles but now they were patched together into something closer to jester’s motely then high fashion. Lace in places, satin in others and poorly sewn to boot.

They were strange but certainly like no women Jossam or I had ever seen. He was afraid, I was intrigued.

“Yeah yeah I got drops.” Jossam said, reaching into his pack.

Casaya was on him in a flash, faster then I thought any human had a right to be, She seemed to slip like liquid through the shadows of the forest. Blink and I would have missed it but she was suddenly at the bars of the cage, holding Jossam’s collar in a fist, a shining silver knife at his throat.

“Make a move to attack us and you die where you stand, foolish boy.” She snarled.

Jossam put up his hands, not an ounce of fight in him. He could’ve snapped her wrist or tried to choke her, do something to fight back but instead he opted for immediate surrender. In seconds he was groveling. Corpses were nothing to wretch at but such sudden submission turned my stomach inside out.

“No no!” He cried, “No attackin’ Missus. Getting’ the drops I was, honest. They’re in my bag. Drops n’ blood gems from Sussex okay? That’s what I’m ‘ere for. I sell for ‘im. Honest I do. Let me go, please, please don’t kill me.”

“This one is no liar.” Savaii said.

She slide alongside Casaya just as fluidly. There was no hesitation in her movements and I could discern no cane to assist her step. She must know her own woods extensively to navigate them blindfolded. Casaya did not immediately lower her knife. She shared a glance with Savaii but continued to leer at Jossam.

“Show us the pills, nice and slow.” She commanded, flicking the tip of the knife towards his bag. “Nothing sudden.”

“Yessum.” Jossam said slowly lowering his hands towards the bag at his hip. His movements were agonizingly slow, and Savaii began to tap her foot. That only made him tense and go slower. When he finally brought the glass vial and dropper out of his satchel, my legs had started to stiffen and fall asleep under me.

“Are they the right kind?” Savaii asked.

Casaya took them from Jossam’s hand and inspected the vial more closely. She shook it and
watched the liquid inside bubble and fizz. It was the same stuff that Clarkus had put in his eyes, familiar to me and familiar to the one who inspected it now.

“It is the same.” Casaya confirmed, “What is your Sussex’s price, boy?”

It didn’t seem as though Jossam had been expecting to actually come out of this with his own life, let alone a profit. For a moment he was stunned. Then it was like someone had flipped a switch in his mind and he went into sales mode, began to wheel and deal with the strange women. They went from ready to kill to intensely captivated as Jossam showed them the range of his products. It was a fairly rehearsed speech but he made it well, highlight the different features and prices of his strange wares. The women were captivated.

“We know the drops work.” Savaii said, “Are we to assume the rest is reliable and will do as the boy says?”

“They’re all made by the same manufacturer, crafted by the same scientist.” Jossam said, “Executioner Sussex would not allow me to sell any failures.”

“It wouldn’t hurt just to try.” Savaii said.

“I don’t suppose it would.” Casaya agreed, “Pay the man.”

From inside her robes Savaii produced a drawstring bag and one by one began placing coins in Jossam’s hands. The substances he sold were expensive and by the time they had settled he had quite the small pile in his palm. There was no greed in his eyes, he pocketed the coins and waited for the bars of the cage to be taken away.

“Shall we test them now?” Savaii asked.

“While the light of the sun still shines? I think not.” Casaya answered, “We would dishonor the moon, holding holy ceremony without her there to bear witness.”

I glanced upwards again but the canopy of trees was as oppressive as ever. Time did not penetrate the woods, but Casaya spoke with such certainty in her voice that I did not doubt her. If she said the sun was out, the sun was out. She was as good a clock as any.

Their deal concluded the women slipped back from the cage in the same fluid manner they’d approached it. I heard the metallic ca-chunk of a lever being pulled, and the chain at the top of the cage sped upwards, dragging the enclosure along with it.

“Step carefully.” Savaii advised before the shaking Executioner hurried away from her camp. She shared cackles with Casaya as soon as Jossam was out of earshot.

“What stupid boys they send. These men, these Executioners know nothing of our ways and woods.” Said Casaya.

“Hunters are no longer fearsome.” Savaii agreed, “But so too are the beasts, more docile then ever before.”

“It is a changing world.” She agreed.

“And we must work to change it back.” Savaii said, “I have seen it. They want it restored, she wants it restored. The chaos of the past was order to the gods. Who were men to upset that balance?”
“Who indeed.” Casaya said, putting an arm around the strangely garbed girl, “Worry not, sweetling. We are tasked to restore it, sisters of the snake. None but us, but none more capable. Your vision and my strength just as was said.”

Casaya passed the bottle of eye drops to Savaii. Her fingers closed around them, squeezing the vial tightly before she slipped it into a pocket. She patte the outside twice, ensuring the small parcel was safely tucked away.

“Just as we said.” Savaii agreed.

Casaya steered Savaii back to the strange mossy hut, speaking too softly for me to hear. I was either going to have to get much closer and continue my observations or return to Yharnam with Jossam. Considering the traps and the strange ways of the strange women, the choice was obvious. They had become customers and it was likely that the dim-witted Executioner would return to these woods. I intended to stay on alert for when he did. Casaya and Savaii were women to be watched.

I didn’t want Jossam to outdistance me. As soon as I judged the both of them were beyond earshot I revered direction, backing away through the same grass I’d advanced through. I didn’t want to create a new path and trigger one of the contraptions in the branches. Thanks to his lantern, Jossam was easy enough to locate. I was on his tail, as before in mere moments.

The woods seemed to pass by more quickly then before. The gravestones didn’t surprise me on the second passing. The corpse startled Jossam less, and I grew lax in my care. It was such a severe change that I nearly allowed myself to stumble directly into a nest of carrion crows. I’d been focusing on Jossam’s lantern instead of the path in front of me. Their surprised caws startled Jossam, but instead of seeking the source he plunged ahead with greater and greater speed. Dying daylight started to color the trunks of the trees and the underside of the leaves.

The cast iron gate was not black as before, but dyed red by the sunset. Confound the time, we were surely going to be late. The sun was beginning to sink, as low as my hopes.

“Thank Kos.” Jossam said to himself when he finally crossed through the gates bars and was able to put the forest behind him. He made no attempt to conceal himself once freed of the Forbidden Woods. He went into a full-on sprint for the gates of Yharnam. He didn’t turn to look behind himself once.

His fear became my fortune. The pace he set was just quick enough to get us both back to the bank before the sky went navy. The streets changed color as we raced over the cobbles. Blood red, polished gold and pastel pink made all the buildings look strange, but they were nothing like the woods. A new coat of paint, even if only given by the sun could alter ones outlook dramatically. Anything so long as we got to the bank.

“Thank Kos.” I said, echoing Jossam’s sentiment. He slipped through one of the back entrances but I opted to go in the same way I’d come out. The rooftops were nothing for me to navigate. I made it to bed before he did, listening to him sneak back through the same halls in the opposite direction, bookending his earlier disturbance. Pretending to sleep was a stupid and tedious activity. If anyone ever genuinely checked to see whether I was at rest or not it would’ve been obvious I’d spent the day roaming the forbidden woods chasing after a suspicious young Executioner.

That was one of the advantages of having too many people all wearing the same clothes and living in the same space. They blurred together and largely no one seemed to waste the powers of their mind on the individual. Even a face like mine could become part of the crowd when I kept it down and wished it to be. When the Golden Ardeo rested over your head and on your shoulders you were
anonymous. Anonymous and absolute.

On my own this was never possible. Denizens and even some hunters would shy from the malformations of my burnt face. This was a source of endless amusement, for what should have scared them was waiting just below the surface. The thing they couldn’t see, the hunger that clawed at my stomach like an animal caught in a trap. It was the kind of frenzied desperation that caused foxes in snares to bite through their own legs to be free once more. The monster inside of me was willing to devour itself, eat through nonexistent fat and consume the flesh that incased it in order to satisfy the insatiable.

That’s what they should have feared, the animal waiting just below the surface.

I waited for the others to stir before I did, and their waking sounds were louder then timpani drums in my ears. They were clumsy things, dropping boots and tripping over the edges of cots sending the echoes of awakening down the hallway. Hard to say where the first gaslight was turned on from but once it was on others started along with the grumbling from several slugabeds that it was too early and too bright. There was always something to complain about.

I washed myself and changed my clothes. It was never a pleasant experience, having to endure the pounding of water on irritated flesh. The fire’s bite had come so long ago, but like sunburn every time it was brushed against it stung anew. Water rained down like a hailstorm as I poured pitcher after pitched over myself, washing the scents of the forest off my skin and into the tub. New clothes that seemed to smell just as stale as the old ones took their time settling onto me. They itched in different places then the previous set, making the whole process arduous and uncomfortable.

Even with the delicate care I was forced to take in bathing I was still far more prepared for the day then most of my fellow Executioners. They had barely roused from their sleep, and those that were awake spent their early minutes speaking with each other instead of readying themselves. I hurried down to breakfast, before it was even ready to be served. The fewer people who witnessed my eating the better.

Everything tasted the same, like salt and ash. Eggs, dried fruit and whatever it was porridge was produced from. They all had the same unpleasant taste to me and it was difficult to swallow it all down. Most of the time I didn’t eat at all, but the hunger was bad today. Bad and getting steadily worse.

This food wouldn’t satisfy it. I knew it was merely placebo, but the act of swallowing and consumption would stay the growling snarls of my insides for a few hours. It was enough to pass for today, it would have to be.

Executioner Sussex called together our unit. This didn’t surprise me. Jossam’s hair was more of a rat’s nest the usual and there was a weariness to the light in his eyes that showed he hadn’t slept. The others didn’t seem to notice, it was still early in their days yet. Jossam didn’t regard me with any special attention and I breathed a final sigh of relief knowing for once and all that I had not been spotted. He did however, drop Sussex’s gaze whenever possible. His eyes despite their exhausted set never stopped moving. He couldn’t settle anywhere, spying danger in every corner.

“What boring task are you going to give us today?” Audrey asked.

Leave it to her to complain. There was no task that suited her, except and exclusively sleeping. When we were put out on patrol it was never the right patrol. If it was then the weather was too cold, and if it wasn’t too cold it was too hot. We cleaned when we should’ve been cooking and cooked when we should’ve been cleaning. Thank Kos she was not the one who made the schedule.
or else everyone would be on an endless rotation of inconsistent tasks according the moody little girl.

“Your duty,” reminded Sussex, “Is to serve the noble order of the Executioners however possible. You are a junior Executioner yet, young Audrey and would do well to remember your station. No task is boring when its necessary.”

She folded her arms and let out an annoyed huff of air, but didn’t say anything in response. Thank Kos for that too. If Sussex and Audrey really wanted to get into it, then we could’ve been here for a good long time while the two tried to insult each other.

“We’ll remember that, Executioner Sussex.” Matta said, placing a hand on Audrey’s shoulder. Audrey jerked away from it.

“Indeed.” Sussex replied, “But if cleaning floors bores you you’ll be pleased to know that its not the task you’ll be working on today. There are many things that need supplying, fetching, carrying and so forth. You’ll be runners today. Matta, Audrey and Strix you will be working for the cook collecting what you can from the marketplaces. You’ll be given money and it’s to be spent exclusively on what you’ve been instructed to retrieve- no frivolities, understand?”

“Yes Executioner.” The three of them chorused.

“Jossam, you’ve a special run to make to the Powder Kegs. They were repairing a few of our Logarius Wheels for us and I want you to retrieve them.”


“As for you-“

“As for me.” I interrupted, “Shouldn’t I go with Jossam? If there are that many wheels then he’ll need help carrying them back.”

“Oh no it’s fine. I’ll manage fine.” Jossam insisted.

“He’ll manage fine.” Sussex said.

“Really,” Strix started, “It’s unlikely they will need three of us in the kitchens anyway, I can go as well, Executioner.”

“No.” Sussex said, “Not you.” Strix Savoy’s face compacted into a visage wrinkled with confusion. He was preparing further inquiry but Sussex had not yet finished speaking.

“The cook needs the three of you, and you’ve already accepted the task. Executioner Kelfazin, if you insist on helping young Jossam-“

“I do.” I cut in and assured him.

“Then assist away. There were better tasks for you, of course. Tasks befitting your rank as proper Executioner but since this is your wish I am not one to deny it.”

How fitting. I was only a proper Executioner to be glorified with tasks better suited to my station when it was in Sussex’s best interest to treat me as such. He was trying to get me to abandon Jossam so that he might go on his own, but I could sense there was more at work here. Jossam was
supposed to go alone for a reason, a reason which I could only gather had something to do with his adventure into the Forbidden Woods. I had walked behind him then and beside him now but still I was a spy, intruding where I didn’t belong.

Sussex worried I was going to cause trouble. That was a bit of a hasty jump to conclusion, especially for a task that was so mundane. There had to be something greater at work here, like me something just below the surface. We had our assignments and without so much as a parting word we set to our tasks, Jossam didn’t seem to know what to do with me at first, scuffing his boots on the floor as he lurked, leaning against the wall and waiting for the others to leave.

“You really don’t ‘ave to come. I can do this myself.” He said.

“I’ve seen you struggle to lift just one wheel, how exactly do you propose to carry more than one?” I returned.

He didn’t know that I knew this wasn’t about wheels.

“You really think a twig like you is gonna be much help?” He asked.

“I’m an Executioner.” I told him, “I know how to carry a wheel.”

He shrugged, “Let’s go then.”

We did, leaving the bank this time just walking through the front door instead of sneaking out the back. So much that he hadn’t noticed last night. The strange women in the woods had shaken him so badly he didn’t see my footprints on his way out of the woods. Now we made new ones, leaving the bank and heading through Yharnam.

“Do you know where the Powder Kegs live?” I asked him.

“Yes. I wasn’t born yesterday y’know.” He grumbled.

I still wasn’t convinced, but I let him take the lead. It certainly wasn’t the fastest route to the train station the inventive hunters had settled into, but he did manage it without trouble. Jossam knew as many back alleys in Yharnam as I did. He had grown up here, taken in by the church and moved into the Executioner subdivision like so many others.

It wasn’t snowing but there was quite the pileup from the day before still on the ground. In parts it was turned to slush, so many shoes having tread over it during the previous day. Denizens rushing back and forth from one task to the next, hardly different then our night time variants of the same variety. The others were going to have to wake up some poor grocers and butchers in the middle of the night in order to complete their task. Hunters the lot of them, but even I didn’t particularly relish the thought of dealing with the business end of an angry meat-cutter’s cleaver.

“Long walk.” I said.

He shrugged

“You know it’s a lot quicker if you just cut around the fishing district. There’s some alleyways that-“

“I think I know my own city.” He grumbled.

Jossam shoved his hands into his pockets and pushed ahead, driving himself harder and farther into the cold wind. He could see the train station in the distance now and wanted to reach it before the
darkness obscured everything. That or he just wanted to be the first of us to reach it. Despite pushing himself I easily came alongside him, his legs not much longer than mine. We were of almost the same height he just had grown in some more muscle, having a steady diet allowed him to grow. It was unfortunate that I would never look the same despite having strength that was far superior.

“Careful.” I cautioned, “They set out traps.”

“I’ve been ’ere before.” Jossam replied.

“I only mention it because I always forget.” I said.

He made no reply but stopped a few feet before we hit the crudely constructed fence that the Powder Kegs had put up. Like everything they produced on their own, the prototypes they constructed it was made from spare parts. They were not great ones for loving the look of things, so long as it functioned and performed as it needed too it made little difference to the strange hunters how much of an eyesore it might be. Their fence and perimeter, from the trench they’d dug to the traps they rigged all looked to be simple constructions, things a child building a fort in the woods might have put together. Looks were oh so deceptive and as we neared the faint scent of explosives, gun powder and kerosene only confirmed my suspicions that something deadly waited just inside of their territory.

“Oi!”

Our heads swerved as they looked around the snow covered Powder Keg grounds. I knew the voice belonged to one of the Lupei brothers instantly, only they spoke with the annoying arrogance of one so over the concept of being polite that cursing had wormed its way into everyday conversation. Viorel could not go for five sentences without either profanity or grievous insult. We scanned the grounds but did not see him, until he was practically on top of us.

He was climbing out of the trench, nimbly navigating between spiked posts before surmounting the gage in the earth and getting level with the snow.

“What do you cunts think you’re doing here?” He growled.

The nerve of him to be dressed like the gentry and behave like the rabble. His clothes were worn to hell and back but still opulent. Satin was satin no matter how stained. Metals were precious even when dented and in bad need of polishing, and filigree once impressive still retained splendor when threadbare.

“We’re here to pick up some wheels.” I said.

Viorel was struggling to pull himself up over the lip of the trench, scrabbling for a firm hand hold in the ice and snow. Jossam extended his hand in offering but the Powder Keg spat at it, taking another useless handful of powdery snow instead. He did make it up onto solid ground after several minutes of struggle. It was like watching a three legged animal try and walk, there was just something deeply unsettling about it. You wanted to put Viorel Lupei out of his misery.

“What wheels? We ain’t got no wheels.” He said as he furiously dusted snow off of his once very fancy trousers.

“Logarius wheels.” I said.

“For Executioner Sussex.” Jossam put in quickly. “The wheels that the Mantis was working on.”
“She’s never worked on no fucking wheels. You missin’ part of your brain just like he’s missin’ part of his face?” Viorel asked.


Was this his attempt at subtlety? If so it was awful. There were children who could keep secrets and carry messages better than this grown man could. Two of the stupidest hunters in Yharnam were trying to have an advanced interaction with each other. If I took a step back it would be comedic, but the better part of me burned with curiosity and a need to get things over with.

“Something wrong with your face?” Viorel asked.

Jossam sighed, “Just take us inside.”

“I ain’t got to take you nowhere.” He huffed.

“It’s important. I have to talk to the Mantis.” Jossam said.

“This is official Executioner business.” I added.

“Yeah and if it’s so official why’d they send the two ugliest mugs in Yharnam sniffin’ around for wheels we don’t fucking have. You never sent us no wheels, we don’t work on wheels and I don’t particularly relish being called a liar.”

“He’s not calling you a liar.” I said, “Isn’t it possible the wheels were brought in without your knowledge. You wouldn’t always be on guard would you?”

He stopped, just like turning off a gas light or a clock wound down to his last. While seconds before everything was tense and argumentative he was suddenly overcome with deep creases, hard in throught. His whole body seemed to factor into this action, tightening in on itself while he considered my hypothesis. I wanted to present him with more evidence but I feared internal combustion was all too possible.

Jossam started to kick a trench in the snow with his boot. He got down past the frozen topsoil by the time Viorel had finally reached a conclusion.

“It’s possible.” He agreed.

“Then let us in.” I said, “Or we’ll come back with more Executioners. It will look more war party then peaceful delegation and I don’t think either of us wants to be responsible for a thing like that.”

“Speak for yourself.” Viorel shot back, “Been a lack of goddamn action lately. Wouldn’t mind blowin’ off a few limbs.”

Despite the violent assertion he pulled at unseen levers and buttons, buried under the snow to create a safe passage into the Powder Keg’s train station.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
Mistaken Identity

Chapter Summary

Frigga's duties continue, running a whole town of hunters is no easy task.

Chapter Notes

As always please let me know what you think!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

What had I been thinking? The next time anyone came in to communion looking and smelling the way that Antares had I was turning them away. Already my head was swirling with questions as Lord Gaines of Byrgenwerth spoke to me about the dangers of cutting off all travel through the Forbidden Woods. It seemed that in protecting the masses upon masses of denizens that were liable to travel through the strange forest, I would be subjecting his hunters too travel through Yhar’Ghul. Yhar’Ghul was one of those areas that was still bristling with malice and monsters. Efforts were made to clear it out but they ended in vain if not in death. I’d stopped sending parties, the city was so overrun it wasn’t worth trying to salvage. There was something different about Yhar’Ghul, I wasn’t the only hunter who thought so. By all surviving records and testimony it hadn’t been a gradual decline that in the end had corrupted the area. Yhar’Ghul had fallen in a day, a matter of hours even. So much evil had bubbled up from the underground caverns in the depths of the city, poisoning everything save a few fortunate survivors.

Abbot Minimus had been one of those who lived during the fall, claimed to have watched it happen. I didn’t think it was possible that such calamity could have occurred within my lifetime, for by all calculation I would’ve been a girl when the city fell. More than just the city the entirety of the Choir crumbled before eldritch forces too great to understand. Blame was thrown at the feet of some overzealous scholar who had made blood pact with an exiled Amygdala and used it to rain hellfire down on the classmates had surpassed him. That is how the stories went and from the way Yhar’Ghuls college and lecture hall were ravaged I didn’t doubt the truth of those words.

Perhaps I needed to re-form the Choir and restore peace. Another arduous side project I was not yet ready to undertake. A few dozen others had tried to before, most of them survivors of the fall. They never lasted long, there were few hunters bold enough to enter the territory. Fewer still who were willing to cast away their lives and try to settle in such a hostile place. That was not a task for this time, not this winter. Not this year.

A light tapping of knuckles on wood roused me from my thoughts. I looked up from my desk to see Fwahe leaning in the door way. The Executioner boy was a few steps behind her, standing in her shadow.

“Hello.” She said.

I forced a smile, “Hello.”
She took it as invitation and stepped inside of my room. Her feet were bare like always, legs nearly the same. She had no fondness for fancy clothes, unless I was the one wearing them. She took winter in the same fashions as scorching summer. It must’ve been part of her nature, to not feel the cold. Cainhurst was a snowy place, from what I could remember. The fragments I had of my time there were horribly fractured and fuzzy.

It gave me headaches to consider the place and the past for too long.

She came up behind me, resting her chin on my shoulder. “What are you working on?” She asked.

It wasn’t actually her question. Everything she said was just a veil over the true inquiry. Translating her attempts at polite conversation, she would’ve been better to ask “are you too busy for me?”

“It’s part of Gaines’ proposal.” I said, “He wants to leave certain parts of the woods open so he doesn’t have to go through Yhar’Ghul.”

She put her hands on my shoulders, moving her chin to the top of my head so she could lean over me and down at the plans. There was a map marked with brief explanations of possible alternate routes but Fwahe didn’t spare it more than a cursory glance.

“Mmm.” She said.

“It’s nothing pressing.” I said, which was only half-true. “Did you need me?”

Most of her weight now bore down on me, her head upside down in front of mine, silver hair spilling across my desk. She stole a kiss then said “Always.”

I laughed.

“It was actually just that dinner’s ready.” Fwahe replied, “The pregnant one cooked again.”

“You know her name is Scarlett.” I told her.

“She calls me the Vileblood.” Fwahe said.

“She’s just scared.” I said.

“Never once have I given her any reason to be afraid. Both of them hate me.” Fwahe sighed, “And Templeton too. They are afraid of tiny little Templeton.”

I swallowed my own thoughts on Templeton. The girl that I had known all my life, who I had trusted time and time again now caused me a bit of apprehension. I had found trust and truth in her eyes but now there was something else. Like a film over iris when the old start to go blind, hunger tainted her entire visage and changed how I saw her. I tried not to let it show but I feared she might become a liability, she did not have Fwahe’s control.

“Ridiculous.” I said, forcing a laugh.

Fwahe agreed.

“You do have enough for her though, right?” I asked.

She cocked her head to the side, giving me a blank wide-eyed stare. Her face was full of questions. I shouldn’t have opened up this discussion if I wasn’t prepared to explain my own side of things.
“Blood.” I said, “You have enough blood so that she won’t go hungry.”

“We’ll manage.” Fwahe snapped, “I know how much we need.”

I pulled her back down for another kiss, another attempt to smooth things over. Was every aspect of my existence coming down to debates and deals? Caught in a cage of give and take. This was not how I had wanted things to be, but the results spoke for themselves. If imprisonment was the price for peace then I would gladly pay it.

“Thank you for watching over her.” I said, “Without you I don’t know where she’d be.”

“Dead and ungrateful.” Fwahe muttered.

“I suppose.” I said.

“It’s a fact.” Fwahe said. “Without me that selfish scholar would’ve gone blood crazy and destroyed villages. She calls me selfish but she would’ve torn down towns without a second thought if I wasn’t there to hold her back. Pathetic.”

I ducked out of Fwahe’s hold, pivoting as far as my chair would allow so that I could look her in the eyes. She was bad at hiding the truth when she had to look at me head on. Another part of my job, finding the weaknesses. I had to know all of the tells.

“Did something happen?” I asked.

Fwahe shook her head, “It’s nothing. I don’t want to talk about it.”

Something had happened. This was the last thing I needed, tensions with the council and now inside my own home, between my rangers. I had thought they would have learned how to get along after those years abroad. It was not so.

“Come on love, no secrets.” I pleaded.

Another trick, another manipulation. Now I was playing with guilt in my hands, wrapping it around Fwahe’s fingers in deadly cat’s cradle. People made into puppets, that’s what my friends were turning into. Little things with their coverings taking off so that I might tune the gears and wind the springs. Once I had seen how to correct the inner mechanism it was hard to wait for it to work itself out when all I needed to do was twist the right tool.

I had long ago forgiven her for concealing the truth of her nature from me. There was no reason to bring it up again. I watched her cheeks flush with embarrassment and she became tongue tied, breaking away from me and pacing the room as she worked to formulate her response.

“No secrets.” She finally agreed, “But I don’t need the Executioner listening in.”

I looked back to the door. Patience was still standing there, every inch of him painted in discomfort. He was just one of those people who never seemed to relax. He offered a tense smile as our eyes met, and the one I returned with was brief but genuine. I wanted this boy to like us, it was important that he did. We needed to charm this Executioner to continue and broker the trust of his order.

“Would you mind stepping outside for a moment?” I asked him. “I promise you, I’m not going to let Fwahe out of my sight.”

“Why does it even matter?” Fwahe snarled, “He falls asleep on his job, so the constant surveillance
is a farce to begin with. You shouldn’t have to make deals with him. He should be-

As she spun around to accost him personally it was evident he had already left. Her reply was
caught in the click of the door as he pressed it shut behind him. Truly it would kill her to show so
much as an ounce of decorum.

“Did he really fall asleep?” I asked.

“Yes.” Fwahe said, “On his breakfast toast. The breakfast that I made for him.”

“You made him breakfast?” I asked.

“Well. I pointed to the bread.” She quantified. “I didn’t want him thinking he was allowed any of
my strawberries.”

“He’s perfectly welcome to them.” I said.

“He doesn’t need to know that.”

With a huff she flung herself down over the footboard of the bed. She landed face-down in a
comforter and several blankets. She proceeded to scream her frustration into the silks and feather
padding. Her legs, hung over the end of the bed, kicked like a child throwing a temper tantrum.

I got up from my desk and sat on the edge of the bed. She stopped kicking when she felt my weight
depress the blankets, but did not look up from the mattress. I wanted to comfort her, to gently
stroke her back as others had for me before their unfortunate passing. I couldn’t though. The touch
would only draw unfortunate pains down her spine. The scars of long ago still stung.

I kissed her on the head, breathing in the scent of her hair. It was not perfumed or oiled as some,
but smelled like tilled earth and all the faraway places she’d been. She had one of those
inexplicable scents, like the interior of a home. It was very present upon first meeting but faded
over time, faded to the familiar.

She rolled over, tickling my nostrils with her hair as she turned. I giggled and she forced a smile.
Fwahe pushed herself up and leaned her head on my shoulder. Her legs still dangled over the edge,
kicking back and forth. She didn’t want to stay still. Her movements rocked the bed frame back
and forth always causing ripples.

She never knew how to start conversations, not soft ones like this. If it could not be shouted in
accusation or sharp command nor spoken in casual pleasantries she folded in on herself. The shy
school girl in Vileblood’s clothing.

“So what happened?” I asked, giving in and starting for her.

She picked up her head so that she could look away, but she didn’t lie to me. “Templeton got mad
at me, kicked me out of the library.”

“That doesn’t sound like her.” I said.

Fwahe shrugged, “I asked her to you know, do her job and she got mad. She’s supposed to be
researching useful things and I asked her to research something useful. Then she just got mad and
kicked me out.”

She was back at it now, spewing half-truths as everyone else around me. The days of straight
answers were long over, and it seemed despite striving I could not bring them back. As she turned
away from me I turned away from her, standing and returning to the desk.

“If you don’t want to talk about it, you don’t have too.” I said.

She flopped onto the covers again, face up this time. “I don’t want to not to.” She said, “But you don’t seem to believe me when I tell you what happened.”

“Because you only reveal half of what you mean.” I told her, “Lord Gaines does it too, and Executioner Alfred and the sisters of the church and the woodlanders, and-“

“Don’t compare me to them.” Fwahe grumbled.

“If you weren’t talking like them I wouldn’t have too.” I replied, “But you do. Today you said you made breakfast for Executioner Patience when you didn’t. You just pointed to the bread and hoarded your fruit.”

She rolled over, head in her hands and stuck her tongue out at me. I turned back to my work. There was much to be done, and I just didn’t want to play games any more. Lord Gaines’ plan was a sensible one, as always but when I’d given him orders he’d still completed them to the best of his ability. With all of England to watch over there was too much at risk, and the snakes did not stay hidden. They basked on rocks, out in the open sunning themselves in the rays of doubt I seemed to cast over the council with each snap decision I made.

There was no easy way to solve this problem, not anymore. When it was just the Valkyeries I headed I never had to doubt their loyalty. Barristan was a snake in the grass, for certain but when I’d given him orders he’d still completed them to the best of his ability. With all of England to watch over there was too much at risk, and the snakes did not stay hidden. They basked on rocks, out in the open sunning themselves in the rays of doubt I seemed to cast over the council with each snap decision I made.

Setting down my pen, I stood and went to the door. I checked to the left, found nothing and then cast my eyes to the other side. Patience was a few paces down, inspecting one of the painted set pieces leaning against the backstage wall. I really needed to have them removed or burnt instead of leaning on each other in precarious heaps.

“Patience?” I called.

His head snapped towards me and he came to me quickly.

“Would you head to the kitchen and make a pot of tea, please?” I asked. “The kettle will be on the stove and there’s jars of tea leaves in the cabinet with the tea cups in it. A full pot would be just lovely, enough for Fwahe and I. You may have some too if you wish.”

He nodded and was off before I could thank him. It was a small favor to ask but it kept me from more controversial vices. I would not lead England from the bottom of a bottle nor the stem of a pipe. I’d taken to abstaining from both of them altogether. Whiskey was nice on cold nights, but it could be done without. The same for tobacco, relaxing though the burning leaves may have been if I was to be accused of judgement clouded then there was no place for them. I suffered neither Cato nor Callum’s great fondness for the stuff, and cut it away quite easily.

Tea was all I needed, and of late I consumed lots. Patience was quick to come back with the tray. He’d even located cream and sugar, a benefit for Fwahe who preferred to have tea with her sugar rather than sugar with her tea. She popped whole cubes in her mouth when she thought no one was looking.

I didn’t dilute my own drink very much, but a single cube and a splash of cream made for a nice
treat every now and again. I gave the mixture a stir before picking up the china cup and bringing it to my lips. Before I had a chance to taste it a thunderclap of pain crashed through my skull. I screamed, dropping the cup. It shattered as I crumpled to the floor, unable to stand. I didn’t hear the sound of the breaking china, nor the shouts of Fwahe as she called to me. I just saw her mouth, her eyes both as wide and vast as the sea.

With each passing second the pain grew worse, coming over me in waves that started in my head but spread outward encompassing first my neck and shoulders, but quickly spreading down to my stomach, into my knees and finally my feet as well. I couldn’t hear my own screams. Everyone was rushing in. They were standing over me.

Patience was suddenly alongside me. Fwahe had a fistful of his half-colored hair in her hand. He couldn’t have poisoned me. That didn’t make any sense.

Another wave and the world went white. I no longer heard, no longer saw.

For a long time it didn’t stop. Something seemed to shower down on me in flaming shards, biting every inch of my skin. The pricks of pain pelted like violent rain or hailstones, encasing me. There were no umbrellas in the haze of agony that I strained to navigate. I tried to find some shelter, some kind of relief but every motion caused a new jolt to shoot through me.

Everything took me back to the room, to the chair where I’d been restrained. I had been islanded in a sea of wires as Abbot Minimus tried to put his thoughts in my head. The world had been white then too, illuminated only by sparks of strange blue lightning that went white as they became too hot. I had been lost there and now I was lost again.

“Frigga.”

At first the sound was too loud, rattling the world, tilting it back and forth, sending the space spinning. I tried to put my hands over my ears to dull it, but they would not move. Was Minimus calling out to me again? Dear Kos, no. Ruling Yharnam as I did could not have been a dream, fate couldn’t possibly be so cruel to me.

“Frigga?”

It came again, softer this time, but still my skull shook with the sound of it.

“Frigga you need to open your eyes for me.”

It was not the Abbot’s voice. A modicum of fear retreated and I was able to get in a solid breath. The command made no sense, my eyes were already open, being burnt by the blankness of this place. I tried to reply but my lips were like stone, carved closed and would not yield. The voice came again, one more time.

“Open your eyes.”

I did.

Wherever I had been, it was gone. The more I blinked the more that place faded. I was in my room, on the bed and someone was staring down at me.

“That’s it.” He said, “Keep them open. No sleeping.”

It was Callum. I could make his face out now. As always his pipe was lodged in the corner of his mouth, but he hadn’t lit it. He must have been working too long to notice that it had gone out. It
was a sign, along with his rumpled hair and the dark circles under his eyes, that bringing me back had not been an easy job. He put a cold cloth on my head. It felt wonderful.

“Stay awake.” He said, “I have to go grab Fwahe. She threatened to rip my eyes out or something if I didn’t tell her when you were back.”

“Have I been gone that long?” I managed to ask.

The words were a whistle between my lips, barely loud enough for me to hear them. Something had definitely gone wrong.

I heard hurried footsteps and Fwahe was where Callum had been in a matter of seconds. Slower footsteps followed behind her, Patience and the medic were what I assumed, though there was a chance concern had extended to my other Valkyeries. I hoped it hadn’t.

“Are you alright?” Fwahe asked.

“Yes.” I said.

Another soundless speech. I tried shouting it, using all the volume I could manage.

“Yes!”

She smiled, picking up one of my hands and kissed it. “I was so worried. You collapsed. The Executioner tried to poison you, go on Frigga. Tell Callum that’s what happened. I’ll rip out his throat.”

“That’s not what happened.” Callum said, before I could.

“You don’t know that!” Fwahe growled, “I was there, I saw it!”

Callum sighed and rolled his eyes, “I don’t care what you thought you saw. I have proper medical training, I actually know what I’m talking about. This wasn’t anything that poison could’ve brought on. Were it someone else I’d suspect a severe migraine but considering all Lady Hemlock has been through I think a residual effect of Minimus’ experiments is more likely to blame.”

It had felt very similar to that. “But…it’s been…so long.” I said.

They both turned to me. I was loud enough to hear now, that was good. I hope it was good.

Callum took the pipe out of his mouth and scratched his scalp with the stem. “That is the perplexing things. Conditions like this, not that there are any documented cases precisely like this have been known to lay dormant. Typically there is something that triggers a reaction—“

“Like poisoned tea.” Fwahe offered.

The medic and I sighed at the same time. She could be so stubborn when she thought she was in the right. I was too tired to argue with her and shed light on the weak points in her assertions.

“No.” Callum said, “And if you say one more word about poisoned tea I’m going to insist Frigga go on bed rest without any visitors just to keep you from bothering her with your ill-informed nonsense. Shut up, the professionals are talking.”

I was surprised that she listened.

“In your case Lady Hemlock, I don’t think it was any particular trigger. This might have just been
brought on by the stress of your position, which is no surprise considering how much you’ve got going on. I’d like to stop by more regularly and monitor this. There’s a chance it will happen again.” Callum said, “I’ll have to research where I can and see if I’ve missed something that might be useful.”

“Check Templeton’s library too.” Fwahe said, “She might have a book you don’t.”

“That’s true.” I said.

He nodded, vowing to check with Templeton. “In the meantime please make sure to eat regular meals and get enough rest. Keeping yourself in an optimal condition couldn’t possibly hurt you.”

“Thank you.” I said.

“Of course.” He replied, “Fwahe knows what to do if you have another…incident.”

Fwahe nodded.

Callum took his leave and closed the door behind him. I shifted into a sitting positon. Patience stood by the door, and Fwahe was sitting on the edge of my bed, picking at wrinkles in the sheets. Once she was certain we were as alone as could be allowed she kissed me.

“Don’t you ever do that again.” Fwahe said, “I was worried.”

“I don’t know if I can promise that.” I said, “It was strange…I just..”

“You just nothing.” Fwahe said, putting a finger to my lips. “The medic said rest was good. You’re going to sleep now.”

“I’ve still got those maps to go over. The moon’s still up.” I argued.

“It can wait.” Fwahe said. She got up and dimmed all the lights, then slid beside me. It was a protective stance with one arm curled around me. I wanted to argue, to get up and do what needed to be done but there wasn’t so much as an ounce of strength left in me. My eyes wanted to close and I let them, hoping they wouldn’t be burned by white lights again.

There were no lights. I suffered no dreams and woke up in roughly the same position I’d gone to sleep in. Fwahe’s arm was still curled around me, we seemed to have moved closer to each other during the night. The cloth that Callum had put on my head slipped loose, making a moist patch on the pillow. It would be best to wash all the bedding, I had put tasks like that off for so long. The theater needed a good cleaning.

I let my eyes adjust to being open, blinking slowly and taking my time before stretching and worming my way out of Fwahe’s arms. She mumbled something, but was hardly awake. She sunk into the space I’d vacated on the bed, sucked down by a vortex of blankets and pillows. Standing just beside the bed, I put on a pair of silk slippers while I watched Fwahe sleep. Even with the scars on her face and her hastily cut hair there was something gentle about her in slumber. Everyone was a little younger, a little softer when they slept and Vilebloods were no exception.

I should’ve woken her. She would give me an earful for leaving the bed without telling her. I would call it her fault for not waking up, but really I just couldn’t stand to disturb her when she was calm like that. It was a rare state for her, and she did not sleep often. She was worse than me when it came to resting. A good thing I had paired her up with Templeton, who seemed to need more rest than most. I hoped things would even out while they were on the road together. She needed a friend.
Patience opened the door for me. I hadn’t expected him to be there, but he was, sitting right beside the door. He melted into the room somehow the same way a hat stand or coat rack did.

“Thank you.” I said.

He nodded and closed the door behind me.

It would’ve been nice to have his help with breakfast this morning but it seemed Fwahe could not be left alone. I made it to the kitchen and found Scarlett, Imogen and Sterling had already gotten the preparations started.

“Good morning.” I said, and they returned the greeting.

Sterling handed me a cup of tea. I was hesitant to take it. Tea hadn’t brought on my headache last night, I was sure of that and had Callum’s word to back it up. Yet there came hesitation, some sort of muscle-memory reflex that sent shivers down into my fingers, rattling the cup and sending waves through the tea. I looked down at the strange mark that refused to fade, the lightning scarification that I’d given myself as I’d slain the corrupt Abbot. It didn’t appear any different then usual.

I took a deep breath, steadied myself and took a sip of the tea. Weakly brewed and a little cold, the hallmark of Sterling’s cooking capabilities but it hardly mattered. I suffered no ill effects and could get a proper pot of an English breakfast blend going once this one had been consumed.

“Thank you.” I said, “Did Callum stay over?”

“No.” Imogen sighed, “I really hoped he was going too. It’d be nice if he were around more, considering—“

“Considering that I am not a china doll and I’m not going to break in half just because I coughed once a day ago.” Scarlett said

“You could be catching something.” Imogen argued.

“I’m fine.” Scarlett laughed, “You worry too much.”

“One cough isn’t indicative of anything.” I said, trying to calm Imogen down. “Especially with your careful monitoring I doubt anything is going to go wrong.”

Imogen smiled.

I sat down and took another sip from the cup. “I was thinking I might try and clean this place up a bit. Your child won’t come for a long time yet, but we’ve been neglecting the matience of this theater. The hunt doesn’t look to be ending anytime soon and it’s best we start to do away with the old set pieces. Some of the equipment might be useful but by and large I don’t think anyone needs piles of sandbags lying around.”

“You propose a cleaning day then?” asked Sterling.

I nodded. “The medic said to take a break from anything stressful. Frankly I could use some time to just organize my own things, it would be rather calming. At least I could put this place into a proper order if not the hunters of Yharnam.”

“We could finally clean out a room for the baby.” Scarlett said.
“And get a better system for storing weapons then piling them in the lobby.” Sterling added.

It was hard to believe we had lived here so long and were still picking our daily necessities out of piles. There always seemed to be something more pressing to get done before finding storage space. The three of them began to discuss preparations while I finished my breakfast. The other Valkyries were soon awake and most responded to the idea with relative enthusiasm.

“It’ll be just like old times.” Mouse said, “When we had to tidy the library.”

I smiled, “Yes I think it will. Does that mean you want to organized the kitchen and wash the floors again?”

“I think I still know ‘ow to work a mop.” Mouse replied. “So long as the Powder Kegs ‘aven’t weaponized them yet.”

“And Sinks.” Cato put in, “I think they might have weaponized sinks too, I mean last time I did the dishes I was liable to have-“

“Liable to have talked your way out of ever doing them again?” I asked.

He chuckled and turned away, scratching furiously at the back of his neck, the best he could manage.

“Didn’t think so.” I said, “But I believe Scarlett’s on dish rotation now. Do you think between the two of you, Rook and yourself might be able to handle the dusting?”

All semblance of shamelessness now banished he snapped into a smart salute clicking his heels together and keeping his back straight. “Can do, majesty.”

One by one the tasks were assigned and everyone began to get the process underway. I was surprised, even Fwahe was working with the others, though usually elevating herself to some superior position if Patience was concerned. The young Executioner worked alongside Fwahe and Sterling to do the majority of the heavy lifting, moving the backstage set pieces to other locations. Fwahe was of a mind to put it outside, near the store of firewood so that if needed we would still have the resource. It was a bit of a shame to see it go, some stagehands had worked very hard on those decorations. All that work only to have them become pieces of very decorative firewood.

They were quick about it, and I saw reason to force friendship once more upon my two rangers.

“Fwahe, Templeton, would you mind clearing out the lobby? The both of you always put all your traveling accoutrements there, along with everything else. It could really use a tidy, makes such a poor impression.”

Tempelton glanced nervously up at Fwahe who glared down at her, but neither one protested. They hated working in silence, I was sure that after a few minutes of shifting boxes and repairing broken bench cushions they would be back to their old selves. Patience started after them, but he would only throw off my alignment.

“Patience, will you come with me?” I asked.

He stopped dead in his tracks and gave me a bow.

“I need help organizing my clothes. Yours were so neatly folded, I wonder if I might borrow your skills.” I said.
He smiled, but looked over his shoulder towards the lobby, watching as both of his charges moved dangerously close to egress.

“Right.” I said, “Your duties.”

He nodded.

“You needn’t worry. We won’t be long and Templeton will keep an eye on Fwahe. She’d come right to me if anything happened.” I lied.

Templeton wasn’t a rat, though she looked the type. She had held off from killing her own companions despite starvation and torture. If Fwahe had told her to keep something a secret I could bet it would go to the grave behind Templeton’s lips.

It was also a lie to say we wouldn’t be long. I had somehow amassed a wardrobe more extensive than any person’s had a right to be. My clothes could use a good purging and there were plenty in winter who were in need of warmer wear. I tried more honeyed words and white lies. Patience smiled politely but his feet stayed rooted to the spot. When the lobby door snapped closed behind him, he turned away from me and made a start for it, but he was beaten to the post by Imogen.

She had collected a basket full of napkins, table clothes and various other linens that needed a good cleaning and was setting up her wash tub right by the lobby doors. She could look through the windowed opening and observe the lobby’s goings-on.

“Imogen can keep an eye on them.” I said.

He nodded. The boy must’ve noticed the couple’s caution when it came to Fwahe and Templeton.

Without further hesitation he followed me to my room. They’d made quite the obedient little soldier out of this one. His footfalls were calculated and constant, like a military march. I was used to others behind me, the soft thuds of Fwahe’s barefeet or the scraping of Sterling’s boots. No matter what cobbler he went too they always seemed to come out too big and trip him up every now and again.

My room was a mess. I could organize England but when it came to my own things, there never seemed to be any order. I never entertained guests in the theater’s private quarters for these reasons- not important guests anyway. The thought of Lord Gaines looking over my living space in it’s current condition was laughable. He might’ve started a campaign for his own election, such would be his horror.

"It’s…perhaps going to take a bit longer then anticipated.” I said by way of apology to the Executioner.

He shrugged.

We started with the wardrobe. Some of my dresses were hung neatly from its rungs, but most lay in heaps on the floor. Pants, jackets, socks, everything was mixed together in a pile of cloth. I began clearing it out while Patience sorted, putting shirts with other shirts and skirts with other skirts. I would catch glances of him running his hands across a tailored jacket or the rivets in a corset before sorting it. A touch far too fond for a man working with women’s clothing, perhaps being alone with an Executioner boy was a poor choice. He was silent but that did not make him innocent.

As we continued I became more concerned. When everything was sorted he started putting dresses on hangars, one by one. More then once I caught him holding the gowns in front of himself, and
glancing sideways to the full length mirror at the opposite end of the room. It was impossible to know what he might be thinking, but it didn’t sit well with me.

“Patience, why don’t you let me take care of the dresses?” I said, “There’s an ironing board somewhere in here, see if you can’t find it and make a start on the shirts.”

He hung up the dress he was holding, one of my favorites for summer in fact and then nodded. I quickly took over while he set up the table and began pressing the wrinkles out of shirts, then neatly folding them. There were no lingering hands there. It was, perhaps a matter to be discussed with Fwahe. She would blow things wildly out of proportion, surely but if there was some truly sinister twist lurking within the boy it was best to know about. Foolish to think they had sent me someone gentle and kind, foolish to let my guard down so easily. The paranoia of my partner may well be merited.

I kept a much closer eye on him as we proceeded. Patience didn’t seem to notice when he was being observed, showing none of the hallmarks that others displayed. He must’ve grown used to being a bug under a microscope and behaved no differently when I gave him my complete attention, then when I was distracted by pulling belts out of the loops in the many pairs of pants strewn across the floor.

Truly I had underestimated the time this was going to take. Templeton and Fwahe must have completed the cleansing of the lobby, and someone had organized a light lunch as we were interrupted by Fwahe with a tray. Patience didn’t look up when she came in but I did. She surveyed the room quickly and glared, none too happy to see my corsets spread across the floor while he was in the room.

“What’s… I mean how’s it going in here?” She asked, brushing a petticoat off one of my steamer trunks and setting the tray on top of it.

“We’re making progress.” I replied, “But it seems my wardrobe was a bit more extensive then anticipated.”

“Mmhm.” Fwahe said

I set down the dress whose laces had become a horrible tangle and came over to her. I gave the disgruntled woman a kiss and thanked her for bringing up lunch. Patience too set down his work and came over to join us.

“I can take over for him now.” Fwahe said, “Temp and I finished the lobby.”

“Oh I’ll have to come and see it.” I said, “I don’t think I remember what it looks like clean, but I used to read on the one bench quite a bit.”

Fwahe picked at a piece of bread with her nails. She pulled off bits of dough, rolling them into compact balls then setting them back down on the plate. She didn’t eat anything. “You must have. We found a lot of books there. Templeton was critiquing your choice in literature.”

I laughed, blotting excess soup off my chin. “She would.”

“Indeed.” Fwahe said. “What’s the verdict?” I asked.

Fwahe mushed some of her small bread balls together, creating a larger bread ball. “She was surprised they were mostly biographical journals.”

“I find them fascinating.” I explained, “Tales of false people doing fake deeds never seemed to
hold any stock for me, I’d prefer to learn from authentic experience.”

Fwahe smiled, “I don’t understand them either. She was telling me some silly story about Hari Harel and a crow. It didn’t make any sense, they got all their facts wrong.”

I hid a laugh. “Folk tales aren’t made of facts.”

“Well they should be.” She concluded, crushing her dough into a flat disc before crossing her arms.

There’d be no explaining it to her. They must not have had stories like this at Cainhurst. Why should they? The Vilebloods were graced with unusually long lives, possibly even immortality. What use was there for stories of the heroes of old when they were the people you fought alongside? I kept forgetting that she was from a different world and a different time. It was easy to let that slip away, she often forgot it herself. She remembered Cainhurst only in vague, disconnected ways like dreams or memories from childhood. I knew very little about her time there, only that she’d lived at Cainhurst and had at one point spoken with the Vileblood Queen. I never pressed her for anything more, but I still wondered.

We spoke of other things before lunch ended, but I didn’t focus on them very much. The little thoughts, tiny questions about her time before meeting me, or before joining the hunters, they all started to collect themselves. Like the balls of dough that were small at first they grew and grew, now large enough to choke on. I felt like I had them all caught in my throat, just begging to come out, but my teeth would serve as their prison bars. It was better not to know, I wasn’t going to like the answers I got.

So I just nodded. I laughed and I agreed with her opinions as she proceeded to tear apart more of the food on the tray without eating it and we had a nice lunch. When it ended I sent Patience away with the tray as Fwahe and I made a start on the clothing. I gave away a good many things and had the Executioner carry the boxes down and pile them in the ticket booth. We could give them to the church for distribution come next communion. He took on all the tasks that required leaving the room and in the moments he was gone Fwahe and I didn’t get very much done.

She hated to clean at the best of times, and reverted right back to the petulant child she played at in our library days. Fwahe sulked on the bed or hid under it while I tried to get things into a proper order, always asking if I were done yet. If her act didn’t fill me with such nostalgia for my former home I might have set her another task to cease the whining.

My room took the better part of the day, but was finished and back to pristine splendor with time to spare. I helped to reorganize the pantry while Templeton took better stock of our food supply. The shelves were full enough to know we would last the winter but now it was clear what we would run out of, meals could be planned a bit more easily.

It had been wonderful putting my world back together and straightening out what had gone askew. Things with the other hunters were never as simple as straightening up, but it felt like they should have been. At the start things were proceeding as they needed too, until we had gotten the beasts off the street. No one had to struggle to survive, loyalties were formed with words and exchange instead of heated moments in battle.

It was true that beasts could exist without hunters, but could hunters exist without beasts? We dissolved to petty squabbling and squandering resources when they needn’t be conserved so heavily. It wasn’t worth the lives of the denizens to let the beasts come back, such thoughts were madness. They prodded at me, but I turned them away. Dark things, squirming with devious impulses and shoddy solutions. I would never betray my fellow hunters.
If the order of hunters was coming to an end, and our services were no longer needed it should be a joyful thing. The hunt unending may yet cease and life could return to the way it had been before I was born. Those who came after me would never have to live in fear of a cleric beast climbing the walls and tearing their house in two. They would not wake in the middle of the night, coming out of writing dreams and haunted by the dying faces of friends. Friends I had been forced to kill.

Kos above, I still could not forgive myself for Anwen. Consolations of it not being my fault were hollow comforts. I still saw her face in my dreams, coupled by the stretched elongated maws of the twins as they turned to wolves. Sage and Salem, rest their souls. Their death had not come at my hands but I had still failed to save them.

Protecting my city was paramount. No more dead friends, not if I could help it. If complaints and compromise were all it cost me then I would shoulder the burden for as long as I had breath in my lungs. Tomorrow brought new meetings with it, as I shook the nightmares from my skull.

It wasn’t the Powder Kegs or the Healing Church today, but it was a journey out to the woodlanders. I needed to see how the control of the Forbidden Woods border was going, needed to know if Lord Gaines had impeded any progress. He didn’t seem the type but was unusually passionate when it came to avoiding Yhar’Ghul. His carriages suffered a lot of damage on those foul streets. He was only looking out for his own, same as me.

The forbidden woods was a decent walk from the walled city. I passed through the markets and lower income residential districts. Everyone had to navigate the high-traffic areas before reaching the city walls. I traveled past the stalls, a significant portion of which were empty. Not all of Yharnam shut down when the sun set. Recently there had been the resurgence of a night market which could find itself as bustling and busy as the deals done in daylight. I thought I heard someone following me, and caught myself turning over my shoulder to check for a familiar face. This went on as I wound my way through the crowds.

When I finally locked eyes with the person they called out a name, but it wasn’t my own. They’d merely mistaken me for someone else. I shook my head, hoping to dissuade the fair-haired stranger half hidden by shadow. His eyes narrowed to tiny slits of jade, but he turned away. Something about the man didn’t sit right, perhaps a leftover feeling from Patience’s odd behavior the day previous. I walked twice as fast as usual and reached the border in record time.

The city-issued guardsmen were about as always, but further back in the shadows I recognized the faces of my own allies. Lucian was among them, working to enhance the guards fortifications, monitoring who came and went. I caught his eye and he nodded to me before I proceeded past the gate. After that it was just the open country for a good while. Farmland as far as the eye could see. Without the added security of the farms, none of the denizens in the fields had the audacity to stay awake past the light of the sun. It was an especially needles activity in the winter months when their fields could not be tended.

I looked down at the road and noticed a few sets of footprints in the new fallen snow. They went out in one direction. I estimated about a dozen people on foot and one on horseback, all headed towards the wood. These must have belonged to the party Antares led, though I never remembered anyone working with them to have owned a horse. I followed inside of them, making no new tracks of my own rather matching my boot prints to those of the other travelers. I didn’t need the green eyed stranger following me.

I turned around once more, just to check. There was someone else crossing through the gate. I walked even faster, locking my hand around the handle of my threaded cane. The hunters had made dozens for me, but I preferred one that was much similar to the weapon I’d wielded in the library
days. It had a bronze dragon heads hilt with red stones for eyes. I’d assumed ruby, garnet or something similar but now I wondered if the powder keg who’d crafted it had imbedded two of York’s blood gems into the sockets instead. Not likely, but entirely possible. I didn’t recall where this one had come from or when it was made. Something to look into when I made it back to the theater.

The stranger had not been stopped by the guardsmen or the hunters. They let him pass. He must be safe, just a shifty-eyed farmer who was late coming home. I had done something to offend him, surely. I could’ve bumped into his shopping at the market, though I didn’t recall any collision. I might’ve tread on his feet though I didn’t think the streets were so crowded as I wouldn’t notice a thing like that. I hadn’t coughed in anyone’s face. I hadn’t so much as sneezed. What could I have done?

He cupped his hands around his mouth and cried out across the snowy fields. The name still wasn’t mine.

“Alois!”

Strange name but not one that could be mistaken for my own, it sounded nothing like Frigga. Surely the men and women on duty had heard his outburst and could prevent him from crossing the border. They didn’t.

He belonged here. He had to have belonged here and they must’ve recognized him. Alois might’ve been a horse or a hound or a child, some lost creature he was merely searching for. I tried to convince myself that coincidence had let our paths cross again.

Such thoughts were foolishness. The stranger was after me. Were he a rouge denizen a simple swipe of the cane would be enough to send him on his merry way. I could dispel him right this moment. That would be the easiest way to set my fluttering heart back to its usual rythym.

I’d chosen a horrible time to fall ill, to make promises to Callum. Engaging in a fight with an unknown would not, by any stretch of the imagination fall under the guise of taking it easy. I started to walk even faster. It was a jog now easily. I was less careful about where I strode and left a few of my own footprints. This was careless, foolish, but I continued anyway.

“Alois!” the voice caught in the howling winter wind and carried to my ears. They were red from the cold.

“I’m not her.” I muttered.

I heard the crunch of footprints in fresh snow. He was chasing after me. By the sound alone I knew it was chasing, too hard and fast to have been anything less. What did he want with me? Rather, what did he want with Alois.

I turned on my heels, carving out a semi-circle in the snow. I looked him dead in the eye and like he had to yell at me, I cupped my hands to yell at him. “There is no Alois here!”

He didn’t stop. He didn’t even slow down, he kept after me. The distance was closed in no time at all. I thought I had run faster than I did, and I was sure he was moving slower than he was. Somehow my vision wasn’t matching with reality. I wanted to move out of his way, the stranger seemed like a train run off its tracks. There were no breaks, no slowing down only a gradual building of speed and power.

The pain in my head came again. I tensed to keep from doubling over as my vision blurred. This
was the worst time. The cold weather and the long walk had been more taxing then I’d realized. I
didn’t take to taking it easy well. Sickness was not normally a part of my nature and hastiness was
my downfall. I should’ve stayed in bed, stayed at the theater for one more day of recovery before
going out.

He crashed into me.

He didn’t even speak and I didn’t even stop him, the stranger just dove at me, pushing me down
onto the snow. I hit the ground and my head rung. His full weight on top of me hurt.

"Get off!" I shouted.

It wasn’t as loud as I wanted it to be. He put his hands on my face, furiously brushing strands of
hair away from my face. It was hard to see clearly, had to move. Callum and illness be damned
there was no choice but to fight. I still had my hand on the hilt of my threaded cane. I worked the
weapon free of its hilt and held the bladed tip at my attackers throat.

My hand was shaking the sharpened metal end of the blade wobbling up and down. It seemed to be
shaking anyway, it was hard to see clearly.

The stranger didn’t seem put off by having a blade at his throat. He handled it with the calm ease
of one used to tense negotiation. I tried to get a good look at him. There was a burning pain all
through my brain as I cataloged the features of my attacker. Something about the set of his jaw, the
position of his eyebrows and the way he spoke was all so familiar. It scorched with irritation, a
forgotten face so much like a forgotten word on the tip of my tongue.

He looked like someone I knew, though I was certain I didn’t know him.

“Calm down sweet sister, don’t struggle so.” He cooed.

“I’m not…your sister.” I mumbled.

He cocked his head to the side, looking me over with a different kind of curiosity. He spoke again
but I couldn’t hear it, couldn’t keep my eyes open. My limbs felt heavy. My grip on the threaded
cane was loosening. I could feel the weapon slipping but there was nothing I could do to stop it. It
was cold, everything was so impossibly cold.

“Don’t go to sleep.” I said to myself, as though that would somehow change the inevitable. The
words were only in my brain, I couldn’t actually get my lips to form them. I wanted to scream in
pain but the sounds stayed deep in my stomach, churning into a sea of tight muscle. Not enough for
my head to hurt but now this too. “Don’t go to sleep.”

I was being lifted, being slung over a shoulder. Good, take me back to the gaurds, back to the city.
They would slay this stranger where he stood and I could return to my theater and my bed. What
was I thinking? Antares and the woodlanders were more than capable of creating a border. There
was no need to have traveled all this way.

He kept talking, the torrent of words were unending but I couldn’t hear them. I struggled to take in
some sight, any sight. The stranger wasn’t going back to town, he was going towards the woods. Why
would he do a thing like that?

It didn’t matter. This was fine too. Walk right into a party of hunters and the fate of my assailant
would be the same as with the city guard.

We weren’t on the path. We were cutting through farms. My head swung back and forth, neck
draped over his arm. I must’ve looked like some fainted sleeping maiden from the folk tales Fwahe was so-
Fwahe.

That was who he reminded me of. They spoke with the same harsh hisses and mispronunciations of “w” sounds. I didn’t know if she had a brother. Was she once a sister in addition to a resident of Cainhurst who had held council with the Queen?

There was too much to think about and everything was swimming and out of focus. The falling snow felt like falling ash so cold it burned my skin where it hit. If I could’ve gasped or cringed I surely would’ve done it.

The stranger shook me.

“Stop that!” He barked, loud enough to cut through it all and make himself known.

I was screaming. Somehow I’d started that again. I didn’t know how I’d started and certainly had no idea how to go about stopping. He threw me back down onto the snow. I tasted dirt and sweat and blood as he shoved his hand in my mouth to quiet me. It was a disgusting taste all wrapped up in heavily used leather gloves.

How pitiful to lack the energy to spit it out. I tried to grip the cane again but it was gone. I must have dropped it in the snow. How far back, if only my neck would turn so that I could see how far back. There had to be footprints even with the fast falling snow.

He stroked my hair. “Shh, shh Alois. Quiet down its ok.” The stranger said, “I’m going to take care of you now.”

I didn’t need to be taken care of.

I’m not Alois, I’m not your sister.

So many things I wanted to say, but I couldn’t. The agony overtook the world blotting out all color until sky, tree and snow all blurred together and the stranger vanished into the oblivion of sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
Shed Some Light on the Situation

Chapter Summary

The search for absent parties begins, pulling into the overworked and very tired medic who still complains that he’d rather be in other careers, while dutifully slaving over this one.

Chapter Notes

As always, please let me know what you think

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Callum

More and more I envied the laboring of the fishmongers. It always came back to that as I passed their frigid butcher stalls on the walk back from the theater. My bag weighed heavily on my shoulders, pulling me into a slump because of all the books I’d shoved inside it. The Patron Huntress came first but I had other clients to meet that day, and lugging around several verbose volumes was far less than ideal.

If hunters could not be counted on for business, Red Street whores could. There were probably those inside who wished to be a medic with the same abstract fantasy I did the fishermen. In day dreams the ugliness of the realities of life never shone through. There were no doubt private struggles known only to the men behind the cleavers and cutting boards the same as there were the silk curtains of bordellos. Kos knew I kept mine pinned under a poster.

I came to Red Street so often the girls had stopped trying for my business. They knew me on sight, furthermore knew that I was only here to do a job and would not be tempted with lewd offers. After knowing what I knew about these places I’d be more inclined to take up chastity vows then lie down on molding pillows crawling with bed bugs to get my earthly satisfaction. No sir, not for me. I could smell the reek of disease and decay through the clouds of perfume and scented oils that filled the entryway.

“Who is it this time?” I asked, pushing past half-dressed strangers to reach the brothel’s proprietor. She called herself Madame Lautrec in an attempt to fool people into thinking her French. She was as English as anyone else.

“Hello Callum.” Madame Lautrec sighed. She gave other customers a false accent, I got a half-hearted greeting. “It’s Ida again.”

“Of course it is.” I said.

I had half a mind to hit her over the head with my medic’s bag. I might have too, if I weren’t also the one who would’ve had to patch her up.
“I know what you said last time but-“

“But you completely ignored my advice in favor of offering your salacious customers a chance at a night with someone exotic. You do know that, just factually speaking there is nothing at all exotic about Ida. If anything the average Yharnamite is a rarer find then-“

She sighed again. “Yes I know. You’ve told me.”

“Clearly you didn’t listen.” I argued, “Or I wouldn’t be here, and as a matter of fact Ida wouldn’t be here.”

“Are you going to look at her or not?” Madame Lautrec said, “Because you’re taking up valuable time.”

“It’s three am Miss Lautrec.” I said, “Three in the morning in the middle of winter. I promise you no one is desperate enough to come crawling out of the woodwork for your attention in this weather at this hour.”

She laughed, “For all your years of study you know so little about human nature. Desperate men do desperate things, even at unseemly hours.”

This conversation had run its course. I left her to whatever work she found so pressing and traversed the rickety staircase. The stairs deposited me on the upper floor of the brothel, which was mostly a long balcony that ran along all sides. Over the railing you could look onto the floor below, down at all the activity that wasn’t happening. The walls of the upper floor were all identical doors painted red and numbered. I’d visited Ida several times, behind number four. She was regularly sick.

The room had fallen into disarray. It always did when she had taken herself out of service. The room transformed from work space to living space, with dishes strewn across the floor and warmer blankets piled on the bed. From beneath the sea of quilts I heard a cough.

“Hello.” I replied.

Ida’s voice was weak and strained, worse than it had ever been before. “Mr. Ferguson?”

She could’ve called me Callum at this point. With the relative frequency of my visits one might consider us acquaintances. There was something to be said about maintain formalities in a place like this, but I took the tone my patients set and matched it to the best of my ability.

“Yes Miss Ida.” I replied, “They sent for me again. Said you weren’t feeling well.”

“What are you talking about?” She asked forcing a smile. The punchline of her joke was ravaged by coughs, and for several seconds I hovered at the edge of her bed resisting the urge to turn away and cover my mouth. “I feel fine.”

“Trying to be funny with me again?” I asked.

Ida nodded weakly.

“I’ll go through the examination but I’m sure you already know what I’m going to say. It’s obvious from the sores you’ve sustained that your carrying a disease. Painting it over with pigment so that you can continue working is only going to make it worse and spread it to more people. You are dying Miss Ida. It is imperative that you find a new line of work.”
She laughed, the sound mangled with coughing. Infection and in all likelihood consumption as well. “Who’s going to hire me Mr. Ferguson? Looking the way I do, working the work I have, no one will give me a job. I could even go begging to the slaughter houses but they only let pale boys like you scrape up offal and innards. Is my touch somehow going to spoil the meat?”

It became an awkward situation. She was right of course, surely knowing her own situation better than I ever would. Yharnam had become a beastly place full of superstition and stigmas about a person’s appearance. Yharnamites only seemed to employ other Yharnamites or those who might pass for average denizens. No one was going to confuse Ida for a local. She had a much darker complexion. Her nose was curved and long and her eyes had a golden hue to them unlike anything I’d seen in local bloodlines. Ida had likely come from beyond Hemwick, settling here for Kos knows what reason.

“You’re not restricted to Yharnam.” I said.

She laughed at me again. “Foolish boy. If I cannot get out of bed I surely cannot travel. I do not want to be gobbled up by the first beast that sees me out on the road.”

“And I do not want to keep coming back here to administer the same treatment only to have you catch ill again in a few weeks time.” I said.

“Keep me alive. It won’t happen again, I promise.”

So many times she had spoken that same lie to me, but she needn’t say it again. I would serve the needs of my patients however foolish for as long as I was able. I removed a cotton mask and leather gloves from my bag and began to mix up a solution of mercury and dandelion root. While collecting materials for the poultice I thought of the blood gems and the discussion I’d had over them.

“Miss Ida?” I asked.

“Yes Mr. Ferguson?” She replied

“I want to try a new treatment, something I have not done very much work with before. I am not sure how you will respond, but there is a chance that this could be very beneficial. On the other hand there are plenty of risks to untested methods and-“

“No need for fancy explanation.” She said, “Go ahead and do what you think is best.”

She trusted me completely, wanted me to keep her going. I hesitated to fulfill my own curiosities. Was I no better than Minimus? He lined and labeled his human experiments keeping them in cages. It was not so different from the number on the door of a woman who could not leave her bed. I could practically hear the Brain of Mensis in my head, goading me to add crushed rocks to the mortar and pestle.

I began a brief search for them, only to remember that they’d been left at home. It seems fate had made the choice for me.

“If it returns.” I said, “But see to it that it doesn’t.”

I applied my remedy to the affected area and insisted to Madame Lautrec that no one was to disturb Ida for three days. She needed the bed rest. The brothel keeper assured me that all would be taken care of, that no one would disturb her. She paid me with a few bronze coins and some low grade tobacco. Better then nothing.
Madame Lautrec was full of piecrust promises. The kind that were easily made and easily broken. I expected as soon as Ida’s cheeks got their color back she’d be sent gentlemen after gentlemen. Laughable that gentle was more than half the word. The men on Red Street were monsters.

As I headed home I was astonished to see the truth of Madame Lautrec’s words. Despite the chill and the late hour a group of howling drunks with their arms across each other’s shoulders stumbled through the streets. From their fractured yelling and wild gestures they made their destination known to all. Kos preserve those poor girls and keep their appetites from room number four. This town was becoming one that never slept.

I however, did need sleep. Some rest and a hot meal were just what the doctor ordered. I walked past shop after closed shop before finding a tavern with the light on. I had been hoping against hope for a butcher or a green grocer to extend the measly funds a little longer. Potato porridge was beastly after the third night in a row. If the shops wouldn’t sell me anything new I would have one good meal this week at a back table.

I had to cut through the less savory parts of town to get the best value for the coppers. I stuffed the cheap bordello tobacco into the stem of my pipe and smoked along the way. I had it in my mind that the cloud of smoke made one look more menacing. After my run in with the strange man in the alley I wanted to seem as foreboding as I could manage to be. The fragrant smoke and the thought of a hot meal seemed to loosen the weight of the bag on my shoulder.

I ended up at a place that lacked any sort of outward appeal. Inside was just as bad, run down furniture, chipping paint and a barmaid with false teeth. The Black Octopus was not the kind of place the average Yharnamite went for a treat, but I’d been there before and there were two reasons to choose this tavern above all others. The place was cheap as hell and they had eel pie on the menu. I hadn’t had an eel pie since early summer. In winter they were surely using a stock of pickled eel, which wouldn’t taste half so good but after weeks of potatoes I didn’t think I would notice.

“We’re out late aren’t we?” The barmaid said as I entered.

“No one gets sick at decent hours these days.” I replied.

She laughed, the sound whistling through the wooden teeth. I couldn’t tell if it was forced for my benefit or genuine amusement but I didn’t care.

“You light haired fellows all seem to be night owls.” She muttered.

I didn’t want to converse. “Eel pie, roast corn and a loaf of brown bread.”

“It’ll be awhile.” She said, “Don’t usually keep the ovens running this late.”

Clearly she had hoped to dissuade me from dinner and chase me out of the dining room for want of waiting. I had a whole bag full of books, and no one waiting on me. She wasn’t going to enjoy my response.

I leaned back in the chair and made myself comfortable. “That’s fine. I’m in no rush.”

Templeton’s basement had contained a number of odd volumes I hadn’t yet had the chance to look through. As much as Frigga’s headaches worried me I was almost certain they were a result of her time spent with Minimus. I didn’t want to discuss it without having asked my confidant for more information but the blood gems would surely be enough to banish the migranes.

So much to be learned from the strange crystals. More still from ink and paper. I removed the
largest of the books I’d taken from Templeton. It was a volume written in the black forest with only a rough translation scrawled over top of the original text. I spoke both so it wasn’t a problem, but the hastily scrawled shorthand made the book a bit troublesome to read. I laid it out on the table and began to study.

Time went by without my notice. It wasn’t until the smells of cooking meat and roasted vegetables wafted in from the kitchen that I even looked up from the book.

“Es tut mir leid, aber- “ I began, calling for the waitress. Halfway through my sentence I realized I’d switched languages. “Excuse me but-“

“It’s not done yet!” She barked at me.

“I’m out of water.” I said.

She rolled her eyes and re-filled my glass. “You a foreigner?”

“No.” I said, “I just didn’t limit my education to one language.”

“Are you with the asshole who just skipped out on his tab?” She snarled.

“What?” I asked.

She set the pitcher of water down so suddenly and with such force I had to pull the book back to avoid splashed water marring the ink. “Long haired fellow, about your shade and spoke like a lord. You know him?”

I shook my head.

She didn’t seem convinced. I expected I would be overcharged for my meal.

When it was finished she flung the food down on the table. Crumbs from the piecrust rained onto the pages of my borrowed book. I brushed them aside and began to eat.

“Take the trash your friend left behind with you when you leave, yeah?” The bar maid said.

“I told you, I’ve no idea who you’re talking about.” I muttered.

As much as I wasn’t paying attention to her she also was not paying attention to me. I was too busy filling my stomach and the barmaid wasn’t going to be convinced of the truth in my words. The pie was flavorful and hearty. Root vegetables and chunks of meat swam in a brown onion gravy encased in flakey layers of crust. The corn and bread had both gone a bit cold, she’d cooked them ahead of time and hadn’t bothered with heating them over the stove before serving. I hardly noticed, tearing off chunks from the dark loaf and letting them soak through with gravy.

I ate everything, down to the last kernel of corn. I repacked my books and made my way to the door but the barmaid refused to let me leave. She insisted I go up to some strangers room and paw through their belongings as though we were old chums. I was too tired to argue with her. There was the chance it would be a lucrative endeavor. Maybe he left behind tobacco.

He hadn’t left behind tobacco.

His room looked like the scene of a grisly murder except without the blood and the body. The mattress had scratches in it, molding filling coming out of the tears. Blankets were shredded, furniture cracked.
“What in Kos’ name..” I muttered.

She sighed, “Well no one’s that good an actor. With a face like that I reckon you were telling the truth and have no relation to that man.”

“It looks like he…transformed.” I said, “Have you contacted the authorities? The hunters association?”

“They gonna compensate me?” She asked.

I didn’t have anything else to say. Of course I had to select a tavern full of trouble. I wanted nothing more to do with it. I’d had a long enough day and there was a home and a bed where things made sense to get too. I slid past the scowling barmaid and hurried home. I stuck to the main roads, the longer path but I was done taking risks.

Sometimes I found myself talking to the bottled brain when I didn’t mean too. I approached the boarding house and braced myself for my battle with its door. Any time it became the least bit moist outside the wood swelled and docked itself in the doorframe. I twisted my hand raw on the door knob and rammed my shoulder into the unyielding board.

I was just starting to resign myself to sleeping in the snow when the beast of a barrier was finally tamed. The wood groaned and the hinges squeaked but I was able to bully it open just enough to slip past, pulling Templeton’s books along behind me. The gap wasn’t wide enough for it to come through at my side.

“I’m home.” I announced to the brain.

It never spoke to me until I took it out of the alcove. With a thing of such obscure anatomy I wasn’t all too sure if it had any ears to hear with. The ones it did possess must not have worked very well. I set my bag down on the table. It wobbled dangerously.

The flimsy thing best not collapse. Tonight was the wrong night. I dug around in my pockets and dumped their contents out as well. Two copper coins were all that was left from Madame Laurtrec’s compensation. I could buy potatoes without mold. I ran through the list of tasks waiting to be completed, things that were already tomorrows burdens. I was already exhausted from them.

I slid my shoes off and, much as I wanted to lay down on the bed and let myself rest my clothes smelled like whore houses and cheap taverns. To lay down with them would be to allow the scent to linger and be forced to endure memories of those places every night until it faded. I inspected my store of clean clothes, once more down to the last I owned. I hated doing laundry in the winter time. Things took days to dry, weeks even and could still be damp after that.

It was too cold to worry about washing my old shirt and pants, they went on the pile with the others. In summertime I didn’t wear a stitch to sleep, but now I crawled into bed as a caterpillar making its chrysalis, insulating myself in layers of wool blankets.

I had to settle for tobacco breakfast. Late sunset vendors were heating up carts of hot coffee but I passed them all by, heading directly for the theater. I had to get there before sundown and inform Frigga of the Black Octopus incident. Hopefully it was cult activity or lewd desires of the stranger gone astray. There hadn’t been a beast loose in Yharnam for many months, and with the tension currently weighing on Frigga’s shoulders it couldn’t possibly come at a worse time. Clean streets were one of her greatest claims to fame.

All along the walk I could hear late night gossip from the denizens. They gathered around
newsstands and street lamps pouring over the latest scandals. Some of them smoked, others burnt their fingers on foil wrapped baked potatoes or roast chestnuts.

“She’s the murder I tell you. If they’re out lookin’ for the Ripper it’s the Queen’s Whore they want.” An elderly man struggling to split the shell of a peanut insisted to his younger cohorts.

“You shouldn’t say things like that Grandpa.” A young woman with a ribbon in her hair replied. “Without the hunters protection this place would be crawling with beasts.”

“Bah.” The old one spat, flinging his peanut shell into the street, “Ridiculous having soft-hearted women in charge of beast-killing.

“Gramps these women ‘ave made the streets cleaner n’ ever.” The old man’s other charge said. He was on his knees picking peanut shells out of the snow while the old man carelessly cast them down. “I ‘ighly doubt she would ‘ave anythin’ to do with this.”

As stimulating as their debate was I didn’t need to wait around in the icy wind to see how it turned out. Trying to change the stagnant opinions of the previous generation was an exercise in futility. It was best I did hear it though, and at least be able to give Frigga a heads up. People were still concerned, still talking. I was sure she already suspected but knowledge however grim was better had then hid.

I expected the Valkyeries to have slept in once more. They weren’t always quick to stir before moonrise but as I approached the theater I saw lights in the windows. There were footprints criss-crossing the walkway and front lawn. Dozens of them.

It took no time for the door to be answered. Fwahe was behind the theater door, wide-eyed. The instant those eyes alighted on me they narrowed.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“She’s missing.” Fwhae said, “Frigga is missing.”

“What?” I asked.


I tried to shuffle past her, out of the cold and into the theater but she wasn’t paying attention. Fwahe would not stand aside so I stood one fit in the theater and one in the snow.

“Yes I heard what you said, but what do you mean by missing?”

“She went out and did not come back. She was supposed to come back. She is gone. They will not let me go look for her.”

Fwahe kept all of her sentences short and direct firing them off like military responses. There was a nervous clip to her voice and a twitch in her hands as she kept the door open.

“Let me come inside.” I said.

She gave a nervous swallow and a weak nod before stepping aside. We went through the lobby and into the theater, which looked at once freshly cleaned and torn to shreds. The balconies echoed with footsteps as Fwahe’s companions scrambled to and fro trying to sort out their patrons whereabouts. Judging by their noise level and frenzied actions it was safe to assume she was nowhere on premises.
“He did it somehow!” Fwahe shouted, turning her anger on Patience.

The Executioner assigned to guard her took a cautious step back. By now he appeared used to the delicate dance that one had to adopt if they were the object of Fwahe’s anger. One step forward, two steps back, pivot and pray she wouldn’t lose her temper. I’d been there on many occasions. Bedrest and healing were concepts I had to fight with her to adopt.

“Here.” I said, taking the pipe from my lips and turning it towards her lips. “Have a few puffs.” She regarded it with raised eyebrows for a few moments before accepting it. She sucked on the stem for a few seconds before breathing a cloud of smoke in Patience’s general direction. After a few more puffs she passed it back to me. I wiped her drool off with the cuff of my shirt.

“When did you realize she was gone?” I asked.

“Morning.” Fwahe replied, “She didn’t come back from the woods. She was supposed to meet with Gaines..or Antares…or someone.”

“Did you send for them?” I asked.

She shook her head.

I breathed a sigh of relief, “Then she’s likely fine. Fwahe, it probably just took longer then she’d bargained to set up the barrier. Frankly she was supposed to be resting in bed to begin with so its no wonder she couldn’t lend her full strength. She must’ve just worn herself out and spent the night with the Woodlanders.”

She relaxed slightly, which might have been the advice but was more than likely the tobacco. I got her to call the others together and organize a few search parties. Sterling seemed to be stepping up in her absence, ensuring that rations were consumed and everyone was sure on where to go and what to do. Frigga certainly had made a proper hunter out of him since the days of Minimus’ bloody tournament. I told the Valkyeries what I’d seen at the Black Octopus but decided to wait until we’d found Frigga before talking about the people in the street. In Sterling’s haste to construct groups I was counted amongst the volunteers and stuck in with Fwahe and Patience.

Back into the cold, and back to envying the fishmongers. Oh to have a job where I could simply do the same thing over and over with no variation.

“When Frigga tells me it was you I’m going to turn this snow red.” Fwahe growled at Patience.

His face was like stone, not reacting at all. Patience’s gaze reminded me of Fwahe’s from just moments before, the kind of stare that went looking past the person it landed on. They’d both been far away, solving other problems in other places.

“Did you hear what I said?” she growled at him.

He gave her an empty grin and tried to look attentive. She threw up her hands and plowed forward all the faster. Fwahe’s stride was extremely long, uncharacteristic of any human’s. She moved more with the gait of a four legged thing then a bipedal creature. Patience was much shorter and had to take several steps for every one of hers, but he made them quickly. I was fast falling behind unaccustomed to the pace of a hunter.

I should’ve thought to check the barn for the horse, Swift. I was not a great rider but I had learned a thing or two of horsemanship. Being born a Prestwick required knowledge of riding and other useless pursuits of the upper classes. My brothers and sisters had excelled with the strong-willed
creatures where I was a cautious youth and did not meld well with my mounts. It should have gone unnoticed with twelve elder siblings and twelve long shadows to hide in but Lord and Lady Prestwick wanted thirteen talented heirs.

It struck me that I’d always thought of them that way, as Lord and Lady instead of mother and father. A sense of subservience bred into one at birth, these were the feelings of a peasant, not a prince. It made my training all the more rigorous. I’d endured training with sword and shield and benefited nothing from it. I would never grow up a warrior.

Turning away from them was the first and last bold thing they’d seen me do. Lord and Lady Prestwick were back to their perfect dozen and I didn’t have to be forced into a mold I didn’t fit. Strange to be thinking of them, and past places while the present was so demanding. The ground was covered in footprints from the day before, and the further we strode from the theater the more convoluted they became. An experienced tracker might have been able to sort them out through the others as we walked out of the town, but much like riding tracking had not been my area of expertise. It became easier to tell one person’s trail form another when we drew near the wall around Yharnam. There were far fewer trails, all of them seemed to be heading out as opposed to coming in. Fwahe was of a mind to plow right ahead and continued beneath the arch.

“Wait.” I said.

She stopped dead in her tracks, turning towards me and tapping her foot. Fwahe flipped her hair and drummed her fingers on the hilt of her sword as I conversed with the guards.

“Did anyone go out last night?” I asked the nearest one.

Inquiring turned out to be a waste of time as the guards rotated shifts. From a log he was able to tell me that ten people had left the city last night but was unable to provide further details. I suppose it would be madness to detail the appearance of everyone on entrance and exit but I regretted the substandard log keeping.

“Press on.” I said.

She didn’t need to be told twice.

The countryside surrounding Yharnam was like great sheets of untouched paper. They were laid one against another, yard after yard ready for the printing.

“She was here.” Fwahe said.

It should’ve been voice louder but the wind caught her words and carried them away. I had to call out twice for a repetition before I was certain I’d heard her correctly. Fwahe was standing by a depression in the snow, lying next to it was one of the hunter’s trick weapons. The cane and its dragon’s head handle stood out in the white snow.

“That’s hers?” I asked.

Fwahe nodded.

It was a distinctive weapon, she wouldn’t have mistaken it for another. Her fingers were tight on the hilt of her sword, ready to pry it loose and coat its blade with blood. She was leveling her gaze at the Executioner. He was studying the snow instead of paying attention.

I took a half-step between them, when all of a sudden Patience’s head shot up. He motioned us closer. Fwahe didn’t relax at all but hurried across the snow. The Executioner knelt down and
lightly brushed at the snow with his fingertips. He’d seen the pointed end of a feather poking out of
the snow and brushed away until the whole thing could be seen.

“A crow?” I asked.

Fwahe snatched it, crushing the feather in her fist. “They must’ve told the truth.” She said.

Patience nodded.

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“It’s the Bloody Crow.” Fwahe said, “The Bloody Crow of Cainhurst.”

Patience nodded, then turned back to scanning the ground for more feathers.

“That’s just some kid’s story.” I said.

“Yes and a very stupid one.” Fwahe said, “but Antares had spoken of some kind of killer in the
woods who’d taken that name. They were talking about the Bloody Crow last communion.”

That did change things a little. We all followed Patience’s lead. Leaning so close to the snow I
noticed the faintest scuffs and impressions of a boot but they were quickly lost to the sea of white
before us. Snow just kept piling on top of them and hiding the tracks. Both hunters soon lost the tail
and the one feather was all we could find.

“It’s hardly proof.” I said, “Any numbers of things might have-”

“No.” Fwahe said. “It’s got to be him.”

Patience once more nodded agreeing with the Vileblood. I scratched my head, fingers like ice on
my scalp. I would’ve brought this kind of thing to Frigga but with her absent there was no one to
take it too. She had a rotating council rather than a definitive chain of command.

I resisted the urge to ask what to do next. I looked at Patience who was looking at Fwahe. She was
clutching the cane, running her thumb over the dragon’s head, back and forth. It was no genie’s
lamp, and granted no wishes despite her persistence. The Vileblood didn’t pause for long, but was
soon glancing towards the woods.

“The bastard must be in there.” She spat.

With her mind now made up she turned for the woods, striding faster than ever.

“Fwahe don’t!” I shouted, “We’ve no idea what’s in there. The others need to know what’s
happened, we have to go back and regroup.”

“No.” Fwahe growled, “They’d only slow me down.”

“What if you get killed?” I asked, “You’ll be no help to her dead. You don’t know anything about
this Bloody Crow. If he was able to abduct Frigga then he won’t be any easy thing to fight. You’ve
seen her with a cane, everyone’s seen what she can do. Remember the tournament Fwahe, she was
one leg down and still a formidable opponent.”

She stopped dead again and slowly turned away from the Forbidden Woods. “She was sick. She
shouldn’t have gone out when she was sick.” Finally, something we could agree on.

“She’s never been good at resting.” I said, “Again I cite the tournament for example. She wouldn’t
stop fighting even with a kirkhammer-smashed leg. If she’s been taken somewhere you can bet she’ll be making every effort to escape.”

Fwahe nodded.

“And,” I continued, “There’s no blood on the snow. She left here alone. She’d want us to do the same. Let’s go back and regroup.”

“No.” Fwahe said, “She was meeting people, woodlanders. They might’ve seen her or might have…I don’t know they might’ve met their ends with the Crow.”

I hadn’t wanted to go into the woods before I knew there was a murder somewhere inside of them. I certainly wasn’t going to go into them now. Grief-stricken Fwahe was hard to reason with. She marched off with the cane as I strung together arguments after her. Patience seemed unsure of the woods himself but he dutifully followed his charge. We left our tracks behind in the snow and I couldn’t help but wonder why ten people had gone into the woods last night but not a one had returned.

The sun had been setting while we searched the countryside but the second we were swallowed by the forest the light seemed to vanish. It was like someone had pulled a curtain down over the world.

“Fwahe I can’t see my own hand in front of my face.” I said, “This is senseless. We have to go back.”

She didn’t have to answer. Patience was kind enough to open the glass door of a hand lantern and strike a match to light the candle inside. The meager little thing cast a tiny halo of yellow light in the otherwise black woods. He passed me its handle, patting my curled fingers as they clutched it. Was that supposed to reassure me or meant as an insult?

By the time I’d raised the lantern high enough to illuminate his face, he’d turned away. I thought to ask Fwahe for the cane but paused before inquiring. I had to weigh the cost of asking for her absent lover’s weapon against encountering a beast unarmed. Somehow the latter seemed safer. A Vileblood with a grudge was no doubt a dangerous creature. I’d carry the lantern.

This wasn’t my first time coming through the Forbidden Woods but when I did make the trip I preferred to go with a much larger party and navigate the twists and turns during the day. I’d witnessed firsthand what a bite from a snake in these woods could do. It was a horrific burning venom that spoiled the skin and thickened the blood. Those who’d been struck with the venomous bites said that they burned like acid.

Even if we didn’t encounter any snakes there were plenty of other nasty things that would want to sink their teeth into an unprotected human like me. Without the high walls of Yharnam and the protection of a party of hunters I was easy prey. Fwahe was of a single mind, and even if a cleric beast crawled out of the earth in front of her I fully believed she would carry on past it and leave us for carrion. Patience too, was not likely to abandon his task and would follow Fwahe wherever she roamed. That left me to look out for myself. Should’ve been a fish monger. Hell, I might’ve even been happy with a career as a mortician. Forget fish guts I could put together funerals for idiots like me who followed overzealous hunters into places expressly marked forbidden. These woods had been named for a

Forbidden they might be, but Fwahe trudged into the forest as if it were her own living room. The path, both covered in snow and obscured by the dark shadows of tree branches was too convoluted for me to traverse. Despite having the lantern I defected to lead the party, following behind
Patience and treading in his or Fwahe's footprints.

"This is crazy." I muttered.

Neither of them reacted.

"This is crazy!" I shouted.

"Shh!" Fwahe hissed.

"Fwahe there's no way we're going to be able to see shit in these woods." I said, "That's a fact. This is stupid, we've got to turn back."

"Then turn. You'll slow me down." She said.

Heading back to Yharnam on my own was not beyond the skills of my navigation but I feared the rash actions that would be taken without me to oppose them. The Executioner surely would not speak against Fwahe and though he had his badge and his robes I didn't trust him to stop her in this state. I truly believe she was liable to leap upon the first traveler we found be they guilty or innocent and demand retribution for Frigga's abduction. I couldn't willingly allow that to happen.

"We need a bigger party." I said, "Look at these woods. Do you really believe you can comb them on your own?"

"I will turn over every last rock and-"

"And it will take you years. Frigga might not have that long. Why don't you stop being selfish and think about what she needs?"

Fwahe snatched me by the collar, bringing me just inches from her face. In the lantern light she did truly look a fiend, candle flame turning her golden eye molten and filling it with hellfire. It sparkled off her spiked teeth when she spoke.

"Frigga needs me." She growled, "She needs me right now and if you keep me from her, so help me I will rend you in two Callum."

"Then listen to me!" I growled. "Put me down. Stop. Think. I am not your enemy."

Her grip loosened, and my feet touched down onto the snowy forest floor once again. She sighed and scraped nails through her hair, scratching at the letter "V" marking burnt onto the back of her neck.

"I can't just leave her." She mumbled.

"We're coming right back." I said, "Come on, we'll just go get more pairs of eyes."

After a few more minutes of coddling she finally relented, nodding her head and turning away from the dark abyss of tree trunks. She kept turning back to look behind her, still unsure if this was the right path to take. I was certain and tried to put my hand around her shoulder and reeassure her. Fwahe shied away before I could, stumbling forward with far less resolve and conviction then when she had marched ahead. It seemed to take much longer to get out to the woods then it had to arrive at its entrance.

They'd left Templeton behind at the theater, no one keen on the idea of having her run around without an Executioner, I suppose. Denizens and hunters alike really did not understand people like
her. I was certain that even without supervision it would be beyond her constitution to attack anyone or anything. She was a soft thing, the same way I had been when stood against my Prestwick siblings. I was lucky, I'd been able to disown my family but Templeton was stuck with her vile condition. That was not something that could be cast away in the same sense a last name could.

"Did you find anything?" Templeton asked.

I stepped aside in answer and her jaw dropped at the cane clutched in Fwahe's hands.

"What happened?" she asked.

"We found it out by the path to the Forbidden Woods." I explained.

"It's the Bloody Crow." Fwahe said, "He's stolen her."

"T..the crow?" Templeton asked, "Fwahe that was just- oh do you mean the person Antares talked about?"

Fwahe nodded.

"We need to search the woods." I said, "Call everyone together and make a proper search."

She nodded briskly. "You can take the horses. Cato, Rook and Mouse are searching the town if you can find them then-"

Fwahe didn't let her finish. She grabbed a fistful of Patience's cloak and dragged him along behind her towards the barn. The Vileblood wouldn't tolerate hesitation on anyone's part and if she was forced to deal with the imposed handicap he'd best long to work at her pace. I was not drafted into her hasty search party however and was left behind with Templeton.

We stood in mutual silence for a long while as she struggled to come to terms with the situation. Occasionally she'd mutter some small exasperated phrase, unable to believe the situation. It did seem a bit preposterous, in a remote kind of way. In recent years Frigga had become such a pillar for the city to rest on, to think that one person had been able to snatch our patron away was madness itself.

"We'll find her." I said.

"Of course." Templeton replied.

Exchanging lies didn't make either of us feel any better. We heard the thundering cacophany of horses' hooves as Fwahe and Patience sped away from the theater. The Vileblood had taken her lover's mare, the silver one called Swift. Patience had chosen the black stallion that once belonged to Abbot Minimus. It seemed a poor selection where speed was concerned, too large and bulky to navigate the narrow city streets but as I watched the both of them speed away there was a deftness and grace to both rider's motions.

It didn't take as long as I expected to gather most of the hunters together. Anatares was not among those assembled, and there was a lack of woodlanders in general. I could only assume that the woodland representatives were mostly collected somewhere in the Forbidden Woods still waiting for their patron to come assist them in sealing the border. Either that or they'd become victims of the Bloody Crow too.

"She spouts as much nonsense as Antares had." Executioner Sussex complained, "Why should we
trust the word of a Vileblood and go charging into the woods?"

Fwahe had been trying to convince the stubborn church hunters of the urgency of her cause and she seemed mere seconds from tearing into their heads. I made an attempt to intercede.

"Well first of all, your patron is missing. That should be paramount concern. Additionally none of the woodlanders tasked with closing the border have returned. I saw the spot where Frigga's cane was recovered myself, as did your own representative. Do you not trust the eyes of Executioner Patience, who you yourselves appointed to the task of watching over Fwahe?"

Sussex clicked his tounge derisively at me, "What right has a mere denizen to speak amongst hunters?"

"Get off your high horse, Executioner." Cato spat, "This isn't communion. Frigga's missing, we'll take all the help we can get. He's a medic, we might very well need him."

Cato's sentiment was quickly agreed with.

"Excuse me. Hey listen up! Guys could we-" A small powder keg hunter began to speak, trying to assert his voice above all of the others. "I have a plan...excuse me? Could I just-"

At every turn there was more argument and hunters speaking over their comrades. The theater echoed with confusion and I began to fear headache, things had grown so loud.

"Oi!" Shouted one of the infamous Lupei brothers. This was the less fancy of the two, Aditya who decided to shout louder then all the assembled, "Shut your gobs! We've got one with a plan over here!"

Realizing the time for yelling was upon him Viorel took up the cause too. "Everyone shut the fuck up! Yeah you too Moira Anne, wag your tounge one more time and I'll cut it out for a scarf, yeah?"

The stuffy sister gave a gasp and Patience crammed his sleeve into his mouth to stifle laughter but the Lupei Brother's shouts had done their job. The whole room fell silent. The Powder Keg introduced himself as Pen, adjusted his glasses and spread a map of the forbidden woods out across the floor. He began to outline a plan to circle the entire wood and then slowly begin to work our way in. Everyone would remain in contact and there would be messengers stationed every few parties, either fast runners or riders with horses who could easily call for help or spread fresh information as soon as anyone found anything.

It was as fine a plan as any we were liable to have and it was set into motion near immediately. Executioner Alfred led the division of parties, surrounding Fwahe, Cato and Patience's group with church hunters and Executioners. I didn't know most of the names he assigned but they seemed to be an uncooperative lot to put in a party. To Fwahe's left would be a collective of junior Executioners led by the only fully fledged member of their lot, Executioner Kelfazin. On her right was a party of church novices headed by a Brother Bartholomew who seemed rather irritated to have been stirred to action so early. He looked as though he'd rather return to sleep then search the woods, such was the look on many faces.

Once organized they marched for the woods heading off in one huge wave, like ants fleeing their hill. I hadn't been assigned anywhere, and despite her feverish insistence Templeton had been overlooked too. They'd tried to give Fwahe the same treatment but her participation was beyond negotiation. The theater had felt strange and empty without Frigga in it, but after being filled with so many people, then emptied so quickly the lonesomeness had grown twofold.
Redact my application to become a mortician. I hated lonesome empty places like this one, and a funeral parlor was just one big housing of all the loneliest things in the world. Corpses had to be one of the most pathetic objects I'd come across, just ghost, just shadows of what they were supposed to be. I'd had to hold many in my time, it was the grim reality of my profession. Not everyone could be saved, and sometimes despite every knowledge and remedy they slipped away. As humans we clung to them, desperate to restore that which had long departed.

Funerals were never things for the benefit of the dead, for whoever they ended up they weren't going to benefit from coffins and headstones and flowers. They were just placeholders, fillers so that some semblance of normalcy could return to the loved ones of the departed. We always had to find a ritual, a routine so that we could proceed unhindered. Hunters did it all the time, to cope with the brutality of their jobs. Church hunters preyed over the beaten bodies of the creatures they killed. When a hunter went mad there were the mysterious hunters of hunters called in to perform their duty so the rest of us might put it out of our minds.

The rest of them, rather. though wrapped closely in their affairs, Executioner Sussex had been correct. I was not a hunter and could only understand but so much of what they endured.

Hunters though, were not medics. They could benefit from knowledge of my position as well.

Now wasn't the time to pour over strange thoughts. I had taken care of those in grief and hard times before. When I'd become a medic I vowed to deliver the news of death myself, each and every time. I'd been punched more than once, but most of the time it was tears. Templeton was neither the punching nor crying sort, at least not now. Granted, we did not know whether Frigga was currently amongst the living or the dead so that may have skewed the results.

She was the type to just go numb. The small scholar stared at the window, watching the snow fall. It was usually a calming sight but now I could feel the anxious lurch in the hearts of the search parties, those genuinely concerned with uncovering their Patron's whereabouts. The snow would cover tracks, obscuring the ghost of what the Bloody Crow would have left behind and making everything all the harder to find.

I made her a cup of tea, and brewed coffee for myself. I wasn't sure if she could make any sense of the taste but there was a comfort to curling one's fingers around a warm cup.

"Here." I said, "Drink up."

She accepted the cup of tea with a nod and brought it to her lips. I'd thought it was too hot to drink comfortably but she gulped it down without so much as a twinge of pain. When I tried to do the same I cringed the hot black sludge inside my mug. It was too hot.

"It was nice of you to make tea." Templeton said, "I think it's good, but it's gotten harder to taste things since the...the change."

I nodded, "I think that's pretty normal."

She shrugged, "I don't think any part of our lives, you or me, or Frigga or anyone's really are normal anymore. You get caught up with hunters and any chance at normal just disappears."

I blew on the coffee and took a sip, swallowing instead of speaking. There was no way for me to respond to her statement properly. It was a sad truth I was unwilling to acknowledge. I resolved to hang around the theater for as long as possible. If I were lucky they would find Frigga before long and she would be just fine, not require any attending whatsoever. I couldn't stay here forever, surely someone else would need a medic before long, and even if Madame Lautrec did not call on
me I wanted to make sure Ida was doing okay. If her condition worsened I was going to try the blood gems. Consumption be damned it would not claim another patient from me, just because I was hesitant to try out something new.

"Well, to living without normalcy then." I said extending my cup to hers.

Templeton gave me a small smile and tapped her cup to mine. She took another big sip, I a modest one. Stilness overtook the room. I watched dust mites falling through shafts of candle light.

"We should straighten up." Templeton said after we'd sat for a little while. "Doing nothing is driving me crazy."

"Alright." I said.

I didn't really want to push furniture around or clean floors but Templeton was probably right. Doing nothing would drive us crazy. It was a long time before we had any word of anything. We were pushing in chairs around tables when a ringing echoed through the theater. It wasn't the same somber clang as some of the hunters bells. Had they installed a doorbell?

"The messengers!" Templeton exclaimed before racing off to the bathroom.

Confused I followed after her. Practically growing out of one of the bathroom sinks was a collection of shriveled skeltal creatures that the hunters had dubbed "messengers". They were strange little beings who liked to decorate themselves with scraps of fabric or carry around little trinkets, but much like tree roots they had strange branching connections to others of their kind and were able to communicate and pass correspondence between each other at rapid speeds.

Templeton had rigged up a little cord attached to a golden bell that the messengers could ring if they had something urgent to communicate. One of them extended an envelope twoards the scholar.

"What does it say?" I asked.

"I haven't opened it yet." She said, then slid a fingernail under the wax seal and pried it up. I didn't really understand how this aspect worked, how a physical object could be transferred from one messenger to another. It was one of those things I'd planned to look into, if I ever had the time.

When the envelope was finally freed she adjusted her glasses and began to scan the scrap of parchment.

"It seems they've found Antares and the other woodlanders, but not Frigga. They were afraid the snowfall was going to be heavy, they waited as long as they could for Frigga to show up but when it seemed she wasn't going too they had to retreat to shelters in the woods and wait out the storm."

"Did it snow that heavily last night?" I asked.

The scholar shrugged, "I didn't think so, but things are kind of different in the woods."

I nodded.

"S-she...she must not..." Templeton stammered.

I feared that tears might be upon her. I didn't want to deal with tears, not now. I wasn't usually one to beseech Kos for favors but if I could be throw a bone and not have to take care of two grieving Vilebloods in one day I'd be a grateful sinner.
"Are they going to keep looking?" I asked.

She passed me the note and I looked over it myself. The search would continue, still plenty of woods left. The portion they'd covered was the outermost area, places she was likely to have run away too herself if she'd managed to escape her attacker. The things that remained were deeper in the woods, harder to reach and in all likelihood harder to escape from. It suggested Frigga as a prisoner more so then it lended to optimistic expectations.

Templeton sat down on the tile floor of the bathroom and curled her knees up to her chin.

"I should be out looking for her." Templeton said.

I sighed, "They've got hundreds of eyes out there- people who know the woods."

"I should be out there." Templeton repeated, "They might miss something. Fwahe never reads anything wh-what if they go past a sign and its...and then..."

Kos had forsaken me, her voice tumbled into tears and she was overwrought with shaking cries that echoed through the small space. I put an arm around her, the same way I'd tried to comfort Fwahe earlier. She didn't push me away, just seemed to curl in on herself a little more tightly then before. She was shaking and continued in this manner for a good while.

I stayed until the others started to come back. When we first saw them returning we were filled with high spirits but I noticed the slump in Cato's shoulders and the way Mouse's head was hung low. This was not the gait of a champion, nor anyone with good news. Templeton tried to ignore this obvious fact and opened the door for them, eyes glowing with hope.

"It's too cold." Mouse muttered. "We were out...and it was just too cold. Cato started coughing."

"Did not." Cato growled, then collapsed into a series of coughs to the contrary. "I'm fine..."

"I was cold." Rook offered, "We were all cold. There's a perimeter...with soup...and...I...but I was just tired."

"I'm just getting a nap." Cato said, "A quick rest then we're back out there."

The three of them nodded in unison and began to crowd around the stove in the kitchen. Templeton launched into activity trying to supply them to the best of her ability. She was quick to brew coffee and toast bread while simultaneously working to prepare a more hearty meal. The three of them were all asleep at the counter before she was finished, crusts of toast and handles of mugs clutched in their hands as they slumbered.

"I...I really should be going." I said.

"Please don't leave yet." Templeton pleaded. I'm not...please."

"The others can take care of you." I said, "I've got to go back to the clinic there's other matters to attend too." She stiffened her spine and gave me a resolute nod, masking the wiping away of tears with the adjustment of glasses. Templeton was someone who was weak and strong all at once, the most confusing Vileblood I'd ever seen.

"I'll come back tomorrow." I said, "In case anything changes, and if you need me you can send for me. I promise Lady Frigga is a top priority, I just can't afford to neglect my other duties to wait around for-"
"It's okay." Templeton cut me off, "I understand."

They always understood, the people who were left behind. When I was a little boy surrounded by Prestwick siblings I always understood when my brothers and sisters were sent away without me. There were outliers in this world, and we became accustomed to things. I tried not to grow overly attached to people for this exact reason, but now it was happening again, despite my best intentions. I was far too involved with the Valkyeries.

"She'll be okay." I said.

"She'll be okay." Templeton agreed.

The lies we told eachother didn't sit as comfortably now as they had done before.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
The Kingdom Will Fall for a Song

Chapter Summary

Patience has to go looking for Frigga, alone in the woods with a Vileblood. That can't possibly go right...can it?

Chapter Notes

As always, please let me know what you think!! I value your feedback very highly!

The Forbidden Woods was the farthest from Yharnam I’d ever been. The Executioners were supposed to be a group of rangers but they kept the juniors in the city, and of course after earning my badge I was still tethered to the same old cobblestones. I’d had trouble keeping pace with Fwahe as she guided Frigga’s horse through the city. I liked the silver mare. I still remembered Swift from Frigga’s first visit and I’d seen her ride the same horse right into the middle of communion and declare herself Patron Huntress. She’d also kissed a Vileblood in full view of every Executioner and church hunter in England- that had been bold. It had launched our mentors into a series of lectures on the dangers of such relationships, yet no one put a stop to it.

My father would’ve said they’d been forged of strong stuff. He’d liked to speak in metalworking metaphors, which had gone mostly over my head before I’d started to tinker with things on my own. After that I understood, and had he said it about Frigga and Fwahe I would’ve agreed. Metal, heated and shaped according to a grand design, undergoing intense pressure to become what it was meant to be, those were the kinds of things he’d seen in his work and in people. As I steered my horse through the brambles I pondered what metal he would’ve likened me too. Common as copper no doubt, plenty of vow-takers to be had.

He’d stopped visiting. My mother told me he had a second family out where he was working, making gunpowder. I didn’t really believe her, he wasn’t that kind of man, but I know he had wanted more children. I wasn’t enough for either of them.

I didn’t seem to be enough for Fwahe either. Cato had been forced to throw in the towel when his coughing fits overcame him. As frantic as the Vileblood was to find the Patron Huntress she had sense enough to know when enough was enough. Cato’d nobly protested the whole affair, but when push came to shove he was quick to reverse direction and seek warmth. A lot of search parties had started to do that. The distance between groups widened as we pushed deeper into the forest. On the outer ring was safety, a hot bowl of soup and a place to rest but Fwahe wouldn’t be diverted by comfort, and I had no voice to protest.

I was wrapped up in my Executioner’s cloak. It wasn’t anything more than roughspun wool, cheap as could be but it kept out the cold as fine as anything. I had it awkwardly wrapped about my person, like the togas on the statues of heroes from another time.

Fwahe’s horse was a half-pace ahead of mine. Despite the stallion’s intimidating size it yielded
easily to the nimble mare. When she stopped, he stopped. Swift’s ears stood straight up and she took a step back, nearly colliding with my horse.

Fwahe wasn’t the type to roughly handle an animal and push on despite warning. She considered the mare’s warning and began to look around the forest.

“Something’s wrong.” Fwahe said as Swift continued to back away.

My stallion snorted. I could see the air come out of his nostril’s.

“Shh.” Fwahe hissed. I didn’t know if it was directed more at me or the horse. “Keep Big Boy quiet, will you?”

Me. Of course it was directed at me. Along with being blamed for poisoning tea that hadn’t touched lips and being the one who’d abducted Frigga despite never leaving the theater, this two was just another slight against the Vileblood. Just one more phase of the master plan. She was ridiculous.

At least now I knew the stallion’s name. I patted Big Boy on the neck and held my lantern out for a better look into the undergrowth. I didn’t see anything.

Fwahe delicately dismounted, keeping Swift’s reigns in her hands. She held her lantern down, close to the ground. The halo of light on the snow exposed a few bootprints. I hadn’t noticed them before but now it seemed impossible to have passed them by. The prints were heavily imprinted, thrust deep into the layers of snow. They’d stayed visible despite the flurries, still distinct in shape. A pointed boot, you could clearly make out the tip of it.

The Vileblood grinned, candlelight making nightmares of her teeth. Her smile was enough to scare the socks of school children.

“We’ve got him now.” She said, hurrying to get back on Swift.

Our time in the woods must have changed things if I were no longer the one accused. I should be grateful about it, Fwahe could easily tear me apart in these woods and none would be the wiser. However, common sense did not win the day for me. Instead I felt I was owed and apology and was irritated at the lack of one.

Swift still did not want to advance. She was the one snorting now. My stallion picked up on her mood and began to fidget himself.

“Come on girl.” Fwahe said. “Forward.”

She gave another stubborn snort then took a step forward. Fwahe urged her continue but Swift refused to take anything more than a few careful steps.

“Frigga’s out there, Swift. Come on, we’ve got to find her.” Fwahe insisted.

Their battle droned on, the Vileblood straining to keep her words calm and even while her frustration grew. She was wrapped up in conversing with the animal, but I lost interest quickly. There was a strange, faint sound up ahead. It was like the accidental scraping of metal fork over metal plate, a synthetic man-made sound. This wasn’t what I’d expected to hear.

Big Boy was not so resistant as Swift, and when I tapped my heels to his sides he strode forward easily. The stallion’s large hooves made impressions in the snow just as deep as the pointed footprints. That was a head scratcher. Even if the alleged Bloody Crow was carrying Frigga down this
path I didn’t think their combined weight would equal a stallion’s.

“See the big dumb one is going. You can go too. See it’s safe.” Fwahe continued, babbling to her horse.

I held my finger to my lips, but she didn’t see me. Her words were covering the accidental scraping sound. A sword in a scabbard? Some variety of broken carriage wheel? I didn’t know what it could be. Swift must have decided that if the path ahead was safe enough for Big Boy it was safe enough for her too, and began to follow after me.

It struck me that this was the first time I’d ever been in charge of leading a party. I had no idea what I was doing. They didn’t let vow-taker’s take the lead. If something went wrong I wouldn’t be able to warn Fwahe in time. It would be better to draw back, but the sound had stirred my curiosity and I just had to know.

The Forbidden Woods really lived in a different kind of darkness. It wasn’t just the absence of light here, it was places that light had never once touched. Even with a multitude of candles the shadows of this place would never be fully banished. To put it bluntly, I couldn’t see shit.

It was really starting to get to me, the oppressive nature of these woods. There seemed to be an elusive light, glowing just behind where I could see, perched just beyond the corner of my eye. Each time I spun to check it was gone. The shadows were playing games with my head. The sounds slowly began to join in, and I started to wonder if the accidental scraping were not imagined too. It persisted in my ears but after several long strides it grew no louder.

It was no wonder I didn’t believe it when suddenly everything parted and we stepped out into a clearing. The place didn’t seem real at first, so bathed in moonlight which reflected the snow that covered the slanting lines of ruined buildings to make everything seem to bright and too strange to exist. After so much darkness the meadow was a magic thing.

Just like the sleeping beauty and her spinning wheel I was drawn by inexplicable forces out into the middle of the strange place. I urged my stallion forward before fully examining the place. It was even colder out in the open, without the canopy overhead to catch the falling snow and stay the wind. It was a biting creature with a life of its own that refused to stop nipping my ears and nose.

The trance came undone with a shout from Fwahe. The magic of the meadow evaporated in an instant, and I watched in semi-frozen panic as a grotesquerie shambled from behind one of the snow-covered ruins, dragging a jagged-toothed saw over the ground behind it. That must have been the source of the accidental scraping; a thing that was really too large for a single person. I thought that the saw was what they used to cut through tree trunks, but I didn’t think that’s what this creatures intended use for it would be.

The worst thing was his head- or rather the place where a head should’ve been. It had been replaced by a writhing mass of snakes. Their fangs flashed in the moonlight, worse then Fwahe’s smile because of the hissing forked ribbons of tongues that spilled out from between them.

Fwahe’s shout hadn’t come fast enough to stay my hands and avert Big Boy’s course. He saw the snake-thing too and let out an ear-splitting high pitched whinny. As he wheeled around to dash away he bucked up onto his hind legs and I went tumbling down onto the snow. There were only seconds to roll aside before the stallion’s gigantic hooves came tumbling down, inches from crushing me.

“Damnit.” Fwahe spat.
Her eyes were fixed on the charging horse, and as he made the attempt to speed past her, her hand shot out and grabbed the reigns streaming along behind him. She had to grip Swift with just her legs as her arms strained to confine the momentum of a horse on the run. The stallion did not escape her, Fwahe held him, eyes wide with panic as he stamped the snow and wheeled wildly.

The snake-man continued his shambling advance. His lower half was completely human, wearing a tattered coat and stained pants. Everything was normal, down to the pointed tips of his boots. We had been tracking the wrong creature, Kos curse them for their human semblances.

The snake-man was shuffling faster now, making a trench in the snow with his saw. Fwahe was distracted by the horses. I looked around for something, anything that would make for a suitable weapon. Any sort of branch or stone was covered in layers of snow, and unless I was going to start digging through it like a mad badger I wasn’t likely to find anything. The crumbling buildings weren’t the right amount of weather-beaten to pull off chunks for projectiles. I patted down my pockets, hoping against hope I’d picked up something useful.

No chance of that. I’d been taught to travel light and taken it to heart. The scourge was back in my pack, back at the theater. Even with it on me I didn’t figure it would be an ideal weapon for fighting this sort of thing with.

“Get up!” Frigga barked at me.

I rose immediately, nodding as I stood.

Gone was the snake-man’s shambling gait. It was running full force towards us, and would be on me in seconds.

“Up on the horse, stupid!” Fwahe commanded.

She might as well have told me to sprout wings and flee the scene. Big Boy had calmed enough to have his reigns held but was still shifting uncomfortably. His ears were pricked a sure sign of imminent panic. He whinnied every few seconds and startled at my approach.

“Now!” Fwahe growled.

I tentatively reached for the saddle. Big Boy swung his head down and tried to bite at me. I jumped back, right into the snake-man. I hit him right in the chest, losing my balance and sending the both of us tumbling back down into the snow. It hissed like a snake too, all of the heads making the sinister vibrations at different frequencies. I tried to untangle myself from the creature, but the long necks of the snakes allowed it reach I couldn’t escape.

Fangs dug into my shoulder and I fought to keep from screaming. Was the vow so important as to overtake my last moments? Whatever the case I swallowed the agony down, struggling to hold it in while my eyes welled with tears. The bite burnt like heated metal and as the jaws of the snake head started to claws the pressure increased. The fangs drilled their way through muscle tissue until I was sure they were scraping bone. I thought my shoulder would be crushed.

There was a flash of green, and then the pressure was gone. The head that had been biting my shoulder was now severed from the body, falling off my shoulder, leaving a bleeding wound. I scrambled towards Fwahe, who’d dismounted and was holding her sword in one hand. It was alive with swirling green light, mystical and deadly.

“Duck.” She instructed.

I dropped my head as another shimmering arc of light was released from the blade. The snake-man
raised his saw in time to stop it, cutting off whatever arcane powers the sword possessed with the flat of its weapon.

She advanced as I retreated, passing off the reigns of the animals to me. I couldn’t hold both in one hand as she had, the second Fwahe stepped away Swift tried to bolt after her. It was all I could do to hold the both of them steady.

The Vileblood’s blade slammed against the serated edge of her adversary’s. There was a horrible scraping sound, this time no accident, just the abrasive scratching of metal on metal. Fwahe’s sword hadn’t been something that one could refer to as a “fine blade” it had seemed old and dented from the start. Incurring more scars might be the nail in the coffin for that old relic. I hoped she had a back-up.

Fwahe’s strength was certainly superior to the snake-man’s but he had the higher ground. Her blade was caught in the teeth of his and he bore down on it, hard trying to force her backward. She was barefoot, even in the biting cold of winter snow. Had it been boots, she surely would’ve slipped.

The sword flashed green once more, now cutting through the snake-man’s blade as though it was butter. He didn’t seem to comprehend what had happened holding the broken end of his weapon while Fwahe pressed her advantage. The tip of the blade began to disappear into the beasts’ chest spilling a torrent of dark blood onto the crisp snow. Her blade was long enough that she could not only thrust it all the way through the snake-man, but she could keep out of reach of the long necks. They were screaming and flailing wildly, it was horrible to watch.

Fwahe twisted her blade, which made a squelching, crunching sound as it tore through the beasts heart and ribs. The flow of blood increased speed and the snake-man could no longer stand. It fell forward onto Fwahe’s sword, painting out the green light with its blood. Fearing the writhing heads might finally reach her she removed the weapon, dumping the snake-man onto the snow. She snatched up a section of her cleric-beast cloak and hastily wiped the blood from her blade. As her hand ran down the length of the sword the light glimmered and dulled then faded completely. The sword seemed to shrink. She returned it to its proper place, slung over her shoulder as she came over to me. The horses could smell death and blood both in the clearing and all over Fwahe.

Fwahe glared at me before snatching Swift’s reigns away. With a few whispered words and pats on the nose she had the mare calm as ever.

“Stay behind me.” The Vileblood snapped.

My first, and last time leading a party it would seem. It was more of a struggle to get Big Boy calm. He didn’t want to have anything to do with me and was too tall to mount when he kept fidgeting. Fwahe grew impatient while I struggled to get him under control, but finally the stallion relented and I was able to awkwardly clamber onto his back.

Fwahe turned us around, away from the meadow and the snake-man giving up on the tracks entirely. Their source had been found and eliminated. I kept behind her, following dutifully for a few steps before she brought Swift to a halt and motioned me to come up alongside her. I did and she fixed me with another glare.

At least I thought it was a glare. More and more it might have just been the permanent set of her eyes that made it seem like every one of her expressions was overlaid with malice. Then again it couldn’t all be speculation, I’d seen her glances at Frigga, her light joking manner with some of the other Valkyries. These were definitely glares.
“You will return this to me.” Fwahe instructed.

I raised an eyebrow in question and she jiggled her wrist. Glancing down now I saw that she was offering me a hunting knife. Not a hunter’s knife, mind, but a hunting knife, the type a Yharnam woodsman would use for bringing down small creatures. The blade wasn’t of fine make and it was likely the most expendable weapon Fwahe had at the ready, the weakest too.

“I do not trust you.” She said, “But if you’re going to go falling off horses and running headlong into beast battles, don’t count on me to save your sorry ass.”

I nodded and reached for the blade.

Like a cruel siblings exerting dominance over the younger she snatched the knife away from me before I could grasp it.

“Betray my trust, and these woods will be your tomb.” She said, “I will cut you down myself and say it was that snake. No one’s going to believe any difference when I show them your body next to his. Don’t think for one second that you’ll be able to defeat me. You’re only Executioner Alfred’s little puppet, lifeless without your master.”

What did Executioner Alfred have to do with any of this? I didn’t know him all too well beyond the exchange of pleasantries and the occasional lesson.

As usual the most I could do was nod my understanding and once more reach for the extended knife handle. She let my fingers wrap around the hilt while the blade was still clutched in her unyielding fingers. I didn’t pull it away, drawing her blood would only cause her to condemn me for yet another crime I hadn’t committed. I waited for her to let go of it, but she didn’t. We sat, shoulder to shoulder and horse to horse each yielding the first move to the other.

I had a namesake to maintain if nothing else, and both patience and Patience won out in the end. She released and turned the mare away, clicking her heels and setting down the path at a clip a few steps faster then was customary for close conditions like these. I was a little surprised she was willing to turn her back on me, but my earlier failure must weigh heavier in her mind then the potential for an attack from the rear.

We kept going until I lost track of the way out of the woods. They seemed impossibly deep, not confining themselves to any particular arrangement. It was a bit silly to think that the forest would be anything like the city, laid out with signage and landmarks to make finding ones way easier. Perhaps it was just the snow and darkness that caused the Forbidden Woods to blend together so. Whatever the true cause, I was horrifically turned around, freezing and near falling asleep in my saddle.

Fwahe was filled with as much energy as she’d had at the start of the search and showed no signs of withering. Something so simple as sleep was going to end up my ultimate downfall, cause me to fail in my duties and be dismissed from the Executioners. I’d give anything for a coffee and a hot meal to keep me focused a little longer.

Instead I was provided with tired horses, and though I was sure Fwahe would continue to push me until I reached my very limit, but the mounts were another matter.

“We’ll have to stop.” She said, bringing tired hooves to a hault. “They won’t last any longer.”

Nor would I. As soon as I had Big Boy secured to a nearby tree I leaned against its trunk content to use whatever was at hand for bedding and blanket. She did not light a fire. Though I wished for its
warmth I understood its absence. There was no reason to draw attention to ourselves. I kept my
hand lantern close, to steal what I could from the flickering candle. I let the pads of my fingers and
my palms rest against the glass enclosure and defrost around the heated panes. I meant to take a
look at the bite, but hadn’t the energy to begin.

It was in this manner I fell asleep, before my head even came to rest upon my shoulder, the one
not-bitten. It seemed as though my eyes had only closed for a second before I was stirred and made
to ready myself to take on more of the woods. Time was different here, no light reached beyond
the mass of twisted branches. They created their own abstract sky, the snow between them acting
as a lattice of clouds. Strange indeed, and dizzying to gaze upon. Better to look away, for the
Patron Huntress would not be found among the tree tops.

I searched Big Boy’s saddle bags for something to make a breakfast out of. There was a pouch of
crumbling sugar cubes, for the horse. I popped one in my own mouth before digging through
deeper contents. The crusty block was at least something to chew on and invoke the feeling of a
breakfast, the emotion of having something to eat. This was after all, part of the penance.

The saddle bags were mostly full of things that a rider would find useful in caring for her mount,
but there wasn’t much in the way of human necessity. The only food to be found were a few strips
cured beef, salted, dried and good for travel. There weren’t many of them and I didn’t expect
they’d keep me going for more than a two day stretch at most. Yet some food was better than none
at all. I sucked on the end of one of the strips of beef until it softened and I was able to bite through
a piece.

Getting through this meal was work, time had toughed the beef like weather-proofed leather. I was
grateful, for it stretched out the time it took to eat and made breakfast seem more substantial then it
was.

I ate on the road of course, dining in the saddle while Fwahe continued to lead us. Swift was ever
alter and cautious, a mirror of the Vileblood herself. All the care in the world didn’t change the
outcome of things. After traveling in silence for a few hours we saw lights in the distance. The
horses showed no reluctance to them, yet Fwahe’s shoulders tensed and she pulled up the hood of
her cloak. It not only concealed the color of her hair, but it made her look more threatening. She’d
kept the antlers of the beast and affixed them to the garment. When in proper position they seemed
to grow out of her own head, lending a god-like quality to her Constance.

It was white skin, on silver horse; white fur against silver hair all offset by her strange eyes. Fwahe
didn’t really seem to be of this world with her hood up. I’d almost rather she kept it down
indefinitantly, but I was glad that something was going to deter possible attackers, should that be
what the light held. I didn’t want to have another snake-man incident.

As we drew nearer it was clear there wasn’t a need for intimidation, not for me anyway. We’d
come through the woods and were now approaching Executioners and church men, people of my
own fold.

“This can’t be right.” She muttered.

It seems I wasn’t the only one who had lost their bearings in the woods.

A rider began to approach us. She recognized Fwahe easily, and though I was unknown she greeted
me as “Brother Executioner” and we were both escorted into camp as politely as possible. Here,
around the outer edge of the woods were fires and fine company. Crude tents had been set up with
spare canvas, or even at times just cloaks draped across a forked tree branch. Fwahe continued to
mutter to herself while we were led to a fire.
“Do step down ma’am.” Our escort said, standing to the side of Fwahe’s horse with her palms locked together. She was ready to help the Vileblood down, as if Fwahe were a proper sort of lady who had trouble with such maneuvers.

“Step down?” Fwahe asked. “Step down. No. No I need to go back.”

The escort awkwardly rose, scratching her head. “But..you just came out. You searched your area, yeah?”

Fwahe muttered something that neither of us seemed able to make out. She turned to me for a second opinion and the best I could do was shrug. The territory of the woods would remain an intelligible labyrinth to me.

The escort let out a sudden gasp.

“Brother Executioner, your shoulder!”

I looked down at it, and it was rather grisly. With no time to mop at the blood or stem its flow there was a crusty black patch on my cloak with trails down the length of the fabric. It looked as though some small shadowy thing had died there.

“We’ll have to patch that. We’ve got a medic somewhere- hurry up and dismount.”

Fwahe let out an irritated sigh but didn’t protest. With so many Executioners present I highly doubted I needed to forego my own health to keep her under careful watch. To my surprise she followed behind me after securing the horses and stood awkwardly outside of the medical tent while the escort brought me inside. They were busy places, these tents and irritated doctors were liable to bark at those who took up too much space. There was never enough of it, every square inch packed with nurses changing beadpans or surgeons sewing wounds.

This wasn’t even the medical tent of a proper battle and there was still a flurry of activity. I scanned for anyone familiar as one of the middle-aged men of healing assigned me a bed and told me to wait. Doctors were always making you wait, unless your wounds were truly something serious. If you could wait it was a sign that things were going to be just fine.

The tent was warm and for the first time since the adventure into the Forbidden Woods had begun, I felt stifled by my clothes. They were too hot. I unclipped the cape, and very much wished that the capelet beneath could’ve come away too. I was supposed to wear it whenever permissible, so that those who knew of the vow-takers would recognize me as one of their own. A medical tent however, seemed the appropriate place for removing something like that, but if the escort hadn’t known me there was a chance the doctor wouldn’t as well and explaining things would be difficult if not impossible.

It was times like these where I missed my mother. She had no problem explaining things, speaking up and demanding that she be catered too appropriately. Had she been out in the woods, or in the camp when we returned I was sure I’d be seen too with the utmost care due to her belligerent mannerisms and attention to detail when relating my many failures.

It seemed as though it was going to be a long wait. I tried not to puzzle over my mistakes while I rested, swinging my legs back and forth over the edge of the examination table. They were glad to be free of the saddle’s stirrups.

“Ah, Patience, how strange to find you here.”

I turned towards the familiar voice of Executioner Essex and offered a warm smile.
“Strange and, exceedingly fortunate.” He said, smiling as he came up to my bed. Essex made a quick glance over his shoulder before pulling one of the diving curtains, concealing the examination table from the rest of the tent. He sat beside me and patted my leg in a manner meant as reassurance. He had cold palms despite the warm tent, and I had to suppress a shiver when I felt them through the cloth.

“I’ve been wanting to talk to you, no doubt you received everything you needed from us before taking up your post as Fwahe’s watchdog?” He said. It was half summary and half question.

I nodded and bade him continue.

He made another statement in the same half-and-half manner. “And no doubt you remember that further instructions would be incoming?”

I nodded, and he patted my leg again. This one was no more comfortable then the first had been.

“Excellent, excellent.” Essex continued, “Your mother assured us you’d be up for the task. Now, do you have your supplies with you?”

I dropped his gaze and shook my head. The book in which the strange crystals and the syringe had been concealed was back on my washstand at the theater.

“That’s alright.” Essex was quick to amend, “Those aren’t meant for Fwahe, in any case, but the time for further action is now at hand. We couldn’t possess a better opportunity to dispose of this creature. Our Patron Huntress is away, and well we can’t very well expect to be denied our holy duty without her hand to stay us, now can we?”

I didn’t follow where Essex was going, but like so many times before when I was clueless I found that retained silence was all I ever needed. When Essex glanced at me for reassurance I gave him another smile, forcing the corners of my mouth upwards and declining my head in the slightest nod. It earned me yet more pats, like I was some lapdog.

I hoped the doctor would be here soon.

“You see really, and I think you’ll agree, Fwahe is quite the little witch, isn’t she?”

I didn’t know how to respond to that. I kept silent, and this time did not nod. This seemed to indicate a lack of understanding to Essex who went on to elaborate.

“I suppose being raise by a mother like Sister Moira Anne you would not have been exposed to such temptations but really, lust can quite gain control of a person. I fear that our leader, for all of her merits has succumbed to this basest of desires and is ensnared, clay in that Vileblood’s hand for the molding. It is our noble duty to free her, it has always been the job of Executioners to rescue denizens from the jaws of beasts, particularly those who hail from Cainhurst.”

Is what Essex said was true then why hadn’t Fwahe just killed Frigga already? It was not for lack of opportunity, even when I was stationed with her there were times she had been alone with the Patron Huntress. She’d threatened to fake my death and blame it on the snake-man, she was surely clever enough to dispose of Frigga in the same manner had she wanted too. But she hadn’t. Time and time again she had not responded with violence when it was clear she could have easily overpowered that which stood to oppose her. She’d threatened me, yes but I wasn’t killed and left for carrion last night.

“This is our moment.” Essex said, “While everyone is involved in the search for Lady Hemlock, we can divert the Vileblood’s attention, plant her with false trail and remove her from Yharnam
forever.”

Yet each hunter had taken a vow, when Frigga took the throne, so to speak not to attack the Vilebloods. Templeton and Fwahe were off limits, they were rangers and we could not touch them. Executioner Essex might take his vows lightly. I tugged on one of the tassels at the end of my capelet, each one I had crafted from thread spun by my own hands. Every vow-taker had to learn to do this.

“Oh yes.” Essex muttered, “There are the vows. We cannot, and would never suggest a killing. If Lady Hemlock is so dead-set on preserving the life of her little monster, then we can do naught but oblige…yet they needn’t live together. I assure you that, once removed from the scene Frigga will cease caring about the Vileblood all together, and if she doesn’t, well that is what your other tools are for.”

I cocked my head to the side. Essex met my confusion with a dismissive wave.

“Now is not the time.” He said simply, “And this is hardly the place for me to lay out everything. You’ve been taught well and I trust you can take instructions, even those without explanation. Sister Moira Anne assured us of this when you were appointed. Your duty is to serve, is that not right?”

I nodded. He was correct.

“Excellent.” He smiled, “Then once you’re healed I’m sure Fwahe will want to be off again. Be sure that you go with her. We will send a messenger with a false report, something of Frigga being sighted. I doubt the Vileblood will need further encouragement, but your duty is to ensure that she follows just behind the messenger. Do not let her stray, do not let her change course. Can you do that for us, Executioner Patience.”

I wasn’t sure I wanted too, but I reduced all the questions I had but could not voice into a nod of confirmation.

“Excellent.” And a pat on the leg.

This time I let myself shiver. Executioner Essex didn’t seem to notice. Once he’d finished having this conversation he seemed to fidget, seeking swift exit. Essex never struck me as the kind who liked to linger after business was done. To me, it gave the impression of ever-present blood on his hands, something to dash away and wash off before anyone noticed.

I saw with his words spinning circles, making soup out of my memories. I couldn’t get them to line up straight like a spoon the strange request kept trailing motion lines through everything and blurring the images. The doctor, thank Kos recognized my capelet and bade me undress. He also recognized the wounds, seeming fairly familiar with the kinds of creatures in the Forbidden Woods. I pegged him a woodlander if ever there was one, and he was kinder then the doctor Callum that the Valkyeries consorted with. He gave me a sweet to suck on while he worked, but the sugar didn’t dull the bitter drafts I was forced to drink nor lessen the sting of burning antiseptic.

It didn’t seem like the bite was going to be lethal, and it was attended well enough that the doctor thought infection unlikely. I was quickly dismissed and told to come back if the wound was still stinging after a few hours. That didn’t seem a likely course of action, I doubted Fwahe could be convinced to stay the night.

She wasn’t outside the medical tent, where she’d been lurking earlier but seated by a fire very close to the spot. A few other hunters thought to have shared the fire with her, but as they approached
thought better of the idea and settled on the other side, nervously roasting corn and sausages over the flames. It smelled delicious.

“Doctor fixed you up?” Fwahe asked.

I nodded.

“Able to travel?” She asked.

I paused. Could the illusionary blood on Essex’s hands transfer to mine? It wasn’t there to begin with. This was nonsense. I had taken a vow, and I had a job to do. There were sins totted up in the thousands listed with painful and exacting detail in the book my mother had started, and it would not do to add more to their numbers now. Hesitation was unthinkable. They were all counting on me, and I’d already accepted my task.

I nodded.

“Good. “ she said. She rose quickly, springing up and starting off at once. “We’ve no time to loose. We’ll set off in the opposite direction.”

I felt sick to my stomach as we collect the horses and readied ourselves to enter the forest once more. It was not a sickness from the bite, nor one from a general lack of food, but the strange twisting of guilt as it wound its clawed hands over my heart.

It shouldn’t have been like this. The Vileblood had hardly been kind to me, though last night’s rescue was the exception. This should have been an easy choice to make, duty over heart was always the easy choice to make. Still, with every step our horses took following one right after the other I wanted to scream. Some deep desperate part of me wanted to shout warnings and avert course but I dare not.

After all, I had taken a vow.

The world became strange music. There was the soft crunch of heavy hoof beats over snow. I could hear my own heartbeat pounding in my temple and echoing in my ears; it was the steady metronome. Drums were made out of the horses tack, and my lantern clipped to the front of the saddle, swinging freely. Like everything in my life it was always instrumental, a prelude to vocals I couldn’t provide.

The cathedral canopy above seemed to have woven itself even thicker overhead. It was less like a sky and more like the bars of a cage, something to lock us in these woods and throw away the key. Would that be better or worse, for Essex had not said what fate awaited Fwahe at the end of the path. She was insistent on leading our party, so there was no way for me to second guess my choices and direct her elsewhere. Like I had chosen to do, she plunged straight ahead; no regard for the consequences.

I kept scanning the tree line, looking from side to side and all over the forest. I was tense, waiting for this rider to come in with false news. Sussex had not told me when to expect them, and perhaps if someone had been behind me or our party had possessed an additional member I would’ve looked suspicious, but Fwahe never turned. She relied on her ears, and Big Boy was a big horse. There was no need to check if I were behind, for surely the thundering footsteps of my stallion were all the reassurance she needed.

Even if she did check, I must’ve just looked like I was seeking out signs of Frigga. Was this presumption and perception a lie, did it count as a false identity? There were so many implications
springing up, so many questions that wound their way around me like thick thorns. Had it not been for the nature of my mount I surely would’ve been secured to some spot on the grown, unable to move and held prisoner by inner turmoil.

How fortunate we went on horseback. How fortunate I could just sit back and let things happen. How fortunate I had the vow, and there was no temptation to shout. How fortunate it was dark and how fortunate she did not turn and how fortunate that I could shove all my personal reservations deep deep down and not speak up, never speak up. How fortunate my mother had taught me how to follow directions.

I wanted to scream.

There were times where I had, when I was young and imperfect and still just learning the ways of a vow-taker. Learning to pray silently had been difficult, and I’d gotten my fingers rapped with a ruler more than once. Sometimes the punishments my mother prescribed made me cry out and on instinct start to beg for mercy- but in time I learned.

I did not scream. I had not screamed in years.

I heard the rider before Fwahe did. That surprised me, but I turned and saw someone on a spotted grey horse thundering towards us full speed. Maybe it was just because I was looking for them, seeking them out. It wasn’t until Swift let out an alarmed whinny that Fwahe turned and saw the rider. I pretended not to have been looking and she did not catch on.

The rider hailed her with a shout and Fwahe pulled the horses to a halt. Everything was proceeding in exactly the manner Sussex had proposed that it would.

“Patron’s Ranger?” The rider gasped breathlessly, playing the part so well. Their dress was simple and nondescript, typical hunters clothing down to the pointed hat with fraying edges. They’d chosen to send the standard hunter as opposed to one of specified religious ties. Smarter on their part, Fwahe was more likely to trust someone like this.

Fwahe nodded. She already seemed impatient to get back to the search.

“We’ve found her.” The rider panted, “Lady Hemlock. In the woods. She’s injured.”

All of it was lies. It sounded so convincing though. The hunter they’d chosen to play messenger was really putting on all of the appropriate touches. They were covered in sweat and had their eyes wide with false worry.

Fwahe took it all in and didn’t show the faintest flicker of disbelief. Why should she? We were all supposed to be looking for Frigga. It made sense to send someone for her. Her eyes narrowed and she tightened her grip on Swift’s reigns when the urgency of the rider’s words were sorted out in her brain. There was no need to talk further.

“Lead.” Fwahe barked.

There wasn’t so much as an affirmation before the rider made a violent and sudden about-face maneuver and plunged back into the woods. The horses hooves flew up high clouds of snow and dirt as we tore after her. Branches sliced at my face and tugged at whatever bits of cloth trailed behind me. They stung but there was no reason to slow on their account. If Fwahe was at all effected by them, she made no exclamation.

I was surprised the Vileblood didn’t pry for any more details in regards to Frigga’s condition. She must’ve figured that if they’d sent a rider things were serious enough and splitting hairs wasn’t
going to help her beloved Patron. The horses leapt over a frozen stream and dashed through small clearings. Some of them sparkled with the same eerie moonlight as before but we were moving too fast for it to work its strange enchantments on me. Deeper and deeper we plunged into the woods, never slowing. I could sense that we were getting fairly far from the point of entrance, riding either towards the center or out along the edge of the forest. The rider had her bearings but I did not and could not discern deeper forest from lesser.

“How much further?” Fwahe asked. Her question was shouted loudly, so as to be sure the rider heard it over the sound of running horses, but it was caught up in peculiar tones of fear. I almost didn’t recognize it as the Vileblood’s at first- but it had to be. The rider would not ask herself such a question.

“How much further?” The rider said, pointing to a rise in the terrain. “Just over those hills. She’s on the other side.”

Fwahe urged Swift to go even faster, though the mare needed no second bidding. I had feared the perceptive animal might blow my cover entirely and put up the alarm. She must’ve been one with Fwahe’s adrenalin and spirit. We raced over a swinging bridge, built from logs tied together. I hated the crossing, for its swayed from the motion of my traveling companions, and over the side I could see nothing but dark depths.

I had no sense of being on elevated grounds, nor of climbing anything of the relative shape to merit a canyon of this depth. I was as well, quite sure that no elevation of this nature had existed in the forest the night before. These woods were playing tricks on me again. They were playing tricks on all of us for that matter.

When we came over the side of the hill, to look down from it summit there were lights and a sort of covered wagon down below us. There seemed to be other such carts too, but it was hard to make out anything more in the distance and the darkness.

“An herbalists van.” The rider said in a single breath “We wanted to attend-“

Her words were unesscary to convince the single-minded creature. She saw the lights like a beacon, shining on the one she was searching for. Now that Fwahe knew where to go she let Swift have her own head and the mare shot forth with all the speed of a bullet loosed from a gun. The two of them left me and the rider behind on the hillside.

I started after her, but the rider directed her horse in front of mine.

“We’ve got it from here Brother Patience.” She said. “Just watch.”

Shoulder to shoulder we walked a little closer and watched as Fwahe dropped from the hill and into the tree line once more. The second she passed the branches of the first tree, a weighted net was dropped over her, and she tumbled from Swift, landing hard on the earth below.

Like rats fleeing a sinking ship people descended from the trees, swarming over the fallen rider. Startled but steady, Swift wheeled round to face them. She kicked at one with her back legs, knocking them flat. The rest she made angry noises towards or attempted to bite while they attempted to settle her. Many grabbed for the mares reigns, and some lost fingers and went off screaming from the attempt.

Fwahe was fighting just as hard but with none of Swift’s success rate. The swarm of people around her had used the Vileblood’s confusion to gather the ends of the net between the lot of them and drag Fwahe along behind them. Even from a distance I cringed at what it must feel like to have
rope pulled over skin pulled over ground. I reminded myself that her skin was stronger then mine, more like stone then flesh.

I had taken a vow and aided in a successful mission. There was nothing to be ashamed of.

Both of them fought tooth and nail, the horse and the rider. Fwahe still had her weapons with her, and while men tried to remove them from her she furiously worked to free her sword and slice her attackers to ribbons. Everything ended with the shot of a gun and a horrific screech. This was followed by the dull thud of a heavy body hitting the ground. The gun belonged to one of the swarm, and its target had been the mare. Now she would not be able to fight anyone.

With the barrel of the gun, still smoking and hot from the killshot, now pressed to the Vilebloods temple all she could do was leer at her enemies while they tore away her weapons. The strange sword was taken away, as were the blades of mercy and the other various knives that Fwahe kept on her person. They were most invasive while they sought new weapons, running their hands over places where she couldn’t have possibly concealed anything. Surely they had found every last knife. All of them were put into black bags while she glared down the muzzle of the gun.

The rider said it was safe to make our approach now. It seemed she wanted to gloat. I would’ve much rather stayed behind on the hillside. Once more my choices seemed to be made for me, as Big Boy was of a mind to follow whatever horse was in front of him. The rider’s would do as well as Swift had.

When we came into the light I found that the people who’d captured Fwahe were very strange indeed. They weren’t members of the church, nor were they dressed as hunters. Sure, scattered amongst them I saw the curve of a Logarius Wheel and my eyes alighted on a face that belonged to either Essex or Sussex. I expected the latter as the former likely would’ve remained at camp rather then arousing any kind of suspicion. He was the planner, the conductor and orchestrator. Sussex did the leg work, played the instruments and most importantly- Sussex drew the blood. I could see no stage and no post, but with such a crowd it was possible they planned to have a secluded Execution out in the woods.

Essex could’ve lied to me about preserving Frigga’s wishes and Fwahe’s life. It was definitely within his power to construct elaborate falsifications and convince me of truths that were not. He hadn’t spent much time on this part of the plan- the outcome, the ultimate results.

It was the strangeness of the collective that put the thought out of my mind. There weren’t enough clergymen, not nearly the quantity of Executioners needed for a proper extermination. This was something else. They were dressed in garish things, silks and cottons mostly with stripes or diamonds or star-studded patterning all across their garb. There were trails of ribbons and ruffles in distasteful torrents spilling over every possible surface. As they filed in from the trees, they lit lanterns, until the whole camp was ablaze.

The rider, of course, had lied for the van belonged to no herbalist. There didn’t seem to be a doctor, medic, nurse or any sort of healer amongst the strangely dressed men and women. The side of the cart was painted with stars and in overly embellished flowery script was rendered the words “Circo Obscuro”. More context on the side of other carts and sundry made it clear that this wasn’t a place affiliated with English hunting in the slightest. This was a traveling carnival.

My father had told me of a circus he attended, and my mother had chastised them for being sinful places where poor sinners who suffered deformation of birth or lowness of character were put on display. One would find advertisements for bearded women, tiny people and tattooed ladies amongst others. My father had assured her that circus contained nothing of the sort, but was rather an exhibition of human ability. She’d told him it was just as bad, and thus had cut his narrative
short to send me to pray before bed.

The Circo Obscuro seemed very much the type of place my mother had described. The sides of covered wagons were painted with grotesque renderings of persons undergoing transformations, and a large stretched-out white ghostly chap who’d they labeled a “Pthumerian”. The carnival players pushed and dragged Fwahe over the ground before forcing her into a large cage.

The gunman was the one who locked its door. He passed his gun to one of the traveling players nearby, and turned to face the rider and I. The few hunters amongst the gathered had all come out from the trees or their hiding places and stood about me on the ground, or waited in the wings on horseback.

“My most gracious compliments and sincere thanks to the noble hunters of Yharnam.” He said, removing his silk top hat and bowing to us in a grandiose, overdrawn manner. “Acquiring such a creature would have been impossible without your assistance.”

“Snake!” Fwahe spat. I thought she was talking to the gunman, but her eyes full of fire were fixed on me. “I knew it! You never fooled me you little rat!”

She thrashed against the bars, shaking the door of her cage until the man sighed and retrieved his gun once more, again pressing its muzzle to Fwahe’s head.

“I’m going to need you to quiet down.” He instructed.

She complied, but her gaze only twisted, grew sharper with more cold hatred.

“As I was saying, your order now carries the gratitude and well wishes of Mr. Hayden Cruptinelli,” and here he made to indicate himself, “As well as the entirety of the Circo Obscuro.”

“Gratitude is nice.” Executioner Sussex, yes indeed it was Sussex, “But I believe we bargained for a little more than pleasantries.”

Money exchanged hands. I had just aided in the sale of a person- no a Vileblood. Yes, a person. If my crimes were to be totaled they would be totaled honestly. I had aided in the sale of a person for the sake of a vow.

I felt sick, more so than ever. My stomach turned as though ripped from my chest and tossed into an endless abyss, tumbling, tumbling. It was hard to stay on a horse, and my stallion seemed to become drunk on the mood of those surrounding him. Fwahe’s captors and my fellow Executioners began to celebrate, lighting enormous bonfires and making the night too bright. They kindled their own suns, mixing day and night together in a perverse corruption of both.

The players might as well have been demons. Some seemed to have extra faces, or wrong faces. I could’ve sworn one had several arms, sprouting from his back in a mockery of noble Amygdala. I wanted to get away but when I tried to steer Big Boy back to the hillside the reigns slipped through my shaking hands. I didn’t know they were shaking until I found myself dropping things. Mounted Executioners rode by to slap me on the back and offer congratulations. They put cups in my hand and clicked the rims of theirs to the side of mine- bidding me to drink with them.

Even if it wasn’t against my vows, I couldn’t have toasted if I’d wanted too. Every time I tried to move the glass my hands opened to wide and it slipped onto the ground, leaving wine-red trails and staining the flanks of my horse. The men, for it always seemed to be men in this light, who offered me drinks laughed and shouted words that were caught in the chaos of the moment and never reached my ears. I thought it was my own hearing, failed, but it was just that loud. Drumbeats and
hoof beats and singing- such singing, with echoed chorus in the hundreds.

They were not church ballads, nor songs from any tale ever told in Yharnam but perverse shanties about women in sheer gowns and nights in tavern bedrooms. I didn’t wish to hear any of that. I just wanted to go home.

“Drink up.”

Another glass came to my hands, pressed upwards from below. I looked down into the black-socket eyes of the strange company my fellow Executioners kept. They were wearing masks, somewhat like those of the dismantled Choir used to wear in that they concealed the majority of ones face. These masks weren’t as finely made- coming from wax-dipped paper instead of fine metal. They were made in ever likeness so that men and foxes, birds and beasts and cleric and codfish all found their likenesses affixed over smiling faces with red ribbons.

I gave a weak smile and accepted the cup from the creature- for they did look a creature. The mask depicted some sort of horned creature with a toothy smile. They didn’t skip off like the others and when my quivering hands dropped the cup, they took it in fist and threw it back at me. I was struck on the side of the head with the beaten copper mug. It was not a particularly powerful throw, but in such a state it was enough to knock me from my seat. I fell onto the muddy forest floor, arms shaking as I scrambled to stand. The demon-man was going to have come around the stallion in seconds and I wanted away.

Reckless I left the party behind, tripping and stumbling and shoving my way through the uproar of hunters and carnival players. Sometimes hands snatched at my cloak, trying to stop me. Sometimes perhaps it was thorns. Dimly felt there was a dampness on my forehead, surely blood as I was surely bleeding but I didn’t care. I fell and rose and fell again, running until I was in unknown woods.

It was only when I couldn’t get another breath in that I was able to stop. My chest was full of hot coals, scalding me whenever I tried to breath too deeply. I stumbled forward in the snow, pushing more effort from them. I had to keep going, the demon-man was after me.

What would my mother have said? She didn’t condone drinking of course and I’d never taken so much as a single drop from anything, save at seven years of age when the wells had become to polluted to drink from. Everyone had needed to forego their standards and drink beer. The other options were to die of thirst or risk infection. Some lazy hunters had been dumping bodies in the sewers instead of taking them out to be buried. They’d tainted the water and stifled the city until the patron at the time had fixed things.

It was so long ago that I couldn’t remember the taste. The other novices and I took it like medicine, I remember it being a foul thing. My father found it very funny, complimenting my taste. In these dark cold woods I could remember his actual words.

“Look Moira, the boy has taste.” He’d laughed, “He’ll never be satisfied with the cat’s piss they mislabel as beer, let me give him something stronger.”

He’d thought I was strong. He’d thought I had taste.

My father only spoke like that during the crisis, when my mother was a little more agreeable. She’d upbraided him for those words of course but with only half her usual vigor. They almost seemed to get along, but then the wells were clean again and there was no more laughter and no more beer. My father stopped drinking too, and donated what’d he used for nights out back into the church.
He was somewhere in the East now. I should’ve been able to tell which way East was but everything was dark and twisted here. I couldn’t go East when the moon was hidden and there was no map or compass or hands to guide me. I was an Executioner now, full-fledged with a task successfully carried out. Fwahe had been delivered exactly where my superiors wanted her and I will have made a good impression on Essex and Sussex. For all this achievement I still didn’t think they would allow me to proceed as I desired and go wandering.

That was an Executioners job, to comb the ends of the earth and hunt down any Vilebloods that remained. We had not released a party in so long, and were unlikely to start again. I had to go, I had to find where East was and make a start at filling in the gaps.

If the Executioners couldn’t leave, so be it. I wasn’t going back to that horrible circus. I did not want to return to my mother who would speak for me and administer punishments as she counted sins. Leave the book behind, leave the scourge behind and set out freely. That was always the way it was done in the stories.

Those heroes were able to talk though, to converse freely and ask help. They could sing and swindle and charm. I hadn’t spoken a word in years, it was doubtful I could remember how to do it. It was sinful to even want too, but alone in the woods I opened my mouth and tried to push my own name past my teeth. The only thing that came out was a puff of cold air.

I was mortified to have even tried. My face was warm from embarrassment, even without witnesses. I needed to go back to people who could do the talking, back to the party and the demon-man. It was foolish to think I could make it on my own. That was part of the vow taken, the heavy reliance on the good graces of your fellow man. The world beyond Yharnam was not so kind. My mother had told me about the sort of people who lived outside the wall, and alone I would never be able to face them.

I swallowed, pushing down the fiery feeling inside of me and turning back towards the way I had come. The way I thought I had come from anyway, it was too dark to be sure. I didn’t have my lantern with me it was still clipped to the horse. I was stupid for not having grabbed it, stupid for letting the demon-man scare me. It was only a mask and he was only a persistent partier. There was nothing to have been afraid of. How could I expect to fight beasts and Vilebloods if cheap carnival gags were enough to send me running for the hills.

I swallowed whatever resolve I had left, taking a final glance to the direction I perceived to be East. That kind of life was not for me. I had taken the vow. It was then that I was finally able to breathe and the air came out of me in a calming gust. I turned away, looking for the glow of the bonfires amongst the trees. I was sure I saw it, something sparking yellow-orange not too far off in the woods. I began to head towards it.

There was a snap, and like the mouth of a great creature the ground beneath me opened up and I fell into its dark throat. Tumbling, tumbling, just like my stomach had been before only now it was all of me together, falling until I landed on snow-covered grounds below. The sky above was dark. The walls and the floor and the space in front of me was dark, and I could not call out for light.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you very much for readin
Possesion

Chapter Summary

OTL guys im so sorry. For some reason this chapter never got published and I do not know how i made such an egregious oversight. Please forgive me.

Chapter Notes

I'm really sorry this somehow didn't get posted on schedule, please enjoy anyway!

Smoke wash over my body and cleanse my lungs. The reek of incense polluted the chambers of the devout, but here it served to still my aching head. What a mistake to have made, erroneous not to recognize my own bloodline. She was wrong in so many ways but the potential for success had blinded me, made me its fool and in an overzealous fit I had taken her instead.

Of course she was not Alois, for she hadn’t responded to the name. My sweet sister would surely come running.

Wouldn’t she?

The answer elected to change with every puff of smoke I took, every inhale and exhale brought another wave of confidence, doubt and so many other opposite emotions that everything cancelled itself out. I sat, numbed in a cloud of opium, like so many of the degenerate souls I had condemned on the streets. Things were different for a noble man of my blood line, the vices of men did not produce the same strength of effect for me, but like disinfectant on a cut I needed something to dull the sting of indignation.

The mistake was completely understandable. I had not looked upon the perfect symmetry of Alois’ features in years. The portraits were sullied in the massacre and I had not so much as a lock of hair to recall her by. The bastards my brothers bred, bred bastards of their own and now they clogged the streets content to bear similarities to my heritage.

Yet still, I had thought I would know her. I had thought that the second I laid eyes on Alois I would know deep in my soul that we had finally been brought back together by the crooked hands of fate. To find this not so was debilitating.

I sat smoking, posed with the quandary of that to do with the body. Presently it lay in the back corner of a crumbling old attic in a disused Yharnam slaughterhouse. The place was already stained with blood and death, churning with the promise of progress before it had been shut down. It was likely a bad foundation- all buildings came down to that. A crack in the bottom spoiled the whole barrel.

That’s what she was- a crack. One rotten fruit to corrupt the flesh of the others, of the sweet reward I had so long been searching for. Everything about her was wrong. Her hair which I’d though shining in glowing moonlight was dull now that I inspected it closer. Her eyes had not glowed the
same shade of blue. Her lips were not as full. Her skin was not as pale, and what's more it was marred by a repugnant scar. It was a strange thing that shimmered when it shouldn't, as though it were metallic when all was just flesh and blood. There were other shimmers too, as of silver freckling but I thought such malady ridiculous and assured myself it was a trick of the light.

To acknowledge them now would be folly. They had not existed in those snowy fields and I would not allow them to exist now. Another sharp intake of smoke. I mustn't be so hard on myself. This would all be forgiven when we were finally joined.

“Mm..”

The body mumbled in its sleep.

It was but a corpse delayed, however I would not suffer the indignities of killing a slumbering opponent. Humans were vermin, the lot of them but I had been taught to behave better than that. Outshone, perhaps by my siblings in every way- but I had been given instruction in the art of the sword and the rules of combat. For a matter such as this there would be justice demanded. It would have to answer for resembling my sweet sister so heavily.

A crime had been committed. There were now rules and formalities in place. The night was a quiet and cold one, but full of odd contentment. I judged this to be mostly the responsibility of the pipes’ contents, but the feeling was no less genuine when achieved with artificial tools. These were the kind of nights that Death preferred, when one could slink from shadow to shadow and leave nothing but footprints in their wake. I must grow used to these too.

When it came time for me to pay the Piper, I expected he would come on a night like this one. I wanted to grow used to them, be ready for them so that I was not caught unawares like the body behind me. I would face death, eye to eye and hold until one of us blinked. That was all a man could do upon his final day, but Death had promised that I would see my sweet sister once more before I saw him.

It was likely dangerous to be here, to remain in Yharnam. I had had to kill the screeching violinist at the Black Octopus. I could suffer the insult of his talentless wails no longer. The bar patrons were so accustomed to the sound of screams they didn’t notice the difference between his music and his death, but now my face was known to that disgusting wench. She didn’t like me. It was very likely there was already a price on my head, a warrant for the arrest and execution of Lord Kane Hirsch heir to the Hirsch dynasty. Soon there would be “restorer of Cainhurst” tacked to the end of their billing.

I would have to be more careful if I was to go on the search again. This body however, could work for its life. Perhaps there was usefulness to capturing her after all, and it had been part of some grand design to which I was not yet privy. Death pulled the strings after all; I was merely allowed to spin the thread for them. For now anyway, when we came face to face I did not plan on blinking.

Yes, she could be my eyes and ears in the city while I awaited the return of my sister. Any young woman would be terrified to be awoken in a strange place to discover a Vileblood, a race long thought dead. She would cave to my every command out of sheer fear alone.

“mm.”

The muttering again, and more annoying this time. Why wouldn’t she just stir already. My pipe, like my patience was running on empty. I breathed one last cloud of smoke through the broken sky light pane, then set the pipe on the floor. There were no luxuries here, bed table or otherwise. A
square of dusted floorboard was the best that could be hoped for.

The body lay under cobwebs. The slaughterhouse was a goldmine for imprisonment. The chains that had once held animals in position to have their throats drained of blood now secured the ankles of the imposter. They were heavy iron things. It would be easier to cut off ones own foot then have a viable means of escaping.

And I was done waiting.

I tapped her in the side with my boot, lighter then she deserved. Silver-white eyelashes fluttered as she opened her eyes, then furrowed her brows, confused. I must’ve still been coming in to focus. Like Alice waking up in Wonderland she had fallen down a rabbit hole and nothing in her life was as it had been.

“Don’t speak.” I commanded.

This caused her to shit, not to shudder or quiver or show any standard human reaction of fear but just to change position. She was getting more comfortable. How dare she. It was not my presence but the sound of shifting chain links that widened her eyes with fright. She turned and saw with her own eyes the reality of her imprisonment. Like so many others her immediate instinct was to fight against it, kicking her legs and moving her hands to assist. I stopped that immediately, seizing her, holding both of her wrists in one hand. She was stronger then I anticipated, and almost managed to pull away.

“Let go of me!” She growled. As she struggled her eyes alighted on the crowfeather cape behind me, and she must’ve remembered who I was. Her efforts grew more frantic.

Rather then pull away she brought me closer, until my arm was close enough to bite. Furiously she tried to break through my skin with her weak teeth and brittle jaw. I could snap it so easily.

I set my other hand across her face, confident it would knock the fight right out of her. She didn’t flinch, she just bit down harder. Seems she would be a difficult one. With a hand to her throat I cut of her air supply and as she began to struggle to breathe she released me. I would not be letting her go so easily.

“Now, listen girl. You will do as I say or I will kill you. It makes no difference to me weather you live or die; my life just gets a little easier if you stay alive and do as I tell you. You are not special and I could pluck a hapless orphan off the streets and replace you just as easily.”

I would’ve continued talking but her eyes were rolling back in her head and her ace was turning multiple colors from lack of air. I loosened my grip and she gulped in air, a rush of it in a choking swallow.

She was smiling.

“Explain yourself.” I demanded.

“You don’t know who I am.” She said.

“It doesn’t matter who you are.” I growled, once more bringing my hand across her face. She took it even better this time, quite literally turning the other cheek and bidding me continue. I would not be taking commands from a prisoner.

She laughed. She had the gall to laugh. It must’ve been madness. She was so scared she had lost her mind. This wouldn’t do, I could not have a madwoman running my errands for me. Her half-
breed lineage must have tainted her mind and it was by virtue of the blade I would set her to rest. What a pity the parasites of this world always turn out to be so disappointing. I dropped her wrists so that I might leave and retrieve the instrument of her demise.

She leapt at me like a rabid hound, locking her hands around my leg and pulling me down. I hit the attic floor hard. She pressed her advantage trying to dig her dirty nails and wandering hands where they didn’t long, but I was able to kick her away.

“Kill me and all of England will hunt you down.” She said.

The girl was sprawled on the floor, dull hair in a mess but eyes brimming with confidence. Oh how the madness grasps hold of the mind and turns the lies into truth. She believed every word she was saying.

“There are hundreds of hunters in this town.” I laughed, “They will not miss you.”

“There is only one Patron Huntress.” She said. Her arms did not shake with effort, her breath did not come in ragged gasps. Calmly she stood, rising to her full height, which was not much shorter then my own, and looked at me right in the eyes.

She was ready to stand face to face with death.

I narrowed my eyes at her, but did not blink. I let my teeth, sharp and swift catch the light so that she might be terrified. She still did not quiver. Even with her ankles chained and her hair ragged there was an undue elegance to her posture. Something about the tilt of her chin, the way she allowed weight to settle on her shoulders gave her the bearings of a queen. Once again it was no wonder that I had mistaken her for my sister. She would pay for my mistake.

“I do not care who you are.” I said, “But you should care to know me.”

She laughed, “Oh yes suddenly now that I’ve brought it up, introduction becomes important. You are a weak thing who preys upon the helpless. I know all I need to of you.”

It had to be madness. How could one say things with such confidence and grace in settings like these. Had she not seen the knife? I brandished it once more, raising it so that it fell directly between our line of sight. She was forced to see it now, I flickered the blade back and forth. It caught the light just as my teeth, for it too was sharp and full of danger.

“I am not afraid of you, nor that little butter knife you’re so proud of.” She said, “I am Frigga Hemlock and Yharnam is my city. So long as I’ve breath I will not cower from men like you. Were this open combat you’d be dead where you stand, but even with these chains I will-“

At this point I had had quite enough of the girl’s talking. I lunged forward, and she side-stepped. It was a deft maneuver, the kind of thing that only a practiced swordsmen would know to do. My mistake for not securing her more tightly. I grabbed the chain that ran to her ankles and pulled her down to the ground. She let out a hiss of pain from the sharp collision. Before she could stand I was yanking her, arm over arm pulling chain after chain until there was no distance separating us.

“You have no idea what kind of man I am.” I said to her, “By your hunters laws I might not even be considered a man at all. You have fallen to the clutches of the old Cainhurst monsters that made so many Yharnamites cower while we stole the lives of your breed by the thousand. The walls of Cainhurst ran red, we painted them for fun.”

“Vilebloods do not frighten me.” She said.
Now it was my turn to laugh.

"Oh little girl, you do not know of which you speak." I said, "You may think a Vileblood to be as dull and easily maneuvered as other beasts but we are of proud lineage and exceeding intellect. I was born in the red halls of Cainhurst and I-"

“You’re from Cainhurst?” She interrupted.

Nostrils flaring with irritation at the bothersome question, I collected all of my poise and graciousness to explain simple matters to simple minds. "Of course I am from Cainhurst, that is the birthplace of-"

“But the massacre.” She mumbled.

I slammed my boot onto the aging wooden floor. I had hoped the sound would make her jump, make her flinch but it didn’t. Girls were not supposed to be like this, even Alois, proud though she was had been smart enough to fear me. Madness and stupidity at the same time were a noxious combination and I was growing tired of opposing them. She’d need to either be gagged or killed, and frankly I didn’t care which.

“Massacres can be escaped. You think they kept us locked behind the wall every day of our lives, that none of us were ever allowed to go beyond, to travel? The Hirsch family was well respected and I have been abroad thousands of times, received by families of importance, courted by wealthy maidens. Suitored to-”

I carried on lying to her. In truth as heir to my dynasty I had not been permitted beyond the walls. There was a fear that I would suffer injury there and my life had been wrapped up in the duties of diplomacy. While my inferiors were able to train for their knighthoods and go hunt down scores and scores of human parasites for consumption I was stuck at a desk learning laws and letters. I had an aptitude for the tasks I was bade complete, matters of negotiation came easily to me, but there was a hunger to leave.

There was a hunger for other things too, a sinister appetite deep in the pit of my chest. No matter how many waves of blood washed down my throat and welled in my stomach it was never sated. The forbidden object of my desires was the only thing to fill the void- and attempting to seal it with others had been my undoing. Banishment and disgrace, exile was the reason I had not been present during the massacres.

Lord Death had forseen it, and placed such cravings inside of me so that they might one day save my life. What I had thought at the time of my dismissal to be a curse was a blessing, and now the ones who had scoffed and scorned were decaying bones- fertilizing the grounds of the castle I would restore. Broken skulls and smashed fingers would grind to dust and I would sew them full of the sweet white flowers Alois loved so dearly.

When I was done detailing my life and lineage, the girl seemed astounded. Finally she was struck dumb by my presence- in awe of me as she should be.

I grinned, “So now, will there be more interruptions?”

The question shook her from stupor, and the eyes that had been clouded with wonderment narrowed to scathing defiance once more.

“So you knew her?” She asked.

“Knew who?” I returned.
This stopped her dead in her tracks as she turned her thoughts around in her head. Like women’s laundry in a tub her tiny mind strove to string together words from abstract images, to hang her thoughts out to dry so that I might look at them.

“Nevermind.” The girl said.

“Explain yourself.” I demanded.

This time she did shiver when I brought my boot down to punctuate a sentence. She no longer stood proudly but sat with her hands clutching each other around her knees. She’d turned away from me, much for the better so that dull hair might drape over blue eyes and I would not have to bare constant reminder of my mistake.

“Nothing.” She repated.

“Who am I supposed to have known?” I growled.

Could she know? Did she know? Impossible.

“Alois?” I asked.

“That’s not my name.” The girl spat at me.

“Of course it isn’t.” I snarled back. “I mistook you for her, and can’t imagine how. You wretched imposter how dare you paint yourself as my sister.” “Sist...oh..” She mumbled. There was now fear in every twist of her muscle, every raised hair in every line of her brows, cut in to every crevice of the soft skin of her lips. “Oh Kos in heaven, that’s why.”

I dove at her once more, taking her by the neck. I let her hands claw at my chest, she could not scratch the skin with brittle human nails. She tried to punch, tried to kick but this was beyond her ability to escape. I crushed her flesh with mine, sealing off the airways and siphoning out the oxygen.

“Tell me where Alois is!” I shouted.

She strained to shake her head, eyes watering. The pain she must’ve felt was related to me in the hollow gasping sounds that came out of her mouth.

A modicum harder and I would be crushing bones. I could feel her going limp, feel the rapture that comes with shutting your opponent out piece by piece. First the toes and fingers, then the legs, next the arms and slowly the inner mechanism too. The heart would stop pumping, the lungs stop their inflation and death would lock his hands around the soul and with a deft flick of the wrist remove it to extinguish the spark of life.

But I could not take that from her now, not when it seemed that the imposter might know something of the genuine article. I let lose my hand and she gulped in air. As she dropped to the floor I caught her wrists in one hand, removing my belt with the other and fastening them sharply together. Raised on tip toe I fixed the leather strap to an old meat hook, and now she dangled like an unwanted puppet, a few inches off the ground. There would be no more of her loathsome attacks now.

I watched as she tried to pry her wrists apart, strained to stretch her toes down far enough to stand, but as all dead men whose death come to them at the loop of the noose, she soon found there was nothing to do but hang.
“Now that we understand things,” I said. “Why don’t you tell me what you know.”

She didn’t speak, still focused on escaping the inescapable. Her shoulders went red with strain as she tried, time and time again to shift them, to get the weight of her hanging body off her fast-weakening wrists.

I picked up the knife again, held the point of her against her chest. It rose and fell; breathing itself was torturous in this position. I had strung up enough scum to know.

“I don’t know anyone called Alois.” She said.

I let the tip of the knife dance over her clothing. I was a decent man, kind enough to leave her with most of what she came in with. Of course had she been Alois I would’ve been forced to fetch something more suitable, the trappings of a Yharnam huntress would not do for nobility. There was little brocade and lace to be had in these stinking streets, and I myself was looking less than my best- but for my sweet sister I would abandon all reservations and acquire something suitable. If it need be taken by force or by theft it made no matter. She shall have nice things again, as will I.

The girl’s coat was thrown aside, too many pockets and weapons. Women shouldn’t be wearing hats to begin with and that too was removed, but the rest I allowed her to keep after making careful inspection to ensure no hidden weapons in unholy places. She had quite a few nasty things in pants pockets and the sleeves of her shirt, but that was all. She was attempting to impersonate a proper lady after all, such base concoctions wouldn’t do.

“What do you know of my sister?” I asked.

“I don’t.” She said quickly. Too quickly.

I let the tip of the knife trail across her cheek. She tensed as the tiniest of cuts opened up, nothing that would scar but enough to make her aware of my practiced hands. I knew how to get a knife to turn all kinds of tricks.

I removed metal from flesh and brought it to my tongue for a taste. The violinist had been enough to satisfy me for awhile, but there was nothing wrong with little snacks here and there.

She stared at me the whole way through, eye to eye with death- or rather eyes to teeth. She seemed to focus on them heavily. It was a curious gaze, the look of a scholar with his specimen. The girl seemed to be cataloging my features for later reference, and I was not appreciative of such treatments.

“I will ask again.” I said, “What do you know of my sister?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She insisted.

Lies and trickery were not well suited to this woman. She had too many obvious tells, to stiff a clip in her speech and her imposter’s eyes revealed everything to me. This was going to be a long and bloody night- not even the kind I preferred. How horribly dull.

It wasn’t until morning that she started to weaken. Little cuts, several bruises and seven removed fingernails later, the girl was ready to speak. Her arms shook with effort. She’d lost feeling in them, numb at the wrists and nervous besides. Sleep deprivation, blood loss, all the little things that broke humans apart. They were all of them books, fine volumes with locks and buckles and binding who assumed the printed pages that recorded their lives were beyond the reach of any reader. How foolish to think that no binding could be split, no leather covering pried away. How delightfully naïve to think that copper clasps could hold their own against a flat blade and a twisting of the wrist. They would always come apart for me.
“I’m sorry.” She huffed. “I’m so sorry.”

She was not speaking to me, of course. When they were about to confess they never apologized to their interrogators but to the ones they were about to betray. Her loyalty had been bought for so little. A few dozen wounds, a black eye and seven fingernails. She called herself the Patron Huntress of England. If that was so England needed to get on their knees and pray for her strength was nothing. Broken to me in a matter of hours.

“What do you know of Vilebloods?” I asked.

The girl struggled to reign in tears as her mouth flapped open and closed, willing words to come out. When none did I stepped closer, placing the tip of my knife underneath one of her last remaining nails. No point in saving the wedding finger- there would be no making proper brides of this one after she had told me all that she knew.

She screamed as I pried it away. I didn’t think much blood was reaching her hands at this point, but there seemed enough to trickle out. Enough to make a dribbling fountain.

“She’s called Fwahe!” The girl screamed.

“Mmm?” I asked.

“T-the Vileblood. The one I know.” She huffed, struggling to mediate the pain coursing through her. Tremors shook her arms and made jelly of her stiffened legs. “S-she’s called Fwahe.”

I was furious and slapped her twice across the face.

“I know of none by that name!”

An impact to her chest so that she would scream, so that she would know the sickening drowning feeling in my gut when I had thought that I had at last been reunited with Alois and it had turned out to be this parasitic creature.

“She….c-change….changed it.” The girl wheezed.

“What?” I asked.

Back and forth, back and forth my blow had sent her swinging on the hook. I took her chin in my hands, holding her eyes to mine, her face to mine so that there could be no disparity. I would see the lies in her eyes if she thought fit to tell them.

“She doesn’t remember….she calls herself Fwahe. She’s from Cainhurst.” The girl sputtered, “She is my lover.”

I sent her spinning again. How dare she make such claims? No one in Cainhurst would fall to such depravity. Blood ran from the lip I had split. It was always shocking how much of it one human could hold. Moreover how much one human could loose and still continue to live.

“The truth!” I demanded. “No more of your lies.”

“It…it is true!” She growled. “S-s-sh-“

I had enough of her. I gave another blow to the head and continued until her eyes had closed and her head lolled to the side, resting on her exhausted arms. Dead or sleeping, I did not care either way. Better she be left to rot here in this dismal place, while I investigate her claims. They were
false, of course and had to be proven such. I would be able to do so with ease I was sure, for how could such perversions be true.

The only reason I bothered to look into what the woman had said was the dim recollection that Alois had preferred to bed women instead of men. Why a woman so strong would choose to lie amongst the weaker sex was something I did not yet fully understand. Of course I had taken numerous women myself, but that was as expected. I enjoyed being the one to hold the reigns- but Alois went after the challenges. It was perhaps the only flaw in my otherwise faultless sister.

Taking for my own the hat and coat of the girl strung in the slaughterhouse I blended in with the Yharnam streets perfectly. The denizens thought me a hunter and were quick to step aside as I prowled the streets, giving me, at last the respect I was due. My hair had to be knotted up and fixed beneath the cap, and I was careful to contain all grins and expressions so that the flash of Vileblood teeth would not disturb the gentle public.

There was no small amount of bowing and scraping as they stood aside. I nodded to those that greeted me with formalities.

“Good day, Brother hunter.”

“G-good morning, Brother hunter.”

“Keep our streets cleansed and our souls clean, Brother hunter.”

They were all so wonderfully respectful now. I had half a mind to march my way down to the Black Octopus to watch the wretched barmaid bow and scrape to me now that I was dressed in what Yharnamites regarded the same as noblemen. That would be a sight worth seeing.

It would no longer befit my station to wander in such loathsome places though, now that I was afforded proper respect it was time to gather information and resume the search for Alois. I tried to find the taste of the other name, the one the girl had provided on my tongue but it sounded foreign and forced. Fwahe was not a hard name to pronounce but so ill did it fit the sister I adored that I would rather it not be spoken at all. If the body yet had breath it would learn not to speak of it.

As I was heading towards the center of town I felt a hand come down on my shoulder.

I whirled around to accost whoever dared make such advances on my person to find myself looking into the eyes of an Executioner. I could not recall seeing one depicted without the looping Logarius Wheel or pointed golden helm, but I knew their wardrobes well enough. There had been hundreds of them on the blood soaked grounds the day I returned to Cainhurst. She was clad in the unmistakable tunic of their order, emblazoned with hunter’s sigil and lined with evenly spaced brass rivets.

“Where are you going?” She asked.

“I-“ I started.

Apparently she was not finished, “We’ve been called to a council. You’re going the wrong way.”

I could not very well allow my cover to be blown and followed dutifully after the Executioner. We were joined by others along the way and I was caught in a crowd of different hunters in different dress all mixed together. The denizens were equally astonished to see us in such droves. Yharnam hunters must’ve tended to stick to night time activities and to invade the citizen space during the day caused quite the shock. Everyone was pouring in to a central building, a church by the look of it. More so then any other variety I saw the capes and cloaks of the Executioners.
They lined the stairs and held open the doors. When we poured into the chamber they directed us to seats and a blonde one stood at the podium in the center of the stage. If there was ever a time to gain information on the hunters, this was it. What fortune that had smiled upon me, how nobly and deftly the hands of Lord Death directed me along my path providing me with exactly what I needed at precisely the time it was required.

Of course the girl had been telling lies. England’s patron hunter appeared to be an Executioner. He seemed every ounce the part one might expect with a pale complexion, a broad figure and the robes of his order perfectly tailored. His grooming was perhaps a bit questionable as there were sizable chunks of hair to either side of his face that should’ve been removed with sharpened razor, but, for whatever reason were left as they were. If that was the fashion in Yharnam it was in despicably poor taste.

“My brothers and sisters, please, come in.” He would say, beckoning the crowds in with a wave of his gloved palm.

They were all eager to comply quickly filing to fit in their seats. I thought I had seen every variety of hunter but there were many amongst their numbers whom I could not name the subsect of. A gang of pale boys, barely beyond childhood painted with charcoal crowded towards the front making boisterous bawdy jokes as people passed them by. I thought I saw Antares, the abhorrent beast from the woods lurking at the back of the room. They stood mostly in shadow and with the unending onslaught of hunters it was impossible to truly tell.

I judged it to be a half an hour before everyone was seated and settled, a time that seemed grossly inefficient for what was supposed to be an organized gang. These men and women were supposed to strike fear into the hearts of things like me, but I wasn’t the least daunted. They were fools who could not recognize a monster in their midst. How horribly blind they must be to have let me slip through their safeguards. The panic when they realized their mistake would be delightful.

Yet patience, there must be patience and careful preceding. The lives of all the hunters in England did not matter if I were unable to locate Alois.

“What pray tell is the meaning of this?” One of the hunters asked, a man dressed almost exactly like myself.

“Lord Gaines please, if you would allow me to speak-“

“Seconded.” Another spoke up, dark haired and with a slightly scholarly yet tired air about him, “Explain yourself Executioner Alfred. Calling a meeting, a council no less in the middle of the day. You are not patron here, you’ve no right to-“

“I am getting to that Lucian.” Alfred said, tension growing in his tone. He cleared his throat and adjusted the stiff high collar of his robes.

An uneasy silence fell over the room. Alfred took a step forward, coming out from the podium to stand in the center of the room.

“Frigga Hemlock has vanished, this we all know.” He said.

That name. I had heard it before.

“She was a grand patron and watched over us with ease, but last night a development in the investigation has given us reason to believe she is no longer in the realm of the living.”

The girl. The girl was called Frigga Hemlock. She was the patron? England’s patron? She had not
been lying. How astonishing. Were I able I might have admitted my mistake and restored one of her fingernails. Too late for such trifles now.

“Last night her lover, the Vileblood Fwahe disappeared, taking with her Executioner Patience who had been assigned to watch over her. We have reason to believe she has slain them both and fled England.”

Instantly the room erupted into a cacophony of shouted sounds. Hunters turned towards Alfred, turned towards their neighbors or even just began shouting in general directions. I caught the broken halves of several opinions. Some were sure she was dead, some though Alfred’s claims nonsense. The pale boys all seemed to be arguing amongst themselves, unable to come to consensus. The Executioner who had grabbed my shoulder began to defend Alfred to the hunter next to her. It was all so loud and confusing, and so wonderfully disorganized.

Alfred had spoken the name I could not, adding new evidence to the girl’s story. Fwahe was not the kind of name one would invent and fabricate then have reciprocated so suddenly. It was not like Johnathan, so common a name one heard it a thousand times and could no longer connect any particular face to it. Fwahe was singular and sudden. Fwahe was potential.

“It is my wish to be allowed to act in her stead!” Alfred said, raising his voice, “Until she is found, dead or alive someone will need to lead England’s efforts against the scourge!”

“What gives you the right!”

That shout rang out louder than all the others. It came from a boy missing most of his fingers, wearing strings of teeth.

“Of course being a Valkyerie Cato, you’re biased in the late Lady Hemlock’s favor.” Alfred said.

“Biased my ass.” Cato returned, “You’ve shown us no proof. They’re not dead until I see a body.”

“That’s unreasonable.” A new executioner spoke. There were so many of them, and this one stood by another that looked just like him. Either my mind was starting to fray just as the madwoman in the slaughterhouse, or these two were related. “They’ve disappeared, absconded. We have searched the entirety of the woods, over and over. You’ve combed it yourself.”

“Missing and dead are different things, Sussex.” The hunter in teeth growled.

“I’m Essex.” The Executioner sighed, “And while that may be well and good, we cannot afford to let all of Lady Hemlock’s work go to waste. The streets are clean, the commerce is flowing and trust among denizens have never been higher. Yharnam flourishes, it is up to us to continue to let it blossom.”

“And you think Executioner Alfred is the best champion of that cause?” asked Lucian.

“Why wouldn’t he be?” Essex asked. “Was it not Alfred who’s master and martyr led the charge at Cainhurst. Some of us are not old enough to remember, or were not amongst our numbers at the time but Alfred’s own pupil, a boy he was willing to mold and grow into a proper Executioner became infected. In order to protect the city Executioner Alfred slew him without hesistation. He is willing to make difficult sacrifices for the greater good.”

“We all make difficult sacrifices.” Gaines said.

“Another man in charge will be disatorous.” One of the woodlanders said. “Remember how bad things were under Minimus?”
“Queen Aspen, I hardly think that Minimus is the measure of all men.” Gaines quantified, “If Frigga is to be replaced at all, the hunters should elect a new leader by merit of vote. We shall have nominations and then every hunter can vote as they see fit.”

“This is madness!” Cato growled, “Frigga’s been gone what? A day? Two? And you are going to take away everything she worked so hard to get, to maintain? She gave up so much to make these streets clean to keep the beasts at bay—“

There was a welcome familiarity to conversations like this. It brought me back to the council rooms at Cainhurst where I stood for my family’s proud name and made negotiations on behalf of our noble queen. My mother, Lady Seren had watched over me at first when I was but a young thing training to fill my role correctly, but as I grew older she stopped looking over my shoulders. By the time I had reached maturity and shared in the elevated blood of Cainhurst becoming Vileblood once and for all, I had most of the northern lands wrapped around my finger.

I could see how this argument would end before it truly had a chance to begin. Matters like these were rarely decided in favor of the passionate, those like Cato who demanded their ideals be heard and sprung their arguments from overzealous emotions rather than reason. The sensible ones, the majority who would be casting votes sat back, as I did to watch the drama play out. Calmly and coolly, one by one all of Cato’s reservations were chased away by Alfred’s clever answers. Sometimes Essex stepped in, or another one of the hundreds of their order to answer instead, further separating the impassioned hunter from the general public.

He did not have the stamina to continue long, and quickly became disheartened.

“Shall we put it to a vote then?” Executioner Alfred asked.

All seemed in agreement and he was about to call for nominations when one of his own flock stood up and spoke.

“No.” He said.

“Sit down.” Alfred said, “Junior Executioner Savoy you are wildly out of line.”

“With all due respect, I’d value the boy’s input.” Said Gaines.

This was agreed to by nearly everyone in the room.

“Very well, step forward then.” Alfred barked.

Strix wove his way past the legs of others until he found an aisle amongst the crowd. He hurried down it and stood in the center of the room, looking into the eyes of those assembled. Like the girl I had caught he didn’t seem intimidated despite the magnitude of the situation. When faced with being judged by his peers he stood proudly.

That was not the only similarity that they shared. His hair had the same grey-silver tint, another one of the bastards born of my kinsmens lucidious appetites. I would not mistake a masculine face for my sweet sister’s however, and I found the color was less offensive on other men. None would be able to best the shade I boasted. I was not worried.

“Speak.” Alfred commanded.

“We cannot allow an Executioner to rule this city.” Strix said.

The statement, especially when coming from one dressed in the cloth of the aforementioned order
set forth gasps from the congregated. Even-tempered as he attempted to remain there was a twitch in Alfred’s lower lids, a tightness to his grip and a sudden firm set to his jaw that betrayed everything.

“Let me explain.” Strix continued, “The priorities of the Executioners are not for the good of the many. They are dedicated to hunting down the few. They- myself included are trained for sneak attacks, assassination and gaining the upper hand against vastly stronger opponents. These things are excellent for soloists, but it would not make for a well run city.”

A few hunters- other loners I could only assume, began to voice their disapproval.

“You misunderstand!” Strix shouted, “We make spectacles out of slaughter, paint the streets with the silver-red blood of the Cainhurst descendents. It would not due for the same sort of thing to occur when dealing with an enemy of the church, per say. There’s too much bloodlust in our order too much.”

“Forgive him, my fellow hunters.” Alfred said, stepping forward and putting his arm in front of Strix. “The boy is too much impassioned, too caught up in idealisms to see the reality in front of him.”

There were nods and whispers from the older members of the hunting collective. The passions of youth were evident on the boy’s face which quickly wrinkled into anger. He started to speak again but Alfred cut in first, and walked around the room as he talked, slowly and subtly forcing Strix back into the crowd.

“And now, truly I think we’ve heard from everyone hear who’d have anything to say.” Alfred continued, “It is high time we put it to vote.”

“But what of the other Vileblood?”

It was another youthful hunter who spoke, this one dressed in no distinguishing garb other then a pair of riding boots. She was likely some sort of correspondant, someone fast on horseback.

“I trust her far less then Fwahe. You can see the hunger in her eyes every time she looks at people. Frigga was right to keep her trapped in the theater- but without the other one there to feed her, and the Executioner watching her gone...”

“I-I’m right here..thanks.”

All eyes turned to look upon the girl who came around from behind Cato. She was so small and so slight I didn’t notice her before now. Her hair was the wrong color to belong to my race. What should’ve been silver was orange. She did not carry herself with Cainhurst pride but there was the proper smell to her, metallic like old minted coins and drawing charcoal.

“Y-you can just say that to my face.”

There was no awkward shuffling nessecary for her to make it down the ailses. Everyone in the vicinity besides the boy with teeth and a handful of others moved as far to the side as they could manage.

The girl with riding boots seemed unable to meet the gaze of the slight little monster. She didn’t seem so intimidating until I got a look and saw the unfamothable depth to the hunger in her eyes. They were like pits dug deep in the earth, graves begging to be filled with bodies. These were mass military graves too, something for efficiency and an excess of corpses, not neat rows and well kept plot but trenches filled in lest the deceased begin to rot.
She certainly was not from proper Cainhurst but with hunger like that she would’ve fit right in. If only her hair had come out the proper color I could’ve considered taking her back with me when Alois and I restored our homeland. With this appearance it would never do. I could not bring a half-breed before the queen, no matter the hunger.

Did she even know I was here? Would she be able to smell it?

“Perhaps it is a choice to be made by the leader we choose.” Alfred offered, “Their first matter to deal with.”

“I’m not going to hurt anyone!” The Vileblood shouted.

“Temp’s never hurt-” Cato started

“She’s survived hasn’t she?” Alfred yelled, “The both of them, those foul creatures survive in our fair city. Do you think it escapes us where these rumors of a Ripper, of a Bloody Crow came from? Do you think we are stupid? It is the creatures Frigga Hemlock harbors that are responsible. A Vileblood who does not eat will go blood-crazed, yet when Fwahe and Templeton winter at home do we ever see the slightest onset of madness?”

“Shut your mouth!” Cato spat.

The Vileblood girl could not look the Executioner in the face. He came towards her as he spoke. I flinched. My body acted on a repressed memory that was not even my own, but I could see the ghost crest of a Logarius Wheel over his shoulder. The man coming towards the girl did not carry a weapon but the weight of his stride and the intensity in his eyes. He was ready to end her here and now.

“She’s eaten our fair denizens the people we fight so hard to protect, haven’t you Templeton?” Alfred growled.

“I-I…” Templeton stammered.

“Admit it!” He demanded.

She shivered.

“Without Frigga’s skirt to hide behind nor Fwahe’s strength you are nothing but a monstrous liability who will devour our whole city if given the chance. My noble master, Martyr Logarius fought so bravely to protect innocents from monsters like you and I will see myself do the same. Now who is with me!”

It wasn’t even a question at that point. Cheers echoed through the high vaulted rooftops of the church. Voting at this point was going to be a sham. The twin Executioners, for now as they came forward it was clear that they were twins or else very similar brothers took a hold of the shaking Vileblood’s arms.

It was not unanimous, but it did not take long. Nominations were had. Lucian and Gaines had sense enough to nominate each other. The woodlanders all stood behind their Queen and perhaps if those with minds of their own in the city had joined together there might have been numbers enough to turn the tides, but the power of the church was massive. They voted almost as one complete entity placing their trust in Executioner Alfred.

He insisted that his position was temporary, that there would be search parties continuing to comb the Forbidden Woods and the territories beyond, as well as the city for the whereabouts of Frigga
Hemlock. It seemed I may have to move her from the slaughterhouse to a safer location. Good to know that the woods was being combed, nice to see their plan of attack laid out before me. The hunters in England were so easily read, each just one more page in the book.

The coronation, if it could be called that was simple. Alfred seemed to have prepared himself ahead of time, and I was not the only one who found it rather convenient that made up for him beforehand was a badge to indicate his status. I did not recall seeing one on the girl, but now a large pin in the shape of the hunter’s sigil on a field of light blue stood out against the greyish wool of his robes. It was a fine choice, and there was a slightly cocky but certainly regal heir to the thing.

I had enjoyed such ornaments when I’d dressed at Cainhurst. One had to look the part. For all my struggle I had held tightly to one such thing, a hairpiece of which I was particular fond. It was only metal setting now- there was a need to carve out the ruby and sell it long ago but the white gold band had remained. I regretted parting with the stone, and would see it restored when the time came. Perhaps I would even make gift of it and set it in the hair of my sweet sister. She’d always worn it so lovely and long.

Attending the matter at hand, all eyes were fixed on the newly chosen leader of English hunters.

“Alfred please wait-“

“Would you be so casual in tone towards your new overseer?” Essex asked.

She gulped, a visual thing. “P-patron Executioner.” She corrected.

Alfred nodded his approval of the title, though he had not requested its amendment.

“Please…please wait until we find Fwahe..or Frigga.” Templeton begged, “Please they’ll explain everything.”

“I don’t see why you can’t explain it.” Alfred said, “Really all of our confusion boils down to a single question. Where have you been getting the blood, Templeton?”

Her eyes darted to everyone except the Executioner before her. She even seemed to be asking the twins for help, though they stood like statues firmly grasping her and not so much as turning their heads. The room fell silent. Many hunters leaned forward, as though this were the climatic moment of a play and they were desperate to know the outcome.

I was confident this play would not surprise me. If the Executioners knew she was getting blood to begin with then surely they knew where it came from. A bottomless appetite like that was not going to be able to lie dormant for months on end, and if Templeton’s claim was she went the whole winter without eating, there ought not to have been a man alive who would believe such things.

“I don’t hunt.” Templeton said.

“Lies!” the twin who was not Essex barked.

“H-honest I don’t! Fwahe’s always done it for me! I couldn’t kill anyone n-not even when Minimus was s-starving me! Ask Scarlett if you d-don’t believe me! G-go on ask her!” Templeton stammered.

As she spoke she struggled against the men that held her. She should’ve had the strength to get past them, if she was truly one of our order. Why was she supressing herself?
“Is Scarlett here?” Alfred asked.

One of the girls seated nearest Cato stood. She was named for her hair, how deploringly creative. It was as red as her face when called upon to speak. She didn’t seem daunted just genuinely embarrassed to have to testify on Templeton’s behalf.

“S-she did not try and eat me, no.” Scarlett said, “And Minimus was starving her… I do remember that.”

“See?” Templeton asked desperately. “See?”

“She… did come close a few times, though.” Scalett amended.

Templeton’s jaw dropped and she stared wide-eyed at the red haired girl. A shiver ran down her spine but it did not register on the Vileblood’s face, as though there were some disconnect between body and mind.

“Scalett… what the fuck.” Cato mumbled.

“Do you believe she might have succumbed, given more time?” Alfred asked.

“No!” Templeton insisted, “Never I’d-“

“He didn’t ask you.” The twin who was not Essex snarled.


“She’s lieing, sir!” Cato shouted, “It was a terrifying time she must be misremembering or has the facts wrong or just-“

“I’m not.” Scarlett said, “I’m just telling the truth.”

They broke out into arguments. Cato threw a punch and the women next to Scarlett stopped it. Two male hunters stepped in and took hold of Cato before he could do any more damage, speaking to him softly and trying to get him to settle down.

“I will not take rash action.” Alfred announced, “If what Templeton says is true then she has nothing to fear. For now let us lock her somewhere and keep her under the watchful eyes of the Executioners you have so graciously put your trust in. If she’s telling the truth it should be of no consequence and her hunger will not corrupt her. If on the other hand it is false then she will be unable to hurt anyone and we can decide how to move on from there.”

“She’s got research to do!” One of the boys holding back Cato said, “She’s a scholar, remember?”

“Then you may bring her books to the jail cell, Sterling.” Alfred said.

“Any objections?”

The group which I could only assume were Frigga Hemlock’s loyalists, dubbed “Valkyeries” all raised their hands. The troup of pale boys and a few various others, but not nearly enough to make a difference. Someone muttered motion carried and it was accepted. The stone-men holding Templeton began to drag her out into the streets. Alfred the newly elected continued to conduct business, but many hunters left in a rush to watch the girl be carried off.

I thought it best to leave before I was scented, spotted or made example of. The hunters of England seemed a dull lot yes, but one must be careful of strength in such numbers. Additionally I had a girl
to conceal and a hidden location to survey for safety. The last thing I needed was to stand before that council as an enemy. It would be nothing to simply eliminate them with brute force and the swing of a sword; but it would be tedious and distract me from finding Alois.

Or Fwahe, if that was the case.

I was a little confused myself at where exactly this other Vileblood might have ended up. If I had Frigga and the Executioners were blaming her capture, her abduction on death than surely they did not know what had become of her. What was to happen to them when she returned? I very much doubted that Fwahe and the lost Executioner were any different, merely lost souls that the faithful had decided to capitalize on. The better for me, for now I had paranoid search parties on both ends out seeking what was mine to find.

The Executioners were out to find and dispose of, and the loyalists to find and return. If I continued to pose as a hunter it seemed I would be able to catch in tenuous arguments the findings of both side, and thus rise above the pettiness and find the clearest path to victory. What a strange way Lord Death had of raising me up and showing me the path to Alois. I was able to slip away from the crowd of hunters with relative ease. There were so many ants milling about the hill nobody noticed when one of them went missing. I draped the coat over my arm and tucked the cap away. It forced me to mingle through the crowds but I didn’t need another hand on my shoulder pulling me back to the room full of hunters.

I had the location of the slaughterhouse marked in my mind as well as on a map, so there was no fear of losing my way. Even so I took my time. I wanted to inspect the building from all angles and see if there were any at which I was exposed. The clamor of the lumberyard nearby, the metal Whirring and saws buzzing surely concealed all noises from arousing suspicion- but a girl’s scream had a certain tone too it. It could seek out the ears of those who fancied themselves heroes and beseech help in dire straits. I had not thought anyone on the alert for such noises, but now I would need to remember to keep the girl quiet while I was gathering my information.

After circling several times I decided against moving her. The old place was as good a stronghold as I was ever going to get. When the woods were exhausted they might search for her in places like these but when they did I would be able to see them coming. The skylights showed the city from every viewpoint, warning me of attack from a great distance. They were nothing when held against the battlements of proud Cainhurst, but they would have to do.

Should I be approached they would also provide escape. A nimble leap onto the nearest rooftop and I will have melted to shadows in seconds. The girl was not a slight thing, but I had been able to easily manage her over my shoulder when I’d brought her here, escape would no doubt be just as easy. Should it come to that.

I wanted to keep her. She seemed valuable and if they found my sister I may need to ransom for her very life. How silly to think it was a thing bought or sold, traded like currency for comestibles. It was deplorable. She was above such things, would always be above such things- but it was my job to protect her. I was her older brother and seeing to the safety of my sweet sister meant getting my hands dirty.

“Fwahe.” I muttered it again trying the name to see if it was an acquired taste. I found it just as deplorable as when I’d first heard it. The possibility of it bearing fruit was dismal at best, but it was the only lead I had.

The hunters would have to be carefully infiltrated. There were many outcasts, evident from the events of the gathering whom I might be able to befriend and siphon intelligence from. Those pale boys seemed a fairly stupid lot, but they were boisterous and stood out far too much for my liking.
I was not going to cut my hair, stain my skin and pose as one, not when there were better options. Cato certainly seemed the sort who would easily be lead astray. After the devastation he suffered, betrayed by his own allies there would be the desire for fresh companionship. I would ask Frigga of his vices, for he was one of her men and perhaps there was something corruptible within that angry soul. If not then I was certain I could win over Strix. Even if Cato would be brought in to my cause I would be able to win over Strix, there was everything to gain from a relationship with the boy. I did not fear the mantle of Execution on his shoulders, for it was clear he had sympathy for the people he had slain.

His mistake. Sympathy was a symptom of the human condition and one of the most easily charming and exploitable traits of the little friendships they formed. If only they could see the world from above, as I did. If they knew how the hawk viewed the ants then they would know better. Nothing differed, one from the other. Crush one and another, identical took its place. The lives of the hawks were far more precious.

I slid through the old wooden doors of the slaughterhouse. I was going to have to seal those tighter and make a concealed entrance for myself. That would be safer. My nostrils filled with the scent of blood as I crossed the threshold and hand over hand began to climb the rusting ladder to the attic. Her cuts had stopped flowing but she hovered over a pool of her own blood. It soaked her white shirt and ran in rivulets down her arms. The rise and fall of her chest assured me that she was still living.

I was not so cruel a man as to let her perish. There had been a bucket and a drinking ladle left up in the attic. The water inside the pail was stale and brackish but when I pressed it against the girl’s cracked lips she sipped eagerly and did not resist.

Once more I noted the unseemly elegance with which she completed the task. Most allowed water to spill over, to drip down their chin as they greedily sought all they could have. Drowsed in her own blood and hung like curing meat she still preserved her dignity, until I forced her to abandon it. I spilled water on her intentionally and pressed the ladle to her mouth at odd angles so that she might drink as sloppily as anyone else. The girl would become a rule, not its exception.

“Will you not thank me for my generous gift?” I asked.

She said nothing.

I took a step forward and finally, finally she cringed. Exhaustion was a weapon that I wielded against my enemies as well as any knife.

“Thank you.” She whispered, so weakly I could hardly here it.

I placed my fingers under her chin, palm flat and elegant. It was a gentle touch as I lifted her eyes to mine, staring at her. Almost Alois.

“A little louder.” I told her.

“Thank you.” She said in even tone. There wasn’t a touch of affection in those words.

“We have much to talk about.” I said.

Her brows furrowed. She very much doubted it, but when I tossed the name Cato out into the open she gasped and was astounded by my knowledge. Truly it was only one with my skilled hands, my talent for subtle maneuvers and the almighty guidance of Lord Death would would be able to find Alois and restore the glory of Cainhurst.
“Tell me all that you know.” I said, “Or there will be prices to be paid.”

So fearful for the lives of herself and her companions, the girl was eager to betray them all and began to relate their particulars to me.
Chapter Summary

It's gonna be harder then you think to leave this place, let me explain.....

Chapter Notes

As always please let me know what you think!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was something akin to numbing mist, accept it put me to sleep. When I woke up I was weighed down with chains and there was a pounding in the back of my head. They had caged me. The last time I had been caged I had seen the man who held the keys become nothing but pulp beneath my feet. That was the only thing that kept me from devastation, the knowledge that I had come through this before and would do it again. I would pry about the bars of this cage and claw out the throat of the man who put the barrel of his gun to my head. I would hunt down the Executioner boy and tear him to pieces. Tearing was too elegant a fate for him. They all deserved far worse.

Men had put my cage inside a wooden box on wheels and shut the door, shut out the light from behind me. A tiny shard of moonlight poked its head in through a crack in the wood, but that was the only thing around me besides darkness.

Generally it was not so much a problem. I could see in the dark beyond human capacity, when there was something to see. There was nothing in here. They had put me in a box inside of another box and taken away the light and the world. I threw myself at the bars until I’d bruised my shoulders, my back. I clawed at the keyhole until my fingertips bled, even bending and gnawing at it like a crazed dog- shameless in pursuit of escape.

All night I raised as much hell as I possibly could. I screeched like a banshee and scraped my nails on the metal floor of my prison. It produced a horrendous scratching that grated in ones ears, When that proved fruitless I began to claw away at the wood. Perhaps the metal would not come undone but wood can be broken through. There was not much purchase to be had. Arms and legs chained it was all I could do to force my fingertips beyond the bars and scrape at the side of the cart. Long slivers of an unvarnished cheap variety found their way under my nails. They stung the sensitive skin but I ignored the irritation and continued to claw away, chipping at the boards bit by bit. Every time I loosed a chunk it was a victory, a millimeter closer to the light, to freedom. Were I able to tear a hole big enough I would reduce to every indignity and pull myself across the ground, scraping grass and dirt and pulling the cage along behind me. I would crawl through the entire woods if I must to return to Yharnam, to resume the search for Frigga.

Before I had broken through a single board the box began to shake, the wheels below me churning as the cart jolted into motion. Time had become lost to me and now my captors were on the move. My heart dropped. I could get no sense of direction, not here, not when sealed away so tightly. With every rotation of the wheels I was moved further from my purpose. Revenge and reunion
were put further and further away. I was not even allowed to watch them go, I could only grasp a
general variation in shades of light as we passed underneath tree branches. The small crack was not
big enough for light to dapple across the boards, just to flicker no larger than a firebug.

Hot tears once more burned at my eyes. So long had I held them back in situations like this, when
men standing over me would laugh. I recalled dimly, of the same occurrence in Cainhurst walls
and Cainhurst beds. The voice of a woman, not as familiar as the queen but with eyes like ice
telling me not to cry I’d ruin my makeup.

They had stolen everything from me, and I was wracked with grief but like the girl in the shattered-
mirrors of memories I followed the ice-woman’s advice and did not cry. I swallowed it down like
Callum’s reeking medicines and replaced it with more rage, greater fury.

My sword was gone and my hands were bleeding. I needed the sword, it was important. Someone
was inside the sword and I needed to free them. Or was it that I needed to forget them? It was
impossible to think with the jostling of the cart and the sound of wood scraping wood. Outside was
the sound of their horses, and that made my blood boil.

Swift had been good, and moreso she had been Frigga’s. The mare trusted me and allowed me to
take her into the woods. Most she would bite at should they come close but overtime she had
become used to me. We could’ve been called friends by some, and the horrid barrel of that circus-
man’s gun had ended her life. Frigga would be devastated when she found out- but I would avenge
her.

It was a long time before the wheels ground to a halt. Being thrown from one side of the cart to the
other had given me a headache, bringing back strange voices into my skull. This hadn’t happened
in a long time and the sedative Callum used to keep things at bay had been stolen from me. I was
sure I could not stand things another second, but the cart drove on, unfeeling towards the girl in its
stomach.

When we stopped I didn’t realize it until the door opened. My head was pounding that hard, hard
enough to make me think we were still moving.

“Careful now.” I heard someone say, “She’s a feisty one.”

Fiesty did not begin to cover it. Whoever made the mistake of coming close to me would find
themselves with missing parts. If they were stupid enough to lay a hand on the bars of this cage I
would bite off their fingers, right through the bones. If their boots strayed within my reach I would
sink my claws into their toes and tear my way up to the legs, turning their pants red and pulling
them down to the floor. They would never rise again.

I was greeted by the smiling face of the man who had killed Swift and traded coin for living
creature. He wore a top hat and clothes that were styled to be fine things but were made of vastly
inferior material. He came inside the cart, getting close, so dangerously close. I could smell leather
polish and aftershave. Cheap smells the both of them, the scent of a man who could not bed a
proper lady thus took to trying to impress the women he paid for.

“I’ve been waiting a long time to find one of you.” He said. He beckoned someone outside closer.

The man who followed after was even worse, a hulking brute of a man with ragged brown hair that
seemed more like fur. If there was found moss growing inside of it, or bugs crawling up and down
the unwashed strands I wouldn’t have been surprised. Unlike the ringmaster he did not smell
perfumed at all, but rather like someone who had never once taken to bathing in all their life. I
couldn’t decide which of the two was worse.
“She’s the genuine thing isn’t she Cutjack?” He asked.

“’Hard to say Mr. Cruptinelli, sir. Best to be bringing her out into the light for proper inspection.’”

Inspection, I loathed the term. I was not some tiny creature caught under the microscope of larger beings. Still, I couldn’t afford to let anger take the reins and negate all chance of gaining an upperhand. They would have to put their hands on the cage bars to take me anywhere. The second they were within my grasp I would dig my nails in and bring the fingers, putrid or perfumed to my lips so I might bite them off.

To my dismay this seemed to have been a problem the men of the circus had encountered before. Unseen from inside was a loop at the top of my prison, they simply slid a pole through it and bore me out of the cart that way. The sun was blinding and I hissed when it hit my face.

“Oya! Is it true then? Are they allergic to the sun?”

The ringmaster and Cutjack set the cage down on the grass. The person asking ridiculous questions was ridiculous himself, covered all over with metal rings and studs. He jingled when he walked, chains from rings in his ears to rings on his lips clanking against the other metal protrusions he rubbed against. All I need to do was wait for lightning to strike and he’d be fried. The sky didn’t seem to indicate storms however.

Then it stuck me that I shouldn’t be able to see the sky at all. Traveling all night had taken the circus and its repulsive employees beyond the Forbidden Woods. We were somewhere unknown to me, with no sign posts or roads to follow back. In the dead of night they’d stolen my life, my bearings, everything.

Even if I did escape I didn’t know which direction to go there.

Even if I did escape, I was never going to find my way back to Yharnam.

The chains weighed me down and the cage held me captive but the knowledge that I was lost held me prisoner in greater degrees then any physical bindings. Hopelessness was my jailer.

“Put your storybook ideas away, Marcel. We are men of science.” Cruptinelli replied.

He jingled when he laughed too, doubling over and clutching his chest with ringed fingers. All of him was cheap iron, not a glimmer of silver or gold, not even bronze. Everything was cheap and weak here, it should’ve been easy to break free of.

“Men of science. You’re a con artist Hayden, a damn-“

There was the harsh impact of skin on skin and metal. The instant Cruptinelli’s hand came away Marcel was bleeding in several places. His eyes watered as he re-adjusted the rings on his face. The one in his nose made me briefly wonder if the circus-man had caused a nosebleed or if it was from the piercing itself.

“Mock me again and I’ll pry those rings out of you one by one, starting with all those you keep hidden.” He growled, “If I’ve told you once I’ve told you a thousand times to show some respect when talking to me.”

He laughed again, “We share blood. You are not above my station.”

The circus-man’s head dipped up and down, looking over Marcel in one quick assessment. “You’re nothing but a mutilated bastard, borne because our father couldn’t control himself. We do not share
a last name, and the only branch of family tree you perch on is rotten and does not bear fruit. You’re a mistake and lucky to have a tolerance for pain that allows you to earn a living. I did not ask for your opinion. I did not tell you to speak. Stand silently, and assist us as we inspect this new acquisition. Do not forget your place. Have I made myself clear.”

Marcel sucked on the ring in his lip and spat a gob of blood in the grass. “Yes.”

“Excuse you.” Cruptinelli corrected.

“Yes sir, oh exalted brother of mine.”

“Half-brother.” He muttered, but did not press the matter further. “Assist Cutjack in whatever he needs.”

There was no further affirmation, but no blood hit the grass either. Marcel opened the clicking toggles of a briefcase. Cutjack leaned over and pointed to something, the jingling boy removed it for him.

Clearing his throat and donning a threadbare bowler hat with a withered flower in the brim Cutjack began what seemed some kind of rehearsed performance.

“There are actually a few ways to verify the authenticity of a Vileblood specimen.” He began. In his hands he held a thin piece of metal which when pulled correctly folded out on itself. It was similar to the pointers lecturers use for teaching schoolchildren their alphabet, indicating each mark on turn with the thin end of the stick.

Cutjack did not make his marks upon a blackboard. The thin metal piece began to poke at the collar of my shirt.

I struggled awkwardly to avoid it. The cage was too small to stand in. My ankles were bound to each other, and a chain connected them to the cuffs on my wrists. All movements were locked tight together and I did not wish to endure the indignity of losing my balance while these men tried to put me on display. I could not catch it in my fingers, but they hadn’t locked my mouth yet.

“If she has ever been caught by Executioners or put on any kind of trial they will have marked her with a branding or carved scar of the letter “V”, for Vileblood.” He informed.

His words may have been true but I didn’t focus on them. The next time Cutjack made an attempt to move the fabric at my neck I spun, catching the tiny thing between my teeth and biting until it bent. In a rage he furiously pulled at it, trying to yank the pointer back through the bars. I was not letting go, even if the metal slashed my gums to frayed edges. Marcel was once more laughing much to the chagrin of the circus man.

Cutjack reduced himself to using both of his hands to furiously tug at the rod. It broke, one of the segments loosing itself from the rest. He fell to the ground, quickly picking himself up and trying to salvage his performance.

“A-as you can see she exhibits the characteristic bite of the species.” He said.

I worked to drop the little metal poker from my mouth into my fingers. I had never learned to pick locks, but I knew an improvised weapon when I saw one. The thin thing slipped right through my fingers and Cutjack was able to snatch it back.

“Of course even if she doesn’t have the brand there is one surefire way to tell a real Vileblood from any of the fake ones people hawk. Too many times you’ve been tricked by powdered hair and
painted skin, but no one can fake the color of their blood. These monsters bleed silver.”

Using the jagged edge of his broken pointer he poked me in the cheek, swift and sudden. It was a hard jab, he was expecting the strength of my skin. Hayden’s eyes looked like those of a hungry creature stalking its prey- just about to pounce.

“Is the color right Cutjack?” He asked.

“Sir it doesn’t get more silver then that.” He replied.

“We’re going to make a fortune.” He smiled, “Just imagine it, right there in that cage sits the key to eternal youth.”

His goon seemed like he didn’t want to argue, but could not understand the circus-man’s words. Cruptinelli rolled his eyes and waved his hand dismissively.

“Never mind, nevermind. Find a place for her in the best tent- Marcel help him carry her. I’ve got to speak with the painter.”

“Yessir.” The two of them said together as they bore me off.

When he was out of earshot Marcel leaned down, coming as close to face-to-face with me as he dared.

“So is it true?” He asked.

“What?” I said

“Are you allergic to sunlight? Do you really only eat stillborn babies? Is Cainhurst haunted?” So many questions like so much cheap metal.

“Bite me.” I said.

Is Cainhurst haunted? What a stupid question. Of course for me the place was a tainted mix of memories, part of them from the time before I was Fwahe and part of them from the darkened prison cell the Throat-Slitter had kept us in. There was nothing but ghosts in those halls. So many varieties it was dizzying. The bones of my brothers at arms and wheel-wielding enemies had long turned to dust. Some things were better buried, and even without a clear memory of them I knew Cainhurst was an age written in red. There was no need to dwell on it.

“Quit yappin’ would ya?” Cutjack barked.

“She hasn’t even said nothin’ yet.” Marcel mumbled.

They took me into a hideous tent. Everything here was gaudy and patterned with harlequin diamonds or long blocky stripes. The colors of the canvas were stained with dirt and smoke, furthering adding to the dreary atmosphere. The one I was carried into was striped with white and purple. The colors of smoky incense, fields of flowers and tombstones- they bore me into a grave.

It was not as dark as I feared inside the tent. As much as I raged against my oppressors being poked at in the sunlight was preferable to being kept in that bouncing dark little box. There were candles inside, but their perfumes did little to chase away the reek of the place. Everything stank, sweat and mildew and urine mixing together and turning up my nose.

“Where’d he say to put her?” Marcel asked.
“He didn’t.” Cutjack said, “But there’s a spot by the Pthumerian.”

“Milksop? He won’t like having something scary that close to him.”

Cruptinelli’s goon carried on anyway. “Stop naming the pets.”

“I didn’t name him.” Marcel did, “That’s just his name.”

“Mmm…told you that did he?” Cutjack asked as I was born past an enormous cage. The thing inside of it was too tall to be human, too tall to be real. It glowed too, white-blue like the moon, giving off its own life. I had heard of plants that did this and Templeton spoke of creatures beneath the waves that exhibited the same properties.

Damn Templeton and her sensitivities. If she would’ve just read the boys notebook we could’ve seen this plan coming. I’d been outwitted by the mundane account of his life. I hadn’t combed it clearly enough, surely there was a code or a hidden passage. I should’ve read it more thoroughly, allowed myself to be bored by it so that I could protect Frigga. Damn Templeton for not helping me. She would’ve spotted it right away.

The glowing creature came towards the bars, familiar with the sound of Marcel’s jingling. I could see it more clearly now. If someone had put a human onto one of the undulating belts used to stretch taffies they may have left a similar shape to the thing in the cage. There was a human form too it but everything was either too big or too small. The mouth of the thing hung open like a fishes.

“Sop.”

“She’s a friend.” Marcel said.

“She’s a vicious man-eating creature from the cold heartless north.” Cutjack said, “She’d kill you soon as look at you.”

“A friend.” Marcel insisted.

“Sop. Sop. Sop.”

Marcel sighed. “Well I don’t make the rules Milksop you know that. I’ve told you that. We’ve talked about the rules I don’t make. “

“Let’s go see what Mr. Cruptinelli wants from us.” Cutjack said, “No dallying talking to the Pthumerian.”

“Bye Milksop.” Marcel said.

“Sop.” Was the response.

They retreated, leaving me in the stinking tent with their other acquisitions. I should’ve spat back at Cutjack for calling me a pet, implying that I was sub-human but this place was too astonishing. I thought I had possessed a strong stomach for the unusual but so much of it condensed into one room made it feel like I’d fallen into a nightmare, black silk all around- and swallowing me.

I tried to count them, but the numbers seemed to add up differently every time. I had seen many twisted things. I was a hunter- such was normal but there had always been a weapon in my hand. They had never walked the mid-ground between friend and foe and if they were to come at me I could make a swift exit. It was different here.
Mostly the circus carried the infected. I was astonished at their brazen disregard for the spread of the scourge, but along one wall they had something billed as a living diagram of the process. It was set up like the drawings wise men do of human evolution, starting with a monkey and moving through all the discovered bones until there stood human skeleton. In this tent it was the very same, starting with a human and progressing towards a full-fledged greatwolf. The infected ones skin was all wrong, covered in disc-shaped sores the size of coins. It must’ve been a wretched new strain coming from keeping the sick ones in such close proximity to each other.

They didn’t know if Vilebloods could carry the scourge. I had feared infection as much as anyone when Yharnam had started to crumble. Instinctively I reached for the bells on brass chains, thought to keep off such maladies.

They were not there.

It was shocking what I’d missed about myself. The clank of metal chains had replaced the sound of bells, of my own adornments. I had killed men for those. There were bells on those links as important to me as Cato and his many strings of teeth. Without them my heart started to pound.

It was a stupid thing to worry about. They were charms, trifles nothing more. There was no power to protect me in those brass domes anymore so then in Cato’s strings upon strings of teeth. Still, despite reassuring myself with cold fact, I felt lost without them. Somehow weaker. My head was still pounding.

I started at the eyes of the persons captured pre, post and mid transformation. They stared back, but we didn’t speak. Conversation was perhaps beyond their addled minds.

“Sop.”

“Fwahe.” I said.

“Oh please not another one of you who talks nonsense.”

I turned behind me to see where the groaning was coming from. The scorn came from a diminutive child who stood no taller than my knees, were I able to come to my full height. A child that age wouldn’t have been able to speak full sentences and the advertisements behind her advertised a fairy-child. More of Templeton’s silly folk tales, things like this happened at birth not after with the assistance of winged creatures.

“That’s my name.” I growled.

“Oh.” She said, dropping into a curtsey. “Beggin’ your pardon Miss Fwahe.”

“Just Fwahe.” I said, “No miss.”

“You botherin’ people again Miss Bea?”

Great, so more of them could talk. The whole tent came alive soon after that, and though I was relived the stomach-tight dread was dissipated their talk was loud and irritated my aching head. If only I were back on Frigga’s bed with blankets on top of me, sheets on top of the blankets and Frigga on top of me on top of the sheets. I remembered how good those sheets smelled, because she slept in them every night. The world could be reduced to nothing but that single room, that single bed and it would be enough.

I never should have left it. I wanted to blame Templeton, the tiny Executioner boy, anyone but really I should not have left that room. What could’ve made me want to leave? There was blood
enough. There was time enough to wait, she surely would’ve returned. I didn’t have to go chasing after Executioners in the night.

“Please.” I begged, I pleaded with gods I did not know, gods who wouldn’t listen. “Please just let me go back. I’ll do it right this time. I’ll be good. I won’t wander.”

It was all done in silence, thoughts beseeched on bended knee in the cathedral of my skull. There were no gods up there and I was not delivered. The same always happened. No one could turn back the clocks.

It was a stupid question and whatever inquires he felt fit to lay at my feet at that moment I took it upon myself to ignore. I curled up on the cold metal floor of the cage and willed that I could sleep. It need not be long, a moment, an hour, just long enough that I could slip away and dream of Frigga. If only in dreams, I could erase the mistakes.

A few more of the strange people tried to talk to me but I refused to speak to any of them. I just couldn’t keep up a conversation. This was a prison not a place to make friends. Some seemed to share that mindset but others smiled and waved and went about their caged lives. How could they not smell the reek of the place, see the dead grass beneath them and the decaying canvas overhead.

I thought being in this hive of unending noise was to be my only punishment until I figured out how to escape from this place, but I was so very wrong. When the sun began to dip below the trees the light in the tent was reduced to the candles. There was one by every cage, casting strange shadows across the forms of the people inside. In daylight you could clearly see the peeling paint on the advertisements posted behind them. They were silly drawings all to do with ordering people about and stealing their money.

“Come see the spider boy- the one touched by amygdala and be absolved.” They said, “World’s strongest woman, Live beasts- see the ravages of the scourge firsthand.”

Who would want to look at something like that?

Apparently most of what ever city was nearest. Commotion began to rage outside, and briefly the smell of the tent was taken over by better things, roast corn and toffee.

“Step right up, step right up!”

Everyone inside became hushed when those words hit their ears. I hated this. It felt like being auctioned, and I remembered the glint in Essex-or-Sussex’s eyes when he accepted payment for my existence. He’d get his coins alright, pushed through his eyesockets by my thumbs.

“Step right up and see beast transformation first hand! Gaze upon the likes of things you’ve never dreamt in your dizziest nightmares! See the creatures that sent hunters screaming back to their hideaways! Yes folks, that’s right folks! We have for you for the very first time a real live Cainhurst Vileblood.”

“No you ain’t!”

“I assume you sir, we have verified her authenticity with only the most cutting edge methods available.”

The only cutting edge was the one edge they had actually used to cut me. My blood was judge jury and executioner all at once. They didn’t need any new methods of finding Vilebloods. We carried the evidence in our veigns.
“Only a dime folks, only a dime for all you can see of the monsters of Yharnam and beyond!”

They packed themselves into the tent by the dozens. In a slow moving-snaking line they clung to the coats of the people in front of them and took careful cautious steps through the candlelit space.

“Look here folks, you can clearly see how one changes from man to beast.”

With each tour came a barker, and their speech repeated over and over hour after hour for crowd after massive crowd.

“You don’t need to worry about catching the scourge, oh no not here. At the Circo Oscuro we value our patrons. Note how we have gone to the trouble and expensive of sewing brass and gold plated coins under the skin of each of these beasts. As everyone knows bronze and gold ward off infection. They’ve got the remedy right below the surface. They will not hurt you.”

While they filed in to look at the display he made attempts to sell wolf-fur charms to those the barker judged to be of more ample pockets and purses. Superstition sold in this place, a few happily parting with their money for what, from my perspective looked like a clipping of dog fur in a glass jar. The way they took it with such reverence and solemnity was laughable. It was junk. How did they not see that it was junk?

“Ah, yes the spider boy!” The barker bellowed, “Touched by the hands of amygdala and now they grow on his back. He can see the future and knows all things, who will come forth to touch his hand and be redeemed.”

Rarely were there bold volenteers. The boy really did seem to be a boy, who sat on a chair and did as he was bade do. I remembered his shilouette from the night I had been dragged here, the crooked arms were hard to miss. He had seemed something fearful then, but in reality I’d met chickens braver then him. How much could I fault a deformed five year old for acting with such fear?

A lot. There was a lot I could fault anyone in this poisoned place for.

At first I did all I could to ruin the barker’s speeches. I would yell profanities, scrape my nails over the metal bottom of the cage and watch in delight while people covered their ears or cowered in fear. The glowing giant next to me would unleash choruses of nothing but panicked “Sop Sop Sops” which heightened the irritation factor.

Yet by the third wave of people I realized this was exactly what the salesmen of the Circo Obscuro wanted. A fearsome beast safely in a cage whom they could get to bear her teeth and act a fool. How stupid of me.

When the crowds started to really crowd in, hearing others talk of me as though I were some public scandal- which I guess in a sense people did talk about back in Yharnam, that was when I decided that doing nothing was better than raising hell. When they packed around and the barker began to ply his trade I sat sedately, letting my eyes glaze over. I didn’t twitch or scream or cause a fuss and the people were bored with me. Such fickle creatures.

“Cor blimey Liam, you fraidy cat. Can’t believe you were scared of a Vileblood.” I caught one of the young and stupid ones saying as they headed on to the next human attraction.

The employees became annoyed with me. They rapped their canes on the bars and did not stop people from throwing stones, bits of paper or handfuls of food at me. They enticed it, wanting a rise. I had been bent-backed in chains while the throat-slitter’s knife ran over centuries old wounds.
There was nothing they could do to hurt me here.

It was not something I preferred, but when the need arose I could wait. They could poke and prod at me, test me all they liked but I was tougher then they. Somewhere in the far reaches of my mind was the pride of a noblewoman I never was and still am. Back-straight and eyes unclouded we do as we must and endure all things.

“Step right up! Step right up- Vicious Vilebloods live in the flesh!”

The words were always the same, over and over. I let them become a lullaby to me, curling in on myself and feigning sleep on the floor of my cage. Even the adults seemed to become sun-tired children disappointed by the park zoo’s lack of animal activity. Who would believe a lion fearsome when it lay on its rocks warmed by the sun, the same as any housecat with a patch of sunlight?

Who was too say I was anything but a girl pretending, a sham like the wolf fur and the garish clothes. I kept my eyes closed and let my chest rise and fall in measured increments. I didn’t even pretend to snore, nothing that might be construed as ferocious. Why give them the slightest satisfaction.

“She’s nothing but a fake.” One man angrily spat at the barker. “I want my money back.”

“Sir I assure you, she’s as real as they come.” The barker replied, “Mr. Hayden Cruptinelli spared no expense in acquiring her. She was purchase from none other then the Executioner’s Union of Central Yharnam. There is none more qualified in the identification of Vileblood’s than there well trained eyes.”

“Well there eyes can be trained to fall for a sham as much as they like, but I’ll be having my dime back now.”

When they saw the barker giving refunds, the other patrons rushed him all of them crying out that they’d been played for fools.

“That wolfs fur is dog hair.” The spider boy said.

Maybe he wasn’t the worst and most cowardly child in the entire world. The barker was able to goad him into admitting he was lieing- even though he was probably telling the truth. The spider-boy also apologized to the audience and offered to bless them all at once, but no one was interested in blessings from a person who was caught inbetween lies. Somehow they just didn’t trust his word for it any longer.

Trust here seemed to be as easily won as lots and while we could hear clearly the sounds of showmanship and coin exchange outside the canvas walls, the people stopped coming inside. Word of mouth and a disappointing Vileblood spread quickly and patrons eager to spare their companions the trouble must have been steering them towards other things. Why bother with a sleeping girl when they could gape at Marcel’s decorated face or do whatever else it was people did at circuses.

All I could see was misery in different shades being looked at by the slightly less miserable. Who was going to pay money to look at that?

They didn’t blow out the candles or make any announcement of the shows end, but when the noise outside was gone a team of Cruptinelli’s underlings began to take things apart. They were going to put me back in that dark wooden box and move me someplace else. They were going to take me further from Frigga, and further from her room and her sheets and her long beautiful fingers.
I couldn’t afford to think about that. I held my chin high as they bore me over their shoulders locking my inside of dark spaces. I held onto myself all the while as tent poles, canvas roles and boxes of grain were packed in alongside me. They didn’t risk anything living, but I could try and cause trouble to what they had left in range. Little by little I could pick away at them.

It was only when the wheels began to turn that I let my chin drop. My neck and shoulders ached. I had went to great lengths to keep them up, so that the collar of my shirt might stay in place and I would not have to endure people pawing at old scars. Here though, alone and jostled back and forth, with aches in my head and splinters under my nails, here I could cry.

I did not let myself despair long. Nothing productive ever came from crying, but I had learned from watching Templeton do it so often, that it did tend to make one feel a little better. Holding in was hard, and there was a performance, a dignity to maintain around the carnival men and the wretched patrons. In private I would allow the cup of sadness to spill over, then gather it up to collect again. The Circo Obsucro would never see the cup.

The landscape was different when we stopped again. I was not greeted by forests, just a wide field of dead corn. There was a town in the distance, but again no name. No sign post.

The jingling boy had returned and he was carrying a bowl in his hands.

“Hungry?” He asked

I was not a dog. I did not sip from bowls. I turned away from it.

“Come on don’t be like that. We had to kill one of Horace’s chickens for this.” He protested.

Chicken’s blood. They were trying to feed me the blood of animals in place of human substance. Did they think me stupid? If not even for me, then for Temp we had tried every other concoction that could be thought of. We pulled the medic in to find a synthetic remedy but nothing worked. Chicken’s blood would not sustain me.

“That is filthy.” I said.

“Horace says it tastes like chicken.” Marcel said with a shrug.

Horace could rot in hell. I did not know him, nor did I care. The jingling boy kept pressing the bowl against the bars of the cage, it was too wide to go through. He wanted me to lean forward and drink it, but he was never going to get the satisfaction. I turned away and watched him picking himself up and try again. Persistent little bastard.

It was somewhat amusing, if anything in this horrible troupe could be labeled as such, but I tired of it before long. I wished him away, and made it so. The next time he rested the rim of that putrid, half-washed dirty bowl against the cage bars, I put my palms together and made a jab at it, lifting my fingers and titling it upwards. Chicken blood spilled down his shirt and pooled in his pants, staining the ground around him.

“What the fuck!” Marcel shouted, jumping back from me.

His metal face was so distraught, and I laughed right in it. This would be the last time anyone tried to feed me the blood of a chicken.

“Kos almighty, Vileblood. I’m trying to help you!” He said, “My oh-so caring brother insisted you have to drink that bowl. Now I have to kill another chicken, and go through all of this again. These pants were good for two more days, but now you’ve stained them.”
“Bite me.” I growled.

Marcel threw up his middle finger and jingled his way back into the circus. There were stifled snickers from the people he passed by, asking questions about what lewd activities had caused his crotch to bleed so much.

He didn’t come back alone. It was not the ragged haired Cutjack or the top-hatted circus man on either side but two strangers. They looked to be odd fellows just like him, and both were women. The larger, and in fact largest of the three reminded me of Anwen who had used to be one of Frigga’s strongest fighters. She hadn’t survived the Cainhurst escape, but had in fact made it possible for the rest of us. Without her we would’ve surely lost Cato if not the entire lot of them. This woman however was even a head taller. The other one had a dolls proportions, with thin limbs and big eyes. The innocent look her stature might’ve acquitted her was completely negated by a cascade of tattoos that wound their way down her arms, up her neck and over her cheeks. She was drowning in black lines.

“And Cruptinelli says shes the real deal?” the inked one was saying.

“Yeah, saw her blood myself. He’s got plans for her but I don’t know why. You know how he gets with his collecting.” Marcel replied.

They nodded. The large girl was wearing gloves, the thick heavy armored kind that seemed oddly familiar. There was a threat to them and only once she had drawn near did I realize that they were the metal-disc covered bracers of an Executioner. What insult that I could not escape their foul order even here.

“Please just drink it.” Marcel said as he approached me. The blood was not in a bowl this time, but a bottle, like one might use on a child. That was an insult, I was no infant. I told him where he might stick his bottle of blood, then the jingling boy sighed and nodded to the women.

“Rotu, if you would please.”

From a pouch at her belt the one covered in tattoos removed a set of reed pipes and began to play them. The melody was soothing and made my eyelids have weight that was not their own. Everything became heavy and slow.

“Now you, Nimah.” Marcel instructed.

A pocket watch became a pendulum before my eyes. Nimah started to speak but the words did not seem to come from this, or any other vocabulary that I’d previously experienced. It was something else, something not of this world and I found myself drawn to it. The flittering notes of the reed pipe and the soft sounds of Nimah’s voice were lulling me into transe. Back and forth, back and forth the pendulum swayed.

I understood the commands given to me even without a translator. My mouth opened of its own accord and I dimly felt my chin press against the bars. Warm blood, metallic, thick and reeking of barns and fearthers began to pour down my throat. I swallowed it, polluting my stomach with its foul taste. My teeth turned red and my lungs struggled for air while the stream of it came down.

“Easy does it.” Marcel said, “We’re almost there.”

I was being coaxed like some sick child. My brain seemed split between hated and calm acceptance. In a shout everything crumbled away and I was confused no more.

“What is the meaning of this!”
The bark came, of course, from none other than the circus man. It did not send the girls scattering, but it made Marcel flinch. “I’m just doing what you told me, Mr. Cruptinelli.”

“I didn’t tell you to feed her charmed from a bottle like an infant you imbicle! The public wants her wild and blood-crazed not the….the sleeping housecat she was last night!” He picked up the empty bowl, still on the ground from earlier spill and hurled it at Marcel.

The jingling boy ducked. Rotu gripped the pipe with her teeth so that her playing hands might shoot out to catch the piece of dirty crockery mid-air. Playing music must not have been her only talent. She glared at the circus-man.

“Yeah I tried things your way, sir.” Marcel spat, “And all I got was blood spilled all over my pants. She doesn’t eat chicken blood, your forcing a poor diet on her, just like those starving tigers. You covet new things so much, but you’ve never cared for them properly- then you wonder why things never perform according to your plans.”

“And what would you have me do, if you’re such the clever one Marcel?” Cruptinelli asked.

“With this one?” He asked.

He nodded.

“You have to let her go. Vilebloods eat people, everyone knows that. If you keep her around you’re either going to kill her or have to start killing us to keep her alive. It’s bad news either way- you never should have-“

“That’s quite enough.” The circus-man snapped, “I have spent so long searching for one of her kind, I will not be dismissing her on account of your little theories. Nobody cares if the tigers are thin or the Vileblood weary. If she does not wish to work in the tent with the rest of the freaks then there are other places for one like her.”

“Dead is dead.” Marcel said, “And you’re running them into the ground.”

“Keep at this conversation and you’ll be the first one fed to her.” The circus man replied.

The boy’s rings clacked together as he readied himself for another impassioned speech, but Nimah’s hand came down on his shoulder pulling him back.

“Leave us.” Cruptinelli instructed, “I want to speak with the Vileblood, alone.”

“Won’t be much of a conversation.” Marcel quipped, “All she ever says is “bite me”.”

“When I want your opinion, I assure you I will ask for it.” The circus-man growled.

“Don’t wait up for me brother-dearest.” Marcel laughed as Nimah pulled him away.

Now the circus-man took his position. He sat down on the dying stalks of corn so that we might look level, eye to eye. It was a funny thing to try and balance what was clearly a skewed situation. I am sure he thought himself the superior, it would be easy to think so when one has the other caged and in chains, taken far from their home- but he was mistaken. There was not a doubt in my mind that he was truly a loathsome bottom feeder who had just happened to get lucky. It was not the circus-man who had captured me. It had taken an entire army of Executioners to pull it off.

I had to be tricked, swindled and caught unawares just for this conversation to have occurred. On any other grounds I could’ve found this man and forced his cooperation. Not only were we
unequal, but we did not even stand on the same field. He could touch me, but he could not touch me.

“It is such a shame our first true conversation should occur in such a way. Really we should be seated in finer places, but I must admit I do not trust you.” He said.

“Is that because I am a Vileblood or because you have stolen all that was dearest to me, forced me into chains stolen me from my home and exploited me for showcase and profit?” I asked.

He chuckled, “Temper, temper. I thought we might go about this with refinement and civility.”

“Bite me.” I snarled.

This was not a conversation I wanted to have and while he could force me to be part of his display and for now keep me from escape, I could not be prodded into conversation. There were dozens if not hundreds of others for him to talk too. I turned aside, closed my mouth and thought of Frigga. It was the best I could do to get his words to blur out, turn the syllables to mere sounds so that I would not have to focus on their actual meaning.

“You musn’t treat me so poorly.” He said.

I must do nothing.

“Really you will regret turning a cold shoulder when I extend my hands in friendship. I have a grand plan for you.” He said, “It would work so much better if you would embrace it but should you turn aside I will take what I’ve paid for by force. I assure you there will be no resistance. If you want to keep your wits about you, speak now and speak kindly. Otherwise it will be nothing but suffering under the methods of Minimus.”

“How do you know that name?” I growled.

He chuckled, “There is a woman in my employ who knows all things, can see the future and the past as clearly as the words on book pages. Long now have I wanted a Vileblood for my own and she has worked hard to find me one. Don’t you know of your past, Alois Hirsch? Can you begin to guess at your future?”

That was a name no one knew. That name had not been spoken, not been thought in many years. I myself could not remember the time when it belonged to me. I had thrown in aside, left it to sputter and die on a clinic floor, to perish in obscureity. Alois was not me and I was not her, but we had both worn this body.

I tightened my jaw and kept all my questions and insults inside. I really did not want to talk to this man. More so now then before. He knew things that he shouldn’t the things he had no right to know and he continued to badger me with specifics.

“Perhaps it is not even your own life that concerns you. I know you had friends back in that crumbling city. Would you like to see them?”

No. No I would not. I did not want him to know about anyone, lest he bring them here. It was safer that they stayed far far away until I could tear this place apart. He would use them against me if he knew of them.

What was happening to them, it did consume me so. I worried for Frigga and her safety of course, but then there was Templeton and her hunger. She knew where I’d been keeping the blood but there wasn’t enough to last the whole winter. Kos almighty the way she drank when portioning for
herself there might not be enough to last the rest of the month. She was still yet to hunt, yet to plunge her teeth into something and kill it for herself. Like a child she drank from bottles. If the circus-man had been smart he would’ve taken her for his menagerie. Gone without blood she would be more vicious and she was often made to do stupid things when her fear got the better of her.

“I have no friends.” I said.

“Surely that is not true, there are those hunters that-“

“They are a convenience, nothing more.” I lied. Kos forgive me, Frigga forgive me for the lies I was about to tell. They were for her own safety, for everyone’s safety. I had to keep him from Yharnam. “I lie with the girl so she will think I am safe, a tame thing but then pray on her allies the moment her back is turned. She is nothing but a bed to me, I am sure you have known girls the same way.”

He laughed, “What a clever demon you are. To bed an angel and trick it into thinking that’s what love is.”

He had no idea what love was. This was it here and now, sacrificing it all for a woman who was missing. A sickening revelation crawled from my spine to my skull. Could this be the place that Frigga had disappeared too? Somewhere amongst the tents he might have her. He could be waiting for me to say something just like that.

My hasty actions could cost her life. I waited with tensed shoulders and sweating palms for him to continue, to say anything more. He had spoken names he should not know, was Frigga’s going to be next.

He did not say.

“You confuse me, little Vileblood.” He said, “I have been told of you in bits and pieces by our little seer. She is not very talented but she is never wrong. Fortunes told for only a dime and they come out correct every time, just as the barkers say.”

He chuckled once more, in appreciation of his own rhyme. What a repugnant human.

“Regardless of your desire to know the past or scry for the future you will learn to assist me, Alois.”

“It is Fwahe.” I corrected.

“Fwahe?” He asked.

“Yes.”

“A strange name but no matter, people will find it more exotic.”

People would find me nothing but curled up and asleep on the bottom of a cage. That was all they could force me to be. I hoped so anyway. Crupinelli hadn’t said anything about Frigga but he hadn’t not said anything about Frigga either. She might be here and she might be far far away. I could not ask for giving her away if she were free and safe. I could not, not ask for she might be used against me or hastily killed if I continued to feign callous indifference.

“You see, there is something you must do for me and my respected clientele.” He continued, “This world has a way of aging people, breaking down the young and beautiful into the old and ravaged.
So many do not care for this to happen to them and are desperate to forestall it as long as possible. Everyone knows that the Vilebloods are on par with the immortals and do not expire of natural causes. Their bodies harden and continue forever.”

“To be Vileblood is more than that.” I said.

“It needn’t be.” Cruptinelli purred, “Not how I am going to sell it. Step right up ladies and gentlemen come into the tent of the mysterious Cainhurst marvel. Look into the opposite eyes of the Vileblood Fwahe and drink of her fountain of youth-giving blood.”

This was his purpose? Conversion for the masses.

“No.” I said.

“You refuse me?” He asked.

“Isn’t that what no generally means?” I asked, “Do you not comprehend such a simple word.”

He scowled, “Do not mock me, little Vileblood. You do not know the power that is at my disposal.”

“And you do not know the strength of my breed.” I said, “Begone with you and your air-brained schemes.”

He thrust his cane through the bars of the cage and cracked it against my jaw. I bit down on my tongue and cheek, hard, enough to draw blood. It hurt but I couldn’t show it. Let it boil in the bottom of the cut until I was away. I must not let it overflow.

“Your consent isn’t necessary.” He informed, as he stood up, brushing the dust from his pants and standing over me. “It is preferred but you are not in a position to protect yourself. In a moment I could have you strung up by your toes and drain your blood by the bucketful. It will keep and I can go a long way off of one little jar so think carefully how you proceed. Your mind is dull and stupid thus I will leave you to consider my generous offer. Perform for me, Fwahe. Perform or perish.”

“Bite me!” I spat at him.

He left without a word, marching off at an odd, irritated clip. His legs straigntened out too far, his arms hung at his side, straight as a line. He was tense and annoyed and even with me caged and chained I had still come out on top. We were not equals and he had seen the power of my position. There was no upper hand for him to game. He could throw out all the names that he wanted, but so long as Frigga’s remained a private thing I needn’t fear.

She must not be here. Surely he would’ve spoken of her if she was. That was what I labored over instead of his proposition. Time was ticking down and now I needed to break free more than ever. Escape had been primary before but now it was a desperate pleading thing. The only way to make a survey of the entire circus was by combing it myself. I had no interest in allies, no need for assistance. I sat in my cage while the sun began to bake the bars, turning them to hot metal. He could roast me alive and I would not burn.

I had the cup and Frigga was safe inside it. I had the cup and it would keep me safe. I had the cup and when all was said and done I would pour the blood of Mr. Hayden Cruptinelli in to wash out the tears and the terror and drink until my stomach was swollen.
Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
Chapter Summary

With the overturning of power in the city, Ezra decides its time he started climbing the ladder, and reaching new heights.

Chapter Notes

As always, please let me know what you think!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Oh how my brothers had tipped the scales. I was standing near the back of the room when everything happened, watching as Executioner Alfred not only struck down the preposterous reign of Frigga Hemlock, but the lunacy of Strix Savoy too. His loyalty to his patron and to the infernal truth of his confession had finally come back to bite him. One could not betray his brethren and escape consequence.

The Valkyrie boy who tried to hold it all together, to keep the order Frigga had established from dissolving simply did not have the fingers left to get a proper grip. The ground collapsed beneath him and there was nothing to hold too. How masterful our new patron had been, to make his enemies seem the ridiculous and impassioned one, when truly none but Executioner Alfred was more single-minded in pursuit of their goals. He loved his old master, Logarius and would honor him in any way he found. The devotion of that man was truly something to marvel at.

Easily he the church hunter with the greatest conviction currently living. He had never strayed from his path of true and good. When I had completed my task and eliminated all other strains of this blighted blood, I would have him exonerate me with proper death. I need only last that long.

The new found vigor for tearing the life away from the Vilebloods was wondrous but also fraught with danger. Hunger was a powerful task master, and I saw my own appetites reflected in the bookish girl they had brought into our fine home. Being that it was a bank we were able to quickly put together a jail cell for her. Executioner Alfred had specified that this was just a containment situation, she was not yet proven guilty.

She was not yet proven innocent either. That girl had to be feeding on someone, I should know. Despite her thin little arms and fragile speech there was the smell of our kind about her. She reeked of it, and seemed an ungrateful thing overall. We had given her a nicer set up then most of our juniors got. She had her own room with a desk and a little bed. That boy Sterling had collected all of her books. Some were hesitant to allow her any pens as they might be used as the weapon by the slightest thing, but Executioner Alfred assured us all that despite allegations her work was important and must be allowed to continue.

He made his own inspection of her work whenever he passed by, casting sideways glances at the many pages strewn across the desk, over the bed and littering the floor. She worked feverishly and whenever someone met her eyes, the Vileblood was quick to grab the nearest book and apply
herself to it thoroughly.

Strix had been assigned the duties of cleaning up after her. He changed her wash basin, did her laundry and emptied her chamber pot. It was suitable punishment for the row he caused at the council and even though he went about his duty with pride there was none to stop us from reminding him that he had now become everything an Executioner vowed not to be. If you took his robes and exchanged them for the red and gold tabard with lions rampant, the difference between Strix Savoy and a Cainhurst serving boy, would be nigh indistinguishable.

“Make sure to wash behind her ears!” Jossam shouted as Strix passed him, balancing fresh basin, water pitcher, soap and towels all at once. He must not have been the type to make two trips.

“The water mustn’t be too hot!” Audrey cautioned, “Nor too cold, ensure it’s just right. You wouldn’t want to disappoint the Vileblood Queen.”

He tried to bear it all in silence but day by day I watched his jaw tighten. I watched his knuckles go white on the handle of buckets, nails dig into stacks of fresh parchment. With every task he completed on the Vileblood’s behalf he was a little more worn away. She was the waves against the rocky Cliffside, constantly crashing until he became dust.

“Off to go bring fresh linens to your girlfriend?” Executioner Sussex asked, even he was joining in on the spectacle.

“We are not involved, sir.” Strix replied.

“Don’t tell lies now boy, for you are certainly involved with her. You are perhaps the one here who involves her the most, looking after her as you do.” He corrected.

“I am only so involved, sir,” Strix continued, “Because my seinor officers saw fit to involve me, there by absolving me of any voluntary involvement.”

The words seemed to have twisted around Executioner Sussex just enough to momentarily confuse him. Without his twin there to fire back with equally scathing wit he was not at his best, and Strix Savoy only needed a moment before ducking his head and proceeding with his duties. Laundry day and he had to join the washerwoman scrubbing shit stains out of other people’s clothing. A fitting position for him that had betrayed me.

He was taken care of, but I still had rungs in the ladder to climb. Sure my face was an unpleasant one and a kind man might’ve taken to hiding it in order to gain more sway, but that was not for me. If someone looked upon my face I wanted them to see the ravaged crevices and burnt folded flesh of it all. I need not forget that I was a monster, one serving the greater good as much as any monster could, but a monster nonetheless.

I was grateful to my late relatives, retrospectively for trying to burn the infection out of me.

It did make it harder to become acquainted with those on higher rungs. There was a certain reluctance in dealing with malformed persons that no one liked to admit to but everyone seemed to agree with. Even a pretty Vileblood was preferable to an ugly man, it would seem.

Templeton was not one I’d describe as pretty, but her face did not look like mine. Executioner Alfred spent more time with her, even in just glances and scoffs then he did with me. That was something I needed to change.

“Are we still to send search parties after Frigga Hemlock, Patron Executioner?” I asked him one day, catching him in the hall on his way to breakfast.
“Of course we are.” He replied.

“That seems…problematic, sir. From my understanding.” I said.

Executioner Alfred was far more interested in obtaining his coffee then me, and made a mumbled reply to try and brush me off so that I might leave him too it. I was used to this and persisted despite all things.

“Really, I mean if she is found then we loose control of the city.” I said.

“I am acting in her stead, Executioner, nothing more.” Alfred sighed. He made a glance towards the cafeteria doors. Must have been contemplating weather skipping his meals was worth it to get out of this conversation.

I couldn’t blame him. Ever since the council ended he had been swept up in never-ending meetings and badgered with never-ending questions. I didn’t want to seem an annoyance on our weary Patron but what I had to speak must be spoken. In the end he opted to endure it as well. Coffee was better medicine then silence. He must have been getting headaches. Who wouldn’t the way the hunters of this city could steal ones time.

“Shouldn’t we be doing more then acting in her stead, Patron Executioner? Is now not the time to re-establish the ways of the past? The ways of your martyr? Let us strengthen the church oncemore.” I said.

He smiled, “You are the perceptive one Executioner.”

“Kelfazin.” I said, “Executioner Ezra Kelfazin.”

“Yes, I know.” Alfred replied. This might have been a lie or the truth. With a face as distinctive as my own you never really could tell for certain.

“It would seem a waste if she was to suddenly reappear.” I said, “Which is why the Executioners must find her first. I’m sure you know as well as I, that the moment Frigga Hemlock returns to the city is the moment we loose our sway.”

“You think too small, Ezra.” Alfred said, “She must be found and found with all the haste we can manage- but I agree it must be an Executioner who finds her. Frigga Hemlock’s credibility must dissolve in her absence, thus when she return the good hunters will not want her reinstated. She can go back to doing whatever it is she used to do before sinking her claws into England, my England. I’ve no wish for her death- but I cannot stand to see Vilebloods in this city.”

He said this as he stood, unknowing next to the Vileblood in his own employ. The irony of it could kill a man.

“Nor I.” I said, “They are wretched things.”

“Let us cleanse these foul streets together.” Alfred said, “I remember you were the one who stood in solidarity with your brothers, even when Frigga Hemlock had threatened to dismiss you from our order. I also remember your impassioned condemnation of Executioner Savoy.”

“I have never been fond of him.” I said, “Nor would I ever betray my brothers in arms.”

“He is a most irritating one. Perhaps he should not have been admitted here.”

“He’s good for emptying chamber pots.” I said.
Alfred laughed, “You would be better not to speak so highly ill of others.”

“Pardon me, Patron Executioner.”

By now we were seated together, both of us at breakfast. Executioner Alfred did not seem to notice that my tray was empty and that when raising fork to mouth there was nothing but air caught on the metal tines. Details, that was how you caught a Vileblood red-handed. It was always somewhere in the details.

“You seem to have your priorities aligned correctly.” Executioner Alfred said. “How well do you know the city?”

“I could walk it blindfolded and never lose my way home.” I replied.

“Excellent. I want to put you in charge of the search on the homefront- I find I cannot organize everything myself. At the start we will have many offering to help, but as they grow more and more disillusioned they will believe my statements and think her dead.”

“I don’t think many believe that.” I said.

“I myself know it is false.” He admitted, “But people will believe a lie if it is spoken often enough. Wherever Frigga and Fwahe have gone it does not seem they will be returning in the immediate future. It is enough time to seize our moment.”

I nodded.

“When you send out the other hunters, concentrate the efforts of the passionate- those who yet want her to live on places she couldn’t possibly be. We have combed those woods and she was not in them, they may go there. The city is bustling and I believe there is a much higher chance she lurks within these streets if not far away having unseemly nights with her Vileblood lover.”

“Could they have gone to Cainhurst?” I asked.

Alfred paused for a moment. He placed a hand to his chin, staring beyond me while his brow furrowed in thought.

“I do not think it likely.” He concluded, “Whatever memories of the past glory of the place Fwahe might posses, no doubt will be tainted with memories of Abbot Minimus. I heard about what went on in those halls, and I don’t think it likely that Frigga would wish to return there either.”

“But surely, the less logical amongst us might think so.” I said, “If there is a goose chase for the sending.”

“A fox hunt without a fox?” Alfred asked.

I nodded.

He took another sip from his coffee. It sounded like satisfaction to me. Finally, finally I was able to offer my services as I had a right to do. It was now in this moment, this imbalance of power that not only Alfred could climb the ladder but I too would rise above. I was an Executioner, full-fledged after all, and tired of being seen as equal to my juniors. It was time to get amongst the true players.

“Do you truly believe the Valkyeries would rush back there?” He asked.

“The yelling one seemed willing to do anything to dethrone you, Patron Executioner.” I said.
“Cato.” He said.

“Pardon me, Patron Executioner. Cato.”

“It is also important that we find where Executioner Patience has gone.” Alfred mused, suddenly reminded of the vow-taker. “Did you know him?”

“He was in my bunkroom.” I said, “He was with my patrolling group.”

“Ah, then surely you will be able to find him again.”

This was not what I wanted to be doing. My plans were vanishing before they’d even become concrete. To be stuck looking under bush and shrub for the silent boy who had already been a frustration. It was beneath me to do such things.

“Surely I could-“

“We do not leave our men behind.” Executioner Alfred said, “And Brother Patience is certinally one of us. He has been involved in things since his youngest years and the Downey twins have tasks he need complete. If he can be found you must find him, Executioner Kelfazin. This is your new task, use whatever resources you might need- within reason of course.”

Kos damn Patience. I was about to be planning the searches, getting my feet through the door and into the highest circle of our order. Now it was just leg work again.

Like the man I now searched for, I must myself have patience. Any progress up the ladder was still progress. I had finally put Strix beneath me, he could grab at my boots and claw at my legs all he liked but I would never let him pass. He was going to labor beneath better men for all time.

It was nothing that Executioner Alfred’s assignment for me was minor, a fetch and carry job at best, but I could dress it up much better than that. I would parade it past Strix Savoy so that he might seethe with jealously while working with lye and scented soaps to clean the prisoners clothes. When he had to stretch his arms overhead to reach for clothespins and try to dry clothes in the dead of winter, he would know that I was out in the woods, doing important work.

“Late with the laundry Savoy?” I asked, when as fortune would have it we met in the hallways.

I was leaving the cafeteria and he was shouldering a basket of wrinkled clothing.

“It’s Strix.” He said as he tried to hurry past me.

“Not so fast.” I said. “I’ve washing that needs doing too, Savoy.”

“Strix.” He reminded.

“Come and fetch it with me.”

“Wash it yourself.” He growled.

“Is that any way to speak to a superior officer?” I asked.

He shrugged. I pressed my advantage, unclipping my cloak and tossing it over his basket. “Really, Savoy you must listen to me. I’ve been given a task by the Patron Executioner and it should be your honor- your joy to assist me in any way possible. I’ve important things to retrieve in the forbidden woods, the least you could do would be to scrub out a fresh pair of clothes for me whilst I’m away.”
“But you-“

“And be sure to iron my shirts.” I said, “I can’t abide wrinkles.”

I had never once cared if there were folds in my clothes, but I wanted him to go to the trouble. I told him to fetch the things from my room or he’d be hearing about it from the other Executioners. Alfred had better things to worry about then the condition of my clothes, but Strix Savoy didn’t seem to notice, angrily turning on his heels and going to collect my things.

Along the way I stopped to grab Matta and Audrey from there rooms, finding Jossam and taking him as well. They were far from the best team but they were the only people here Strix had ties too. Exclusion of Vilebloods of course.

“Bid your farewells if you must.” I said.

Audrey and Jossam had nothing to say but of course Matta had to take her moment.

“Don’t worry.” Strix was quick to say, “I’ll be fine.”

“You must keep your temper in check.” Matta pleaded, “We’ll find whatever Alfred sent us for and return with all haste.”

“Don’t worry.” He said again, “I’ll be here. Doing the laundry, scrubbing the floors.”

“It’s like you say.” She laughed, “Somebody’s got too. If nothing else it ought to keep you out of trouble.”

“Come now Matta!” I barked, and then because revenge was seldom and sweet, “This is not your party to lead and I’d like to be on our way.”

She shot a glance at Strix, the meaning of which I didn’t quite catch. I knew enough to not like it though. Alfred had said I could take any resources I might need, and there were none better than the horses collected especially for the use of search parties. Most of them were beasts of burden, unaccustomed to territory like the forbidden woods and more used to pulling carts over the cobblestones. I was not used to riding horses- so it hardly seemed to matter.

Judging the merit of an animal was no great skill of mine. I didn’t pretend to know the first thing about horsemanship but I could keep up appearances. I had been doing that for years. What better then four Executioners on four white horses. There must’ve been a Hari Harel story that started that way, if not then perhaps some other equally frivolous but endlessly repeatable legend.

Now might be the time to begin making legends of our own. For the beginning of the ride I was confident. The horse I rode on had shaggy tendrils of fur around its hooves, hooves bigger then my face. It’s back was broad and three of me might have fit across the saddle. Going through the city it was easy enough, I knew the road to the gate and whatever denizens were still awake certainly hopped aside for an enormous animal like mine.

It was only once we reached the woods and there was a mess of brambles and branches to traverse that I started to find the beasts size troublesome. I made my control look effortless, despite the many times branches sprung back to slap me in the face. I must’ve been doing it well, or else I would’ve heard laughter- and behind me there was none. It seemed my juniors had finally learned to respect me. The woods were dark and cold, and it wasn’t long before someone started voicing complaints. Audrey of course, what a surprise.

“I….I..are you sure you know where you’re going Ezra?” She stammered.
I tried to turn my horse around, so that I could face her, but my horse was too broad. I was stuck awkwardly in a half turn, and when I tried to just move in my saddle, so that I could twist and face backwards I found my legs caught in the stirrups. Too many straps and too much to control. I had to resign myself to talking facing forwards, and hope the words came out loud enough for those behind me to hear.

“There’s really no right or wrong way now that we’re in the woods. We are going the way that Patience went, I mean the way I think he went. The way he was most likely to go.”

“Know that for a fact do you?” Matta asked.

“Yes.” I lied. “Patron Executioner Alfred told me.”

“And how did he know?” Matta asked.

“We don’t have time for plesantires.” I said, at last managing to turn my horse back the way he was supposed to go, “let’s go find our lost brother.”

I thought my speech would inspire confidence but instead I heard them whispering behind me. I twisted as best I could to look behind me and found that, whereas before Audrey rode behind me with Jossam after her and Matta in the rear, the order had now been reversed. The two of them were deferring to Matta for instruction again.

How was this always happening to me?

Another branch smacked me in the face. I kept my head turn back so at least I could see the satisfaction of the same obstruction hitting my juniors. Matta’s hand simply shot up and caught the branch before it hit her face. She calmly pointed it out to the others and the branch was passed down the line.

Second position must’ve been the one leaders were supposed to take.

“Matta.” I said.

“Yes?”

“Take point.”

I pulled my horse to a stop. It snorted and stamped its hoofs. The beast only seemed to listen when I pulled with all my might. That wasn’t a problem so much as the bubbling foam that rose in its mouth and drooled out onto the ground afterwards. It was most undignified and made the beast look rather stupid.

“How am I supposed to lead when Patron Executioner Alfred did not personally, stop me and tell me where we needed to go and what we needed to do?” Matta asked deftly pulling up her horse alongside mine.

There was only room for them because she had taken the smallest of the horses. It was so small she had to look up to me. She brought the dainty creature to a quick stop, and hers produced none of the foam mine did. Perhaps the great thing was sick as well as stupid.

“I’ll tell you which way to go.” I said.

“So instead of just following you- you want to shout directions in the middle of beast-infested woods?” She asked.
Damnit all. She had caught me in light that was not very flattering. If I took the lead once again it would be by her direction. If she took it then I should look a fool calling out turns and twists at random. I did not know where to go any more then she did.

That was the problem with being on the field, there was no time to consider all of the problems. They popped up and immediately demanded to be solved, one could not meditate, request a recess and find the best course of action. I’d been sent to the woods instead of the council. Even now Patience was ruining everything. I’d fix him for this one.

“Just follow me.” I growled finally, tapping my feet against my horse until it finally decided to move.

“You know riding would be a lot easier if you’d just-“Matta started

“I know how to ride a horse, junior Executioner.” I snapped. Lies upon lies, but none of it mattered. Audrey and Jossam could not tell the difference between a skilled horseman and a novice one. Matta was no queen here, she would not overtake my lead. If nothing else I would be the one to find Patience. I would see him first and call the others over and be the hero of the day.

I had to do this, or else lose all sway with the Patron Executioner.

We carried on, and when I noticed a bridge crossing a river to one direction I elected to turn the other way. Patience did not seem the bold type, he wouldn’t have been so daring as to go across an untested bridge.

“This way!” I called and hauled at my horses reigns until he turned.

We kept going. I trailed us along the river bank, scanning for scraps of clothes or shoe prints in the mud, anything to indicate we might be moving in the proper direction. I kept on until the river curved away, thinning to stream and twisting through thickets of thorns that I wouldn’t have thought anyone could run through.

“We’re getting close.” I lied. I had to keep their hopes up.

We carried on, leaving the thorns behind us and following what trail could be found. The path was fairly easy to track, someone had attempted to plant cobblestones through the woods to better guide travelers. I marked them well enough, even if sometimes I was only sure of them by the sound the hooves of our horses made as we carried onwards.

Suddenly Audrey unleashed a scream.

“What is it?” I growled, “Some spider or something?”

“T-t-there was man.” She stammered.

“Probably just another bit of search party.” I reasoned, “There are plenty of them-“

“He was too tall to be a real man. H-h-his eyes were glowing.” Audrey stammered.

Nonsense of course, nothing but the stories of a frightened child who had been dragged out of bed to do her chores and wished to return with all haste. I wasn’t going to let her shirk her duties. We stopped briefly and looked around for Audrey’s shadow-man but there was nothing.

“Let’s just keep going.” I said.
“Maybe we ought to turn back.” Jossam said, “If that thing’s prowlin’ then it must already ‘ave Patience. No use searchin’ for whats already dead.”

“There’s nothing out there!” I said.

“I saw him!” Audrey cried.

“There’s nothing to see!” I said.

My horse was stamping again, legs jostling underneath it. The beast was as restless as I. It was hard to control while I was twisted in the saddle looking back over my shoulder at the rest of my party. Why had I chosen these dullards of all people? I should’ve made a wiser choice, taken Sussex or Essex with me. Even a different group of juniors might’ve better followed orders, and been half as scared besides.

The three of them were as hard to control as my horse. If only there were reigns for them too that would set their minds back at ease if only pulled hard enough. Would that cause their mouths to foam as well? I might take the froth over the cacophony of frightened words that kept spilling out.

“Enough!” I shouted.

The words were hardly out of my mouth before my horse rose up and flung me out of the saddle. A terrified whinny echoed through the woods, and the moment it came down, it came down hard. On my hand. My right hand, the one that had done all the work in my life thus far was smashed to nothing under the loathsome creature.

Everyone was screaming. What reason had they to scream when my bones were the ones broken. My hand was an unmoving mash of flattened flesh, the pain traveling all the way up my arm and burning into my skull. I knew what it was to have my face flayed.

Matta was taking charge again, wheeling her horse and by turn Jossam and Audrey’s in the reverse direction. The horse who I had been riding on was gone, disappeared in a few bounds. All that could be heard of it was a distant whinny and an echoing of thunderous hoofbeats.

There was ice on my shoulder.

I turned around and like two dinner plates, freshly washed and gleaming, suspended in blackened sky were the eyes of the shadow man. There was no pupil, no iris just white space flittering around the undulating black tendrils that composed its shifting skin. I tried to move, but it had me pinned. If my hand hadn’t been crushed I might’ve been able to grab a lock, to get purchase, to do something besides just writhe on the ground. The wheel was on my back, but it was a thing that required both hands. I could not carry it like this.

When it blinked the world went black, and as its eyes opened again I was once more blinded. Blinded, but it wasn’t painful.

There was cold but it was a good cold. Iced beverages on summer days cold.

My hand did not hurt anymore. So long as I was looking in those eyes everything was too cold to be felt. I was rising. I was walking. The white eyes moved deeper into the forest and I followed them, swallowed by trees, the branches were cold.

Then there was heat, scalding my shoulder. I was thrown backwards and the eyes snapped shut. Matta was in front of me. She had the Logarius Wheel whirling in its most deadly form and was slamming it against the shadow-man. The shadow-man was howling. I didn’t want her to kill him,
until he was dead. His blood reeked like a sewer.

“Why did you just stand there!” Matta shouted at me, “Why didn’t you run?”

“Eyes…” I muttered, “I was inside of his eyes.”

“And you called Audrey’s talk nonsense.” She mumbled. Her hand was locked up in the hood of my robes. “Come on, lets get out of here before any more of those things show up.”

I nodded dimly.

By and by things came back and I realized what an indiginity it was to be led along by Matta. I wrenched away from her grip and she conceded. Between us we had neither of our horses. Now not only had we lost Patience but we’d lost the Executioner’s resources and two of their juniors.

Matta had managed to salvage a hand lantern though one of the glass panes was horrifically cracked causing the light to come out in strange fractals. She held it and traced our path back towards the thorns. We spotted the first of the horses there. Mine had apparently reached the bridge but not been able to cross and stood at one end stamping his hooves. Stupid thing.

Of all the horses we had to come across, of course mine would be the one we found. Part of me wanted to leave him behind, or push him into the river. The stupid panicking creature had cost me everything, all of my training would have to be re-done.

The only reason I didn’t exact my revenge was because the horse wasn’t mine. It was some denizen’s or some church officials and while they could probably accept death in the line of duty- Matta would never allow an act like this to be called a mistake. I had to settle for glaring at it.

“Hold this.” Matta said.

I took the lantern while she went up to the horse. She started speaking to it in the way mothers coo to their infants, standing on tip-toe to rub its nose. Soon it bent its head down and she looked into its eyes. When she was sure it had calmed itself, she picked up the reigns.

“You’ve been hurting the poor girl.” She said.

I’d thought it was a stallion, not a mare, but I didn’t say so.

“No I haven’t.” I said.

“It’s mouth was all torn up. She’s a cart horse not a war animal, you’ve got to give her more time to take direction and for Kos sake don’t pull so hard. People ruin horses this way-“

“I didn’t ask for your opinion.” I snarled.

“Nor did I ask to be placed under the rule of some half-wit who’s had his saddle on backwards the entire time.” She said, “So forgive me for not waiting for your permission to give my opinon but I’ve watched you ignore us for your own glory and torture this poor creature all night and I say no longer! Now either you can come along with me and do as I say and we’ll maybe make it out with our lives, or I can hop onto this lovely horse and leave you to fend for yourself. Which is it to be, oh all powerful Executioner Kelfazin?”

I could’ve punched her. She was so smug, so holier-then-thou. So I had made one mistake? It was not going to be the end of my career. All the same I didn’t trust my chances in the woods with a weapon I was no longer able to wield.
“Fine.” I snarled.

“Good.” She said, “Now go on, take point.”

She was only ever a half-step behind me, the horse a half-step behind her. Our tightly packed party turned away from the bridge and back down the path we had come. The thorns and the river had been the most distinctive things we’d come across, and now looking down into the woods from a new perspective, I wasn’t immediately sure how to get out again.

I kept on straight ahead. I tried to keep straight ahead, there was a strange pull to the sides. I found myself running off the scraps of cobblestone paving, pulled to the side by some unknowable force. What was it that drove me diagonal?

“How’s your hand?” Matta asked after we had walked a fair ways.

“Unusable.” I replied.

“We’ll get you to a surgeon.” She said.

I didn’t think a surgeon was going to be able to do much. Unless bones could be grown back from tiny scraps I was going to have a new ailment to accommodate too. It was going to be much harder to find my space on the council when I had to re-learn how to do everything with my other hand. It wasn’t even good for holding the hand lantern, quickly becoming tired and numb. Several times I caught it slipping from my own grasp.

I couldn’t catch it with my right, so I had to awkwardly throw up one of my knees, kicking it against the bottom and shifting it to a better position in my palm. Matta sent me strange looks whenever my gait changed to incorporate changes like these, but she didn’t ask any questions.

“How’s that ahead?” Matta asked. She came alongside me and held out her hand for the lantern. What choice did I have but to pass it to her? When she tried to give me the horses reigns I stepped away. I was not getting any nearer that wretched animal then I had too. When I got back I would recommend to the stable hand it’s termination- the violent thing.

Matta had spied what from a distance looked no more than a lump of cloth but on closer inspection turned out to be Audrey. She was curled in on herself, hood pulled over her head and sobbing.

“What happened?” Matta asked.

“W-we were running.” Audrey stammered.

Could she just, for once speak evenly? No matter who she was with or what was asked of her there was that infernal twitch in her speech whenever things went the least bit astray. I hated it.

Of course, Matta was patient. Never mind we were in woods swarming with beasts. Nevermind that there was a crazed horse just waiting to bolt and tear off Matta’s arm or crush a foot or something. Nevermind any of that, she had time to put a hand around Audrey’s shoulders and coax more sputtering speech out of the girl.

“You were running?”

“F-f-from the shadow man.” She continued. “T-the horses wouldn’t stop. Jossam was shouting… he k-kept shouting, that he could see him t-t-hat they were coming. He said there were eyes everywhere and he was worried-but then it all just…he stopped.”
Matta nodded, gently taking Audrey’s hood down and stroking her hair.

“He went like frozen….there was cliff. H…my horse was doing it too and I shouted at him…I tried to stop but the shadow-man was leading him off the cliff. I…I got off and I wasn’t fast enough to pull him down. He walked right over the edge. The…then I just ran and I thought I heard the shadow-man behind me so I…I pulled my hood up so I didn’t want to see his eyes!”

“We’ve got to get out of here.” Matta said.

“No!” Audrey squeaked, “The shadow-man’s still out there.”

Arguing apparently was just not Matta’s style today. She scooped up Audrey and put her on top of the demented animal. “We’re leaving.”

The path out of the woods was not an easy one. Several times Matta would just decide she had made a wrong turn, and go back loosing hours and energy to the undulating woods. We saw the shadow-man everywhere. Everything was his eyes, the moon even fooled me once or twice. The three of us seemed able to sort it out though, one always had a clear head.

When at last we saw Yharnam I don’t think I’d ever been more grateful to be around brick buildings. There was a security in them. Matta explained about the cliff to the horseman, who seemed none too pleased to have lost the better part of his stock.

“And what of the other horse, the one you took?” He asked.

“We didn’t have time to track her down.” Matta admitted, “Report her missing and they’ll keep an eye out when they send more search parties into those woods.”

“Great.” He mumbled, marking the information down into his logbook. He was lucky to have the demon horse back at all.

Strix Savoy was waiting for us when we got back. Of course he would be. The junior executioner was scrubbing the floor of the lobby, and by the way his rolled-up sleeves and pant legs were soaked it seemed he must’ve been at it a long while.

“You didn’t find- wait where’s Jossam?” Strix said.

I didn’t say anything. Audrey sputtered and then started to cry. She mad such a ruckus that it drew the rest of the Executioner’s attention and we quickly had a large crowd gathered around us. Patron Executioner Alfred was among them, demanding an explanation. My throat went dry. I could not find the right words to express what needed stating.

“It was because of Ezra Kelfazin.” Matta finally spoke. “He was headstrong, thought himself capable where he was clearly lacking and at the end of the day did not listen when one of his fellow hunters warned him of danger. That’s what caused an attack to occur, some shadow creature. We lost Jossam and two of the horses over a cliff. My own horse vanished. This is what happens when you put irresponsible people in charge, and leave capable hunters home scrubbing floors! We were-“

“That’s enough Matta.” Alfred said softly. “Junior Executioner Savoy, please take her and Audrey away, somewhere they can rest. I must speak with Executioner Kelfazin, privately.”

“Sir.” Strix said.

He put an arm around either one of them and led them off deeper into the bank. The nerve of him
to not even be smug. He didn’t look over his shoulder, nor smirk. He kept his head bent speaking softly to the both of them, while the ring of Executioners once more closed around me.

Was this how Vilebloods tended to feel? The other Executioners glared as they parted to let us pass. This was the second time in recent memory I had been involved in trouble with steep consequences. Distantly it was laughable, that the things I was always most put out for were the ones I myself was not wholly responsible for. Clarkus had spoken out, I had gone along with him and nearly lost my position. Now Jossam had run himself off a cliff and I was once more in hot water.

They didn’t know I had murdered Clarkus and so many others when the hunger became too much for even I to control. They did not know about that at all. To have Templeton here would be an interesting study for me, I could learn my absolute limitations as she progressed and see just when it was that one snapped and could not come back from the monster inside them. I would murder her too, but that came later.

“We’re sending for the surgeon.” Alfred informed me, when we had moved away from the crowd.

“Thank you, Patron Executioner.” I said.

“Needless to say this did not go as I expected.” He said, “Do you have anything to say for yourself, Executioner Kelfazin?”

Of course I did.

“It was because of Matta, sir. She kept whispering different orders to Jossam and Audrey when they were behind me. I tried to send her to the front but she refused. She is uncooperative and headstrong, trying to cease power wherever it might be. Forgive me for not speaking up, in the lobby so but I was so astonished that she was willing to use poor Jossam’s death as a means of getting ahead that I was just struck dumb.”

Alfred let out a low hum. He pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and his forefinger, then drove them apart to rub at his tired eyelids. Crusty chunks of the strange coagulant that works itself into the corners of one’s eyes when sleeping. Now they applied themselves to his fingertips and he had to dust them off on his robe.

“Frankly Ezra, I don’t know which of you to believe.” Alfred said, “And the loss of Jossam is not something to be taken lightly. We haven’t lost anyone on the job for a long time, this makes me look poor in front of the council. My hold on England is fluctuating at best.”

“Sorry about that, Patron Executioner.” I said.

He sighed, “You’re going to be on sick leave for a little while. That hand will need time to heal if it’s ever going to be back in working condition. Consider carefully what you plan to do once you are healed. It will not be easy for me to preserve your position here, but it is your word against Matta’s. We will have to wait until Audrey has had some time to recover, and see what she says.”

“You’re not going to exile me, sir?” I said.

Once more he sighed, “I am loathe to do it to either of you, but someone must be held accountable. Junior Executioner Clarkus was dismissed for even lesser affronts to authority. Leniency and favoritism do not bode well for running this hunter’s orginzation.”

“Of course, Patron Executioner.” I said.
“We shall conduct a proper trial once everyone has had a moment to breathe. If you have told me the truth you have nothing to fear.” He went on.

Executioner Alfred continued to give me details about the process of a hunter’s trial. There were a lot of specifics but they faded from my ears. I knew how hunter’s trials worked. I had seen them occur first hand, fully expecting that one day I’d be put to one of my own- but not like this. I could not have fallen so far that I would be denied my ultimate purpose when it was within my grasp. There were so few Vilebloods left in the world, I must maintain my status so as to efficiently hunt them.

“What about trial by combat?” I interrupted.

“What about it?” Alfred asked.

“Could it not be conducted as a trial by combat?” I asked.

“Well surely before the eyes of gods and men there is no way more just to determine ones guilt or innocence, but with your hand as it is it-“

“It will heal.” I said.

“Why go to the trouble?” He asked, “We have Audrey for a witness, and I, of course will serve as judge. You could not have a more fair and honorable court.” Audrey could be a problem. She was emotional and easily compromised, but so too easily manipulated. I already had a few pin-pricks of loyalty coming through with her, but I was going to need a lot more light then that. She was too easily influenced, too ready to take up a lie if it meant the easy way out. I was not the easy way out this time.

I trusted my own skills more then I trusted the sad little girl.

“I demand a trial by combat with Matta Blackhill.” I said.

“She will have to accept.” Alfred said.

I was certain she would not decline. There was an end to everyone’s powers of waiting. She would think herself the one with the upper hand- quite literally. My body had been burnt and broken before, coming through stronger then ever. I would bide my time in the doctor’s chair and wait until I met my opponent on the field of battle. Matta had become too dangerous.

She had suddenly risen up alongside Strix Savoy as a threat to my position. The both of them had twisted together until melting, two heads sprouting from the same body. I could cut off one and it would cripple the other. Matta could submit to me if she liked, begged mercy if it was within her power to set pride aside but I would not let her leave unscathed. She would die or I would crush her hand as that horse had mine.

They hadn’t killed the beast and it could be brought back when I demanded satisfaction. The hunters of England could not deny me that. Perhaps it would be construed as a cruel gesture, a senor going up against their younger. I could make that work for me though, continue on about her headstrong and uncontrollable attitude. I tried to warn her not to be a hero, but it was inevitable that something like this would happened.

Yes, in fact that’s what did happen. That is exactly what happened. It would be a narrative I repeated to myself endlessly when subjected to time in the doctor’s chairs. If I said it enough I could believe it- with repetition anything became the truth.
Ezra Kelfazin is an uninfected human.

They believed that.

Matta Blackhill got ahead of herself, grasped for glory and sent a man to his death. If I said it with enough repetition they would believe that too. The church hunters had their gods, whom they worshipped endlessly. There was no reason to believe that any of those great old ones worried over our pitiful existence, but they kept the faith. They kept the faith and the gods and the lies until it became so true no one thought it false again- or if they did they were quickly stamped out.

People didn’t like having their false truths questioned. That was why it was always of the utmost importance too. You had to be first, and Matta already had the advantage when coming in to the bank. Audrey just had to make a scene. This would set me back perhaps but I was far from crippled. Figuratively speaking.

“E-executioner Kelfazin?”

Alfred and I both looked up. The boy had the same blonde color, the same curl in his hair as the Patron Executioner. Alfred grinned and motioned the boy closer.

“Come in, Anthony. You’re not disturbing us.”

“Beggin’ your pardon, but I’m here to accompany Executioner Kelfazin down to the doctor’s.” The boy said.

Page duties. Those were days I did not miss, running to and fro on tasks for men standing over you. I hardly needed escort down to the medic’s. We used the same one all hunters wanting to avoid making big scenes of their injuries, or spending large fortunes did. Callum was a loathsome complainer, always muttering about bygone days and other careers he might’ve had. He didn’t seem that aged to me- though the hunt had ways of tricking ones eyes. If he hated his profession, surely he might change it.

“Right you are.” Alfred said, rising and patting Anthony on the head.

Was that?

Could it be that he had sired this child?

“If you’re going to see Callum, there’s no reason to come back empty handed. Be sure to ask for a refill on the typical prescriptions- oh and do be sure and give him this.” Alfred put a small drawstring bag in Anthony’s palm. “There should be payment enough in there.”

Anthony’s fumbling fingers pried at the strings to peek inside. It was probably just tobacco again, that’s what most of the medic’s payment was given in. I was wrong this time, instead of the little shriveled leaves of plants this bag was full of coins, gold at that. Perscriptions was it?

Did we spend so much on medicines and I was just ignorant of it?

“No stopping to buy sweets with it again, you hear?” Alfred asked.

“Yes, Executioner.” Anthony said. He put on the sweet face of an angel- and I suspected him of fibs. The kid was like a cherub, all rosy cheeks and golden curls. He could’ve stepped right out of a painting, and it made me suspicious.

“Run along now.” Alfred said, “And mind you’re not all day getting back.”
“Yes, Executioner.” He said again.

The boy sprung up and dashed for the door. He held it open for me, smiling as nice as you like and brought it swiftly closed behind. He walked with the spring of untainted youth in his step. He was probably too young to have actually known what it was to fear beasts. They were but fables to him. The problem with our city, the problem with Frigga. No one respected hunters when there was nothing to fear out beyond the city walls. Cleansing the streets limited our power- and was it ever truly the end goal of everyone, everything that had been established to upend itself once the threat was gone. Denizens were weak things, they should be glad of the generous hunter’s watchful gaze.

I would not live to see those times, and it was nigh on preposterous to worry about them- but with this boy in front of me it was hard not to muse on them. Anthony did not make an attempt at pleasant conversations, and I had not spoken to anyone more then five years younger then me for as long as I could remember. I had no idea how one might strike up familiarity, so I left it in silence. Anthony seemed content to hurry ahead and hold doors.

Outside was still full of activity. Yharnam was becoming one of those places that never slept. Anthony kept a tight hold on the bag Alfred had given him. I kept watching, kept waiting for him to run to one of the women cutting blocks of fudge or the sweetroll salesmen. There was something deep inside of me that clawed with a deep desire for the boy to show through sour where he appeared sweet.

It was nothing but jealousy. There was the ease with which people viewed him, waving at the child and smiling. They did not shy. My visage gave everyone pause and the only people who called to me wanted to sell me something. It was wrong to be jealous in manners like this, and I struggled to focus on other things. That wasn’t all too hard to do. My hand ached with every little jostle, every bump from just the rise and fall of my shoulder as I walked.

I did not swing my hands back and forth, for fear of fingers brushing against my knee in most painful and unpleasant ways. The wind alone was enough to sting. I didn’t remember it hurting so bad when we had come out of the woods, gone back home. I must have been coming down from the adrenalin or something.

“Ain’t much farther!” Anthony said

I knew that. I knew how to get to Callum’s. I didn’t need an escort, but they had called for one anyway. Was I being watched as Fwahe with Patience? They might be marking me now, and I needed too put on as much of an angelic front as the cherub before me.

“Thank you.” I said.

“Ain’t nothing.” He replied.

I will hand it to him, he did know the way to Callum’s. Without making a wrong turn or taking a route that would’ve added on to tedious walking distance we arrived at the doctors. The hand-painted red cross in the boarding room window assured us we’d made it correctly. The only question now was weather the man was in, or if he had been called away to more urgent matters.

Alfred approached the door and was kind enough to open it for me. It was one of the more unpleasant things about Callum living in the boarding house, there was a hall full of other residents to navigate and jostle with before one could confidently reach his quarters. Often the entryway served as his waiting room, and when there were particularly bad bouts of sickness coming through the boarding house was crammed.
The only reason Callum’s landlord allowed him lease was because he was a sickly fellow. Having a medic right on call set his mind at ease and he was sure that if he prayed to his gods and treated Callum as any other tenant he would do just fine. That or the medic would work his fingers to the bone trying to ensure the old bastard’s survival. Whichever outcome one preferred to choose.

“Think he’s home?” I asked Anthony. My attempt at being friendly, making conversation.

Anthony shrugged, then rapped his knuckles on the door. One little tap was all it took to send the door swinging open on squeaking hinges.

“Cor, Blimey! Smells right awful in there it does!” Anthony exclaimed.

I stepped forward and despite warning took a sniff. I suppose that is just one of those strange things about curiosity, even when you had been warned - things could still shock you. It smelled bad - wrongful bad like rotting meat and something split open.

“Callum!” I shouted, moving past Anthony and stepping into the room.

A curtain, used to divide his living space from his practice hid part of the room from view. The reek was heavy in the air.

“A moment!” came the cry of the medic. “Give me a moment! Go back into the hall!”

“Are you alright?” I asked.

“I’m fine.” Callum growled, “Just go into the hall.”

“It reeks in here-“

“I am aware. My nostrils are perfectly capable of discerning bad smells. In the hall. I will attend you as soon as I’m able.” I looked down at Anthony. Anthony looked up at me. I shrugged and made for the door.

“It’s a matter of some urgency, sir.” Anthony said.

I thought I could hear something like humming - something like singing from beyond the curtain. It seemed like the beginning of some riddle. What hums, smells like death and fills up a surgeon’s backroom? I could think of no answers, neither clever nor logical.

“A moment!” He cried once more.

What else were we to do but heed him? Anthony shut the door behind us and we covered our noses with our sleeves, trying to breathe in the smell of clean cotton over noxious practitioners office. We waited much more than a moment. Anthony tired and sat down on the unwashed floor. I leaned against the wall.

“Sorry about that.” Callum said when he finally came into the hall to greet us. The front of his apron looked like it had recently been cleaned, still dripping water in pools around his feet.

“What was that?” Anthony asked.

“I was repotting plants.” Callum replied.

“Gardening makes a stink like that?” He went on.

“Erm. Yes. This particular time anyway. Now, come in. What can I do for you?”
He was being far too pleasant, but one look at my hand and he returned to his usual surly self. He had me lay back on a table and spoke to Anthony while I drank a sedative.

“Wolfsbane too? We’re almost out of that-“

He was talking to the kid but my eyes were getting heavy. The sedative took effect and I was soon asleep. I could only dream of waking to hand well repaired, functional once more. As I was slipping into unconsciousness I tried to lift my hand in front of my face. I just wanted to see what it looked like once more before I went under but I lacked the strength to make it so. One more blink and then I was out.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
Goeth Before the Fall

Chapter Summary

A series of conversations with the Bloody Crow.

I didn’t like looking at him. His face was so close yet so far from the one I adored. Looking at him reminded me of being a child, in training to be a huntress. The space I’d worked in housed many girls and rather than give us our own bouridours as the one I had waiting for me back in the safety of the theater, we had just one long mirror in the bathroom, a ponderous huge thing.

I thought that if I spent too long looking, or leaned across the sink to far I would fall through. The man who held me captive was like that, except instead of falling through he had crawled between. A possessed beast in a pit who had all but ripped his own arms to shreds to claw his way out. Every breath was laced with demented desperation and all the words the spilled out between pointed teeth were barbed themselves. He never said anything without motive. And he was wearing Fwahe’s face. They were too similar. Despite the damage that was clearly present in his brain I could not ignore the sinking feeling that he truly had been a survivor of the same Cainhurst massacre as Fwahe had. She did not talk about these times, they were mostly gone from her memory.

He had called her Alois, and claimed her a noble woman. In better circumstance I would’ve laughed at the notion. Fwahe abhorred all things prim and proper. She could not be convinced to wear shoes or a corset, even when I tried to take her into town. She did not sit straight, but slouched or else threw herself across chairs, arms and legs hanging out over their armrests. Sometimes she perched too, like a bird or the gargoyles on the top of Odeon Chapel. Nothing proper or ladylike about that. Fine ladies didn’t dress in the furs of beasts that they themselves had slain but the way my captor carried on about it was so vivid and so real and so almost it made me worry. Some of the things he said were things I knew Fwahe to do. She scratched her cheek when she was confused or working out some kind of difficult problem. He had mentioned strawberries too.

Scratching cheeks, coming from cainhurts, silver hair and blue eyes and a fondness for strawberries weren’t exactly unique traits all on their own. Combined together I feared it was becoming close enough, scraping the silver backing off the mirror and trying to break through. I didn’t know which side was the real one and which side the false.

I just knew that Fwahe was in danger, and more than that so was I. So was England. This man was a cruel and callous creature. I sought to escape him in every way possible, but I was getting so tired. Most of the time he was gone, off looking for his lost Alois. At first I had shouted, tried to struggle. There had been a brief moment where I thought if I could only twist the right way I might be able to grab a pin from my hair and work it through the lock mechanism, but my neck just would not twist that far, and my wrist would not bend as they needed.

I had already told the man too much. It was silly to think I had become strong and invulnerable in my time as Patron Huntress. There hadn’t been a need to hunt in so long, and whilst I kept practicing, enduring was different. This was no practice and Kane Hirsch, the Bloody Crow was no teacher. He was a jailer and a monstrously cruel one at that.

I hated how tired I was. The winter wind got in through the windows. He had taken away my cloak and my cap, the cold went right through me. It turned my bones to icicles that threatened to
plummet to the ground and smash into a thousand pieces. I was starting to cough too- the usual sort I could only guess. I had to pray this was only a result of poor clothing in bad weather, and not the onset of infection.

But ever cough rattle fluids that should’ve been in my chest but weren’t. My stomach growled. It started on the second day I was held here. By then I had given up hope of escape by my hands alone. My strength was failing and despite the musty deteriorating attic, the chains Kane had used held firm. The beam I tried to pull them out of was old, rotting most likely, but I just couldn’t stand on my toes, pull down my arms with enough leverage to break free.

He came back that night, throwing my coat over the back of a chair and flinging my cap onto the floor. He was dressing himself up as a hunter. Had no one seen that it was my cap? My coat? Was he truly so skilled to blend in amongst the others. Someone ought to have questioned what a hunter was doing alone in the city- but he did boast the crowfeather cape as well. They would’ve just assumed it was proper this way, for a hunter of hunters to track their own quarry while others focused on their patrols. I could not bring myself to blame them, though I wanted too.

“No word of my Alois.” Kane informed me.

I hadn’t asked. I was not going to speak to him anymore. I had told him too much already, and it pained me to think what else I might reveal if he engaged me in conversation again. With a sword in my hands, or even just my legs back on the ground I might have been able to do something about it. If only I weren’t so exhausted then there might’ve been a chance for me.

Thinking better of himself, he stooped and picked up the hat, placing it on a table instead of the floor. He didn’t want to damage it. Must be intending to use it again.

“No word on your Fwahe, either.” He said.

In answer my stomach growled.

“Hungry?” He asked. His every word was rife with sinister delight. “You sound just as she did. There was never a time when Alois wasn’t hungry. Even when she was eating, her stomach would howl like a lone wolf.”

I did not care. If only there were a door between us that could be locked and shut so I did not have to hear words from the demon that had crawled out of my childhood mirror. I was not so fortunate though, my stomach spoke oncemore.

He laughed, “Yes, just like that. I was a good brother to her- and gave her all the sweetest things, but one must always temper indulgence with practicality. Seeing Alois go to ruin would not have done.”

He came over closer to me, putting his face close to mine, his green eyes searching, always looking too longingly and deeply into everything they cut across. He still wanted me to be her, even though he’d made it clear I was not.

“Don’t you think that’s lovely?” He asked, “To have a brother so concerned. Not all men are like that. They are not all selfish petty things.”

I could’ve laughed, but it would’ve twisted into a cough. The one who was keeping another strung up in their desolate hideaway was unselfish. Give me a break. He was the definition of selfish and petty. He briefly waited for me to make a reply, but when none came I added impatient to the list of his qualities.
“You’re boring me.” He said.

I closed my eyes and tried to steady my breathing. There was no sense in making him angry, but I was not used to condoning childishness. Serving as Patron Huntress had gotten me drunk on respect and now it became difficult to lower myself back to old standards.

“Talk.” He commanded, barked orders at me like it was a trained thing. He wanted me to be part of his performance, to act sweet or gentle - to be the Alois from his memory. I was not something to be called to command and concede my strength to lesser men, but everything changed in captivity. This wasn’t about dignity anymore, this was about survival.

I took another deep breath and promised myself that whatever the conversation he drug me into, I would remain light and aloof. I would give him no more information then he currently possessed.

“How was the weather?” I asked.

“No no!” Kane shouted. “That’s not how she talked!”

“I’m not her.” I protested.

He had his hands on my neck again, squeezing. It hurt enough when I was coughing, I already felt like my breath was stolen and my throat was dry. I wanted to live, but I also wanted him to just go ahead and let his nails cut through my jugular, slash away at vocal cords and bones and give me red sheets to rest in. I was tired.

“I’ve got to practice, don’t you understand?” Kane asked. There was a desperate twinge in his voice and tears in his eyes. His fingers tightened bringing twin tears to mine, “I didn’t remember what she looked like! It has been years since she was stolen from me- when we meet everything must be the same! I must remember! I must!”

He was screaming so loud but the sound didn’t carry. The wind was cold but his hands were ice. The only warmth in my life was from my tears, and the thought of calloused fingers brushing them away. Put the demon back in the mirror and give me the reflected broken girl I was used too.

In a rush winter was back to me. I gulped in cold air and coughed out stale breath. Kane took a step back and flung his hands away from each other. He curled his fingers in and out, relieving pressure. The nerve of it, for him to feel strain because he had put strain on me. When he was done, he combed a hand through his hair, an attempt to arrange the stream of silver that had quickly become unruly in his impassioned frenzy.

“Now.” He said, breathing more evenly and speaking with greater control, “Let’s try that again.”

“I’m not Alois.” I reminded him. “I don’t know what you want me to say.”

He sighed. “I find you dull. Really I do. Do you know how much you pale in comparison, how much it pains me that one so lacking in intelligence rose to prominence in this city? People have forgotten what it is to be ruled. You are no queen, and you are nothing like Alois.”

He kept telling me that, like it was some kind of revelation. It was information I had willingly handed over- begged him even to accept. If he had just believed me and not tackled me down in the snow then I would be back beneath my blankets. The next time I was sick and Callum told me to stay in bed I would listen. I would take it easy.

“I know.” I said. “I’ve told you that.”
“It’s no excuse!” Kane snarled. “You rule England, why can you not simply just play the part?”

He was beyond reason it seemed. There weren’t going to be many advantages when it came to situations like mine- I needed to capitalize whenever I could, sound out where his brain had frayed around the edges. If I could but grip one thread and give it a tug, I was certain he would unravel and I would be free of this frigid prison.

“How am I to act a queen when strung up like a dead calf?” I asked, “You’re more likely to bleed me dry then bow at my feet. If only these cuffs were not-“

His hand came across my face, sharp and sudden without hesistation. My cheek stung and I tasted blood from the inside. A split lip or a bitten tounge, nothing more. Kos above, I hoped, nothing more.

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the scratchy bristles as he whisked everything to a frenzy.

When it came away with a thick trail he seemed satisfy. He tapped the edge of the brush twice against the rim of the jar and then carried both closer to me.

“And here I thought you’d be eager to get these blemishes removed.” He said before applying the brushed to my cheek. His hands were heavy, depressed all the brushes and sending them outwards until the little brush looked like the variety used for chimney sweeping. There was dried paint caked to the end of all the little tines and they scratched at my skin.

Kane worked carefully, applying dripping coats of paint to my face and my arms. He went over some areas twice or thrice. He sought to cover my freckles as well as any scars I’d sustained. When practically every inch of exposed skin was now stiffened and immobile within its chipping paint crust, he stepped back and gave a satisfied nod.

“Much closer.” He proclaimed.

Next came the hairbrush which was all soft bristles. This was the sort of thing that was good for infants and small straight-haired children, but as Kane began to brush my hair he soon realized it was hardly the thing for grown adults. Strokes that had been measured and gentle before soon attempted to become rough and pulling as he worked at my curls.

“What is wrong with your hair?” He growled at me, “It will not untangle!”

“You’re using the wrong brush.” I told him.

“Nonsense.” He insisted, “This was the kind Alois always favored.”

“She must have more manageable hair then I.” I said.

“Yes.” Kane said, “For I was always the one who managed it.

He settled for an attempt at a braid. He tugged at my hair, sending pain shooting right down through the scalp. I preffered to work at my own hair for this exact reason, no one knew how to manage it better then I. Kane removed his own hair pin and used it to secure the braid. There were still plenty of curls that sprung out of the even strand running down my back, but he stepped back once more and seemed mostly satisfied with this.

“I do so hate her hair pulled back.” He mumbled, “But she insisted it was more efficient for her days on the hunt.”

“I find that less blood got into my hair when I pulled it back for the hunt.” I said.

Kane’s eyes sparkled with delight and he clapped his hands together like a delighted child. “Yes, yes! That is exactly the sort of thing my sweet sister would have said. Tell me, tell me how did it feel to be on the streets?”

I tried to paint a proper picture of life amongst my fellow Valkyeries, but the longer I carried on the more I could see that this was the exact opposite of what Kane wanted to hear. I hunted to protect, Alois hunted to control. I took no more then was needed, she gathered to excess. We were different at every possible turn, yet Kane worked to make us the same. The comparisons ceased when the paint began to seize, drying and forming a crust. It cracked when I moved and soon there were little fault lines all over my face.

“I should’ve known it would never stay so close.” Kane mumbled.
He took a wet rag and began to wash the paint away. The water was cold and I shivered under it, excess running down my spine, dropping off my elbows to soak through my pant leg.

“Quit shaking.” Kane barked before splitting my skull with another slap.

I tensed all of my muscles and strained to endure while he continued to clean off the paint.

“No point in half-measures.” He said, flinging the paint-stained rag to the floor. He took his hair pin out with a yank and I gasped. I was surprised all of my hair didn’t come away with it.

“This has been lovely, really. You’re improving.” Kane went on. “But I’ve got to go track down that passionate little friend of yours. Cato wasn’t it?”

“Le-leave him alone.” I said.

“Oh come now, come now.” He said, “You must be getting lonely.”

“I’m fine.” I assured him.

He would not hear of it. “I really can’t afford to damage you any more then I already have, and you know so much of this world- and it’s strange girl called Fwahe. You need encouragement to share information, I understand. Nothing comes for free in this world, girl. I’m just going to get some insurance, someone who is not so precious and could stand to loose a lot more then you.”

“Oh don’t fret over me.” He said.

I didn’t.

“I’ll be back before you know it.”

Just like that he was gone, disappeared through his secretive little entrance. I let my muscles go and could afford to shake again. I could see my coat, still waiting on the back of the chair. If only it could be reached. The only object I might have been able to grasp was the rag full of paint, and that was no use to me.

I had to break free, especially if Kane was going to try and bring Cato here. Cato was a dear friend, and even though the shadow of fear never left his eyes after what I’d done to him at Cainhurst, he still treated me with the same respect and casual joking as before. He did his best to hide the terror from me, but when he thought no one was around he was a mess of shakes. Rook said he spoke in his sleep, something I’d never known him to do before.

If Kane brought him here, if he were held in chains again- the shock well may kill him. I could not afford to let that happen.

At the same time I could not stop it. With all the strength I still possessed I fought against the cuffs but now as always it made no difference. I could not escape them.

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For a second there was a glimmer of hope. I heard a harsh clicking sound. My eyes went to the window. I had hoped for salvation, but all it provided as a view of a raven trying to crack open a late walnut on the glass panes. He was not having an easy time of it. The clicking noise was of the
walnut smashed again and again into the glass. I thought the bird might break the old thing, but it held firm and soon he’d burst open the walnut.

Was that to be me and my fate? Kane to be the bird and me just another tiny thing caught up in the wrong place at the wrong time. Smashed to bits.

There were few times I had felt this small, and I was proud to note that the vast majority occurred in my youth, when I genuinely was small compared to all the things in the world that sought to harm me. The days before Atlee had taught me what it was to be fearless, and before I had needed to look after Templeton.

I did hope that Fwahe was keeping an eye on her in my absence. Scarlett and Imogen, gods what was I thinking letting her around the both of them? There were rifts between my friends that could not be repaired and I was unable to blame either side. As much as I loved Fwahe, treasured Templeton’s friendship they were still a danger. They were a risk that I was willing to take, come whatever might- but was it fair to have everyone else sign up for the same?

They were going to have a kid.

That still astounded me, that anyone would want have the time to worry about offspring and legacies in times like these. Even with safer streets and less attacks, child-rearing seemed something reserved for denizens and those whose lives hadn’t been directly affected by the events of the hunt. A child should never have to see the scourge.

In brash youth when we had been taught to admire boys and become mothers and wives as well as huntresses I had fancied a daughter of my own one day. It was a childhood notion that lacked any holding in reality- for I quickly found that boys, just as kids were not for me. My fellow sisters dreamed of days where they might teach their children lessons while maintaining a pot on the stove and a household besides.

I had never learned to cook beyond the most basic of necessities- and even in those I was lacking. The mysteries of cooking rice were lost upon me. My bread either burnt or did not rise, any of the real tasks of baking and food preparation had to be done by my other hunters. Frankly it had been a miracle that the breakfasts I attempted to cook for our overnight guests didn’t kill them.

Fwahe was always kind enough to eat my blackened food, on the nights I tried but truly failed. Cato would run it into the ground with complaints, but the Vileblood dutifully chewed through each charred morsel and praised the taste. This produced one of Cato and Fwahe’s famous circuitous arguments in which neither relented nor gained the upper hand. He argued she could not properly judge food being a Vileblood, and she argued that he was stupid and thus his opinion was invalid. Hours and hours they could go on, and I used to get quite cross with the both of them for spending so much time wrapped up in nonsense.

I would give anything to hear that argument now, almost anything. I didn’t want either of them brought here. They needed to keep going in circles in the safety of the theater kitchen- but I was sure neither of them was there.

It had been several days since Kane had brought me here. At least two, plus all of those that I had been asleep for. They were sure to be looking for me now. Would they ever think to look in a place like this? Besides Kane I don’t think anyone had come in, in years. We were so used to the old places in the city- the buildings that were avoided simply because everyone knew there was nothing there. I had to hope for outside eyes and creative minds if I was ever going to be found.

I hated having to hope too. So much to the better if I could escape myself. I should have tried
harder, found some way to overpower Kane when he was brushing my hair or painting my face. There were still places he’d missed, crusty bits of drying substance caked through with little brush hairs. Nothing useful, not in the slightest. My whole world had become coats I couldn’t reach and cuffs that could not be undone.

I looked back up at the raven. They were said to be smart things. They were said to be the eyes of gods, the messengers of death, so many different things.

“Please.” I beseeched it.

It squaked and flew away. I was alone again, without its clicking. All there was to do was struggle and wait and hope that Kane failed to find anything useful. Every time he was gone I found myself falling asleep. When the Bloody Crow stayed for long stretches, hour after hour I would quickly loose all energy- but I could never actually sleep until he had gone away. Even then it was still hard. I had never before spent so much energy, so much time on thinking about falling asleep. I had to coach myself into it.

The only gentle words these days were the ones I said to myself. Even those were slipping into irritated frustration. I wanted to scream at myself for being unable to escape these bonds. It was maddening to play over and over in my head the walk to the Forbidden Woods and the ambush. Why hadn’t I just taken someone with me? Why hadn’t I listened to Callum.

The urge to berate myself was overwhelming- but it did no good. Kane Hirsch already had things covered on the degradation front. Adding to it would only aid him. Still it was hard to remain sure of myself on the ever-shifting ground. It was like solving a riddle, the answer should be forefront and obvious- but instead it was deeply obscured and no amount of over-thinking could peel back the shadows and expose it.

Somehow there had to be a way to escape this prison. Nothing was so definite, so fixed in stone. If I could only keep my head clear, rest my arms for a moment. A clear head wouldn’t result from panicked exhaustion. The battle with Kane was a marathon, not a sprint. Pushing on recklessly would only bring poor choices and more injuries.

Sleep still snuck up on me, even when I was trying to beckon it closer. One moment my eyelashes felt too heavy to possibly exist without crushing my eyelids completely, but the next I was being shouted at. I had slept, and Kane had returned. The dreams, which I rarely dreamt, seemed to have ceased completely. I never woke with the sense of having been somewhere else but always was rooted in this nightmare.

A quick survey of the room showed that we were once more alone. He had not managed to capture Cato. I could let myself breathe for tonight.

“You sleep too much.” He growled at me.

“Sorry.” I mumbled.

He took my chin in his hands and slapped my cheeks several times. The pain was sharp, jolting my eyes open, until weariness pulled them shut again. He didn’t stop until the stupor of rest was chased away and I could hold his gaze without fluctuation. My face stung.

“She never slept as much as you. Not only are you horrible when placed in control of a city, but you are a lazy thing too.”

He got to muttering about other lazy people he found disagreeable. There was someone called Will
who bore particular scorn, and Kane launched curses at him in such dispropertiant quantities that I surmised there was a personal grudge between the two. I found myself subconsciously taking Will’s side in the mock-arguments Kane went to great lengths to stage for me. He went on and on, while I had no choice but to watch. He could really go on about it.

“Your fingers are turning purple.” He said suddenly.

It was hard to keep feeling in them, but so far I hadn’t lost them completely. That was before sleeping though, and now when I tried to coax movement through my wrists and into my fingertips I couldn’t get it to flow.

“I can’t move them.” I said.

“She has all her fingers.” He said, “No one was ever able to so much as hold her hand without her consent- and mother did throw the suitors at her. One after the other they were put against her and she made mincemeat of them all.”

“Mmmhm.” I said.

I wasn’t listening. My lifeless fingers worried me. The woodland hunters told stories of northern winters. Many of them had lost fingers and toes to the icy conditions, and they had the wounds to prove it. I didn’t want my fingers to frost over and snap off. The best I could do was get them to shake.

“She has to still have all her fingers.” He said, “She must be able to wear her rings.”

There had to be some way to convince him to take me down. This riddle had an answer, I just had to think it through.

“Rings?” I asked.

“Oh yes.” He replied, “She had many of them, fine things. It was her obligation to wear the signet ring of our house- when it came for sealing letters and such, but there were others. She liked to take trophies from the suitors after she’d removed them.”

He licked his lips, savoring the memory.

“Trophies?” I asked.

So many leading questions, but if he were to use me as bait surely I could bait him back.

“She rifled through pockets and pulled from chains the many engagement rings they intended to bestow upon her. It could be said that Alois wed herself many times. There were enough of them so that she could wear a separate set of eight, every day of the week with no repetition. It should’ve been enough to stop suitors dead in their tracks, but our family was prominent and men were persistant.”

“I see.” I said.

“No. You don’t.” He corrected.

Kane scanned the ground looking through the dust before picking a metal nut, long separate from his bolt off the ground.

“In place of anything better, this will do for a pauper.” He said.
I watched as he slid the keys to my cuffs from his pocket. My legs tensed. I was ready to spring at
him the moment he set me loose. Were I him, and thank Kos I was not, I would’ve exercised a
great deal more caution then he did. His fingers fumbled as he hurried to unlock my wrists.

Now was my chance.

I screamed at my legs to move. One swift jerking motion from my foot, up through the knee,
culminating in a devastating blow between my captor’s legs. That would surely shut him down,
and one free hand was all I’d need to grab the key, take back my coat and be on my way. That was
the plan, but things did not go accordingly.

The second my full weight was on my legs again they collapsed underneath me. I hit the ground
hard, and felt the pain of old wounds rise anew. Alfred had severely damaged this same leg with
his Kirkhammer back in Minimus’ tournament, and while Callum had been able to set it right
again, there were still pains. I hissed through my teeth and tried not scream.

Kane chuckled, “Now now, the man is the one who is supposed to be down on his knees when
presenting rings.”

Everything came back in throbs and pulses. Feeling in my fingers had to be paid for with agonizing
bolts of sudden seizure as blood ran back where it was supposed to. It was as though my body had
forgotten how to function. Forget fighting, I would be lucky if I could sit up.

Impatience, as I mentioned was not one of the things Kane had to excess. Someone had stolen his
helping when they were doling out virtues in the god’s court. He watched me struggle for a
moment or two before grabbing me under the arms and moving me to a seated positon. My legs
were stiff and my arms hurt but all around I kept noticing oppourotinites. If only my arms would
reach I might grab hold of the chair and be able to smash it against him. If only my legs could kick
I might send him flying off the edge of the attic platform, careening down to have his bones
smashed on the factory floor below.

If only I could so something to fight back. Kane pressed me against the wall, leaning my back onto
it.

“All the same I can’t have you running.” He said.

My eyes were going blurry from so much movement, the rush of activity and motion was
overpowering. He took a few steps away and I saw that he was struggling to get the cuffs out of the
ceiling support. He was going to secure me again, only differently.

There was the hairbrush, if only I could stretch my fingers up to the table and pull it down. I could
use the handle to stab at something. There was a break in the glass panes, if only I could ram it
with my shoulder and make myself a glass shard sword. There was a loose brick, if only I could
pry it out and bludgeon him with it. There were so many things, all of them impossible
destinations.

It was only hopeless men who thought like this, seeing their chances before them and taking none
of them. I had scolded and condemned those around me for not acting, but this is the first time I
had ever felt it for myself. I didn’t realize how, when trapped with Minimus I had been given all of
the advantages. There was constant attention, I never went stir crazy locked in a cage. I got to sit in
a chair, I did not have to strain my stomach just to breathe. There was the pain of course, but that
soon went away when my will was taken.

I thought I had suffered the worst under that man, but there were demons in every gutter. Their
claws and teeth were all different, but they tore the same, they killed the same. Here I was trapped. It was only a matter of time before I perished. He’d finally got them down. The cuffs would come again. They would be on me and I would be as helpless as before.

Confound the notion of noble women and helpless maidens. My wrists and legs could scream all they liked I was not staying down another second. I could not reach the brush or the chair or the glass or the bricks, but there was the rag. There was the rag still moist with paint and leaking onto the floor. I was a dancer and my legs could reach. I was a runner and my knees drug though my muscles to pull it close. I was a fighter and I could take a weapon into my own hands.

I was the Patron Huntress of this city, and I would be ruled by the Bloody Crow no longer. He was coming to chain me up. My body screamed at me to stay put, but I tensed it once more, and before he could even turn his head and look at me straight on, I sprung at him. I shoved the rag into the eyes of the bloody crow. He was shocked. He fell over and crumpled beneath my meager weight. It was all I needed. I kept the rag over his eyes, squeezing paint into them. I wanted to bleach all the green out so that no one ever had to look at it again.

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I soon felt his nails on my back, his claws, his talons trying to take me for prey again. I would not let it happen. I had to beg my legs to move but they did. Tired, but these motions were familiar. I kicked him as I scrambled out of the clawed hands, sprinting for the desk.

I was not quick enough to avoid him. He locked his hand around my ankle and I went down hard. All was madness and fury, like a rabbit caught in a snare I tugged furiously, struggling to get away.

“Don’t you dare run away from me!” Kane shouted.

His eyes were yet to open. The hand that was not on me was over them. Perhaps luck had won the day and he truly had gone blind. His fingers scraped furiously at what paint remained. It must’ve heard. Good, the bastard deserved it.

So long as I lived I would never stand to wear the color green again.

One more tug and I was at last free of him once more. My shambling footsteps were only serviceable because I threw one down right after the other. I was moving too fast to be stopped, and too fast to stop myself. My side went crashing into the side of the desk. I wheezed in pain. Kane was right behind me, it could hurt but I couldn’t be forced to stop. I snatched my cap, his knife and my coat. I yanked so hard the chair fell away behind me.

Now it was too the ladder, and a dangerous climb. Cap on head, coat over shoulder and knife in my mouth I began to climb down rushing legs down before hands. Kane was upon me in seconds, twisting and snarling like a mountain cat. He had his claws in the collar of my shirt. They were caught in the fabric.

I resented the strength of it now as he got his hold on me again. I begged it to tear but it held firm and when Kane started to pull up, I clung to the rusting ladder with everything I had. He tore me away easily, holding me a loft with inhuman strength.

But I had a knife. Letting go with one hand as he fought to haul me back onto the attic floor as a fishermen pulling his nets onto a ship, I stuck at him. I brought the tip up above my head, pushing it through his palm. I knew Vileblood to be tougher than that of my own species, but it was not invulnerable. Kane howled and his hand let go.

Triumph.
Then despair.

I was sliding over the edge, sliding back too far too quick for me to stop myself. The knife was stuck in Kane’s hand I could not get it back as my own weight pulled me down toward the edge. I tried to dig my nails into the floorboards, the ones I still had but they weren’t strong enough. My shoulders shook and then loosed when I made an attempt to cling to the edge of the attic floor.

Then I was falling, I was falling what felt like a thousand feet. The factory floor was below me and it was scattered full of old machinery. I was going to hit something. I knew it was coming. I couldn’t reach the ladder. The support beams sped away. I readied myself.

The hit was like one of the bolts of electricity from the chair, sudden and all encompassing. Everything snapped and then there was only darkness.

I wanted it to overtake me, to pull me down into the realms of unconsciousness, or else death so that I wouldn’t have to feel anything. I was not so lucky. I had landed on something unyielding, with sharp corners and a deep recess, a bin of some sort. I was caught in it. No matter how much I strained I would not be moving now. The mere thought sent spear-jabs of pain up my spine. Now not only were my fingers unfelt, but my feet and my chest. I wasn’t completely sure that I was breathing at all.

There could not exist agony like this without breath. I was still alive, I must be. How else would I hear the slow clink of boots coming down stairs and know without a doubt that Kane was coming for me.

My head could not be raised too look. I could barely get my eyeballs to swerve back and forth, to search. The soft metal clinks of boots coming down the runs seemed to echo in my head as bells from the cathedral. The echoes of one bled into the echoes of the other. Not church bells, no hunter’s bells, calling to each other on the street. We knelled the denizens away and sent messages of confidence out to each other.

I had no bell of my own. I could not return the call.

It was not the call at all, I mustn’t let myself fall to delirium like this. It was just the Bloody Crow coming to feed off his carrion.

The ringing stopped and switched to boots over wooden floors. They had heels if I was not mistaken- did he wish to appear taller then he was? Kane was rife with insecurities, that I had no doubt of. It was a matter of those that I could exploit that concerned me, should concern me. It was hard to know what was pertinent information when I was paralyzed with pain.

“Oh dear.” Kane said.

Another second and he was standing over me. His face had eclipsed the sun, blotted out the walls and the ceiling until it was the only thing in the room. It was narrowed in angry satisfaction. Looking at him felt blinding, but I couldn’t make myself turn away.

“Oh dear.” He said again, “It seems you’ve had a horrible fall. Alois would never have lost her balance like that.”

My eyelids couldn’t keep holding themselves up. My lips quivered and I tried to slide words through them, but they came out in moans- sounds not sentences.

His hand was in my hair, brushing it out of my face. Most of the curls were stuck on with sweat. I did not want him touching me. His hands were cold, but I could not shy away, nothing would
move.

“Now now, I’m sure you’ve realized your mistake haven’t you?” He asked.

“Mmm.” I weezed.

“You’re surely very sorry.” He said, pushing the last of the stray hairs behind my ear.

“Mmm.” I said again.

“There now, don’t worry. I’m going to look after you, you tiny fallen thing.”

I couldn’t stop him from scooping me up. He had one hand under my leg, the other bracing my back. Like a bride he carried me, in awkward staggering jolts we rose up the ladder. He was taking me back to the prison and the skylights and I couldn’t protest. I couldn’t feel anything.

He spoke softly as he carried me back, and continued on when he laid me on the floor. Cuffs around my legs, the same that had stangled my wrists, but now he need not fear me loosing fingers. The wooden floor made poor bedding, but anything was preferable to the dangling. If he put me back up again I was sure I’d collapse- a puppet whose strings has been severed.

“You’ve misbehaved.” He said, “Which, although quite like my sweet sister is not what I want from you. I told you I need to practice so that I can be a gentlemen again, a proper son of Cainhurst- but how am I to do that if my fair lady tries to drop herself to her death?”

“Mm.” I said. It was all I could manage. I didn’t even know what I meant by the sound I just knew that I had to reply. It was just pushing air out past my teeth.

“The cuffs are for your own safety.” He said, “I was hoping we might practice the social graces- dancing and what have you, but I cannot risk you do something like that again.”

He acted like I was the bereft heroine of a droll novel- that I would rather drop myself onto rocks and swirling sea then face my problems. Could he truly not believe that there were people in this world who found him repulsive and wish to escape his insidious clutches?

“You’ve gone and broken yourself.” He said, “And I am no doctor. You might remain this way forever- and you’ve no one to blame but yourself. It is so unfortunate, though you were not my sister I am sure you might’ve met someone who would think you a great beauty. Even if you could not be tamed, you could’ve continue to hunt. Do you see where selfishness has landed you, girl?”

“Mmm.” Again.

Processing his words hurt. Anything that required me to think was a burden, and Kane’s conversations were so full of truth and lies knotted together like brambles. I was not of a mind to navigate them properly. I was not of a mind to do anything but lie on my side and try to breathe. I couldn’t do anything more than that.

He kept talking. I could not listen but to know when he paused and say the same meager sound over and over. His vanity was so great that he thought this engaging conversation and droned on. I knew that sleep would come for me eventually, the one place that Kane’s claws could not permeate. If I was going to have a dream, let it be one of Fwahe. Or perhaps better not too- best she did not see me like this.

Perhaps it was best that no one saw me like this. My chances at escape had fallen to the floor-smashed to a million pieces. I went along with them and now I must go along with Kane. I faded in
and out of coherence. When I slept the world was ice, but I awoke to fire. To be burnt and thawed, exsistant in that half state between wakefulness and slumber, that was my life now. Instead of active participant, able to engage in my own affairs and direct my proper course- I was now passive audience; looking on but unable to intercede.

He had set me down on a bed of rubber sheeting, giving me a sandbag for a pillow. The burlap was moist and scratchy, tiny fibers coming off and sticking to my face. The itching was terrible but I couldn’t reach up to scratch them. One of the sheets was on top of me, nothing more than a thin cover, but it was now beyond my power to lift. He was gone, and I was unrestrained- but I couldn’t even try for escape. Everything was just broken.

“You’d look like her.” Kane said.

I hadn’t even realized he was here. I couldn’t see anything that wasn’t directly me above me. Mostly I saw the sky, but the moon could be eclipsed, split into the twin jade planets of the Bloody Crow’s cruel eyes.

“When you sleep- if only not for those infernal blemishes.” He carried on.

I was not his Alois. Why couldn’t he understand? I was too tired to explain, the words would not come out. He tapped his foot, impatient. The sound came down right next to me, vibrating like echoes through a cave. Too loud, far too loud.

“You are very dull now.” He said, “I should just kill you- your death is the only thing with the potential to entertain me, but I am a kind and sympathetic man. Your hunters have been useless in finding Fwahe- so I will have to send you after her. It seems that even though I find you unsatisfactory, without you England fails.”

Why was anyone trying to find Fwahe? She would be at home, at the theater. Patience was watching her and the dogged little Executioner wasn’t going to let his charge stray. Had she disappeared searching for me? That couldn’t end well.

At least I knew she was not with Kane. Wherever she had gotten off too- looking for me in the wrong places, at least it wasn’t here. I would have her stay far away.

I had so many questions, all fighting for prominence in my thoughts. They screamed at me to speak, while the boot came down and my parched lips refused to part. In addition to all other ailments, it seemed that I would be fraught with more headaches. The mere word was enough to set the horrible pain into action. No words got out but a scream did. White flashes bleached away the world, I couldn’t see anymore.

It felt like falling through a tunnel of glass, the longer it lasted, the further I fell the more shards I picked up. It kept getting worse. Kane was shouting at me, and shaking me which only made my broken body burn all the worse. It felt like it went on for hours, and truly when my eyes were able to see again, the sky had changed hues.

“What is wrong with you?” Kane growled.

“C…Callum.” I muttered. “m..medic.”

“What’s that?” He asked.

“T…th..” the words just wouldn’t come out. I could think them but they were beyond speech. He stood over me, watching as my lips twitched, begging words for as long as he were able. When it was evident I could speak no more, he snatched up his cloak in a flutter of feathers, or perhaps it
was my coat. All I saw was a flash of black.

“I’ll get a doctor.” Kane said.

“C..callum.” I managed once more.

“Is that your doctor?” He asked.

I took a slow satisfied blink. The Bloody Crow understood. Callum was clever and capable. I was sure he could play the part and find a way out of this, if only Kane’s temper might be reigned in. While he was away I would have to work on being sweet and charming, playing the part so he might be swayed in the right direction.

“Yes.” I managed, in a weaky breathy whisper.

“I’ll fetch him.” Kane agreed.

His boots echoed across the attic and then rung like bells down the ladder. Callum would’ve cursed the thing- would be cursing the thing. He was no great fan of heights and probably did not revel in the thought of taking his delicate tools up rickety rungs. He would come if asked though- he would always come if asked. Odeon almighty, what had I asked of him?

Placing all my hopes on him was foolish. Kane would trap him here and never let him go. It had been such a selfish choice, there were those who truly needed him. People were going to die because I had asked for him.

I tried to stay awake, to plan for what I might say and do when the medic arrived. Kane hadn’t been able to find Cato, surely Callum could allude him to. He was not the brightest bulb in the chandelier, not in this state. I think at one time, before the fall of Cainhurst he may have truly been terrifying. I was fortune not to have known him there, and this sister he so desperately sought seemed to have been even worse.

He looked like Fwahe though. I tried to ignore it but it was impossible- especially with how much I longed to be next to her again. I may never be able too. She was far away and hidden, something must’ve caused her to run. Without me England fails, that’s what Kane had said. I could only guess as to meaning, but none of my possibilities seemed positive.

Thinking so hard was exhausting. I couldn’t believe how much it wore me out, I used to run through possibilities and manage argumentative hunters with ease. Plummetering from great depths took its toll. I had promised myself the next time I got injured I would rest, I would heed good advice. It was a promise I had to break- how could I just lie here?

I had to. Restraint was important, and I hadn’t imposed any on myself. That was how I got here and if I continued I might never escape. Escape was a dream. I couldn’t run away with broken legs. I could not climb down the ladder with broken arms. A puppet with tangled strings could not perform.

“Frigga?”

I had fallen asleep again. I blinked awake and looming over me were hazel eyes- not green. Gods above a familiar- if terrified face.

“Callum?” I asked. “Is that really you.”

He nodded, “It’s me. I can’t believe we finally found you. I don’t know the hunter who did it- he
just grabbed me off the street and said you were in trouble. What happened to you?”

“H…He did….Callum he’s not-“

“Not concerned with anything except our good lady’s health.” Kane cut in.

He bent down and took off the rubber sheeting. I could not twist my head down and see the broken condition of my own body, but the widening of Callum’s eyes spoke volumes. He could see all the work that was before him.

“Fuck.” He said, “Frigga…how are you even alive?”

“None of that vulgarity please.” Kane said. “It hardly befits our lady.”

“He’s not-“ I tried to say.

“Sh.” Callum said, “Just rest.”

I hadn’t listened to him before and it spelled disaster, but heeding his words once more would spell disaster. He thought that Kane was a hunter.

“He’s not-“

“I said hush.” Callum barked, “Just please. Please dear gods Frigga, lie still and rest. Your body cannot handle any more stress.”

Stress, he could not even imagine the scope of the word. With Callum looking over me and Kane looming behind him, I wasn’t going to get the slightest chance to explain. Callum opened his bag and I heard things shifting. There was the clinking of metal and glass, sloshing liquids and shifting pills.

“I don’t have enough.” Callum said.

“What?” Kane asked.

“I…I need more supplies- there’s not enough here.” He explained, “I need splints, for resetting bones. I don’t have nearly enough silk for all the stitching and really my better smaller set of forceps would be ideal. If I give her the sedative I have on hand, she might wake up halfway through, and we don’t need our patron huntress experiencing such pains.”

“But.” Kane started, “Just look at her, surely she will die if we-“

“With all due respect, brother hunter,” Callum began, “I think I know a bit more about this subject then you. She is incredibly incredibly stable right now, considering the scope of her injury. It would be far better to spare the hour it would take to travel there and back, if an hour at that.”

“Very well.” Kane agreed, “I shall accompany you.”

“Absolutely not.” Callum said, “Any manner of beast might crawl through the roof- whatever had wrought this damage might come back. There is too much danger in leaving her alone- plus you must ensure she stays awake and breathing. This is vital, brother hunter.”

Kos be praised, that doctor was clever. He knew. He must have known. Kane was caught in a net of his own lies and his foot tap-tap-taped on the floorboards again as he tried to cut himself free. The Bloody Crow had thought to trap a foolish man, but Callum proved himself no fool. I had to hope, beyond hope that Callum wasn’t being serious. To some degree- anyway. He likely did need
more tools and wasn’t expecting to find me like this, but this must be him running for help.

“I really don’t think its-“

“With all due respect, “ Callum said again, “I know what I’m talking about.”

He left his bag behind and hurried for the ladder. Kane wasn’t being given a choice anymore. These moments were full of danger now, until he reached the ground. He might decide the medic was safer dead then his secret exposed, and try to work on me with the tools he’d left. I prayed to every god I’d ever heard of that Kane would contain himself.

I heard footsteps start for the ladder, start after him. The gods would not be able to save him.

Callum had told me to be quiet- but now more than ever it was surely time to speak. I had to play on the strange sympathies of the disturbed man who was my captor.

“Kane?” I asked. I forced my voice to sound delicate.

It stopped him dead in his tracks. Callum didn’t slow continuing to speed down the ladder. I just needed to give him a little time. The Bloody Crow came to my side. It seemed that any bird, even the most vicious could be trained. I only need keep him caged for a few moments.

“Yes?” He asked. “What is it?”

“Please.” I started, again voice light and delicate. I tried to retreat in my mind and find a space that was not me. I had never known Alois, nor been a noble woman but I had seen plays and read books. It was a strain to put on a mask, take up the voice of an actress and play the part when my own body felt like collapsing- but I would endure. I must. “Please Kane, I need some water.”

His eyes welled with sympathy.

I was not classically trained and had never been on a stage in my life, but it was enough to win the Bloody Crow over. I had the advantage of similarity which bred empathy, and for that I could only thank the parents who were distant in my memory. Luck of genetics I suppose, studies of traits passed down that were far beyond my comprehension. One could not learn everything, and my bloodline was one of those subjects that was fine left in obscurity.

“Of course.” He said.

So cruel one minute and nothing but a selfless serving boy the next. His mind must have broken somewhere, if I could only see the cracks to tear it apart. His feet thundered away, too loud still, but this time I had no fear of him preventing Callum’s leave. The medic would surely be on the ground if not out the door by now.

Kane knelt beside me and pressed a spoon with cold water to my lips. The cold metal was chilling, but it felt marvelous against my flaking lips. He gently tipped water into my mouth, but I didn’t take it well. On purpose I sputtered and coughed and had a fit, despite wanting to gulp down the whole spoonful. It further played on his sympathies. He worked to gently prop my head up and get more water down my throat.

My empty stomach began to fill, but this alone would not be enough. He seemed to forget that humanity required food, and I hadn’t had so much as a crumb since coming here. That had the potential to be as detrimental as the injuries. Starvation could change a person, and I was certain that as unsavory as it became in Vilebloods there was a side to humanity that emerged after being denied food. I wasn’t convinced it would be any better than the manifestations of the Vileblood’s
hunger.

For now all there was to do was drink and hope that Callum understood and might be able to intercede for me. If he could just bring back an army to slay the Bloody Crow. He was a mere denizen, but make mention of my name and surely the hunters would come together. Surely there would be a way.

More water down my throat but my eyelids were closing. Kane’s hand came across my face—gentler then before but still too harsh.

“Stay awake.” He commanded, “The doctor said you must stay awake.”

I gritted my teeth and opened my eyes. “Thank you.” I said.

He pressed the spoon to my mouth again, and I continued to receive water from my jailer. You had to take what you could get. I just hoped Callum would hurry.
Virtues

Chapter Summary

A look into Patience's past while the young Executioner is lost in the woods.

Chapter Notes

As always, please let me know what you think! Your feedback is incredibly valuable. I hope to hear from you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I had lost track of time. Shortly after realizing this a new measure for the hours sprung up; rising puddles. It had started to rain. The bottom of the pit I was trapped in started to become a sink hole. I’d never get the stains out of my robes. Kos, that was such a stupid thing to be thinking, about stains and laundry. There was a genuine chance of choking on mud and being buried beneath the ground. The rain poured down like a shower head that wouldn’t turn off. There was no knob to turn so as to make it more palatable, it came down cold and unyielding.

What would mother have said?

I didn’t even have to wonder- no doubt a lecture about disobedience. This was what came for wandering away from your elders and betters. I could practically hear her speaking the words, first it would be the disappointed sigh and then my full name. Patience Oliver Hastings. What a label to wear.

I wondered if my father wanted to give me a different name, and she’d derailed him. Probably not, we were supposed to be miracles- a complete set. I didn’t want to think about the circumstances of my birth, not here and not now. I hated recalling it, reciting it but that was the first story ever committed to my memory. Patience and the six murdered children- it hardly had the ring of a Hari Harel tale.

Still I had heard it before any of the other stories children learn. I knew it by heart before hymns, before nursery rhymes. I think in a way Mother was always telling it. Every part of her rose and fell with the shameful words. I knew them. I knew every last one.

“‘You were supposed to be part of a set, Patience Oliver.’ She’d lament, “The fifth of seven. Seven of you, one for each of the virtues.”

I had ruined it. Something had poisoned me long before I’d taken my first breath of air. The seven of us were a beacon of hope in a time poisoned with still births. Blood ministrations had not been going well, there were shortages and the beasts ran through the city in waves. Expecting mothers were too stressed and proper care could not always be guaranteed. The waiting rooms and operating tables of the many doctors in the city were packed, and hardly a one could be spared for birthing. There were lives already lived to be saved.
But my mother and father had been the exception. When it was confirmed by several doctors, shepherded in to watch over them both by the former leader of the city- Abbot Minimus, that they were going to have seven kids all at once newfound joy broke out amongst the tired hunters. Seven new young things to train in the ways of the sword, to watch over and care for and raise in the church.

And I had stolen all of that.

There were many doctors that advised against trying to host the lot of us, but the many women of the church would not have it. They would not allow any infant blood to be spilled, not so much as a drop. Mother was of the same mind, children were simply too precious. She never told me if Father considered trying to thin us down, but in the end he hadn’t had too.

I was supposed to have had three sisters, Charity, Kindness and Chastity. I was supposed to have three brothers, Temperance, Diligence and Humility. I knew the order of their birth, for we were named in accordance with the order. Charity first, who came with her cord wrapped around her neck, her little face purple. Mother had not heard her crying and the doctor strove to calm her.

It got worse when my eldest brother, Temperance came out the same way. Another umbilical noose. Charity was born upside down but her fate was the same. Diligence came out cold. He had been dead a long while. Mother was in tears and Father was desperate to calm her any way he could. That’s when I’d appeared and ruined things.

I should have died with the rest but I didn’t. I came out kicking and screaming and crying, causing a row like any babe might. At first there was a great swell of hope- for surely I was alive. Everything evaporated to disappointment when they saw, caught around my fist, wrapped over my arms the six cords of my siblings. I had grasped them all and killed them, sealing their deaths from my mothers stomach. Kindess and Humility were stillborn after me as dead and unfelt as the rest.

Mother said she was in tears- said the doctor offered to kill me. Surely he said, my soul was a wicked one and no good would come of a child born with murder in his heart.

Sometimes when she told it there was scalpel at my throat, other times a knife and once even in a particular rage as she was ensuring proper usage of that dreaded scourge she told me he’d taken a bit of my own cord and held it just at the neck- just ready to strangle so that I might pass over into the abyss in the same fashion as my siblings.

She said she never so much as considered it. Children- even vile murderous ones were too precious in these times. She committed to raising me properly and penitent right then and there. From day one I would know the weight of the lives I had taken, the six I had strangled so that I might live and breathe in crowded womb. I had been selfish in my earliest developments, and so she was determined to never let me be selfish again. I was going to be a proper child, the best the church had ever seen.

They kept the name Patience, more as a reminder of what they’d lost than anything else. I tried to suit it, strained at every turn to show I could wait, be the embodiment of the virtue they had named me for. I waited at the end of every line for every meal. I readily gave up toys, pencils, hymnals, prayer books anything to anyone who asked for it and waited my turn. I completed tasks as soon as they were given so I might not keep people waiting and was always served last at dinner.

The efforts of a child to make up for sins incalculable. How could I think that trite little behaviors could counteract the loss of my family. What good to be a fifth without a first?

I thought I could make Mother love me, love me beyond the toleration and the diligent lessons and
the never-ending record of my mistakes. I tried everything I could think, attempting to overflow with sweetness until I was irresistible. Too much sugar and the teeth rot out I learned, for when I tried to draw us all, all seven together she grew furious. An insult to their memory she had called it, burning the piece I’d labored over so long.

My father tried to urge caution, but she would not be swayed. I was grateful that Mother held position. Murder ought not to have been something so easily overlooked. I had taken six of her children with my bare hands. Truly a monster born in a time of hunters. I did not belong.

And now I would die alone, isolated from the Executioners I’d sought to join for so long. I’d finally started to gain her approval- or at the very least become useful instead of a disappointment. That stupid Vileblood had-

No. It wasn’t fair to blame her. She was mean but she wasn’t stupid, and I’d never seen her kill anyone. She’d bullied me, but it was not so different from other bullies I’d endured. What’s more she hadn’t deserved to be carted away like that. They did that to animals and I felt bad about it, the depth of my guilt fell deeper than the pit I was drowning in.

I wished for parchment and ink.

Then I wished I hadn’t made that wish because even if I’d had the materials, even if I’d broken my vows so as to communicate my final regrets to my Father, leave him an explanation of what had become of me- the mud would swallow that too. Odeon almighty, what was the point of it all?

I buried my head in my hands and waited for the end to come, willing the ground swallow me. I was ready to face the twisted purple faces of my unborn siblings. It was high time they dragged me down and had their revenge.

Instead of drowning, I heard an exchange of voices. There were people out in the deluge. Why were they here?

Had some Executioners come looking for me after all? My stomach felt empty, but maybe it was just fear altering the way time passed. I might not have been gone all that long. Perhaps they would take me from the pit and I really would have the stains in my clothes to worry about.

“Savaii I appreciate your communication with the great ones, but don’t you think we’ve spent enough time checking?”

The voices were full of harsh clicks and rolled “r” sounds. They were not the voices of Executioners—but something else entirely. I got up, to the limit that I could, and looked up. Even with salvation so close I still felt the weight of the vows on my shoulders. If I called out to them I might be saved, but they might also be with that horrible circus. I didn’t want to be caged and carted away.

I didn’t want to be dead either. It was a difficult choice. I decided to listen, doing my best to hear through the thunderclaps while the sounds came closer.

“They told me she must be found before the flooding, lest she die.”

“Did they say anything about us dieing?”

A peal of laughter mingled with the next thunderclap. It was a wild sort, the kind I imagined crazy things in tales of ghosts to have had. It was a sound that belonged in crumbling mansions and run-down masoleums, yet it suited a thunderstorm just fine.
“You know the cards do not speak of you Casaya. They have never once made you mention.”

“Yes.” Growled Casaya, “So you tell me.”

Their voices grew louder and louder. I became strangely calm, I knew somehow in the back of my mind that I need not call out. It was odd to trust strangers that I’d never met before, but I knew they would find me. Surely I should’ve been panicked. The mention of cards conjured up stories of swindlers and false fortune tellers, they might’ve easily been part of the Circo Obscuro.

But I knew they weren’t.

How could I know?

Sometimes, I suppose- things just happen. I didn’t like to just suppose. I never had. When I had seen a gun go off for the first time, watching some hunters at their target practice I was not content with just the run through of how to hold a gun and where to aim- I had asked to take it apart and see the insides. I wanted to know where the bullet came out from.

My teacher had told me to go home and ask my Father. It was the best assignment I’d ever been given for he was equally delighted with my curiosity- though he knew better than to say so around Mother. I asked him boldly over dinner, but with Mother’s watchful eyes he said he did not think it appropriate for growing men to learn such things. My heart sunk but then I watched as he rubbed his eyelid, then scratched his nose- once, twice.

Our secret sign!

That night I knew he would come to me, and sing in the sweet tunes of his home- far far from Yharnam. Mother was a heavy sleeper, and though she insisted they sleep in the same bed as man and wife, he found it easy to slip away and come collect me from my room.

We went out onto the roof and he spoke to me quietly. The scent of perfumed candles mingled with the night air and made the lessons like a dream. He worked with patient fingers as he explained all of the little mechanisms that men had made to answer my questions.

When a part went sour he knew how to fix it, knowing what required the hammer and what required re-carving, re-fitting, re-forging. Always he had an answer. His guns were the best guns. I knew it without anyone having to tell me- and of course no one ever did. There was no contest in my mind, and I wanted to always carry one at my hip.

We both knew I couldn’t, but he said I could continue to help him fix what did need fixing. We kept our rooftop workshop in operation for months before she caught us, and that was only because we left footprints on the snowy shingles in the dead of winter. Father had even tried to play it off as one of the Yule spirits come to visit us with oranges and candied nuts in the middle of the night- but Mother knew better.

After that I was given a bell to tie on my door knob, so that I couldn’t sneak out at night. Sometimes I still crawled through the window- just to sit out there and imagine the smell. I would sometimes try and sing the words that my Father had when he spoke, but they always felt sharp and wrong on my tongue- that of course was before the vows.

I didn’t have anything to fix up there- except myself. I remember wondering if I could be clicked open like a gun barrel, if someone might look inside and fix me. I was sure my Father could do it, pop whatever hidden catch was on me and take out the bad gears. He could melt down whatever had made me kill Temperance and Diligence, strangle Kindness and Chastity, steal food from
Charity and Humility. He could take out the part of me that was unsure of myself, the part that wanted for ribbons and restore it to its factory condition.

I wanted to ask him where the catch was, where the screws inside of people were so that he could fix me. I even scanned the gutters for coins as I walked home from Odeon Chapel those days, looking to save for supplies.

When I had finally brought the subject up to him, as we were both working to make dinner, he set down the saucepot and pulled me to his chest. It was a fierce embrace and it almost hurt, but I didn’t want to pull away.

“Oh my little one, you are not broken. You could never be broken.”

I was sure he hadn’t heard me, or else hadn’t understood but I didn’t want to break the spell. So long as he held me tight I was going to be held and if he thought me unbroken my childish soul latched onto it and refused to let go.

We were a little late with dinner that night. It was burnt and difficult to stomach, but I didn’t mind. Mother was the only one complaining.

“Why sister, I do believe you doubted me without cause.”

A glance skyward showed their faces, strange and shadowy in the deluge. Two women were looking down at me, crouching with their heads cocked to the side.

“I thought you said it would be a girl.” Casaya said.

“It is a girl.” Savaii replied.

“That’s a boy.”

“Tch.” Savaii scoffed, “I thought I was the blinded one. That is a girl if ever she’d been seen, clear as day.”

“I think it’s wish-fulfillment, sister.” Casaya said.

“Oh just lower the ladder.” Savaii snapped.

They seemed, oddly to get along despite their constant bickering.

The ladder clicked as they threw it down to me. It was nothing more than two long lengths of rope with small pieces of wood in-between- threaded through on either side. It shifted as I began to climb it, tiny spaces in the knots allowing the wooden rungs motion. Sometimes it swayed so bad I had to stop, clinging to the slick fibers like a cat, claws dug into a tree branch. The women above me were patient and didn’t seem to mind the rain now that they’d found me. I didn’t understand why they’d come looking for me, but I wasn’t afraid either.

She’d said I was a girl. I didn’t know how it was possible that she might’ve known that- I’d never told a single soul, but I trusted her implicitly. When I had climbed out of the pit I made an attempt to smooth out my robes before folding over into a neat bow.

They both laughed.

“So formal.” Casaya remarked, “Was that foreseen?”

“Hush. She’s perfect.” Savaii quipped, “Come, let us get you out of the rain.”
I should’ve been hesitant to follow them. They were dressed in strange clothes, things clearly of the woodlands but not, to my knowledge general attire of the woodland hunters. They both offered me their hands, so that I might walk in-between them. I hesitated for a few seconds before accepting.

“We wouldn’t want you to fall into any more of our traps.” Casaya explained, “We have rigged the whole woods.”

“Even with the woods rigged so many escape us- so many get by.” Savaii said.

Casaya nodded and hung her head for a second. The rain had caused her hair, beautiful hair; long and black like I wished mine to be, to get stringy from the rain. It hung around her face like a mourning veil. “It is true. We cannot stop them all.”

I had so many questions but the two kept up conversation without me. I could not participate, neither was I asked too. Still, it was different from being with my Mother or with Executioner Essex and Executioner Sussex when they spoke. If they were having a conversation I was there to listen, but these two seemed to include me somehow, though I no more nodded or made indication of my own thoughts then before.

Every part of my training, my instinct should’ve told me not to follow two strangers arm in arm into unknown territory, but they made me feel safe. I must’ve been that desperate for it, how pathetic. Casaya and Savaii took me back to their home which at first seemed not to be anything at all, just an open clearing. I stood somewhat dumbfounded in the center of it all, as the rain soaked me through to the bone.

“This way.” Savaii said.

She pulled aside a few branches on what I thought had been a bush, but suddenly a whole room opened up beyond it. They had disguised their lodgings to blend in perfectly with the forest that surrounded them, and I had nearly walked right into it without knowing. Once inside, I quickly forgot we were even a part of the Forbidden Woods. The whole room was black silk broken up by shimmering decorations. Casaya went around lighting violent candles. Their flames were picked up and reflected back by the many strings of metal beads and shimmering embroidery that covered the room. From its shape I thought it might be a tent, but I wasn’t sure.

“Don’t bother with the small ones.” Savaii scolded, “Light the firepit. She’s been soaked to the bone.”

“Ai!” Casaya growled, “I know how to start a fire.”

“Temper temper, sister.” Savaii warned, “We don’t want to scare her.”

I stood in the center of the sparkling room while they bickered. I wasn’t sure what to do with myself. I just kept looking around, and each time I found something stranger to focus on. There was a skull with several extra holes bored through it, sitting in a ring of yellow flowers. A string of beetles hung from the ceiling, their iridescent shells glimmering in the firelight. There was a table full of cards, not the sort used for gambling, but beautiful ones. They had metallic accents too, just like the rest of the room and shone as brightly as anything else. They were so beautiful I couldn’t help but reach out, strain to touch them.

“Ai!” Savaii shouted, before rapping my knuckles with the end of a smoking pipe.

I got down on my knees instantly, making wordless apologies. I hadn’t known what could come over me so suddenly to make me think it appropriate to inspect another person’s property like that.
Everything in the room was clearly expensive and expertly made.

“No, no none of that.” She sighed, “The cards are just special yes? They are for my hands alone.”

“You scared the poor boy to death, he’s shaking.” Casaya chuckled, before bending down and taking my hand. She pulled me back up before I could protest.

“Girl.” Savaii reminded. “You are a girl aren’t you?”

They both stared at me and waited. I was half risen, still dripping with mud. Casaya held both my hands in one of her own. I was frozen, stuck inbetween standing and sitting, stuck and unable to make a decision. I felt an ache in my forehead, tears pressing at my eyes. My stomach started to bubble and before I could nod or cry or make any kind of judgement call, I wretched all over the silk coverings on their floor.

“Ai!” Casaya shouted jumping back.

I wanted to apologize but I was shaking too bad. My hair was getting tangled up in the sick on the floor and I was choking on the stench of it.

“What is wrong?”

The sound echoed in my ears until I couldn’t feel it anymore. The world was as black as the tents. I kept trying to get up but everything shook. My knees were like the hoops children rolled over the cobbles, playing games to keep them spinning. They were tired of being rapped with sticks. One of the women was shaking me, but their words had stopped making sense.

I kept licking my lips and brushing my tongue over my teeth trying to clear out the foul taste but it did nothing. My vision blurred and direction made no sense. They were yelling now, hands on shoulders trying to pull me up or down or sideways- I didn’t know. Everything got hot, really hot. I was burning.

I used to feel like this sometime, as a child in school. It wasn’t a problem then- I could lean on the desk or run to the water closet and no one knew, but now there was no escape. I waited for the sleep I knew always came after the pain, after my skin grew so hot I used to think I’d become a forge- that someone had poured hot metal into a mold of my body to shape a newer better Patience Oliver Hastings.

Things smelled better when I woke up. My stomach felt empty- but not bad anymore. I wasn’t in the black room, but somewhere made of wood. There was a little bed tucked into the wall that they’d let me use. I wasn’t wearing my clothes and I might’ve just died of embarrassment there- the thought of someone else having to peel me out of the reeking Executioner’s garb. I was such a burden. I needed to go apologize.

At the other end of the room was something I hadn’t noticed when I’d been lying down. It was only when I stood up that I saw the mirror, which ran large enough to show me from head to toe. They’d given me a beautiful dress to wear- the sort of thing I’d seen girls dress in during the summer and envied immensely. The sleeves were somehow full of air, puffy. I poked at them, running my fingers over the soft black velvet. A lace collar scratched at my neck- a good kind of scratching, like an itch that was at last satisfied. There was eyelet lace at the bottom of the skirt- yes a skirt. Scalloped eyelet lace- the last time I’d touched it had been seven years ago- the last time I’d been to a tailors. It was only a brief brushing with the fingers but oh- oh how pretty it had been.
Now I was wearing it. I had on stockings too—I couldn’t believe it. I twisted and turned observing the dress more so then myself from every angle. There was a white bow on the back. It had come undone in sleep and I tried with fumbling fingers to set it right again. It should’ve been even and full of bounce but after my attempt to cinch it the ribbon looked like wet shoelaces.

I could’ve looked into that mirror for hours, if not for the hunger. I had to eat and I had to make amends. The smell of spices was coming into the room. I opened a door and once again it was like the world had been made into a puzzle. The door opened outside and upon stepping out I realized that the little room was actually some sort of wagon. I could see the wheels and spent a few seconds taking in the intricacy of the floral wood carvings before walking away. Someone had set out shoes for me, little black ones like I’d see the sisters wear in church. They slipped right on with no laces and there were little white patches on the sides.

I closed the door of the wagon behind me and took a few careful steps forward. They had made the forest into their home, and I had to push past curtains of woven leaves and walk down pebble pathways before the clearing opened itself up again and I could see the two of them at work. Casaya was pushing around a few logs, putting together some sort of table. Savaii was simultaneously stirring a pot and correcting her companion’s construction efforts.

I took a few steps towards them, before realizing I’d be almost entirely unable to apologize. I couldn’t fall onto the grass in this dress, it was slick with morning dew and still messy with mud from the night before. It would be ruined.

The two of them were so wrapped up in conversation that they didn’t notice me until I’d been standing there for several minutes, still trying to decide the best course of action. I watched them as they worked and made strange observations. Somehow it had passed me by entirely last night, but Savaii wore a cloth wrapping over her eyes. She’d called Casaya blind when she was the one without vision. Casaya had jewelry made out of bones that rattled when she walked, and had painted her face with strange colors. It wasn’t as makeup like some of the more fashionable Yharnimites donned, but closer to the charcoal markings of the Altered Boys.

“Ai!” Casaya gasped, when she finally noticed me “Scared me half to death! Why don’t you make a noise? Don’t just come up behind someone unannounced.”

“Peace, sister.” Savaii insisted. “You must have so many questions.”

That at least I did know the answer too. I could nod for that. They both laughed and beckoned me closer. Casaya put a white cloth onto of one of the logs and patted it. I sat down and before I could thank her in any fashion, Savaii had thrust a bowl in my hands. It was full to the brim of rice with chunks of seafood and sausage. I thought I saw a frog leg sticking up somewhere too, but I didn’t care, I was starving.

“I have been waiting a long time to meet you.” Savaii said as she stirred the pot. She brought the spoon up to her mouth to give the rice mixture inside a taste.

Casaya’s fingers grabbed a steaming bit of sausage off of Savaii’s spoon before it reached her lips. “You’ve been waiting three days at most.”

“I knew she would be coming!” Savaii insisted flinging the spoon back into the pot and grabbing her sister by the wrist.

“You didn’t know it would be in our lifetime!”

Suddenly they were on the ground, rolling so close to the fire. Dangerously close to the fire. Savaii
didn’t fight like one without sight, always knowing where to grab and how to dodge Casaya’s attacks- but still I worried about the flames. Like animals they rolled over one another, trying to seek satisfaction. I set my bowl down and ran in trying to stop them, fearful something had gone terribly wrong.

Before I could break them apart they came away themselves sides clutched in laughter.

“Oh forgive us, forgive us, little one.” Casaya bellowed, “We did not mean to frighten you.”

“I was merely trying to teach my sister not to steal my sausage.”

How had she even seen the sausage?

Casaya stooped her posture and pulled her hair about her in a way that mirrored Savaii’s hood.

“And I was merely trying to give an accurate recount of-”

She got tackled again.

“Stop it stop it!” Casaya cried, “We’re going to scare our guest!”

They came apart again but this time instead of hovering with concern I was smiling, trying to merge with the light spirit of their morning. They stopped their games and took seats beside me, leaning their bowls on logs and speaking through mouthfuls of steaming food. I ate with considerably more caution, especially when compensating for the spices in the dish. The meal they made was delicious but it left a burning in my throat and on my tongue that cancelled out all the rest of the taste after a few spoonfuls.

“Not everything is as it seems.” Savaii said to me, beginning he explanation. She pulled back her hood reveal sort hair, cut so close it might as well have not been there at all. She quickly began to unwind the cloth wrapped over her eyes. Layer after layer it came away. Like when one of the other novices told ghost stories I felt the tension grow. I gripped my spoon tighter, fearing what lay beyond the cloth and as the last layer fell away I saw only closed eyelids. They blinked open.

Savaii’s eyes were hazel, flecked wit gold and gree, not even the pale blue one usually associates with blindness. She began to demonstrate her vision until it was impossible to have thought she was blind at all. It left me scratching my head with confusion.

“I am not as I seem, for I wish to see with eyes on the inside and look through the lives of the gods. You are not what you think you are nor what those around perceive you to be. I believe that there is an aura of great destiny about you, do you not see it Casaya?”

“Sister I see a boy in a dress.” Casaya said, “But you know I am not one for visions.”

“Yes yes I know.” Savaii said, “You do not believe in the casting of bones nor the reading of cards, yet you still follow as I say.”

“I don’t believe in them, it’s true.” Casaya agreed, “I follow because I believe in you.”

Savaii took a grizzled chunk of meat and flicked it at her sister. It was going to land with a splat on her cheek but at the pivotal moment, Casaya turned her head and caught in her mouth. She ate it with over embellished crunching followed by peals of laughter from the both of them. I couldn’t remember so much of it concentrated in one morning, not even from my days as a novice.

“What I was trying to say is that the gods have so much planned for you. You’ve a great journey to go on, you’ve so much ancient knowledge to bring back.” Savaii continued, “We are to be your
guides.”

“She is to be your guide.” Casaya corrected, “I do not do any of these magic nonsenses.”

“You would not leave us to the tombs alone, ‘Saya.” Savaii whined.

Another debate broke out amongst them, but I hung back on that word; tomb. I tried to make myself believe, though I wasn’t able to in the slightest, that they were merely referring to the graveyards dappled throughout Yharnam. There were stories of something bigger below the city, running under the woods and branching out even further past the borders of England. It was said to be some massive grave, not just for people but for an ancient city. There were castles underneath the earth, and if one thought the topside beasts were bad the tombs were said to be another thing entirely.

They were just stories. I’d heard them many times, told over candleflame on October nights. Usually there were one or two of the older novices, about to have their ceremonies come Yuletide, just on the cusp of becoming hunters. They had heard all the secret stories like these ones passed to them from older hunters down and so forth. After that the tales just stopped, you never heard them at communion.

I had been lucky to hear Templeton’s Hari Harel story. He’d always been a favorite character of mine, though if truth be told there were many better ones. Someone told stories of an escaped prisoner become pirate captain, who strangled her captors with their own chains and went on to liberate a thousand ships before returning to land to try and marry a girl called the White Stag. I’d never heard the end or true beginning of these stories. I seemed to always come in at the middle, but the capable Captain Vithiril was preferable to my own tastes then foolhardy Hari Harel. He made for a good laugh but almost nothing more.

Captain Vithiril had purpose. Was I to be given it as well? Was this to be my moment, the beginning of my legend? Of course not, in the stories people spoke. Hari Harel escaped by sheer luck but Captain Vithiril used her wits to talk her way out of things. I admired the deft trickery but could not emulate it.

Thinking about that brought me straight back to reality and I was suddenly very ashamed. I had work to do, important places to return too. Executioner Sussex was counting on me to be at the theater waiting and ready to use that hidden syringe. I couldn’t let him down. I couldn’t let any of them down.

These woods had a way of confusing people and I had to leave them, wake from them and shake away the dream before me. I needed to get my old clothes back and find my way out of here. While Casaya and Savaii continued to speak of destiny and tombs and adventure I looked around the house that was both inside and out, trying to find the laundry. I hoped there was a washtub somewhere, walking home in muddy clothing was not going to be a fun experience.

Everything was hidden though, not as it seemed like Savaii had said. How was I supposed to leave if I couldn’t find the front door?

“Ai!”

They were yelling at me now, they’d noticed my mind had strayed. I blinked several times and adjusted my head to rest in my chin, giving all indications of listening.

“Afraid, are you?” Casaya asked.
I nodded.

She laughed, “There is nothing for you to fear. All that is down in those tombs is old and dead.”

“That’s not true.” Savaii said, “Don’t lie to her.”

“I am not lieing, it is true. The city’s been buried for years and years. Nothing could survive down there.”

“The gods survived down there.” Savaii insisted, “Ones beyond, past and before Amygdala and Mother Kos. Down there are the gods of blood and bone, the gods of earth and sky who are long buried and forgotten. Away with the healing church and its preaching. Away with the scholars and their attempts to mate a Great One with a mere mortal, ai! None of that. These are the truest gods.”

“Old gods, new gods, it’s all rubbish.” Casaya said. “Good for getting people to buy into your charms and tellings, but nonsense over all.”

“You are lucky you have me to beg pardon on your behalf.” Savaii said.

“You are luckier that I keep my hair long, that I dance and sing so that people even bother to give us a second glance. You are lucky my hands are deft with blade and bow alike. These are the currencies of the world.”

“She still believes.” Savaii said to me, “Do not let her sour mood fool you.”

Casaya began to clear the table. When she took her sister’s spoon, she whacked her on the head with it, before moving on to collect the bowls. I hadn’t emptied mine yet and felt bad handing it back with scraps still clinging to the sides.

“Yes, yes you believe.” Savaii said, “Otherwise you would not have bought the Executioner boy’s drops for me.”

Casaya let out a huff of irritation but was otherwise silent. I was oncemore filled with questions, bubbling with fresh hope too. Savaii spoke of Executioners. The entrance to Yharnam couldn’t have been too far from me.

This has been really nice, but I should be going.

If only to voice it and be gone. I needed my clothes back, my life back. I was not a legendary hero, not an adventurer. I was a murder from the first breath I had taken. I’d stolen my life from Temperance and Diligence, Humility and Kindness, Charity and Chastity. To think to steal it again from the church and turn it to some destiny where I got to wear velvet and be surrounded by laughter was unthinkable. I was no Captain Vithril.

“So you will accompany us, yes?” Savaii asked.

I shook my head, violently back and forth. No I would not. There could be no mistaking it, I didn’t belong here and I wouldn’t belong in ancient tombs. Casaya was right, they’d made a mistake last night- I was not the person she’d been searching for. I’d be forever grateful that they’d pulled me out of the mud and prevented my death but my life was already bound in debt to other people. I could not cast that aside now.

Savaii gasped, completely shocked by my refusal. Casaya was kinder and set the dishes aside gently. She put a hand on her sister’s shoulder and spoke softly.
“What did you expect?” Casaya muttered, “Throwing so much on such small shoulders.”

“But she’s got a destiny!”

“She is a boy in a dress, drowning in mud yesterday and spilling sick everywhere. You are too quick to trust and expect the same in return.” She scolded.

Casaya offered me her hand. I took it and she smiled warmly.

“Let’s get you home.”

They had done their best to wash my clothes, but the mud had gotten in to the robes pretty bad. Everything was still a little damp from the night before, and it only made shrugging off the clothes they’d lent me that much worse. I folded up the little dress, took the stockings off one by one and tucked the shoes neatly under the bed. Such nice shoes. I really wanted to keep them.

The rough wool smelled like moss and heather. My boots were too big and the leather cracked, dull brown just like the ground. The tassels I had made myself were tangled and coming unbraided. I would have to spend hours making new ones, meditating on the proper prayers over sewing thread before I could begin reconstruction. It was a long process.

The mirror had turned from a gift to a curse and when I caught a glance of myself, I turned away sharply. I didn’t want to see anymore, vanity was a sinful pursuit after all. It had no place in my life. I didn’t want to see another dress again. I didn’t want to see another dress again, but I still did. As I left the little wooden wagon I tried not to compare the overhang of tunic to the skirt of a dress. I tried so hard not to fiddle with my collar and wish that it had been lace instead of stiffened cotton. I had to be better than this.

Bubbly Savaii was now all frowns as I came back into the clearing. She looked me over and shook her head, which earned her a slap from Casaya. I tried not to mind it as much as I did. Wearing that dress was kind of like eating the rice they’d made- now that I’d tasted it all the other spices were blocked out. Nothing measured up.

“Back to Yharnam, then?” Casaya asked.

I nodded.

“No.” Savaii said, “First come into my tent. First see for yourself. I will read the cards for you and then you will see, and then you will stay.”

I felt it the least that could be done for my rescuers. They had been so kind to me. People paid to have their fortunes told, certainly not people I knew but the denizens did. They loved that sort of thing at their fairs and festivals. Mother had always said it was just tricks to put hands into the coins of drunks and sinners, but now I was being offered a chance at it for free. I saw no harm, and Savaii really was insistent.

I nodded and she grinned, clapping her hands together several times before snatching me away from Casaya and dragging me inside the dark tent once more. Darkened but not true darkness, false pretenses dispelled by shimmering objects. I was still in awe of the place.

Once Savaii stepped inside it was like she had transformed into something else. Casaya too grew more serious. Gone was the jovial tones they conversed in, now their every move was precise and delicate. I was beckoned to sit down on a little black cushion in front of an obsidian table. Stacked to one side were the shimmering cards, white against the shimmering surface. Before she dealt with them Savaii made preparations over the table, assisted by Casaya.
Savaii placed a white wax candle in each of the table’s four corners. Casaya lit them, and each burned with a green flame. I’d never seen fire in colder colors before and leaned in for a closer look. I got much closer then I realized. It wasn’t until a strand of my hair started to smoke and curl that I pulled away.

Neither of them laughed. They didn’t seem to notice anything had gone awry and I played it off as best I could. Savaii laid down a black silk cloth and began to shuffle the cards. They flowed through her fingers like water, and she the rocks in the river directing their course. Forever they danced across her finger tips before they laid them down in a curve, spreading each equidistant from its partners. All were face down and identical as far as I could see.

Not everything was as it first appeared. There was more to the cards beneath their surface.

“Choose one.” She instructed.

I leaned forward. The centermost card seemed the obvious choice but as I looked the whole set over I was drawn to the left side. I pointed to the seventh card from the end. Savaii smiled and turned it over.

“Oh. See what did I tell you?” She asked, turning to her sister.

The card read “The Emperor” at the bottom, but it was wrongside up, turned so that the text was at the top and the bleak face of a bearded king hidden in flower petals was turned to stand on its skull.

“Reversed Emperor.” Casaya observed.

“Usually this card is all about masculinity and strength, ruling with a firm hand and taking the steady path.” Savaii explained, “But turned on its head it marks the absence of those things. You could not have chosen a better card for representing you.”

With no knowledge of the rest of the deck I wasn’t sure if that were entirely true, but Savaii seemed very excited. She bade me turn over another card and this time I took longer to consider my options. It wasn’t as though any of the cards had changed they were still in the same order, still faced down so that I could not see what they truly contain, but now I felt their strength. Casaya and Savaii spoke of strange magic and gods older then I’d ever heard. Somehow there was a bit of that in these cards too, and I could understand why Mother hadn’t been overly fond of fortune tellers.

Something about them seemed to stand in direct contradiction of the church’s teaching. It shouldn’t have, for there was as much about destiny and predetermined paths in our faith as any other- and was that not what was laid out in the cards? Just another prediction of the steps to be taken, dealing out prophecy picture by picture?

I suppose it was, but there seemed to be something deeper, something stronger. At last I made my selection and indicated the next card.

“This is to be your greatest enemy, the one thing that prevents you from achieving your goals.” Savaii said before turning the card over. It was so strange to see my life laid out on pictures like in the pages of my book of sins. Savaii knew everything without ever having read it. She didn’t ask questions about me and unless one of the sisters had sat down and discussed my life with my Mother there was no way they could’ve known half the secrets spread across the table. Not even that, they would’ve had to have spoken with me- and I was certain they hadn’t.

I saw my enemy in a card labeled the High Priestess. She held a rope in one hand and prayer book in the other, seated in a court of flowers on a throne shaped like a white rose. Savaii warned that
she was a betrayer, someone evil and to be feared. The way the lines of her face were drawn, I thought she looked a little like my Mother.

I saw my Father too, on a card called the hanged man. The High Priestess held the rope, but he dangled from it and was further secured by twisted vines. A plant with teeth loomed beneath his head looking to snap it off at any moment. Savaii seemed to think he might still be saved if only I were to act fast enough.

The cards without people were the hardest to understand, vague concepts like the tower and the sun. Savaii had to explain them, pointing out how the number of petals on the sunflower blossom might correlate to something or perhaps provide a double meaning that needed more consideration. All of the cards were like this, suggestions of what might be and she did her best to interpret them. They came to close and I was quickly overwhelmed, unable to remember any details. I feared my stomach might over churn again, but after selecting a tenth card and having Savaii puzzle over, and then explain the advice that might be gleaned from the Page of Wands, she declared her reading finished.

Her gaze was full of expectation, hope that I might reconsider. If anything the reading had made me homesick and I wanted my head to stop bouncing with possibilities. She was disappointed that I still turned for the door, offering to read for me again but Casaya blew out the candles and ended the aura of severity that had settled over the black tent.

“It is not far, do you feel you can walk?” Casaya asked me.

I nodded.

“My sister will be greatly saddened, she is a sensitive one. It is best that we leave her behind and carry on us two, yeah?”

Again I nodded. I felt awful for causing either of them strife when they’d worked so hard to keep me safe from the storm.

“I will show you the way so that you might return to us if ever you wish it. We may not be here long, for our movements depend on Savaii’s visions, but I will send a raven if we are to leave so that you will not be troubled with a journey.”

I tried to think what she might mean by a raven. I had heard of tame ravens before, and I knew of pigeons and sometimes hawks or owls who were trained to carry messages from one roosting point to the next, but I thought ravens were beyond such things. My Mother warned that they brought misfortune with them wherever they traveled, and were the familiars of Hemwick witches.

Then again perhaps she really did have squadron of tame ravens. I didn’t want to call the two of them witches, it seemed an ugly term. They fit all of the marks in the stories though, speaking strangely, living in the woods, and then there was Casaya’s face paint and Savaii’s false blindness. Witches got burnt on crosses or chased away and locked behind the gates of Hemwick to go mad. There wasn’t much to gain from the term. Warlocks perhaps, or sorceresses. In the stories they all seemed to mean the same, and I’d never heard anyone talk about burning them.

Was it safer to be put under a different classification?

In my case the answer was a violent yes. It would be much easier if I were a boy then a girl. I guess it didn’t matter though, a witch was a witch and a girl was a girl, and birth might make you either one. I was grateful to not be able to ask anyway. Silence saved me from so many stupid questions.
Casaya was a good guide, she pointed to things in the forest that I never would’ve noticed. She set a river to her left and let it act as a boundary, making sure it flowed down and she flowed up. She lead my eyes to glowing mushrooms, things that would help me see when it truly was night overhead. It always seemed to be night overhead, but Casaya assured me it was daylight, that she was able to tell.

“You never want to walk between the gravestones.” Casaya said, “Not only is it the wrong direction to us, but they bring bad luck on you. Don’t walk between the dead, walk around them.”

I nodded, wishing for all the world that I had a better memory. I wanted to record it all, from Savaii’s cards to her sister’s navigation advice. Everything seemed extremely important, but my skull was already stuffed so full of prayers and past memories that there didn’t seem room for anything else. All I could do was smile and nod and try to remember all that she said.

At last I saw sunshine again, beyond thick branches the city of Yharnam. If I were alone I might have cried.

“So you remember it all yes?” Casaya asked.

I didn’t want to lie to her but I was beyond eager to be free of these woods. I nodded vigorously and threw my arms around her. She seemed surprised by the embrace, and truth be told I was surprised myself, but she didn’t hesistate to return it.

“Run along.” She instructed, “Before the beasts come out.”

I nodded and broke away, waving to her from the path and hurrying with fresh enemy towards the walls of the city. Bricks again, lamp light too. There were the sounds of a marketplace in full swing and I was happy to be amongst people once again. Not that Casaya and Savaii, nor the Executioners, nor the Circo Obscuro hadn’t been people, but people in the sense that they filled a place. People that were the nameless crowds in folk tales, faces not worth describing but there to make taverns lively, cities bustling and death tolls higher. At least, that’s how it always seemed.

It was wonderful to have my bearings again as well. I knew exactly where the bank was and began to skitter between stalls and stables to make my way there. Even wearing the Executioners robes and looking like I’d been washing my clothes with mud no one paid me very much attention. I had a way of blending in weather I wanted to or not.

I cast a glance over my shoulder. I knew I wouldn’t be able to see the Forbidden Woods over the city walls, and I couldn’t, but it was more of the thought of the thing. Casaya and Savaii noticed, sought me out even. I was very present there. It had been kind of nice.

I began to worry that no one would’ve even noticed I was missing. Returning to my post at the theater without Fwahe to watch seemed a little silly. I knew she wouldn’t be coming back and didn’t think I could deal with pleading looks, perhaps even angry ones from Lady Hemlock for very long. When you became lost, it was best to return home if able. That’s what we’d been taught at novices. Odeon Chapel had been home then, but the bank stood as home now and that’s where I would head.

My Mother might be there, but if she wasn’t it would be easy enough to locate Executioner Essex or Executioner Sussex, maybe even Executioner Alfred. One of them would be able to point me in the right direction. They’d be mad, surely that I’d been away or that I had the gall to bother them by being lost, but they would get me found again.

I so wanted to be found again.
The area around the bank seemed unusually busy. There were hunters of all kinds speaking to Executioners out on the street. Novices were ferrying back and forth with stacks of papers and logbooks, making quite a scene. It was as though a whole other marketplace had suddenly sprung up overnight.

“Odeon almighty!”

Suddenly I was noticed again. Matta, one of the junior Executioners I was often assigned to work with spotted me amongst the crowd. She set down a pile of papers, ignoring their scattering as the wind had its way with them. She pushed past a line of hunters and took me by the wrist, pulling me along with her.

“He’s back!” Matta shouted.

He’s.

That felt wrong.

“Executioner Patience is back!” She shouted it again and again, and it didn’t take long for the courtyard to start echoing with excitement. My face flushed, and suddenly being noticed was too much notice. Hunters I didn’t know began to crowd in around me. People started to pound me on the back and congratulate me for something. I didn’t understand what they were so happy about.

I went from walking over the ground to being hoisted onto shoulders. The whole courtyard stopped to carry me into the bank, all of them talking and yelling at once. Matta was lost somehow, I looked for her knot of brown hair but it was gone in a sea of pointed hunter’s caps and white church hoods. I tried to paint on a smile and play along, act like I knew what was happening.

I don’t think I pulled it off very well, but that didn’t seem to matter in the slightest. The crows bore me along and I didn’t even have to move. I just let myself get caught up in and deposited at the top of the bank steps.

There seemed nothing else to do but to walk in, and the crowd from my hero’s welcome didn’t seem to be disappearing anytime soon. I nervously opened doors that I’d thought nothing of before, and stepped into a bank that was mostly the same, but felt very different. I didn’t know things could change so much, practically overnight.

For one thing the bank was much cleaner. The floor sparkled, the windows shone and someone had taken the old navy and silver tapestries from their boxes. They’d been washed again and hung from the ceiling, over the colloms draping the bank in the silver wheel symbol of the Executioners. Usually these banners were reserved for special celebrations, like Yuletide. I thought they made the bank look rather handsome and was momentarily dazzled.

“Executioner Patience?”

Alfred’s voice brought me out of my brief astonishment. I looked away from the rafters and was quick to nod at him. He had dark circles under his eyes, didn’t seem to have been getting very much sleep. He grinned when I confirmed my identity.

“We thought we might never see you again, so many have disappeared on us lately. Let me call for Executioner Sussex and some paper. I know you’ve your vows but it’s incredibly important we hear what you’ve been through.” Executioner Alfred began.

I shook my head. I really was not supposed to transcribe my thoughts, not without approval from one of my superiors. I suppose Executioner Alfred was about as superior as it could get amongst
“I know, I’d prefer a more official seal on the matter too, but my stance remains. A lot has happened since you were away. In Lady Hemlock’s absence I have taken over as Patron Hunter. You will have to forgive my boldness, Executioner Patience but we simply cannot afford to delay and pend for approval from the other vow-takers. Your testimony could be vital to finding Lady Hemlock again.”

Now things made a bit more sense, the urgency, the celebration, the banners. Everyone rushing about outside must’ve been trying to bring their matters to what was a shoe string operation of a hunter’s council. Things really did change quickly. I didn’t think I had been gone that long, but perhaps time in the pit was really very different from time on the surface. I might’ve slept in the little wooden room for more than just one night. It was hard to say, hard to sort things out.

“So you understand that we need you now yes?” Alfred asked.

I nodded, and was more than ready to lend my help. I could take atonements for this when I had too, it was urgent I aid in the investigation any way I could. Lady Hemlock still missing was not a good sign. I thought she would’ve been found by now. Nothing I had seemed likely to help but I would tell all that I could.

I should tell all that I could, but how could I catalog my experience with Savaii and Casaya. If I told the Executioners that there were magic women in the woods the sisters might be in danger. They’d been so kind to me. The right kind of kind, given me the kind of attention I didn’t know I wanted. It was the sort of feeling I got from my Father when we spent nights on the rooftops together.

I reflected on him while Alfred led me to a room with a proper writing desk. It was a horrible feeling in the pit of my stomach, to know I had failed on my own so intensely. I wanted to see him again, but if I tried to make it out of England on my own I’d be fast swallowed up. I hardly made it five feet from the part of Executioners before landing myself in a near-death situation. There was no way I could travel to him. I had to hope and pray that he would come back to me. Why did Mother always insist on him being away?

I knew why. He reminded her of the family I’d killed. Most of the church had frowned upon the both of them, but he’d been strong in a time of sick men and they’d married for duty not love. Everyone knew it. He was supposed to have sired strong children, and instead they ended up with a murder. It was one thing to punish me, but she hated thinking she was married to part of the problem. I didn’t think of him that way. The deaths had been my fault entirely, but she was of her own mind. She’d never forgive him.

I didn’t know if I could forgive myself for the truths I was about to tell, or not tell. I wished I could run away, turn back and go hide in the woods a little longer before having to make up my mind. Maybe I should’ve stayed and everyone might’ve just thought me dead. Coming back and being celebrated didn’t feel as nice as they made it seem in the stories. When Captian Vithiril returned victorious or Hari Harel saved the city they were all wide smiles and glasses raised in toast. I was more liable to crawl under the table and hide rather then feast at it.

A folk hero I was not. I was a vow taker and an Executioner and I was going to keep my vows and tell the truth. The truth, the whole truth and nothing.

But.
Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
Feathers off a Crow

Chapter Summary

Kane gets a song stuck in his head, he's not all too fond.

Chapter Notes

As always, please let me know what you think!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Condemn this reeking city and its rats nest of alleyways. I should never have let their feet touch the ground. It would've been better to shove them from the roof and watch their heads split open like overripe fruit on the pavement. Damn my sympathies, and damn the girl for looking so very much like Alois. I had all the control I’d needed, held it in my hands and it slipped away.

Now I was going to find her and kill her. All other goals would have to wait, Frigga Hemlock needed to die. The doctor had tricked me too, a surgeon of squalor who hardly looked qualified to be a back alley butcher let alone carry the recommendation of one of England’s respected leaders. Neither of them deserved the commendations they gave each other.

I had already done the obvious and searched the medic’s practice. I tore the place apart, overturning his cabinets and smashing the various brews and herbs he’d cultivated. I shredded his mattress and broken his chairs. Whatever tools I was capable of breaking in half were broken, and his pitiful supply of food was smashed beneath my feet. If he did return I wanted him to know that whatever he took from me I would take from him tenfold.

It wasn’t like he had much to give. I would take it all.

Even the freakish mutation that was sealed in a jar, hidden behind one of his crudely rendered diagrams of the human body, even that I would take. I threw it to the ground, watching the disgusting thing pulse and flop around in its own juices. Disgusting, just disgusting.

I was going to burn this city to the ground once the rule of Cainhurst was restored. I would find and free my Queen after reuniting with my sister. There was nothing she had greater adoration for then Annalise. Surely if I restored her to the throne I would be in her good graces once more and any malfeasance from earlier times could be overlooked. I would sit my throne once more as well, and Annalise would torch Yharnam as a person favor to me. Gallons of burning pitch over the walls, fire in the streets.

I would replace the rain with flames and personally see to the deaths of each and every one of the foul humans that clogged the streets like rats in a sewer. I’d spent all night soaked to the bone racing through alleys and peering down from townhouse roofs, but my prey had escaped me. I had let the girl and the doctor get away.

Of course I was not entirely to blame. The doctor had done something to her, changed her with that
boiled blood. It had been intoxicating, and I should’ve interrogated the surly little man about it. He was quick to brush me aside, and that was grave insult. I suppose there was no way he might’ve known that I once was a man of great import and that I would be again. You’d think, however that hunters would demand a certain level of devotion from the people they fought to protect.

The city was clogged with churches where clergymen bent their backs to uncaring gods, but hunters wandered openly through the city. Why not take a knee in tribute to them, worship something concrete who would actually take up a sword to protect now and then? The minds of small beasts were so simple, yet so perplexing.

I didn’t go back to the slaughterhouse, it was time to find new lodging. The memory of the place was tainted with failure, and if the two of them got away they would bring their men down on it. I had no fear of Executioners, for I could cut them down fearlessly by the thousand. The hunter’s blades were nothing to me, but I did worry over that beast Antares who dwelt among them.

I was fairly certain I had seen the creature lurking in the shadows when they made their rallying cries and elected their new leader. I could deal with mere men but a trained beast was something else entirely. If we were to meet on the battlefield again I doubted the child would be brought along. Without an advantage I had reason to fear defeat, and a gentlemen never stepped into a battle he could not win.

Beyond the pain of losing the girl and being humiliated by the nights grim results, I had grown hungry again. It was high time I satisfied myself again. During the day I planned, watching from an icy rooftop. I couldn’t feel the cold, not truly as the bundled up passersbys below did, but I was aware of its presence. More than the cold there was the uncomfortable sensation of moist clothes. The rain left puddles and damp sheets over every surface. Leaning against chimney pots and rooftops all of the moisture that had been swallowed up by the old crumbling bricks was spat back out on me.

I tried my best to ignore it and catalog the comings and goings of Yharnam’s denizens so that I might find one who would amuse me. There was something to be said for playing with your food, and I found the best toys around Red Street. Even in winter they were working, calling out from windows and trying to entreat those passing by to come in and spend their coin on a few minutes of fun. Not many customers during the day, but night made different creatures of us all.

All was going well until the caterwauling musician showed up. I hadn’t noticed him at first being suitably distracted by the fairer sex. He himself was a scruffy fellow with unkempt hair and filthy clothes. He surrounded himself with instruments, some of which were as patched together and piecemeal as his wardrobe. All of it looked homemade, and held together by cheap glue and twine.

He was trying to draw in a crowd, voice lost in the drone of the day but soon there was a small circle around him. It was at that point that he began to pump the bellows and depress the keys of a choking accordion. The thing sounded like it was screaming as air was forced through it. Perhaps it was due to my cultured sensibilities that I noticed the wretched tones of the hodgepodge instrument, because no one else seemed perturbed in the least. They crowded in closer.

Then the street performer saw fit to open his mouth and stifle the streets with his bellowing song.

“Oh a drop of great one’s blood wouldn’t do us any harm” He croaked. He must’ve loved the sound of his own chorus as he began to repeat it, “Oh a drop of great one’s blood wouldn’t do us any harm, a drop of great one’s blood wouldn’t do us any harm and we’ll all stand by the Church.”

This only drew more people in. He grinned wide, standing and prancing about while he sang.
“Oh a night down in the woods wouldn’t do us any harm, a night down in the woods wouldn’t do us any harm, a night down in the woods wouldn’t do us any harm and we’ll all stand by the Church.”

Like rusted metal scraped against the ground was his voice in my ears. Everyone else began to join in with the stupid choruses. The ladies in the window leaned out, waving red feathers or bobbing their heads in time with his tune.

“And we’ll roll ol’wheels of Logarius along,” He sang

“We’ll roll ol’wheels of Logarius along.” They chorused

“We’ll roll ol’ wheels of Logarius along, beneath a paleblood sky!”

How I wish I could say the song ended there, but the crows continued to croon. I was going to have sated my appetite in more ways than one tonight, but as it so often does, the need for revenge overtook all others. It would have to be him tonight.

He switched off instruments regularly, and each new pursuit was worst then the last. The strings of a violin were scratched with a splintered bow who must’ve found its bowstring strangling vermin to their deaths in a gutter. The street performer forced its noises into the air while belting a new verse.

“A vermin left alone wouldn’t do us any harm, a vermin left alone wouldn’t do us any harm, a vermin left alone wouldn’t do us any harm and we’ll all stand by the Church.”

Stand by the church. Oh I was going to stand by the church with his head on a pike and see how he liked it. This one would have to die after his tongue and teeth were removed. I wouldn’t wish his wails on those beyond, to haunt and scratch for all eternity.

“A tiny little slug wouldn’t do us any harm, a tiny little slug wouldn’t do us any harm, a tiny little slug wouldn’t do us any harm and we’ll all stand by the Church.”

It would not stop.

I hated the girl and the quack all the more now that I was forced to endure this. If not for their escape I might’ve been able to step down without fear and cut the singer’s throat then and there. I could not save myself from the chorus once it came around again.

“And we’ll roll ol’wheels of Logarius along.”

I was going to roll a Logarius wheel over someone’s head before long.

“We’ll roll ol’wheels of Logarius along!” The crowds shouted back.

I saw the bloodstained snow, the red moon and the frozen corpses. Singing of such things jovially as if they did not take everything I held most dear and smash it to pieces.

“We’ll roll ol’whels of Logarius along, beneath a paleblood sky!”

They just wouldn’t stop. There were other drafty rooftops for me to watch from, other places in the city to find the dejected and unmissable, but I had chosen this one. I had staked my claim. I had gotten here first and would not be driven from my perch by the likes of him.

“Oh and a night spent with their Queen wouldn’t do us any harm, a night spent with their Queen
wouldn’t do us any harm, a night spent with their Queen wouldn’t do us any harm and we’ll all stand by the Church.”

Yes, I was certain the church stood by conquest especially when it came to bedding Vileblood Queens. I wouldn’t have to ask for favors from Annalise now, I need only inform her of this song and she would order the place burnt herself. We cut out the tongues of our bleeders, that’s what she would say. Cut out their tongues and bring them to me.

“And plucking feathers off the crow wouldn’t do us any harm.” He sang.

I’d heard myself called the Bloody Crow of Cainhurst. Was this in reference to myself? Already he had insulted my Queen, the man trade dangerous ground.

“Plucking feathers off the crow wouldn’t do us any harm, feathers off the crow wouldn’t so us any harm and we’ll all stand by the Church!”

Once more they ran through that terrible chorus, and then over again in case someone had missed it. Finally the song was at its end. The girls on Red Street whistled their appreciation for the bard and his torturous violin. It pained me to see his empty cases fill with coin as people filed past.

I am sorry to say that the first song was not his only attempt to produce a profit that day. With my target locked I had to follow him, wherever he might roam so that I could make sure he never sang again. Unfortunately before nightfall he had many other opportunities to sing, roaming from Red Street to the marketplace to looming outside the bank that the Executioners seemed to have overtaken.

The city was in high spirits for some reason, and that irritated me. It must’ve meant that the girl had made it back to her people, that she was lording it over all of England again and embellishing her tales of bravery for their tender ears. She had been terrified of me.

I would terrify again.

When at last the light of day faded and the man, who advertised himself as Issack the Minstrel was made to pack up his wares and return to his lodgings. I had really hoped that was what he might do anyway, but I should’ve known that a man whose pockets were heavy with coin was bound to taverns and revelry instead of good sense.

I was even more appalled at his choice of establishment, for after calling to several sailors and longshoremen he turned into the Black Octopus. I was not going to be welcomed there, but Issack sure was. The whole tavern broke into cheers as he crossed the threshold and launched into a song about the merits of dark brewed beer, demanding pint after pint.

I could see through the window that he was able to put back pint after pint. It would sully the taste but it would make him slow and stupid. I could handle something slow and stupid right now. An easy victory was just what I needed.

His night seemed unending. I watched patron after patron leave the tavern, sailors, urchins, people I could’ve picked off and had my fill of. My stomach begged me to indulge in one of them instead, but my mind was set on the minstrel. I would only dine on his blood tonight.

At long last he left the tavern, swaying from side to side and sipping from a broken mug. It had no bottom and there was no liquid inside of it. The object was nothing much more than a handle but the way he brought it to his lips and truly attempted to take a draft made you almost believe. Well, it made one almost believe, I had to stifle my laughter.
He was such the obvious target I feared someone else might beat me to it. There were prowlers, cutpurses and all other deviants sure to be out. I had no fear for myself, they wouldn’t dare touch me, but I wanted to be the one to kill him.

He was still making things difficult, bellowing his loathsome chorus while he wandered through the exact middle of the street. Without day time crowds there was nothing for him to crash into, and anyone else about would have plenty of time to catch sight of the lone drunk and avoid him. The problem was I needed him to come away, to not be so exposed.

Was it really essential for him to be in the spotlight, performing even when there was no audience? He was forcing my hands here. I followed Issack down several more streets always waiting for him to turn into some dark corner or gloomy alley but he never did. At last I could stand it no longer, and gave in. If he wanted a performance fine, whoever wanted to watch was welcome.

I darted from the shadows and came up behind him.

“’I’ve had about enough of you.” I said.

“Whaa?” He mumbled.

He nearly tripped over himself as he made the attempt to stop and turn back to look at me. It was a sloppy thing, poorly executed though I admit he stayed on his feet.

“I have had enough of you and your loathsome songs.” I said.

I was almost furious he didn’t understand me, but the time for words had long since passed. Now was time for blades and blood to speak on my behalf. I silenced him with a red curtain, crafted by my own hands. It fell not only on his stage but on his throat, through his shirt, down his fingers. Painting a man crimson is a wondrous thing, more beautiful on a woman of course but the color is still something all of its own. It was not as vibrant as it used to be, for when you took your meals in streetlight there was only so much one cold discern. That is why I’d intended to spill red on red street, but this would suffice.

Dragging him under a nearby bridge left a red trail. If there were hunters about, and surely there would be, I wouldn’t have long. Feeding without a goblet, without company was an inelegant thing but I had long since made my peace with it. Now I just did my best to keep it out of my hair, off of my shirt. Praise her majesty, it was nigh on impossible not to be overtaken by it. The scent, the rich warmth of liquid life running to satisfy spaces long left empty, was this not rapture? Was this not redemption?

The people bowed their heads and prayed to receive blood ministration. Those who altered and cleaned blood for the church were respected, gratitude lavished upon them. How were those who bled the larders of Cainhurst any different. I received blood like any man today, and it made me stronger.

I suppose it must’ve been what remained, the leftovers. Corpses were somewhat off-putting when they belonged to your species. I had seen my own dead and I could not deny there was a sickening lurch when living eyes landed on those frozen in eternal sleep. Most of them were screaming or snarling, but as the strange combination of frost and decay overtook my brethren it was hard to tell one from the other.

There were too many to bury, that’s what I’d told myself so I wouldn’t have to go through the effort of digging graves in frozen ground. I’d never strained to dig a grave for anyone after that. The dead lay where they fell, or in this case very near it. It would be a shame not to kick the dead
and drained body into the churning river. It was high with melting ice and snow, chunks of ice caught in the torrent bumped against each other and broke to smaller pieces. The water goblet of a giant spilled, that’s what it seemed, only the river did not pool and end but carried on its way.

The minstrel was now just another cube in the river, carried downstream to bloat and swell with the currents. He’d become as disgusting as his song.

“Did ye hear that?”

“What?”

“Some kind of splash.”

Damn. I’d hoped I would’ve had more time before being noticed. This could quickly become problematic. I heard the shuffle of feet on the bridge overhead, people rushing to look out over the side.

“Give your lantern ‘ere Strawney.”

Light flooded the dark water. I pressed myself against the stone archway, ashamed at the pounding of my own heart. These people were nothing, nobodies and I could easily add their bodies to the river if I needed too. Condemn these nerves, I was above them.

“Cripes!” Strawney exclaimed “Dinnae ask me ta go down there, Nola. I can see the blood just fine from hereabouts.”

“Zis is not good.” Nola replied, “We must investigate, what if zis is where Lady Frigga ended up?”

“Could just as easily be the Ripper.” He cautioned them.

The two of them went back and forth above me, weighing their options. I put my own on the scale, measuring in silence. There was the desire to run, of course and naturally its direct opposite, the desire to bring sword pommel to palm and defend my position. Running would surely expose me. Fighting two at once in close quarters could spell doom just as easily.

The third option left was concealment, which I did not revel in. They were going to search under the bridge, if they did come and were likely to make a thorough sweep. The spaces between bricks were not deep enough to be ignored and unnoticed. It wouldn’t be long before the two of them made up their minds and began shining that lamp into the dark recesses.

“We need to go down zere and check it out.” Nola said, “No more of zis cowardice.”

“Aye.” Sighed Strawney, “But if it is the Ripper you’re buyin’ me drinks for the whole rest o’ the year.”

“Oui.” Nola sighed, “Now can we get on with zis?”

In answer I heard their boots click-clacking across the stones. It wouldn’t be long now and it was time to make up my mind. I looked around for a better place to conceal myself. Was It possible that I could climb to the bridge’s underhang and cling there, bat-like until the two of them went off?

Not likely and as I watched it play out in hypotheticals it felt a little ridiculous. I listened to the rushing of the water mix with the approaching hunters. Of course, there was always a better solution then the obvious. I hurried to the riverside and got a firm grip on the bank before lowering myself, gently into the rapids.
I could go a great deal longer than the common Yharnamites without breath, but fighting the river was another matter altogether. It tried to sweep my feet out from beneath me and carry me down along with the corpse. It flooded my ears and my nostrils, causing the softer skin inside to burn with irritation.

In the black torrents there was no sound, beyond the dull churning of the surrounding abyss. This must have been the sort of thing they taught in those hunter’s churches, about the places the gods sent sinners. What nonsense to fear something like this, one only need muster the strength to overcome it.

The leathers of my boots would never recover, but I drove them into the silt at the bottom of the river. The sand and pebbles all shifted to accommodate me, and I was anchored far more strongly to the bank then before. Like wind the water howled around me, catching strands of hair and trying to tug them away from my careful ties.

If I could force the unruly mess Frigga Hemlock boasted into some semblance of style, then surely I could count on my own ties to hold against the currents. I rooted myself there and waited. I had no way to judge the time, nor to guess at what might be happening above me. Any other denizen attempting the same maneuver would’ve long frozen by the time I stirred again. They would’ve had blue lips and snow-crusted skin, but my blood was from Cainhurst. Nothing could freeze me.

Just as I was gathering my strength to crawl out of the river I was bombarded with a block of ice. It was a huge thing, and it knocked me away. I flailed wildly, desperate to maintain my grip on the riverbank, but I was not quick enough. I fell back into the currents and they picked me up and tore me away.

“Oi!” There came a shout and the lantern was thrust across the water, dangling from its long pole while Strawney and Nola looked around aimlessly for me. It must have been less time then I’d judged it, they were still inspecting the area around the river.

“What is it?” Nola asked.

“There’s a body in the river. Dinnae know if ‘es alive. Hey! Hey!”

They shouted at me as I was flushed down the river. I caught glimpses of them while tossing and turning, chasing after me. They waved their arms and called out, attracting attention I didn’t need. I wasn’t a helpless traveler yet they pursued me as though I had been fond companion.

The minstrel’s corpse had stuck itself on the support of another bridge. It seemed the unsavory singer would serve a purpose beyond mere sustenance. Today he would play the part of dead man floating down the river, taking over for me while I ducked beneath his bloated frame. It was no easy thing to achieve, I had to fight for every step towards the dead man. The ground shifted beneath my failing boots and my legs struggled to take the necessary steps, but I made it before those following me could catch on, swimming beneath the man I’d slain and coming out on the other side.

“There ‘e is!” Strawney cried.

I looked back over my shoulder and saw him pointing at the minstrel. They would find the body battered and drained of blood, but they weren’t going to find me. I dove beneath the torrents and swam as far as I could stand too. When I rose again, the bridge was far behind me.

I expected I’d be able to climb onto the riverbank, but the banks had disappeared. Instead of shifting sands there was now slick bricks beneath my boots. I could not find traction on anything,
and the river was lined with high walls. Water from other places poured down, and everything reeked of human waste.

The river had dumped me into a sewer, some swirling collection of piss, shit and who knows what else. The broken bodies of rats drifted by, larger things would sometimes fall from the walls. A dead dog landed on my head and knocked me back into the sewage. I fought against the currents as well as anyone might but with so much knocking into my back and sweeping at my legs and I was bullied along without chance to resist.

Forget ruined boots, everything would have to be done over with.

Gradually the cesspool swelled and narrowed, directing water to several different places. I was able to get a grip inbetween two of the dividing walls and thrusting my nails into the crumbling bricks pull myself out of the muck and mire.

Everything stank, and once the scent had worked its way up into my nostrils I could not clear it out again. There was no clean cloth to breathe through, nothing about me befitting my noble birth. I checked for my weapons and then the pouch of coins I carried. Both had held strong enough though all of the rushing water. At least I’d be able to change out of these repulsive rags.

The climbs I made attempting to get out of the sewers were a hard ones, and I was met with grated gates that barred my passage more times then I cared to count. Every barricade meant a climb back down into the filth to search for another exit. I was lost in what must have been the most repulsive place known to man.

Optimists would say now I had no place to go but up, and I found myself becoming thankful for small things. It was little peasant’s notions like, at least this part of the sewer wasn’t teaming with rats. At least the drainage pipes were on the other side of the tunnel and I didn’t have to worry about more shit raining down on me.

I hated the people who thought like this, and I hated that I now had to count myself as one of them and think in their manners. I was not supposed to stoop to such things. What would Alois think of me now?

It felt like I had been swimming the whole night long, and even with the strength bestowed upon my bloodline, I was failing. Breath came slower to my lungs, my legs had trouble obeying the commands of my mind and my fingers were stiff and aching, barely able to grab hold of the bricks as I went along. I glanced around and found a ledge just under one of the grated sewer gateways. There was a high chance of garbage raining though, but it was the only realitively elevated place within sight.

I clawed my way onto it, and laid flat against the slime-covered stones, tired of motion for the moment.

It truly was just a moment before the tunnels echoed with a scream. I was so irritated with all of the days failures that I didn’t want to rouse myself and pay attention at first, but gradually I lifted my head and found the face of someone familiar.

“Gettaway from me!”

My eyes had landed on a child, a familiar feisty little thing. A meal that had gotten away, back in the forbidden woods.

“You scared me Mister!” She said.
I cocked my head to the side and tried to think. For some reason she hadn’t run away, did she not recognize me? Of course not, how could anyone in this state? I must’ve looked a fearsome thing, the child could hardly be blamed. What was she doing in a sewer of all places, and why would-

I cut my own questions short. Clearly logic and reasoning were not going to be my saving graces but perhaps this girl could be. She did not appear drenched in sewer water, in fact she seemed rather clean all things considered. I didn’t enjoy taking chances, but she might be my only way out, if I could just play the part. All this time I had been told I spoke too eloquently, that my noble blood bled through my disguises.

All this shit was just another layer of face paint now, another clever position to take up so that leverage might be gained. One had to learn to take advantage, to constantly work to turn the tides in one’s own favor. The council meetings and negotiation rooms were not so different from these places, and if I could dance around with the best of them there, surely I could manipulate a little girl in the gutter.

“Sorry.” I said. “I’sa just…zat is….erm…I ‘it me ‘ead ‘omin in’ through ze- erm…how you say…” ‘unnel there.”

“How?” She asked.

I cleared my throat and tried again. All the wretched voices of the people I’d had the misfortune to meet blurred together into unintelligible babble. I had thought to emulate it and better communicate with the girl. “‘ows about you show me ze way ta Yharnam eh?”

“Yharnam?” she asked, “You’re right beneath it you is. Great night for toshin’ innit? I thought so too, though you seem to ‘ave gone in ‘eadfirst Mister.”

“I tripped.” I mumbled.

She nodded, “I ain’t allowed to trip no more. ‘Tares gets mad at me for even goin’ toshin’, but I always gotta go now and again. Never know what you’ll find is just ‘ow it is. Can’t trip, they musn’t know I was down ‘ere. You won’t tell will you Mister?”

I grinned. I could feel the slime and dirt staining my teeth as my lips moved across them, “It’ll be our ‘ittle secret eh?”

She nodded. I was making progress.

The fortunate, if irritating thing when it came to children, was that the talkative ones did not require much in the way of conversation. Much like a top you just sort of spun them and let them go. The little girl had elected to lead me along much the same as one might try and entreat a street animal to come home with them. It was humiliating but it was my only route to freedom.

“Miss Miriam don’t like it when I been toshin’ neither. She keeps tellin’ me that I’m to go to school n’ I think she expects me to be a scholar like ‘er. Dunno why she bothers Mister, I’m dreadful bad at figurin’ and my handwritin’ is a cry for help accordin’ to Old Lady Fink. She’s them what teaches us. That’s if you call hollerin’ n’ barkin’ at you when you ain’t done your homework teachin’. What do you think of that Mister?”

She spoke in paragraphs, endlessly stringing along one stupid sentence after the other. I got by mumbling something unintelligible and trying to match the way she spoke. It was helpful to have fallen down a sewer before attempting to emulate it, these people spoke like they had mouthfuls of mud.
“Could also be the smell though, d’ya reckon?” She said.

“Mmm.” I muttered.

“’Tares can sometimes smell awful, though they ain’t too happy when I point it out, but sometimes you just gotta. Ya gotta stand up tall and point your finger right in their face n’ puff out your chest n’ say Tares go take a bath right now. Then it’s very important to keep interruptin’ whatever work their doin’ so they do what you say.”

She certainly knew a thing or two about interrupting. We plodded along over slippery brick walkways and shaking bits of wood, tied together or hastily nailed to the floor. Now that I was away from the torrents of sewage I could see the little paths I had missed, and felt a fool for despairing earlier.

“Ze exit…how far d’ya rekcon’ it might be?”

She shrugged, “Depends on where you’re ‘eaded Mister. Your voice is real funny so I can’t quite tell where you’re from.”

“Yharnam.” I said.

She laughed, “If you say so Mister, but you don’t sound like any Yharnamite I’ve ever ‘eard. Come to think of it…”

I couldn’t afford for her to catch on to me. I started to spew false coughs to break up her thoughts, but instead of diverting attention from my person, it brought more on.

“Cor blimey! You ain’t sick are you Mister?”

“No.” I said.

“That’s a right ‘orrible cough it is, you need a doctor.” She decided, “A doctor and a bath for that matter.”

“I’m fine.” I mumbled.

“Oh don’t you fret none, sir.” Goose carried on, “I can get you both of those. We had surprise guests n’ I think they’re still gonna be ‘ere for awhile.”

“Guests?” I asked.

“Mmhm.” Goose nodded, “Came in the middle of the night they did. Woke me up somethin’ terrible, then I couldn’t get back to sleep, no sir.”

“The middle of last night?” I asked, “Or this one?”

“Last night.” She replied. “That’s a wicked good trick you got there. Will you teach me?”

“What?” I asked.

She stopped walking altogether, coming to a halt in the middle of one of the rickety wooden walkways. It was so small that her slight frame was enough to block my passage as well, and I was forced to wait while she pried her unending questions.

“That trick with the voice, sir. You keep changin’ ‘ow you speak. Can you teach me?”
“I do not!” I growled.

Though maybe I had.

“You do too!” She growled back.

I would not be teased into childish arguments like this. Their endless repetitive nature had annoyed me even as a child. I hated repetitive tasks, and circuitous conversation. When Alois was growing up I ensured she would never have to endure such horrid things, as I often was made to undergo when the other sibling was a child. Will barely deserved our family name, much less my time. He had not the spark of intelligent curiosity that my sweet sister overflowed with.

Even before she could talk she behaved accordingly. Will had cried and screamed, our mother so put out by him that he was only handled by nurses and serving girls. She could not deal with the constant wailing. Alois only cried when something was truly wrong, and after maturing never after. She liked to be read too, and I was her constant translator before she learned the words for herself.

I found Goose leaning far closer to my brothers habits then my sisters. We do-not-do-too’d for much longer then was dignified before I finally put a stop to it.

“Shut your mouth, Goose!” I snarled.

A statisfied grin spread across my face as I watched her skin pale. Her thin little legs began to shake and the boards beneath her feet quivered.

“I never told you my name.” She muttered.

Shit.

Had I just blown my own cover?

“’Tares says not to talk to strangers.” She mumbled, starting to back away.

Oh we aren’t strangers little girl. We aren’t strangers at all. I have met you and you have met me, though I looked more like myself then. I pressed my advantage taking a step out onto the shaking walkway.

“Stranger? Is that what I am to you?” I asked.

Her eyes squinted as she stared, trying to see beyond the layer of grime to the person underneath. I never would’ve known refuse to make such an effective disguise, but now I was quite done playing games. I was quite done with the lot of it.

“Get away from me!” Goose shouted.

She made to run but I was too quick. I had her by the collar. She weighed nothing and was easily born aloft. I knew her to be a dangerous thing and held fast despite her kicking and screaming. Who was going to hear any of this from the sewers?

“Let go!” She shouted, “Let go!”

I held her over the rushing waters. The drop wouldn’t kill her, not even with the bricks below to smack one’s head upon, but children were foolish and often did not see sense. It was enough to force evermore panic into her little bones.

“Let me go! Let me go!” she shouted.
"I told you to shut up!" I shouted, and I could shout much louder then she could. My voice bounced off the walls, magnifying until delicious delicious terror welled in her eyes. They went big the way only frightened animals can urge them to go, for what more was she to me then prey?

I shook her several times. Her arms went limp and her shouts died down. The felted hat that was nestled on top of her ragged hair clung to her head limply, as a leaf about to fall from its tree. I reached out, plucking it from my other hand.

"Give it back." She whimpered. "Please give it back. You’ll ruin it.”

"Do you remember me?" I asked her.

I shook her roughly while she stumbled to answer. I wanted her to be fully aware that my questions were far more important then her pleas.

"Y…you killed that man…in the woods." She said, “You’ve got ugly eyes and ‘orrible breath! You’re a big mean ol’ bully and you-“

I went from holding her gently to taking the air right from her lungs. Any tighter and things would begin to bruise. I had done this enough times to know. Purple necks attracted attention. No amount of scarves tightly wound or collars pinned up could hide it. Things like that lasted for weeks.

"That’s right. I am the man in the woods and tonight I think I’m hungry for a goose.”

Despite my hold she somehow managed to squeak out a scream.

I licked my lips just for show, but they still tasted of the sewer water. I had to hide my regret, it wouldn’t do to play the fool and send her into hysterics. Control, it was all about control that’s where terror truly stemmed from. Everyone thought they could steer their little boats wherever they liked, but the tide had other plans. Oh the swirling sea could pull them all under, and I was wont for wrecked ships and tangled masts.

"You’re going to answer all of my questions, and you’re not going to give me any trouble. When I’m done asking and you’re done answering we’ll see if I liked what you’ve said. Who knows, I did have a rather filling meal the other day. Perhaps there won’t be any room for geese after all.”

I loosed my grip ever so slightly so that she might respond.

The moment her breath came back she started to fight a battle with tears. It was one she had better win, nearly nothing on earth annoyed me as much as crying. We had tried so hard at Cainhurst to remove undesirable qualities from our servants, or those we housed and bred to feed upon. Bleeders, that’s all they were- kept the same as cows and chickens and other livestock. They were a resource, nothing more. When they spoke back we took out their tongues. The ones that bit lost their teeth. If they clawed it cost them their hands.

In all that time I’d never found a way to keep them from crying. You could take out the eyes themselves but somehow, someway the water still flowed.

“You said that you had guests last night.” I said, “Who were they?”

“No one sir.” Goose said, “ ‘onest.”

“Now now.” I cooed, “Don’t you worry. I’m not going to eat them, I just lost some friends of mine and need to know where they went. I’ve been looking for them all night. Do you now how horrible it is to loose a friend Goose? Have you ever lost anyone?”
She nodded.

“Now who were they?” I repeated.

She looked down, past her feet to the rushing water below. Maybe she was gauging her chances of survival, but I figured it was just a gathering of her courage.

“T…they weren’t nobody sir…i…i it was people on the run. ‘Tares ain’t never turns nobody away, Miss Miriam wanted too, she don’t like people in the house none but they didn’t. They let them stay but I promised. I promised ‘Tares that I wouldn’t tell nobody nothing.”

I pressed Goose against my stomach, putting her ear to my chest.

“Can you hear that Goose? My stomach’s growling, and I don’t think it really cares what you’ve promised.”

She let out another worried squeak. How like a mouse. Perhaps she had been misnamed.

“I promised.” She pleaded.

I opened my jaws wide, hoping the sight of teeth- even those stained by sewage would be enough to frighten her. I was, of course, correct.

“It was just Strix.” She said, “Just Strix and he had a doctor with him.”

“Who’s Strix?” I asked.

“I. I don’t know really.” She said, “He’s one of ‘Tares friends but he’s an Executioner. I don’t like goin’ near um. Their helmets are ‘orrible scary. I thought he had something movin’ under his cloak…looked like he had four legs comin’ out the bottom instead of two. It musta been why he brought the doctor because if I had four legs instead a two then I—“

Majesty be praised, she would not shut up. It was a bloody shame there wasn’t a good knife and block about so that her voice could be properly taken away, though for the time being it seemed I would still need it. Rubbish tales about four legged freaks did not interest me.

“Stop your lying and tell me the truth.” I demanded, letting her breathe again.

This time she started to cry. “I am telling the truth! I am! I am! Honest.”

“Well we’ll just have to see about that.”

I kept my hand at her throat but set her down in front of me.

“Get me out of this stinking sewer and take me to these freaks of yours.” I ordered.

She wiped snot from her running nose, but did as she was bade. The storm had once more directed headstrong ship back to its proper course. The chances of any of this being useful were slim. At the least the terrified little whimperer would get me out of the putrid labyrinth, and at best I would find Callum and Frigga had run to seek refuge with Antares. That’s what I hoped, for what else constituted strange visitors in the night.

“What did your guests want?” I asked as she walked on.

She let out another squeak, for some reason. I didn’t think answering a question warranted that much fear, but children were small and stupid. She was giving her lies away, always whimpering
before she told them. I could play along though.

“Nothin’.” She said, then quickly changed gears to “I don’t know.”

I hated that answer, and I’d been given it so many times from so many people. There were nobles who didn’t know where the Cainhurst coffers had started to lose money. Servants who didn’t know where the silver disappeared too, knights who didn’t know how the prisoners had escaped. Finally there had been her majesty, Queen Annalise who worst of all did not know what to do with me. I would show her what could be done, just how valuable the man she exiled truly was. When I returned her favorite knight, brought back my sweet sister and re-set the board to play again, she would thank me. Oh how she would reign apologies and shower me with thanks and appellations.

Forget knighthood, I would become a prince. Forget that even, a king. Other propositions were preferable, my affections ran down other rivers, but marriage to a Queen was something to be proud of. Mother couldn’t have possibly made a better match, and she had tried to get me to court many. Will was the only one to ever take a wife. He also failed to produce an heir.

Heirs I had in massive quantity- or had at one time possessed. Unlike Will I was quite good at conquering pretty young things, and sired my fair lot of children. Mother would no doubt dispose of some of them, the ones she could find but there were a great many. That was the inconvenience of bedding the bleeders, the ones who were only supposed to be around to serve our appetites come feasting days- they would take to child bearing so quickly.

Truly my bloodline was the superior one. I still could not imagine how my brothers and sisters had fallen beneath the Executioner’s wheels in such great droves. It was ridiculous. That would be like hogs on a farm overthrowing their masters. What nonsense.

“What were they doing there?” I asked again, giving Goose a shove.

She stumbled, skinning her knees. It was a good thing I had eaten earlier, or I might’ve broken her then and there just to get the foul taste out of my mouth. Wash out the smells of the sewer with fresh blood.

“I don’t know.” She insisted.

“I told you not to lie!” I yelled at her.

“S-sorry!” she stammered, “Miss Miriam made me leave the room, I didn’t get to hear what Mr. Callum wanted. ‘e was talkin’ to fast!”

“Did you say Callum?” I asked her.

She froze, lips trembling. I picked her up again and shook her back and forth. She put up no resistance, just let herself be flung from side to side. I could hardly believe it was the same girl who had smashed a lantern over my head and tried to jump into a fight. She wasn’t so strong without her guard dog.


“C-callum.” She said, “’e’s a doctor, Mister. ‘Onest ‘e is. I ‘ad a cough once n’ ‘e fixd it.”

The world had smiled upon my plight and given me mercy. I put her back down, and patted her on the head, getting dirty water and bits of slime all over the yarn and felted wool of her little hat.

“Excellent.” I said, “Callum is one of my friends too. I was worried about him you know. He ran
away so suddenly and gave me quite a fright. Tell me, did he have a lady with him?"

“No Mister. Just the man with four legs. I swear."

There was that lie again. Four legged man, how ridiculous. I was going to rip the stupid thing’s head off. I might have a better chance of extracting the truth from her dying brain then these fruitless conversations. I pressed her harder, and she walked ever faster. I never allowed her to stray further then my arms could reach. When I saw her head turn or her eyes dart to one of the many side passages that littered the walls of the sewer, I tightened my grip on her collar.

There would be no running away from me. The tunnels grew darker and that seemed to make her nervousness all the more potent. She began mumbling to herself. I thought it might’ve been useful stuff at first, then I concluded it was nonsense. The many arches we passed under began to echo with the stuttered sounds, and the rushing of water below began to act as accompaniment. I had been wrong both times.

She was whispering the words to a song. A song I unfortunately, had become very well acquainted with.

“F-feathers off a crow wouldn’t do us any harm. P-plucking feathers off a crow wouldn’t do us any-“

“Stop singing!” I snarled at her.

She squeaked and then silenced, but now the foul melody was lodged in my brain. I could still hear the horrible minstrel’s wails and the crowd leaning out into the street to join him in his infernal chorus.

This night was nearly too much to stand, and I had endured my fair share of bad evenings. The fact that this one refused to be solved by blade and blood was the most infuriating culmination of possibilities. I couldn’t kill the child or I would never find Frigga and Callum again. I couldn’t kill Frigga once I’d found her, for she might assist in finding Fwahe. There was no way to know wether or not this Vileblood would turn out to be my sister, but every possibility had to be chased down and followed up with due haste.

Alois favored women, and though Frigga was at best a repulsive creature with so much time spent away from Cainhurst her judgement might have lapsed. In a moment of weakness she could have taken up with the queen of the city. She had a thing for royalty, my sweet sister did. Always so eager to serve.

When I was her king and savior, things would be different. She would surely, for once listen to my wise council. I would be a good and just ruler, never forcing suitors upon her but keeping her affections reserved for someone more appropriate. Really, how was she supposed to make such an important decision for herself when her tastes ran so heavily towards women? She could not be expected to fend for herself on such matters.

It was a great burden to bear, the re-taking of Cainhurst. The management of my sister’s affairs, all of it would fall unto me. I had been trained at this, prepared to run the house of Hirsch with grace and dignity when then time came. Before the massacre they must’ve thought it never would, that all their efforts to better me would have been in vain.

It was a shame they could not be brought back so I might laugh in their faces, those pompous lords who had spurned me. I was sure that spitting in their face would be just as satisfying as slaying the minstrel had been.
At last we came to the gated entrance of the sewers. It looked locked, though why anyone would want to break in here still baffled me. Toshing, the child had called it. I wouldn’t be caught dead looking for precious heirlooms dropped in sewer water. Better to just bend ones back at a job and undergo the strain of hard labor then stoop to stealing pearls out of piles of shit.

Once her feet hit the streets Goose tried to bolt again. She was like an animal in a trap, willing to chew threw her own foot to be loosed, but I was stronger than the snares and held her firm. We must’ve made quite a sight, and had it been daylight I might’ve worried.

“If you do anything to-“

“HELP!” Goose screeched, kicking and screaming at me. “HELP ME! ‘TARES HELP ME! THE BAD MANS GOT ME!”

Her wailing was louder than church bells and it bounced from town house to town house. I saw lights flicker on before I could get my hand over her mouth. I started to drag her underneath a parked carriage, confident it would provide the cover I needed to set the horrid thing straight again.

Already it had become too late for me. People were opening their doors, yellow beacons of light raining down from rooftops. What had they heard, what had they seen?

Suddenly I was back in that chamber, in the council room of castle Cainhurst. The Yharnamites became the heads of respected families, every one of them looking down on me. The years had been too great for me to recall the exact words spoken over my wide eyes and pounding heart. Disgraceful, with an appetite I couldn’t control. It had been that and the siring of too many sons, too much shame for the Cainhurst nobles to bear.

I had killed too many, and Alois exposed me. What had driven her too such madness, to open the doors and show off the corpses of suitors and servants that were stacked deep within my bedroom walls, why she had betrayed me I did not know. My sweet sister, so desperate to escape my affections that she would have me banished? Was it so wrong what I wanted from her, such a crime to wish for her to have the best in men at her side? She ought to have been proud I chose her from hundreds of others, she should’ve been loving and willing and ready to give Mother Seren the heirs she always wanted. Trueborn heirs.

The people here were no different. They saw a man covered in flith gripping a young girl and jumped to perverse conclusions. My heart was pounding. It shouldn’t have been. They were only stupid mortals. I could slit their throats in seconds, but something held me down. Somewhere in my head that song began to throb and pound, ringing in all the hallmarks of a headache. Everything froze and I found myself quite unable to move.

Goose wrenched herself free and ran off screaming into the night.

“’TARES! HELP ME!”

Just as she had done in the woods, but this time I did not pursue her. They came with shotguns and pitchforks. The denizens of Yharnam still retained the old habits of nights on the hunt and kept their weapons close. From every corner they began to circle in.

“What’s your game there, eh?” One grizzled old woman asked, “Preyin’ upon poor hapless little girls.”

I did not have an answer for her. I didn’t have an answer for any of them.

It wasn’t until I saw moonlight painting in the colors of a gun barrel that I finally had the good
sense to reach for my weapon, but they were on me like a murder of crows. I was kicked to my knees, pounded in the chest. There were too many of them for me to make a move, and none of my protests deterred them. Not even the smell of the sewer kept their blows from coming.

I was never shot, but I was beaten and broken. I feared someone would notice the color of my blood was wrong and call for the Executioners, but in their blind rage at the suspected assault of a child they failed to catalog important details. Lord of Death be praised for their small minds and unseeing eyes.

They tossed me back in the sewer. I had to claw my way out again. They’d closed the door, but the rusting iron bars were easy enough to break apart. I had to slink past their windows like a dog with its tail between its leg, silent and suspicious.

I didn’t know where to head, but at last came to a fountain. There was nothing flowing, disabled for the winter but the rains had collected in the basin and after much furious scrubbing I was at last at least able to recognize my own reflection in the water. The sewage came away and I was myself again.

A nearby bucket would serve for shower. I did my best to rinse the filth from my hair though it took considerably more effort. I swallowed my pride and stole clothes off their lines, and exchanged them for my disgusting rags in an old alley way. The whole time I was worried someone would see, that from out of nowhere my sweet sister’s twin eyes would blink open and she would look down at me in shame.

This city was a meanace. I turned away from the alley and began to look for something familiar. As I was gazing around I spied the golden glint of Executioner’s helms and retreated back to the shadows.

“Yeah Old Lady Daniels said some weirdo was creeping on girls down by Sewersgate.” One of them said.

“I fail to see how that is a problem that requires the attention of the hunters.” The other replied.

“Well Essex, my good man, you can’t just sell all your problems away to a circus.” The first said.

He laughed at his own joke like it was the penultimate blunder in a decadently arranged comedy. It was hard to imagine that this man, doubled-over with laughter and wheezing for breath belonged to the same order that had slain so much of my bloodline.

“That’s where the Vileblood belonged.” He returned, “Orius stop laughing, we’ve a job to do.”

“Sure thing. Sure thing.” Orius chuckled. That vow lasted about a second before he broke down into fits again, “You just should’ve seen her face. She was spewing insults while that carny had her carried off. Taken away in the forbidden was but I saw Fwahe trying to retain the pride of old Cainhurst while shut up like a canary in a cage. It was a sight, chief. A sight for eyes that had seen her flounce about behind prissy Miss Hemlock too long.”

“I suppose I cannot begrudge you that, darling.” Essex said. He titled back his companion’s helm so that the two of them might join lips where none could see. “Let us away.”

Fwahe connected to Cainhurst. That could not be coincidence. Lord Death did have a funny way of bringing things to fall upon my lap. This must’ve been another sign. My pursuit of Frigga Hemlock was vain and vile, full of passion instead of reason. I must give up on vengeful quests and turn my attention in the direction he bade.
Yes, my lord. I would go to the Forbidden woods and follow after Fwahe. At least there, I would not have to endure songs about the Bloody Crow.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
Of Sacrificial Lambs

Chapter Summary

Fwahe makes some new friends

Chapter Notes

As always please let me know what you think!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Every day I met new people that I wanted to kill. The circus was taking me somewhere, and no longer did I travel in a dark empty caravan all by myself. The ringmaster had decided he ought to socialize and civilize me so that I’d be more likely to come around to his cause. That man was an idiot, for when stupid circus children started circling my cage, daring each other to jab their fat little fingers through the bars and poke me.

I had tried to bite them at first, but that had been days ago. Cruptinelli still forced me to drink other animal’s blood, insisting that I would come to accommodate it. My stomach had taken the first few doses without problem but things had changed. After every meal it felt like my insides were folding in on themselves, and everything burst back up and out again. Marcel had ceased whining about his ruined clothes. He wore a cloth apron now, looking like nothing so much as a doctor trying to get me to take my medicine.

No amount of explanation would stay their hands. I could neither complain nor fight my way out of this one. I put up all the resistance I could manage. The jingling boy relied heavily on the skills of Rotu and Nimah to play their music and lock me in stupor so that he could do as he wished, but I was learning to get around that. It only took another note added to the mix to throw them off key, something so simple as tapping a foot or humming a tune could break their illusion. I never gave them perfect silence to work with.

“She’s clever this one.” Rotu remarked. “I like her.”

“Say that when she’s barfed on you a few times.” Marcel grumbled back.

Rotu giggled, “That is part of the reason she is so great. She makes you look a fool. Have you considered joining the clowns act, Marcy?”

“Call me Marcy one more time and I’ll put you and your magic flute there instead.”

“This isn’t a flute.” Rotu said, “You know that right? It’s important to me that you know that.”

“Flute, pipe, what’s the difference?” He asked.

“There’s a world of differences, especially when the history of the instrument is considered.” Nimah said, joining in on their conversation.
The three of them took to eating after feeding me. This was part of the circus-man’s attempts to socialize me, to make me invested in his people. I wasn’t about to form friendships with them, and had tried to chase the trio away at first. Lonesomeness had a way of changing things though, and I found that I did not entirely despise them. Rotu and Marcel’s arguments reminded me of mine and Cato’s. One jingled with metal the other with teeth, it was hard to blindly hate something familiar.

“Well I’m sorry I didn’t go to school and learn my histories. I ain’t highborn and can’t tell an oboe from an elbow.”

“Well I’m sorry I didn’t go to school and learn my histories. I ain’t highborn and can’t tell an oboe from an elbow.”

“An elbow’s not an instrument.” Rotu said, “You know that right? It’s important to me that you know that.”

He scowled. Nimah laughed then started to go on about the history of folk instruments and music in a very dull way. It sounded like she was reading it out of a book, though there was nothing in her hands. She was just boring to listen too.

I pulled up handfuls of crabgrass, the only thing I could reach outside of my cage and started to braid them together. I did this because there was nothing else to do. The jingling boy and the girl with tattoos would listen to Nimah’s lessons endlessly, which always meant that the interesting part of lunch was over.

“There were also said to be great balls at Cainhurst castle, which was truly when the flute rose to prominence in orchestral collections. Apparently the lords and ladies there had a fondness for the tunes, and it’s popularity spread due to their influence. Once it got through to the Prestwick Company that-“

“Fuck the Prestwick Company.” Rotu and Marcel chorused together, before tapping their cups of water to one another and drinking them as though they were ale.

Nimah sighed, “As I was saying- once it got through, they began to increased their distribution of the instrument. More production lowered cost and the northern commoners picked things up here and there.”

“That’s ridiculous.” I said.

They all turned to me.

“What do you mean?” Nimah asked, “It’s the truth.”

“Maybe it’s true about the Prestwick Company-“ I conceded, and was interrupted by a repetition of “fuck the Prestwick Company” from Rotu and Marcel. “But I assure you the Cainhurst nobles had bigger problems then what instruments were playing. Queen Annalise never once care if a band had a flute or otherwise.”

“And how would you know?” Marcel asked.

Rotu brought the bottom of her cup down on top of his head. The piercings jingled like bells. “She’s a Vileblood you idiot. She was at Cainhurst.”

“That’s right!” Nimah said, “You must’ve lived there, what were you? A maid or something?”

I had already suffered these interrogations from Templeton. She wanted to know everything but what was there to tell? My time at Cainhurst was a thing of the past, my only memories were cracked, covered over in satin and blood. If the scholar had no right to them then certainly these people didn’t.
I just glared.

“Give it up Nimah.” Marcel advised, “That’s the most she’s spoken since she’s been here- at least what counts as words and not insults.”

“Bite me.” I said.

“There she is.” He laughed.

They didn’t press me for any more details and quickly returned to their conversations about nothing. I hated that they’d brought this up, for now with no distractions all the missing memories needled at me. They were like something stuck between the teeth, an irritant one couldn’t pry free. I cast it away, trying to put myself above it. The past was irrelevant and could not hurt me anymore. I needed to focus on what was to come, plan my escape and the journey home.

We never seemed to stop moving. I couldn’t have been gone longer than a week. I didn’t want to have been gone longer then a week, but time became fuzzy and there was no way to keep track. The circus didn’t keep clocks around, and my quarters lacked a calendar. The landscape changed so often that I could not track it by the weather. Things fluctuated, but to some degree the Circo Obscuro always seemed to situate itself in sunlight. I thought we might be heading south, towards warmer climate.

I wasn’t sure though. I had hoped I would be better at this, that traveling the globe with Templeton would’ve prepared me for finding my way, but that wasn’t so. It was she who labored over map and compass, finding the names of lost places that we need trek through. She knew the names of the towns, but I forgot them. They poured through my head in a tumble of meaningless letters.

Letters had always been hard. That I could recall from Cainhurst as every time I looked at a page there was a moment of shame before I attempted to make light of the inscription. Disapproval was a general feeling. I remember passing pages to hands colder than mine and asking for someone else to read them.

Why couldn’t I recall something of greater importance?

I had seen Templeton’s maps before. Somewhere in the gallery of my mind I must know what they looked like, the general shape of them. Wherever that knowledge was it didn’t present itself when called upon. We carried on into the unknown.

There was a pattern to circus life. There were stories of people casting aside their burdens to live a life of freedom and fun amongst the carnival, but if the Circo Obscuro spoke for the rest, they would end up severely disappointed. Everything went according to a schedule and a series of endlessly repetitive barked orders. There never seemed to be enough time for anyone to set up anything, breaks for the workers few and far between.

I had to know this, observe this and catalog it in the part of my brain that wouldn’t forget things. The slightest detail, the smallest slip could mark my chance to make a break for it. It didn’t matter if I knew where I was going, sooner or later I would find Yharnam again. First thing to do was get the bars out of my way.

Mr. Cruptinelli was right about one thing, I did make friends. They were not the companions he would’ve wished and were certainly no more social then I was, but we understood each other. The circus held them captive same as me, in spaces too small that they’d never be able to free themselves from. Boxer and Bruiser the two thin tiger cats were set next to me while their tent was assembled, and we came to an understanding.
I think it was a mutual desire to devour the circus man and all he stood for. They were hungry, so was I. I could see the anger in the set of their shoulders, their massive paws that paced about the cage they were kept in. Neither of us had enough room, but Boxer and Bruiser stood nearly shoulder to shoulder. They had to coordinate their pacing.

The circus man always wanted more though, it wasn’t enough to just have two tigers. That wouldn’t leave the rabble awestruck on its own. Bruiser was without color, nearly entirely. His fur was white as snow and the stripes that should’ve been signature black were pale as well, a yellowish tone. Cruptinelli had his handyman Cutjack go in and paint them over black, while powdering Boxer’s fur to appear shiny- metallic shiny. They wanted a silver and gold tiger, and the effects of the powdered metals could be clearly seen. Boxer was losing her fur in patches. She also had a sizable lump, which dangled from her stomach and was yet to be attended too by any sort of veterinarian.

Bruiser had a rotting tooth, and his tongue was often black from trying to lick the paint off. The poor fool got it all over his nose and suffered under the lashes of the angry circus man. That was where I differed from the two of them. They feared Cruptinelli but I did not. I had no doubt that given the chance they would rip him apart- but they needed the chance given to them. I was going to take it, provide it to myself and capitalize.

I put my fingers through the bars of their cage. Boxer came up and started licking them, giving me rough scratchy kisses like a house cat. The only ones I could get now.

“That’s a good girl.” I said using my other hand to scratch behind her ears.

They never seemed clean. I could feel layers of dirt and scuttling insects in the tiger’s matted coat. They both needed a bath.

“That’s a good girl.” I said again.

Bruiser soon noticed attention was being handed out and came over to grab some for himself. How like a boy. He had to wait for Boxer to step aside and allow him to get closer, the both of them were pressed against the cage in odd places, trying to stand close enough so that I could reach them. Bruiser stank, he really smelled. They needed to pull that tooth of his.

“Who’s a selfish little man today?” I asked Bruiser

He just lifted his chin so that I could scratch under it. That too was gross, grizzled with old chunks of paint and scraps of food. I tried to pick out what I could but the white tiger was really just a big baby when it came to pain. The slightest tug on his fur and he would shy.

I didn’t blame him. It seemed like he had been through a lot. We’d all been through a lot. I did what I could for the both of them. Maybe it was a little silly to try and care for these creatures but I needed someone, something. I didn’t want Cruptinelli to know or things might get worse, and of all the creatures certinally Boxer and Bruiser had it better then most.

Horace really did eat live chickens in front of a paying audience, and they were crammed into cages made for songbirds. The horses were thin and had coats like threadbare rugs. Even the horse with stripes like Boxer’s didn’t seem well, though I’d never seen a horse like that before. Most of the animals they kept were things I hadn’t seen, or painted and costumed to look like other things. They claimed to have a live gargoyle and a band of trained frogs.

Of all of them the cats were mine. They were my friends and I kept them secret for their own safety. Every time I went to pet them I checked over my shoulder, making sure the circus man and
his goons weren’t watching. They didn’t look at anything very closely.

I had to pretend not to notice their protests when they had to be moved away from me. I just turned away and feigned sleep. What else was there to be done? I didn’t know what happened to them in that tent, but if it was anything like what I saw going on in mine then it couldn’t be good. Nothing wanted to be displayed like this, but Cruptinelli’s precious audience had to be catered too. They needed their marvels and he needed his money.

It was nice to know he could be frustrated so easily. The less I did to impress his treasured patrons the more he raged. I slept, or stared blankly from the bars of my cage. They tried to bill me as a Vileblood monster but I might as well have been a doll, a corpse. He might have been better to put one of his little machines in my place, dress someone up in a costume and have them claim to be genuine.

Frustration brought interruptions, Cruptinelli taking it upon himself to interrupt the next of our lunches so that he might speak with me. I’d only recently come out of Rotu and Nimah’s trance, and each left me a little weaker than the last. I didn’t know what blood I had in me now, but it was coming back up again.

Truly it was coincidence but I would paint it as a weapon. I managed to get some of my retching onto the circus-man’s fresh-shined shoes. He tried to be civil about but I saw his nose twitch, and his grip on the cane tighten. Was he ever mad.

“They tell me you are still not participating.” Mr. Hayden Cruptinelli said.

“And you’re still feeding me chicken blood.”

“I believe that was rat, actually.” He amended. As though it were any better. Mr. Cruptinelli must’ve born the strain of blood on his boots as long as he was able. He removed a frilly handkerchief from his jacket pocket and began to wipe red liquid off black leather. When he’d finished he pinched the one unstained spot on the handkerchief, lifted it from his boots and flung it into the grass for someone else to attend too.

“We have fed you and given you housing, company, all that one desires. Why do you not join our family and perform pleasantly like the others?”

“I had, housing food and company. This is prison blood and my captors.” I replied, “I think you can see the difference, unless you’re truly so stupid as to beg further explanation.”

He was not fond of that answer. It set his nose twitching once more, sniveling up and down like a rat sniffing through trash. Cruptinelli’s cheeks started to puff up, ready to unleash another torrent of reprimands. Before he could unleash so much as an insult, Marcel’s jingling interrupted him.

“We’ve got a problem-“

“What do you think you’re-“

“It’s the tigers.” Marcel carried on, ignoring all interruption. “Boxer specifically, she’s howling and whining we think it might be that huge lump on her that’s giving her trouble.”

“Then cut it off.” Mr. Cruptinelli snapped. “I don’t see why that’s my problem. Get whoever poked holes in you to sew her up.”

Marcel swallowed nervously, “With all due respect I don’t think that-“
“I didn’t ask for your opinion.” He replied, “Get yourself gone this instant and don’t bring up such trifles to me ever again.”

“But Hayden she’s-“

The circus-man grabbed Marcel by the ring in his nose. I don’t think the jingling boy had much of a choice about the tears that came to his eyes. He didn’t whimper or struggle just froze and tried to maintain the angry glare that had pinched all his features together.

“I said that-“

“The tiger’s having a baby. She’s fucking pregnant you idiot!” Marcel growled.

Hayden twisted the ring and my stomach lurched. I wish I could say it was from disgust, but the fountain of red that suddenly began spilling from Marcel’s nose was the first whiff of proper food I’d had in days. The both of them heard my stomach growling.

“Unbelievable.” He grimaced. “I was assured that male was sterile. It makes no difference, just cut out the cub and lets be done with it.”

“Sir its-“

“And feed it to the Vileblood.” He said, “From the way her stomach just spoke it seems she’s hungry enough.”

“Hayden!” Marcel cried.

The circus-man pulled the ring out of his nose, bringing cartilage and flesh along with it. So much food going to waste. They fed the ground better than me. The jingling boy was on his knees but like the animals he caged, the people he’d captured and the men he commanded Hayden Cruptinelli had no sympathy when it came to his own blood.

“Get up, and go take care of it.” He barked.

“Yes sir.” Marcel muttered, clutching his nose and rushing off towards the menagerie.

Mr. Cruptinelli pinched the bridge of his nose with his fingers, that twitching repugnant rat’s nose. He sighed and looked as though he were going to speak to me. After a pause he thought better of it and, after giving the fallen ring and the smidgen of flesh it connected to a kick, he stomped off towards his tent.

I stretched my arms as far as they would go, scraping the dirt and the ground, desperate to reach that little scrap. The ring fell away as I pried it closer, hardly anything at all. There was blood, still moist soaking it and when I took the bit of skin between my teeth and bit a little more seemed to gush out. What I could suck away wouldn’t have filled a thimble, and did nothing to quell my aching stomach but the taste of blood anew on my lips was rapturous.

They were going to hurt my cats. My good girl. Friends I had barely made and hardly knew, but the ones I needed.

I tried not to think about it, and turned my focus to what had spilled on the ground. I didn’t want to think about it, and it was easy enough to let my hunger eclipse all other desires. Most of the boy’s blood had soaked into the ground, and sucking it out of the dirt wasn’t going to do me any favors. It was gone.
There were precious places however where single drops, or whole puddles had been caught in grass and leaves like morning dew. Plucking them was a careful affair, the slightest twitch or wavering would cause things to topple, allow blood to spill out over one side and return to the earth. I sucked little red pearls off dry grass, and took communion-wine mouthfuls from crumbling leaves. Most of it did not reach my mouth, and I had to suck what overflowed from my fingers. Little tastes, nothing more. I still doubted it was more than could fit in a thimble, but just the act, the routine and the smell of this consumption sated me.

At least it was able to banish the churning hunger inside of me, momentarily. I thought it would make things better, but it just made everything sharper. I could hear every sound as the performers continued their daily rush of setting things up and taking them down. The smells of sugar and popcorn were nauseating, always the same old frying oil and squeaking machinery. Popcorn was such a loud food, the entire process rife with unnecessary crunches and jolts. I don’t know if I had ever had the true capacity to attempt to enjoy such a thing, before my blood was ripened into its true form- but had a youthful me sampled the puffed kernels I’m sure she’d have rejected them.

All of this was just stupefying and distracted me from the important noises, the ones across the way in the menagerie where Boxer was being tortured. I wanted to think it wasn’t possible for men to be like this, and that Mr. Cruceptinelli hadn’t been serious about feeding the stillborn cubs to me- but I had seen the things that men could do.

If Minimus could alter minds and harness the arcane bolts of the gods for his own torturous machinations, then this circus man was more than capable of cutting open an animal’s belly for the sake of performance. Boxer would be devastated.

I hadn’t betrayed our friendship, I was sure of it. That was possibly the worst part, he wasn’t doing it to be cruel to me. This was simply how the Circo Obscuro conducted itself. The horrible man waved his baton and for one reason or another everyone jumped to position and did as told. I shouldn’t have been expecting much from a man the Executioners hired. I always thought the worst of people, but oh how I could underestimate the depths they would sink too. There was always a lower level to be reached.

Once it seemed that someone had truly hit the bottom, the very worst of the worst, there was a layer yet waiting to be looked upon. It never ended.

I had stood firm in the face of the fallen Abbot and his torturer. Even when the Throat-Slitter’s knife carved deep into ancient scars I’d opposed him and held strong. I’d watched him bring Cato to the brink of death and I’d remained above it all. There would not be a lapse for two animals I barely knew. A hole in my heart widened, but I did not let it show.

This was not one of Templeton’s books where the heroines curled up in their rooms and sobbed about their problems until someone else came and fixed them. Who could I hope to rescue me in a place like this- a place that was not even a place for the location was never twice the same. There’d be no dark haired stranger come in through the window. I didn’t have a window. I had bars on all sides.

Whatever was happening with Boxer must’ve taken longer than anticipated. They sent Nimah and Horace to move me into the tent with the spider-priest, Bea and the other freaks. That’s what we were billed as, not the term I would’ve readily chosen. For once I gave Hayden Cruceptinelli the performance he wanted. I had a temper.

I’d tried to go about things the same as ever, to lie down and pretend to be asleep, but then one of the patrons had to extended his dirty fingers through the bars of the cage, and jab them into my spine.
The barker must not have been paying attention, or he was otherwise unconcerned. He’d seen me play the docile captive time and time again and to his chagrin did not know it was all an act. I wasn’t having this any longer.

I spun on him, moving faster than that glazy-eyed drunkard had probably seen anything move in his life. One second the gnarled pad of his calloused index finger was pressing into the scars on my back, the next it was between my teeth. Forget the morsel I had scavenged off the midway grounds, this was a fountain. His finger came off easily, like biting through a carrot. I gulped down his blood, which was thicker then I remembered blood being and tasted faintly of smoke.

They used all manner of things to get me to release him, and I did not protest long. One could only endure so many blows before striking at the men who dealt them.

“Crazy goddamn bitch!” The man with the missing finger spat at me. “I want her hung!”

“Sir,” The barker said, “You were warned not to touch the exhibitions and there is explicit posted signage warning all of our guests not to-“

“Fuck your signage!” He growled, shoving the barker away and stomping out of the tent.

“I’ll be damned.” One of the onlookers remarked, “Her bloods silver.”

Cuts from a whip had caused me to bleed in more places than one. A crowd quickly gathered, swelling around me to inspect for themselves. The barker noticed the sudden interest and began to spew false facts on the spot, enticing the audience with stories of a Cainhurst that never existed. He claimed I was the queen and seduced men into sleeping with me before they died. As if a queen needed to seduce anyone, and did not have a line of suitors out the door and around the gate.

It was all nonsense and lies, but the patrons were entranced and I was basking in the half-meal I’d managed to claim for myself. He wouldn’t die, thus whatever happened to putrefy living blood into the dregs my kind required wasn’t going to happen, but at least I could keep this down. I felt full even if I wasn’t.

Thus I briefly became the star attraction of Circo Obscuro’s tent of freaks. It was unintentional but undeniable, and even if I were to have curled up and slept there were rumors flying all about. The barkers kept me agitated, poking and prodding me if I started to look less engaged then before. It didn’t matter if I spun on them. Or tried to grab the ends of their rods, that was what the audience wanted. I knew I was playing into Cruptinelli’s hands but I didn’t care.

There was no space in my cage for me to pace. I could not turn away from everyone at once when set in the center of the room. When running was not an option, fighting became more tantalizing, cathartic even. My rage had finally produced something, a few mouthfuls of blood. Not rat or chicken or whatever woodland creature had been caught in Horace’s snares but the diet I was supposed to be drinking.

The circus stayed open for a long time. Word spread quickly and the desire to capitalize and profit was never quickly stashed away. By the third or fourth wave of people there were a few who doubted the story, coming in so much later then the first that they hadn’t seen or heard about it from other bystanders. Some of the bolder ones wanted to test the claim, to put their own fingers through the bars and see what happened.

The barkers insisted they do no such thing and denied a follow-up meal from even the most persistent of patrons. Night wore on and as time passed with no word from anyone on anything I just got worse. I shouted at the barker pointing out flaws in his story. He accused Vilebloods of
being born from necrophilia and relationships with corpses, what else was I supposed to do? It was
slander and it was beyond stupid. Everyone in Yharnam was at least smart enough to know that it
was an exchange of blood that brought on the transformation.

These people weren’t from Yharnam- weren’t even close. The barker wasn’t there to tell facts, he
was there to sell stories. No one cared if they were truthful or not. The more I raged the more
people surged in, until at last there was no more and the curtains of the circus closed. I had some
clarity in my last moments displayed, realizing the whole time that I should’ve been trying to listen
to the conversations of paying customers for word of the menagerie. Instead I’d been shouting.

If there was ever a night to let me alone in a dark caravan this was it. Solitude was the greatest
blessing I could be given, but of course that wasn’t how things worked with the confounded
carnival men. They packed my cage onto a shelf in a stinking old wagon that had hammocks strung
up on one side, cots underneath them. Conservation of space was suddenly important.

The people who found nightly refuge on the various beds were always different. No one seemed to
be particularly attached to any one sleeping caravan, so I was constantly bombarded by new faces
and new smells. There seemed to be no bathing requirement for the people Cruptinelli employed,
and often they generated puddles of sweat on their blankets as they snored away beneath the
covers.

The sounds from a sleeping circus were just as irritating as the sounds from a waking one.
Someone was always whistling through their nose as they slept, the high-pitched tones enough to
make your ears sting. Always there was coughing too. I hadn’t known people could sleep, snore
and cough at the same time but the Circo Obscuro proved me wrong. The worst were the nights
when one had to endure the sounds of two people in the same bed.

Even when it was just innocent affection, kisses and loving words it made my blood boil. Could
they not find a place to do this away from me? It was an insult, but I bore it the best I could.

In the morning they came for me, as always, taking my cage out behind the caravans. Some
mornings it was a bucket of soapy water duped in sideways, followed up by fresh clothes. They
wanted me to wear one of their costumes, some gaudy dress made of red cotton. It would fit their
narrative of a deflowered Cainhurst noble better than the bloodstained rags I clung too. I threw it
back at them every time. I wasn’t going to be a part of their show no matter how many times Mr.
Cruptinelli threatened me.

Usually these impromptu baths occurred on sunny days, which made them easier to bear. The
excess soap and water would quickly be dried away, but this morning was a dismal cloudy one.
The dampness in my clothes did not dissipate, but latched on and made things doubly unpleasant. It
was a packing and traveling day for the Circo Obscuro, which meant that I wouldn’t be set next to
the menagerie. I wouldn’t get to check up on Boxer and Bruiser, but would be packed and shipped
like dry goods, taken farther into unknown territories.

They wanted me clean so whomever was set next to me didn’t complain. It was reasonable, though
I still hated them for it. There was nothing I didn’t hate the carnival men for.

Traveling like this was a difficult thing to endure. I was used to walking paths myself, and in the
small space I hadn’t been able to stretch my legs in a long time. Instead of pleasant strolls where
one might stop to look at interesting trees- or in my case stop to chastise Templeton for stopping
and looking at interesting trees- I got to be jostled to and fro in the miniature prison. My head hit
the top of the cage every time the horse pulling us along started or stopped. I did not bruise easily
but after repeated wear and tear the bars of the cage would begin to batter me, and there were
several spots in which my skin became discolored and tender.
Stoppages for meals were common. The Circo Obscuro apparently did not enjoy traveling foods and preferred to halt progress entirely for the sake of meals. Everyone searched for cooking pots or worked to assemble fires. They never seemed to remember where they’d packed anything, despite always tying everything together in the same order. It might be that I had just died and was doomed to watch their performances play out as part of endless, eternal purgatory.

I was at least brought out of the covered wagon. The sky was still gray. A few birds chirped sporadically from the treetops. Their attempts to lighten the mood only made things worse.

In strange fashion Rotu and Nimah appeared before Marcel did. They quietly sipped cups of coffee and spoke in hushed tones. I could hear them, they were close and my ears worked better then most, but it was never this strain. They were usually loud to the point of irritation.

“So he’s alright?” Nimah asked.

“As alright as its possible for him to be.” Rotu shrugged, “Though I don’t know if he’ll ever look quite the same again. Can noses grow back?”

Nimah thought on the matter for a few seconds before she concluded that she did not know.

“It was only a tiny piece, anyway.” Rotu said, taking a sip from her coffee. “He’ll live.”

Nimah nodded, “I hope he gets back to his old self soon.”

“I hope the food is ready soon.” Rotu replied, but from the way she angrily swirled her spoon in her drink it seemed she was just as nervous as Nimah.

Marcel was carrying something in his arms, something leaking red when he came into view. He did have a bit of his nose missing, but with such a strange appearance to begin with It hardly made any difference. He walked slowly, not returning the friendly waves of his companions, but bypassing them and coming over to me directly. He knelt on the grass and spoke to me gently.

“Hey.” He said.

I nodded.

He fumbled instantly, not sure how to continue. “Hey so, uh… please don’t give me any trouble with this one. I don’t want to watch. Just…please.”

He gently shifted the little bundle through the bars of the cage. It moved of its own accord. The cloth came away to reveal a cluster of infant tigers, all of them still covered in fluids and blood. Rotu and Nimah gasped. The jingling boy quickly stepped away.

I hardly knew what to make of it. There were four in total. Each looked a proper tiger, none of them were white like Bruiser. I didn’t want to spend a lot of time looking at them, but I noticed three of them cold as ice. There was one squirming and mewling pitifully. It still felt cold, but not dead. Not beyond help.

“Saints and stars, Marce. Are those..”

“They’re Boxer’s yeah.” He said, voice shaking. “She’s…she’s not looking so great and the travel isn’t any help but you know how Hayden gets.”

“This one isn’t dead.” I said.
“Yeah. Yeah I know that.” Marcel replied, “But you’re supposed to be some kind of a monster right? Rat’s blood, chicken blood…some guy’s finger…he was alive the other night so what difference does a few cats make to you?”

“I’m not going to eat them.” I said.

“You sure as shit will.” Marcel growled. “I had to bundle them up and bring them here. Boxer tried to take my eye out when I went to take them away from her. I didn’t want to take them away from her. They ain’t right, ain’t ready. Cut out before they were supposed to be.”

“This one isn’t dead.” I repeated.

“I know.” Marcel said, “It’s your job to make it dead, okay? Not mine. I’m not doing it. You can dump blood on me and be a raging bitch as long as you like and I’ll deal with it. I’ll clean up after you and your stupid selfish ass, but I’m not killing a tiny little thing because you’re picky about your food. Just fucking do it and get it over with.”

“Marce she-“ Rotu began

“Shut up!” He barked.

She backed off, and they all stared at me. I didn’t want to look at them but I didn’t want to look at the corpses either. The blood was beginning to pool in the bottom of the cage. The living cub had not yet mastered motion. It fell to one side, nose trembling to suck in breath. It had fallen into the blood of its littermates and was going to drown if I didn’t do something.

“Get me that stupid dress.” I said.

They looked at me like I had spoken in tongues.

“Now!” I shouted.

Nimah flinched and was first to leap to action, scurrying away with Rotu behind her. Marcel didn’t follow them, sinking back to the grass.

“I shouldn’t have told him.” He muttered, fishing around in his pockets. “I shouldn’t have told him anything.”

I up-ended the toppled kit. It took my finger in its mouth and began to suck on it, silly thing. It would not find proper food there.

“You’re right.” I said. “You shouldn’t have.”

I heard two sounds that regularly came from Callum’s room; the spark of a match catching and the slosh of re-settling liquid in metal flask. What predictable vices. The scent of tobacco choked the air and Marcel’s breath was recolored with the unpleasant tones of whiskey.

“I couldn’t let Boxer keep jumpin’ though.” Marcel muttered. “I work with the menagerie. Right by it, she can’t go through hoops with kids in her stomach. Didn’t need Francis’ whip on her back, no. Hayden doesn’t listen and I should’ve guessed it.”

The tiger cub had started to squeal.

“Get up.” I barked at Marcel, “Drinking and smoking aren’t going to keep this thing alive. Go find some milk before it dies of starvation.”
“You’re supposed to be the one to kill it.” He muttered. “I was told it wouldn’t be hard for a monster like you.”

“I’m not a monster.” I said. “And I’m not going to kill it. Consequently you’re not going to be getting it back either. It’s mine now.”

“You can’t keep it.” Marcel argued, but I watched him dismantle his own resolve. He screwed the cap back onto the flask, and snubbed his cigarette out before it was truly finished. “They’ll take it away from you.”

“I’ll kill the man who tries,” I said.

Marcel half believed me, and truly half a threat was all I ever needed.

“Milk?” Marcel asked.

“That’s what pretty much every kind of baby drinks.” I said. I hated children, but even I knew that.

“No. I mean yes. I mean of course…but can’t you like…I mean…”

“No.” I said.

“You’ve got…like..”

Before he said something truly stupid I decided it was best to cut him down. “Breasts? Is that the word you’re searching for? Yes I possess them, but somehow I don’t revel in the idea of my own being clawed by tiny paws so unless you’re volunteering your own chest for this operation I suggest you do as I’ve said.”

His face went red and he tried to sputter out some kind of redeeming sentence. In the end he only managed to say. “Milk. Yes. Will get.” He went away, and I was left alone with Boxer’s children. I pushed the dead ones out through the bars. I didn’t want to look at them. I took the cloth they’d been wrapped in and tried to wipe all the blood and refuse off the fledgling’s fur.

Wiping bloodstains off with something already covered in them, didn’t end up going very well. Rotu and Nimah quickly returned with the wretched gown.

“Where’s Marcey?” Rotu asked as she passed the bundle of cloth to me.

“Getting milk.” I said.

They accepted it without question and looked on, as I wrapped the little cub down with the stupid costume. It let out angry squeaks. Perhaps I’d been too rough with it.

I was not now, nor probably ever good around young things. Children annoyed me, and infants were worse. Every time Frigga had mused on the subject of offspring I’d made efforts to direct her attention elsewhere. The conversations had become harder and harder to avoid once Scarlett and Imogen had decided to go about the process of getting one.

I remembered telling her I never wanted any, that I found them loathsome and irritating. She’d laughed at that, asking hadn’t I ever been a child. Of course I must have, at one time but I didn’t remember it, not even slightly. I was afraid my violent opposition would turn her away completely.

Of course, because she was Frigga, it didn’t. She had not tied herself to me for the purpose of a possible child, just the promise of a loving future. It seemed she had no desire to labor endlessly
over a screaming child, to fill her stomach and have to set her duties as patron aside. Heirs weren’t important to her, as Yharnam wasn’t run based on bloodlines.

She’d deiced that Imogen and Scarlett’s could be child to all of us. I’d smiled and tried to carry that opinion with a sunny disposition, but I was never going to like the thing. Scarlett and Imogen hated me, they might claim otherwise when Frigga was around but I knew it was true. I wouldn’t be at all surprised if that child grew up wanting to be an Executioner.

That was supposed to have been a conversation for another time, but what good was that now? Even if that were the only subject I would’ve traded my last breath to have that talk, any talk with Frigga.

Instead I was wiping afterbirth off a squirming cub. At last it was clean. I tore off some of the cleaner parts of the dress and tried to wrap it up with them, but the little thing wouldn’t stay still. It was going to use up all of its energy just trying to get away from the people who wanted to help it. The cub just wanted to go back to Boxer. That’s where it belonged, not with me.

“Hush now.” I said, trying to talk some sense into it. “Your moms sick. You can see her when she gets better and you get bigger. Stop your squirming.”

“Ohhh!” Rotu cooed, “It’s so cute.”

Marcel had returned, and didn’t waste a second before jumping in on the exchange. “The tiger or the Vileblood?”

“Which do you think, dumbass?” Rotu asked.

The three geniuses dumped out their coffee and used the kettle to heat up the milk Marcel had brought back. The circus didn’t travel with cows, I was uncertain where he might’ve got it but I didn’t care enough to ask specifics.

Being as there were no infants in the Circo Obscuro, besides the one currently refusing to be wrapped in dress scraps, there were also no bottles. I’d hoped that the cub would just lick milk from my hands like a housecat, but it didn’t seem capable. The only thing it wanted to suck at was my fingers, and thus began the long process of feeding it milk, near drop by drop.

“Mr. Cruptinelli is not going to like this.” Nimah said.

To say that Mr. Cruptinelli disapproved was to say that a hurricane and raging thunderstorm was a light drizzle. If Marcel’s face had been strange before it was gruesome now after suffering his brother’s blows. Rotu and Nimah turned away, while the jingling boys stifled cries choked the air, until at last they could take it no more.

Nimah was strong and quick besides. She wrapped her arms around the circus man, taking him by the wrist and squeezing until he released his cane.

“Nimah Corssada what is the-“

“You were going to kill him, sir.” Rotu said, putting herself between Cruptinelli and his brother.

“He delibretly disobeyed and-“

“And the other tiger is sick.” Nimah said, “Let the Vileblood keep this one, sir…at least until you know if Boxer’s going to be ok. You need two for the act right? Think of it as…insurance.”
He wasn’t easily compelled, but Rotu and Nimah began to cause such a row as to attract the other performers. Within a short time the costumed men and women were packed shoulder to shoulder. Many of them voiced their own opinions. Cutjack, ever the loyalist forced his way through the crowd to stand at Cruptinelli’s side. He shook his whip at the crowd just the same as the animals in the menagerie.

All of the noise was upsetting Boxer’s cub who squealed and pawed at me. I tried to quiet it with more milk, the little thing had barely had any but it could not be enticed to drink any more. Even with a stomach so small it wasn’t enough.

“Since when was everyone so concerned for the welfare of a beast?” Cruptinelli questioned.

“Them tigers bring in more money then the eight o’ us combined.” Kyrie, one of the jugglers spoke up. She was only half-dressed but she had rallied her troupe all the same, “Without them ain’t no one comin’ to the menagerie tents where we do the horses. People want the cat’s sir. Unless you’ve got a lion hidden away then-“

“You know bloody well I haven’t got a lion!” He raged.

“Yes, yes but a baby one- sure to draw the kiddies close.” Horace added, “And I can munch and crunch the failures for those of stronger hearts.”

“I don’t care what happens to the corpses.” Mr. Cruptinelli shrugged, “If the Vileblood is picky then fine. Use them in place of the chickens if you think it might-“

“Ohh yes it will.” Horace said, patting his stomach several times. You’d think it would be a round bulbous thing owing to the amount of chickens he consumed, but it was thin and taunt. Something constantly hungry and never satisfied, I related more then I cared to admit. “They’ll line up for miles.”

Everything paused while Mr. Cruptinelli considered the problem. People held their breath. The window stopped blowing. The blood that came out of Marcel and sweetened the air temporarily stemmed its flow while we waited for the circus-man to pass judgement. His cane had been wrenched aside, and it was the first place his eyes went as the air stilled. He wanted to regain control.

Marcel stirred first, one hand still wrapped around his stomach, the other grabbed the cane and handed it to him. The circus-man’s gloved hand hovered over it, hesitating for a second before he took it back. Cruptinelli did not offer Marcel his hand, eyes going right past him in callous indifference.

“We’ll see how it’s mother fares.” He declared, “If it perishes before then, so be it. Call it the will of the gods but it-“

“She, actually.”

All heads went to the strange two-headed man. It looked like he’d been fused with one of the skeletal messengers, some bulbous weird half-formed face protruded from his neck. He displayed it proudly with unbuttoned, deep-necked shirts calling the unmoving blob “Chief”. The man himself, though skinny and short enough to be thought a child was Kota, who functioned as both act and asset to the circus. He’d claimed to have medical experience, of one form or another and it was him who had apparently given Marcel all his rings.

Kota’s carrot-orange hair stood out from the rest of the performers as he wove his way into the
There was much shuffling and stepping on feet.

“‘It’s a she.’” He said, “Chief and I delivered the kits. Three boys and a girl.”

“Shame.” Cruptinelli scoffed, “If it was a male we could’ve been sure there’d be no further unfortunate births.”

Kota shrugged, “‘Little thing’s a fighter, she is. First one out and the only one to—’"

“That’s quite enough.” Mr. Cruptinelli said.

“Right, sir.” Kota replied.

“Shouldn’t you be attending it’s..” and here the circus-man paused to scowl at the cub in my arms, “..her mother?”

“Well I—"

“Well you left your post and risked the safety of my property. Around here we pull our weight and attend our tasks. Did you not get taught this? Were you not one of the precious ones adopted as children? Did I not assist, nay, sponsor in raising you despite malformation?”

“Suppose you did…though Lilla was really—“

“And this is the thanks I get?” He asked.

We had reached the moment where the circus man’s confidence had returned in full scope. He turned the collective from conversation to speaker and audience. Waving the cane to punctuate his points Mr. Hayden Cruptinelli began to tell tales about the unwanted children he’d collected from orphanages and asylums, gutters and the brothel alleyways. He called them his children still, though none were particularly young.

One by one they cowed to him, the fools, breaking away in small groups as they were individually guilted. Kota did not hold out for long. Bea, the tiny person trundled off after that, til the crowd that had once been was no more. The sounds of cooking and over embellished rehearsals filled the air. Nimah went away with the others. Holding the circus-man back had shaken her, I could tell.

Rotu stayed behind. I think she was worried about Marcel saying something else he’d regret. There was no closing ceremony or final speech. Hayden took a last glance at Marcel then scoffed before stalking off to more important tasks.

“Saints and stars, Marce.” Rotu cried, throwing her arms around the jingling boy’s shoulders now that the ringmaster was out of sight, “I really thought he might kill you that time.”

Marcel forced a laugh. “I’d never be slain by someone so ugly. When I go out I want it to be at the hands of a lovely lady.”

“I think you got your head hit a little hard there, Marcey.” Rotu said.

“Mmm.” He muttered. “I really didn’t expect to be coming to the defense of a tiny cat in the hands of a Cainhurst horror this afternoon, but I guess there’s that thing they say about beggars n’ choosers.”

The tiger let out a sharp mew, done being silent and now ready for more attention. I tapped my fingers on the bottom of the cage, nails rapping on metal. She twisted and turned towards them,
trying to pin my hands down on noise alone. Such a small thing, but Kota was right. She seemed a fighter.

Kyrie brought bowls of lukewarm porridge and a bottle of something’s blood over to us, warning that we were to eat fast, for it was back on the road at the drop of a hat. Marcel took one look at the blood and dumped it into the dying fire.

“Done with that.” He proclaimed, dusting off his hands for dramatic effect before attending the lukewarm porridge that coated the bowl, thick like paste or plaster.

Rotu chuckled. “Red not your color today?”

In response he hunched his shoulders and combed his hair into his face before stealing the voice from my own mouth and imitating my “Bite me” with perfect inflection.

Rotu laughed so hard the porridge start coming out of her nostrils. “Ow!” she cried through chuckles. “That hurt’s you bastard!”

“Guilty as charged.” Marcel grinned.

The cub had finally caught my finger while the duo distracted me. She had no teeth but energetically mashed her gums on the tip of my finger while batting the others with her tiny paws.

“Yes yes, you win.” I said, trying to reclaim my finger.

The little fighter wouldn’t let go, easily. It was a labyrinth of careful wiggling and twists that finally freed my hand. I didn’t want her cutting her mouth on my nails. They wanted for trimming. Frigga and I tended to keep ours short when we had the time to maintain them. She preferred lacquer and varnish, colors of all sorts, but I’d settle for cleaning the dirt beneath them.

“Why’d you do it?” I asked them, while I tickled the cub’s stomach.

The jingling boy looked up at me from his current occupation, which seemed to be blowing his bangs back into place after having obscured them for the sake of performance. Being as his hairstyle appeared to be rendered from a labor-intensive process of grease, pomade and oil the stray strands did not easily return to their former places.

“Do what?” Marcel asked.

I took a moment to find the right words. The little cub squeaked at me. I guess I was taking too long.

“Rally.” I said at last. “All of you, I mean.”

Marcel shrugged, “Dunno.”

Rotu absentmindedly whacked him on the nose with her spoon. Her eyes went wide as his began to water, in sudden realization of what she’d done.

“Sorry!” She exclaimed.

Marcel turned away so that we wouldn’t see his weaker moments, while holding up his middle finger as a form of self-expression. I found I had it in me to make a joke, and lowered my fingers to cover the little cub’s eyes. Despite it being blind.

Neither of them noticed and once Rotu had overcome her torrent of apologies she went back to
answering my question.

“You defended one of us, of course we’re going to defend you.” Rotu said, “Circus sticks to circus. That’s just how it is.”

“I am not a part of your circus.” I said.

“Not voluntarily, no.” Rotu agreed. “But lots of folks start at that way. Cutjack used to raise all kinds of hell. Now he’s as loyal as anything.”

“He’s a dick.” I spat.

Rotu laughed, “You can’t blame him. You don’t even know him.”

“Nor do I want too.” I was quick to put in. “I don’t understand it. Not at all.”

Rotu shrugged, “We stick together. You protected that little thing, brought it into our family so to speak. Can’t just let it be eaten up.”

“Even when it’s part of your family who intends to eat it?” I asked.

Marcel had gotten over his tears and now turned back, eager to tack his arguments onto our debate. “Now now, technically Horace only asked for the dead ones.” He pointed out.

“That’s not better.” I said.

“Is so.” Marcel argued.

“No no, she has a point.” Rotu agreed, “It really isn’t better. I mean yes, constructively speaking eating a live cub would be worse but in that moment when laying things out purely for entertainment’s sake it is just as bad.”

“Well I was talking about the first thing you said.” Marcel countered.

“Were not.” Rotu said

“Were too!”

They fell back into their endless back and forth. I did my best to ignore them, and was not put too it long. Someone gave a whistle, and everything was taken back to motion. I was loaded into one of the carts, Marcel and Rotu struggling to shift my cage without Nimah’s help while also taking down the last few coagulated mouthfuls of their lunch.

The little cub did not enjoy the cage shifting. When one end was titled up too far she began to squeal and squeak most pitifully. I did my best to hold her steady but they were not very elegant about their transportation methods. I feared that the bouncing along the road would be even worse.

“Don’t worry.” Rotu said, as she shoved the bottom of the cage past the gate of the wagon. “You’re family now.”

No. I tried to tell her no, but she had already turned to leave. Maybe these outcasts had needed to band together against whatever common enemy loomed larger than Mr. Hayden Crupinelli. That drove them to be a family, but as for me I had my own. My family was far away, and no amount of rallying and promised protection was going to change that. I belonged to another.
Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
I didn’t need luck to survive. Forging ahead despite the odds had always been my way and I was proud of it. I worked hard and got results, but still it was hard to watch fortune smile upon the Executioner’s new favorite son, and turn the tides so easily. While I clawed my way to Alfred’s side, he was born on the shoulders of our order straight to his doorstep.

Patience was back, damn him. He had returned on his own, no assistance nessecary. The solo venture added insult to injury. He’d come through alone, but I’d gotten lost and sent a boy and several horses to their death. Well, really when it was considered carefully their deaths rested on Patience’s shoulders, for if he hadn’t gone and gotten himself lost there would be no reason to go poking through the woods to hunt him down.

I was the only one who seemed to have the sense to see it, like usual. The other Executioners were quick to leap to celebration, not at all suspicious of the boy’s return. I knew Patience, had known Patience for a great time. He was hiding something. I watched his face as they carried him across the courtyard, and something in it wasn’t right. His smiles and easy manners hid a taut surface tension, something slimy slithered just underneath.

Of course I’d tried to listen to the exchange between our Patron Executioner and the returned. Everyone within earshot tried to press their ears to whatever doors were at their disposal, get their purchase wherever they could. Alfred and Patience were deep inside the bank, but that didn’t stop the crowd from swelling and pressing their ears against the bank’s entrance doors. It was folly to think that they’d stand around discussing things in the lobby.

Did they forget Patience’s vows? He would not speak a word of what had transpired. How did they expect to learn anything from the silence? I wanted to scream, but I was just as bad. I prowled around the windows, all of them boarded up or barred. No sound would come from them, nothing to be viewed through the covered panes. The Patron Executioner was smart, he would keep the curtains drawn.

Infuriating as it was, waiting remained the only action to be taken. I had the advantage of familiarity. There was a good chance they would send Patience back to my room, where he had used to lie awake, feigning sleep. He couldn’t have been away from here more than a month, if that. Time was moving so quickly now, but it felt ages since I’d spoken at the vow-taker.

Time passed and it seemed, once more that fortune and I were destined to be at war instead of allied. The room seemed to get smaller with each passing second. Perhaps they had set him up with proper Executioner’s quarters, or sent him back to Frigga Hemlock’s.

Patience was the last lead in the disapareence of Fwahe. Everyone had been too much concerned with Frigga, but in recent days my sights had become set on her whore. I wanted to crunch her between my teeth and satiate my growling stomach. I was getting thin again and it showed, most days my robes were more full of folds and air then me. So much empty space.

“I can’t believe he made it back!”

The excited voice in the hallway was at least something to investigate. I turned to learn out of the doorframe and hissed with pain. I wasn’t used to being down to one hand. I kept trying to use it for things even though the medic had expressly told me to be gentle with it.

He’d been such a strange fellow. I hadn’t dealt with Callum all that much, but this time in particular
his awkward manner stood out to me. It was one thing when he was curt and surly as any man under the stress of supplying half the city with medication would be, but this time it was different. He’d been too polite, minding pleases and thank yous entirely. Neither his room nor his clothes stank of smoke, the rotting stench polluted the air even as the medic attempted to air it out.

Repotting plants was the excuse he’d given poor simple Anthony, but I could not believe that myself. Gardening was a horrific bore, and a fruitless labor when not practiced upon a farm or some other source of sustenance. There was a whole market for the production, purchase and sale of utterly pointless goods. Flowers did not feed starving hunters, yet the church gardens grew them in great quantity and the market stalls overflowed with them in spring and summer time.

Callum struck me as someone above such trifles as well. Everything in his tiny boarding room was purposeful. The well-worn medical tools were obvious in their uses, but there were also ingredients for his remedies scattered about, a rickety cabinet doing its best to contain them. Spare clothes were folded and stacked on a chair. That was all I had seen beyond the stained yellow curtain that separated Callum’s office from his operating room, none of it looking like soil and pots and flowers.

He was not growing flowers.

A mystery for another time, that’s what I concluded. I now had reasons ad infimum to go and visit Callum again, to explore his odd behaviors when it suited me. For now I adjusted my grip on the doorknob, to my left hand. It was weaker in every sense of the world, unable to hold fork or spoon or quill. It was embarrassing to deal with the shaking awkward motions of a child once again as I re-taught my fingers to close around a sword hilt, to pull the trigger of a gun.

I thought I had recognized the voice in the hall, and indeed I had been correct. The same one who had shouted the happy news all through the courtyard was making a scene in the hall too. She had stopped Strix Savoy in his tracks to talk it over with the overburdened junior Executioner. Matta Blackhill, who I’d sworn to challenge in single combat not so long ago. I was loathe to admit it, but with an injured hand my chances at victory were very slim, thus I remained concealed and did not make a big deal of myself.

I was going to have to bide my time with Matta. There would come a day, surely there would when I would have all the advantages and we could enter the battlefield on equal grounds.

Strix was carrying a washbasin, pitcher tucked awkwardly under one arm, while a basket full of rumpled clothing was balanced against his hip with the other. Matta had stopped him mid-stride and for a delightful second it seemed as though he would lose his balance entirely and send everything crashing to the floor. In a series of frenzied steps and mumbled cursing, Strix managed to keep the various objects in his arms.

“I’m a little busy, Matta.” He said.

“I know, I know.” Matta replied, locking her hands around the pitched and basin, alleviating some of the strain. “But it is rather amazing news, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is. Of course it is.” Strix replied, “It’s beyond amazing. It probably borders on the miraculous. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to belittle things, I’m just very tired.”

“They’re working you too hard.” Matta said, “If you’re too tired to be excited for the return of a lost Executioner.”

Strix did his best to brush her concerns aside. They walked in step down to the washroom, off to
take care of the laundry. Positions that befit their station.

It came time for an evening meal, and while I tended to ignore the calls for hot food, this time I made my way to the cafeteria with the others. The lines were long, we must have received a new shipment of supplies, else a cow had been butchered for the best semblance of a feast that could be put together at the drop of a hat. All of the cooks, pot-scrubbers, the kitchen boys and scullery maids seemed exhausted.

I stood in the snaking line because it was what was expected of me. Roast meats held as much as watered-down cabbage soup to me, but the way the junior Executioners clamored and made grabs for plates of corn bread and bowls of thick stew, rich in meat and vegetables I almost wanted the experience for myself. I couldn’t remember base foods ever being more then ash in my mouth.

All through the line theories were exchanged. Patience had gone into the woods and walked until the moon opened up. That he had stepped onto the palm of Odeon and been carried up into the stars where he ate nothing but orange slices and warm milk until his head was fuzzy with stories and he had to be returned to earth. They said that Patience had been swallowed by one of the gigantic snakes, and, through some fortunate stroke avoided being cut by their poisonous teeth. Taken down in one gulp he’d spent a few days in the belly of the beast before it had devoured another human, this one with a sword at his hip. The vow-taker was said to have taken the sword and cut the snake open and then come directly back to Yharnam.

This last was quickly dismissed in a crowd of youths eager to point out that Patience wasn’t draped in snake guts when he’d come into the courtyard, that he couldn’t have been cutting open snake bellies and walking directly home. The dissuasions only made the exchanged stories louder and more ridiculous as everyone around strained to find plausible explanation in the mysterious.

“Well I haven’t even seen him yet!”

I could pick out Audrey’s whining in any crowd, shrill and sharp. Of course she would’ve had to have a special problem about the situation. The girl was a good ways behind me, and I had nearly reached the front of the line. To go back and comfort her would’ve been quite the unpleasant endeavor.

Should things culminate to trial, I need curry her favor. I began to wave the younger Executioners in front of me. I ceded my spot to senior members of our order until I was standing shoulder to shoulder with Audrey.

She was droning on to a very tired audience. I made several attempts to greet her, but Audrey as so focused on her own complaints she didn’t hear me. At last one of the exhausted members of her audience pointed me out.

“Audrey. Turn around.” He muttered.

“Oh.” She said startled, spinning, then further startling when she caught my gaze. It was not a pleasant face to be surprised by.

“Ungrateful, isn’t he?” I asked her.

“Huh?” She asked.

“You were talking about Patience, right?” I asked.

She nodded.
“I said he’s ungrateful. I mean, he didn’t come to greet us or thank us for going on the search for him. You’d think with Jossam’s accident and all that he would’ve at least made time to mourn the loss.” I said.

“That’s exactly what I meant.” She agreed.

It wasn’t. She hadn’t mentioned Jossam at all. So long as she was agreeing with me, I didn’t really care that she kept switching her story.

“Everyone’s celebrating like coming out of the woods make you some kind of hero.”

“He didn’t even do anything.” She complained, “He never does anything. He never says anything.”

“He took a vow of silence.” I said.

She rolled her eyes, as though the contact of silence were nonsense itself. She treated it like an adult mocking a child’s fear of the dark.

“It’s stupid.” She said, “I mean how did he get to be an Executioner but we’re still novices? He couldn’t ask for it, it’s all just because of his crazy mother. Executioner Alfred is a fool for thinking that we aren’t good enough yet but Patience is.”

I chewed the inside of my cheek while she carried on, layer after layer of ridiculous problems. Any effort to join the conversation on my part was completely overlooked. She spoke right over me, all through the line and as we were being served she went on and on. It earned coughs from the old and looks of contempt from the tired cooks as she increased the decibel level in the kitchen significantly.

Even as we exited and searched for seats at the many benches in the crowded dining room she continued on. What few spot were available began to seal themselves. Audrey had a reputation, and those already seated were quick to wave over acquaintances or shift closer together to avoid her droning talk. We must’ve been quite the unwanted pair. I wasn’t so much scanning for open seating as I was for Alfred and Patience. Surely their table would be packed, and I wouldn’t be able to consume a meal with them, but I’d never had the intention of doing so in the first place. Audrey began to fidget as I made careful inspection of the rows upon rows of faces. He should’ve been easy to find, but the uniform robes of our order had a way of acting as camouflage. I could find neither Patience nor Alfred.

“Why don’t we just sit there?” Audrey asked, indicating a place along the wall where many of those who had not been able to grab a table were seated, cross legged, eating off the polished marble. I could still see the room from there so I shrugged and she began to weave through the crowd. Such eagerness for the consumption of stew, it made beasts of them all. The lot we ended up near were quite the untidy animals. I had that to say of Patience, at least when he brought his meals to our room he made it a point to use a spoon, not to slurp out of bowls or spill crumbs across the floor. Someone had taught him some table manners and they’d stuck with him.

Audrey became too focused on eating to talk, though she made several efforts. The only thing that ceased the spilling of words was the massive quantities of stewed meat, soggy vegetables and crusted bread that found their way down her throat. Several times I was worried I might have to save her from choking to death, so rapid was the pace she carried on at. The sooner she finished the sooner she could make her next stream of petty complaints.

I resolved to away myself before then.
After extensive survey it was clear that Patience and Alfred weren’t in attendance. How rude of the vow-taker to not attend his own welcoming party. I couldn’t fathom how he’d won them all over. I had made it out of the woods too, but no one came rushing to lift me on their shoulders. I suppose I had Jossam and his inconvenient death to blame for that.

The two of them must still be talking- if any discussion with Patience could be classified in such a manner. I supposed Alfred must be asking a laundry list of yes or no questions until he started to get somewhere. That little nuisance.

I had to find a way into the room.

Glancing down at my tray, which was piled with more food than I was ever going to consume even if I had a healthy appetite and a growing body I tried to puzzle it out. Perhaps they’d need their dinners brought to them. Was this enough for two men?

It would have to be.

I feigned deeper interest in Audrey’s stories motioning to the others seated around her in an attempt to draw them closer. A few turned their heads and that was all that was needed to shift her focus. I snatched a chunk of cornbread and spoon off her tray while her back was turned and wove my way through the tables and meandering gossipers.

I rearranged the tray as I walked down the hall, trying to make it look like something intended for two people instead of just the eclectic collection of a Vileblood in disguise. It occurred to me, as I left the dining hall that I had no idea where I was going, where Patience had been taken.

The obvious assumption was Alfred’s private quarters. That’s where I would’ve taken him, but my way of thinking was not always in line with the Patron Executioner’s. This proved true once again, for when I turned down the hall that led to his door all of the lights were doused. I didn’t see a light under the door and was forced to recalculate. The food was going to get cold if I turned circles for too much longer.

I turned for the hastily constructed conference room, set up in one of the old bank vaults. Alfred was conducting all of his business as England’s new leader from an elaborately carved dining table that had been shimmied in through the door. It had been no small task to accomplish but looking at Alfred seated at the head of the table through the circular entrance of the vault cut quite the impressive figure.

When I arrived the vault door was sealed and faithful Essex and Sussex stood to either side, acting as guards. Jackpot.

They watched my approach with cool indifference.

I shifted my tray towards them. “They sent me with food.”

“Did they?” Sussex asked, “I don’t remember calling for meals.”

I gulped, but Essex came to my defense, waving his brother’s concerns away.

“Better someone did. We don’t want the boy to catch his death.” Essex said.

The both of them turned as one to spin the dial and open the door. It swung away and locked inside was what I’d been searching for. Alfred sat at the head of the table, as always. Seated at his right was Patience, his arms stained with ink as he worked furiously to fill a roll of parchment.
“Food.” I said.

I could find no better way of announcing myself. They both looked up and Alfred waved me forward.

“Gods be praised.” He said, “I was half-starved. I’m sure you must be hungry too, Executioner Patience?”

Patience didn’t turn from the page, just nodded and continued to write.

“I’m so glad you’ve come back, Executioner Patience.” I said, “We were worrying over you.”

Patience looked up from his writing to give me a cooked, uncertain smile. It seemed to strain him now, what he used to carry so easily. The lies were showing through. He was not happy to see me. I hadn’t expected him to be, but I did expect him to fake it. That seemed to be diminished now, and what a time to loose such a skill. We needed lies now more then ever.

“Yes he seems to be all safe and sound.” Alfred agreed, “Though I’m sure a hearty meal will do him some good.”

The Patron Executioner nodded and tapped his fingers on the table, showing me where to set the tray. He was already impatient with me, and that did not bode well for my intentions. I had so wanted to linger.

I crossed the vault threshold and came towards them. I walked behind Patience so that I might catch a glimpse of what he had written. It was no easy task, his letters were the awful curling and swirling of elegant cursive, pretty to look at but hard to take in at a glance. I’d expected some fumbling for someone who’d been permitted so little language as he, but it was truly elegant.

I did recognize the Vilebood’s name, scattered throughout the page several times. The capital “F” stood out amongst the other letters. Fwahe and something that looked like “hill” and “horse” and “circus”. Not a lot to go on, but I could not betray myself and snatch the papers from him.

I set the tray between the both of them.

“I hope it will suffice, Patron Exectuoner.” I said.

“It looks fine, Executioner Kelfazin.” Alfred assured me, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome Patron Executioner.” I replied.

There was an awkward few moment that followed. Neither of them started eating, though I noted Patience’s dark eyes had shifted their focus to food. He was not the type to eat before his elders. Executioner Alfred clearly wanted me to leave so they might resume their exchange.

I needed to be here. I needed to know.

“They want the dishes back when you’re done.” I said. “I can wait and collect them for you.”

“There’s no need for that.” Executioner Alfred said, “I’m sure you’ve other tasks that need you attendance. Best hop to them.”

I coughed, drawing things out. Every second I could steal was to be utilized, but I could not put more distance between the Patron Executioner and I. I headed for the door once more, dipping into a bow as I went by Patience’s shoulders. A few more words, stolen in the guise of respect. “Gun”
and “rain” and “lost”. Nothing that would aid me in my endeavors.

I exited as they began to eat.

Essex and Sussex shut the door behind me, locking away all chances of further reconnaissance.

“So happy to have him back.” I said, trying to make pleasant conversation with the two of them. Even outside the vault was better than being resigned to the dining hall or my own quarters. Here I was just a little bit closer.

“I’m sure.” Executioner Essex said, “He was your roommate, wasn’t he?”

“Yes.” I said, “Before they sent him to watch over Frigga’s Vilebloods.”

“No one is watching them now.” Sussex said.

The way he smiled about it, you would think an unsupervised creature was a joyous thing. I would’ve thought he’d be concerned at the very least. This was a few steps away from laughter.

“Perhaps Patience’s report will shed some light on the situation.” Executioner Essex proposed.

I was about to respond in the affirmative when we were all silenced by a shrill shrieking. I had heard ghost stories exchanged, tales of banshees and I expected she would’ve given them a run for their money. If levels of annoyance were to be counted as books, then Audrey’s would not have even belonged in the same library as this woman.

Sister Moira Anne came storming through the hallways crying for her son. It wasn’t to be mistaken for the kind of tender crying marked by tears and heartfelt emotions, but the crying of an angry beast. The screech of the transformed cleric was in her throat as she neared us, drawing the attention of everyone within earshot.

“Let me pass!” She demanded of us.

I realized then that her screeches were actually words, just too wrapped up in her own wretched vocalizations to be easily translated. Setting the caterwauling aside the rest of Moira Anne seemed as collected as ever. Her robes were neatly pressed, her hair brushed and pulled back, hidden beneath the stark white hood of her church robes.

“Sister Moira Anne, it’s a little bit-“ Sussex began.

She held up her hand, cutting him off, “Save it. Let me through. I want to see my son.”

“Ma’am he’s-“ Essex attempted

“Don’t you try and stop me.” She barked.

The twins shot each other side glances, then Sussex shrugged and reached for the dial. Essex was slightly slower to comply, but soon they were hand-over-hand spinning the machinery until it yielded. Sister Moira Anne Hastings was not the kind of person you could reason with.

“He should’ve been brought to me directly.” She said.

“Ma’am he’s employed as an Executioner he-“ Essex started again

“Don’t interrupt me.” She snapped.
Sister Moira Anne’s lecture didn’t stop until the door was open, and even then she wagged her finger at the two of them as she crossed the threshold.

“What is it?” Alfred asked, expecting the person entering the room was merely an attendant like I’d been. When he found he was facing Sister Moira Anne he straightened up, adjusting the stiff collar of his tunic and attempting to be a bit more presentable.

Patience looked up from his work and shuttered.

“What is this?” She asked. “Patience Oliver Hastings why in Kos’ name are you writing?”

As always the vow-taker was at a loss for words. His eyes widened to their limits and he shuffled the pages round as though somehow he might retroactively conceal them.

“Sister please, I had asked him to-“

“Did you get permission from the Vow-Takers to allow this?” She said, quick and sharp even with the Patron Executioner. This astounded me, and I was further surprised to see Executioner Alfred stammer and make attempts to appease her.

“Well no, there simply wasn’t time and-“

“Then I must correct your mistakes.” She said, stalking over to the table.

In a flash her hand shot out and snatched up all of the parchment. Patience flinched, and Alfred’s hands curled to fists.

“Moira, please.” He said, “You need to calm down.”

Instead of calming she met his eyes and held the corner of the pages to the burning candelabra. Ash began to dust the table as all of the frenzied elegant handwriting crumbled away. Alfred’s fist came down on the polished wood, shaking the bowls, forks and food.

“That is vital information!”

“He’s taken a vow.” Moira Anne said calmly, “And there will be no breaking it just for the sake of efficiency. You must do things the proper way, ever more so given your position, Patron Executioner.”

Executioner Alfred inhaled sharply, trying to control his temper. This was the perfect opportunity for someone to step in and smooth things over. How lucky I was here to fill that role. Fortune may have finally decided it was time to throw me a bone. My appearance was not something that could be easily adjusted and straightened out to match the precision of Moira Anne’s robes of Alfred’s collar. With a scarred face and a split pupil there were limits to everything, but I would make my words calm and my sentences clear. Being well spoken could be just as valuable as being well groomed.

“If I may, Sister,” I began, stepping into the vault.

Essex and Sussex didn’t know whether to stop me or let me pass, thus any obstruction they might’ve put up was hesitant to rise. I passed through them easily.

“It was such a thrill to have good young Patience to return to us that things got a bit overhasty.” I said. She longed to protest but I spoke faster than she shrieked. “Which, while no excuse just brought to us new hopes. If he came back then perhaps there is hope that Lady Hemlock would
return, that he might’ve known her whereabouts. At the very least there was the chance he could
tell us what had transpired to make the Vileblood Fwahe vanish. We’re Executioners, you
understand. We simply can’t abide Vilebloods loose in the city.”

She took a deep breath before nodding. “We can agree on that at least, young man. It is perhaps the
only proper thing to come from these odd occurrences of late, the restraining of that other
Vileblood Frigga harbored.”

“Forgive our haste.” Alfred said through gritted teeth. “We were concerned for the safety of our
fair city.”

Patience nodded his agreement, as did Essex and Sussex. She could not protest all five of us at
once and settled into one of the chairs for further discussion. I followed after, and was not bade to
leave, nor glared at by Executioner Alfred. I had found a seat at the table, and now I wouldn’t miss
a thing.

“I’m not one to easily forgive rash actions.” Moira Anne informed, settling into the wooden chair,
“But given the circumstances I suppose I can make an exception. I accept your apology, Patron
Executioner.”

“How gracious of you.” Alfred replied, still speaking through a gate of gritted teeth. He took a sip
from his goblet, to keep any regrettable sentences away from his lips.

“Shall we be sending for the Vow-takers then?” I asked.

Moira Anne satisfied her own thirst by taking her son’s goblet and drinking from it. He did not
protest. She took several long gulps, until the water got the best of her and she began to cough and
sputter. Patience was up from his chair in a second, the carved wood upended and cast aside, so
sudden was his rising. He hovered over his mother, and she spent more effort trying to wave away
his help then to recover from her cough.

“Perhaps a doctor?” Alfred asked, when Moira Anne started to go red in the face.

Both of the Hastings shook their heads. It seemed this was a common accurance. Patience gave his
mother’s back a few pats and then pressed the goblet into her hands again. She took down water
like someone dying of thirst, and the coughs subsided to only ocasional interruptions of speech.

“I’m fine.” Sister Moira Anne said before we could ask.

“Does this happen often?” Alfred asked.

“It’s nothing.” Moira Anne said, “A tickle in the throat.”

It would be much easier for the Patron Executioner if we could focus on this cough instead of the
issue at hand. How simple to simply present a fear of infection, contamination and thus dismiss the
one raising issues from the room. I’d seen him handle such passions and tempers with due
elegance. Never would his manner with hot-headed Cato be lost on me.

The excitement of tonight must’ve worn him considerably, as he did not begin any deft maneuvers
now.

“I’ll send for more water.” Executioner Alfred said, nodding at me. “Are you sure it isn’t
sickness?” I asked, as I rose to fufill the Parton Executioner’s wishes, “You can’t be too careful
these days. Shall I go for a medic?”
It was over the top, meant to seem caring. I wanted to look the tender roommate. Let Moira Anne demand that Patience be placed back with me and I would find a way to get the Vileblood’s whereabouts out of him. That was for sure and certain.

One might imagine my surprise when Executioner Alfred replied in the affirmative. “Yes, I think that might be best. Fetch Callum won’t you?”

“Sir?” I asked, astounded.

“It is as you said, we cannot be too careful. If there is the slightest fear of infection we can dismiss it easily after a clean bill of health from the medic.” Alfred continued, “I’m sure you’ll forgive me Sister Moira Anne, but I saw the transformation take Sister Veera years ago and it was a most beastly and unsettling thing.”

Moira Anne pounded her chest a few times to keep the next few coughs down.

“Go on now.” Executioner Alfred said, “You know the way.”

There could be no denying that I did. I’d been there with Anthony and found my way back. All eyes were on me, as I had wished earlier. They just never seemed to turn my way when I was painted in a flattering light or lofty position. Misfortune was a more persistant follower then my own shadow.

I swallowed, “Yes, Patron Executioner.”

I willed myself to walk faster, but the translation from mind to man got lost somewhere along the way and my feet dragged the floorboards. The door was a world away and took eternity to reach.

“Hop too it, Kelfazin!” Alfred said, clapping his hands as emphasis.

That seemed enough and I was suddenly running, sprinting in long bounding steps past the twin Executioners and through the halls of the bank. They were largely empty and there was no need for shouts to shift people out of the way. A path as clear as a cloudless sky, yet the only one I wished to take was about-faced and to Alfred’s side. To be twice overlooked in favor of Patience was an error almost too grievous to endure, yet I carried on.

The gusts of Yharnam air were full of foul scents. Soot-stifled chimneys blew their black smoke in clouds over the rooftops, and the stink swirled down through the gutter collecting up the fur of drowned rats and little dead black flies all to blow them back out the drain pipe to rain over the cobbles. I was drenched in the horrid nature of it all.

Usually I could slip away into the alleys and back streets, but today the courtyard outside of the bank was packed. Everyone was everywhere, and Callum just as well might have been in the petitioning crowds. It seems that the hunters in the city were taking any excuse for celebration. A cask of ale had been broken open. People lined up to dip tankards, canteens, sometimes even just their open palms into the foaming amber liquid for a taste. Rousing cheers echoed off the walls, and confused novices did their best to field drunken inquiries into their proper places.

“Have a drink!” Someone shouted.

I wasn’t sure if the red-faced woman was addressing me or some of the others crowded around her, but I shook my head and continued to side step the revelers.

“D-death to L-l-ady Hemlocks W-whore!” Another drunkard hiccuped. The thin little twig of a hunter wore the antlered cap of the woodlanders, the feathered cape of the hunter of hunters and
the white skirt of a church hunter. I knew very little of fashion, but I was sure this hardly qualified.

I grew further distaste for the poorly dressed individual when their cheeks bloated and they turned and wretched not a foot away from me. I leapt away like a fawn caught off guard by a gun shot. The suddenness of motion was such that I could not slow myself down. I skidded into one of the flimsy desks that were strewn here and there. The cheap wood buckled and cracked, sending a flurry of white letters into the air.

“Kos damnit!” The well kept novice behind the desk growled as she snatched her papers out of the sky.

I made to grab for a few of the letters while she scolded me. As she turned to see who had caused such a mess she gasped in horror. My face was still a shock too many. I handed her what I had collected, then stood and dusted my robes off.

“Sorry.” I said, “This drunk-“

“Just leave me alone!” She snarled snatching her papers back.

It seemed everyone was hurrying me away today. This was the last time I suggested medical attendance for any reason. One missed so much when in the business of fetching and carrying. Miserable is the messenger. Miserable and often mistaken for the bad news he carries. How hard to be a harbinger.

There were a few more narrow escapes, ducks and dodges. I was often called to drink, it seemed there was more than one cask to be had around the courtyard. Alcohol’s acrid tang stung my nostrils as unpleasant as the decaying rats and departed flies. I could only hope that same horrible reek had left the medic’s operating room.

For once the less savory districts were the quieter ones. At least the factory workers and livery men had the good sense to contain their catcalls and slovenly songs to the taverns. Lit by the windows I could see the human depravities on full display, framed like artwork by the glass panes. It was not as if I felt the draw to the tap as my fellow hunters did. I had tasted it of course, but ale, mead and everything similar was as ashen as the rest of their diet to my palette.

It was not right that they should fall to this. I wanted to protect them all from the Vilebloods, from those with corrupted blood like me. I’d once heard tale of a dog raised amongst cat, and experienced a strange kinship with the tale. It was not so different from me, for it never knew anything of it’s true anatomy. Unlike a dog however, I was able to reason it out for myself, and keep restrained, but there were human vices and behaviors I simple could not comprehend. Why did they drive themselves to these things, to the taverns and the opium dens and the ladies of red street when their church credos and hunter’s vows frowned upon such activities in the extremes?

My brothers made promises they could never hope to keep. I suppose I could not place to much blame on their shoulders, for I lied and schemed as much as any. My motives were purer of course, I was only out to rid the world of the putrid plague, which I had been made unfortunate partner too. The only lives I took were those that deserved it, and Fwahe certainly had it coming.

I tried not to think about all the strangeness of the day. The world certainly had been turned on its end, but I knew Callum’s practice would be ever the same. I approached his simple boarding house to find the curtains drawn, but this was not unusual. Their black wool backing made the hand-painted red cross in the window stand out with greater contrast so that all might know they’d reached their medicinal destination safely.
I scented no tobacco in the air, was it possible he was doing without? The Executioners surely could remedy that once he attended Sister Moira Anne. I walked up the creaking steps of the boarding house. The cuff of my pants caught on an exposed nail, sending me crashing into the door. It was unlocked, and swung open to a darkened hall.

The place smelled sweet and metallic, a scent that I would not soon mistake for any other. With shaking fingers I fished a match from my pocket and lit the hand lantern at my hip. It painted a small circle of light around me, shining on the walls and floor. It wasn’t much in the way of illumination but already I could see pools of red and smeared hand prints on the walls.

I sparked the nearest gaslight to life and now I could see it all. The landlord was lying face down in a pool of his own blood. It had spread a decent way, re-painting the floor before it had congealed. I tried to tread around it and make my way to the medic’s door without obstruction but it was no easy task. The tips of my boots were soon tainted with sticky coagulation.

Callum’s door was unlocked too and as I stepped inside I realized the room was all wrong. The smell was not of humanity but the cold scent, like incoming snow that could only belong to the Cainhurst Vilebloods of old. Fwahe must’ve been here. She slit the landlord’s throat- damn her and now as I picked my way past the toppled table and broken chairs I searched the floor, certain I’d find her other victim.

Killing Callum would not only destroy the life of the medic himself, but countless others who he worked to save. It was truly a crushing blow, he was an essential fiber in the tapestry of Yharnam society. Cut him down and a hundred others went with him, if not a thousand. I found a fallen candle, worn down to naught more than a nub. I lit it, and the room came into more solid detail. I was able to locate a smashed oil lamp. The glass was broken but the rest was workable enough and once that was lit I breathed a sigh of relief. Callum’s corpse was nowhere to be found, and there wasn’t so much as a single drop of blood in the room.

Everything else however, was ruined. His supply cabinet had overturned. Any liquid remedies has spilled creating discolored rainbow puddles all over the floor. Medicinal flowers were crushed by heavy boots. A mortal and pestal had been thrown at the wall, the bowl cracked and spread out over the wall and on the floor as a small explosion. Some of the ceramic shards were lodged into the cheap drywall. The pestle was still stuck in the hole it had made, protruding from the wall like a peg for hanging coats.

My boots came away from the floorboards sticky, covered in the flesh of rotting potatoes and spilled, spoiled milk. The sink had been ripped out of its setting, and the yellow curtain had tears all through it, clawed as if by an animal- and in fact it was something animalistic what had been done. Fwahe must’ve been on the rampage, had some unknown score to settle with the medic and gone mad when she’d not been able to find him. It was so like someone with her temper and destructive tendency to do a thing like this, without even the slightest regard for other forms of life. How selfish. How pathetic.

Nothing had been spared, even the metal tools of the medics trade were bent and broken to the best of the intruder’s ability. I opened the door to Callum’s pantry, just to check, just to be sure that there was nothing nasty waiting behind closed doors.

Immediately the scent of his “plant repotting” hit me. I started to cough with the same violence and unyielding perseverance as Moira Anne. I took several steps back and tried to get a few gulps of clean air in before taking to my survey of the pantry again. Something in there was horribly, horribly past expired and it had mingled with a pulsing mass of crushed eyeballs, their white and blue fluids eating away at the wooden floorboards. I couldn’t imagine what this might’ve once
been. Thick slime coated shards of glass, the remains of a broken pickle or preserve jar.

I thought I might need to take something as evidence were Alfred to accost me for Callum’s whereabouts. It would be rather shameful to have to admit to another disappearance on the same day that Patience returned. The celebration was going to go sour.

“Kos damnit.” I muttered.

I didn’t want to linger in this place any longer then necessary. Someone might’ve already called for the constable and it wouldn’t do for them to find me here. I kept my condition well hidden, but all the same it was easier to blame a hideous man in the moment then recognize the twisting truth of the matter. To admit this damage had come by Fwhae’s hands and not my own would mean admitting on a large scale the failure of our order to keep her contained.

All of this was yet Patience’s fault. He should’ve kept a closer watch on her. If I had been assigned to Fwahe’s surveillance I never would’ve let the bitch out of my sight. I’d always known her capable of things like this. What a shame it was that I’d never been permitted to take action before Frigga had vanished.

I sighed and did my best to fix my stray hairs and adjust my jackets lapels, the cuffs of my sleeves. Looking halfway decent might carry a longer way then expected in the strict sister’s eyes.

I hardly minded the noise and the smells on the walk back to the bank. Nothing would ever be as bad as that unsavory horror in Callum’s closet, nor so would anything invigorate the senses quite like a Vileblood to be hunted. I knew now that she was in the city, somewhere within these walls. So long as the Queen’s Whore kept Yharnam as her den, I’d be able to find her. It was only a matter of time.

I decided to avoid the courtyard altogether, and take Jossam’s old path over the rooftops. There was no ladder to ease my entry, but I had stronger bones then I liked to let on, and no fear of breaking them. My landing was anything except elegant, but it did all it needed too. I was storming down the hall seconds later. Essex and Sussex must’ve sensed my desperation and began to open the door before they started asking questions.

“What happened?” asked Sussex.

“Where’s Callum?” asked Essex.

I didn’t answer either of them, and I don’t really think they expected me too. I wanted to tell Alfred before anyone else. The Patron Executioner needed to know first, and then at last he would see what use I could be. Returning with this news would surely, surely land me a place in the searches, else a place at his side. The misfortune had to end somewhere, there must exist some balance for the ruined room and lost life. Let the balance rest on my shoulders, at last let luck rain down.

As soon as the door came away I started to speak. I didn’t want to waste time in the greetings.

“He’s gone, sir.” I said, “Callum’s workshop was destroyed and he was just…gone.”

“What do you mean, gone?” Alfred asked.

“His place was torn to pieces, the landlord was dead on the floor, blood barely gone cold. I didn’t find Callum’s body- but it seems like Fwahe’s made her first kill.”

“That’s impossible.” Alfred said.
“Come see for yourself.” I said.

Alfred nodded. The Hastings and the Downey twins followed him. Our boots made frantic rythms over the polished marble floor. Patience, who already seemed quite exhausted, was having trouble keeping up. I could hear him panting, and his steps were unsteady staccato to our measured drum beats.

Any other day we would’ve attracted a crowd and a barrage of questions, but everyone was packed into the crowded dining room slurping their stews. I was leading us towards the main exit. Alfred’s hand closed around my forearm, and he pulled me in another direction.

“Let us not attract such attention.” He said, “I have my own ways.”

I had lived in this bank for as long as I could remember. I’d thought I knew every inch of its halls, its vaults, but the city was full of secrets. Alfred brought us down a set of stairs and into the basement counting rooms that had long been renovated from their bookkeeping days. This was our laundry now. It smelled of soap and was strung through with clotheslines. The crisp, clean scent was preferable to the others from today. I took a handkerchief off one of the lines and tucked it into my pocket for later use. I would need it to block the stench.

“This way.” Alfred instructed, holding up sections of laundry, shifting robes and sheets to expose a path.

“Who’s there?”

Everyone froze and glanced around trying to sight the call that had not come from the Patron, the twins or the Hastings. I knew who it must be. Somewhere in this room was Strix Savoy. I was not going to let him ruin my plans again. The moment was urgent and the time to intervene had one more presented itself.

“To your work, Savoy!” I barked, “Do not mind us.”

Silence from the other side of the room. Alfred took a few steps forward, and the others began to follow.

“Do you not answer?” I called, covering the sound of their shifting with my own voice.

“It’s Strix.” He muttered, but quickly came to his senses and replied with the appropriate tone and due respect. “Yes, Executioner Kelfazin, of course, Executioner Kelfazin.”

“And don’t forget to iron my trousers.” I said.

“Yes, Executioner Kelfazin.” He said.

With that we were away again, tracks suitably covered. At the far end of the laundry room, Essex and Sussex worked to assist the Patron Executioner to push aside one of the laundry bins. Below it, and much to my astonishment was a trap door. Alfred put his hand through the looped handle and lifted it.

“Quickly now.” He whispered.

Essex went first, then Sister Moira Anne followed by her son. I intended to go after Sussex so as to be closest to Alfred, but he held firm and I did not imagine that arguing would suit our task well. Alfred closed the door behind us. Hopefully I had dissuaded Strix’s infernal curiosity and he would not come looking for us. That would spell disaster for us all.
“Straight on.” Alfred said when he joined as the rear of our party.

We walked through tunnels, ones I’d not know the city to have. I’d been through the sewers and through some of the secretive inner walkways of Yharnam, things that had been carved from stone or paved with brick to serve a purpose, but this was not of the same quality. It was roughly hewn and ever-changing in its dimensions. Length and width would bulge to accommodate two persons walking side by side for a time, then shrink so narrow that one had to shift sideways to slink through them. The roof of the earthen tunnel often scraped at my scalp, irritating the scarred flesh and dirtying my hair. Sister Moira Anne put up her hood to save her meticulous style from the unsavory ceiling. The priorities of the church, Kos preserve them.

“What is this place?” Sussex asked as he searched for a match to light his lantern.

“That’s a funny story, actually.” Alfred said. He helped the Executioner by lending a match of his own, and soon we were all passing our lanterns back to share in the flames. Everyone except Sister Moira Anne carried a lantern. She had passed hers to Patience, who’d neglected to take his along.

“Will it be a long walk?” Essex asked.

“I suppose. It takes about the same time to go above as below, I only wanted to use this tunnel for the sake of discretion.” The Patron Executioner informed.

“Well then it seems you’ve time to tell it.” Sussex said.

Alfred chuckled, “I assure you it’s no Hari Harel and the Constables.”

“Don’t matter.” Sussex assured him.

“Yes, go on.” I said, “It’ll pass the time.”

“Very well.” Alfred said, “Though again, it is no long narrative. This tunnel as I’m sure you can see wasn’t made by any skilled craftsman. This was the work of a depraved denizen much invested in gambling and card games.”

“Sinning.” Moira Anne corrected.

Alfred nodded, though considering he was behind her the gesture went largely unappreciated.

“Anyway, it seems that one day he lost a little more than he was able to pay and got to contemplating how to come by such an unusually large sum.”

“He wouldn’t have needed it if he hadn’t sinned in the first place.” Moira Anne said, “Pay attention Patience Oliver, lest you fall prey to the same vices.”

“Patience is as fine an Executioner as they come, Moira Anne.” Alfred said, “You needn’t worry.”

She huffed, as of not truly believing him but did not make further protest. Patience fell a little ways back behind her so that he could listen to Alfred’s words.

“He took it upon himself to set to bank robbery.” The Patron Executioner continued. “Thus began construction of a tunnel under his house and into the vaults.”

“And this is that tunnel?” Sussex asked.

Alfred confirmed.

“That’s odd.” Executioner Essex remarked. He stopped to inspect a bit of the wall, “It doesn’t
appear to be man-made."

“Well noted.” Alfred commended, holding his lantern up to the wall.

We all did the same as we continued down the path. On closer inspection there were claw marks in the earth, everything scraped at. I kept a closer eye on things as I went along and noticed a few stray clumps of grizzled hair here and there along the ground.

“The really interesting part of the tale is how the tunnel was constructed, or at least how the story says it was. I heard it passed down as most do, from the Executioners who originally acquired this bank, when the hunts began.” Alfred said, “Apparently the man did not want to go through the effort of digging the tunnel himself.”

“So not just a sinner, but a lazy one at that?” Moira Anne chastised.

Kos above, it was like we were schoolchildren being scolded. She had to hammer her morals home lest we forget them, obvious though they were. It was a good thing Patience had taken vow of silence, I don’t know that I would’ve been able to tolerate a woman like Moira Anne without screaming.

“It’s said that he lured the men with whom he’d had the card games with to his basement and given them concotions to make them sleep. As they slept he opened the door of his root cellar and pushed them in, and using dodgy half-pure blood pumped them full of it until he noted signs of the change. Botling and locking the doors the newly transformed men were trapped. He could hear their howls.”

The sister raised yet more protests, but we were drawn into the story now and no amount of hemming and hawing would turn us away.

“So the story goes that he took a piece of meat— or sometimes it’s a live cat or a rat, and soaked it in ministrated blood and had it walk the path from his house to the bank. The beast men below would be driven mad and claw their way after it, carving the tunnels for him. When those ones died he just found more until the tunnel was complete. He didn’t seem to think ahead and realize the constables would be watching him as he walked too and from the bank every day. He was arrested shortly before the tunnel was complete, but the counting house men discovered the nearly finished thing. They realized it would be a decent escape route if ever there were a run on the bank, thus finished it off and here we are.”

It was a ridiculous enough tale to have belonged amongst the Hari Harel stories, but we were walking through evidence of its factual nature now. How strange.

“Nonsense.” Moira Anne scoffed.

“It must not be.” Essex said, “For here we are and here it is. The claw marks do seem to align with those of transformed men, and the shed hair seems about the same. I would say there’s more truth then lies in that tale, though don’t you think a liability like this is perhaps best boarded up, Patron Executioner?”

“I agree.” Alfred said, “It was one of those things I had meant to do, but there have been so many other pressing matters to deal with.”

“Like Fwahe on the loose.” I said.

Alfred nodded, “There is that.”
I expected further talk, theories or condemnations of the Queen’s Whore but there was no interest. Was not this always to be at the center of the interests of the Executioners? Was not the hunting of Vilebloods what we were truly meant for? It fell to me to remind them of this.

“Surely, brothers we must increase our efforts to capture her.” I said, “If she launched an attack on Callum then whose next. I hate to give credit to our enemies but if she goes around killing doctors it won’t be long before the city falls. Winter has set in and people do fall to coughing and ailment more easily.”

“That is true.” Essex agreed.

“It’s simply impossible for it to be her.” Alfred said.

“Sir with all due respect I-“

“Know your place, Executioner Kelfazin.” Alfred said.

We went on in silence after that. I had broken the light and pleasant travel with my insistence. It must be her, it had to be. There was no other explanation for the smell in the room, though I suppose, it was easier for them to dismiss as they were less inclined to notice such peculiarities. Still to dismiss her as subject so readily, without even seeing the scene of the crime made me furious.

He would just have to change his mind when we got there, which wasn’t long off. We could all see the shafts of natural light coming in through the exit.

This time Alfred worked his way to the front of the crowd. He pushed past old preserves and overgrown potatoes. A few carrots had wilted and blackened on their stalks, looking as gnarled and sinister as some of the claws we had left behind.

He climbed the ladder and pushed open the door, leading us up the basement steps of an old house. Every part of it aligned with the chronology of his story. Despite complaints of overcrowding in Yharnam and a loss of general real estate, this house had fallen to disrepair. No one seemed to have wanted it. The floors were covered in dust, the furniture molding and sparse. Plaster buckled and cracked, wallpaper peeled. Every wrong thing was fixable, it was just seemed that no one had been willing to put forth the work.

Laziness was ever the sin Moria Anne claimed it to be, and I could not myself, abide by it. We made our way from the ruined house to familiar streets. It had never struck me how run down the place Callum resided was. I’d kind of always assumed he was well off, having a medical education and being well read. The hunters and Executioners all knew him and relied on him, but his humble lodgings and meager if rank pantry did make me wonder.

I was relieved to see there was no crowd around the boarding house. No one had yet come to call for the constable, though truly it needed to be done. We entered as easily as a party as I had on my own, and were quickly met by the dead land lord. Since they had been warned of him none of my traveling companions were surprised. Yharnam and a loss of general real estate, this house had fallen to disrepair. No one seemed to have wanted it. The floors were covered in dust, the furniture molding and sparse. Plaster buckled and cracked, wallpaper peeled. Every wrong thing was fixable, it was just seemed that no one had been willing to put forth the work.

“Did you check for bodies upstairs?” Alfred asked.

The thought had never occurred to me. I often forgot that there were multiple floors in this house.
My needs had never taken me beyond Callum’s clinic.

“No, Patron Executioner.” I said.

“Essex, Sussex, search the upper rooms. Moira Anne you check down the hall. Patience and Ezra, with me.”

Patience handed his mother’s lantern back to her. She continued down the hall alone and being away from her stifling speeches was like a breath of fresh air. Knowing more unpleasant scents were to come I took the clean handkerchief from my pocket and pressed it over my mouth and nose.

To be amongst Alfred’s chosen was a thrilling feeling and my chest swelled with confidence as we crossed the threshold into Callum’s clinic. I pointed at some of the things I’d noticed gone astray. It was much easier to see with all of our lanterns. I was trying to walk Alfred through my own experience with the murder scene, but he wasn’t listening. He’d knelt down by the window, picked something up in his hands.

“I told you, it was not Fwahe who had done this.” He said, holding the object up to the light. It was a black feather, one of dozens that now stood out like beacons in the room. “This was the Bloody Crow.”
Gods curse the Bloody Crow for what he put me through. I was never comfortable making snap decisions, although it was quite in my capacity to do so. I’m sure that to Callum I appeared as confident as ever, that when the Executioner boy came at us through the rain in the middle of the night and begged my trust I did not hesitate to make the call. It was ever as in the council room, the veil of false confidence came down, so thick and heavy that no one knew it was veil at all. No one could see through it.

To say I trusted the boy was to call a one room school house a palace. There was a world of difference between the momentary agreement to follow one’s lead and to truly raise sword for them whenever they cried for the need. I had to judge all I knew of Strix Savoy, which was next to nothing against all I knew of the man chasing me down. There were a thousand things to consider, but in those moments it boiled down to anything but the Bloody Crow. I at least had it in good faith that Strix Savoy would not chain me from the ceiling and demand I was his sister. That seemed enough criteria to take him on his word.

The Executioner boy tried to explain himself as we raced along the streets. Claps of overhead thunder made mincemeat of his words. Conversations had while running were never memorable things, but I did my best to follow along and nod at the right moments. I could ask for a repetition in the name of clarity’s sake once we reached our final destination.

Strix Savoy stopped at the wooden door of a town house. It was the same as so many others in the city, with red lantern burning outside to showcase support of hunter’s efforts. There were small herb gardens growing in window boxes. A patch of scrub grass not even big enough to hold a tree let alone be considered a yard was bordered by iron fencing that looked to be well cared for. I did not notice any rust. It was a modest house, but carefully kept.

Strix had gone up the stoop, knocked at the door, spoken with someone through the mail slot. Quickly we were taken inside. The Executioner boy looked over his shoulder several times, checking the street up and down for anyone trailing us. He was at last satisfied and took to bolting and locking the town house door behind us.

“This way.” Strix said waving us over to a flight of stairs, “Quiet as you can.”

I nodded to indicate my silent understanding and followed him across the room. It was packed with other people, most of them sleeping. In the far corner one had a hand cupped around the flame of a candle, the other on the spine of a book. She looked so much like Templeton that I wanted to go over and embrace her. I knew this was not so, for this girl’s hair was neatly pinned and kept in straight pony tail. Temple’s never would’ve stayed like that.

Strix took us up a flight of steps, half of them polished wood, the other half sleeping bodies. Some of them stirred, the noises of three persons walking and the clatter of Callum’s medical bag all it took to rouse them from unsteady slumber.
A clap of thunder momentarily woke yet more, but their heavy eyelids fell back after a few seconds recovery and they were snoring once more. I had only bare feet, but Strix and Callum alike had clicking boots which seemed hammers striking heavily at the floor with each stride. The worst of the loudness came when Strix pulled a cord, dangling from the ceiling.

Even the clapping thunder did not disguise the squeaking of old hinges and the clatter of rope ladder as he pulled open the door to an attic. I was beginning to grow a strong aversion to such places. We followed him into the slanted room which turned out to be the only part of the house which was not draped in sleeping persons. Strix lit a gaslight before pulling the attic door closed behind us.

The room was small but lived in, with a mattress well-made in one end, several stacks of books and a threadbare footstool without counterpart chair. The only other seating in the room were a few wooden crates. Strix settled himself on one of them, Callum another. I took the footstool.

“What is this place?” I asked. I hoped this would be an easy start to the conversation. I had a lot of questions that needed answering this night.

“It’s a ministration bank.” Strix said, “You’ll be safe here.”

“A what?” I asked.

Strix sighed, “Of course you wouldn’t know.”

Callum was a bit more helpful, “It’s not just beast blood that can be ministrated, you know that right?”

“Of course.” I said, “But finding viable donors is a lengthy and often fruitless process that-“

“That the church perfected and began rounding people up.” Strix finished, “Started running out of beasts to hunt, the streets were so spotless, but you’ll notice there haven’t been any blood shortages. Ministration banks.”

“So all of these people are here to donate blood?” I asked.

“Sure.” Strix scoffed, “Donate.”

It seemed it was time for a chance of subject. “So why have you brought us here, instead of to the Executioners?”

“A lot has changed since you’ve been gone. I’ve been scrubbing a lot of floors so I’ve heard a lot of conversations. For one thing Alfred has stepped up as patron hunter in your absence.”

“Executioner Alfred?” I asked.

He nodded and began to relate to me all that had transpired since I’d been taken captive. It seemed the city I had worked so hard to protect was not likewise interested in protecting me. I tried not to blame them, these times were sudden and fearful, but I could not cull my rage entirely. I worked so hard for them, how could they have done this?

“He just, spoke the right words at the right moment.” Strix explained, “Cato tried to stop him but he made himself look a fool. They took Templeton, their keeping her in the bank.”

“Then we must go there at once and liberate her.” I said.
“You can’t!” Strix shouted. His boot pressed down on the trapdoor and my hands immediately went to fists. I was not going to be imprisoned again.

“What do you-“

“He’ll kill you.” Strix hissed, “Can’t you understand? Alfred is Patron Hunter now. He’s got all of England behind him. Kos knows he’s not the right man for the job but he is the one currently seated and it doesn’t look like he’s going to be letting that position go. I heard him talking with his officers, Executioners Essex Downey and Sussex Downey, and they were only planning to rescue you so that they could imprison you.”

“Kind of like how you have me trapped here?” I asked.

“This is for your own safety- they mean to kill you if they’re able…well maybe not Alfred but Essex and Sussex surely. Keflazin will want in on it if he catches word and then there won’t be a man amongst the lot of them whose not out seeking glory in the form of your severed head.”

The boy was being theatrical but his point was not lost on me.

“I’ve no doubt you’re well intentioned, Strix but truly Executioner Alfred is not the villain you paint him to be.” I said, “We of course do not agree on every issue put before us, but one cannot expect a man sworn to kill Vilebloods to easily take to one who choose a Vileblood for a partner. We-“

“Would you just listen to me?” Strix interrupted.

“I don-“

“Shut up.” Callum said, “Both of you. It’s too late and I’ve run to far and walked for too long. I’m soaking. We’re all soaking. I haven’t eaten and I’m sure we’re all exhausted. Can we yell at each other tomorrow?”

We both admitted the medic had a point, and truly Callum was more put out then the rest of us. He wasn’t a hunter, not by any stretch of the imagination. He kept up so well and I saw him so often amongst the other hunters I often forgot he was just a denizen. Surely I would have been just as exhausted if not for his efforts and those strange crystals.

“You take the bed, Lady Hemlock.” Strix said. “It’s really the only one avalible, but there’s some blankets over here and the floor’s really not too bad if you pad it with a few of them.”

We thanked him for his hospitality and went about settling in. Cato’s glasses clicked as he folded them shut and placed them on top of the crate. He rested his head on his doctor’s bag and was snoring softly before Strix had even turned off the light.

My bed felt small, empty and cold. In reality it was all of those things, but worse so when my back was not pressed against Fwahe. It was winter time, she ought to have been here with me.

I was awake even after Strix. He slept perched in the slanted window, cheek pressed to cold glass. When the claps of thunder pealed across the city the roofing shook and his whole body was rattled, but he didn’t stir in the slightest. It was said of some that they slept like rocks- Strix’s sleeping was closer to that of a corpse.

I didn’t seem able to sleep at all. Callum and the boy might have been tired but my mind was racing. The injection had felt like the first time I’d received blood ministration. It was exciting and the will to fight seemed to pulse through my legs, that and beyond to my fingers and worn wrists.
There should have been scars there, or red marks from the cuffs. The medicine had healed that too, everything was as healthy as ever- if not moreso.

I worried that Kane was still out there looking for us. He might snatch up some other poor girl in my place, and if he was to find another place to hide who’s to say I would ever find him again? If there were any severed heads to be brought back to the Executioners it was not mine but his. I would have to become folk heroine and kill the Bloody Crow of Cainhurst to ensure my city’s protection.

I would not be dissuaded tomorrow, there were no warnings in the world to keep me from reclaiming my hunters. I had been away from them for two long, away from the theater and my companions. Strix was a good hunter, but he was still yet just a boy, probably scornful of being made to scrub floors. I had placed temporary faith in him and seen it fulfilled, but I would not trust him so much as to present me with must and mustn’t. I’d endured that long enough.

After turning option after option over in my head, working to restructure whatever Alfred may have destroyed before I even confronted it- I at last fell asleep. My dreams were sightless but full of sound, the patter of rain on a rooftop mingling with snores and squeaks from below to create a strange symphony that played all through the night. I preferred the soft whistling breaths of wind through Fwahe’s nose, occasionally broken by tiny coughs or little twitches. She did not rest easily.

Callum roused me gently, all his hair askew and his glasses not yet on.

“Strix is still asleep.” He whispered, “We can try and make a break for it if you like.”

I rubbed sleep from my eyes and combed through my curls as best they would this early. “I think that would be best.”

I tried to stand and found that my legs were as aching and broken as before the injection. They stung and I hissed at the tight muscles.

“What’s wrong?” Callum asked.

“I think your injection wore off.” I replied.

Callum lifted his bag, “I think I can remedy that. I’ll work quickly.”

Everything was too loud once more. Callum muttered curses as the glass bottles in his bag rattled against each other.

“A little cotton in the top will stop that noise.” I told him, trying to be of some use despite injury.

“I prefer not to waste my money, when it does come on things like that.” He muttered, “One can get by perfectly well as a professional with no need for cotton.”

“Are times that tough?” I asked.

He turned from me and began to heat the crushed blood shards over the gaslight. “Let’s just say I know why the ministration banks are so packed.”

I wanted to ask what he meant by that, but it hardly seemed the time for conversation. I waited as patiently as I could manage to for the medic to complete his remedy. Before the blood had melted the Executioner Boy awoke and our plans for a quiet departure evaporated. Callum gave me an apologetic look as he shook the ceramic bowl over the flickering light.
“Everything ok?” Strix mumbled as he came out of his dreams.

“Fine.” We said in unison.

I hoped he might go back to sleep, but Stix just yawned, stretching his arms above his head and coming away from the window to inspect Callum’s work.

“What’s cooking?” He asked.

“Blood.” Callum said.

A few moments later he was tipping the liquefied medicine into a syringe, flicking the needle a few times and adjusting the plunger. There was no count down no questioning of readiness just the sudden prick of metal through flesh. I closed my eyes tight and waited for relief to come. For a few seconds I was strangely fearful that the cure would not work more than once, that his remedy would fail.

Luckily this was only silly notion and I soon felt all of the agony fade away. I wiggled my toes to prove that I could, no need for any of Callum’s assessments this time. A few seconds later I was standing, ready to leave the ministration bank far behind me. I had a city to reclaim.

“I feel that makes for a poor breakfast.” Strix said. “I’ll get us something more substational. I don’t expect you want to face this day without fortification.”

“Thank you.” I said.

“Of course, Lady Hemlock.” He replied.

The creaking of the door and the clatter of the rope ladder seemed more quiet then they had at night. This owed largely to the waking of the people below us. The slumbering ones had woken and were walking about like ants in their hill. I caught glimpses of them as Strix went down the ladder. When he reached the ground the Executioner Boy was greeted by several of them, but he hastily waved them away and pulled the cord to snap the attic door shut.

“I really do not appreciate that.” I said.

“Don’t think he’s going to catch that.” Callum replied.

“Well forgive me for not wanting to be locked up again.” I said, “I’m weary of addicts and silver-haired jailers.”

The medic sighed, wiping down his tools with the blankets he’d just slept on. It appeared he did not much care if their next occupant found a few bloodstains on the fabric. I attended to my own bedding, straightening the blankets and moving the pillow back to the center of the mattress. The roof of the ministration bank was so heavily slanted that all of our work had to be completed with hunched backs. I could feel the oncoming ache in my neck already.

“I am quite confident that if Strix wanted to hurt us he would’ve done it by now.” Callum reasoned, “We might as well take his words for truth.”

It was sound logic. I would like to say I listened well, but impassioned ears were rarely receptive to such things. I sat down in a huff and began to toy with loose pieces of hay that had poked their way out of the thing mattress cover.

I turned my efforts to less opinionated subjects, “Strix said they had imprisoned Templeton.”
“So he did.” Callum agreed.

I bit my lip, waiting for the right words to come. I was afraid to ask, for I feared the answer would be one not at all worth having. To find it at the negative end of the scale would be devastation itself, “Do you know if they’ve also captured Fwahe?”

The medic sighed, scraping soot from the bottom of the ceramic bowl and turning the sleeves of his coat dirty gray, “She’s been gone before Alfred took power. She was out looking for you. The last I heard she was lost in the woods, else presumed dead.”

“She’s not dead.” I said.

“I agree.” Callum said, “She’s not the sort to expire at such convenient times as an uprising of Executioners. I’m sure she’s just delayed by their efforts.”

“I’ll find her.” I said.

He nodded, “I’m sure you will.”

I started to get the feeling that Callum was just telling me what I wanted to hear. He was more focused on cleaning off his equipment. It was irritating, but then the doctor had always been rather surly and self-absorbed. He was adamant in the fact that he’d never taken up any ties or loyalty to anyone. I frequently doubted these claims. He’d always gone to great lengths to come to the aid of my hunters.

Strix returned not long after. He’d piled three bowls of watery oatmeal on top of one another, stretching the clattering crockery up for us to reach before climbing the ladder himself. He’d also managed to bring a seed cake a piece and one could make their meal slightly more palatable by dipping stale bread in watery meal. I would usually have complaint of blandness but given as how I hadn’t properly eaten since being captured. I scraped my bowl clean with chunks of the seed cake. Strix and Callum had no less appetite then I.

“Thank you, once more for your hospitality.” I said.

“It’s more Nye’s then mine.” Strix admitted, “And she’s only doing it because she owes me.”

“Glad we’re worth cashing in for.” Callum muttered, tipping back the rim of his bowl and drinking his oatmeal in slurping gulps.

“Of course.” Strix said, “We have sworn a duty to our Patron Hunt- I mean, to you Lady Hemlock.”

“Am I not still your patron?” I asked.

Strix shrugged, “It is hard to say. With any luck you won’t be. If you’re smart you’ll listen to me and either stay here or get yourself away from Yharnam entirely. Nye won’t mind keeping you a few more days if you-“

A series of jingling bells suddenly silenced the Executioner boy. His hands shook, forming little ripples in the thin gruel.

“Shit.” He muttered, “Shit shit shit.”

“What?” I asked, “What’s happening?”
“We can’t be here.” Strix said.

Good, I hadn’t wanted to stay. The Executioner boy went to the window and looked down onto the street. I was quick to follow him, glancing over his shoulders to see what was cause for such panic. On the cobbles below, perhaps three houses down were four church hunters, fast on the approach. They stood out from the dark buildings in their white robes. The hoods were pulled up, which lent an ominous overtone to their steady gait.

As they drew nearer I noticed there were not four, but in fact five. The fifth wore white robes as well, though they were of a different cut. They had also donned a cap from another time, taking on the blindfold and curved points of a Choir. So few considered themselves members of the disbanded ancient order these days that they didn’t even formally congregate at Communion. It was quite odd to see one now. It seemed there was a lot going on that had slipped by in my time as England’s Patron.

The party of hunters marched neatly up the road, the Choir hunter being the one to approach the door. They didn’t knock but removed a key and unlocked the front door. Three of the others followed them inside, the fourth settling on the stoop to face the road.

“We’ve got to go.” Strix said, “Right now.”

Before I could request clarification Strix had abandoned this window for one on the other side. He scraped at dried paint along the bottom of the window pane so that it could be popped open. When fingernails proved useless he took a knife from his belt and worked with that until the glass started to shift.

“Who are they?” I asked.

“Bad news.” Strix replied as picked at the crusted chunks of paint. “So we’ve gotta move.”

“Tell me what’s happening!” I demanded.

“Please just be quiet.” He begged, “If they find us Nye’s screwed, and I’m double screwed.”

“Who are they?” I asked.

Callum had taken a sharp pick from his bag and chipped away at the paint along with the Executioner Boy. I knew where he stood. He trusted Strix but I had too many questions, and they needed answering before much longer.

While they worked at the window I tried to get a sense of the situation. There was the slightest space between the attic door and its frame, and when I strained properly I could look through a small gap between the door and its frame.

All of the people in the ministration bank were lined up in the hall. I could just see to the stairs but they appeared to be lined down the stairs too, standing shoulder to shoulder. I couldn’t see the Choir hunter or any of the church members, but I reasoned the footsteps that I heart belonged to them. Everything else was dead silent.

The footsteps continued for a while. I could hear some words being spoken but the distance made them fuzzy untranslatable things.

“Got it.” Strix whispered a moment later, “Let’s go.”

I went to follow them, climbing out onto the rooftop. The shingles were still slick with rain from
last night, and gripping them was no easy task. Callum was clinging to the weathervane for dear life.

“Come on, we’ve got to move.” Strix said, hurrying across the gables. He was as comfortable creeping across the roofs as he’d been sprinting through the streets.

“I do not believe myself physically capable.” Callum said. He clung to that bit of metal like it was the last solid ground in the world. I didn’t have to be close enough to reach and feel for myself in order to tell that his heart was pumping at an unreasonable rate. Strix stopped and scratched his head while trying to work out a way of reassuring the skittish doctor. Callum on the other hand had begun listing off all of the bones in the human body.

“Callum you’ve either got to come away yourself or I shall knock you out and take you over my shoulder.” I said.

“I think that might be preferable.” Callum muttered, but started to come away from his perch all the same.

“You’re fine.” I coaxed, “You didn’t fall when the Bloody Crow was after us.”

“That is because I fear Lord Hirsch far more then the fall.” Callum replied, “I didn’t have much choice as we were running for our lives.”

“Believe you me the situation will be just as dire should you remain.” Strix said.

Callum gulped, and took another step forward. His feet were unsteady, and the shingles were slick. Strix bore the advantages of an Executioner’s training. My bare feet made for a better grip, and balancing was an art I’d gained some level of aptitude at over the years. We should’ve been expecting mistakes, yet it was still a shock when one came.

With a snap and a tumble of cursing Callum went sliding down the side of the roof, loose shingles coming along behind him. With dexterity I’d only seen in cats before, Strix leapt to catch him, locking his right hand around the medic’s arm and scraping the rooftop for purchase with the other. Callum’s weight was pulling him down, and while it seemed unlikely that a fall from this height would kill either of them, we hardly needed more paralyzed hunters.

I shot my hand out right after the Executioner Boy’s and caught him solidly. Between the both of us we managed to pull him back onto the roof. He was frozen, just as an animal faced with a sudden and fearful sight. I tapped him several times on the cheek, lightly at first but gradually harsher and harsher to try and bring his true consciousness back.

“Callum?” I asked. “Callum?”

His face went red from my efforts before he finally returned.

“Yes, yes it’s me.” He grumbled, “Quit slapping.”

Well, at least he was back to himself. That hadn’t taken long. He appeared to register what had happened a moment later. He began to thank Strix profusely, but the Executioner boy was quick to shush him. He had crept over to the edge of the roof and was looking down at the front side of the house. I took Callum over, one hand clapsed in his the other on his back to steady him lest he stumble.

Strix was looking down at something, but he held up a hand to stay us from coming, prevent us from seeing what is was.
“Hey! Boy!” A voice called from below

Strix stiffened momentarily, then hailed him. “Yes, brother hunter?”

“What do you think you’re doing up there?” The church hunter asked, “You think you can just slip away from a collection?”

“No sir, I was just—“

“I’m a woman.” The church hunter corrected.

“A thousand pardons, sister hunter.” Strix said dropping into a bow for a show of further contrition.

“Yes, yes your mistake is forgiven, but you’ve still not answered my question. Boy what are you doing on the rooftop?” She asked.

“I…erm…” Strix said, “I prefer to pray up here, after breakfast. They say the gods reside in high places and I—“

“Well your prayers will have to wait. Octavian is inside and likely looking to find the man responsible for putting him off his schedule. You better hope your gods have heard you, boy.”

“Yes ma’am.” Strix said.

Strix Savoy replaced the glass and left the both of us waited there flat on the rooftop, too fearful of being spotted to speak. Looking over at Callum I noticed he was just as terrified now as he was when clutching the weathervane. We lay close together and I could feel his heart pounding. I reached out for his hand.

Callum blinked several times and swallowed nervously before taking my hand and weaving his fingers between mine. I was fairly certain the hesitation came as a result of the height, not proximity to a member of the opposite sex. He’d never seen one to be dizzied by such foolishness, lending itself well to his level of professionalism. Still it was strange to see him flustered and I never wanted to give off the wrong idea.

The condensation soaked through the front of my clothes and my limbs started to stiffen. It felt like hours had gone by, but there was really no way to mark the passing of time from up here. Callum’s fingers shook causing vibrations up through my arm.

All the time we waited I wanted to run. Immobility was an agony near impossible to suffer and coupled with silence it was enough to drive one to madness. I wasn’t used to waiting around, hadn’t realized what a blessing it was to be busied as Patron Huntress. For so long there had always been too much to do, and I’d complained of not having time to think. Now that I had time to think all I wanted was something to do.

There were things to do, so many of them. I needed to get to the Executioner’s bank and free Templeton. She’d surely be terrified, and I longed for the ease and comfort of her friendship. Truly
any company was preferable to that of the Bloody Crow, but there was nothing more welcoming
then an old friend. I didn’t want to leave her alone and afraid for any longer then necessary. She
was prone to panicking, and who could blame her. A room full of Executioners was no place for a
Vileblood, no place for anyone really.

Beyond that I had a need to find Patience. Vow or not he was going to tell me everything he knew
about Fwahe. If anyone were to have seen her in her last moments in Yharnam it would have been
him. She was going to be found again, with all haste just as soon as England was set right again.

So much to do, and yet I was stuck on the rooftop without any means of moving forward. Clouds
began to move in overhead, and I feared it might begin to storm again. Being caught on a roof with
lighting in the general area was not a good idea. I wasn’t sure that Callum’s remedies would work
if we were both burnt to a crisp.

On and on the time dragged. I watched birds fly from one chimney pot to the next, slowly moving
down the lane. They seemed to sense the change in the weather too.

“How long as it been?” I whispered as quietly as I could manage to be.

Callum turned towards me, eyes still wide as saucers. “Huh?” he mumbled.

“Nevermind.” I sighed.

Too terrified to think, really I must remember he did not have hunter’s blood in his veins. He
lacked the courage and fortification. We must get him back to his practice before his nerves got the
better of him and he refused to work again. There were so few doctors acquainted with a hunter’s
biology, who knew of blood ministration and the cures that worked best to placate wounds done by
Greatwolves.

His heart hadn’t yet ceased to pound. We couldn’t have been up here that long, I was just loosing
it. Spend so long around mad people and you’re bound to go mad yourself. It was one of those
sayings I’d heard the nuns rattle off, though I’d never taken much stock in it before. Perhaps there
was a grain of truth in it after all, though surely I’d never get half so bad as Kane, afterall I had no
long lost sister to accuse people of being.

There was the sinking feeling in my stomach that Alois and Fwahe were one and the same. She
remembered so precious little of her time before Cainhurst, nor over what had caused the change in
her; the snap from one to the other. I’d never pressed her before, I wanted her to tell me in her own
time but with the Bloody Crow out searching for Vilebreds it seemed I needed to know all I could.
She always said she didn’t remember.

Was that really the truth?

Kane had spoken of rings and rivers of blood and many other unbearable horrors. It was not as
though I hadn’t seen the halls of Cainhurst, had not gazed upon the red drapery and suspicious
stains. At first my recollection of Minimus’ tortures had been hazy, covered over with so much
residual pain and anger I hadn’t been able to make sense of anything, but little by little they came
back to me. The damage I’d done to Cato, the life I’d taken- all of it had gradually shifted into
focus.

Every time a new piece of the puzzle fell in I’d been overtaken with fresh grief. The night I
recalled Anwen’s passing had been in the dead of winter. I’d known she was gone, dead at my
hands but that was the first time I’d seen it as it had happened. Fwhae had spent the whole night
curled around me, stroking my hair and promising me that things weren’t my fault, that it was all
going to be okay. I’d never stop blaming myself for that.

If all the recollections of her Cainhurst crimes were to suddenly fall on Fwahe’s shoulders would she be able to handle it? If I knew, truly knew all that she’d done would I be able to forgive her for it? They were useless questions, worries I didn’t want to think about, yet still they circled above just as angry clouds waiting to unleash their thunder claps.

Being drenched was a thought none to pleasant, electrocution far less so. Far less. I had endured it before, and was not keen on experiencing the skull-shattering pains once more, but perhaps if the storm broke we could conceal our movements with the sound of thunder. I gazed over to the closest rooftop, but found the gap was quite a decent one. It would require a sizable jump. Unable to check the houses behind or to the left across the gable I had to once again settle for being tapped.

After what seemed the passing of several years we heard a disturbance below, as of many footsteps. I had to pray silent prayers to the ancient ones that they might lend me will enough to keep my head down and expunge infernal curiosity from giving away our position. I closed my eyes and focused on breathing evenly, took stock of the moisture on the shingles and the shaking of Callum’s hand.

I just had to wait and all would be made clear. Strix had said he would explain everything. If and when I found his words to be lacking I was within my right mind to walk away and find meaning myself. If not the bank I could return to the theater, reunite with my Valkyries and that would be enough. There were always options, and I had to be sure not to block my thoughts by focusing only on the goals ahead instead of a means of obtaining them. Step by step, that’s how things had to be taken. One piece at a time, then the puzzle could be viewed.

At last the footsteps began to fade, so far as we could look beyond the sloping roofs and the drain pipe to see a line of people being led away, followed forward, behind and to the sides by white robed church hunters. The Choir member was at the forefront directing their course.

Shortly thereafter Callum and I heard the squeaking protests of the attic ladder. My spirits lifted, finally Strix had come back to retrieve us. Sure enough his silver hair came through the window and he waved for us to come back inside.

Picking ourselves up onto hands and knees we scrambled across the

“What was all that?” I asked.

“A collection.” Strix said.

“Where are they taking all of them?” Callum asked.

“Church of the Good Chalice most like.” Strix replied.

“Decent facilities.” He mused.

“Speak for yourself.” Strix replied.

“Will someone please tell me what is going on?” I asked. For all the world I’d tried to be patient. The Ancient Ones as my witness I had truly tried but one could only expect so much from someone who’d spent the past few a days a prisoner of various persons. I had lost all of my patience, and in turn it seemed Patience had lost Fwahe. There was so much that needed finding, but just what had happened seemed a good place to start.

“They’re being taken away to have their blood ministrated.” Strix said, “It’s a lot of praying and
incense and needles. You feel powerful sick afterwards and there’s always six or seven sisters watching you and trying to get you to confess every sin you’ve ever committed to them. I’ve no idea how that effects the blood, as it can’t tell truth from a lie but they are great ones for the harassment.”

Callum, seemingly recovered from his height-enduced fears began to ask “Does that mean you have-“

“Saint’s blood?” Strix finished for him, “Yes I do, though I ain’t particularly keen on making that a well-known fact. There’s a lot better things for me to do then spend three weeks on a cot being asked about the last time I jerked off. Erm…not…that I..”

I rolled my eyes. “Why was it so imperative to hide us then, if all they wanted was some blood for ministration?”

“Because Octavian was with them.” Strix said, “That man wants to restore the sanctity of the Choir and revitalize Yhar’Ghul. He’s in league with the Executuioners if ever anyone were.”

“Aren’t you technically in league with the Executioners?” Callum asked. He swept his hand up and down making no small matters of the junior Executioner robes Strix wore.

“It’s different now.” Strix said, “I have my loyalties of course, but how things are now aren’t the way they ought to be. Alfred cannot run this city.”

“I know.” I said, “That is why I intend to go to the bank and let people know that their Patron, their true Patron has returned.”

“Don’t you understand that he’ll kill you?” Strix said, “I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again and again though you don’t seem to listen. Executioner Alfred is out for blood and he won’t hesitate to take your life. I saw how he shut your companion, Cato down at the council. They were not the maneuvers of a benevolent ruler, but those of tyrant making his first grasp at the throne.”

“And you know so much of tyrants?” I asked.

“Please, listen to me Lady Hemlock.” Strix hissed through gritted teeth, “What reason have I to lie to you?”

“I haven’t a clue.” I admitted, “But then again I didn’t think the Bloody Crow had any reason to keep me prisoner. Many actions have been incomprehensible lately but that alone is not reason for me to indulge them.”

Strix seemed a few words away from punching a hole in the wall. I was opposing the boy strongly, and almost without reason if I were being fair. I just couldn’t afford to take any risks when I was so close to freedom. I wanted to follow my own mind, my own heart. It rarely took me off course and everything inside was screaming to hunt down Alfred and demand some answers. I would not let him sit the throne of the city a moment longer.

“I am telling you the truth. I told you the truth when Ezra Kelfazin wanted to kill your stupid Vileblood, and you know what happened? Your Vileblood got away, Claruks got banished and…and… I found him torn up in the streets a few days later- but I didn’t want to look a fool. I buried Clarkus with my own hands in an unmarked grave because I didn’t need them killing Fwahe too. Enough death. Enough.”

“Clarkus…” I mumbled, trying to recall.
“Don’t you remember him?” Strix asked, frantically blinking to stay tears from his eyes. “You sentenced him to exile because he spoke out of turn. You want to do the same to me, Oh great and powerful Lady Hemlock? Will you send the jaws of your Vileblood bitch to tear out my throat too?”

“Strix I—”

“No.” He said. “Just don’t. Stay here or run out and get killed, I’m done. I don’t care anymore. What would an orphan know about the running of a city, eh? It’s not like my track record counts for anything. I’m done trying to save you, Lady Hemlock.”

Attempts to speak were caught in the impossible dryness of my throat. Like sandpaper it scratched everything down to silent smoothness and the most that escaped me was an incredulous puff of air. Strix Savoy’s legs were rooted to the floor as though they’d grown out of the wooden plank floor, the rest of him so tense he seemed liable to snap. An avalanche of emotion rested on his shoulders ready to collapse and drown us all at any moment.

Slowly, cautiously I approached him and put an arm around his shoulder. He was quick to latch on, grabbing me and burying his head in my arms. Callum stood by the window, glancing from us to the rooftop as though one were just as bad as the other. Strix sobbed, waterfalls coming out from between his eyelids.

“It’s all right.” I said, speaking to him softly. “It’s all right.”

Kos above, when was the last time this kid had allowed himself to weep? It hit me in that moment that he was still just a kid, he had not yet grasped adulthood and there were those, including myself demanding he shoulder heavy burdens. I no longer bore any distrust for the crying, fatherless, motherless thing in my arms. I’d found Cato in similar straits, without family or purpose and he had grown to be one of my closest friends, one of my most loyal brothers.

“It’s alright.” I said again, “I believe you.”

All the weight on those strained shoulders collapsed. With a shudder he fell even deeper into my arms, and I pressed him against me all the tighter. Fwahe had cried like this. I had cried like this. There were beasts to hunt and cities to run, but there were moments when all a hunters duty boiled down too was holding onto someone in their darkest hours. Atlee, Kos rest her, had done exactly the same. There’d been no one to hold her, and I would not stand for a repletion of such savage tragedy.

When Strix cried his last he leaned away and collected himself. The medic and I both spoke nothing of it, letting it be as though the tear-filled intermission had not happened at all, but we’d all come closer together because it had. The Executioner boy blew out his nose and Callum passed him a relatively clean handkerchief to replace his soiled one.

“Thank you.” Said Strix Savoy.

“Of course.” Callum replied.

It carried all the same weight as the tears, the same transfer of acceptance. At last we were on the same page.

“So.” I said, “What’s to be done then?”

Strix cleared his throat and straightened his collar. The Executioner’s robes had such a high neckline it always looked like the people in them were being strangled by their own clothing. “It’s
like I said before. We’ve got to get you out of the city- both of you.”

“I have a practice too return to.” Callum said.

“Not anymore.” Strix said, “The Bloody Crow will be after you. You think he’s going to leave you alone just because you’re a doctor?”

“Fair point.” Callum conceited, “But I’m not exactly the type to survive on the run. I have work, people who rely on me. There are those in the city who will die without my care.”

“I may die without your care.” I said, “You must admit the blood gems are as of yet a bit unwieldy.”

Callum nodded, “Is there any way we might remain within city limits?”

Strix looked down at his fingers, wiggling them as if in counting motions while he considered the options. “You can’t stay here long.” He concluded, “In the ministration bank I mean. We can’t have you going to the theater or the clinic either, nor the bank. What other loyalties do you have within the city?”

“There are those on red street who owe me debts.” Callum said, “They might be persuaded.”

“To sell you ought to the next highest bidder.” Strix finished, “No I don’t think taking up in whorehouses is the right way to go about this.”

“The Powder Kegs might give us sanctuary.” I said, “That’s where the blood gems came from in the first place.”

“Yes.” Callum was quick to agree, “Yorkshire would surely take us in.”

“She is sister to Essex and Sussex.” Strix reminded.

“And you wear the robes of an Executioner.” I quipped.

He nodded, “If you insist on staying in the city it might be the best option we’ve got, but lets not away so soon. We may yet think of better lodgings.”

It was a comfort to at least have thought of one place to go. The ever-shifting ground was finally stilled and it seemed that we had at last found some solid footing. Strix sat down on one of the crates and we soon followed suit, taking a moment to rest, really rest. I don’t think I’d let my shoulders fall since they were pulled above me in Kane’s cuffs.

We would go to the Powder Kegs. I would bear the torturous strain of the Lupei brothers company for a thousand years if it meant never crossing paths with the Bloody Crow again. Truth be told I wasn’t convinced they would be able to keep their mouths shut, and had already begun thinking out contingency plans. Should our cover be blown we’d need to flee the train station.

It meant I must refuse to be concealed beneath the earth, we would need a place with lots of windows and plenty of exits- perhaps not one all too high if I were to bring Callum with me. If the Powder Kegs could not protect me, else would not then leaving was truly the only option. I could hope to find solace with Queen Aspen and her woodland hunters, but with so many gone missing in the Forbidden Woods I did not relish the thought of weathering the rest of winter in the tops of trees. They might be accustomed to the low temperatures, suited to their environment, but I did not think I’d fair all too well if it came to that.
If it came to that anything was better than imprisonment. I would never be chained again, not while I was still of strength enough to fight.

We all turned plans around in our minds until the squeaking of the attic door as it opened stirred Strix to action. He waved us behind him, and both the medic and I saw the sense in letting him lead off. I had no reason to question anymore.

“Who’s there?” The Executioner boy asked before stepping close enough to the opening to be seen.

“Just me.” Came the reply, “It’s just Nye.”

Strix Savoy’s shoulders drooped in relief and he reached his arm through the door, helping to pull a black haired man into the attic. He wore clothes that had once been nice but were now ravaged by age and old stains to look as plain as anything that might’ve been picked out of the street. It was a nicely pressed shirt all the same, and the buttons running down it gleamed. Nye’s hand in Strix’s painted thoughts of cosmic eclipses- he was as dark as Strix was pale.

“Nye, this is Lady Frigga Hemlock and Callum….erm-“

“Callum’s fine.” The medic said.

“Hemlock and Callum.” He repeated with a nod, “Lady Hemlock, Callum this is Mr. Nye Forrester.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance.” Nye said.

We all shook hands and an air of welcome civility filled the attic. I had the feeling it was not too last.

“Likewise.” I said.

Callum nodded.

Nye tapped his foot and looked away from us, twisting the button on his shirt cuff. Unpleasant news, I could feel it coming. Everything about the attics close quarters amplified the discomfort of waiting for the knife to fall. Nye was clearly too tall for the space he was in, black curls brushing the slanted ceiling, even with his back bent.

“Lady Hemlock I don’t know how to tell you this, but-“

“It’s okay.” I said, “Speak your mind.”

He adjusted the cuff again, then turned to Strix. The words he spoke were intended for me, but kept his eyes on the Executioner boy.

“The collection has everyone all worked up, we can’t guarantee your safety here any longer. You guys have got to get moving, I know I said I could wait a few days, but the situation has changed.”

“Sa’ll right, Nye.” Strix said, “We’ve got someplace else we can go. You did all you could. You don’t owe me one anymore.”

“I’ll always do what I can.” He said, “You know that don’t you?”

Strix smiled and pulled Nye into one of the strangest hugs I’d ever seen. The attic was not a good space for embracing. Nye began to rush us along. Apparently the residents of the ministration bank were all eating and would be distracted. We should leave as little evidence as possible.
I was the last down the ladder and found it strange that I’d grown fond of the small space. I hadn’t even been in it that long, but there was something in me that wanted to remain. I longed for home, and feared I may never sit around my own table back at the theater.

It wasn’t cold or raining when we got outside, but I felt it should be both. Iiggled my toes on the cobbles and stretched my arms, far far above my head. It felt good to finally have a moment to stretch again.

“Come on.” Strix said, “We’ve got a long walk ahead.”

“Is it really that far?” I asked.

“We’ve got to go through the alleys.” Strix said.

A moment later he had unclipped his cloak and draped it around my shoulders. I sighed and pulled the thick fabric around me, bringing the hood up to conceal my hair. “Still too dangerous for an Executioner to be seen with me?”

I tried to manage a light air, but Strix Savoy seemed to misinterpret it for serious question. “Best not to take any chances. Callum, why don’t you take off your apron?”

The medic was quick to comply, wadding up the rubbery fabric and carrying it in a bundle under his arm. There was no way to mask the rattle of glass bottles in his bag, but now we just seemed a less noticeable group, if only slightly so. There was little that could be done about Strix’s hair now that I wore his hood.

With that we were off, falling in line behind him. Strix steered us away from all my favorite parts of Yharnam. I knew it would be foolishness and folly to parade through the marketplaces, stop by the tea shops or have a dance in the square. I could not allow freedom to dilute my powers of greater reason, despite the appeal of it. The Executioner boy took us nowhere near the theater either. It was completely blocked by buildings.

The city may not have had many trees, but buildings it had in abundance. They seemed to sprout on top of one another, blocking out the sky not wholly unlike the branches of the Forbidden Woods. To an outsider it could be confusing, oppressive. I remember when I had first arrived in the city I felt I might cry. To come from humble village and suddenly be swallowed by the black teeth of spiked church steeples and watched by the great rose-window eyes turned Yharnam itself into a beast.

How I had longed for open fields, and cried that there were no butterflies and wildflowers. The problems of a young girl were so immaterial, but they had consumed my small heart entirely. Now I was glad to be back in the maw, happy to survive in the belly of the beast. If I were to suddenly give it up for field and farm again, I imagine my heart would break much the same. As I had longed for grass and dirt so too would I cry for cobblestones and chimney smoke.

“We best hope the patrols are late.” Strix muttered.

“Won’t you be missed?” I asked.

Strix shook his head “As long as my jobs get done no one pays me any mind.”

“When I sit the throne again I’ll-“

“I don’t want any favors.” Strix said.
We continued through the city in relative silence. It was clear that Strix would’ve preferred me to stay inbetween him and the medic, the middle of the party was typically the safest place. I took up the rear instead, if anyone need to be looked after it would be the one who wasn’t a hunter. Callum had trouble keeping pace, but he didn’t complain. He wasn’t able to interpret Strix’s lightning-fast hand signals and often needed to be grabbed by the collar and pulled back or pushed forward. I helped all I could, we could only manage so many miss-steps.

The further we went the more dangers we encountered. I didn’t ever recall having so many patrols going around the city, but almost ever dozen steps we had to duck into a doorway, crouch behind a barrel, and wait for footsteps to pass.

“He’s increased them because of the Bloody Crow.” Strix whispered. “Executioners can’t really stand for Vilebloods in their city.”

Vilebloods like my Fwahe and Templeton. Odeon almighty, how was I to find a way to keep them safe? I couldn’t even preserve myself. Thoughts of this consumed me until we reached the train station. It too, seemed to be a hive of activity. The usually empty grounds were cluttered with Powder Kegs, rushing too and fro. Fires burned and the smell of woodsmoke and melting metal was heavy in the air.

“It’s all lit up.” Callum said, “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know.” Strix replied, “Guess they must be forging something.”

“This is going to make slipping in without prying eyes a little difficult, don’t you think?” I asked.

The Executioner boy sighed and nodded. We should’ve known our luck could only hold so long. It was a miracle we hadn’t been spotted already. Sneaking up on the Powder Keg hunters was an impossible feat. Everyone knew they had all sorts of land mines and other nasty traps covering the grounds, one wrong step and you were either dead or surrounded. The best way was to simply announce yourself, as I’d done before- and pray for the best.

“Maybe I ought to go in first.” Strix offered, “See if I can find someone that can be trusted.”

“Do you know the Lupei brothers?” I asked.

“Who doesn’t.” He said.

“I know.” I said, “But they might be able to help. Aditya would be preferable if he can be found but if not, well I suppose Viorel is much the same.”

“Or Miss Downey.” Callum said, “Miss Yorkshire Downey. She’ll help.”

“Right.” He said. “Wait here.”

What else was there to do? We sat and watched as he crossed the open grounds, waving to attract the Powder Keg’s attention. Kos above, there were dozens of them. I could hear the hiss of hot metal when it was cured in cold water, feel the heat from the forges even at this distance.

“They’ve always been weapons-makers right?” Callum asked.

I nodded. The unique weapons, masterfully made were what the hunters had grown famous for. The first truly effective beast-killers had come from the Powder Kegs and everyone knew to go to them when a trick weapon needed to be made right. They weren’t known to mass-produce like this though, they preferred to craft overtime, or at least so I’d thought.
“How come this doesn’t feel like normal weapons making then?” He asked.

I shrugged, “I never took the time to observe them at any relative proximity. This could well be normal, but I must agree- things seem out of place.”

“If you’ll pardon the expression,” Callum began, “But with a new king taking the throne…well doesn’t this seem sort of-“

“Sort of like someone building up a cache of weapons for unspecified but sinsister purpose?” I offered.

He nodded and began fishing around in his pockets. There was a pipe at his lips before I could stop him. The medic shoved dry leaves into the waiting well but didn’t light it, just chewed nervously on the stem. I was glad he still had wits enough not to light it and release a smoke beacon that was sure to expose us.

“I don’t like the look of it.” Said the medic, “Nor the smell.”

I didn’t either.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading :)
Stay the Night

Chapter Summary

Callum at last makes some choices of his own instead of being pushed around.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

I’d met a lot of different kinds of hunters, Yharnam had no shortage of subjects for case study. After treating and tending to hundreds of them, I had found one infuriating similarity beating in the chest of every patient. No matter if they came from the woodlands or the city, hunted together or alone this trait was common.

To a man, every one of them was impossibly impatient.

Frigga Hemlock was no better than the novices. A few moments after Strix Savoy had disappeared around the corner she was tapping her foot and wondering what was taking so long. She fidgeted in the same manner as the young children in church service, always shifting position and glancing out at the train station the same way youth glanced out stained glass windows, searching for salvation that would never arrive.

“What do you think’s taking so long?” Frigga asked.

“It isn’t.” I said.

“Pardon?”

I sighed, “He’s been gone barely a minute.”

Her cheeks went red. “Oh, it...seemed like it was longer then that.”

I shrugged. Truth be told I hadn’t noticed. The trip through Yharnam had been a trying one for me. I was pushed by Strix, pulled by Frigga and shoved into so many alleyways I was beginning to wonder if we would ever truly reach our destination. I thought I had known the city well, but I had nothing on the both of them. Strix could’ve truly walked the place blindfolded and never stepped a toe out of line.

Things were getting strangely close between us all, and I feared it would serve poorly in the future. I didn’t wish to be around crying persons, though I’d had my fair share of it. Tears were unavoidable in my trade, it was just easier when I could at least be the cause of it. Losing a leg, birthing a child, disinfected a wound these were all things with distinctive cause and effect, a real reason and purpose. Strix Savoy had seemed a practical person before, and I was unsure of how to view him after.

He’d been through a lot, it had seemed. I would not discount his experiences, I just hadn’t expected such an outburst. Trying to care for everyone was exhausting enough as it were, but now I had reason to think that Strix Savoy could make use of a little medicine too. Something to ease the nerves and soothe the mind, if only I had been able to return to my practice, I could’ve given it to him.
There were other reasons that necessitated my return to the clinic. The Brain of Mensis needed to be protected. It grew at such an alarming rate, that pickle jar wasn’t going to hold it forever. It wouldn’t do to have it confined in so small a space. There were patients who relied on me, and more would be popping up now that the winter months were upon us. I was useless to them stuck in some Powder Keg panic room.

Frigga may not have approved, and I daresay Strix Savoy would’ve raised hell about it, but I wasn’t planning to stay with the Powder Kegs for long. The first chance I got I was going to slip away.

Lord Kane Hirsch was a man to be feared, make no mistake of that. He was ever the type to swear revenge and doggedly chase after that which had insulted him. I’d seen him do it. I’d heard him do it. I would’ve been well within my wits to cower and think that he would be out to destroy me. I didn’t blame Frigga and Strix for thinking that way, they didn’t know Lord Kane Hirsch as I did.

I was beneath him. I had always been beneath him, and while at times he could find some amusement the way someone can smile at an ant that crawls over their finger, if they are in benevolent moods- one doesn’t actively seek them out just to crush them. Should an ant come across ones path and cause irritation, then yes it is a thing easily squashed, but you don’t send hunting hounds after ants. No part of me believed that Lord Kane Hirsch would go smashing anthills when there was a silver falcon to track.

It was almost laughable to think of him astride a horse, bow slung over his back. He’d never been a hunter, I’d never seen him stray beyond the castle walls. The younger Lord Hirsch, whose name had long since escaped me was often in the forest hunting. It was rarely animals he brought back. They’d called them bleeders, us bleeders really. The only difference between me and the shackled men and women in the bowels of Castle Cainhurst was that I had been blessed with a lineage. A lineage I had now forsaken, but then it had acted as shield.

No, he would not chase after me, but if he found me with Frigga I was sure to be squashed. She was liability and risk all tied up in a neat little package- not a gift I’d want to receive. I vowed to leave her with some bloodstone gems and show her the method of preparation so that she would not be helpless after I had gone. That was cruelty unthinkable.

Now I was the one who was liable to fidget and wanted for distraction.

“Have you had any more headaches?” I asked.

“There was one…one right before he caught me I think…or maybe it was just from a blow he dealt.” She said, “It’s hard to recall so much happened. I-“

“Don’t strain yourself.” I said, “If it comes back to you naturally, fine but there’s no use replaying those events. As much as you can forget them, forget them.”

She nodded, “None since then anyway.”

“The blood gems might be helping with those too, then.” I said, “Really these are fascinating. There’s no telling what the limit of there-“

Frigga cut me off, pointing out Strix as he waved us forward. Viorel Lupei stood next to him, as visible from twenty leauges as twenty paces. Everything about him shone from the metalwork filigree on his over-embellished robes, to the top of his shaved head. The boy was a beacon. We joined Strix and the Powder Keg. Viorel began to quickly herd us through the weapons maker’s grounds, all the while shouting loudly.
“I got a man down and a medic over here! Out of the way you sons of whores! Man down and a medic!”

“Shh!” I hissed at him, “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Listen medicine-man I may not have a whole lot of brains, or be able to stich people up- but I do know a thing of two about what it means to be a Powder Keg. I gaurentee you everyone here cares way more about their jobs then whatever I’m shoutin about so the more I shout the more they try and ignore me-see. Just like with girls in bars.” Viorel explained.

As always his words and actions were incomprehensible to me, and I made to upbraid his assement. I was silence by Frigga who told me to just go along with things. I could hardly believe she was ceding control of our safety to one of the Lupei brothers. I mean, I had known she was going to do that- that was the whole point of coming here. I don’t know how it had seemed a good plan when we were talking it over in the attic, but now when faced with the reality of its ridiculousness I wanted to slink back to the ministration bank and demand we come up with something better.

Walking straight into the belly of the beast was the wrong time for such propositions. The Powder Kegs were working at full capacity, and true to his word the more Viorel yelled, the less attention anyone gave us. We practically marched straight through the hard working hunters and right into the box car that the brothers had made a home of.

“’Ditya!” Viorel shouted.

There was no need to speak so loudly, Aditya Lupei was practically right in front of him. The elder brother was bent over a work desk strewn with paper and plans for new weapons. He’d made a nest of crumpled pages. They littered the ground and the desk, overflowing from the wastebasket and spilling to all remaining surfaces. It was like a snowfall of failed plans. I waded ankle-deep through the deluge.

“The hell you want?” Aditya growled, not even taking a second to look up from his work.

Strix shut the door behind us.

That was what prompted Aditya to look up from his work. He barked about using the cold winds for proper ventilation and cooling. At last his eyes came to rest upon the three of us.

“Odeon come down from the heavens and fuck me! What do you have, worms for brains Vio?” Aditya said, “What in-“

“Oh quit your muttering.” Viorel scolded, “They needed a place to hide.”

“So that means we’re the ones that gotta hide them?” Aditya asked.

“Sure as shit do.” Viorel said.

The two of them quickly came to blows in the box car. I wasn’t about to step in and stop them, though Frigga and Strix seemed a second away from intervention themselves. Aditya and Viorel pushed each other to the floor, rolling across the crumpled parchment and trying to choke the life out of each other in the process.

“Why are you always making trouble?” Aditya asked as he landed a jab in his brother’s side.

“You raised me to make trouble!” Viorel spat back.
Of the two of them, Viorel had the more aggressive style. He clawed rather than punched and ended up the victor when he clamped his teeth down and bit Aditya’s ear. The Powder Keg’s howls were enough to stir the dead. Once assured of the surrender Viorel let him up.

“You fight dirty.” Strix remarked.

Viorel spit a mouthful of blood onto the floor, “I fight how he taught me.”

Aditya smacked the back of his brother’s head, “Oi, and you stole all my best tricks.”

Viorel beamed with pride.

“If you’re quite finished,” Frigga said, speaking for the first time since entering the Powder Keg camp, “I think we have some things to discuss.”

“She didn’t bring the cow this time.” Viorel said.

“Horse.” Frigga corrected.

“Whatever.”

Aditya did his best to make the boxcar a bit more comfortable. He began to take the wasted papers to candle flame, burning the failed plans so that we’d have some room to sit down. Viorel pushed some blankets off his bed and spread them across the floor for better seating— not that the thin layer of fabric made the plank floor any more comfortable. Comfort wasn’t really the goal of this interaction though, so it made almost no difference.

“Well.” Said Aditya, “Get to discussing.”

It was hard to know where to begin. I looked over to Frigga who was looking at Strix who was looking at the floor. In a second we swapped gazes so that mine now inspected the floor, hers went to Strix and his to me. None of us knew where to start.

“They ain’t discussing.” Viorel said.

“You think I’m deaf?” Aditya growled, “I can clearly see that.”

“Bein’ deaf don’t impact your sight.” Viorel scoffed.

“How’s this for impacting sight?” Aditya asked, as his fist shot out ready to give his brother a black eye.

Viorel ducked just in time, but I feared another scuffle was going to start and I’d be trapped here evermore.

“Look, it’s a long story.” I said, “But Frigga’s got a crazed Vileblood after her and Strix said we can’t go to the Executioners for help.”

They paused, looking up from their battle. Each had the other’s shirt collar in hand, they were the perfect pause in any vaudeville scene. Aditya let go and Viorel followed suit. They put aside their petty squabble and sat in front of us, children about to be told a story.

“You know crazed Vileblood is kind of crude phrasing for someone’s lover.” Aditya said.

“You’d know about crude phrasing.” Viorel scoffed.
"The Bloody Crow is not my lover." Frigga snarled, "For the time being Fwahe is elsewhere. She’s not the one after me."

"Oi, well that’s not what we’ve been told." Viorel said, "The way them Wheel-men paint it is a lot different."

"I’m sure it is." Frigga sighed.

We all might of known that the level of frustration that came when conversing with the Lupei brothers was abnormally high. It was worse to be tired and confused and have to deal with the same incompetence. I felt my eyelids start to droop as I made several botched attempts to explain the nature of our situation to both of them.

I was soon informed, in no uncertain terms that my words had stopped making sense. I couldn’t piece together a sentence and was fast put on the sidelines to listen and observe the conversation, but not actively participate.

The Executioners had been lying about everything. They had gone on a witch hunt for Fwahe, convinced she’d stolen Frigga away in a murderous fit. The disappearances throughout the town, the juvenile Vilebloods that were sighted every here and again, all of it was blamed on her. She was the perfect scapegoat, there was no one in a position to come to her defense. Templeton could not be believed and was additional imprisoned. Cato had spoken too passionately and made a fool of himself, he was not to be taken seriously. Scarlett and Imogen wouldn’t rise to defend her, Sterling did not have the words nor Mouse the authority. All of the Valkyries who might’ve come to aid were dismissed.

Frigga asked if the Woodlanders and Lord Gaines would not come to her defense. In laborious detail we had to pry knowledge from the thick skulls of the Lupei brothers until at last it was realized that they all truly did think their Patron Huntress dead. Even those most faithful to her, the gang of Altered Boys whom she had near single-handedly saved from madness and blood starvation, thought their champion gone to the gods.

"Then I must return." Frigga said, "Bloody Crow or not- I must."

"They’ll kill her, won’t they?" Strix asked.

Both Lupei brothers looked to each other and nodded. If Viorel and Aditya were in agreement then it was as good as fact.

"Patron Executioner wouldn’t like that." Viorel said, "Can’t say I would either."

Aditya hit the back of his head again. "Oi! You stupid? She’s right in front of you and you said you didn’t want her coming back! Don’t you have any manners?"

"You didn’t teach me any manners you fucking pig." Vio spat back, "And it’s damn true I don’t want her back. None of the Powder Kegs do. Look how much work we have now that Alfred’s taken control."

I expected Frigga to be taken aback, offended by all of this but she didn’t so much as twitch with irritation. She had dealt with the brothers before, and waited calmly while they fought with each other before a moment to speak presented itself.

"What does he have you working on?" She asked.

"We’re outfitting an army!" Viorel said.
“Shh!” Aditya hissed, “Idiot! We’re not supposed to give the bloody particulars.”

“I’ll make your particulars bloody.” Viorel growled.

“Whose army?” Frigga asked, “What does Alfred need an army for?”

Viorel was about to answer her, but was silenced when Aditya’s fist came down on the top of his head. “My brother has said too much already.”

“Oiiii.” Viorel whined, rubbing the tender spot on his head. “What’dya do that for ‘Ditya?”

“Shut up.” Aditya said, “The nature of our commission from the Patron Executioner is private. Don’t fucking ask about it again. You should be grateful we’ve bothered to shelter you- Vio’s bothered to in any case. I didn’t get a choice. No one fucking asked my opinion.”

“Please.” I said, “I can’t go any longer.”

Surprised I had spoken all heads turned to me. I don’t know if it was because I’d patched nearly every Powder Keg back together or something else, but I seemed to win over the Lupei’s sympathy. It was a miracle they had any.

“We can talk about it later.” Aditya said. “It’s clear you need rest.”

“No one’s going to find you here.” Viorel said, “They hate coming in our room cos ‘Dityas a grump.”

“Fuck you.” Aditya spat.

With the permission to rest and the guarantee of safety I no longer cared what the Lupei brothers came to blows about. A floor was as good as any bed, and while this boxcar smelled stale and there was a general lack of warmth and blankets, it was much better than the cramped attic quarters and high tensions of small space. I felt weights I hadn’t known about finally drop from my shoulders, and hoped to soon be enveloped in sleep’s sweet embrace.

It was not to be. The Lupei brothers returned to their tasks leaving us alone in the car. Frigga decided that our time meant for sleep was better spent on strategy. She began to petition further actions from the Executioner boy.

“Do you know Patience Hastings?” Frigga asked.

“Not well.” Strix said, “He doesn’t talk much.”

There was an awkward bit of silence before she started to explain the designation “vow-taker” to Strix.

“It was a joke,” He said.

“Oh.”

“Supposed to be one, anyway.” He corrected, “Nevermind. Yes, I know who Executioner Patience Hastings is.”

“I need to speak with him.” She said.

Strix cut in, “That might be a little difficult.”
This time it did produce a chuckle. “Figure of speech.”

“There you go again.” Strix said.

Genuine laughter filled the train car. They shared it between each other for a moment, and I could sense some sort of exchange within it. This was the Executioner boy’s thank you for Frigga’s earlier comforts.

“What do you need Executioner Patience for?” Strix asked once the laughter had died down.

“He would’ve been the last one to see Fwahe.” Frigga explained, “He might have some information about where she went.”

“If he did, Alfred is sure to have it by now.” He replied. “I know they wanted to question him.”

“You have to bring him to me anyway.” Frigga pleaded, “He’s our strongest, our only lead.”

Strix sat in silence for a good while before giving in. “I’m going back to the bank tonight. I can’t afford to rest for very long. My absence will be noted if Templeton is left unattended for this long. I will do what I can from there and try to bring Patience out to see you, but as I’ve said I don’t know him very well. His mother will likely forbid it, she has an extreme distaste for Powder Keg hunters.”

“Didn’t she marry one?” Frigga asked.

He nodded, “Maybe that’s why.”

“He was no one of note, so far as I’m aware. I’ve never met him.” Strix said.

“Shouldn’t he be here? Can’t you just tell Patience that his father is looking for him?” Frigga asked.

“I suppose that might be the easiest way to go about it.” Strix said, “Though I’ve no idea what Patience thinks of his father.”

“Let us hope they are favorable opinions.” Frigga said.

She tried to come up with other possibilities, something to impassion Strix Savoy. He met them with easy indifference. There was nothing she could say that would produce further commitment, and at last, exhausted she retired.

It was her hand that woke me, some odd hours later. Strix Savoy was already gone, and I needed to be on my way as well.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Legs.” She replied.

“Do they feel no better than when you were first injured?” I asked.

“Slightly.” She said, “But I still can’t move them.”

I fished about for my bag. She drummed her fingers on the floor while she waited, ever impatient and ever a huntress. Nothing had been damaged despite the frantic nature of our Yharnam street slinking. I’d been pushed against walls and hadn’t even had time to fear the loss of materials. It was still nice to know they would’ve been wasted worries. I quickly located the jar full of crystals
and a vessel to liquefy them in.

“Watch this now.” I said to Frigga. “You should know how to do it.”

She nodded, turning her head for the best angle.

I taught her how to temper the medicine over the open flame. Careful attention had to be paid, everything had to be smooth, no lumps. Putting any small bits of crystal into the bloodstream might lead to some unforeseen consequences, things one would certainly prefer to do without. Being as she was accustomed to the blood ministrations all hunters required I’d no doubt the Lady Hemlock knew her way around a syringe, but just to be sure I went step by step through the process.

“I don’t know what happens if you wait for it to cool before injection.” I told her, “So I would make sure you just managed it while the mixture is still hot.”

“How long will it take before I’m healed completely?” Frigga asked.

I pressed the needle to her skin and depressed the plunger. While I watched the red liquid leave the glass tubing I tried to put together an estimate for her. How the hell was I supposed to know when she would be better? It was rare I ever dealt with injuries of this nature, and I’d never worked with medicine of this source. Her guess would’ve truly, truly been as good as mine.

“I’ll have to consult my books.” I said.

Books. That was one way of saying I was going to ask the pulsing amalgam of eyeballs and flesh in my closet to tell me the answers. She nodded and massaged her legs, waiting for the medicine to kick in.

“At least we need not fear a shortage.” Frigga said. “Not with York so close.”

“I should restock before I go.” I agreed.

“Where are you going?” She asked.

I put the cork in the bottle of crystals and set it beside her. I didn’t take back the syringe.

“I can’t be expected to stay.” I said, “There are people, patients- who need me. I have work that must be done.”

“The Bloody Crow will kill you.” Frigga said, “Or have you forgotten?”

“Lord Kane Hirsch won’t waste time on me.” I promised her. “I’m not worth his time.”

“How can you say that? How can you be sure of that? The man is insane.” She protested.

The things Frigga asked for explanation of would’ve taken a lifetime to tell. I didn’t like to muse on the times at Cainhurst, and especially now with the fearful stance the Executioners had taken on anything that vaguely resembled a Cainhurst noble I was no more inclined to spill the proverbial beans. I had buried that terrified child in the bloodstained snow along with the name Prestwick. There was no sense in dredging it up now.

“It’s a long story.” I said.

“I’m not going anywhere.” She said.

“Look, Strix Savoy might be happy to spill his guts and cry on your shoulder, but I’m not the
sobbing sort.” I said, “I’ve got my business to attend.”

“Callum if you go out there you’ll die.” She said.

“And if I don’t Ida will, Ida and dozens if not hundreds of others.” I replied, “My life is not more precious then those I service. I have taught you to administer your own medicine, the supply is ample and I’ve no need to loiter and monitor your recovery.”

“Don’t be so cold.” She said.

It sounded like an order. That only stiffened my resolve to leave. Casting aside Cainhurst and the realms of royalty had brought with it disregard for the orders of those in lofty positions. Like or not she was Patron Huntress no longer, not actively in any case. I had not sworn to serve her when she did rule, and things were no different now.

“Forgive me, Lady Hemlock.” I said, “However it is winter, and if there were ever a time to grow cold and take up hearts of stone it is now. I am needed elsewhere.”

“You’ll die.” She repeated.

I shook my head. “I don’t think so.”

She reached out to stop me, but I was able to step away from it. Aditya and Viorel were gone, though I expected it would not be long before they made their return. Aditya seemed to always find reason to sequester himself and Vio wasn’t the sort to work diligently for hours on end. The boxcar was their space for breaks, regardless of if it housed a wanted fugitive or not.

“Swift recovery.” I wished her, before slipping out through the sliding door.

Frigga said something, but it was cut off by the screech of wood sliding through old and ill-kept grooves.

The clouds overhead were thick and grey, foretelling snowfalls. If I wanted to reach my clinic without trouble I’d need to work quickly.

First it was down to see York. I assumed she’d still have her workshop in the basement of the train station, never minding the wealth of changes that had occurred above ground. I’d reasoned it was too early in a hunter’s schedule for much activity, but the forges were just as active as before. They steamed, metal bubbled and boiled, and the fresh-forged barrels of guns hissed in protest when forced into chemical-diluted waters for their final coatings.

It was a wonder I’d managed to sleep at all, and then again it was no wonder at all. I could make it to bed with the sounds of the drunks above and the landlord’s snowing next door. I didn’t draw attention to myself like Viorel had. A medic was a normal sight just about anywhere, at least when there wasn’t a Patron Huntress and an Executioner on their tail. I wasn’t stopped and questioned, only occasionally barked at when I was in one of the weapons-makers ways.

York’s defensive nature and expert aim with a show was not forgotten. I made sure to announce myself far ahead of time.

“Miss Downey?” I called as I came down the stairs. “Miss Downey, it’s Callum. Callum Furgeson. I just want to talk.”

I heard a shuffling back in the shadows. I really should’ve thought to grab a candle or lantern before coming down here. It didn’t have to be Lord Kane Hirsch’s hands who ended me, it could
just as easily be a stray nail which caught on the leg of my pants and sent me tumbling to my death. One cold body was the same as any other regardless of cause.

“Miss Downey?” I called.

“A moment!” She replied.

It was not with annoyance that she spoke, but the frantic tones of someone involved with too many tasks at once. Nevertheless there soon came a light in the basement room, and by and by by Yorkshire drew nearer.

“I didn’t expect to see you back.” Yorkshire said as she met me at the bottom of the stairs. “You ran off so fast last time. I was afraid you’d been offended.”

I tried to blink away the remaining darkness while I took my glasses off to polish the lenses. Going down into the basement seemed to stir up dust clouds that further obscured my vision. “I must admit, I was surprised by the sudden change in things, but it was rather wrong of me to take off with such haste.”

“It is forgiven.” Yorkshire said, “Instantly forgiven. It’s good to have you back.”

She took my hand and began to lead me to her workshop. I tried to mark the path through the piles and rubbish more clearly in my mind. This was not supposed to be a long visit, and should York decide to try and keep me longer then I liked it would be good to know the way for hasty retreat. Of course I’d be no match for her, as these underground rooms were her primary dwelling. That would be like trying to outwit a badger in its own burrow- ill-advised and often painful.

“Thank you Miss Downey.” I said. There seemed little reason to beat around the bush, so I cleared my throat and got right to the heart of the matter. “In fact I came to ask you for more of them, your crystals I mean. I have done my own research with them and found their healing properties beyond any I’ve heretofore experienced.”

Yorkshire’s eyes sparkled, “Truly?”

I nodded.

She clapped her hands together in delight. “I knew they were something special, I just knew it. They tried to call me up to help with the gun smithing, but I told them my work was here. I mean of course I didn’t doubt myself, but it is nice to have one validate you, isn’t it?”

I nodded, “I understand completely.”

She dusted off a corner of work bench and patted it twice, begging me sit down. This was to be a long visit it seemed. Of course, nothing was ever kept to my schedule before, why should today be any different?

All the same I’d no desire to offend and took the seat graciously. She made room for herself, pushing a few bits of paper and a bedraggled quill pen off a wobbling chair before settling into it. She sat in it backwards, the way defiant schoolchildren are want to do. Her hands perched eagerly on the back of the chair and she rested her chin on them.

“So, they have potential for healing, you said?”

“Yes.” I said, “Great potential. I had a patient who had sustained severe injuries from a fall. These injuries may have crippled them for life, but in act of desperation I turned to your crystals. Melted
to reach liquid consistency and directly injected into the bloodstream they gave a near immediate elevation to permanent paralysis.”

“Cor!” remarked York.

“It seems the need for such injections is unfortunately daily, maitnece is required but I believe with due diligence and faithful administration these effects might become permanent. I wish to take more crystals so I can experiment with other medicines, if you’ll allow me.”

“Allow you?” Yorkshire asked, “Allow you? I implore you!”

She hopped up from the chair so fast she toppled it, but made no matter of fallen furniture. Turning her back to me she began to browse her many shelves and storage cases, removing tray after tray of the crystals.

“I haven’t stopped making them.” Yorkshire said, “Those ridiculous Lupeis called me crazy for quote un quote “playing with rocks” but I think them both rather brainless, don’t you?”

“Most certainly.” I said.

That was perhaps the easiest statement to agree to that I’d yet heard. While tray after tray of the miraculous little things were laid before me I tried to hide my impatience. I didn’t know how many I might be allowed to have, and certainly the stranger shapes were of more intrigue than the common triangles. I made no requests though.

“I’ve found even stranger ones.” York continued. She began to pick through one of the trays with a pair of tweezers. “I thought they were mistakes at first, some kind of fault in the process but I hadn’t made any errors. I know I’d checked the temperature and had all my ratios correct.”

At last she found the crystal she was looking for. She held it out to be, pinched between the metal beak of her tool. I could see why she had first thought it a mistake, for the crystal was hardly of specific form, instead it seemed more like a clotted coagulation of blood. Peering closer I could see shapes inside of the misshapen red circle, shapes with dizzying precision, not unlike snowflakes.

“And these are the rarest you’ve yet found?” I asked.

“Yes sir.” York replied, “Only managed to make that and one other, but the other one…well it came out different colored.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“It turned blue.” She said.

“Curious.” I muttered. “May I see it?”

“What do you think I’m digging around these trays for?” She snapped.

I cleared my throat and looked away. The sudden tension was unbearable. I watched as she shifted through the trays. I figured something blue would’ve easily stood out in the seas of pinkish red, but it was a matter of being buried under hundreds of other similar things. Yorkshire really needed to get a better system of organization.

It made me recall the neatly labeled jars, lined up on their respective shelves. They were alphabetized no less, everything sorted with proper printed handwriting for easy accessibility. Any medic could’ve glanced at the supply and been able to find what they were looking for. It was a
personal point of pride that my stock could be used by any other - I saw no reason for coded messages and concocted formulas as some doctors did. There was never a reason to keep ingredients from one's patients.

The moment I returned to the clinic I would sort out the stock York provided me with and give her suggestions based on my end results for how to store her future batches. At long last, too long judging by the melting candles Yorkshire found the crystal she sought. She picked it up and placed it in my open palm.

It was blue, to be sure with a teal and pink center. The crystal was just as misshapen as the previous one, yet equally as complex.

“Have you figured out what causes the different shapes to form?” I asked.

“Sadly no.” She admitted, “Though I’ve begun to label both the blood samples and the corresponding trays. I’ve made a logbook too, counting the different types and inspecting for color. I’m trying to be more exact.”

“You ought to get a better system for storage then the trays.” I advised, “If you come by the clinic sometime I can show you my methods of ingredient storage and see if I can help set you up with one of my styles if anything suits you.”

Yorkshire grinned. “That would be very nice, thank you Mr. Furgeson.”

“Think nothing of it, Miss Downey.” I replied.

“I shall think everything of it.” She insisted, “In fact, as a gesture of good faith I’ll let you take the blue crystal for your studies.”

“Are you serious?” I asked.

“As the scourge.” She replied. “You can take anything you’d like. I’m just so happy to see my work being made use of.”

Now with permission to have my pick of the batch I began to select the subjects that interested me. Yorkshire faithfully plucked every crystal I indicated and dropped them one by one through the neck of an empty bottle. At first there were harsh “ping” noises when each hit the bottom or rattled against the sides, but as the bottle began to fill the noise quickly died down. She filled it right up to the brim, never once saying enough was enough or clinging to a particular specimen.

“I think this should hold me for awhile.” I said at last. I’d been here much later then I’d wanted to already.

“Are you sure?” York asked, “There’s still plenty left.”

“I know exactly who to turn to when I start to run out.” I said with a smile, “And really I should get back to my practice. I have been away long enough.”

Her face fell but she hid it to the best of her ability. “Very well, Mr. Furgeson. Shall I see you to the stairs?”

“Please.” I replied, “I fear my eyes are not the best, and the dark is quite the hinderance.”

“Right this way.”
We went through the darkness together. York didn’t even bring a lantern with her, but she still warned me of every pile and upturned floorboard that may have tripped me up. She certainly had made thorough study of the basement- or just run into them herself enough to be aware.

It was strange to emerge from the shadowy basement to the sunlit world. The shift in lighting left me squinting and everything around seemed to burn with colors to bright to be believed. The sounds of the Powder Kegs at work did nothing to ease the transition. I could feel a headache coming on.

That could be cured once I was returned to my clinic. I ignored the strangeness of hunters working in broad daylight and picked my way through them. I could find neither Lupei brother to guide me across the field strewn with Powder Keg traps and had to entreat a curly haired youth to show me the way across. There was the usual amount of grumbling and muttered plans for 4 barreled guns being interrupted. A ridiculous notion, if I were to be asked my opinion. The recoil seemed like it would kill a man, yet the nameless Powder Keg went on.

At last I was loose on familiar avenues and headed home. I was quite ready to put this whole experience behind me and return to work as usual. I’d never thought attending ungrateful patrons and eating half-rotted potato mush could sound so appealing but I walked towards that fate with all manner of eager step and bright spirit. As I drew nearer the boarding house I began to feel strangely about the path I walked. It must’ve been how the elderly felt when they sensed a rain coming, knew it would happen despite the sky being entirely free of clouds. The Yharnam sky hadn’t had a clear day since winter started, and it wasn’t the snowfall I feared. This wrongful feeling belonged to something more elusive, an abstract terror that wound clawed hands over my heart and made it hard to take another step forward.

I didn’t have to wait for the rain to fall.

There was a constable outside the boarding house, and a washerwoman surrounded by red rags. A moderate crowd of curious Yhamnamites were piled up around the door. I had to push my way through them.

“Callum, thank Kos.” I heard one say, a previous patient no doubt.

“Let me through!” I shouted, “This is my house, my practice, let me through!”

I pushed aside those who didn’t part for me. No one provided much resistance. I briefly felt the constable’s hand on my shoulder, but he must’ve seen the red cross on my apron and loosed me easily. Even with the washerwoman’s efforts, the floor was still sticky. The hall no longer smelled of stale sweat and cigarettes. It had changed since I’d been gone.

The door to my home hung loose on its hinges, certainly not the way I had left it. I opened the door and looked down in shock at the ruins of my clinic. The bottle of blood crystals suddenly weighed a thousand pounds, pulling me downwards. I was kneeling on the floor which was a soupy mess of pooled liquid remedies, scattered pills and broken glass. Everything was torn apart.

The tentative footsteps of the constable came up behind me.

“Son I-“ He said

“Who did this?” I asked.

“Well we uh, we don’t rightly know.” He replied.

“Was the Ripper.” The washerwoman muttered as she walked behind him.
The constable cleared his throat. “I really need to ask you some questions, son.”

“I need some time.” I told him.

It was the last bit of coherent thought I could string together. The constable nodded, muttered his of courses and called me son for the third time. I’d forsaken my father. If he said it once again I was liable to snap. He made the effort to close the door behind him, but that scrap of wood wasn’t going to shut again for anyone.

All I had in the world lay in shambles before me. The cabinet, which I’d hauled from a rubbish heap and traded my last good bottle of scotch to get fixed was no more then firewood now. It had been shoved over, then torn apart. There wasn’t a single glass bottle that was left intact.

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The brain of Mensis.

Kos rest me if anything had happened to it.

I picked my way over the wreckage to the cabinet where I’d last left it. Everything in there was broken too. Not an inch of this place had escaped destruction.

The brain of Mensis had been crushed to pulp. The eyes which I’d stared at and taken council from were liquid pools, crusting over and maintaining fossilized boot prints of the person responsible for causing its death.

“No.” I muttered, “This cannot be.”

A burbling cough came from the lump of rotting flesh and eyes. There was still yet life in this creature. I had no time to waste. I ripped my bag from my shoulder and began to look for a syringe. If the crystals worked on Frigga they were the brains only hope. After a mad search I realized I’d left my syringe with Frigga, confident that I would have more at my disposal once I returned.

No one could’ve planned for their entire life to be cast in shambles upon their return. I began digging though everything. The mercury was gone and the lavender was ruined. The yarrow, the aloe the skullcap, all of it had been soaked and stomped on. The morphine tablets were crushed powders, useless. I found many needles, scattered across the floor, but every bit of glassware I owned had been smashed.

If whomever had done this had been hasty enough to leave my cabinet’s drawers unmolested there may have yet been a surviving syringe, but those two were ripped to nothing more then matchsticks.

How was I to give an injection with no syringe?

I cleared a place on the floor and dumped my pack out onto it. The moderate supply of bandages, silk thread, sewing needles, seadatives and a few other basic supplies seemed horrifically small. At least I had my good scissors still. They weren’t going to help me now. I pushed things aside, seeking supplies that weren’t going to produce themselves in a desperate attempt to alter reality.

What hadn’t been was not going to magically produce itself now. I thought about turning on my heels and sprinting back to the Powder Kegs and taking back the tools I’d left for Frigga. It seemed selfish and stupid at best. Who was I to choose to preserve this things life over hers. It could breathe though, of a fashion. Somehow it filtered air and produced oxygen though I’d seen no orifice through which this was possible.

I’d first experienced the crystals powers through smoke vapors. Perhaps now the same application
would still prove potent. Fire first, I needed to burn them, not liquefy. There was all manner of tinder. I could burn all my old furniture, my tables, my chairs, my cabinet and cupboard. The intruder hadn’t even spared the sink, the basin was cracked and would never be able to hold water again. What good was a surgeon who could no longer wash their hands? Reuptation down the drain. Kos, did I even have a drain anymore?

“I’ve really got to ask you some questions, son.” The constable said from the other side of the door.

“I’m not your son!” I spat back.

I was not often prone to fits of rage, but in this moment, in the wreckage of my residence it could not be avoided. I scooped a half of a broken bowl from the floor, took aim and prepared to hurl it at the hanging door. A moment before it was loosed I noticed something on the floor, swirling in the currents of wind coming in through the window.

There was a mass of black feathers dancing in the corner.

I must have taken Frigga’s warnings a bit to lightly. This was Lord Kane Hirsch’s doing. Of course he knew where I lived, he had come to get me. When we escaped he must have vented his rage on my lodging- on the other tenants. They were all dead. That was there blood being wrung out into buckets in the hall. Dead at my hands, because of me.

I had sworn to protect people, not to endanger them. The whole reason for casting aside ties to the Prestwicks was to avoid situations like these. The Prestwicks were merchants and slavers, my family was terrible people with more heirs then they’d ever need. I had never wanted to make deals with a Hirsch again, nor any other Lord or Lady of Cainhurst. I thought I had been clever enough to escape their wrath, but I might’ve known.

You cannot out run your history. The world wasn’t big enough to hold all of my secrets and keep me safe from harm simultaneously. I’d grown careless and this was the result.

The constable was done waiting for me. He pushed open the door, leaving me just enough time to shove the panty door closed with my foot. There was no way to hide everything I’d dug out of my bag but I could blame some kind of grief. I’d no idea what I’d be questioned for.

“Sorry.” He apologized, “We’re just trying to figure out what’s done this.”

“I know who’s done it.” I said, “It’s the Bloody Crow of Cainhurst. There’s feathers from his cape in the corner.”

The constable went over to inspect them, making notations in a little book as he did. I didn’t want him in my house. I don’t think I even really wanted myself in my house anymore. Without landlord or residents whose to say what would happen to this place. Maybe it really would have been better to have just stayed with the powder kegs.

“What’s going to happen?” I asked.

“Well we’ll take into account what you said and try to find the ruffian what’s done this.” The constable replied, “Ain’t much to go on though. Any idea where this crow of yours is?”

“We’re not exactly friends.” I muttered, “That’s not what I meant. I meant what happens to me. To my clinic, this boarding house? Who is paying damages?”

“Ah, that’s the thing, son.” The constable said “Seems your landlord never took out a proper insurance policy so unless we find the bloke who smashed it all up…well there’s nothing anyone
can really do.”

“So I get nothing?” I asked.

The constable swallowed and tapped his foot several times. “That’s about the size of it, yeah.”

“Brilliant.” I muttered.

“Landlord didn’t leave behind any will so this building would go to his next of kin, you wouldn’t happen to know who–”

“Hasn’t got any.” I said, “Now if you’ll excuse me I’ve got a lot of cleaning up to do.”

He paused, looking at me like I’d spoken in another language. I stared and he stared and neither of us seemed to know what moves to make. At last when the constable couldn’t stand another second of silence, he cleared his throat.

“You can’t expect to stay here.” He said.

“It’s my home.” I said, “I’m not leaving.”

“There might be another attack.” The constable warned.

“I understand that. My contract is until the end of next month, you can’t kick me out. I’ve paid my rent, sir. I’m not leaving!”

He didn’t argue, just nodded and backed away slowly, through the hanging door. I was left alone again, and all the more thankful for it. There was so much work to be done, but first I needed to revive the brain of Mensis. I’d matches in my doctors bag and there were stumps of smashed candles on the floor. I was able to hastily mold one into something that would catch fire. The mortar had been smashed but I was able to pull the pestle out of the wall and crush some of the crystals on a shard of porcelain, smoking them in the same fashion.

I copied York’s methods the best I could remember, and soon the room began to fill with the same smoke she’d produced. I dumped the crystals into my empty pack and tried to trap what vapors I could in the bottle. It wasn’t ideal but it did work, though a lot leaked into the open room, and admittedly my own nostrils. I kept at it until the bottle went cloudy and I supposed that was enough.

There were gods that could be called upon to bless such desperate acts, but I let them alone. My practice was destoried, I would keep my pride. My own skills would save this creature, with no interference from any cosmic deity. I put my hand over the neck of the bottle, and let the vapor out in puffs over the mushed puddle that was once a living thing.

I heard more of its strange gurgles. I wished for anything to hear the strange songs, the speech again. How was I to know when it had taken enough? How was I to know anything at all?

The thing with the blood crystal smoke was when I breathed it in myself. That was perhaps unavoidable, and if I’d had any sense I would’ve found a mask about, or tied a cloth over my face to prevent my own intoxication. I took no such precautions, and soon felt a rush in my head. There was a shaking that stated in my hands. I remember the same had happened last time.

I needed to continue with the smoke but I couldn’t risk breaking the bottle. Would my hands go right through the glass? I wasn’t in my right way enough to venture a guess. The room began to go muddy, all the wreckage and color swirling together, dictated by the dancing feathers. I put the
bottle down and great red clouds of smoke billowed from the top.

*I see you have returned.*

Crystals, not gods be praised. It was speaking to me again.

Chapter End Notes

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Thanks!
Chapter Summary

Patience tries really really hard to follow a path of their own choosing...but there are always such distractions.

It felt like it had been a long time since I’d had the chance to breathe. Since coming out of the woods I hadn’t been alone for so much as a second. I’d tried to spill out every detail to Executioner Alfred, but I’d barely written about the strange circus before my Mother came and threw that plan out the window. I got yelled at and Executioner Alfred was yelled at, but all of that stopped when Executioner Kelfazin returned with news of Callum’s disappearance.

It was rather exciting to go to secret places with Executioner superiors. Come to think of it, that was really my first outing as an Executioner among others of the same rank. I had to deal with my Mother making interruptions the whole way through, but it was still something to hear stories of old Yharnam straight from our leader’s mouth.

At least that was the way I wanted it to feel. I had tried to enjoy things, and Patron Executioner Alfred’s stories were interesting, but all the while I was growing more nervous. I had been prepared to pour out the complete details of my nights in the woods, to tell of Savaii and Casaya, but now I wasn’t so sure. Now everything seemed even more confusing.

The Patron Executioner wanted to keep spirits up. After finding Callum’s practice a ruin, he called in the denizen constable to have matters taken care of. He had the authority to do so now and was eager to make his presence known. We returned to the bank and he called for deserts to be prepared, wanted a proper evening tea. My Mother railed against such frivolity. Going by the looks shared between Executioner Essex and Executioner Sussex they seemed liable to push her from the room and exclude her altogether if she made any more complaints.

Patron Executioner Alfred took care of it for them, “It’s getting late Sister.” He said, “Perhaps you’d better away to your church. With this new matter come up it might be better to deal with Executioner Patience’s predicament in the morning.”

She made small arguments, but she could not rail against all of the Executioners united against her. I wanted to feel a part of them, but I knew they weren’t so much standing up for me as they were annoyed with my Mother. I should’ve tried to defend her, but I didn’t. She left and we sat in the vault. I swung my legs under the table, waiting for the tea to come while Essex and Sussex argued with each other.

“The thing to be done is to ask about, see if the denizens have seen the Bloody Crow.” Sussex said, “They’d sell out their own mother for a sovereign.”

“That’s precisely the problem.” Essex replied, “They’ll say whatever they think we want to hear and we’ll end up in a pile of useless information.”

“Better some information then none.” Sussex shrugged.

“If there is a Vileblood left free in this city we will hunt it down.” Executioner Kelfazin cut in,
“They are a menace.”

“I agree.” Executioner Alfred said, “We must not grow complacent in our battles against them. It is imperative we find the Vileblood Fwahe.”

I thought we should have been focusing more on finding Lady Hemlock, but of course Executioners were meant to slay Vilebloods. I was sympathetic towards our lost patron. I hated to have people missing, and the city without her felt very much like the empty place in my heart where my father was supposed to have been.

Everyone was in agreement on the matter of Vilebloods except me. When they spared me a glance I nodded or smiled and tried to put forth the same vigor and energy for hunting down things as they did. A few moments later, black-haired Executioner Orius brought in a china tea set. I caught a rare smile from Essex as Orius caught his foot on the edge of the vault’s circular door and stumbled. He was well known for his tendency towards clumsiness and was quite practiced at compensating for it. Despite stumbling he hardly so much as rattled the tea tray.

“It’s a jasmine blend.” He announced, even though no one had asked.

Orius felt the need to fill the air with yet more conversation, despite it already being polluted. The other Executioners all nodded dismissively as he made to set the tray in the center of the table.

Orius swallowed, brushed a clump of hair aside and continued, “And they’ve done a poached pear for dessert.”

“Fine.” Executioner Alfred said.

“I’ll just go on and serve that out then.” Orius said.

He was talking far too much. Perhaps I was the only one to pick up on it but it was clear he was meant to leave, not stay and pour tea. An uneasy tension fell over the room while he traipsed about filling the tea cups and asking how many sugars we needed.

“Didn’t know we had any sugar left, given the season.” Sussex said.

His brother’s eyes narrowed in a way I could not understand. Sussex smiled and sipped his tea smugly. At last all the drinks and softened baked fruits had been passed around. Orius was able to collect the tray and leave the room. I’d hoped talk would continue but something in the air had changed and could not be gotten back. Alfred was no longer trying to provide a light mood and there was too many convoluted asides for me to keep up with.

All of the food started to swirl in my stomach. I stood up, bowing to everyone and made for the door.

“Executioner Essex, won’t you show Patience where he can sleep for the night?” Alfred asked, “I think he’d do best with some time to himself.”

“My dormitory is still open.” Executioner Kelfazin offered. “He’s more then welcome to-”

“That is kind of you, but let him retire in private.” Alfred insisted, “He’s had a difficult day.”

“Indeed.” Said Executioner Kelfazin. He glared as I went past. I couldn’t understand it. He’d never wanted me for a roommate before, always complaining about the space I took up. I followed Essex out of the vault and down several hallways.
It had been a long time since I’d been in the Executioner’s wing- the actual Executioner’s wing. They all had plush pillows, embroidered bedspreads, shelving units. There was room and private spaces, though some had left their doors open. A few of the rooms were decorated after some fashion, with paintings or woven hangings. Nothing was as elaborate as Frigga Hemlock’s room, but there were definitely distinct people given each area.

“This one’s yours.” Executioner Essex said.

He pushed open a plain white door, to a plain white room. This was more like what I was used too, but it too had been embellished. There were curtains and a beautifully made comforter over the bed. It had little silver logarius wheels sewn all over it. This must have just been their standard issue stuff, but it was still very nice.

It was all spoiled by the book and the scourge. My Mother must have stopped by before returning home. The book lay open, and the multi-tailed whip had been lain inside in place of a bookmark.

“If you need anything I’m down the hall.” Essex said, “That is when I’m back from the meeting with Alfred.”

I nodded, stepping inside my room and pulling the door closed. At last I didn’t feel the eyes of a hundred people baring down on my shoulders. They weren’t able to rest, not just yet. There was a chair to sit in, and I tried to rest in it. The only place to look was the bed and in the center demanding attention was that book.

I couldn’t put it off forever, but it could wait. It could wait just a little while.

It was a rocking chair- the one they gave me. I remember when I was little, I used to mistake them for rocking horses. The other schoolboys all had little wooden carriages or dogs or horses. My Mother didn’t think it appropriate for me to have anything, when Charity and Chastity, Kindness and Temperance, Diligence and Humility should all have to do without. I did not get little wooden things to play with, and I’d told them all it didn’t matter because I had a rocking horse at home.

There was no end to their disappointment when one day the biggest, loudest little bullfrog of a boy, Brandon demanded I have the lot of them over and produce the magnificent horse. I was so ready to settle up and prove them wrong that I agreed. Brandon laughed right in my face when I proudly presented the rocking chair to the expectant school boys. They never asked to visit or come play again, and I was scolded for bringing people home without asking.

I knew the difference now of course, but why should it have to be so different? They performed the same function. I swung back and forth in the chair a few times before the memory played out and I was left feeling hollow. I unclipped the Executioners mantel, unbutton the capelet and slipped off my shirt. I laid the clothes neatly over the back of the rocking chair, and tried to avoid looking in the mirror as I went to be bed.

My mother had written my sins in for me. I couldn’t believe it possible that she had managed to fill half a page in the small allotment of time between when she’d been and when I’d arrived. There was enough there for seven evening’s punishment.

In all her careful catalogs she’d left one thing out- I’d left one thing out. I looked around for ink and quill and found both in the bedside table. I’d meant to write it for a long time, but was always afraid to put my thoughts down permanently. I no longer had that fear. Somewhere in the woods I had cast it aside- and if I was meant to bleed and suffer for doing so then so be it. My mother had filled half a page, I would fill ten. I set the scourge aside and took up writing. I wrote down every selfish wish of mine until my cheeks were red with the shame of it all. Over and over, on every
page until I’d lost count of how many times I had put it down.

“I want to be a girl. I want to be a girl. I want to be a girl.”

My mother had left a recommended punishment, but I ignored her numbers completely. My back would take strikes until my hands shook and could not give anymore. I tried not to stain the floor, but when I was through the blood had soaked through the waistband of my pants, come down my legs and pooled on the polished wooden floors. I wanted to ask Executioner Essex where I might find a cleaning rag, but I had not the wit left to work out how, nor the stamina to walk there. I couldn’t even stand.

I had to crawl to the wash basin, and take the pitcher and bowl down to the floor. I wanted to wash off, and tried to tip water out into the bowl to mix with soap. Only then did I realize that no one had filled the pitcher. It was empty. My back felt like it had been set on fire, and now I’d no way to douse it. I curled up on the floor, blending the hot sting of the scourge with hot tears from my eyes. What a fool I had been. What an absolute fool.

It had been a nice white room and I was turning it red. I hadn’t spent one night in it properly and now I was staining the walls and the floor. If I were able to make it to the bed, the beautiful sheets would be next.

“Kos almighty!”

I looked up from the floor, astonished to see the door wide open and the black-haired Executioner, Orius looking down at me. A tray of biscuits wobbled in his hand, just about to drop. What a sight I was, curled on the floor covered in blood clutching a scourge. It was the same position I’d killed my siblings in. If only I could explain.

I tensed, surprised to find that I was nervous for the sound of the falling plate and the clatter of broken dishes. I didn’t want to hear that almost more then I didn’t want anyone to see me like this. I waited, but it did not come.

Orius rushed inside, flinging the plate on the bed. His hands were on my shoulders, gently, hardly bearing down at all. He was afraid to touch me. I tried to reach up and brush his hands away. I was fine, I could handle this on my own. He misunderstood, taking my hand and pulling me up until I was sitting. He put his fingers on my face, gently brushing away the tears.

“Hey, hey, what’s happened to you, kid?” He asked.

How could I explain? It hurt to sit, all the torn skin tearing further. I could not tell him. I dropped the stained scourge on the floor and pointed at the tasseled capelet resting over the chair.

“This is a vow-taker thing?” He asked.

I nodded.

Orius puffed up his cheeks then let his eyes go wide as he blew all the air out. “Shit.”

I nodded.

“Vows or not, we can’t let that get infected. Come on now let’s go, let’s get you cleaned up.” He said.

I shook my head. I didn’t want to stumble down the hallways leaking red and attracting the attention of everyone. I’d had quite enough attention for one day. He tried to argue with me, and
truth be told I felt airy, insubstantial. I wasn’t sure I weighed anything at all. Orius did not grip me tight nor did he lift with any real power or force, so I stayed where I was. I was certain he was capable of forcing me to rise, but for whatever reason he did not.

“Better if I clean you up here?” He asked.

I nodded. Sure, anything he liked just don’t make me subject to a walk of shame down these halls. Anything but that. He promised to be back quickly, and I tried to keep myself collected until I was sure he was gone. The second he’d left the room I lunged for the book and shoved it under the bed. I didn’t want him to see, there was a chance he’d caught a glimpse when he’d flung the biscuits asunder. He might’ve made mention if he had. I doubted he had. Maybe I was lucky and he was illiterate, but I couldn’t risk anything more. Those pages were going to have to be ripped out and burned.

Later. I hardly had the strength for it now. I slid the whip under the bed too. It left a snake-like trail of blood on the floor which I promised myself I’d scrub out before going to bed. If the stain had time to set I’d be done for and it would be much more arduous to try and take out. Never put off to tomorrow, as they say.

Orius soon returned with a basin, a pitcher, several rags and a bar of soap. I was able to hear him coming. The combination of heavy footfalls in oversized boots at a sporadic clip was unmistakable. Sometimes I really couldn’t see how people went on making noises they were completely unaware of. The vow-takers had taught me how to step without making a sound, even on the creakiest oldest floors.

“Sorry that took so long.” Orius said.

I shook my head, it was nothing.

“Turn ‘round now.” He said, “Let me clean you off.”

I was sure that my Mother wouldn’t have thought this appropriate. She had been worried that I would grow to have what she called “unnatural thoughts” about boys. She’d fretted about it so deeply she almost kept me from becoming a novice because of the shared showers, but I must have kept a clean record in the end. I was allowed away.

I tried to take the cloth from him, but wasn’t able to manage to communicate my intentions clearly enough. Being tired was very difficult, tired and hurt impossible. Often I lacked the energy to resist. I braced myself on the bed frame while Orius pressed a soapy rag and cool water to my burning scars. Like rain after a drought, it was a rapturous thing.

He was surprisingly methodical, slow and careful to clean unlike his haphazard actions. He of course, talked as he worked.

“Don’t you worry kid, I’ve had my fair share of accidents. I know how to clean a wound, stitch a cut, set a bone and fill a syringe. I was too cheap for proper doctors, even that one who’ll do it for free what’s gone missing. He was okay but cor, did he have a scowl about him. I don’t like being judged and asked a bunch of questions as to how I got injured. It ain’t like there’s a guidebook about most of the stuff I get up too.”

I did my best to nod or twitch my finger or give some sign that I was listening to what Orius said, but I was of a mind he didn’t much care one way or the other. He kept on talking while he rung bloody water out into a basin and applied bandages. I didn’t want to be bandaged but he insisted. I’d have to take them off first thing in the morning, the cuts were supposed to be a stinging
reminder. Infection was worth fearing though—there were times when even my Mother allowed exceptions. This would just have to be one of those.

“You’ll be alright now.” Orius said, giving me a pat on the head. “I know it’s hard making mistakes, Kos knows I made more than my fair share. For a long time I punished myself for them too, but that’s not the important part, kid. The important part is learning from them.”

I thought about his words as he cleaned off the last of the rags. Atonement had always come paramount to all else in my Mother’s lessons, but Orius was right. Everyone I knew had to have made at least one mistake—some of the hunter’s mistakes cost the lives of their fellow men. Why was I the only one putting scars on my back for it?

I didn’t know what to say, so I just nodded. His talking didn’t annoy me as much as it had before. When he stood, everything was an awkward mess in his arms. It was late and I ought to have gotten myself into the biscuit covered bed and slept, but I didn’t want too. His hands were full but I grabbed the nearest pastry and offered it to him. The layers of icing were sticky on my fingers, leaving smears across the bedspread. They’d have to be cleaned away too—but that could wait.

Orius smiled and set his burden down on the floor.

“Sure.” He said, “Don’t mind if I do.”

We brushed aside the remaining baked goods, taking one a piece and munching while sitting on the side of the bed. It was far too late for sweets, far too intimate to have anyone sitting beside you on a bed, but it didn’t matter. I was a full fledged Executioner, put here by my mother’s own hand. If she was going to give me power and position, if all the collected would consent then I must be allowed to make my own choices now and again.

I chose to eat a pastry when I should’ve been sleeping. I chose to listen as Orius droned on about everything and nothing. I chose to write down my desires and sins in that book, and I chose to bandage my wounds afterwards.

Before this day I’d made another important choice—one I ought to have stuck too like the icing that now glued the wrinkles of my bedsheets together. I chose to forsake this order, this city and go find my father. That was the choice that mattered. I would find a way to make amends for the many many mistakes that I was sure to encounter along the way, but more important I would learn what I could from them.

I didn’t clean the rest of the biscuits off the bed or scrub out the stains. I crawled under a blanket that was equal parts fabric and food and slept on my stomach with my face pressed into the sweet-smelling pillow. I slept until someone knocked at the door to rouse me. I was groggy upon waking, it didn’t feel as though I’d been asleep very long. I suppose that’s what comes of staying up and eating patisserie.

“Patience?”

I didn’t recognize the voice, and walked to the door with cautious steps. They didn’t make a sound.

I pried open the door only the smallest bit, and found Strix Savoy waiting on the other side. I was both relieved and confused. It would’ve been a scary thing to find my Mother or Patron Executioner Alfred on the other side. Strix Savoy still had that temper to be afraid of, but I didn’t think he’d come about any sins I might have committed in my sleep.

“May I come in?” He asked.
I opened the door wider and let him pass through. I’d known him to be direct and fairly sensible, there was no danger in letting him in. He started to pace across the floor. I motioned towards the chair, trying to help Strix settle.

“I prefer to stand, thanks.” He said.

I nodded.

“Thanks.” He repeated.

I closed the door and sat down, swinging my legs and waiting for him to explain his sudden intrusion. He kept pacing awhile, swinging his hands back and forth and looking at everything in my room except me.

“This is difficult to explain.” He said.

I nodded, doing all in my power not to sigh. Being patient and obeying my namesake was all well and good, but it was a lot to ask of someone first thing in the morning. I guess part of being a full-fledged Executioner was letting people into your bedroom at all hours of the night.

“Long story short you need to come with me. You need to come with me to see the Powder Kegs.” Strix said.

I nearly jumped off the bed in excitement. I was eager to attend anything to do with the Powder Kegs at all. The more I got to be around the weapons makers the more chances I had to hear word of my father, or learn about his craft. I hadn’t had the proper chance to tinker with tools in a long while. I missed working with my hands in a capacity that wasn’t meant for killing or cleaning.

I had to control myself though. I didn’t rise immediately and follow him outside without a second thought. I had a slight bit more dignity then a child during Yuletide.

“It’s very important- I promised to do a favor you see. For someone. I shouldn’t tell you who, then again it’s not like you could tell anyone. You just…you need to come with me ok? I promised to ask and to try and bring you. I am very tired and have been trying to get difficult people to see sense. Please don’t give me a hard time on this Patience. I know I’m being vague and-“

I wasn’t going to let him dance around in confusion forever. I stood up and began lacing my boots. He thanked me in excess and then began to rush and fuss at me. Whatever this was it seemed urgent.

Maybe my father was there, with them. Maybe he’d sent for me, to take me away and we musn’t let on to anyone where I was going. I pulled the laces of my boots tight and then gave Strix a firm nod. I was ready.

I wondered if Strix had told anyone. I should’ve left some kind of note. I hated to think what might happen if the Executioners believed me to have disappeared again. I doubted I’d be welcomed back with the same open-armed enthusiasm. I got the feeling it would’ve been better to stay put and go back to bed. Too bad I was already being pulled down the hall by Strix.

“Come on.” He urged in hissing whispers, “Be quick about it!”

He was as nervous as I, if not more. We sped through the halls, him just as silent and sure footed as I. These were not the clumsy steps of ill-fitting boots, but the silent footfalls of someone used to sneaking. It made me wonder how much the novice Executioner got up to in his spare time. I’d always thought of Strix as someone who followed rules, but he tread like someone used to breaking
them.

He didn’t take me through any secret tunnels or back entrances. Strix was privy to knowledge of his own and had us slipped through a window. I was astonished to find it wasn’t barred as most of the banks windows were made that way to prevent robberies. It served just as well to keep beasts out, we hadn’t gone about removing any of them.

“Careful on the way down.” Strix said before lifting the glass pane and slipping across the wooden frame, “It’s further down then you think.”

The window gave me no trouble. It was just another familiar thing to bring back memories of my father. We’d had to pass through windows to get out onto the roof to work. It was a farther fall then I was expecting- even with the warning. I hit the ground and felt a shake go all the way up through my legs.

“You alright?” Strix asked.

I nodded.

We hurried away from the bank, leaving a little trail of footprints in the newfallen snow. They’d be covered over before long. I didn’t worry too much, I knew the way too and from the train station a lot better then most. There had been times when I was known to run and check for word of my father, but that had been when I was much younger, before I’d really properly been put to work as an Exectuioner novice. It had been so long since I’d gotten a chance to be among the gunpowder and the lively bunch of hunters that composed the odd little covenant.

Instead of approaching the train station directly, Strix pulled me behind some barrels just beyonf the reach of the Powder Keg’s territory.

“We’re going to that box car.” Strix said.

That was fine with me, but why did he have to make it seem like such a secret?

I nodded and tried to keep my feet from tapping. I was too eager to enter the camp. My father could be just a few feet away. If he was behind those wooden doors I was going to hug him so tight and so fiercely that he’d never be able to get me to let go. He’d have no choice but to stay.

A tug from Strix’s hand on my arm, and we were off. He was as fast and silent running as he was walking. I knew that the Powder Keg ground was littered with all kinds of little traps and bombs, so I followed directly in Strix’s footprints. He seemed to be following in someone elses. The snow was on our side tonight.

We didn’t exactly come into the Powder Keg cam unnoticed. I was mostly to blame for that, but I just couldn’t help myself. The Powder Kegs were a hive of activity, making weapons and stoking forges even at this hour. Everything was lit up by sparks of brilliant red and orange fire. Metal glowed popped and sizzled, each new sound begging me to turn and seek its source. These were all the sounds my father made. I expected to see him at any moment, taking a step back from the forge to wipe the sweat from his brow. He could be at one of the work tables, carving away thin curls of metal as he put his signature silver work into the stock of his latest gun.

Every time I stopped for more than a moment there was a hiss from Strix, or a pull at my arm, something to get me moving again. I tried not to get annoyed. It had just been so long.

Waiting for Strix to push aside the door was an agony unspeakable. It was fairly dark inside, only one lantern was lit. I didn’t need any more light to see that my father was not waiting for me inside.
Instead, on a small pile of blankets waited the Patron Huntress, Frigga Hemlock.

With everything inside, I strained to not be disappointed. There was much joy in having her alive. I never wished ill of her, and had sought her safe return as I searched the woods with her Vileblood. The first time at least. The second time hadn’t been my fault.

It hadn’t really been my fault.

I didn’t want it to have been my fault.

“You brought him.” Frigga said.

“I said I would.” Strix replied, “Do you two need some privacy or-“

“I think that would be best.”

She spoke with all the bearings of a queen. Even seated in a nest of rubbish on the floor she was elegant and refined. I’d set my jealousies aside long ago, but Lady Hemlock sometimes poked the sleeping thoughts, just slightly. I stepped inside the box car, gave her a proper hunter’s bow and then sat down to see what she’d called me out here for.

“It’s…good to see you safe.” She said.

I could tell already that it was going to be a difficult conversation. Forced pleasantries were the soothing ointments one prepared ahead of time before they were to deliver scathing conversation. For lack of better communication I nodded, and expressed similar sentiment. It was good to see her safe, she just hadn’t been the person I was hoping to see, not even slightly. I tried to remind myself of all her good points. It wasn’t fair to blame her for things she couldn’t help, and misguided rage because my father was still far from me wasn’t going to help anyone. She had tried to fix my hair, tried to make Fwahe and the others warm to me. There had been the dinner too. She had done her best, I could at the very least hear her out.

“I’m sure you’re wondering why I had Strix fetch you- well maybe you’ve already figured it out. They say you’re a bright one and it’s not as though I’ve kept my feelings for Fwahe a secret.” She continued.

I nodded again. Yes I know why I’m here. Yes I know what you want.

Really I was hoping to just get this awkward interaction over with so I could take a few seconds and search for my father. It didn’t seem as though I’d have the time for it. There was already so much to have to relate about Fwahe. I was tired of telling that story, but I couldn’t very well deny the Patron Huntress anything.

“You will have been the last one to have seen her, won’t you?” Frigga asked.

I nodded.

She struggled with her next sentence. It got itself stuck in her throat, and were it food she would’ve started to choke on it. There were even tears.

She finally managed to cough it up “Is she alive?”

I nodded, before I thought better of it. The circus people might have had her slain by now, I wasn’t truly sure. The last I had seen of her she was living. That would have to be enough. Confirmation of this only seemed to bring on more tears. I could understand that. There was a different sort of grief
in having a person dead, then having them separated from you. Both were potent enough to bring on great bouts of grief.

I couldn’t push away the desire to comfort her. It was an awkward thing, but I took the Patron Huntress’ hands in my own and tried to pass some feeling of comfort between us. It didn’t seem to work, for after only a moment she withdrew.

“Thank you.” She said.

It took her only a moment to brush away the tears, adjust her hair and resume all the elegance she was so well known for.

“Can you take me to where you last saw her?” She asked.

It was clear that Frigga had considered her questions carefully. She didn’t ask for me to break my vows and relate an entire narrative, she cut through the issue with all due efficiency. I was very much capable of getting to the woods, but once inside I wasn’t certain I’d be able to find the place where the circus had been.

I shrugged, not a dismissive thing. Frigga was able to understand it as uncertainty.

“Can you try?” She implored.

I bit my lip and looked at the floor of the box car. The swirling grains of old wooden floorboards did not bring any deeper clarity to my mind while I struggled to sort out my response. I really didn’t want to go wandering in the woods again. The circus men had startled me, especially the one who had shot Lady Hemlock’s horse.

Odeon almighty that was another sorrow for her to discover, if she hadn’t already.

“Please.” She said, “Please Executioner Patience. It is incredibly important Fwahe is returned to my side.”

I couldn’t just leave. I’d barely yet returned and I had promised to meet with Alfred and the others. They were counting on me. I had appointments to keep. I wanted them to be enormous important thing, but re-writing my account of that night with the permission of one of the senior vow-takers seemed a desperately dull task. My wrist hurt from all of the writing I’d done already.

I sighed and nodded. Yes, yes I can show you.

“We must go at once!” Frigga said, rising to her feet in one fluid motion.

I shook my head, but the Patron Huntress was past the point of paying attention. She’d gotten what she wanted from me, and just like that I’d surrendered what little power I’d been given without realizing it. I followed after her, falling into line as I’d always done. She slid open the box car door. Strix Savoy hadn’t left, he leaned against the wooden side of the car watching the passing Powder Kegs.

“Get what you wanted?” He asked.

“We shall see.” Frigga replied, “But I’ve work to do.”

“Work?” Strix asked, “I thought you were to rest, get better. Not draw attention to yourself.”

“Plans have changed.” She said.
Strix scratched furiously at his hair, trying to keep the frustration out of his voice. “You should listen to the doctor.”

“I’m fine.” She said, “And this is urgent.”

“Fine.” He said, “Your will is beyond control. I’ll take Patience home.”

“He’s coming with me.” Frigga said.

Now it wasn’t enough for him to scratch, the frustration boiled over. I looked behind us as the volume of their conversation increased. It didn’t seem we had drawn attention to ourselves. Everything happening around us, just as loud as their words.

“Oh a fool’s errand?” Strix bellowed, “No way. Every Executioner in the nest wants to talk to him. If he’s gone more than a few hours they’ll turn the entire city inside out looking for him.”

“They don’t run this city.” Frigga said.

“As of now they do.” Strix protested, “Everyone knows it. Everyone’s under the Executioners now, how many times does that have to be explained to you?”

She didn’t take kindly to that. While the two of them had their spat I began to slip away. There was a siren song to the forges, beckoning me closer. I wanted to walk amongst the weapons makers once more, and while Strix and Frigga felt like hiding I’d no reason too.

“I’m telling you there’s no reason to limit ourselves to just one barrel on a gun.” A curly haired novice was saying, “If anything four should be a minimum.”

I stifled a chuckle. The recoil from something like that would be enough to shatter a shoulder, let alone the ridiculous amount of time it might take for four barrels to be reloaded. The curly haired novice’s enthusiasm was carried on to two seasoned Powder Kegs who wrapped their arms around his shoulders and mulled the problem over themselves.

“I’ve been down this same path.” One of them said

“Me too.” Echoed the other.

“There’s just no way to reduce the recoil.” Repeated the first.

“Now now.” Cautioned the second, “Best not be tossing never around like it’s going out of style Kostya. If Bao was here he’d know how to do it- that guy could build anything, and make it look lovely too.”

Bao. That was my father’s name.

I snuck even closer.

“He was a proper silver smith.” The second one explained to the novice, “And he had a real talent for being able to fix things. Twenty Powder Kegs might try and fix a stuck trigger, three of them could get fingers blown off in the process to boot, but all you had to do was take it to Bao and he’d fix it right up.”

“Then let’s take this too him!” The novice cried.
Yes. Let’s do it. Let’s go to Bao, let’s find my father. I realized I was nodding and smiling. This was the first news I had heard of him in such a long time.

“Can’t.” Kostya said, patting the young man’s curls. “He ain’t here.”

“Where’s he at then?” the novice asked.

“Last I heard some huge mountain range, way out east.” The first replied, “The Hallelujahs or somethin’.”

“Himalayas.” Kostya corrected, “They’re called the Himalayas, Rayhab.”

“Well I’m sorry I didn’t go to school and learn the names of every little rock and bug and shit.” Rayhab replied.

“They’re the highest range of mountains in the world.” Kostya said, “I mean. I think.”

The novice powder keg drummed his fingers on the worktable while his two elders fought. Clearly a lesson in geography was not where he’d hope this conversation to go.

“If they’re so important how come you only think you know? You’re supposed to be the smart one.”

“I ain’t got all the books I read in front of me. Some of us like to fact check before making bold assumptions.”

I got the feeling I wasn’t going to be getting anything more useful from this conversation. Powder Kegs seemed to fight like cats and dogs. That’s what people said anyway- I’d never actually seen a cat fight a dog. It would be better to say that Powder Kegs fought like carrion crows. They’d tear each other wings off for the parts of a corpse they valued. That I had seen. That wasn’t pretty.

I committed the name of the mountain range to memory. Like Kostya I’d never heard of that place before. Anything outside of Yharnam really hadn’t been a part of the curriculum. We learned of the gods and the beasts and the city, and of course there were some tales of Cainhurst but nothing much beyond that. Kostya must have learned things someplace else.

It might not have even been my father. Bao wasn’t a very common name, though. I’d never heard of anyone else going by it, even my father seldom introduced himself with his given name. My mother had him take a different one, so that he could be blessed by the Healing Church. It didn’t recognize foreign names for whatever reason. He’d chosen Christopher to appease her, but had shared his name with me.

I could still remember the day I’d learned it. As a child mother and father had always been enough in the way of names, and after taking the vows names were of even less importance. It was one of the first times my father had noticed the scars. He’d taken me into the city for a walk. A walk really meant a trip to the café around the corner, where he could satisfy his sweet tooth.

We both loved sweets, but I had come to notice that the more he spent at the café, the worser the news was. Whenever my father asked the waitress for a dozen of anything, I knew he was going to be leaving on another trip soon.

This time felt safe. He’d ordered us each a Danish and a cup of tea. Half of the sugar bowl went into his, while I preferred a bit of honeycomb in mine. He began to tell me about the east, and I leaned forward on my elbows to hear more about the world outside Yharnam. He didn’t spend as long on the details as usual, cutting it short to take my hands in one of his, and turn up my chin so
we met eyes with the other.

“In the east no one calls me Christopher.” He said, “I have another name there…a secret name. I’m going to tell you now Patience, because you are good at keeping secrets and you may need to find me one day. There I am called Bao. It is a secret name but it is also a secret promise. Bao means to protect. I know your mother....she sometimes thinks it is your job to protect the entire world. You must carry it all, do everything. It is my job to protect you. I know I have failed so many times, Patience. So many times- but I promise I'm going to protect you.”

He told me all of this while hiding his face. He didn’t want me to see how much it meant to him, how important it was that I knew these things, these secret words. I remember hearing the splash of tears hitting tea. I had wanted to ask about it, or reach out and comfort him, but I didn’t. I don’t think he’d wanted me to notice.

It was clearly an important conversation, and I had wanted to remember it in perfect detail. When I got home I cataloged all of the details. The dangers of doing so weren’t lost on me. I knew if my Mother found out I’d been writing she’d be furious. It had happened before and I was prepared to make my atonements if need be.

The paper was long lost, but most of the details were still stamped on my mind. I had read over it many times, struggling to find what had caused such sadness. Later on I realized my Mother had asked him to give away much himself so that Yharnam would embrace him. I think he had more regrets then he cared to admit.

“Oi!”

I’d been so caught up in the ancient memory that I hadn’t noticed the Powder Kegs come over to me. The youngest had his face set in angry scowl, but the elders seemed more curious then anything else. I didn’t know which had shouted at me.

I pointed to myself.

“Yeah you!” the novice said, “What are you doing here?”

My mind went blank. There were no excuses to offer.

“Oh my gosh.” Kostya exclaimed, “Let him alone. It’s Patience isn’t it?”

I nodded.

Kostya grinned, “Speak of the bloody devil, that’s Bao’s kid. Bao the blacksmith, just like I was talking about!”

“Can he fix my gun?” The novice asked.

“You are Bao’s boy aren’t you?” Kostya asked.

I nodded.

Kostya elbowed Rayhab in the side with enough enough violent enthusiasim to break a rib.

“See I told you!” He said, “Let him look at the gun. If Bao ain’t here to work on it his kid’s the next best thing.”

I tried to push them away, but they dropped like crows to a carcass. There was no escape, and with
no desire to have my eyes pecked out I let them shepard me over to a workbench. The world around us was a flurry of activity, but I was able to filter it all away and just get down to the strange four-barrel gun in front of me, and the tools scattered about the worn wooden tabletop.

They would soon find I was no substituted for the man who’d sired me. I decided to make the most of the time before that came to light. I wanted to feel tools in my hands again. I borrowed a pair of work gloves from Rayhab and began by unloading a gun. That was one of the first things I’d learned to do.

“It’s always best to check and make sure.” My Father had said, “Carlessness is a silly reason to lose a finger.”

I could hear the advice bouncing around in my head as I followed through on his suggestion and emptied the quicksilver cartridges from the gun. It was surprisingly light without them. The novice must’ve thought that a lighter weapon wouldn’t be able to generate a forceful impact when it bounced against bones. I’d always preferred something with more weight, finding I could hold it steady and direct the recoil where I chose.

I took a hand drill and began to bore a hole in the base of the stock.

“Oi! What’s he doing?” Rayhab asked.

“Shhh.” Kostya hissed. “Let him work!”

I could feel the huddle of Powder Kegs behind me swell in size. Every so often Kostya would let the others know who I was and they’d set down their tasks to stand behind me. The Powder Kegs looked on while I blew away curls of sawdust and cut a lead rod down to fit into the hole and weigh down the stock. I melted the end to seal it inside, then held the gun to my shoulder.

It was better, but nowhere near a useable condition. The stock felt right, but there were four bullets to compensate for. I was going to need more than a lead rod.

I showed the rod in the bottom to the crowd and they nodded their approval. I’m sure some of them had advised the novice to do just as I had. Everyone tries to make lightweight guns when they start out, sacrificing stability for an easier burden on a hunter. Training with guns made you tired of carrying them, carving away excess weight seemed a revelation to a young gunsmith.

It often spelled disaster.

No gun which had been associated with my father was going to fall to pieces. I would uphold his quality even without his level of experience. Everything was going well, until the crowd of Powder Kegs behind me began to shift and press against one another. Someone was trying to break through. I became so worried about the close-packed crowd that I set down the gun to check over my shoulder and make sure they hadn’t trampled anyone.

I watched as a young man broke through the wall of Powder Kegs. He was dressed in a long grey coat that had a pattern of studs on the lapels. He had the scruffy start of a curly black beard growing on his chin and when he spoke there was something faintly familiar about his voice.

“You’re Patience.” He said

It was both question and statement. The Powder Keg didn’t seem to really want for confirmation. He didn’t seem at all unsure of his statement either, but I gave him a nod in the affirmative all the same.
“You won’t remember me.” He said, “For I only met you the once, when you were very young. Your Papa was right proud of you at the time, but I was only a novice and didn’t think much of infants- you must forgive me.”

I smiled and nodded. Of course he was forgiven.

“I studied under your father. He taught me everything I know about weapons making. I even went along on one of his missions beyond the borders of England. My name is Tamal Patel.” He continued.

I offered my hand and he shook it enthusiastically.

“It’s a real honor having you come join us in our time of need.” Tamal said, “But your talent is wasted fixing silly contraptions like this. You should be working things of your own design out for the manufacturing. Never have we had such a big order of guns before, but you needn’t squander yourself in the tedious parts. Come, come, we can find something much more fitting for you to do.”

Tamal hadn’t let go of my arm since he’d started to shake it, and now it was clasped between both of his. He tried to pull me away from the workbench. I was reluctant to leave. I had only just gotten started. The novice looked on with pleading eyes. Kostya and Rayhab did not step in to stop Tamal. Perhaps he was of a higher rank then they were.

It was so hard to tell with the Powder Kegs. They never seemed to elect one leader, but preferred to exist as a dissonant collective. The people they sent to communion were different every time. I could recall seeing Frigga sigh more then once when having to wait for an answer from the Powder Kegs. The entire union was compelled to vote from the seniormost weaponsmith to the newest novice. Everyone counted the same in the Powder Kegs- and their votes took a long time to count.

Still somewhere somehow there was a way of keeping things organized, there had to be. Powder Keg hierarchy was just another item on the pile of conversations I’d meant to have with my Father.

“Did he teach you the trick to keeping a trigger loose enough to fire easily, yet still tight enough as to never fall out of place?” Tamal asked.

I shook my head.

“I was there when he figured it out. We were down in the drowning city that was once Venice.” Tamal said, “It was incredible.”

My father had sometimes spoken of a drowning city, but he didn’t go on about it with the same vigor and detail that Tamal did.

“You could tell it had once been a beautiful thing, like we had to walk over the rooftops and they were all full of carvings and gargoyles and filigree trim. The chapel spires looked like swords sticking out of the sea, that was how high the water had risen.” He said.

I tried to picture it. In my mind I let a flood of rain and rivers pour through the streets of Yharnam building up until all that was left of Odeon Chapel was the slanted rooftops where pigeons roosted. It was impossible to imagine. Where would all the people go?

I suppose that’s why the drowning city got its name. While Tamal’s tale was full of submerged sculpture and adventures fighting the winged two-headed lions that haunted the city roofs, I recalled my Father’s version. He hadn’t mentioned the beauty the city once was, but made a quick
comment about the corpses floating in the sinister tides. One could never be sure if they were truly
dead denizens or re-animate beasts that merely resembled rotting flesh. Apparently he’d been
fooled more then once.

Tamal continued to fill me in with details, and though I was eager to hear more about my father,
the poisonous vines of jealousy began to grow. I could feel them blossoming in my stomach with
every word he spoke. I tried not to let resentment grow, but it was like a weed, it sprung up weather
you wanted too or not.

It just wasn’t fair.

Tamal got to travel with my father, got to learn from him without being scolded. I’d have given
anything to be able to go to all the far away places he spoke of. A father was supposed to
apprentice with their child, that was how so many professions went. It might have been my
destiny to become a great weaponsmaker. I was denied the oppourtnity and being spoken too by
my replacement. It made me mad enough to shout, but of course I couldn’t.

They all called him by his secret name too. I thought it had been our shared little thing. My father
had passed it around a lot more then I’d thought. Was it selfish to wish he’d kept it between the
two of us? Of course it was. I didn’t want him to have to hide himself, and I’m sure he wished that
I didn’t have to remain silent. It was just the way of things. We did as my Mother asked,
neverminding the sour feelings that might spring up as a result.

“I’ve never seen you around before.” Tamal said, “But your father talked about you so much I feel
like you’ve grown up as one of us, you know? Shame you picked the Executioners, we could’ve
really used another one like him.”

I wasn’t to tell him it hadn’t been my choice and that if I were able, he would’ve been the one
feeling like a replacement. More vines, choking my throat and growing leaves over my thoughts. I
needed to cut them down, hold them back. Tamal hadn’t done anything wrong. He was taking my
towards the train station, away from the forges and manufacturing processes. We were about to go
inside when I heard Strix shout for me.

I hesistated, as did Tamal.

“Who’s that?” he asked.

I took off towards Strix before I could offer explination. The box car was easy enough to spot, and
though I truly wished to help the Powder Kegs in any capacity- I didn’t want to hear about all the
stories I wasn’t a part of any longer.

“Wait! Where are you going?” He shouted.

He tried to catch me, but he was too late. I leapt off the train platform and began to rush towards
the Lupeı’s boxcar. I had to dodge sparks from the forges and Tamal created quite a stir when
calling out after me.

Even when I was wearing different clothes from everyone else, I knew how to get lost in a crowd. I
was so used to blending in, it happened without a second thought. It wasn’t long before Strix was
pulling me back into the boxcar.

“Where the hell have you been?” He asked, “Did anyone see you?”

“Don’t scold him.” Frigga said.
His fists, caught tight in my collar, slackened. I tried not to look nervous. Strix took a few deep
breaths to steady himself before he spoke again.

“We could get in some real trouble for being here.” He explained. “I’d prefer it if you didn’t call
attention to yourself.”

Too bad. It was a little late for that.

“We’ve got to get going, anyway.” Frigga said. “We can’t afford to waste anymore time.”

“I still don’t think this is a very good idea.” Strix said.

She shrugged. “It’s different from last time. The bloody crow won’t be able to sneak up on me as
I’m not going alone.”

He nodded. “I’ll cover for Patience as long as I can…but please for the love of Kos don’t disappear
again.”

I locked my pinky around Strix’s swearing not to go missing. This would be as quick a trip as I
could stand for it to be. Frigga tied up her silver mane of hair. It was beautifully long and the
patterns her hands made while tying her hair with ribbons were bewitching. I wish mine were that
long, and hers had such a lovely curl too it. I patted the short stalks of blonde-and-black that stuck
out from my neck at odd angles. They refused to be tamed. I never had any luck with it.

Viorel Lupei lent us some of his old cloaks. We pulled the hoods over our heads and followed Strix
back into the city. Frigga had insisted on getting horses for our excursion. This was beginning to
feel all too familiar. Bad things happened when I went into the woods, and without words to warn
of them, they were bound to happen again.
There was the overpowering desire to met out justice in Lord Death’s name. If I could slay the medicine man then a thousand tributes would arrive at his doorstep. What better gifts to be given, what sweeter way to pay the Piper?

He had the audacity of absence at my arrival. I did not want to disappoint my sworn patron and spent my rage at him on everything in my path. The cabinets were smashed, medicines crushed. Someone would die as a result of this. By that I did not refer to the bloated landlord nor the nosy tenants who had become carpets of crimson and corpses, laid across rotting floorboards. I thought of every stick and starving Yharnamite who went begging favors from the medic, buying medicines and poultices for their frail bodies. They strove to preserve their little lives with everything they had.

They would sell their very soul for a few more days of breath. The life that came in awkward gasps out past yellowed teeth and diseased tongue was miniscule in comparison to the eons I was capable of thriving in. The old lords of Cainhurst had seen the rise and fall of more suns then these maggots could even consider in their dizziest daydreams. I would know worlds that they couldn’t possibly imagine.

Such a future came with heavy pricetag. Lord Death wanted the meek slaughtered, the cowards culled. Our futures were one in the same, full of promise and prosperity. I would sculpt whatever world he desired so long as my sweet sister was a part of it.

To think she might be within grasp, gone away in some woods under some false name. Fwahe. It was like the sound of spitting. I couldn’t imagine a less elegant name for a more elegant person. What could’ve stupefied her to take it.

Yet it might not be. There was always that chance that this was yet another wild goose chase and I would come out with nothing, but another blood-stained path behind me. I was so tired of running after foggy things. I wanted goals carved from marble, something I was certain of. Alois, my sweet sister I wanted something to hold again.

So I made sure to put myself in the good graces of the lord who was going to get her for me. There was not a remedy in that room which escaped my corruption. I was of half a mind to lie in wait for the medic to return, come crawling back to his pathetic practice only to be devastated. Briefly he would sink into sweetest sadness, and afterwards death. Death at my hands, for what humiliation he’d caused me. I was forever shamed by the way the two of them had run free in the night, and this condemned labyrinth had opened up to hide them.

No.

No. It would not due to dwell on my failures. Lord Death had already forgiven me. How sweet it was to be forgiven, to never be forced to languish in one mistakes and parade embaressed through the stone-faced judgement of hundreds of respected families. I remembered the feeling, like hands crushing my neck. All the air went to syrup and stuck in my throat. I was blinded by their scathing eyes, the scowls painted in plunging curves over frowning lips.

On the nights I slept they came for me, the army of stone. It was a tool they wanted and would
achieve their sharp edge by whatever means. Apply to whetstone until the unsavory bits had all been scraped away and everything was a perfect copy readied for war. I was not to even be a sword but a pen, someone to head a family.

Someone to settle with a single wife. What indignity that I should have to raise children and be a crowned lord when there was so much more available to my traitorous brother and honey-sweet sister. She was the one who should be shackled to a throne, just as her beloved queen. I would not mind lording over much of what I was provided, but a man had desires. A beast had cause to hunt and to deny them their chance at prey for a chance at domestication was cruelty. One could not make a lap cat of a lion.

The smell from the medic’s pantry was noxious. He had stuffed an odious amalgamation of flesh and eyeballs in with shriveled vegetables. I wasn’t sure of its purpose, but I sense an evil within the creature and strove to crush and kill it. It didn’t bleed. Not like the things I had fed from before fleeing through the window and heading for the woods.

It was petty revenge but it was enough of a catharsis that I didn’t feel as though I had to go chasing after the both of them. Perhaps it was a childish thing, to smash someone else’s toys because they had wronged you- but I thought the same now as I’d done then. They should consider themselves lucky it was their toys and not their lives. I could’ve broken fingers. I could’ve snapped necks.

I had left so many dead things in these woods. The hunters would think them haunted long after I had gone. Already there were rumors spreading, something to be heard on the streets. The denizens called me the ripper or the bloody crow. They weren’t particularly flattering names, and dressed as a hunter I did not stand out as the man they feared.

As I left the city I looked over a pile of damp newspapers. The headline “Ripper at Large” was boldly stamped on the front page, and beneath it a drawing of a handsome gentlemen in a feather cape. The artist had drawn someone with shorter hair and a moustache, more of what a Yharnamite might find desirable. Clean shaven, as of Cainhurst was not particularly the style. I suppose I should consider myself fortunate that they hadn’t drawn their visage of me like some twisted vaudevillian adversary. That would’ve been quite the embarrassment. Still I found myself wishing they had gotten it right.

“Oi! Thissain’t no library. Buy or keep walkin’ mister.”

These denizens were unbelievable. I ought to have made plans to come back and kill him, but he was fortunate I was full. I’d no desire to stand out either. Most of the blood from the landlord and his renters was caught on the black feathers of my cloak, which was packed into the bag over my shoulders. Here and there I still showed signs, I had been overhasty.

Such errors could be the difference between a lifetime of glory and successes, or an untimely demise after a shameful parade through streets full of inferiors. I did not want to disgrace myself and fall to their Executioners just because I hadn’t wanted to change clothes. Rage made fools of all men, and I must not allow myself to fall victim to such human failures.

Still, insulting customers was really no way to do business. He needed to be taught a lesson. If there were people in the world who might speak to Alois like that it was best to eliminate them before I found her again. I need not make a scene, nor either feed off the fruits of my labors. I set the newspaper down and made as if to storm past the offensive man. I proved more then disgruntled waif, sliding my knife from my sleeve I let it lick sharpened tongue across fragile throat.

How simple it was to spill blood. His black and white paper wouldn’t stay pristine for much
I casually wiped the blade clean on a stack of pages before slipping it back into my jacket. I was rounding the corner before anyone noticed and the first of the screams were loosed to run rings around my ears. Let them wail and write their little articles. If they wished to call me a bloody crow I would have to live up to my name. After all isn’t that what legacies are for?

There was a rush of people both in and away from the square. Those with a strong stomach for the grisly and ill-fated went running to see the corpse before the constables had it removed. The sensible and squeamish fled the scene fearing another attack. I wonder if they knew that among the throng of boots pounding over the pavement there lurked the very killer that gripped their lives with such tower. How wonderful to have power over them again. It was not the same as the endless supply of wide-eyed begging bleeders, but it would do.

As I drew nearer the woods new obstacles arose. Someone had stationed hunters at the gates, controlling the flow into the city. They inspected bags and questioned those who passed beneath the stone archway. As many as they were letting pass, none were able to exit. Come to Yharnam and come to stay.

One of the guards boasted the golden helmet of the vile order that had slaughtered my kinfolk. I knew none of the attackers, neither name nor appearance. It was indignity beyond reckoning to be unaware of the name of my queen’s killer, my mother’s killer. All of them deserved retribution. How I longed to place the broken corpses of the wheel-wielders over their bones. That much peace they deserved, despite how they cast me aside.

If I were to kill these guards the hunters would be after me in a moment. I did not know what spies they might have waiting on rooftops, ready to shoot me down with a silver bullet before I’d the chance to make my escape. I would have to use my wits to find a way through. Judging what I was up against I didn’t think it would be much of a strain.

I adjusted my coat. The leather did not take to blood at all, anything on me had been repelled by the slick material. Cotton shirt cuffs however were another matter. I did my best to tuck them under the sleeves of the jacket, lest the red stain show and spoil my innocent visage.

“How now, brother hunter!” I called as I came upon the guards.

There was the quizzical raising of eyebrows and I strained to hide my disappointment. I was still yet to master this increasingly frustrating Yharnam dialect. Why couldn’t they just speak as cultured men?

“What’s your business here?” a girl with brown hair growled. She wore the cape of the Executioners but not the helmet, perhaps an apprentice.

I was clever enough to have thought this out. They would never have put aside the search for their past monarch and that was where I directed my efforts.

“Those woods have been turned inside out already.” The girl replied. “Who’s orders do you act upon?”

“Those of our honored patron.” I said, “Executioner Alfred.”

The girl turned to her helmeted companion.

“That’s funny.” They spoke. Gloved hands reached up to remove the Golden Ardeo. Behind the wall of metal was Alfred’s face. “I don’t recall giving any such orders.”

She folded arms across her chest, allowing a satisfied smirk. The wretched black widow had spun a
web around me, and it had not gone unnoticed. The stream of people passing by began to break off and crowd. They wanted to see what was causing their bold protectors pause.

Meanwhile my mind was racing, trying to figure out how to smooth over the situation. I began to suggest that this might have all just been a misunderstanding, but the brown-haired girl wouldn’t hear of it. She had leapt at me without warning, wrenching my arms behind my back and trying to take me down to my knees. She lacked the strength.

“Matta!” Alfred exclaimed, “Let the man speak his piece.”

“He’s a liar, sir!” She argued. “You just witnessed it.”

“I prefer to have his side of it, before we go jumping to conclusions.” Alfred replied, “It wouldn’t do to seem...how shall I put this? Inhospitable. We shall escort him back to the bank with all due haste. Help him off the ground.”

“Yes, Patron Executioner.” She muttered.

The ungrateful wretch was dull enough to let her hands slacken. The second tension left my wrists I twisted free, rolling out from under her and scrambling to my feet. I bolted for the woods, ready to run until the soles of my boots were worn to nothing.

I did not bargain on the speed at which Alfred was capable of stopping me. He hadn’t seemed a man built for speed, rather broad of shoulder and full of stomach. He moved with all the grace of a cat and his gloved hand grabbed my collar, stopping me seemingly without effort.

The onlookers gasped. Alfred clicked his tongue.

“Perhaps I was wrong to stop you.” He said.

I was about to tell him he most certainly was. The nerve of this man, to grip a lord of Cainhurst by the shirt, like some common mongrel.

“I would think so, sir.” The girl replied.

He didn’t regret restraining me at all. He’d been speaking to the young one and completely ignoring me.

“Unhand me!” I shouted.

“Is that any way to speak to your Patron?” Matta asked.

I lunged at her. She caught me by the wrist. A moment later her nose wrinkled in disgust. As the sleeve of my jacket slid down she could see the stained shirt beneath and began to realize that both the fabric and her hand were covered in blood. She pulled away in surprise, worried she might’ve hurt me.

“He’s bleeding!” She cried

Alfred looked down.

“I don’t think that’s his blood.” The Executioner said.

I struggled with all due ferocity, but others quickly arrived at the Executioner’s side. My worst nightmare began to materialize as helm after gold spiked helm wove through the crowd to help Alfred restrain me. Strong hands clamped down on my arms. Someone tore off my coat.
Carelessness. Mother Seren had always warned of carelessness. When I had spent my rage in feathered bedrooms I had learned to hide the bodies. She didn’t like finding them, nor the bloodstains. If our appetites grew too strong I knew how to sate them, but one must have their dishes done after a meal. I could already hear her preparing another lecture from beyond the grave. It looked as though she might deliver it sooner than expected.

I was all but carried through the streets. There were so many with hands on me. Some of the bolder denizens thought it suitable to help their heroes propel me across the cobbles.

I bore it all with a lord’s dignity. There were no shouts of protest or undignified struggle. Though Alfred’s hand held tight, I did not allow him to press my head down so that it might hang like unwanted laundry. A few people tried to take the hunter’s hat off me, but a snarl and a flash of teeth was enough to make them retreat. The cries of outrage burned in my ears as I was taken up the stairs and into the Executioner’s fortress. It was a towering place with huge columns and row after row of barred windows. Who might’ve guessed a bank could seem so formidable?

The denizens had crowded below, hurling insult and accusation as I was taken inside. Hunters accused me of slaughtering everyone and everything. Some called me the Ripper. Others insisted I had murdered Frigga and the very concept of patience itself. Such ridiculous angry creatures. If only there weren’t so many I would crush them under my heels.

I showed no fear, confident that I’d be able to escape them, come whatever might. They’d merely surprised me. I would find myself an opportunity and get out of this wretched city. I promised Lord Death the souls of every person who’d laid a hand on me. None of them were suitable for this world, and when I brought Alois back they would be a danger to her. I could not allow for that.

“Put him in with the Vileblood!” Someone shouted.

Vileblood? Did they know? Was someone here aware of me?

No. I was getting ahead of myself. They had wanted to put me in with a Vileblood. Another Vileblood. Could this one be Fwahe? Perhaps capture was yet another strange means of Lord Death’s guidance. We were to be joined at last.

“Where’s Savoy?” Someone asked, “Vilebloods are his department.”

“Yeah especially that one he’s sleeping with.”

“He’s not sleeping with her!” Matta growled, “And we’re not putting them in the same cell.”

“It’s the only cell.” Someone mentioned.

“We’ll tie him to a chair in the vault.” Matta said, “If we lock it no one is getting in or out.”

“No way.” Another Executioner protested, “That’s Alfred’s office. We’re not going to lock suspicious persons in there.”

There arguments continued, and though I’d no knowledge of this bank it felt like I was being taken around in circles. Alfred had separated from the group, too many rowdy enthusiasts for his taste. How like a lord to be above it all, almost commendable if it wasn’t for his position. Additionally there was the fact that I intended to crush his skull the first chance I got. There was only hope for worthy opponent, which he could not possibly live up too.

In the end I was shoved into a room filled with books. The hunting party split, half gone off to search for the one called Savoy and the other half set to organize a trial. I pulled myself off a pile
of literature, head swimming with sudden dizziness.

I shoved a volume off of my chest. As it slid away I realized it was one I’d read before. Whomever it belonged too was studying flowers, and in a sudden flash I recalled the brief study of botany I was put through as part of my lessons.


“A-actually I find it v-very informative.”

No one told me this cell was occupied. I looked over my shoulder to find a ragged orange haired woman with cracked glasses. She had a scarf wound around her throat despite the warmth of the stuffy room. Her hands were stained with ink and she clutched a sheaf of paper to her chest as she spoke- smearing more ink across the soiled shirt.

“I didn’t realize that you were here.” I said.

“They didn’t warn me there was g-going to be company.” She replied.

I could see a strain in the throat, working too hard to keep the fear out of her voice. I usually found myself growing hungry at the sight of such things- bulging throats and nervous cracked lips but not this time. There was something wrong about her. I stood, doing my best not to plant my feet on any of the tomes lest I loose balance and look a fool.

“It is not as though I intended to end up here.” I said, “Who are you?”

She blinked several times, cleared her throat and looked down at her papers instead of meeting my gaze. “I’m Templeton Kingsley.”

She said it shamefully and at the same time I got the feeling this was someone whom I was supposed to have knowledge of. I didn’t. That wasn’t something she need know.

“Well you need better taste in literature.” I said.

She coughed and than forced a smile, “D-do you read much?”

How rude of her to be completely uninterested in introductions. I’d gone through the trouble of asking for her particulars. Why should she be more interested in books then me?

I rolled my eyes. “Yes.”

“What do you like to read?” She pressed me.


“Y-yes of course.” She stammered, “Books. If you’re looking for a particularly educational one about root systems I’ve several decent volumes. There’s even one from an old choir novice that details the cultivation of coldblood flowers.”

She turned to grab the aforementioned journal, and that was when I saw the scarf shift as her neck stretched. There was something scratched into the back of her neck. The more she strove the more I saw, and gradually the jagged angles of a crudely etched letter “V” marked her one of my kind. No wonder I hadn’t the desire to consume her.

I had never seen her before- and surely I had not made her. The Executioners had hunted down the ones I’d made to amuse myself- little wind up toys with short shelf-lives. They never were able to
control themselves, nor keep their appetites in check. Such fun to watch the raw power that came about when desperation prepared ones meals, but failed to clean up afterwards. The wind-up Vilebloods were enough to pass the time, until their inevitable executions.

She didn’t much look a Vileblood. The Executioners who had hurried me along made me think she’d be a threat. They made me think she might’ve been Alois. How disappointing. One of our species with orange hair. My mother would be rolling in her grave. It had been bad enough to have my eyes come out green instead of blue. This would’ve been castle-wide scandal.

It would be best to slay this one.

I couldn’t afford to risk doing so now. I hated to give the Executioners any undue credit but they had me in a little bit of trouble. Killing her now would only raise suspicion. For a Vileblood she seemed docile anyway, I did not fear her. She was nothing but an insult.

“That’s enough talking in there!”

Looking beyond the bars I recognized one of the twin Executioners from the Hunter’s council.

“Yes, Executioner Sussex!” Templeton replied.

She gave me a sympathetic wince before handing me a leather bound book. I looked down at the cover. It was billed “The Private Findings of Yilmarie Bennet- a catalog of useful plants”. Once again it hardly seemed an interesting read and upon further examination it was filled with hurried handwriting.

“This is illegible.” I proclaimed.

“Quiet!” Sussex barked.

Templeton winced again, reacting to the outburst as though someone had slapped her. Pathetic. I had seen Alois stand against men ten times her size and never flinch even if they were to draw swords. What a useless creature this wretch was.

Boredom prompted me to examine the text again. I couldn’t stand around and wait for other men to decide my fate without fear of madness. At least the words would be something to focus on. I tried to give them my full attention but the person who had written this journal couldn’t stick to one topic. There were whole paragraphs of personal anecdotes and scribbled drawings. The name Abbot Minimus was mentioned more then any sort of botany. I couldn’t imagine why this had the scholar’s recommendation.

“Did a mad man write this?” I asked.

“I said quiet!” Sussex barked.

He slammed the hilt of his sword against the barred door of our room, producing a sharp ring which echoed several times before dissipating.

“You know what quiet means don’t you?” He asked.

I bit my tongue in the effort to remain above him. There was no reason to play into the childish games of this man and allow him the feeling of superiority that small men craved. I was better then that. I closed the book and let it fall to the floor. It crashed into several others, which slammed into the ground a hundred times louder than the metallic ringing.
What could he do? I hadn’t spoken.

It was the same sort of games Alois and I had used to play with each other, seeing what we could get away with. She was endlessly bored and our little adventures in curiosity had become a way to break up the time between hunts for the eager knight. She couldn’t always be in service of Annalise. When her skills were not called upon she sulked in her chambers, ever dressed in full suit of armor waiting for her next summons.

That was when the questions started to bubble to the surface. How long can a bleeder stay alive when they’ve been flayed? How far can one go without arms? Without legs? Without either?

There was always something new to amuse ourselves with, and her hunts more than supplied the storerooms. The wells of Cainhurst blood never ran dry. We drank and we made our wagers, sacrificing when we were wrong, and reveling in triumph when we were right. She had lost so many bets. Alois didn’t know when to quit.

I was a much better judge of character. Sussex made a lunge for me, and though I knew I could pull him right through the iron bars and leave him bleeding out on the ground, I stepped back and avoided his grasp. Sussex slammed his head into the bars instead, and came away bleeding.

“Executioner, please.” Templeton said, “Things don’t need to get violent.”

“You’d like that wouldn’t you?” The Executioner growled, “All that blood?”

Her stomach gurgled. What little liquid ran from Sussex’s cut was enough to stir her senses. I could see hunger in her eyes, something that was enough to have rivaled my sweet sisters. I realized that Templeton looked rather thin and pale— even for one of our kind. There was a discoloration to her skin, a shake in her hands. She was starving.

What a wager this would have been. I bet you can she can kill every Executioner in this hallway. I bet you she could’ve killed every Executioner in this bank. Every hunter in the city. We’d raise and raise until neither could be sure of the outcome, and then let the girl loose. No wonder the madman’s scribbles made sense to her. She was dangling over the edge herself. It was the least I could do to help her out and push her over.

Such a delicious possibility.

She ducked down into the scarf around her neck trying to use the fabric to block the scent of Executioner’s blood. Judging by the size of her dilated pupils it didn’t seem to be working very well. She was just like me when I was younger.

Still the strange girl did not act on her impulses. She turned away and said nothing, even as Executioner Sussex became belligerent. The fool didn’t seem to know or care that her strength was surely superior to his in every way. I was begrudged to give her any credit, a meek thing did not deserve our noble lineage, but she was Vileblood nonetheless. Perhaps I could use her as an ally until such time as my expiration was called for. She would be useful to throw at them while I made a swift exit.

“You speak so boldly to a Vileblood.” I said to the man beyond the bars, “Are you not afraid?”

Executioner Sussex leered and once more tapped on the bars of the cage with his sword. “Not with this between me and the bloodthirsty bitch. You best hope she doesn’t get hungry”

He brimmed with confidence, but I saw only stupidity. Templeton went to labor over her texts and I was left with only growing resentment for my jailer to pass the time. If they were going to put me
on trial why not hurry up and do it already? This was tedious.

Executioner Sussex didn’t seem particularly pleased to have been placed on guard duty. He complained of Savoy’s laziness to anyone passing by in the hall. He made an especially long appeal to his twin when he appeared at the end of the hall arm and arm with a dark-haired Executioner. The two of them were eager to move on, but Sussex held them as captive audience for as long as he could.

“Odd that Savoy should be missing.” The other twin, Essex said. “He is usually easy to find. It seems that Executioner Patience has once more disappeared. How many slip through our fingers.”

“I saw Patience just last night.” The dark-haired one, Orius said.

“What were you doing with Executioner Patience?” Essex asked.

“He needed soap and a bandage.” Orius said, “I just happened to be out in the hall.”

Essex re-adjusted the position of their interlocked arms. His heavyset brow and huffy breath of air spoke of much deeper discomfort then he was letting on too.

“Well find him. Savoy too.” Sussex said, “We’ve got enough trouble on our hands as is. Missing persons are the last thing we need.”

“We’re on it!” Orius declared with a wide grin, “Hold down the fort for us Sus.”

Sussex rolled his eyes, “And mind your formalities.”

The pair headed off down the hall without further comment. Halfway down the hall Orius tripped over his own shoeslace and pulled Essex down with him.

Was this truly the order of men whom I was told to fear- the same sect that held me captive? The indignity of human stupidity was unfathomable. This bank had no windows, no way of judging the passing time. Sussex was given a meal, and they offered one to me as well. I had to maintain appearences and accepted the metal tray, looking down at the stewed meat and soft bread with disdain.

It wasn’t that I was incapable of consuming such things, they were just rather tasteless and tedious. There was no appeal and my stomach would not be sated with the illusion of blood. I would be sickened by it later, that was for sure. With a grimace I began to suck it down. The stew was at least the correct temperature of my preffered meal, but the lumps of stringy beef and half-cooked potato made the meal far from pleasant.

“Better then you deserve.” Sussex muttered. He talked while chewing on a hunk of roasted lamb, grease running down his neck and chin the way blood usually ran down mine.

“It lacks flavor.” I informed him.

The bread at least provided some amusement, something to do with my hands. I pinched bits of dough off and rolled them between my fingers. The little balls of bread were no more palatable then the original provided, but they passed the time.

Templeton was not given anything to eat, and though her stomach made frequent protests she worked at her books without so much as a sideways glance towards our meals.

“They’re ready for him now.”
The proclamation came from the end of the hall. Matta waited for me there. Strangers in spiked helmets assisted Sussex with my extraction, making sure to place and adjust cuffs on my wrists lest I try and harm them. Yet more obstacles to overcome.

The cuffs could be looked at in another light. They’d just locked weapons around my wrists, and a chain for the choking between them. If I found the proper time, it would be all too easy to take them down. The Executioners weren’t allowing me many opportunities.

They kept up their caution around the gentle Templeton, barring her way with swords lest she rise from her desk. She didn’t so much as stir from the text she was reading. She must not have wanted to see. She would’ve made the portrait of model prisoner if not for the incessant growling in her stomach when the scent of Sussex’s blood filled the air. She clutched her stomach in a fruitless attempt to quiet the hunger inside.

“Let’s go.” Sussex barked at me.

I was led like a dog through the halls. In another moment I realized we were back outside. I could feel the biting gusts of wind in the air, though their chill did not effect me as it did my jailers. They pulled up hoods or turned up collars to bar the icy air from their sensitive skin. This was nothing when held against a proper Cainhurst winter. This town could use a blizzard, it might teach them a thing or two about what it meant to suffer. Let their widows frost over and crack. The shoddy rooftops grow heavy with snow to buckle and cave, spilling ice so generously over the shivering bodies below. They were all the easier to hunt down when they stayed inside.

I recognized the room my journey terminated in. We were once more in Odeon Chapel where I had witnessed the uprising of Executioner Alfred. That hadn’t happened so long ago. I didn’t know how the hunters had been running things before, but I was left to wonder if I would’ve been caught so quickly if Frigga Hemlock were never captured. I was prodded into the middle of the room, and found that many of those in surrounding audience were wheel-weilders.

There were other sects of hunter sprinkled throughout the seats but I reasoned that Alfred had stacked his deck. If there was an outcome he wanted he was going to get it, even if this meant a loss of impartial judgement. I would’ve done the exact same thing. Queen Annalise had done it to me the day I was exiled, I just had not had sense enough to see that the crowd was entirely made up of puppets. She pulled the strings on them all, even my sweet sister.

Oh, Alois. What would she think of me now? Should she site me she would say I were not worth saving. I must prove her wrong and assist myself so that I might soon do the same for her.

Alfred called upon the crowd to settle.

“Now brothers, sisters I do not wish this to be a sensationalized moment. Let us deal with this swiftly and seriously, with never-failing justice. Brother hunter, explain yourself.”

“For that matter, name yourself.” Executioner Essex, now seated two chairs from Orius spoke. “Who are you? What group do you belong to and why have you been lying to the Patron Executioner?”

I had to think up some excuses, something that would ensure my innocence and it’s ever-present companion, my release. Fortunately I had my experiences with these kind of sensitive situations.

“Forgive me Patron Executioner, for my aggressive attitude.” I began. It was no easy thing to humble myself, to scrap and bow to lesser men but for Alois and for Lord Death I would endure the insult of such a task. “When I’ve fully explained myself I am sure you will understand that I
meant no insult to you and your—"

“Please, proceed with the introduction and explanation, brother hunter.” Alfred said, “I do not wish this to last longer then it has too.”

The nerve. To interrupt the words of a lord, and a lord contrite none the less. I gritted my teeth and spoke through a strained smile. I offered my traitorous brother’s name coupled with a commoners surname. There was no need to provide my own, nor my lineage and his was such that I should feel no remorse were it shamed and heard so typically none would question the truth of it. There were only women to wonder how so pleasant a visage was shackled with so homely a name.

“My apologies, Patron Executioner. I am called Smith, sir. William Smith. The nature of my relationship with Frigga Hemlock…is sensitive shall we say. I hate to put this kind of business before an audience…perhaps a private omission might be more suited to discussion of a woman of such prestige.”

“Whatever you need say you may say it before my eyes as well as the eyes of my trusted hunters, and the Formless one himself.” Alfred said.

I looked around the room, scanning for those of tender age. It was easy to tell with humans, they were not like those of my bloodline. Age was written across their faces as plainly as printed texts in library volumes. Proper books anyway, not the scrawled journals of a mad man as the half-breed Vileblood preffered to fill her time with. A few looked rather young to my eyes. I gestured towards one of them, who was dressed in a cape of moss and a crown of woven twigs. She did not seem to be one of Alfred’s close confidants and perhaps if I made efforts I might find her dismissed. The thinner the ranks the better my chances.

“There are some here of tender age.” I said.

“I’m as seasoned a hunter as any!” The moss-caped girl piped up.

A small deliberation broke through the ranks. It was reasoned that the young were dismissible and so those who had not yet seen there thirteenth yuletide were bade wait outside. The youth were a great crowd for protesting and tried to petition their elders for a reconsideration. Knowing looks passed between the older hunters assured me no such task would be undergone. They were beginning to get an idea of where this was headed.

Once a final sweep of the crowd was carried out they returned to questioning me. By then I had time to get my story nicely settled and begin to layer falsehoods together until they went from transparencies to ironclad truth.

“Please proceed Good Hunter Smith.” Alfred prompted.

“Yes, Patron Executioner.” I said, laying the false respect on so thick I was even one for the bowing of heads. They would never see beneath the surface. “You see, I have been rather…engaged as a consort with Miss Hemlock for several months now.”

“Consort?” Executioner Essex asked, looking up from a roll of parchment. It seemed he was serving as secretary. “I’m sorry could you clarify what exactly you mean by that.”

“Yes, of course Executioner.” I said, “Miss Hemlock and I were engaged in secretive relations of a sexual nature.”

It seems not all of the children were banished from the court. Muted chuckles broke out from those assembled. Alfred suppressed a wry smile.
“That’s bullshit!” someone shouted.

All eyes, including mine looked across the crowd. The speaker had made no attempt to hide themselves, standing up amongst those sitting. He was also painted almost entirely ghost white, save a charcoal cross on his chest and skeletal war paint on his face. There were several bands of cloth wrapped across the strange man’s chest. They did not appear to be for warmth, and as I stared at my attacker I tried to puzzle out their purpose.

“Would you care to explain that outburst, sister-“


Satisfied with the correction, Lorel continued. “You know the Altered Boys and the Valkyries are very close. That’s no secret. I’ve never seen this man before, not to mention Lady Hemlock was quite happily in consorts with Fwahe.”

“As if her needs could be fully satisfied by another woman.” Someone scoffed.

“Her words to me exactly.” I said.

“This is ridiculous!” Brother Lorel shouted, “In all your time knowing Frigga Hemlock, did you ever once even see her dance with a man let alone kiss one. She was only interested in women.”

“Ridiculous.” Protested a white robed woman. “Things were made compatible between men and women for a reason. We know Miss Hemlock to have been a deceitful person at times, usurping the throne largely with tricks and surprise tactics. She-“

“I will not have you speak ill of her!” Lorel shouted.

The white-robed woman snorted, “You think you’ve any right to speak to me? You conceal your very nature before gods and men alike. I will not speak to one in a disguise. Take off those wrappings and lets have you stand as Kos made you. I do not think you would be so bold then.”

“Sister Moira Anne!” Lorel exclaimed, “I would think that a woman of the church would be more understanding. For those who preach-“

“Do not lecture me, girl.” Moira Anne snapped.

“I am not a fucking-“

Alfred held up his hands for silence. “Settle this on your own time. Lorel, had you anything of actual merit to submit for consideration.”

“Frigga Hemlock only fucks girls.” Lorel said, “Is that clear enough for you, sir?”

He spat the last word like it was an insult. Alfred sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger.

“I can assure you my information and experience are much to the contrary.” I said.

“What reason would she have to invite you into her room?” Lorel asked, “From what I heard…and her Valkyeries could hear, the Vileblood Fwahe kept her quite satisfied.”
I shrugged, “She told me otherwise. Naturally you can see how I would strive to find her by any means, even when that meant attempting to deceive a member of our highest order. I let passion overrule me, Patron Executioner- but I certainly meant no harm by doing what I’d done.”

“Bullshit!” Lorel shouted again.

“Quiet yourself.” Alfred said, “Or I will have you removed from the room. I know it is not a kind thing to uncover secrets about the less than perfect standing of any individual let alone one we have so much respect for, but we cannot let such respect cloud our judgement. If Good Hunter Smith has spoken true then I would put no major punishments upon him. What man has not made some colossal mistake in pursuit of a woman?”

“I’ll remove myself.” Lorel said, “If you’re not going to listen to me I will rally those who will.” The Altered Boy pointed his finger at me, his eyes wild glowing with wild fury. “There’s not a doubt in my mind that that man is dangerous and a liar. If you let him go you’re going to regret it.”

With that he stormed out, leaving the room in an astonished silence. I was able to make sense of the first few whispers. The Altered Boy seemed to have been known to give prophecies before. There were the superstitious ones who wanted to consider the matter with more care, but they were few and far between. I had done my job and provided a narrative which was both easily believable and painted me with full sympathies. No man was going to be put to death for this.

“What now?” Orius asked, the first to speak loud enough to redirect the attention of the assembled.

“Now we put forth a verdict.” Executioner Essex said, “Though I don’t really believe that the issue of Miss Hemlock’s sexual proclivities is one that can be reduced to guilty or not guilty.”

“William Smith’s the man on trial, not Frigga Hemlock.” The white-robed woman reminded everyone.

“Yes.” Alfred said, “And as such we are dropping charges. Set this man free, he has not done anything to warrant arrest. Good Hunter Smith if you feel such passion for your cause, you’ve my permission to sally forth and return Frigga Hemlock too us. At such time we shall simply get her to confirm your testimony and all will be well. Does this please the court?”

All were in favor.

How easy it was to bend their minds to my will. Such simple creatures. Lord Death would be pleased.

Executioner Essex unlocked my cuffs for me, and returned my belongings. No one stood to stop me from hurrying down the stairs of Odeon Chapel. I wanted to be well concealed in the Forbidden Woods before the fickle alliance changed its mind about me. That Altered Boy could’ve made for trouble, if anyone had actually believed him.

He did watch from the stairs though, the one who’d tried to bring me down. I could hear ugly sniffing sounds as I went by. Tears perhaps? How ridiculous. Whatever emotions had overcome the strange hunter he was being comforted by the ugliest Executioner I’d ever laid eyes on. Half the man’s face was disfigured and crumpled into melted shapes. He looked like a painting left too close to the fire, all of the colors pooled, buckled and dripped instead of laying flat and smooth. I turned away and hurried my steps all the more.

That was ever the problem with inexperience. It was hard to temper. One became so caught up in the rightness or wrongness of their stance that thoughts of presentation were cast aside. That was
where it all lay. I was spitting lies as a fountain with water, but humility and elegance were the basin in which they collected. So what if fine wine was carried in by the truth-telling Lorel. No one was going to drink it out of a chamber pot. So too were the arguments. Information irrelevant, the win was in the wrapping.

The markets were closing. Praise the Lord there were no rambunctious newspaper sellers to accost me anymore. As much as I wanted to put this wretched city behind me, I strolled rather than sprinted through the streets. It would take a moment for word to reach the gate guards, so that I would be granted passage.

It was also difficult to find myself leaving. Stone walls and civilization, even the squalid scraps of it that the Yharnamites attempted were few and far between on my path. It was hard to say when my skills as a speaker would once more come in handy. I possessed loquacious skill with a blade to be certain, but even its edge could not cut as deep as a proper bit of verbal repartee with cunning opponent. I’d never had as much time as I wanted to practice with the sword, but I had plenty of time in the negotiators chair.

Alois shone so brightly in all the areas our mother wished her too, but she could not best me in this. None could. While I dealt with the families of proper bloodlines, they scraped and bowed to me. Gifts were laid at the feat of the Hirsch household and Cainhurst had never been so prosperous as in my time. It was a glorious feeling to have just outsmarted the very same sect that had brought my brethren to heel. It just goes to show what happens when the best son is cast aside; the castle crumbles.

These streets were not familiar to me. The people that dwelled in ramshackle hovels were not the ones who cleaned my chambers and washed my clothes. Being amongst them, though sharply tainted with sadness was at least a familiar feeling. One could have no affection for bleeders, but oh how I missed them scrambling to satisfy. There was nothing grander than their groveling after a long day of hard won victories then someone so dedicated to fulfilling ones every need.

They should always be this way. It was insanity that they thought it proper to rise up and destroy us, the superior creatures. Ants did not start wars with wolves. They had not the right.

Yharnam would be the first city I sent Alois too. She would be eager for a hunt, and I would demand every denizen be taken so that we might replenish our long empty larders. I thought of the discussions we would have as I finally put the place behind me. She would ask me for every detail of ever building, try and get a map or a survey of the land. It was rare she was ever provided with such materials but my sweet sister was nothing if not thorough. When she took Yharnam she would search every alley for survivors. None would be safe.

I would be right by her side, and Annalise on her throne would anoint both of us with a thousand accolades when we returned, string after string of Yharnam bleeders behind us. What a glorious day it was to be. Fantasies of that future could be dangerous distractions, but often they were the only thing that propelled me onwards.

I must find ways of retaining my dignity after enduring the insults of this place. Never again was I going to crawl through refuse and sewage. When I did come back, I was going to find that little girl and snap her neck. There would be no offering her to Annalise nor saving the sweetest blood for my sister. Her blood belonged to no one but me.

I turned the false name around on my tongue, trying to imagine how an Alois had become a Fwahe. For all my rampant imagination this was one story I couldn’t piece together.

The woods were dark as ever, and full of shadows to melt into. I was able to become one with
them, draping crow feather cape over my shoulders and blending with the twisting tree trunks. I ought to have climbed them and been aloft once more, walking branch to branch overhead while tiny things prowled below. That was the safest place to be when the snakes came out, or the shadow-men. So many sinister things ran through these forests that cautions had to be taken.

But not tonight. Tonight I would have to track down my sweet sister, and she was unlikely to have scurried through the canopy like a squirrel. Alois would never…but perhaps Fwahe would. I still hated to hear that name in my head. It seemed like the name of a girl who would prefer climbing trees as opposed to strolling past them. A ridiculous notion, and one I quickly chased away.

I looked for any kind of tracks. Most of it would’ve been obliterated by search parties by now. Their clumsy feet would’ve scrambled all the little details which might’ve made for a clear path for me to follow. They would never cease to get in my way, these little ants.

There was one thing I possessed that they did not, and that was a nose for blood. If anyone had gone on a killing spree- and with Alois that was more then likely, the faint odor of blood might persist in the air. It was want to mingle with the unique scent of a person and if I could seek that out I would have her at my side with all haste. I could still recall how she smelled; like fruit just on the cusp of spoiling, so full of juice its sweetness would overflow and corrupt its core.

The night went on, long and terrible. I did catch sight of the great serpents which lurked in their forest dens all day until they went out on the hunt, but the beast did not see me. The hissing creature gave itself away whenever it scented the air to look for lunch. I had to alight upon the trees then. There was no sense in tangling with the snake if it could be avoided, and once it was gone I might resume my tracking as calm and methodical as before. While I waited for the beast below to pass I felt an odd urge to climb further and further into the tree. Its branches were strong and steady, I did not fear them snapping.

I followed the impulse and pulled myself upwards. The tree was a massive thing, and recalled to be the great columns that adorned Cainhurst Castle. I was born long after they’d been sculpted, but they had held strong even as those inside the castle crumbled. The trees would still stand after we’d overrun Yharnam. Ghosts still needed something to haunt.

Being at the top of the tree was like looking out over the walls of the castle. I had loved to find excuses to be up there, and see the borders of our great kingdom spread out below like a quilt. Nothing could take one by surprise when they had a view as this, and I wondered if perhaps looking out from the topmost branches would give the same feeling.

I wanted to reach the top, even as the night was long and it was unlikely that I would be able to see anything with the ground bathed in shadows. The further I went into the tree the more obnoxious it became. Dead leaves and vines poured down like rain, catching in my hair and cloak. Picking them out was going to be a process. Oh for the days when there were men in my service to do such tedious tasks at my bidding. Soon was ever the promise with which I comforted myself, soon.

Of course good sense once more won out over hope. At the top of the trees there was only darkness below. I reclined against the trunk, satisfied to wait until light shone so that I could find a likely direction to head in. Looking at the ground had gotten me nowhere, this was far from my worst idea.

I pulled the crumbling leaves from my hair as I waited. Sleep was not so common a thing to me or my species. On occasion I was want to rest, and had certainly slept a lord’s sleep in feathered four poster at Cainhurst- but the days where my mind rested easily were long past. I dropped the dead leaves into the blackened maw of the forest below.
Waiting for daylight was tedious, but the mind was a marvelous thing. I could recline against the rough bark, shut my eyes and be once more inside the stronghold I was born to rule. It was my constant dream even in the waking world, and I held fast too it until dawn broke the illusion. The sun cast a red glow over everything, painting in the first highlights of the morning to give me the lay of the land.

At first it was only curling crimson lines that suggested shapes, the guess work of a forest created by an artist who hadn’t had time to finish the rest, thus leaving his sketch abandoned on the floor. Little by little the light picked it up and painted in the rest. As soon as the general form of the earth was shaded in below me, I began to survey it.

At first I saw nothing of particular note. The Forbidden Woods was ever just a woods and most of what was below me was covered in branches and bracken. It should’ve been possible to see through the canopy- winter had killed a majority of the leaves but what remained was thick and oppressive. Night never fully left this place.

I had failed to notice the change in elevation. In the distance, perhaps miles ahead was a rise in the landscape. There were hills, dusted less densely with trees then the surrounding areas. I could see several paths through the trees converging on those hills. Someone had once made an attempt to domesticate these, laying brick paths and strange talismans throughout their wooden labyrinth. There had once been villages too, by my own reckoning. I’d come across more than one ruin. Crumbling hovels about to give in, housed brittle skeletons or put shelter over the madmen that refused to abandon their homes.

The skeleton places were grim reminders and I’d taken to avoiding them. Some of the woodland hunter groups had revitalized them, living amongst the wreckage on the ground as much as the rubbish they pinned to trees. Forget myself or my sister, if anyone was playing at being squirrels it was that lot. I hadn’t thought much of the crumbling places and never wanting to tangle with hunters, avoided them.

Alois would’ve rushed them in pursuit of either shelter, a meal or both. I had to try and keep her childish impulse in mind. She was not as smart as I was about these things and lacked the knowledge to properly fend for herself. Who could blame her? I would teach her all she need know once we were together again and save her from such dangerous wandering.

I located the path with the most of these dwelling places along it. I could link up with the others if I had not found her by the time I reached the base of the hill and travel along a different route. Somewhere that had to be a sign of her, even if just a single wisp of silver hair I would find it. There was nothing that could hide her from me.

By midday I ached all over. It was truly a testament to the vastness of these woods that they could manage to tire a Vileblood. Everything had looked small and squashed together from the tree tops when in reality it was sprawling and full of twists and turns. The brick path was not always easy to follow from the ground. They were often overtaken by moss or eroded into nothing. Sometimes the footprint of a giant creature would create craters that could be trailed more clearly than the walkways. I used whatever was avaible to keep my course.

In the end all was fruitless. I tracked my trail to the base of the hill, searched through the graveyards and huts, but she was nowhere. None of it helped. It was going dark again, and despite dejection and despair I opted to hurry aloft and try to regain the lay of the land. I thought it possible to see something I’d missed from the hillside, though the possibility of such was slim. I didn’t miss things often if ever.

When I crested the hill I saw the first sign of activity that might’ve matched with Alois’ usual
activity. Somewhere down below was the faint smell of blood. Peering through the trees I could see the twisted body of something. It was definitely not human, and the shadows sliced it in to shapes that didn’t make any sense. As I drew nearer I found only renewed disappointment.

The corpse was hardly worth surveying. The crumpled body of some peasant’s horse, shot in the side and left to bleed.

What a disappointment. I looked to the ground in despair, and to my delight it was there I found hope. There were footprints by the hundreds. I could see snapped twigs and ruts left by wagon wheels. I tried to find a mark and follow it, track the progress of the battle as though I were there, but these marks were days if not weeks old. I was worried they might belong to anyone, for hunters had their disagreements.

I had to be certain this was Alois, or Fwahe else all of this running around was for naught and I would’ve done better to let the Executioners have my head. There was little excuse for failure in the cold castle walls. Examinations were regular, rigorous and always to be passed with flying colors lest we suffer steep consequences. Alois had a great deal of trouble reading as a girl, to the point where she was cloistered away until she mastered the skill.

She never did properly manage it, even into her senior most years she would swap words or reverse meanings. It displeased watchful mother Seren to no end, perhaps the only thing about Alois she didn’t adore. I learned to read with all the grace of a trained thespian. The shame of an eldest son having to step into the empty shoes of his youngest sibling and fill the places where they failed. It should have been the reverse.

As much as I loved my sweet sister there were pieces of her I wished to change. She shouldn’t have been the favored one, but I was certain that restoring the honor of Cainhurst would forever catapult my standings above hers. She would be glad to embrace me and celebrate my deft hands; if only I could find her. I trailed the battle ground, and tread over the hastily abandoned objects the massive encampment neglected to take with them.

There was a tin cup with a bullet hole through the bottom. It would never hold wine again. Someone had left three pairs of shoes hanging from the branches of a tree. Clothes had been stripped from their clotheslines but the lengths of taut twine still stretched across tree branches. The pins still clinging to the line swayed in the breeze. Crumpled showbills littered the ground, crunching underfoot like dead leaves. I picked one up examining the advertisement of some squalid circus. Judging by the quantity strewn behind I concluded that alas it had not been Alois, not even hunters who had been responsible for this.

Or so I thought.

Hope once more alighted on my tired eyes when I noticed a splash of dried blood clinging to a bit of tree bark. Had there been casualties beyond the horse?

I went over everything once more, and just as the sun had begun to breathe its last I saw several shimmering hairs littering the undergrowth. They were silver, as thin as spider’s thread and shining with the unique tint of our breed. I was disheartened to note their length, shorter then I ever remembered Alois having kept hers, but it was not impossible to believe she’d cut it. I couldn’t imagine her with anything so scant, for even as a child it was always kept long and flowing.

I would have her grow it out the same way again. It was proper for those of good breeding to maintain alluring appearance.

They could’ve just been odd pieces, chopped for one reason or another.
I dare not think of some garish barbarian holding rusty blade to her scalp and sheering her like a sheep. It was too nightmarish. I was sickened.

Short as it was the silver hair was a sign, I was certain she’d left it for me. If only I could let her know that I was in pursuit, that soon she would be safe in my arms again.

The circus hadn’t exactly made it a point to conceal themselves. They crashed through the woods like a stampede of bulls, tramping foliage and leaving the wrappings from mincemeat packages or empty barrels of corn here and there along the way. A blind man could’ve followed them.

Night fell over the woods and I had to keep myself from howling with joy as I chased after Alois’ trail. What could she possibly be doing with a circus? I hardly thought her the type to take up childish pursuits of running away for the sake of frivolous exhibition. Had her position become so low that she must showcase her talents for prying eyes? The horror of it was difficult to bear.

I was so caught up in symathies for my sweet sister that I did not pay any special attention to the ground. The signs were so obvious one no longer had to press their nose into mud to see where she would’ve gone. So overbearing was my moment of celebration that I did not feel the wire snare closing around my leg until it was too late. In a rush of air I was born aloft, carried through the trees with the hissing zip of ascending wire.

The world reversed as I dangled upside down, caught in a tree by my ankle. Everything I carried with me rained down out of pocket and pouch, sliding off my flailing arms as I attempted to claw myself free. This was a trap for a beast no doubt, but wire was brainless and could not be expected to know the difference between creatures to be captured and those to be respected. Whatever hunter came along to inspect their quarry I intended to have a word or too with.

It could be hours until then. I tried to close my eyes and let my mind fade to Cainhurst. Dangling upside down however proved infertile for illusions and I was forced to wait out the night, eyes open, completely aware of my own humiliating circumstances.

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think! Thank you for reading :)
Templeton often chastised me for a lack of empathy. My inability to interpret the emotions of the people around us was somehow a major failing in her eyes. Even with my horrendous oversight, I was able to see that the circus man was loosing his patience with me. His numerous attempts to bill me for his show, even alongside the cub were fruitless. No one wanted to see a Vileblood tending to a cat as a mother and child.

I didn’t intend to seem so soft in front of him either, but she needed me. Perhaps it was guilt. Hayden Cruptinelli had been the one to pull the trigger, but I’d ridden Swift into his trap. Frigga loved that mare. She had survived the library fire and been a gift from the Altered Boys. She’d fought in that tournament every bit as much as Frigga had. It wasn’t as if I’d particularly cared for the horse, but it was mostly my fault she’d discover it dead- if she discovered it at all.

Patience better have the decency to at least lead her to that.

Who was I kidding? A decent Executioner?

There were no such things.

This strange place, the location that was not a location was clouding my brain. That and the hunger. I don’t know how long we had been on the road, nor how far we’d traveled but it had been a long time since I’d had a warm meal. I stared at the necks of the performers when they spoke, and was actually starting to find a reasonable amount of flavor in the various animal bloods Marcel lay at my feet.

The illusion of a full stomach was worse the indigestion and violent heaving that came hours later, when the blood decided not to sit.

Today was no different. The jingling boy made his approach. The sound of him was like dinner bells, but also cymbals played out of time. I looked forward too it, but hated it in away I could not yet explain. He was a sorry-looking person, from his ragged clothes to the oppressive curving slope of his over-embellished eyebrows. The metal hanging from them could not disguise the ever-present concern that was forefront in their setting.

“Meal time.” He announced.

I gave him a customary glare, but had no energy for any kind of protest. Strength had left me, replacing itself with soreness. Inside the confines of the cage I could not stretch out my legs. There was an oppressive weight set on my shoulders and my back was always irritated in one fashion or another. For the first time in my life I felt my age.

Biter wasn’t having any of those problems. She frolicked between my captive-bound body as merrily as any young house cat- and assumedly young tiger cub. She’d gotten her name when I’d first tried feeding her. I pitied the day she was sent back to her mother for she was no doubt the most tenacious of the lot, sinking her tiny claws into my flesh while she sucked milk from my fingertip. I’d looked in her mouth, which always hung open while she slept and Biter had only got one thin-needle tooth coming in so far- but she used it as though it were an armies worth of pikes.

I had more punctures then Marcel had piercings. She was a feisty thing, and as she grew little by
little she became more tornado then tiger. The red dress I tried to wrap her in was quickly clawed to shreds. I used the scraps as toys for her, dangling the little ribbons in front of her nose so that Biter might chase them. The way she tore them apart when they reached her, she wasn’t going to have toys for much longer.

“What kind of blood is it this time?” I asked.

Marcel swallowed before speaking. He was always nervous to give answer when it came to my dinners. It was the most appetizing part of the day, watching the nervousness carry down his neck. There was so much blood in there. So much.

I licked my lips as he put forth his answer.

“Actually its goat tonight. One of ours stopped giving milk so Hayden decided it wasn’t worth the feed any more.” Marcel replied. “How’s Biter?”

The tigress could smell her meal and was already trying to shove her face through the bars to get at her food.

“Hungry, apparently.” I replied.

It was exhausting to keep the conversation up. It really was. I tried to stop licking my lips. They were dry and cracked, my tongue ran over them like sandpaper. I chewed at the little flakes of my skin. It’d be nothing to break through and bite down, just to pull him inside and drink and drink until the emptiness went away.

He wouldn’t fit through the bars in one piece, but I didn’t need all of him. I’d settle for an arm. Who was I kidding? A finger would be a feast to me.

Instead there was the bowl of goats blood which was starting to go cold. I slurped it down while Biter mewed at me begging for her dinner. Her paws were four sizes too large for her, and the tigress was clumsy. I feared she might knock my bowl over and spill blood on herself. That wouldn’t do.

“Alright alright.” I said, “Settle down you ruffian.”

Biter wasn’t exactly what one might call well behaved, and had to be told something several times before it set in. I tapped her on the nose and at last she retreated, taking a few steps back and sitting with her tail curled around her paws. She still kept up the pitiful pleas until I was given her dinner.

For one reason or another- and to be fair it was probably good sense, Hayden kept Biter on bottle-feeding. She was probably old enough to get a warm mash of some sort, and certinaly had the tooth for it- but they didn’t want a nipper. She was destined for domesticity and so I had to prop up a bottle of warm milk while she supped at it greedily. They tiny hairs on her chin would run like faucets until there was a puddle of spilled milk in front of her paws.

Dessert I called it, for as soon as she was done with dinner she lapped the leftovers right up.

“How’s Boxer?” I asked.

I didn’t look at Marcel while he was speaking. With red already dripping from my lips I couldn’t risk any more temptation.

“She’s recovering still, despite everything. Kota’s really done a lot better then I’d ever expected. It’s in part something we can attribute to Rotu as well. She had a book on the subject and read the
sections on surgery too him.” Marcel said. He paused to clarify before adding, “Human surgery, I mean.”

I nodded.

Boxer needed to get better. Bruiser’s fur was coming out in worse clumps then ever before. He was irritable to even the gentlest interactions. The cat didn’t want for my company anymore- snarling and swiping his great paws at me whenever I came close.

I guess I understood how Templeton felt on my worser days now. Getting so violently rejected wore on a person. I promised to be kinder to her when I got back.

If I got back.

If there was even a back from this place.

Biter had finished her dinner, and began to lick at my fingertips with her sandpaper tongue. She still remembered when I had to feed her drop by drop from them, before she’d learned to feed from a bottle. She always maintained hope that there would be something additional underneath my nails or pooled in my palm.

“There’s nothing there, silly.” I told her.

She licked my palm clean anyway. I rubbed her own saliva off on her fur. She clawed at me and I bore it without signs of pain. She had lost every one of her brothers and sisters, the little thing needed a playmate. I was no tiger, but Biter wasn’t particular when it came to things to shred.

“You two make quite the pair.” Marcel laughed.

“Too bad no audience seems to think so.” Hayden cut in.

We both jumped, neither having noticed the skeletal circus-man until he announced himself. I was losing my superior senses. This was not good.

“Hayd-“

He wouldn’t even wait for the jingling boy to give his full name, cutting him off with a snap of the fingers.

“Don’t test my patience.” He ordered, “I’ve been patient with you. I really have. You cannot possibly imagine how long I had wanted to add a Vileblood to my collection. I was so sure that it would pack so many bodies into a tent we’d have to turn away hordes of ticket holders for fear of overcrowding.”

This wasn’t exactly the first time that Mr. Hayden Cruptinelli had given me a speech about my general uselessness. In my dizzy state of constant hunger pangs I was beginning to find them entertaining. Madness threatened me with its vice, and I could do nothing to prevent it from closing round my mind. I needed a drink. Odeon Almighty, I needed to drink.

“Instead of a stampede I get…stragglers. If I’m lucky!” He lamented, “She’s not worth the upkeep anymore. Marcel get that cub out of there, if Kota says the mother is ok its high time she was returned. I’m loathe to do it but its time to liquidate this asset and sell bottled immortality while it lasts. Call over Nimah.”

“But Hay-“
He snapped again, “Did I ask for your opinion?”

I wish I could say that the loss of his nose piercing had not effected Marcel in the slightest, but his widened eyes reflected newly instilled fear. The circus man had stolen the fight in a single yank.

“Sir.” Marcel said.

“Use these.” Hayden said.

He passed Marcel a pair of fire tongs, clipping them together sharply in front of the cage bars. Biter hissed at him. She jumped forward to swipe at the tongs, but that was just what they wanted. If they intended to take her away from me they were going to have to try harder than that.

I grabbed Biter by the scruff of her neck and tucked her close to my chest. So long as I kept on the move I could turn my back to Marcel and the cub would avoid capture.

“Come on, Fwahe.” The jingling boy pleaded, “Can’t you make this easy for me.”

I didn’t justify him with a response. To do so would be to insult his intelligence, for even one so dull as these circus folk must know that Vilebloods did not give up without a fight. The tigress was the only thing here I didn’t hate. I was not going to let her be pried away from me. They had taken everything else.

“Honestly, if she won’t cooperate just get the numbing mist.” Hayden said, “It’ll make the whole process easier in the end. Go. Now.”

“Sir.” Marcel replied.

He left the tongs on the top of my cage and raced off to fill his brothers orders. If only this had been the kind of construction with bars all around, instead of a solid top and bottom then maybe I could’ve reached for the metal instrument and used it as a weapon. There was nothing to shield Biter or I against the mist.

I looked down at the cub. Biter’s eyes were wide and wonderful. I didn’t know any cat to have ever looked so cute. The strays that Templeton tried to persuade me to warm too were not anything like Biter. She was special, and as far as they were concerned she was mine. The cub had been with me for more days then her mother.

I loved Boxer and Bruiser too, but there were stories of mother animals who left their young out in the cold. The both of them were so confused, they might forget Biter was therers. She could not possibly have still smelled like a tiger after being around me for so long.

“I’m sorry.” I told the little cub.

Biter licked my hand. She didn’t understand of course. Tigers cant speak English.

I apologized to her again, stroking her fur and scratching behind her ears. She was my good girl and they were going to take her away too. The circus was full of the worst kinds of people. Marcel returned, saying what all small men say before they do horrible things.

“I don’t have any choice.”

There is always a choice. He could’ve fought, certinlly with Nimah at his back he would’ve stood a fair chance. These people weren’t people, they were lambs lined up in front of Hayden’s block. They were afraid of the butcher’s knife to be sure but they should’ve thought to fear the wolves’
teeth even more. When I broke free there would be nothing left but wool and broken bodies.

Marcel shook a metal Rosmarius and I heard liquid sloshing around inside. The mist-sprayers were frequently used by hunters to subdue beasts out on the hunt. I couldn’t imagine where the circus man had managed to acquire one, nor the arcane mixture inside that it needed in order to function. Who could even be supplying them, now that the Choir had fallen?

“There ain’t much left.” Marcel said, “Are you sure you want to use it up now, especially with Brusier and Urso acting so off?”

Urso was their dancing bear. The circus man had made Kota put a ring through its nose, and strung a rope through it. When it was tugged the bear would get up on its hind paws and could be persuaded to walk about in a crude mockery of human dance. Urso was so timid, just as Boxer and Bruiser and the rest of the animals.

If I were kept in this cage I feared the same thing might happen. I suppose that was the one upside to being strung upside and bled like a pig, at least I got to do it on my own terms.

“Just do it.” Hayden complained, “We’ll pick up more eventually.”

“Alright.” Marcel shrugged.

His hand shook as he approached me. Even with a weapon he could fire from a distance and completely immobilize me, he was terrified. At least this sheep remembered that teeth could bite and claws could kill. It didn’t stop him from pressing down on the handle and letting the mist pour out.

I felt my bones lock up. I was surprised to find it was the ones in my chest that went first. My heart made keyhole, and the ribcage locking mechanism, everything snapped and went tight. Rigid jaw, rigid fingers- everything was frozen.

I tried to move, watching in petrified rage as the iron tongs were put through the cage bars, clamping down around Biter. She tried to squirm and claw her way free. The tigress twisted so fervently I was worried she might damage her spine, but I could not free words from fanged prison to plead for her to calm down. She was going to hurt herself.

They didn’t even open the door. The monsters pulled her right through the bars. She would’ve been yowling in pain if the mist hadn’t seized her too. They couldn’t seriously bring her to Boxer and Bruiser like this- they’d think she was dead.

“Find a tent, string her up and get some buckets.” Hayden said.

“Hayden…we can’t kill her.” Marcel protested.

He was slapped across the face, “Why not? Executioners do it every day, and they don’t bother with collecting the resources. You know the law here. It is mine. If a mouth doesn’t make money it’s not worth feeding, I’m not running a charity. Turn that runt over to the tigers and then do as I’ve asked!”

It was a childish speech, the kind of thing that I faintly remembered laughing at when made in the childhood halls of Cainhurst. I could recall clearly the scorn behind my mockery, but not the speech deliverer not why I had spoken with them. Puzzle piece memories weren’t going to save my life this time, and though it was a poorly worded semblance of fragmented commands, Marcel still obeyed it.
“Nimah. Pick up the cage and follow him.” Hayden commanded.

“Yes sir.” She said.

Nimah who had been there for all of the stupid picnic lunches this disgusting caravan ate. She would stand silent and kill me too. Her crime was worse then Marcel’s. She wasn’t even trying.

She had the strength. Built like a brute. Why didn’t she use it? She could’ve broken these bars, broken his bones, but she just followed orders.

Sheep.

All of them sheep.

I began hoping desperate stupid things. There was the thought that they might not be able to kill me if they couldn’t find an empty tent. I hadn’t seen all of the circus but I had observed a good deal of its comings and goings. Everywhere always seemed to be packed. They might not have spare canvas to waste on blood stains. Fortune did not favor me. It never had. A tent was quickly found and emptied.

They had to put together supports to hang me from. What poor executioners they ended up as, making their prisoner watch the construction of her noose. It wasn’t exactly a hangman’s noose, but the cross beam and wooden supports brought the same to mind. They hung men by their necks, Vilebloods by their ankles, but in the end dead was dead.

Nimah opened the door of the cage and took me out. It must’ve felt so good to finally be able to stretch out my legs, unbend my back. I could only imagine as the arcane formula which had invaded all of my pores prevented me from feeling any of it. She easily lifted me to the length of rope and slid it through my left ankle.

I was hanged.

It was almost no surprise to find that impatience and rage wove themselves together in convoluted knots. I almost wanted them to just get it over with.

Marcel came into the tent with one feed bucket in his hands. Hayden upbraided him, seizing trainer’s whip and brandishing it menacingly in front of the jingling boy.

“What do you mean this is all you could find?! Have we no washtubs? Do we not have bowls?”

“No… I mean yes we do…but” Marcel stammered.

“Then get them! Bring me anything that holds liquid you idiotic maggot.” The circus man demanded.

Marcel dropped the bucket on the ground and went racing out of the tent. I tried not to let myself mistake his incompetence for assistance. He wasn’t trying to help me, he was just really that stupid. Soon the boy would be back with vessels a plenty and they would run over with silver. I didn’t want to die here, not for a thousand reasons.

I didn’t want to die and never make it back to Frigga’s side. There was no one in this stupid circus who would be able to send word to her. If this was truly my hangman’s noose and final resting place she was never going to know about it. I’d missed my chance to say goodbye.

This wasn’t supposed to happen. I was supposed to out live her. I was a Vileblood for Kos’ sake. It
wasn’t supposed to be like this.

“Stay here.” Hayden barked at Nimah.

The tail of the whip swished behind him as he stormed out of the tent. The flap of fabric which fluttered closed cut off my last view of the outside world. It wasn’t a landscape worth looking at, scrublands and sparse trees cobbled together to call itself a forest, but it was more pleasant than view they were going to give. I didn’t want to look at circus trash while I died.

Nimah muttered something while I glared at the settling canvas.

“I don’t want to kill you!” She cried, “I don’t want to kill anyone. Hayden always makes me do it and I don’t want to. Stop being a fool.”

I couldn’t even get my fists to clench in rage. Swinging from the rope made me dizzy, made it hard for my muscles to know what to do with themselves. Nimah’s yelling was so loud, why did she have to be so loud? Why did her words have to make my thoughts hurt?

She didn’t stop, and I couldn’t seem to ask her too. She kept pleading as my head pounded, like drums in those silly parades the Yharnamites insisted on having. No one was going to let me go quietly it seemed. More out irritation then will to live I struggled all I could while suspended. The rope was tight, and all my efforts only served to cinch the vice moreso. I’d break my ankle before escaping this thing.

Hunters sometimes spoke about creatures so desperate to escape what ensnared them that they would gnaw off their own limbs. I couldn’t get my mouth to reach. If only I had my sword, or a knife- anything that might produce an edge sharp enough to sever flesh. Gods if only

Loathe as I was to admit it, Nimah was right. I was running out of time to think of anything better then abasing myself in front of the circus man and hoping for the best. It would be humiliating to beg for deliverance and be killed despite it. I had thought to meet my fate boldly, but when I’d pictured it I had always possessed a sword and my proper strength. I had wanted to take several of my enemies to the grave alongside me, in a battle that would’ve had its place in any one of the multitudes of tedious stories Templeton liked to recite.

A death with honor and dignity. I think I had been born to want those things.

Instead I had this.

Hayden and Marcel returned. The jingling boy was half buried in the things he carried, arms and legs shaking from the weight. His arms were piled with bowls and buckets, a thousand tiny things to keep all of me from going to waste. He began to lay them out beneath me. The biggest bucket was directly beneath my head. My hair spilled into it, and the rim nearly obscured my view. I could only see so far below me now, things were beginning to close in.

The crockery clicked together as the bowls were spread beneath me. Tonight they would fill with my blood, and tomorrow the performers would eat their breakfast from them. Nimah stooped to help him with this. Hayden presided over the both of them. I guess he couldn’t stand to get dirt
from the floor on his trousers. He would rap the but of his cane on places he thought they’d overlooked. Sometimes both would scramble to fill it, and bump heads with each other mid-way.

Idiots.

Idiots with swords and knives who were going to kill me.

When every one of the blood-collectors had been spread across the floor Nimah and Marcel stepped back for the circus man’s final inspection. He looked over everything, circling around me several times to be sure of his own opinion.

“It’ll do.” He finally proclaimed.

I thought there would at least be a barrier between the circus man and I, now that the ground was covered. Hayden found a way to make himself uncomfortably close despite obstacles. I could smell him, foul and stale. Something that had spent a lot of time in the water and then started to rot, like a sink with dishes that everyone collectively refuses to wash. Better to just buy a new basin, get new dishes and start afresh.

Everyone’s eyes were locked on the circus man. He hadn’t stopped pacing around me. He was nothing so much as a butcher examining the hunk of steer suspended in the street waiting to be portioned out with sudden swift cuts. I would be mincemeat without even a proper burial. All that was left was to pass on the knife and let the sentence be carried.

“Marcel.” Hayden said.

He looked at his terrified half-brother and like rotting fruit his lips peeled away to reveal a crooked smile. The vulture circled above carrion, diving to pick out the eyes and tear out the throat. He wanted the best bits for himself and Mr. Cruptinelli was not one for getting his hands dirty.

“N-no.” Marcel stammered.

The circus man turned the knife he carried around, offering its handle to Marcel’s shaking hands.

“Do it.” He said.

“Sir I-“

Hayden thrust the knife closer, “Do it.”

Marcel shook his head, “She….she’s…”

“She’s what?” He growled.

“..family.” Marcel choked.

Hayden laughed, and the posts of my hangman’s noose shook with it. “That is not family, that is a monster. She would eat you the first chance she got.”

“Because your starving her.” Nimah muttered.

Hayden whirled about, anger blazing. Nimah, who was so tall her head scraped the sides of the tent, seemed to shrink whenever the circus man spoke to her. He wasn’t so much speaking as shouting. Words took a mountain and turned her to rubble.

“She’s just hungry, and scared!” Marcel said, trying to protect Nimah.
“Hungry and scared?” Hayden snarled, “Look at the two of you, defending her as though she’s some downtrodden puppy. You know what she eats don’t you?”

He looked back and forth, impatient for their answers. Like puppets who’d had their strings cut, they lowered their heads and turned away. He tapped his foot and Nimah was not the type to keep him waiting.

“Humans.” She replied.

“Exactly.” He said, stepping away from me and patting Nimah on the head, “And what are we, here in this tent?”

She gulped. “Humans.”

“And does family eat each other?” How I longed for one of Cato’s clever asides right now. Had he been put up like a felled pigeon beside me, he would’ve crafted his last words into a perfect jest. Nimah made no use of the set up, for she was not one for defusing situations with humor. She shook her head and after fixing her with a stern gaze the circus man returned to Marcel.

“Has all finally been made clear to you?” Hayden asked.

“I won’t kill her.” Marcel said, “I’m not a killer.”

“Oh so I should just make Nimah do it? Is that it?” He asked.

“No!” Nimah squeaked.

“Worry not, girl. You’ve proven yourself loyal enough. Some of those among us need to learn to follow orders.”

He held the blade out to Marcel once again.

“Get Kota to do it.” Marcel pleaded, “Or…or Rotu. Or…”

“No.” the circus man said, “I’m telling you to do it.”

“Hayden, please.” Marcel pleaded.

The circus man cracked the knife handle over the boy’s head. All of his piercings jingled. He slumped to the ground, falling on his side. He’d been hit a little too hard. I heard Hayden unleash a series of curses.

“Guard the tent.” He barked at Nimah, “He’ll kill her when he wakes up.”

“Yes sir.” She said.

“Fetch me the moment he rises.” He said.

“Wait…so did you want me to stand guard or run and get you-“

“Figure it out!”

“Yes sir!” Nimah said.

She followed him out. The tent flap was closed behind them. I thought I would be left to my own thoughts but the same second the dust settled, Marcel’s eyes opened. Clever to have fooled his
brother but tedious to prolong my death.

Marcel stuck his tongue out at the tent flap. The silver stud in the center of it sparkled. What an odd place to be embellished. I wanted to ask what he intended now, for if my salvation were now at hand he best be quick about it. I did not want to tarry long.

It was fury unmentionable that I could not air these questions. The mist yet held me prisoner and with my bones locked in place no sound would leave my lungs. I did not think this boy possessed the courage to loose me, but should he let me down I would at least let him run. I could make no promises after waiting so long to eat, but should he escape I would not pursue him. That was the best that could be extended to a coward. I’d no doubt he could get away, the fearful were great at running.

Marcel stood up. He stretched his hand out over the buckets and bowls, steadying me so that I would stop spinning while suspended. It didn’t seem to clear away any of the dizziness, not as I’d hoped it would, but the pain of the rope’s bite lessened slightly.

“I don’t want to kill you.” He said.

He’d already made that clear. If he wasn’t going to kill me he ought to have helped me. I waited for him to pick up the knife that Hayden had left behind and cut me down.

“I just don’t want to die either.” He said, “He’s not usually this bad.”

He continued with his piss poor attempt at last rites, all while making frequent glances towards the exit. If I could’ve screamed at him I would’ve. I wanted to tear out my hair, run my nails through something but the mist prevented it all. It shouldn’t have existed.

The arcane mist had been popular when the Choir was prominent, and that was before I’d had my Holy Moonlight Sword, a good few decades. I’d gone away for a matter of months, and when I’d returned I found their city had crumbled. I used to fear the powerful concentration of hunters in Yhar’Ghul. It’s streets were ones to be avoided if one was a Vileblood, for all the denizens were overwhelmingly friendly, and prone to hovering. Salesmen over your shoulder, grandmothers looking past the washing, so many prying eyes. It was nearly impossible to find a spot to have a meal alone.

The Choir was even worse. They were ever-present. Like clouds about to unleash a winter blizzard they tained the air with their peculiar odors. The stink of chemicals would linger in the air long after their robes had turned the corner. Worst was their masks, for with half-covered faces one could never be sure if the Choir’s hunters were looking at you or not. It was unnerving.

I always felt like I was being watched, even though I was probably the last thing on the Choir’s mind. Their strange experiments brought to mind doctor’s tables and shining scalpels—neither of which I bore any fondness. Places like that were best avoided like the plague.

I’d been alone in these beliefs before, but now everyone kept away from the streets. They had been overrun by horrible things. Melted bodies that somehow still breathed life crawled over the pavement until their stomachs had split. They would kill anything that came close, tearing it apart and splitting the spoils amongst their many mouths. The greatwolves who staked out territory there were made of bones. No one seemed to be able to say for certain how it was that a creature like this could survive. The strange properties of Yhar’Ghul seemed to invert logic.

The formulas for sprays and mists like these had been known only to those who had studied in Yhar’Ghul or at fallen Byrgenwerth— that’s what Templeton had told me. I didn’t expect her the
type to lie over matters like these. Where was Hayden being supplied from?

It didn’t matter. So much time wasted on thinking about the details when not a single one would save me. This information was only valuable if I got it back to the hunters, and they were miles away from me now. I had to stop trying to find these little things to bring back for Frigga. This was a travel I wasn’t coming back from, there weren’t going to be Yuletide gifts stuffed into my pack.

“You should’ve just…” Marcel muttered, stirring me from my thoughts while he searched for the right words. “You should have just listened.”

He rubbed his thumb over the empty space where the tip of his nose used to be, regretting some of his own defiance.

Stupid kid. Of course he should’ve stayed down. Those who didn’t have the strength to fight only made fools of themselves when they took up the sword. I couldn’t tell him this. I was sure I didn’t need to. When the people who sought to do you harm took away a piece, or left a scar that memory was there forever. I could not remember much of Cainhurst but I remember the chill of the snow that the Executioner’s pushed me into while they carved their scars and markings into my flesh. That was not something I’d be able to let go.

“You don’t get a good life after you die, if you spend this one killing people.” Marcel said, “That’s what my mother told me.”

He raked hands through his greasy hair as though an answer was caught up in the mop somewhere.

“We don’t have much time.” He said.

He kept saying things like this, and then pausing. The jingling boy couldn’t seem to keep in mind that I had been paralyzed. Prisoner to the arcane spray I wouldn’t be able to have a discussion with him.

“I can’t think of a plan. Gods damnit why can’t I think of a plan.”

He tugged on one of the rings in his ear while he paced the tent. He was going to give away himself, for surely his shadow would be cast on the canvas and the illusion of sleep would spoil. Foolish child.

It was as though I’d cursed him for the next second a twig snapped, followed by quickened footsteps. Marcel’s head shot up. I could smell the blood in his heart as it churned, pounding faster then it had ever before. He dove for the ground, rattling the china. The circus-man had returned, and brought the strange two-headed man, Kota with him.

“There’s no telling how long that spray will hold.” Hayden said, not sparing so much as a second glance to Marcel, “But it’s going to be my bastard half-brother who slits her throat. He’s got to take his punishments and will waken before long. It’s all to the good if she’s able to struggle, but we musn’t let her bite.”

“No sir.” Kota said, “That’d be right ‘orrible. Chief agrees.”

He was speaking for his head. The shriveled one.

“I’m pleased you both see sense.” Hayden said, rubbing his hands together, “So there’s something I want you to do for me.”

Kota nodded, “Of course, sir.”
“I know your work is mostly needles, but let us make an exception for these.”

The circus man reached into his pocket and removed a rusty pair of pliers. This was a tool that crumbled more then it held together, and was stained with flecks of various colors. I couldn’t have imagined a worse contraption to be provided with. I wanted to curl my fingers in, make tight fists that could not be pried open. I wasn’t going to loose my nails to that monster.

“So long as the bitch has no teeth, she’ll do him no harm.”

No.

I was captive bound in silent screams petrified by just how much this man could take from me. He was not exceptional, possessing no particular strength or means about him. Were I free and of my proper strength I could snap him in two. That’s what truly bothered me, to have been taken down by a man I could’ve killed. Were he superior in any way this might not have felt like such a betrayal, for truly now I was despairing to myself. How dare I not see it coming, how dare I not be able to fight?

He handed the pliers to Kota. I watched his face, while laughter sounded from the shriveled mass he insisted was a second head, an unborn twin. It didn’t seem capable of life or laughter, but the sound was unmistakable. He forced his unwashed fingers between my frozen lips, pushing them apart to reveal sharpened teeth and limp tongue. I could feel it falling around in my mouth, and there was soon moisture as saliva ran down my face. I couldn’t swallow it back. There was nothing that could stop this.

He wasn’t wearing gloves. I could taste him, gods even this foul skin was beyond compare. I could feel the faintest throb of a heartbeat in his fingertips. The scent of circulating blood was so close at hand, if only I could bite down. I was so close.

“He wasn’t wearing gloves. I could taste him, gods even this foul skin was beyond compare. I could feel the faintest throb of a heartbeat in his fingertips. The scent of circulating blood was so close at hand, if only I could bite down. I was so close.

“Be sure and take them out whole.” Hayden instructed, “Don’t chip them. The tooth of a Vileblood could be valuable- if nothing else the Executioner’s order will buy them to burn them.”

Kota nodded.

Chief hissed.

The two-headed man put metal braces in my mouth to hold it open. They bit into the corners of my lips and stretched them beyond what was comfortable. I thought I might start to bleed because of them. If I could’ve laughed at myself I would, for they hardly mattered. As soon as those pliers began their work I’d be bleeding from different wounds.

Marcel was no help, still on the floor pretending to be dead. He wasn’t going to kill me, sure, but toothless I’d be just as bad. Templeton had more nerve then he and I’d seen her run from a lapdog. If there was ever a time to grow a pair, now. Why did he hesitate?

The knife was still there where the circus man had left it. His back was turned. He would not see an attack coming. A better opportunity could not have been asked for.

He didn’t take it.

I felt the metal grip down on my lower left canine. The rusty tool did not provide much in the way of traction and several times Kota pressed down to hard, causing the pliers jaws to slip off my tooth. Every scrap stung, sending sparks of pain through my gums and into my jaw. I felt frost in my skull.
After several tries and no shortage of impatient foot-tapping from the circus man he had managed a firm grip and was pulling with all his strength. Deep down in my gums I felt something shift. Kota tugged and an aching crack spread through my mouth. I could feel it in my cheeks. I wanted to scream but I couldn’t. The root had come loose. He could wiggle the tooth. My blood now joined the saliva running out of my mouth.

I heard it drop into the bucket below me, a few hesitant drops at first but by and by a steady flow as it pooled around the loosened tooth and spilled out of me. I could feel it, hot and warm, could taste the acrid metallic tang as it coated my tongue. I wanted to spit it out, but I couldn’t.

“Nearly got it!” Kota announced.

Hayden leaned forward, looking over the half-wit dentist’s shoulders and into my mouth. He squinted his eyes straining to see beyond the fluids for the little pearls.

“Hurry up and pull it out!” Hayden barked.

It happened in snapshots.

First the pliers locked around my tooth and Kota pulled. Next it came loose in a horrible crack which flooded my entire jaw with pain. Third, a hand slipped, and sharpened teeth slit open sullied skin, as Kota’s tools failed to grasp his prize. The arm over sharpened teeth—was there ever any chance? Fourth the blood flowed red and the moment it poured down my throat and pooled in my shrunken stomach, I could make myself move again. The metal braces were crushed, sent flying off as I bit down on Kota’s arm with all the strength of a cleric beast.

I tore, swinging myself back and forth until the chunk of him inside of me had loosed to be swallowed in one gulp. I was not done.

A noose could not bind my legs, not now. Though my head spun and my mouth ached, I was more clear-headed than ever. I saw true terror on the circus man’s face as I kicked free of the noose and fell to the ground. He was right to fear me, for I must’ve looked a thing of nightmares.

The circus-man fumbled for his pistol while I put my hands around the stunned and very alive head of Kota and curled my fingers until they met in the middle of a pile of flesh and bone. Oh how I longed to drain every last drop. Everything tasted better, and the more I drank the more I wanted. I had teeth in the dying body. I felt the pliers bang against my shoulder as we stood on cracking porcelain. His wounds didn’t hurt. The shards of china in my feet didn’t hurt. The only place that hurt was the spot where my missing tooth had been, but that could be overlooked for now.

I heard bullets bouncing on the ground while Hayden scrambled to load his pistol. I knew I had to go after him. He needed to die, but the hunger was more powerful then I’d thought possible. I couldn’t stop eating. Bite after jaw-crunching bite, gulp after gulp. Everything was warm and sweet. I couldn’t recall the last time anything tasted so good.

“Hayden no!”

I saw Marcel spring at his brother a moment before a flash of amber sparks and a deafening sound filled the tent. I screamed.

The two of them were wrestling each other on the floor, both desperate to keep the gun away from the other. I couldn’t stand any longer. Kota’s body came down with me, my hands still sunk in the oozing flesh. Something was in my leg, burning in my right leg. It wouldn’t right itself. I couldn’t stand.
I needed to run. There was nothing more important in this moment then movement. The last vestiges of the rope noose were still clinging to my right ankle and I could not kick them off. I tossed the body aside while the half-brothers grappled, rolling themselves into broken dishes. Marcel was choking, eyes wide-ready to pop.

He had not saved my life, I would not save his. I dug my nails into the dirt and clawed my way towards the entrance of the tent. It felt like slow progress when held against the speed at which the performer and the ringmaster tried to kill each other. Marcel’s jangling had never been so loud.

I reached the edge of the tent, and began to pull myself free of what was going to have been my tomb. I heard another gun shot, just as I was poking my head outside of the tent flap. It was not the best moment to have done so, for gathered outside was what essentially amounted to the entire circus. Some of them screeched in horror when they saw me.

I must’ve looked like something from the Executioner’s stories-a creature of ghosts and blood magic hell bent on devouring everything in site. Usually these accounts were ridiculous, but today I was every bit the beast. I could not bring myself to stand, for my leg was still awkward and bent, shrieking in pain as much as the onlookers were in fear. I lunged for the closest.

The red-headed acrobat could not tumble away as he would’ve liked too for I sunk my claws into his calf and pulled him towards me until he was close enough to bite. Bite until it ran like a river. Some of the circus-people fled in panic, but more stood shocked and unsure what had happened. The gunshots had been the first thing to scare them, but they were not expecting me.

I became the terror of old Cainhurst. The acrobat tore away, leaking sweet red wine all over the dying grass. I was not of a mind to chase where there was so much else close at hand. I did not know the squealing sword-swallow who next met his death at my hands, but he was by far the most terrified. His final words were choked in cries of fear and he soiled himself before passing. How disappointing.

“Where the goddamn spray!?” Someone, it might’ve bene Hayden or his right-hand lackey asked. Everyone was too turned into panic to stop and think. There was the sound of clicking metal, likely more guns. I was unsure how many bullets I’d be able to take before they felled me. The sword-swallow gone and a fire-eater after him. I kept clawing through them, and they scattered around me like poorly shuffled playing cards.

“Stop!”

I was up against the ace now. Nimah the timid giant stood in my path. She was a gold mine. Who could say how much blood pumped through a body size. I licked my lips and did my best to jump at her. I managed a small flop, close enough to grab her foot if she hadn’t jerked it away.

“Now!”

A rats nest of cords and cables fell over top of me. I clawed at it, but the more I moved the further tangled my lip leg became. I tried to stand and drag the weighted prison along with me as I went but it did not budge. I had so much strength but I couldn’t walk.

“Spray!” Someone shouted.

I heard the shaking can and the hiss of sputtering liquid as the handle was depressed. Then came more furious shaking.

“It’s out!” Rotu called back, “The Rosmarnius is out!”
Curses echoed around my ears, but what difference did it make if I were paralyzed. They had me again, and now I was doomed. I looked around the circle and noted the many guns, clubs, knives and rapiers that were carried in the hands or belts of the performers.

“Someone go find Mr. Cruptinelli.” Nimah instructed.

They scattered to obey her while I fought against their prison. I tried to scream at them, hoping to scare one into doing something stupid, but the pain wasn’t worth the risk. Yelling hurt. I hadn’t stopped bleeding from the hole in my gums. It was ruining the taste of them, my own blood spoiling the sumptuous supper.

At least let it be said that my last meal was satisfying. Coming down from the rush of it, fear clawed its way back inside and put my thoughts in cage bars. I hadn’t had a prayer of being spared before, and now that I’d killed in broad daylight there wasn’t a one of them who’d speak up to defend me. It was an odd switch, suddenly thrown. I had been so ready to devour Rotu and Nimah, but now that they stood with weapons at the ready I felt as though I’d been betrayed.

“Where’s Hayden?” Nimah called, more urgently.

“C-coming!”

It was not the voice of the circus-man.

The crowd parted and a strange shape began limping its way through the bodies. I didn’t recognize Marcel at first, he was hunched over and his face had been splashed with blood. All of his features washed over in red made him look more a demon then a man. The piercing rings caught pools of the thin liquid, which stretched over their circumfrences. Like so many childrens toys, it looked like one might blow bubbles made of blood through the air if only the leaned close enough.

Hayden Cruptinelli’s limp body was draped over his back.

“What the ‘ell happened?”

It was Cutjack, the circus-man’s rabid dog who had pushed his way through all the other to meet Marcel. He shoved the jingling boy away from Hayden.

“Oya!” Marcel cried out.

I smelled more so then saw that he was bleeding too. The wounds weren’t nearly as bad as the ringmaster’s but some of his rings were torn and there were scratch marks that leaked slow and sweet all down his clothes.

“Don’t you try an’ scold me, boy! Explain!” Cutjack commanded.

“He had a gun!” Marcel cried, “He pulled a gun he was going to kill her and-“

“Good! She’s a demon! Look what she’s done to Skip and Jessup and-“

“I didn’t…I didn’t mean to…” Marcel muttered.

“What do you mean?” Nimah asked.

The way her nostrils flared and her lips curled, were preadatory. She who was so terrified of the circus-man- she should’ve been grateful to see him so close to his expiration.

“I jumped at him and the gun…it went off and there…and then…It was so loud and there was
“You shot him?” Cutjack snarled.

“I didn’t mean to!” Marcel squeaked.

If it wasn’t for Hayden’s body in his arms, Cutjack would’ve had a knife to the jingling boy’s throat. In its place several others stepped up and offered their weapons to his neck. Marcel grimaced in pain as his wrists were twisted behind his back.

“Wait! Wait!” he pleaded, “Wait, please just listen to me!”

“Give me one reason why I should.” Cutjack growled.

The sentiment was echoed by the collective. I was not the only one out for blood this night.

“Because she can save him!” Marcel said, “I-Immortality. He was going to bottle and sell it. Her blood can bring him back. He doesn’t have to die. No one has to die. We can bring back Skip and Jessup…and…and…Kota.”

“Kota’s dead?” Nimah gasped.

Marcel nodded, then immediatly amended that before she could burst into tears, “He doesn’t have to be.”

They all looked at him like he was mad at first. Their angry eyes reflected in their gun barrels and several hands dipped into pockets, holding fast to caches of silver bullets. Cutjack’s voice was the thing that stayed them.

“You best be tellin’ the truth, boy.” He said. “Bring him back to us.”

It was strange to see them so in mourning. I knew they hated this man, I had heard them eat their picnic lunches and sun themselves while they lamented their debts to the penny-pincher, but now they were in tears trying to preserve his life. It was disgusting, serving only to remind me what squirming insects they all were- those who were not my Frigga.

“I have to get some of her blood.” He said.

The knives drew back from his throat. Someone kicked him to the ground. I saw shards of broken bowls sticking out of his back. He clutched his side and stood again, slowly bringing his hands in front of him and holding them level with my eyes.

“Easy.” He cautioned me, as though I were a snarling hound he was trying to tame.

I spat at him.

It hurt to spit.

He took a flask from his belt and began inching closer. There were shouts of caution from some of the performers while others worked to assist Cutjack. They wanted me to joint their efforts to preserve that monsters life, and bring back their dead?

Never.

“I just need a little bit of your blood.” Marcel said.
I snapped my jaws at him. Pain again. Stupid tooth.

Just needed a bit of my blood. He could’ve only needed a passing glance or a muttered curse and I would’ve kept it from him. He seemed to think I was going to let him approach, be grateful because he’d pretended to sleep instead of slitting my throat.

The boy hadn’t freed me when he’d had the chance. He hadn’t stopped Hayden before and if the circus man was brought back to life there was no guarantee he’d stop him now. It was safer to let them both perish.

“Hurry!” Cutjack hissed, “We may not have much time.

Marcel gulped and took a step closer.

I swept my hands at him, nails becoming claws becoming weapons. I was not about to let him come close.

There were plenty of Vilebloods who went about the business of making other Vilebloods. According to Minimus’ lackeys Annalise herself had turned Templeton. Supposedly she was hidden away in some secret Cainhurst safehold. Thousands of hunters and nearly every living Executioner had scoured the place top to bottom and none had been able to find her. Templeton was living proof that somehow they’d been able to pollute the blood stream, but I doubted the ancient queen’s hand.

I could not recall having turned anyone, nor having my blood collected for such ceremony. With a memory like mine, I could never truly trust that I had the facts straight, but of this I’d little doubt. I did not want to spoil my first time on the heinous ringmaster.

Marcel jumped back and I landed more tangled in the nets then before.

“Hurry up!” Cutjack barked.

“She’s trying to-“

Hayden’s right-hand man was not interested in excuses. He loosed a wordless bellow, some beastial sound that defied language and shook Marcel to the bone. His foot came down on the net. I strained to reach it through the web of cables. If I could hook a nail to his flesh I was certain I could tear him apart, but the weaving was too tight to manage it.

“Come on Fwahe please.” He begged as he tread a little further onto the ropes.

I strained at them, desperate to claw him to shreds. He held the flask in front of him with shaking hands. Beyond that he carried no weapons, the fool. I was going to kill him.

“Please.” He said again.

I wanted to tell him to shut up, but I had to save my strength. It hurt to tear into them with that part of my mouth still raw and bloody, screaming for its missing tooth.

“Listen Fwahe, if you just do this. If you just help me out I promise I won’t let them kill you.”

Oh to laugh in his face. They were definitely going to kill me if I did not kill them first. The jingling boy was a fool, thinking that the saving of one life would make them gracious. I had bared witness to these situations before, and mercy did not extend beyond death. If Hayden woke he would want me killed a thousand times over. I wouldn’t be surprised if my death sentence was the
first thing out of his reborn lips.

“Please just do this.” Marcel begged.

He took another step.

If it was not for the tightness of the cables I could’ve had him.

He began to skirt the side of me, aiming to steal from my twisted leg. I had to admit it was an intelligent choice. I could not attack as I usually might while it throbbed and refused to cooperate. There was still blood coming out of it.

I should’ve been worried about that. I’d taken in more blood then I’d had in months. Even on the road with Templeton I stayed conservative in my consumption. There was no need to gorge ourselves, but starvation had a way of pushing one to past vices. Would the blood gained balance out that which was lost?

I tried to twist myself around and grab at him, but the cables just grew tighter, stretching over my skin until they left stinging sores. I felt the cold metal rim of the flask pressing against my flesh. It hurt, tender flesh seared at the slightest irritation. I let a gasp escape me and heard laughter from the watchers.

I could not force my spine to bend so that I might attack him. My shoulders could only wrench themselves so far. Cables choked me, winding around my stomach and my legs, holding me down. Every little struggle was fruitless, and the jingling boy was able to siphon blood from my wounds. I did my best to fight it, but there was nothing I could’ve done.

“Cage her.” Cutjack said after Marcel stepped away, a full flask in his hands. “We might need more of it for Mr. Cruptinelli.

Voulenteers to take me away were difficult to find at first, but once Nimah stepped up the others soon followed. They did not return me to my old cage, throwing me in a new one that was taller but more narrow. The performers left me by the panicked animals before returning to their beloved leader.

I should’ve spat on them. Forget the pain I should’ve yelled and fought.

I tried to pull my knees up to my chin, but my leg would not obey the commands it was given. Urso the dancing bear made frequent and pitiful bellows. His distress carried through the other animals. I heard mutterings of a zebra who had broken its leg after frantically kicking at its enclosure. The animals I really cared for were right beside me. Nimah had left me next to the tigers.

I couldn’t begin to guess as to her meaning.

Boxer and Bruiser were pacing their cage, mewling pitifully. I couldn’t see Biter.

“Hey, little man. Hello good girl.” I greeted them. It was hard to speak softly with a hole in my mouth but I did my best for the both of them.

They recognized me.

Bruiser shoved his snub nose through the bars, expecting to be pet and coddled. I reached out for him with shaking fingers. His nostrils flared when my fingertips met the soft skin. He could smell the blood and recoiled at the scent.
“No no.” I cooed at him. “It’s okay.”

The both of them started to sniff, and that’s when I saw Biter spring out from behind her mama’s paws. She was used to the smell of some kind of blood on me and wriggled her little shoulders through the cage bars until she had gotten herself stuck. She was half inside of my cage, half inside of her parents, but all happy meows.

“I missed you too.” I said.

The little cub spurred her parents to action. I tensed as the rough strokes of Boxers’ tongue met my tender wounds. She was trying to clean them. Kos above, here I was receiving better medicinal treatment from animals than men. I wound my fingers around the bars of the cage, gritting my teeth to ward of the pain as the compassionate creatures did their best to care for me.

I tried not to hate them along with the circus, tried to come down from the blood lust. Every stroke stung. My shoulders were shivers and I bent my head down, staring at the withered grass. I had to survive this. If I could just hold on a little longer, survive one more sunrise then maybe I’d have another chance to free myself.

My life became a waiting game, and I hoped that the strength from swallowed blood would overwhelm any loss, and that I would soon be my right self again. If only in that moment, then I could get away. I was sure of it. I just had to keep holding on.

Kos above, it hurt to hold on.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! Please let me know what you think!
Yharnam’s rumor mill was a machine more efficient than anything designed by honored engineer. It churned out information so quick and fast with a blatant disregard for facts, mixing truth and lies together until even I couldn’t tell the difference at first glance. Patron Executioner Alfred was so sure that the Bloody Crow was the cause for the murders at the boarding house, and worked the whole of our order into a frenzy over it. The denizens were swept into the thick of it as well.

They took to it like it was some kind of game, sensationalizing their “Ripper”. They composed ballads and made theatrical depictions of a masked man in a cape of feathers, tacking up wanted posters and clogging the square as actors put forth shows. It was hard to know if they were afraid or amused that there was a murderer in the city. Perhaps the citizens had all been in need of some excitement during the winter, now that Yule had passed. It was ridiculous, but it was a good time to be an Executioner.

Coffers were never fuller. Yes, many laughed at the idea of a Bloody Crow flitting from rooftop to rooftop, picking off children and hapless beggars. There was a lot of commotion when it was printed in the papers that he’d murdered the landlord, for that was getting close to people of standing. Things were sensationalized when an heiress was found stabbed to death in a darkened lane. Nevermind the fact that they caught and shot her attacker while he made his escape, the rumor mill churned that she’d been killed by the Crow.

The concerned public began to give us old guns. They were outfitting Executioners with everything they could find, filling donation boxes and clanking tin collection cups at passerbys. If one were to don their robes they were as kings in the street. People made way, or asked to shake hands. Even I, whose face had dissuaded the approach of anyone for years found that there were curious children now nipping at my heels. Bent-backed washerwoman begged me come closer and offer a prayer to my gods for them.

It was wonderful to be receiving their devotion, but every grin, each cheer was tainted by the ugly feeling that we were headed in the wrong direction. The black feathers on Callum’s floor had made strong indication of the Crow’s involvement, but I felt sure that Fwahe had something to do with it too. I could not shake the feeling no matter how hard I tried.

We still hadn’t been able to find her.

“With any luck, the Crow’s got her.” Audrey said.

She’d taken to sitting next to me at breakfast. I had to watch while the precious stock of creamer and sugar was wasted in her morning coffee, most of which was left in the cup. She never finished things. I wasn’t prone to eating nor drinking as they did, but the waste bothered me. She should have had the discipline to finish by now, or at least take less from the lines.

“If the crow got her we can’t be sure her body was disposed of properly.” I said, “Better if she comes back.”

Audrey slammed her spoon down in disgust, “If she comes back we can’t kill her. Lady Hemlock says so.”
I closed my eyes before rolling them, trying to conceal just how deeply the tediousness of this conversation wore on me. I couldn’t imagine how she kept forgetting that Frigga wasn’t in charge anymore. There were Executioner banners and Executioners themselves all over the city to remind her, not to mention hordes of concerned citizens crowding the plaza outside who certainly hadn’t been there before. We called Alfred our Patron Executioner now. Everything had changed for the better, and here she was moping in the past.

“Frigga’s not in charge anymore.” I said, “So it doesn’t matter if she wanted to protect Fwahe. Alfred wouldn’t let a Vileblood stay alive in the city.”

“He let’s Templeton stay alive.” Audrey said.

I hated to concede any point to her, so I didn’t. Best not to let her think she had the correct ideas. “Templeton’s a special case. She’s only being kept alive while she researches- but as soon as her work stops being useful we’ll have a proper Execution.”

“Do you think they’ll let you pull the rope again?” Audrey asked.

I shrugged. “It’s chosen at random, but the honor of participation is great.”

Her eyes sparkled as she mused on dreams of her being the one to wield the wheels that cracked bone in front of a crowd- instead of being stuck cleaning up afterwards. Although it was imperative that each piece of the corpse be carefully disposed of, it was a bloody and unpleasant task. You could get buried in the stink of it all, hands dripping with pummeled flesh. All over your coat, all over your shoes- and it never washed out.

I pulled apart pieces of buttered toast while she continued to talk. It still wasn’t easy to pick out individuals in the crowded dining hall, but thus far I hadn’t been able to locate Patience. I needed to track down Fwahe- and do it fast. The hunger was growing again, and the first wave of sickness would be upon me before too much longer. Sometimes I watched Templeton from the shadows, trying to see how she dealt with the urges. The symptoms were clear, shaking hands and growling stomach. She was prone to doubling over- likely with vicious stomach cramps, and sweating profusely. Sometimes I thought I saw her eyes glitter a different color, but in a blink and a flash of eyeglasses it was gone.

I knew her to be in constant pain.

Strix would spot me after awhile. He was not the most observant guard, but he wasn’t inept. After Audrey stopped to take a breath I might make quick excuse for myself and go down to observe once more. Watching Templeton seemed to lessen my own hunger pangs. At least I was not that bad.

Like it or not they were getting worse, and it was urgent I locate Patience and pry Fwhae’s last whereabouts from him. He would have to give them up, and I had resolved to use a knife if I must.

At last Audrey had loaded her spoon with too much oatmeal, and while struggling to talk, eat and choke all at the same time I found my chance to duck out.

“Please excuse me.” I said, then stood and all but sprinted for the door. As the hunger became worse the smell of food tended to make me nauseous.

I didn’t know exactly where Patience had been stationed to sleep, but the Downey twins would, and I might be able to pry it from one of them. They knew everything, somehow getting the chance to dip their hands in everyone’s private matters and rifle through them for anything useful. That
was where I needed to be, sorting through information instead of spending breakfasts with Audrey.

I checked the training areas first. I got the inkling it was a poor idea the moment I’d set out for the designated spaces. Essex and Sussex certainly maintained the skills and physique necessary to swing a Logarius Wheel with ease. Despite that fact, I had never actually trained alongside them. I had never seen either one practice anything, it was as though they came into the world with a natural aptitude for what they did- that they’d never had to actually try to improve their skills. Of course this was nonsense, I’d just never particularly looked for either one when sparring.

The more I tried to justify their absence from all practices, the less certain I was that coincidence had been the mastermind behind the missing twins. I didn’t know one thing about the way they fought, nor their preference when it came to weaponry. Surely somewhere along the line I must’ve been out to hunt with them, but the details were lost to me. I tried to catalog what I could of the people I watched in the practice ring. When Frigga Hemlock first rose to power so too did the popularity of trials by combat. In the end right of conquest is what she’d been able to prove in order to take the seat of Patron. There’d been several upstarts and challenges from others eager for a seat, but she’d bested them all.

Threaded cane. That was her weapon of choice. I’d watched hers snap in two on the battlefield when Former Abbot Minimus had put her on trial. Alfred had chosen to fight with his Kirkhammer in those battles, and had used it to smash her leg. She’d recovered marvelously- and it angered me I hadn’t received the same urgent care at any point in my life. Perhaps they could’ve saved more of me from this terrible visage.

In that time it was always down to questions. Could I fight Frigga Hemlock? Could I fight Executioner Alfred? I’d always been able to delude myself into thinking a definitive yes to nearly every challenge I propositioned myself with. Now that it was down to Essex and Sussex, I wasn’t so sure.

I continued to search for them as I made my way to the training rooms, taking the longest path I knew. The obvious place to expect them would be a dormitory, but their rooms were vacant. Every door in the hallway was open, and only a few penitent Executioners were inside their rooms, kneeling in prayer or studying various texts. Most of these were older, of Alfred’s generation. They sat and waited and talked about how glorious it would be when Executioners ran the city. We did run the city, we had our hands in every piece of England now, if only our Patron would take hold of it.

They were not in the library, though the sweep I made was hardly thorough and in truth it was a sad thing to call a library. Frigga’s little Vileblood had acquired most of the books of credible knowledge in Yharnam, stashing them in her secret archive in the Valkyrie’s theater. It was high time we took them back, not that reading were a particular interest of mine.

I was nearly at the training room, when I heard illicit noises coming from one of the laundry closets. You would think in a time of crisis and oppoutronity, with the Bloody Crow fantiscisim higher then ever one might keep their dignity about them and find other times for such matters.

Though everyone seemed to enjoy forgetting, I was an Executioner yet and took it upon myself to break this up. The last thing we needed was another sullied reputation.

One could only imagine my surprise when the bodies in the closet turned out not to be passionate youth, but none other then ever-composed Executioner Essex and the clumsy fool who’d served tea last night. Orius; that was his name.

I cleared my throat, waiting for an explanation. I couldn’t wait to see what story the two of them
were going to try and piece together, just how it is that one finds themselves covered in perspiration, pushed against boxes of soap and cleaning solution with a hand ever so convienently in another man’s trousers. They detached interlocked tongues. Orius went pale- and to my eyes seemed almost transparent. In his expression I could see all the little gears and wheels of his mind working together at top speeds, desperate to generate an excuse.

“This isn’t what it looks like!” He cried.

All that effort for such a woeful lack of originality.

“Isn’t it?” I asked.

Orius was about to speak again, but it was in that moment that Executioner Essex took back his hand, calmly wiped it clean on a towel and then proceeded to adjust his robes. He was not at all phased by my intrusion.

“It is none of your concern.” He said.

“Perhaps not mine, though I do think Patron Executioner Alfred might be interested in hearing about this. Surely it is his concern.”

“Then run along and tell him.” Essex said.

“Es, are you crazy he’ll have us-” Orius

Essex pressed a finger to Orius’ lips. Once silence was excepted, Essex laced Orius’ trousers for him and turned back to me.

“What are you waiting for?” He asked, “You’re his loyal little dog aren’t you? Run back to your master- go on I’m sure he’d love to have you yapping in his ear again.”

Orius stifled a chuckle.

I grit my teeth and tried to control the temper that surged inside of me. I would not allow two sodomites to suddenly have the upperhand. Essex might have his fancy words and cutting insults, but there was no excuse for behaviors and relations of this sort in our order. The church would be in a row when they head about this, and Executioner Alfred would have to dismiss them.

“I don’t think you are in a position to be giving commands.” I said, working to keep my voice as low and even as Essex’s.

“Do not delude yourself into thinking you operate on the same level as I do.” Essex said, “I’m sure that in your tiny world it looks like you hold all the cards, but in reality your not even playing at the same table as me. Nothing you could do or say to Alfred would change his opinion of me, and should you present this to him all I must do is point out that your story is clearly a shoddy fabrication.”

“I know what I’ve seen.” I said.

“And unless you happen to be carrying around an extra set of eyes for Alfred too look through, then you’re the only one who saw it.” Essex said.

He was right again. Not the slightest flinch, no signs of doubt in his face. There had to be a crack somewhere, if I could find just the smallest one I’d break him open. Wherever Essex stored his concern, it was well hidden and I, unable to find it.
“I won’t forget about this.” I said.

It was a meager threat. Not even Orius seemed concerned by it.

“I don’t expect that you will.” Essex agreed, “Now do as I’ve said and run along. I’ve some unfinished business to attend too.”

I was not a deviant and didn’t linger long when they closed the door. It was only as I found myself halfway down the hall that the questions I’d had for Essex came back to me. If I’d been doubtful of winning his assistance before I was certain not to get it now. I would have to find Sussex, and be quick about it. If one twin had already communicated my blunder to the other I would be shut out from the more reliable sources of information.

I hoped that fortune would smile upon me again, and that I would simply stumble across Sussex, but as I tread the tired halls of the bank he was nowhere to be found. I needed to get away from the closed doors and tight-packed rooms. I was beginning to feel like the walls of the bank were reaching out to choke me.

I made my way through the bank’s towering doors, and into the crowded street. Really it wasn’t much better out here then in the halls, still too many bodies all jostling against one another. Despite efforts from the juniors and scholars, the denizens could not be pushed into straight lines, crowding in clumps around the people who tried to service their needs. The pulsing throngs of them made my mouth water.

No, I could not be around this many people. My investigation had to speed along with greater haste. I was going to loose it before long, for I couldn’t cope as long as Templeton. Everyone knew what she was and it was fine for her to crack and show signs of hunger. I must maintain composure, always. I pushed through them when I had too, but most had the sense to stand aside.

The plaza was an anthill, and the streets beyond it were just as bad. Yharnam was used to quiet winters, full of closed doors and stifled markets. There weren’t supposed to be jugglers and singing bards, and all the other summer nonsense that choked the air. It got so thick with the stink of sweat and cooking meat that it was a chore just to walk a single block. I hated summer, and now the winters I used to build my tolerance for unpleasant things were being stolen away.

“You there!” A barker shouted, “Executioner!”

I knew it was just another street-corner charlatan, probably out to win a coin or two from my purse-but I turned all the same.

She was dressed in a flowing cape of chicken feathers, spattered with red paint. I could see from the shoddy stage, and the fluttering playbills clasped in the hands of those nearby that this was a theatrical production. For some reason Yharnamites adored these macabre little spectacles, full of poetry and professions of emotions from then men and women on stage. I didn’t really understand what they were on about and turned from her instantly.

She stepped down from her platform and pursued me.

“Oh noble Executioner, who art thou to turn thine face away from sworn enemy?”

Her voice carried over the din of the passing people, drawing them in like a siren song. In a moment her hand was on mine, tugging me towards the stage. I dug in my heels, assuring her that I’d no interest in her performances. She would not be dissuaded.

“Come now, we must have an Executioner!” She said.
The crowd was on her side, cheering and clapping. Some of them pounded me on the back or assisted her as she tried to shift me towards the stage. For every one of them that made an effort, a half dozen more stopped in their tracks to watch the scene.

“Come on,” she said, “No need to be shy.”

“I’m not interested.” I protested.

One of her stage hands had stepped forward at this point, taking firmer hold of me then I was of a means to allow. He was a big fellow, and I shortly dealt him a great deal of surprise when I jerked away from a grip he thought iron. It was true that I was as thin and wispy as the scarecrows in the farmer’s fields around the city, but my strength was not defined by human limitations. The corrupted blood had its advantages.

“Not. Interested.” I clarified.

Before anyone else could touch me I stormed off down the street. I had to ignore the urge to kick over merchants barrels, or knock cages of squawking chickens out of line. Somewhere there must be salvation from all of these things.

Yharnam was one of those places full of dark corners, but it was packed with people who knew about them. Men brought women there to fall prey to lust away from the scolding eyes of the church. People drowned their sorrows in tiny bars, which were too stuffed to start with. The people who ran them took up more space then they had to spare, and there was always the smell of chicken grease and boiled bones in the air. I wanted for rooftops, a wide place where I could truly feel alone.

I thought of the house Alfred had taken us to, through the tunnel under the city. It was not vast and the odors weren’t the most pleasing- but I was reasonably certain it would be empty. That would be enough.

I didn’t recall the precise location of the dilapidated little thing, but I thought I’d be able to trace the way backwards from Callum’s clinic. The boarding house would probably still be packed full of constables, or daring denizens who wanted a peek inside a real murder scene. They were known to loot places where horrible things had happened and sell off bloodied trinkets as souvenirs. Tragedy had it’s market and did a brisk trade in back alley Yharnam.

I found the way easily, but began to doubt myself as I drew nearer. I didn’t see any of the shady people I’d expected to come across. The street which should’ve been hung dark with mourning colors, or at least full of closed shutters was brightly lit, and appeared to be doing as brisk a trade as any other. I even thought there was a light on in Callum’s old practice.

Coming closer to inspect I found I was correct. Not only was the window lit, it had been cleaned. The red cross was painted in brighter colors than ever. I watched from across the street, and saw someone inside. They moved and breathed, walked and lived and were definitely not dead. The medics body wasn’t left at the clinic, but everyone had kind of assumed that the Bloody Crow didn’t leave survivors.

I had to get a closer look.

It was strange to see the boarding house lit up again. There weren’t any notices posted on the door, no barricades or inspectors on stand by, not a single thing to indicate that a murder in triplicate had just taken place there. I continued up the stoop and found that there were several other people in the little foyer, waiting.
His clinic already had visitors, two of which I recognized. Frigga’s Valkyrie girls were here. I knew the two of them were involved in explicit relations and had taken each others names, but now both faces were awash with concern as they sat about in line with a coughing boy and an elderly man. There were candles in the halls sconces, and light coming from Callum’s door but the rest of the boarding house was dark.

The older man patted the boy’s back as he bent over in coughing fits. Scarlett and Imogen were too focused on each other to notice as I slipped past them into the shadows. If the constables were respectable they would’ve long since cleared away the bodies— but it smelled as though they hadn’t. Not the reek of death, that horrid decaying spoiled-meat smell— but the blood. There had been so much of it that it had yet to fade. It had soaked past the floorboards down into the very foundations of the boarding house.

I shook my head, trying to get the overpowering scent out of my nostrils. The boy coughed again, and the motion of his throat made my stomach growl.

I needed something else to focus on.

“You’re going to be just fine.” Imogen said. “I’m sure nothings wrong.”

Scarlett offered her a weak smile. One of her hands hovered protectively over her stomach, the other was clutched tightly in Imogen’s squeezing until the knuckles had gone white. Imogen moved strands of red hair aside and planted a kiss on Scarlett’s lips. The young boy gave a snort of disgust, then fell back into coughing.

Scarlett smiled but Imogen glared. The anger lasted for only a moment, the next she was turned back to the door, anxiously watching the shadows through the gap between it and the floor. From what I could discern it seemed that someone inside was pacing. It must’ve been the medic, I could think of no other reason for the sick to gather. It had to be him. I was as anxious as she for the door to open. The waiting was the worst.

I thought the noises from the coughing child had been bad, but all of a sudden a screeching sound, like that of a trapped creature came billowing through the thin walls. I looked around in every direction, checking the staircase and the shadows. I looked at the door, and beyond that through the window, but could see no reasonable place for it to have come from. I was nervous that there might be beasts about, but I seemed to be the only one. The old man and the boy were calm as could be.

“That was a loud one.” Scarlett said, face flushed with embaressment, brows wrinkled with worry. She had been doubled-over screaming, that sound a testament to the pains she felt. She patted her stomach while Imogen offered consolation.

If I were being made to scram s that., I would be a lot more concerned then either of them. They ought to have pounded down the door and demanded to be seen at once.

“I think they’re getting quiet, actually.” Imogen said. She raised the tightly clasped fingers to her lips and kissed them as well. The boy didn’t make another proclamation of disgust, but I wanted too.

“Thanks, darling.” Scarlett said.

There was only one other howl, and to be honest it was a lot less off-putting then the first before the door opened. It was Callum sure enough, with spectacles and apron ever as before.
“Be sure to take that twice a day, mixed with tea.” He reminded the woman who was hurrying towards the door. She turned back and waved, nodding her head in understanding, then promptly exited.

“Who’s next?” Callum asked.

“We are!” All four of the people waiting said at the same time.

Callum sighed, and looked towards the door as it was swung closed. He would be wanting for a smoke break right about now. Perhaps if I waited I might intercede and be able to talk to him about the Bloody Crow, about how he’d survived and started at his trade again so brazenly.

“Right, well.” The medic muttered, taking his glasses off and polishing them on the corner of his robes, “It’s ladies first.”

Scarlett and Imoen smiled over their small victory. They hurried inside of Callum’s examination room while the other two sighed and settled into their seats once more. The wooden door was thin, and I could hear the occasional screeching sound come from the other side. I tried to entertain myself with watching the old man, but he wasn’t moving much. The two of them didn’t talk to each other.

After a few minutes the boy was offered a clean handkerchief, but that was the extent of their interaction. Naturally I began listening, leaning against the wall and pressing my ear the peeling paint. The voiced beyond were muffled, but I could hear the rattling of bottles—no doubt Callum searching his cabinets for something specific. There was the pounding of mortar and pestle.

Not too long later both women were leaving, a wax paper bag clutched tightly in Imogen’s hand.

“I want you back next week for a checkup.” Callum said, “I’ve never seen anything like this before. Really I ought to go with you and keep watch over night, but I have other patients.”

“We can wait.” Imogen said, “We’ll wait until all your clients are gone, really I—we…I mean. The best care possible is what we’re after…Frigga being gone and all, it would…it would be really good to have someone else back at the theater.”

He nodded. “You can just wait out here then.”

Another victory for the happy couple.

It seemed the moment to catch Callum alone had vanished, lest I step from the shadows and feign sickness. I didn’t think anyone would begrudge me complaints of pain, scalded flesh had the tendency to remain sensitive long after the flames had faded. I did not enjoy exploitation of my unfortunate appearance, but this was a rare case.

Watching the boys coughing throat, and even the old man’s haggard breaths I could not ignore the stirring in my stomach. Yes, it was definitely time to see the doctor. The boy and the old man were called in. As they left I sat down on the bench, trying to play it off like I had been waiting to sit down instead of just lurking in the shadows.

“Oh my!” Scarlett squeaked, “I didn’t see you there.”

I turned to face her and grinned. She smiled back, but her nose wrinkled. Not only had I surprised her, she found my face unsettling as well. It was a small thing to dwell on, but I marked the way Imogen’s hand protectively jolted over Scarlett’s stomach. Was she worried that my looks were contagious, that they could infect the unborn?
What nonsense.

“Suppose not.” I replied.

She laughed and gave me another strained smile. After exchanging looks Imogen tried to strike up a conversation.

“Are you quite well?” She asked.

“Nothing contagious.” I was quick to reply, “Just pains from old burns.”

“Ah.” Imogen said, nodding as if she understood. She couldn’t possibly understand.

“What about you?” I asked, “Should I stand a few feet away?”

Imogen and Scarlett exchanged glances again, but this time instead of apprehensive smiles they shared bursts of laughter.

“No no.” Imogen said shaking her head. “It’s nothing like that.”

“We’re expecting.” Scarlett cut in, “I mean…well…I am.”

“Ah.” I said. “If…I mean…well..um…whos the father?”

They glared. “We are going to raise this child. Scarlett and I.”

“Sure.” I said, “Congratulations.”

“Thank you.” Scarlett said.

Their discomfort prevented any further conversation. I had overstepped my boundaries, and now the two tapped their feet or drummed their fingers while they waited to take Callum back to the theater. I guessed it was another twenty minutes before the boy left the medic’s room. There was no strange smell or smoke curls this time.

“Is that everyone?” Callum asked.

I stood up and raised my hand, “Sorry Doc.”

He waved me inside, “It’s no matter, Executioner Keflazin. Come in.”

I admit I was rather agog to find him so agreeable. Callum was not known for a cheery disposition.

There were still signs of the attack throughout his little room. I was relieved to see them, fearing that the adventure beneath the city and the many bleeding corpses had all been mere illusion. He’d cleared away the glass and the broken furniture. There was even less then what meager belongings he’d had before- no longer a bed frame to speak of, but a straw matress on the floor. The walls were still stained with all the things that had been throne against them.

Gone was the massive medicine cabinet that used to dominate the far wall. It had made his practice all the more official in appearance, for despite soiled yellow curtains and aging diagrams, the dispensary gleamed with glass jars of cure-alls. That’s what everyone was here for in the end, that’s what it all came down too. Everyone needed little pills in little jars to keep the illness at bay, and Callum’s cabinet was their glittering goldmine.

Now he had a satchel on a rickety table, a few bottles of colored liquid and a meager collection of
withering plants. This was definitely not the makings for an affable medic.

“I must admit I was surprised to see you back.” I said.

“Can’t keep a good dog down.” Callum returned.

“Are you aware the Bloody Crow is said to be after you? That he killed your landlord and your-“

“It’s not my blood he wants.” Callum replied.

“He?” I asked.

“Yes.” The medic replied, “Is this in some way relevant to your ailment, Executioner Kelfazin?”

I shook my head, “Well no, but- everyone in the city thinks Fwahe is the Bloody Crow, and you claim otherwise?”

Once more he replied in the affirmative.

“How can you be sure?”

“Your ailment, Executioner?” He prompted.

“Yes, yes.” I said, “My old burns feel rather inflamed lately- probably just the chill in the air but I wonder if you might have anything to stave it off.”

“A scarf.” He said dryly.

Back to the man I was accustomed too. I gave him a half-genuine chuckle while he began to look through his satchel, muttering about how crystals would not cure me. I didn’t know what to make of it, but then again most of his work was incomprehensible to me.

“About the Bloody Crow,” I started again.

Callum made a gruff noise, that I took as acceptance of my continuation.

“How can you be sure it’s a he? Everyone is so certain of her long silver hair and-”

“I’ve seen him. Trust me. He is no woman.”

“You’ve seen him?”

Callum rolled his eyes and drowned out any further questions with the furious pounding of mortar and pestle. It was not the same set that had been thrown into the wall during the raiding.

“Yes, and I do not ever wish to again.” He concluded.

The medic poured some of the green liquid into the ceramic mortar, stirred whatever powdered roots had been in there before, then scooped the grainy paste into a wax envelope. He extended it to me.

“Apply this before you go to bed, and sleep with your scarred side away from the pillow. It should help.” He began to prompt me towards the door.

“Callum, wait.” I said, “We need to talk about this. The whole city is in a-“

“Are there any other immediate medical concerns that require my attention, Executioner Kelfazin?”
“No, sir.” I replied, speaking through gritted teeth.

Callum tilted his head, causing the candelight to strike his glasses just so. Their reflection in the smudged glass looked like hellfire.

“No, sir.”

His tone was simple and dismissive. I could’ve ripped his throat out, broken his arm, squashed his skull. There was all manner of strength and hostility I might have released on the unsuspecting medicine-man, but I’d never allowed myself to become slave to such base emotions. I was better then brute force.

If I took it into my mind to destroy the doctor I would do it the clever way, rising to the top and then squeezing his resources away from him. There was more then one way to bring someone to death’s door. Callum, however was still useful. The city needed someone to clean up its messes and tend the sick. He was a simple creature, no doubt frightened by the Bloody Crow. His response to trauma was this off-putting aura of elevated status.

He was not better then I.

Still I took my leave and went back to the darkening streets. A few torches were lit, but the denizens were quickly filing away into their houses. During Frigga’s reign they had started to linger in the streets or stay red-faced in taverns beyond the end of one day and well into the next. The fear of the hunt had left them, but this talk of Rippers and Crows had them locking their shutters and dousing the flames of their gaslights.

They shouldn’t have worried. There were plenty of Executioners to keep the streets clear. I did worry though, for when push came to shove and hunger threatened to overtake my countenance I might be left with an empty larder. I needed to find Fwahe. As I made my way back to the bank, I mulled a few possibilities over.

Templeton presented a unique problem. As far as all records indicated she was the last Vileblood, besides Fwahe and I. Some people claimed the Bloody Crow had silvered blood, but I took no stock in that. Everyone was eager to blame monsters for their problems when human solutions were more likely- unless of course it really was the Patron’s Ranger leaping about in a crow-feather cape. It could be her and if it was she would die at my hands.

Templeton needed to die at my hands too. Frigga would never allow that, thus she might soon become a throat that wanted for slitting. It would save far more people to cut her off, so that I could take down her treasured monsters and rid the world of a corrupted race forevermore. What was one life when weighed against the thousands Fwahe and Templeton had slaughtered by now?

I chewed on the thought, rounding the corner on the final leg of my walk home.

The plaza was empty- and I didn’t think it a particularly good sign. Even at these later hours there were stragglers, those who just couldn’t wait to lobby their protests at our Patron. Frigga’s theater was never this crowded, she held fewer audiences. She was not a woman of the people, not one of the denizens. At least Alfred was willing to listen to their concerns, numerous though they were. I tried to shake off the growing sense of foreboding that welled in my stomach as I walked through the empty space. No matter how I attempt to frame things, I could not set them at ease within me.

I hadn’t reached the door before I heard the far-off tinkle of a hunters bell. It had been a fair time since I’d been on patrol, but I knew the cadence and rhythm of the various signals that hunters passed through the city by heart. Someone was in trouble. My speed doubled, as I hurried towards
the sound, returning their call with my own bell. Were there anyone else about perhaps they would move to assist us too.

It had been so long, so long since anyone had called for anything. The tones of the “all’s clear” bells had become white noise, another back drop in the clamoring city sounds. To cry for help was to be horribly off key, instantly disrupting the stillness of the night.

Distress calls had been more common before Frigga had organized a city watch. In the days of Abbot Minimus they were frequent and beast attacks were their best known cause. In recent years the bells had more signaled housefires or overturned carriages. They weren’t necessarily hunter-specific problems but we were posted to serve the city in any way we could. I expected it might be another one of these little issues- but feared far worse.

There was no sound of startled horses in the street, no plumes of smoke rising above the rooftops. I kept on the alert, listening for other bells. Those that voiced response were father from the caller then I. For all my multitudes of hunts, I had never been a first responder. There was always someone ahead of me who’d taken charge of the situation.

I suppose that should come as a comfort. Crisis was best not to be viewed as an oppourtonity. All the same I was unable to help myself, for this could be a chance to be painted in yet more flattering lights. My feet pounded down the pathway, and I found myself on Red Street just in time to catch sight of the bell-ringer.

I was surprised to have recognized him- despite his distinctive appearance I did not know a great deal of hunters by name outside of my circle of Executioners. There could be no mistaking this Valkyrie however, not with the teeth he had stitched into his clothing.

What cause had Cato to ring bells for? He was yet another one on Frigga’s endless list of little problems.

“What cause for trouble, brother hunter?” I asked coming up alongside him.

His eyes were reddened and wide and his smell was off. All the excitement and tension that had built in my shoulders fell suddenly. I rolled my eyes and pulled out my bell once more to signal to the others that it had been a false alarm. Drug enduced hazes were no reason to call out the city’s hunters.

“..Saw it.” Cato muttered. “Giant dog-thing.”

He was waving his arms in wide circles and struggling to keep his footing. Drunken as well no doubt. There were sins to be commited on Red Street for certain and the hunter seemed to have imbibed all of them at once. Instead of slaying beasts and keeping the city safe from attack, it looked like I would spend the night picking up messes and guiding the raving lunatic home.

I did my best to humor him. “Greatwolf?” I asked.

He shook his head. All he managed to get past his quiver lips, which oozed with even worse smells then his skin. “Bigger.”

If there were something larger then one of the massive wolves that used to be the terror of Yharnam, then it wouldn’t have been able to hide in this narrow alley.

“I’m sure it was.” I said, putting an arm around Cato’s shoulders. I could feel the sharpened points of the decorative teeth sewn into his shirt poking me through my Executioner’s robes. “I’ll take you home.”
“No!” Cato said, ducking out from my grasp and spinning around. He pointed down the lane. “We’ve got to kill it.”

“Fine.” I said.

Cato could barely manage his weapon. He’d lost most of his fingers, and no longer possessed the two-handed grip required to wield his typical whirligig saw. The rotating saw-tooth blade and intense metal work were great for tearing blood and bone. It had been such a unique weapon and so effective that it had caught the fascination of the Powder Keg hunters who quickly worked to build their own variations. All of them were heavy and hard to manage without sufficient strength. Cato had been forced to set that weapon aside and train at a new one.

The tonitrus he carried was small and simple in comparison. This was not much more then a metal ball at the end of a leather wrapped stick, good for bludgeoning and breaking. It too, was heavy, and drug the ground when Cato could not keep it at the ready. He started down the street, and I followed.

I was trying to pick out just what was different about the smell in these streets. I could usually pick out a creature— if there was one by its odor. Carrion crows, more so then most had a distinctive reek about them which carried from quite a distance away. I’d never once been caught off guard by a carrion crow.

We had reached the end of the street by the time I had finally picked out the scent. It was sulfuric, the kind of thing that people compared to rotten eggs. There was a deeper metallic bite to it, not merely spoiled food.

“Keep alert.” Cato cautioned me.

The drugged man giving me pointers, oh how I wanted to laugh. I was an Executioner, fully-fledged. The longer this went on the more weary I became of being treated like a novice.

“There’s nothing here.” I said again, “Be realistic— whatever you were inhaling in that bordello is just making you see things.”

All the points in his face collapsed inwards, a dilapidated anger. This had been worn into over time, my comment merely catalyst. I was certain I’d receive violent retaliation, but after a momentray inhale he spoke evenly.

“You could be right, Executioner.” Cato admitted, “But I saw it and I still have to check.”

It was sound logic, moreso then I had expected. Caot had nevertheless made the mistake of admitting to engaging in dubious activities and I would no allow it to go unreported. When we returned from this fool’s errand, I would issue a report and have him investigated. False alarms could be dangerous and if the hunter intended to be cause for more of them he would need to be removed. Frigga was no longer here to make excuses and intercede on behalf of her favorites.

With Alfred reigning over the city at least we could guarantee a measure of fairness when dealing with broken laws. He did not pardon people merely because he had served alongside them. I would ensure this practice be kept up, were I ever to oversee it myself. This seemed less and less likely as time went on, for soon Fwahe would be found, and then Templeton slain and I would have to keep my oath and spill my blood.

I would do it with dignity, nobly submitting myself to the Executioners so that they could properly dispose of my body. I would list all the names of the people I had killed, make it known that
Clarkus did not disappear but had been the unfortunate subject of a moment of weakness. They would not forgive me, and it was best that they didn’t. I needed to be taken to the block, and put to death with the wheel. That was the fate of this rotting blood, the ever-present curse of my kind.

The sulfurous stench became more potent. Cato had stopped in front of one of the doors on Red Street. Light came from inside, spilling beneath the door and through the cracks in the windows. It seemed too bright for candles and nighttime. I looked about but there were no plumes of smoke, making fire an impossibility.

While I didn’t believe that Cato’s massive dog lurked inside the house seemed to merit further investigation. I came up behind him, waiting for Cato to make the first move.

He didn’t hesitate. No part of him, be it through injury or drugging had been so damaged that he lost his impulsive nature. That was both good and bad when it came to hunting, reacting quickly was often the difference between life or death. Then again so was thorough investigation before launching an attack.

Cato twisted the door knob, and was rather shocked to find that his entrance was barred. He rotated it both ways, yanking several times before stepping back and kicking the door in frustration. He hadn’t given it enough strength to cave the treated wood.

“Locked.” He proclaimed.

As if I couldn’t see that for myself.

“Seems theres nothing we can do.” I said, “Might as well-

The next moment his tonitrus came down, bashing the doorknob. The decorative doorknob went flying off its peg, landing a good ways down the street and rolling further along the cobbles.

“Oh look.” Said Cato, “It’s open.”

I added destruction of property to the list of problems I had with the Valkyrie. Hopefully whoever lived in this house wasn’t going to shoot us on site. The older Yharnamites were still pretty protective of their property. Given a situation like this I really couldn’t blame them.

He opened the door.

We caught one glance of the snapping jaws of an almost crocodilian snout. I saw fur and fire, ancient blazes like magma. My glimpse lasted only a brief second before Cato slammed the door closed. Whatever was inside had hurled itself towards the door. The whole house shook with the blow.

“Still don’t believe me?” Cato muttered, bracing his shoulder against the cracking wood. I bent to help him.

In response I took out my hunter’s bell and quickly called for assistance. I was glad that I hadn’t been able to negate his request. Something this size would require assistance. How had it even gotten in here? Red street wasn’t exactly close to the wall, and I didn’t imagine a glowing snarling thing like that could walk through Yharnam unnotice.

It leapt again, and the door provided no shielding against the strength of the blow. I felt it down to my bones. The door would be splinters before much longer.

“We can’t hold it!” I shouted.
Cato nodded, stepping away from the door and readying his weapon. All I had with me were knives. This was not going to be an easy battle. The teeth on Cato’s clothes rattled as he hurried to rub bolt papers over his weapon and imbibe it with strange lightning. I’d known that Abbot Minimus, who was largely responsible for the hunter’s missing digits was also a proponent of this sort of enhancement. Strange to see him using it, and not just because he had to awkwardly grasp the handle of his weapon by nestling it into his armpit while his good hand gave the metal ball a through coating.

The next burst brought down the door, and the snapping jaws returned. The entire creature was too large to go through the door, which made me wonder how it had gotten into the house in the first place. It snarled and snuffled, working to free itself while plaster and plank board caved in around it.

“We need to clear the streets!” Cato shouted, before smashing one of the teeth of the beast out of its mouth.

Now was hardly the time for him to be collecting trophies.

“It’s safer for them inside.” I called back to him.

“This thing is inside!” he protested.

There was no chance for further explanation. No matter that it would be more dangerous to have a bunch of addicts and whores running through the streets with a beast at their heels, there was no time to put either of our plans into action. Whomever was good and safe inside would have to hope they stayed that way. Whatever late-night wretches were unfortunate enough to be caught in the street on the night of the hunt, well in a sense it was their own fault for succumbing to base urges.

The beast broke through, bringing the upper floors of the building crumbling down around it. It opened its maw and let out a piercing shriek. The sulfurous smell poured from its mouth, and though it glowed with fire it did not burn the ground it walked on, nor the things it brushed against. I could not understand how it hadn’t been incinerated for the fire dealt it no damage. I wondered if Cato’s tonitus might.

I wasn’t about to rely on him to do everything. The beast’s eyes blazed with the same fire that coated its back and belly. They made for easy targets and I was able to force one to close with an expert throw that lodged one of my knives through its eye, deep into its skull. The creature howled with rage, and swept a great foreleg at me. I jumped aside and made it, just barely to safety. If it hadn’t been for the half-collapsed building that the creature was still working to crawl its way out of, I would’ve suffered quite heavily from a swing like that.

“Look out!” Cato cried.

A little late on the warning.

There was a flash of fire, this being of the sort that could actually burn, followed by a manic howl of delight.

Just my luck. The Lupei brothers had shown up to aid us and decided to quite literally fight fire with fire. Their Molotov cocktail caused the remnants of the building to catch, but the monster seemed none worse for the wear.

“Oi!” Aditya scolded, “What’dya do that for?”

Even from down on the ground I could hear the two of them starting another one of their infamous fights. This was hardly the time for an overdrawn argument.
“It looked like they were tryin’ to bloody’ smoke it out! I was helping!” Viorel returned.

“They ain’t settin’ it on fire it’s already on fire!” Aditya screamed.

“Well I’ll set it more on fire!” Viorel shouted before throwing another Molotov cocktail at the beast.

“Idiots!” Cato howled, “Use your guns!”

The very mention of firearms sparked new energy into the Lupei brothers. Viorel removed a set of pistols from his coat, while Aditya began assembling something large and bulky. He made occasional demands for his brother to help him, but they went unheeded. Viorel was having too much fun being a sharp shooter. Cato’s tonitrus had seemed midly impressive when it shattered the beast’s teeth, but Viorel preferred to take them out from a distance with quicksilver bullets.

They managed to send the beast stumbling backwards into the flaming building, but their earlier mistakes had cost them greatly. Other buildings were beginning to catch fire. Cato struggled with his tonitrus while making frantic attempts to ring his bell and signal for more help.

“Kelfazin! We’ve got to get the denizens out!”

The beast was by far the more important problem, and I continued to work with the Lupei brothers, throwing my knives to blind it the best I could. I hadn’t managed to land another good hit, and the creature seemed to be getting bored of me. It shook loose some of the rubble that had collected on its back then bounded forward and sent me flying down the street with a kick from one of its back legs. I hit the brick wall of a building opposite the recently destroyed. My vision blurred.

“Vio!” Cato shouted, still calling commands despite his incompetence on the battlefield, “Keep it busy!”

“Aye!” Vio replied, all too happy to make a running leap down into the street and come into close range contact with the beast.

Cato disappeared down the alley and began to bust open doors, sheparding herds of half-dressed denizens away from the creature. For now he had the advantage while the beast’s back was turned to monitor Viorel, but I didn’t think this was last.

“Oi!” Vio shouted at the monster, “Look at me you shit-faced mongrel! ‘Ditya! Hurry it up!”

He was loud, somehow shouting above the ear-splitting blast from his pistols. I finally managed to collect my senses and rallied to his side.

“Is all you brought a bunch of fucking butter knives?” Viorel asked of me.

“I didn’t expect anything serious.” I said.

The flaws in my strategy were evident though, and if the dim-witted Lupei’s could see them then certainly my tactics were even weaker then I’d first thought. I did not carry a great arsenal with me and already I was beginning to run short on blades. The beast hardly looked like it had taken a hit.

“Ditya!” Viorel shouted.

“Oi shut your fucking mouth!” Aditya yelled back, “I’m almost done!”

“And I almost fucked your lover senseless- so unless you wanna make that a reality you better-“
For once it wasn’t words that Aditya fired back with but a massive cannonball, which hit the beast in its side. The crack as the projectile collided with its ribcage was solid and satisfying. It slammed into another building, howling with rage while Vio hooted in delight, jumping up and down and waving his pistols in the air.

“What in Kos’ name..”

I was surprised to find that other hunters had answered the call. Anatares was easy to spot, their large frame towered above the throngs of fleeing people. They pushed their way through the onslaught, coming up behind the injured beast and slashing its legs with their saw cleaver. Their wife, Miriam was a few steps behind, not as adept at threading her way through the crowd. She carried a cane and I’d no doubt she knew how to fight with it, but she stopped short of the battle and began to corral some of the more panicked denizens.

The children especially were fleeing in droves, and Cato’s hands lacked any ability to grip them and right their directions.

“What the hell is that?” Antares asked.

“Language.” Miriam snapped.

“It’s a fucking- shit…sorry…it’s a…” Viorel said, trying to both filter his foul language and get them up to speed with the battle.

“It’s fucking dead is what it is!” Aditya howled, launching another cannonball.

The beast bounded aside, crashing into Cato, Miriam and a crowd of panicked denizens.

“Shit!” Aditya cried.

Antares shouted for Miriam and began prodding the creature aside with the teeth of their saw cleaver. I joined alongside them, using up the precious few knives I had left.

Thankfully Miriam and Cato had avoided the worst of it, but the creature’s paw had come down on quite a few unfortunate runners. I knew it would’ve been safer to stay inside.

The fire was spreading now, black clouds of smoke choking the air. Those that could still run held their arms up to their mouths, trying to filter the air as they fled. Judging by the horrible coughs it wasn’t working.

Viorel drew the beasts attention again, pistols a mass of activity while he scolded his brother.

“Oi! It’s got a head bigger n’ yours how about you try hitting it there next time, Shit-for-brains!”

“Quit focusing on your brother, and do your job.” I barked at him.

Viorel shrugged and fired another shot, landing a bullet in the beasts paw. It swiped its head down at him. The beast had some sort of bone protrusion like an armored crown or a helm that protected its face and devastated the young powder keg when it collided with his body. Viorel went down hard, and didn’t stir from the place he had fallen.

Aditya’s next shot missed.

Antares was doing the best they could with the cleaver, defending from the rear. They had to dodge kicks from the creature’s back legs. Occasionally the beast would tire of these attacks,
thrusting its long neck towards Antares to snap at them. They’d jump back, and each time narrowly avoided getting their hand bitten off. It seemed an unspoken exchange between Antares and Miriam that they should work together to keep the crowds safe.

With Viorel down and Aditya reloading, the creature focused its attention on me. I was out of knives to throw, and the end of the alley was near. I grabbed one of Viorel’s guns as it came closer, hoping that the weapon would buy me some time. The boy who would wield it was yet unconscious and did not stir when looted.

The beast had no hesitation, hurtling towards me. It didn’t even stop to sniff at Viorel which set it apart from the beasts that had used to roam the city. They always ate the bodies.

I fired the weapon several times, and most of the bullets bounced off the bone protrusion on the great beat’s head, harmless. I just wasn’t getting through.

Another shot launched from Aditya’s cannon. Bone snapped where it crashed into the beast’s foot, loosing a fountain of blood that glowed with the same molten essence as its fur did.

Antares was inches from the blast, their head nearly taken off by the crazy contraption. They did not ask for apology, nor did the Powder Keg offer it. When the strange blood began to leak out, Antares kept their distance. Touching that blood seemed like a good way to get infected. Even with the newfound limp I could not get around the creature. It was too close to dodge away from, and the three good paws that remained were plenty enough to keep me pinned against the wall.

“Oi!” Aditya shouted, “Vio quit nappin’!”

There was no response. Viorel lay still on the ground.

“Keep them moving!” Cato called to Miriam, before stepping underneath Antares’ attack and running beneath the monster’s belly. The fool was trying to come to my aid.

As he ran beneath the creature he trust his Tonitrus upwards, hoping that the lighting it was imbibed with might seek out a weak spot. Unfortunately this thing was unlike many of the monsters he had fought before and was no softer in its belly then anywhere else.

The beast lunged and I fired the pistol. It took a shot to the shoulder, letting more blood. In turn I found my arm stuck in its mouth, raw pressure forcing teeth through flesh. Silver began to run down my arm. I preyed the light of the fire might make it look red, even as the unimaginable pain coursed up my arm.

I dug in my heels trying to free myself from its jaws, but the beast wasn’t having it. No matter how I pulled and twisted I was stuck tight. It lifted its teeth, briefly before biting down again. Nothing could’ve held against strength like that. I felt its teeth scrape my bone, before I lost it. The last sensation that side of me would ever know- for my arm was snapped like a twig and disappeared down the flaming maw of the beast.

A body that had survived fire could not survive this. That was what it came down too, for the beast was an inferno manifest, come to take that which had been stolen from it so long ago.

My robes were filthy. There was a fountain running from my arms that I did not think would ever stop. I tried to do something to oppose it- but everything felt as though it were caught in syrup. My fingers could not grip tight nor my arms raise fast enough to be of any use. The beast swept its head into me and knocking the wind out of me and sending me sprawling flat.

I saw its eyes in their immense multiplicity burning with rage. They burnt into me as It began to
open its massive jaws. So many teeth.

There were more in its mouth then Cato had stitched into his shirt.

Impressive really.

I heard the crackle of lighting, spreading at last through some weak point in the monster’s armor. It shuttered, then collapsed on top of me. My ribs splintered when its enormous chin was driven into them full force. Any survival I owed to the corrupted blood that was now spilling through the streets. Whatever it had fallen on before was surely dead as dust.

“Hang on Kelfazin!” Cato shouted.

His determination was laughable. Not a moment later the beasts’ paws sent him flying into a rubbish barrel. The wood smashed, Cato cursed and Miriam did not reprimand him for it.

I heard the blast from Aditya’s canon, and more shouts for Viorel to get up. The shot missed. The creatures jaws pinched my side, squeezing blood and air and broken bones into places they didn’t belong. It raised its neck and thrashed me side to side.

The world went to brushstrokes, sweeping colors that meant nothing.

Its teeth sank in, and then there was no color anymore. There wasn’t an-

Chapter End Notes

As always, please let me know what you think and thank you for reading!
No matter how fast we went it was not fast enough. It took to long to slink through the shadows to reach the barn, and once we got there Patience was far too hesistant to take action. I did not think it was fear of horses that bade him stay his hand, but rather an ingrained sense of right and wrong. It was bred deep in these church hunters and was difficult to overcome- but he had already made his promise. If we must steal horses to reach Fwahe with all due haste then I put my qualms about it aside.

Technically we weren’t even stealing. I’d explained to him that the barn beside the Theater was constructed for me. The horses in there were either gifts or entrusted to my care. I was unsure if that was seeded to a new patron once I’d been displaced. Patience seemed to think so, but as I pushed through the barn doors, all I could think of was seeing Swift again.

I needed an old friend. It had been a long wait. I didn’t want to risk getting Scarlett and Imoen involved, I had to ensure that they’d left their little residence. With a baby on the way there could be no thoughts of dragging them into whatever downward spiral I was about to dash into. If they were smart they’d stay inside and stay safe. I longed to see them both, and make sure that my dear Valkyries were doing fine without me. We had all grown strong together, and I was certain that they would do well in my absence- but I missed them.

I could only stand to do so many selfish things at once. It was bad enough that I rode in search of Fwahe and took the Executioner boy along with me. Endangering anyone else was foolishness itself. When I opened the barn doors, I was surprised to see it so empty.

Most of the horses, including Swift were gone. The empty stalls made me think of empty graves. I’d no idea where they might’ve gone. I swallowed back my disappointment, and proceeded to look at the remaining selection. All of the fastest mounts had been taken, and I reasoned that they might’ve been stationed elsewhere as the searches for me continued. Something small and fast would be ideal, but all that remained in the barn were the massive cart horses and an aging stallion who had seen better days.

I hoped Patience did not have the same lackluster riding skills that Sterling was known for. Even now he had never really mastered the art of the ride. To have to learn on one of the massive Percheron was not going to be an easy task. I called him over.

His eyes went wide, but not with fear when he saw our mounts.

“This is Antionette and Benijeaux.” I said, “Seems my favored horses are gone for the moment and we can’t afford to wait.”

He nodded, and stepped into Benijeaux’s stall without hesistation. I had planned to ride this one myself, for he was the more spirited of the two and larger by a hand. I was a little worried that Patience might get kicked or spook the stallion.

Patience, true to his name was slow to approach, gently holding out his hand and waiting for signs from the steed before making his approach. They were fast friends, and the Executioner boy set about applying tack as though he’d done it many times before.
Antionette’s made had been braided. I was relieved to see someone was taking care of her. When both of the horses were dressed their dark coats made them look like shadows given form. Antionette was black from ears to tail tip, not so much as a white smudge on her nose.

Benijeaux had three white socks, and I was privately amused at the thought of him having left one in the laundry. Patience did not need my assistance mounting, though he should’ve taken it. The young Executioner stood no more then five feet high and the stallion’s back was far beyond his reach. It took a stool and a few bales of hay before Patience was able to make his way into the saddle, but once he’d done it he grinned.

“Are you ready, then?” I asked.

He nodded.

Antionette trotted out of the barn at a tap from my heels. I was tempted to leave a note. I didn’t want them to worry about the missing horses- but again I feared what danger might occur. It was better to let them think thieves had come in the night.

They’d be able to track us through a carpet of snow, and riding enormous black horses through the middle of town was sure to be noticed by someone, but I decided it was worth the risk. We went galloping across the cobbles.

They weren’t fast enough. It felt like a gentle stroll compared to the way my favorite mare flew down the streets. I tried to keep from drumming my fingers in impatience. The Percherons were doing the best they could.

Patience had the good sense to think ahead, and had acquired a set of Executioner’s clothes for me. They were scratchy and thick, lacking the movement and structure I was accustomed too but they did wonders for keeping denizens away. Those that were out late parted in the streets when they notice the distinctive cut of the blue-grey cloaks.

I suppose they must’ve garnered a bit of respect now that Alfred had taken over the city. I wasn’t used to this kind of unobstructed travel. I kept trying to meet the faces of the people who stepped aside, but always they were down turned, respectful. Patience acted in a similar manner, looking up only when he needed to be sure of the way or if we were crossing through some narrower spaces. Otherwise he trusted Benijeaux to guide him, and let me have the lead.

That would need to change when we were in the Forbidden Woods. Like it or not he was going to have to step up and direct our course, for I did not know the way.

We reached the city gates and I grew worried that the posted guards might stop us. This subsided when the nearest lifted their hood and revealed themselves as an ally. Strix Savoy motioned us closer.

His companion however, called for a halt.

“What’s going on here, Strix?” She hissed. “You can’t just wave them through. Our orders were to stop and search everyone…scratch that, my orders were to stop and search everyone. You’re not even supposed to be here.”

“I know, Matta.” Strix said.

“You’re lucky that Orius got sick…you were supposed to be watching Templeton.”

“Yes…lucky. I know.” Strix said, “Just...”
Matta elected to take charge of the situation. I remembered her, faintly as one of the liars who had gone along with Ezra and Clarkus’ false claims. She had neglected to be truthful when I had first met her and I found that a pattern which tended to continue throughout one's life. I was not confident that she’d keep any of our secrets.

“Pull down your hood and state your business.” Matta said.

“Just let them through.” Strix hissed, “I know them”

“You know two hooded figures on black horses that you’ve definitely never seen before due to your general fear of horses?” She asked.

“I’m not afraid of them.” Strix amended, “They’re just large. In any case I’m expecting them.”

“Expecting them?” Matta gawked, “How could you be expecting them if you didn’t even know you’d have gau—....oh Strix you didn’t!”

“Orius will live through a little stomach ache.” The junior Executioner said with a shrug, “And this was important.”

I didn’t want to speak, lest I betray my voice and ruin whatever plan Strix had constructed. He seemed to be having enough trouble with that as it was. I was impatient, however. At a tap from my heels Antionette stamped the ground with her hoof, and though the two Executioners might have carried wheels and have a cache of allies not far behind it might do well to remind them that a draft horse was a weapon all its own.

When Matta next spoke it was with a greater measure of concern, and she did not address us with accusation. In fact she didn’t address us at all. Perhaps I had overdone things and caused her a greater measure of fear then was necessary. She turned back to Strix.

“Am I going to get in trouble for this?” Matta asked.

“Absolutely not.” Strix said.

What astounding ease he was able to lie with. I chose to believe it was trickery, for if the junior Executioner truly believed we would pass beyond the gate without repercussion he was far stupider then he seemed. No. I had held extended audience with Strix Savoy and while it seemed he wasn’t a liar I was certain he wasn’t a fool.

“We’re even now. You and me.” Matta said as she stepped aside to let us pass. “This makes us even.”

He nodded his head in agreement, “This makes us even.”

“Be quick about it.” Matta called to us.

I needed no second urging and sent Antionette galloping for the woods the moment the gate was open. Patience was only a half-step behind.

I pulled Antionette back as we neared the edge of the woods, coming up alongside Patience’s mount. He did not increase his pace and take the lead, nor fall back. It was difficult to ride side by side with horses this large.

“Go on.” I encouraged him, “Lead.”
Patience looked at me, and his face was rife with concern. It was obvious that bad things had happened the last time he went into the woods, but we could not afford to let that deter us. He did not surge forward, so I let Antionette drop back. She did not fight me the way Swift would have. My mare always had to be at the front of the charge, but not so with the Percheron.

As we rode on we passed the ruins of camps, hastily thrown together. They were the remnants of all the search parties that had spent time looking for Fwae and I. There wasn’t so much as a single curl of smoke rising from any of the stone-ringed campfires. While I was grateful that there were no hunters about to spot us, I felt my heart fall to the floor.

The city had given up on me so quickly.

I had looked after all of my hunters with such fervor and brought unknown peace to its streets but they could not be bothered to keep up an ongoing search.

It must’ve been the Executioners.

Alfred was a smart man, I could not discount that. I knew he had studied under Martyr Logarius and had been a trusted ally of Minimus. He knew how to ingratiate himself with powerful people. I was used to him being a man in the shadows, it stood to reason he would make changes when he stepped into the light. Another man who would run my city to ruin.

Patience had stopped dead before the first of the many twisted trees that spilled out from the forest. He did not seem capable of pushing himself the border. Cowardice at a time like this, when every second was precious. I so wished I did not need to drag him along, but he was vital.

“Come on Patience.” I said. “Lead on.”

He looked back at me, and was no more then a terrified kid. It was partially the size of the horse that did it, but mostly it was the way the moon reflected in his dark eyes. The golden glow was like fire, catching through eyelashes and setting his face alight with panic. His hands shook when they lifted the reigns.

Yes, truly he must’ve seen something terrible in there.

Perhaps a bit of reassurance was in order, though after seeing me at my weakest I didn’t think there was much I could promise in regards to my own strength that might still his fast-beating heart.

He was not one to ignore commands, however. At my urging he swallowed, and you could see all the apprehension and fear catch in his throat- but then tapped his heels and started Benjeaux forward. The dark horse blended in with the shadows from the tree, swallowed up by the forest in only a few steps.

There were hand lanterns clipped to the horses tack. We leaned down to light them as we went along the path. Being in the forest reminded me of one of the strangest conversations I’d had with Templeton. A long time ago she had found a book on deep sea fish, and was speaking to a priestess about them, trying to find out which might contain similar attributes to Mother Kos. It was a fairly useless endeavor. The air-headed priestess was unwilling to consider that a goddess might have physical biology resembling anything from this world, and was pushing away the scholar’s efforts.

Yet Templeton was persistant, flipping doggedly to the next page of drawings and asking if perhaps those creatures weren’t a bit closer. The woods reminded me of a particularly sinister sort of fish which dangled some sort of bioluminescent orb from atop its head, luring curious things into its cavernous mouth. The light on Patience’s horse was so like that of the fish, the only
glowing thing in unfathomable depths of darkness.

We just couldn’t see the teeth.

His pace was horrendously slow. Even the cart horses seemed to be growing impatient. Antionette’s ears pricked at the slightest sound while she stood waiting behind her stable mate. The Percherons weren’t any better at waiting then I was.

Patience frequently raised his lantern and glanced around at the branches and structures that we passed. The Forbidden Woods was one of those strange places that seemed both full of life and entirely dead. It was an ageless place, the crumbling ruins in side didn’t really seem that old. A few of them had a contemporary sort of style about them, but the wild forest reclaimed everything in a short time- covering them with ivy and rotting the wood. There were odd structures crafted by people that had never been seen, and not even Templeton’s growing archive had ever heard of by name.

The woodland hunters, who knew this forest better then any others were only able to offer theories. None of them could explain the giant tombstones that were dotted throughout the mossy undergrowth. None of them seemed to be carved from rocks that were common to Yharnam- nor any of the neighboring quarries. The rocks simply were there as if they’d sprouted from the soil like everything else.

Nothing grew in carved with runes.

There was a dizzying amount of mystery in these places, and it was hard enough to find ones way with a map. I should’ve expected the hesitation being as Patience only had faint memories to go on.

“Is everything alright?”

I found myself asking that more and more as we went on. Each time Patience would halt completely, hold the lantern to his face and turn so that I could see him. He would give me one distinct, decisive nod and then continue onward.

It became a horrendous time waster to ask, but I began to need the reassurance. I had hoped that it would be like in a story- and that with every step I would feel myself growing closer to Fwahe, but it wasn’t. I just felt like she was getting further and further away from me.

We needed to go faster or I was going to lose her forever.

I asked again, to the same response. We passed by the ruins of a bridge. The line had broken, and a few sodden boards were caught on rocks in the stream nearby. They made strange noises as they bobbed up and down. The current drove them under, yet they would always rise again. I watched them while Patience inspected the woods, getting his bearings before making a choice of direction.

There was not much to mark the way, but he kept on little by little. I lost any fear of losing him, for even with the vast shadows of the woods I was not going to lose the light to them. It didn’t move fast enough. That concern dimmed but others brightened. I heard things in the woods and started to see shadows out of the corner of my eye. Whenever I turned to look there wouldn’t be anything there, but I was certain- always so certain that just a moment before there’d been a man in the woods. A man with eyes that glowed.

It was such a silly notion, and I shook it away every time. If there was something with glowing eyes then I would be able to see them for more then a few milliseconds in the farthest corner of my vision. Anything bright would’ve stood out in these woods. The faintest glow would be as a
lighthouse beacon- but there was never anything there.

Patience had come to a dead stop.

“Is everything alright?” I asked.

He turned to me and did not nod. His face was still painted with the ghosts of fear. He seemed unable to offer me any explanation- at least none that I could readily interpret. He leaned close to the ground, which was covered in snow. In here it didn’t look white anymore, everything inside the Forbidden Woods was black.

Bad for tracking. If he’d lost the way there was little hope of recovering it now. There wouldn’t be any signs of travel left. I was sure it had snowed several times since I’d escaped the Bloody Crow. This winter was a harsher one then I’d first expected. I wonder if we had enough food stored up, back in the city. I knew Yharnam had a grain reserve- it wasn’t like we were a kingdom and could just attribute the earnings of our denizens to a collective pool- but the raining Patron before Minimus’ time had been one for organizing a method of stockpiling. I would need to look into that when I got back.

If I got back.

I was starting to hear footsteps. There was the distinctive crunch of depressing snow, and I twisted and turned trying to sight whatever was walking. It wasn’t a constant pace, not really steps moving in a particular direction. When it stopped I always found something to blame it on. Perhaps it had only been Antionette’s hoof settling into the snow. Likely it was Patience who was still shuffling about looking for something.

There were plenty of comforting little explanations I could play the sounds off on, but I was not so naive as I had once been. The woods weren’t innocent or kind. They were full of tricks and the second one started taking stock in their own good fortune and believing themselves protected and privileged would be the moment it chose to trap them.

“Keep quiet a moment.” I hissed to Patience.

His eyes narrowed at me.

Right. I didn’t really need to tell the vow-taker to quiet down. Still he froze, and waited unmoving while I looked about. The footsteps had stopped and the woods were still. The snow that fell and became black carpet on the ground didn’t even make a sound. I slowed my breathing, and became aware of all the little noises living things couldn’t help but make.

My own heart was too loud. It felt like I could hear it in my ears, beating too fast- too much like a drum. I calmed myself all I could, but by the time I refocused it was clear that whatever footsteps I’d heard were gone. Either their source was on to me and cleverly hiding or it had gone away. I was reasonably certain of the latter.

“Alright.” I said, “We should get moving.”

Patience nodded.

He tried to climb back on to his horse, but Benejeaux was too big. There were no mounting blocks to assist him, and the snow made every rock and protrusion of roots to slick to be viable. I eventually got down to help him, lacing my fingers together and boosting the tiny Executioner onto the sizable horse.
He looked even more a child now.

Patience seemed a bit more certain of the direction after we took a few more steps. He stopped scanning the ground, making his way by the horizon instead. I wasn’t sure how he could see anything through the mass of tangled trees, buy by and by the woods darkness became less of a single shade and more a variation of grays. Like watercolors they were layered thinly, one on top of the other. At first glance everything appeared to be one, but when looked at with clearer vision the shapes began to make sense.

The Executioner boy made small adjustments to his mount’s course. For a little ways we went along a river. I made a few glances behind us every couple of steps and kept trying to check for the crunching snow sound. It would’ve been blotted out by the hoofbeats of our mounts, and I knew it— but I kept myself busied by keeping watch anyway.

Patience increased our pace slightly, tapping his heels against the draft horse just as we were passing beneath a network of thin wispy branches. They swatted weakly at us while we passed beneath them. A moment later he stood up in his saddle, pulling Benenjeaux to a stop and reaching up into the foliage. He pulled something off of one of the branches, then backed up and passed it to me.

I held it up to the lantern to inspect it. In my gloved hand was a clump of greyish-white fur. I would know it anywhere. I’d seen the tangled curls time and time again. This had come from Fwahe’s cloak. Sadness rushed over me, I felt tears burning my eyes as I lifted the little puff of fur to my nose. It was cold as ice, which took me by surprise. For some reason I had expected it to still be warm, like her cloak always was.

It still smelled like her though. Even if it hadn’t I wouldn’t have mistaken it. I was sure.

“It’s hers.” I confirmed.

Patience nodded. He’d already known. Slow as we were going it was in the right direction. The boy was not leading me astray. I kept the little puff of fur, nestling it safely into the pockets of my borrowed robes. It seemed a little foolish to think that finding this meant we were a little closer together, but the thought of letting it fall to the snow or leaving it behind broke my heart.

Patience didn’t inspect the branches for more tufts of fur. I think all he had needed was that one sign, and now he went forward even faster. It figured that now would be the time where I wanted to slow down and scan every last stick for another clue, something else that would further reassure me that Fwahe had been in these woods.

The branches broke away into a clearing, and from it we could see the sky again. The trees were not so densely packed here, but the snow was high and heavy. It would’ve been a trial to trudge through had it not been for the Percherons. I think that even Swift might’ve struggled with it, though bounding through the snow would likely cause her endless delight. She liked to roll in the mud too— anything that had the potential to make a mess.

Across the clearing I could see a hill, rising up in the distance. I’d never recalled the forbidden woods being a place full of elevated terrain, but then again I had yet to do an extensive study. I’d felt so certain when I was back in Yharnam, as Patron Huntress. Certain that I knew all I ever need know about my city, but as always it was full of secrets. Nothing told the truth these days.

He hesitated at the edge of the clearing. I didn’t rush him. I thought he might have spotted another sign of Fwahe. If he had it was not the sort of thing I wanted to pass up. I wanted as many as possible. While we stayed ourselves at the edge of the field, the crunching sounds returned. This
time I was certain they were footsteps, for not a one of us was moving.

The Percherons were still as statues. All muscle and nerve they waited for commands despite their eagerness to be on the move. Swift would never have been able to still herself like that. Patience wasn’t movie enough to make a sound, it was only his head which swiveled from side to side. The footsteps were getting louder.

I scanned the line of trees that circled the clearing. They were like a dark wall, and I could not see an inch inside the woods. I knew there was something there. I kept getting half-glances, something tall. Could it have been her?

Why wasn’t she coming close to me?

Maybe she couldn’t see.

It was a foolish thought and I tired to shake it away. I knew her well enough, if we had seen each other we would know it immediately and nothing would’ve kept us apart. Patient approaches and hesitation just wasn’t her way.

“I think there’s something in the woods.” I said to Patience.

I hated for him to be any more concerned, and indeed when he turned to me his eyes were yet wider with fear. His hand went to the gun at his belt. How strange for an Executioner to favor firearms when weapons of bludgeoning and bone-breaking were their typical fare. He had shown extensive fascination with the innerworkings of the Powder Kegs. A ranged weapon could be useful here, I ought to have been grateful. These scathing attitudes needed to subside, lest rage rise up and consume me.

Patience checked the borders of the clearing himself, but didn’t seem to see anything. He was not one to disregard a warning, and after a few seconds survey urged Benejeaux forward. I followed. The second we came out of the cover of the black branches I felt more vulnerable than I could ever remember. I’d thought that seeing the clear sky and getting a moment to breathe free of the oppressive cover of the woods would be a blessing, but it was curse. It was as if the ground had become one giant malicious eye, looking up at me. It could see everything.

We were not safe, and I was eager to cross the clearing and be on our way. I urged Antionette into a trot. We’d made it mid-way when the footsteps gave way to snarling. I did not have to squint and guess any longer, for breaking into a sprint across the untouched snow were the lithe bodies of two salivating hounds.

They were unlike the kind I’d grown used to hunting- those were the unfortunate result of some farmer’s pet who’d got into the corpse of a carrion crow or the like. They were common problems and we’d had a problem with a pack of them lurking in the alleys. Still there was an element of domestication, even if deeply dormant that made them a bit easier to fight. The hounds that rushed at us now had been born wild.

They’d feasted on the blood of beasts and were, by all manner of study beasts themselves- just another catalog in the endless list of variations. I wasn’t entirely sure they’d started out as dogs, for there was cloth wrapped about their legs, and strange spikes jutted from beneath their skin. Their grizzled black fur had blended in with the shadows, and if they were to stop and try to hide now there would still be considerable difficulty to spot them.

Patience didn’t hesitate, quickly firing a shot from his pistol. He caught the dog charging for him, a good solid shot to the paw. The dog yelped, blood leaking from its wound. The gun had sounded
as loud as a thunderclap in these woods.

I readied the threaded cane I’d been given. The chain on this one was a bit bulkier and shorter then what I was accustomed too. Limited range did me no favors in situations like these.

Though the dog furthest out had been shot and was now limping, it hadn’t stopped coming for him. Benejeaux had been spooked both by the sharp gun shot and the scent of blood. Neither of the horses were accustomed to combat, and he began to stomp his hooves and flare his nostrils. The dogs were coming closer.

I directed Antionette’s course closer to her Stablemate. Standing together I thought we might have a better chance, for it’d be easier to defend one front then two.

Patience fired off another shot, catching the injured dog in the eye. It fell down in a heap on the snow and did not get up again. Benejeaux was not having it. Patience lost his grip on the pistol as the horse reared up on its hind legs, letting out a terrified whinny.

Patience clung to Benejeaux’s mane, trying not to slide out of the saddle. Antionette was seconds away from doing the same, maintain her composure only because I could yet speak soothing words to her. Silence did nothing to comfort the draft horses.

Neither of us would be able to lean from our saddles and grab the fallen gun. The remaining dog gathered all of its strength and speed in its hindquarters before it leapt at me. I swept my cane to meet it, but Antionette went up and threw me off course. The mass of claws and spikes flying at her was not taken well.

The dog landed on her neck, scrabbling for purchase.

He did not find it, the powerful muscles flinging the hound back onto the snow. Moments later her hooves crushed its skull.

There were only the two of them, and as their blood began to stain the snow, I leaned out of my saddle to grab for Patience’s gun. There was no need for the Executioner Boy to have to spend tedious and valuable time getting onto and off of the draft horse. I believed that my arms were long enough- and I was right. They scraped the crusted top of the snowfall as I stretched towards the firearm. As I got a grip on the cold metal, I noticed something strange.

I could see underneath Antionette, and her shadow was wrong.

It was hard to define how beyond to say it wasn’t the shape of a horse. Additionally it seemed solid- like something you could touch.

I quickly pushed away from the ground, coming back up into my seat, and turned to get a closer look.

I saw the flash of moonlight on a blade, and felt something biting into my shoulder a few seconds later. I could not raise cane in time, but I yet had the pistol. I held it, weakly and fired. My arm rattled, trying to keep my hold on it- but no bullet shot from the barrel. Empty.

Damn.

Antionette could not attack the thing that had come at me- and I believed it to be the same thing I’d heard following us in the woods. It was tall, about a foot more so then a man and had white eyes that glowed. They were blinding. It wasn’t a man, wasn’t a beast, it was just a shadow. The air around it turned black and wispy, like fog. Some of that air was caught in the wound from its
sickle-blade, and I could not push it away. It clung to me.

The thing shrank from the gun, even without a bullet to hurt it. The sparks and noise were enough to get it to shrink back, and merge with the shadow of our horses.

“Run!” I shouted to Patience.

He needed no second bidding, nor did his mount. Benejeaux had been fighting to free his head since the hounds rushed in, and once he was given it he set off five times faster then a creature of that size should be able to move. Antionette was right on his heels.

The shadow man may have been large and strange, but he had only two legs. I was confident we could out-pace him.

I saw the glowing eyes everywhere now. They peeked between the trees that blurred past. They slunk along the snow we sped across. The horses’ hooves sent great clouds of it flying backwards. At least the path back to Yharnam would be an easy one to follow.

The terrain started to rise. We were going uphill, and the Percheron’s pace hadn’t slowed one bit. Benejeaux was still in a panic despite Patience’s efforts to calm him down. They needed to be spoken too. Pats on the neck weren’t going to cut it. I decided to lend my aid, and let Antionette rush forward. She was astride him and then in front. I brought her gently into a walk. The other draft horse quickly dropped his pace and stopped his sprinting.

Their mouths were foaming, the poor beasts. They had run too hard and too fast this night and if they went too much further we risked exhausting them. For all my reassuring words the creatures would not calm as they continued forward. I still saw the glowing eyes everywhere I looked. I didn’t really want to stop completely, irrationally afraid that the shadow man would be upon us any second, but we had too. My head was pounding and the motion of the horse beneath me was doing nothing to aid in my attempt to regain control.

Patience did not want to stop. I passed him his gun and he clutched at it, still on high alert. I guess he must have seen the shadow man.

“There’s no way he could follow us.” I said.

Patience nodded. It was the kind of nod that prompts one to keep talking, quick and non committal. It was not a nod like agreed. His wide eyes focused in on me, and he raised a hand to point at my shoulder. It shook in the air like it was hard for him to keep it up, weather that was from fatigue or fear I couldn’t say. He was pointing at my shoulder.

I knew it was the one that the shadow man’s sickle had cut into, my left shoulder. It still stung but it wasn’t bleeding. There wasn’t any kind of bruise and you couldn’t see my skin through the Executioner’s robes, but there was something gut-wrenching and wrong about it. The same billowing shadows that had trailed off the man in the woods now came off me as well.

I could only guess that this was some kind of poison or infection. I was no doctor and while I hunted beasts I hadn’t seen any like this before. It couldn’t be good news.

I didn’t want to turn back.

I also didn’t want it to get worse. For all I knew I could spread it to Patience who could run and spread it to Yharnam and the Ashen Plauge would become nothing compared to these shadows. I would not be the one who brought darkness into the world.
Options for immediate solution were limited. I did not know how to fight something like this, and I risked contamination with everything I touched. The definitive solution would be to cut off my own arm—like an animal in a trap. I had seen how Cato reacted to loosing a few fingers. I couldn’t remember taking them, it had all become corrupt and difficult to recall, but I’d done it. I felt the deep well of guilt in my stomach every time Cato turned to a bottle or a pipe—often the result of loss of strength. There were weapons he could no longer wield, tasks he couldn’t complete. If fingers hurt, could I even imagine an arm?

I wanted both of them— to embrace her when she got back. Maybe it was a little selfish, but I doubt there was a man amongst those in Yharnam who would be willing to even consider slicing off their own limbs for the good of the populus.

I had sworn to be their patron and protect them, but I wasn’t sure if under the given circumstances that applied to severing limbs. For all I knew this could fade and I would be looked at as a foolish whelp for having acted on fear and adrenaline.

I tried to focus on other things. One problem at a time.

“Do you know where we are?” I asked Patience.

His finger just jutted towards my shoulder again.

“Are we close to where Fwahe was?” I asked.

He pointed once more, and raised his pistol.

“Calm down!” I cried, “Patience it’s me. It’s still me.”

He jerked the barrel at me, not firing but just motioning. Pointing. Past my shoulder.

I turned in the saddle and looked behind me. It shouldn’t have been possible, but the shadow-man was there. He stood in the cast shadows of our horses, rising out of it, growing from the provided darkness. There was no way to slice off a shadow, it could not be outrun.

I reached for my cane. One cut was bad enough, but I wasn’t going to allow the creature another. His sickle met my steel. The clashing sound was enough to spook Antionette again and she set to stamping and rearing, making it increasingly difficult to fight the aberration. I could not use the cane’s threaded chain with her starling like this. I was more likely to get us tangled then to hurt the beast that way—so I stuck to blocking blow, parrying and thrusting. I used all the techniques of a master swordsmen.

They came to me with ease, something gained over years of hard practice. If I had possessed a steady mount I might’ve had a chance.

I turned away the Shadow-man’s blow and his curved weapon cut into Antionette’s flank instead. That was the end of it. She was off like a shot, and the most I could do was try and cling to her as she sped through the forest. I called for Patience—and in the distance I heard a gun shot, but we were moving to fast for me to try and make sense of anything.

“It’s alright, it’s alright Ann.” I said, desperate to calm her down.

She could not be spoken too. The horse was no longer a creature of reason. Branches scraped at my face, tore at my hair. There would be scratches and scars I was certain of that. Everything was going so fast, there was only so much I could do to remove myself from the path of low hanging branches and the craggy overhangs of cliffs.
I could hear rushing water and cracking ice in the distance.

Kos almighty Antionette was headed for the falls. I hadn’t realized we were so close to them. I found that surprising for some reason, despite never having been to the falls. The woodland hunters spoke of them, and their fast-flowing current. They were dangerous places, and best avoided.

I hated to hurt any creature, and especially one panicked and foaming at the mouth as Antionette was—she would end up running us over the edge if she kept on like this. I dug my heels into her side and pulled at the reins, every inch of me begging her to stop. She kicked up a cloud of snow as she skidded to a halt.

We were only a few feet from the edge, a drop off that would’ve plunged us into a half-frozen river.

“Good girl.” I said, patting her on the neck.

I didn’t feel good about the blood mixing with the foam in her mouth and dripping on the snow. The metal bit must’ve cut into her mouth. Sharp and terrible, but better than death.

I didn’t know where the shadow-man was, and it didn’t seem like Patience had been able to follow me. I turned Antionette around and tried to get my bearings but I couldn’t site anything familiar. The hill was long gone, and the only indication that it had ever been was the hoof-prints in the snow. I could re-trace those and follow them back, perhaps I would encounter Patience along the road.

It wouldn’t be too hard to walk along them, for even as the dark forest swallowed up my surroundings, the glow from the hand lantern was enough to illuminate the path of hand prints. I wished it were brighter. If I could block all the shadows then maybe that strange thing would be unable to return.

Antionette didn’t seem to want to go back the way we came. Every few steps she would try and turn around.

She wanted to go back to the falls.

I was beginning to wonder whether it was possible that she may have truly wanted to go over the edge as well, when my head began to throb. I dropped my grip on the reins, bending down and burying my face in my hands. It was like something was drumming on the inside of my skull.

This was the worst possible time, surely.

I stopped being able to hear. There was not the crunch of snow or the snap of breaking branches, everything was fuzzy and muted. It was a struggle to keep my balance. I could feel myself sliding and slipping. I closed my eyes, and I was on Antionette’s back. When I opened them I was down in the snow.

It was freezing, and the icy chill of it all penetrated my skin and bones, snaking through every part of me until I was sure my veins had crystalized. Nothing could move and everything was glass. If enough snow fell on the world it would break and we would slip right through—sucked down like in a sink hole.

Everything flaked in my mind, broke apart. I tried to pull tight the corset of reason and lace it back together, but there was no tether which could hold my crumbling thoughts together. They scattered and I slept.
It felt like an endless fall. I didn’t know how long I might’ve been suspended there- frozen and unmoving but I knew the whole time I was falling. It wasn’t a dark fall, like a hole or a tunnel. If anything it was too bright and I had to shield my eyes from the light. The only relief was the rise and fall of heavy curtains as I blinked. That’s how it felt.

There was so much effort in keeping them open, but even closed they were scalded by the pure brilliance of whatever I drifted through. Something seemed to have broken the physics of the world, for I was sure my descent was slower then it ought to have been. Wherever I was it felt like I should’ve hit the bottom by now.

“Wake up.”

The command was given in a short simple bark. I did not recognize the speaker. The world shook.

If this was the voice of Kos, it was not what I expected. She sounded angry. The church had spoke of vengeful gods but I somehow never managed to picture the great ones that way. In my mind they were peaceful, relegated to their cosmic spaces, their ever flowing tides or unknowable shadows. I thought Kos was only able to sing, though of course the Anointed Texts were said to contain direct quotations. It was funny how ones idea of the thing and the reality of it could be completely different. I suppose if I had just listened to the teaching of the church I wouldn’t be so surprised.

Even with a god’s bidding I did not want to open my eyes. The world began to shake again, as the cry came once more.

“Wake up!”

It was louder this time, and harder to resist. I knew the lights would burn me if I opened my eyes, but the shaking rattled my bones in equivilant pain. If I did as she said would it stop? It was worth the attempt. Anything to get the shakes to cease.

“Alright.” I said.

My voice was scratchy and weak. I took my hand away, letting my shield from the light lower and opened my eyes. The whiteness was gone. All the blank spaces had fallen away and I found a strange woman looming over me. She had painted her face different colors. They stood out brightly against her dark skin. For some reason her eyes seemed to be missing.

I was certain I’d never seen her before. There weren’t many people who looked like her in Yharnam.

“She’s awake!” The girl shouted.

“That’s great!” Another unfamiliar voice replied.

So now I was outnumbered too. Excellent.

“Where am I?” I asked.

It was the choice between that and “Who are you”? There was no way of knowing which was the better order to place those questions in, but at least if they told me I was dead I would be aware I was speaking to spirits. That was something I wanted out of the way.

“Just outside Yharnam, in the woods.” The painted woman replied.

I took a deep breath and let the oxygen swell my brain with relief. I was not dead, and so long as
there was life inside of me I needn’t despair.

“Who are you?” I asked, and then as the shadow-man and Antionette’s run through the woods came back to me I found another question, “Where’s Patience?”

“Shhh.” Chided the woman, “In time in time. My name is Savaii. My sister shouting out there is Casaya. We live here. You are in our home.”

I nodded. As she spoke the world began to paint itself in. I was in some kind of tent, and there were strange things scattered all around. If a room like this were found back in Yharnam the church would have it burned, condemned as a place of witchcraft. I tried to stand, for I wanted to be back outside where things looked familiar- but as I made the effort I realized my legs had failed me. Paralysis again, damn. Callum’s crystals had worn off.

I’d packed more to travel with of course, but they’d been in my pack. I did not appear to still have it on me. It was hard to feel anything for certain. I was lying on a cot and there was a heavy fur blanket over top of me, and several woolen ones on top of that. Heated stones were placed over the fabrics, warming my fingers and toes. Despite the coverings I was very cold.

“Patience.” I said again.

“She was the one that brought you here.” Savaii said.

“Patience is a boy.” I said.

“Tch.” She scoffed, “As blind as my sister.”

“Maybe we’re thinking of different people.” I said, though I didn’t think it a particularly common name.

“No.” Savaii said. When she shook her head there was the sound of jangling beads and bones. “She is the same. Short, bad hair- doesn’t talk.”

That was a much harder description to refute. I suppose the fall must’ve shaken things around in my brain. It didn’t seem like the kind of detail I’d forget but perhaps it was a little too early to start arguing facts with strange women.

“Fine.” I said, “Where’s he gone?”

“She.” Savaii corrected.

“She.” I said.

“They are making food, right outside.” Casaya said. “The little girl and my sister.”

I tried to call for Patience but found that my throat was weak and raspy. I needed those crystals- the sooner the better. I didn’t like being laid away here without my strength. I could not push the blankets aside. They were strong enough to hold me down and I felt a prisoner, though there were no chains. Savaii hardly seemed the Bloody Crow.

“We’ve been finding so many people in the woods lately.” Savaii said.

“Have you seen Fwahe?” I asked.

“What?” She replied.
She lacked a last name, making it more difficult to clarify. “Fwahe, she’s.. a little taller then me. Silver hair. Wears a white cape with antlers attached too it.”

Savaii shook her head. Everything rattled again, all of the sounds of small pieces on thin thread. “This I have not seen.”

My heart sank. It would figure the only person who had last seen Fwahe was the one who couldn’t tell me where she’d been?

Savaii disappeared from view for a few moments, and when she reappeared she was wearing a hood. I watched as she removed a layer of black silk from her face. There were eyes behind it. She seemed less ghostly now, less like a spirit.

“Shall we look?” Savaii asked.

She held out a deck of fortune teller’s cards to me. Their strange pictures may have held significance to some, but I was not among those who held stock in them. At best they were a game, but more often than not I saw them used to con coins from the desperate. She hadn’t asked me for any money, but I still thought it a sham.

“I’m… alright.” I said.

Savaii laughed, “That is certainly a lie Frigga Hemlock. Those who are alright never find themselves in my tent.”

She deftly began to shuffle the deck, coursing cards to trade places with her fast fingers. It was hypnotic. The patterns on the back of her cards threaded together, locking into each other like snake scales and making the inanimate paper seem very much alive.

“Take one.” Savaii encouraged.

She stopped her shuffling and fanned the cards out to me. The backs were all painted with iridescent beetles which glinted in the candle light. There was a border of tiny bones around the outside, arrows and bows in the middle which pointed to the very center of each card. Strange things, the significance of which I didn’t understand.

Savaii had fanned them evenly, space completely equal between each card, and they all looked the same to me. I did not feel a particular draw to any one card as I’d heard one was supposed to when dealing with fate and fortunes. I hadn’t really expected too, this was all just some elaborate trickery anyway. Savaii seemed the kind of person who was much like Cato, easier to humor then to oppose.

I was still trapped beneath her blankets, and she quickly realized there was no way for me to take what was offered. She started to laugh, but was interrupted when Patience came through the tent. I was struck by his sudden change of appearance.

He was wearing a dress in an old and very traditional cut. Someone had forced a tiny braid into his hair- which was already full of fly away hairs and coming out of its tie. He blushed when he saw me, and dropped my gaze. He didn’t frown though- so many times when he turned away there was a profound sadness worn like a veil across his face- but now he was wide smiles.

It was the same Patience I had expected, but he was different too.

She was different?
Savaii seemed so certain. I didn’t think this particularly proper behavior for a young hunter, but as I turned it around in my brain more and more the pieces began to fit together. Perhaps Patience had not held my clothes so dearly as of some deep-rooted perversion, but of desire to posses them himself.

Herself?

Impossible to say. Just impossible. I didn’t have time nor energy to wrap my head around a thing like this, and was not of a mind for trying.

“Ah, pretty girl. What have you brought for us?” Savaii asked.

The red in Patience’s cheeks deepened. He held up my pack and with a nod to Savaii came to rest beside me. She must’ve known I had needed it. I was able to instruct her in the administration of Callum’s crystals. Savaii’s other companion, Casaya entered the tent shortly thereafter. Her face paint was even more intense then Savaii’s- and the two of them watched with interest as the blood gems boiled.

When at last I could move again I found that the blankets were easily cast aside and was relieved that I hadn’t any lasting vestiges of weakness. Even the pounding headache I’d picked up began to subside. I had more questions of my own to ask, but they were chased away with soup and spoon. Casaya insisted on trying to feed me, pressing the first few mouthfuls to my lips before I had proved that I could handle my own utensils.

I ate until they were satisfied, downing bowl and broth methodically. The soup they’d made tasted of spices I’d never had before, unknowable things that were beyond the cumulatively simple culinary knowledge my Valkeyries had managed to collect. It was good and went down easily, tasting something of lemongrass, but mostly of deep earthen things.

“Are you done now?” Savaii asked.

“Yes.” I said, and quickly had the good sense to add “and thank you.”

“Now you can choose a card!” She cried.

“Ai!” Casaya snapped, “She doesn’t want to play games with you. She needs rest.”

Savaii began to pout, and truth be told I was done sleeping. I had enough lying down and being tended too. What I wanted was not to play cards, but to stand and be on my way. I said as much but they continued to argue with each other, speaking as though they hadn’t heard me. When I tried to insist they waved their hands at me, a clatter of vibrant nail polish and jangling bracelets. The two women seemed to think that I would wait for them to finish their disagreement before returning to urgent business.

I cleared my throat, “Thank you for your hospitality- but we’ve got to get going.”

Patience bit his bottom lip and scratched his hair- further loosening the braid. I could see his mind working to find reasons to stay. The longer I lay here the harder it would be to leave. We had better be off before attachments formed.

I cast aside the blanket and stood.

“No!” The sisters cried in unison.

It figured that my imprisonment would be the one thing they could agree upon. Casaya put her
hands firmly on my shoulders. It seemed rather forward of her to be that familiar. She gave me a gentle push back down to the cot.

“You are not well enough to leave yet.” She said.

I felt fine, and told her as much, disquieted by how easily I’d been overpowered. I began to feel a nagging suspicion about these women and though I hated to abuse any position availed to me I began to explain that I was held in high regards with the Yharnam hunters.

“We know who you are, Frigga Hemlock.” Savaii said. “We know who you are, and I know there are words you must hear. You must let me read the cards for you.”

Casaya loomed in the doorway. She rolled her eyes when Savaii brought forth the cards again, but apparently my resistance had brokered their agreement. It seems I would be forced to get my fortune told. Best to have it over with quickly I supposed, reaching forward for one of the cards at the center of Savaii’s fan.

I pinched the corner of one card gingerly between my fingertips. Savaii’s eyes widened and she tried to pull back the cards- to stop me. They felt colder then the snow, colder then the ice. The tips of my fingers stuck to the surface, and when she pried them away not only did I hold a card, but one slipped from the deck and fell to the floor.

“Ai!” Savaii snapped, dropping to a crouch to collect the fallen card.

“Sorry.” I said.

She overturned it, revealing the fool. How fitting. I apologized again, but she waved me away. After brushing the dust from the fallen card she asked for the one in my hands. I turned it over and she held the fool up next to the newly revealed wheel of fortune.

“Should you just do it over?” Casaya asked.

Savaii scoffed, “Do you not know a prophecy when you see one, sister? The fate of the fool and the wheel are tied together. If one should fall so plummets the other.”

“Of course.” Casaya mumbled. “It couldn’t possibly have been a slip of the fingers.”

“Do the cards speak to you?” Savaii asked.

“No.” Casaya said, “But common sense does.”

I could sense another argument incoming. Patience gave me a sympathetic look, albeit a shy one. I cleared my throat and got their attention again.

“What do the cards mean?” I asked.

I couldn’t believe that such a foolish inquiry was the one that pushed itself to the forefront of my mind. I wasn’t going to start believing in signs, but I wanted someone to tell me she was alive. I’d been trusting in her for so long and I knew from all the sad glances and gentle reassurance that people thought it best if I gave up on Fwahe. Someone else had to believe that she was alive. I needed to hear it.

“Your heroine…your Fwahe, that is who you wish to see is it not?” Savaii asked.

I nodded. She took both cards from me and sat down, laying one on each of her folded legs. She
studied each intently.

“This one is her.” Savaii said, holding up the fool.

I had to suppress a chuckle. Were Fwahe here she surely would’ve sprang at the painted lady and demanded retribution for such an insult. The card displayed a drawing of a man in peasant’s clothes standing at a cross roads. To one side there was a mountain, and to the other a forest. The mountain looked steep and the forest full of long shadows. I didn’t like the look of either one all too much.

“I don’t think she’s that stupid.” I said.

Savaii shook her head, laughing gleefully. “Common mistake Lady Hemlock, common mistake. The fool does not always represent a lack of intelligence. I think for her we see a lack of foresight. She is very lost.”

“She’s alive?” I asked.

“Surely.” Savaii said. “One like her is not so quick to die. Were she expired you would not have dropped the fool. The cards insisted you know she is still breathing.”

“None of you are going to remain alive if you don’t stop and eat.” Casaya scolded. She set down bowls of food, placing mine on the edge of my bed but roughly plopping Savaii’s in her lap. Sauce splashed everywhere. Savaii preserved her cards over herself and came up dripping.

Casaya chuckled before grabbing a cloth for her sister.

“Patience, would you get my pack?” I asked.

Patience nodded and ran to fetch it. He wasn’t tripped up by the dress at all, gathering the extra folds in one hand for more efficient movement as though he’d been doing it for years. The two sisters smiled at him.

“I told you we would see her again.” Savaii said.

“Yes, yes. You are always right and love to remind me of it, dear sister.” Casaya said, then promptly rapped Savaii on the head with her spoon.

Patience brought the pack over me and assisted with the preparation of the crystals. The sisters watched with marked interest as the crushed gems were heated over candle flames before becoming liquid. It was a little embarrassing to have so many eyes on me as I regained my freedom of motion.

“How is this done?” Casaya asked.

She picked up my jaw of crystals and held it level with her eyes, inspecting it carefully.

“Truth be told I’m not entirely certain. There was a medic who taught me how to perform the treatment but I’m no doctor.”

Casaya nodded. She stepped over to a small wooden chest and removed a jar filled with crystals just like mine.

“We use them for other things.” She explained, “I was unaware they were able to heal like this.

“Where did you get those?” I asked.
“An Executioner sold them to us.” She replied.

“And speaking of Executioners-” Savaii cut in, licking sauce off her finger, “It seems that there
wheels chase after your fool.”

She then raised the other card, and indeed the cartwheel it bore looked very much like the weapons
that the Executioners carried. I was worried this might mean one was hot on Fwahe’s heels. If she
was being hunted who knows where she might’ve ended up.

Savaii went on to explain, “It was the Executioners who spun the wheel of fortune and set the girl
on her path. They were the ones who drove her away. She studied the card closer, frequently
looking from the printed paper over to Patience. He grew more and more nervous, shifting from
foot to foot and taking long glances around the tent to avoid making eye contact.

“Executioners like the one in this room?” I asked.

Savaii swallowed, then nodded. “Yes. It seems that Patience had something to do with her
disappearance.”

I was up with all the haste of a speeding bullet. The covers were fast slid aside, allowing no
hindrance. I had my hand around Patience’s throat. Forget the cards I could tell by the flush of his
cheeks that he was trying to hide something. It was everywhere in his stance, and strangely dressed
or not I would have the truth out of him.

“What did you do to Fwhae?” I growled.

His vows would not protect him now. He would start to speak or he would suffer.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! As always, please let me know what you think!
It was strange to be back in the theater. I was certain that the size of a building couldn’t just change on its own however it pleased- but without Frigga inside of it the space seemed much larger. Cavernous- the way I imagined the end of the world would be. The pointless decadence of an empty theater seemed to laugh at the people it looked down on, eyes of paintings in the ceiling boring into my back.

I hated big places like these. There was no reason for them, and so far as I’d known they tended to house unsavory things. Castle Cainhurst and the Prestwick Manor had been this way too.

It felt like a trap, that any moment a cage would fall from the ceiling and keep me here. I didn’t know where thoughts like that came from. Paranoia was trying to claw my ears to shreds, drown out the sound of steady rationale. I didn’t have the remedies to dull its claws yet- wouldn’t have most of my stores back until spring.

I had intended to make the tobacco I did have last, but as I followed Scarlett and Imogen into the desolate theater, I found I couldn’t help myself. The stem of the pipe was at my lips before I’d even realized it.

Fortunately Imogen had the good sense to stop me, “Should you really be doing that around a pregnant woman?"

“Force of habit.” I apologized.

She told me it was alright but it was evident from her scathing glare that I was anything but. I put the pipe in my apron pocket, vowing to return for it later. The theater was big enough that I’d be able to find a quiet place to calm myself.

Sterling and Mouse were in the main auditorium playing a card game with each other. Rook, Cato’s Altered Boy friend was the first to look up from the room. He seemed disappointed to find the three of us coming through the door. Cato must’ve been elsewhere. Scarlett asked weather or not I remembered where the spare room was. I assured her I did and then advised she go sit down. It wasn’t really of immediate medical concern I just hated all their hovering. Of course the two of them took it to heart, Imogen insisting that they not only sit down but retire early. I was fine with the both of them going to sleep, now no one would get in a huff if I smoked.

“Good Evening, Callum.” Mouse said, starting a conversation before I had a chance to dig my pipe out of my pocket again.

Really everyone needed to start calling him by some other name for the boy certainly wasn’t a mouse anymore. He’d changed a lot, grown with Frigga’s seizure of the city. He was as big a hunter as any could hope to be, and I rarely saw him at my clinic for he rarely fell ill. All of the Valkyeries were fiercely proud of him and I knew a part of it was because he carried the Kirkhammer of one of their departed comrades.

Not everyone had been saved in those last few bloody days of Abbot Minimus’ reign. They served as a reminder of why it was always the cause that must be sworn too and not those who cry out for. Men and women can become corrupt and evil, but the idea never looses its integrity.
“Evening.” I returned.

“It’s good to see you safe.” Said Mouse.

“Yeah we kind of heard that your clinic was like majorly ransacked or kidnapped or something.” Sterling said.

“I doubt anyone is going to kidnap a clinic.” I said.

We all had a decent laugh about that. I didn’t want to have the Bloody Crow conversation again. Thinking about Lord Kane Hirsch in any capacity sent shivers down my spine. Bad memories like a poison and I didn’t have any cures for them. It was frustrating to be a doctor without remedies.

“Did you see Cato about?” Rook asked when the jovial back and forth died down.

“No.” I said, “Where’s he gone.”

“Red Street probably.” Rook sighed.

“Cato wouldn’t do that.” Sterling said with a forced grin.

“He’s been gone for a really long time.” The Altered Boy lamented.

Sterling toyed with one of the buttons stitched into the couch as Rook spoke, pulling and tugging at the little metal disk until the thread started to strain and fray. It was unsettling to watch his display of discomfort- his hands were a cry for help. Sterling’s Fingernails were picked jagged and yellowed. They wanted for trimming or at the very least the sharp point of a knife to pick the dirt from underneath them.

“He’ll be back.” Sterling said, “Cato’s like an alleycat. He’ll come and meow when he’s hungry.”

“It’s long past suppertime.” Rook said.

“It was a metaphor.” Sterling said. It sounded more like a question. I don’t think literary devices and print material had ever been the boy’s particular strong suit.

“Metaphor or not he should’ve been home by now.” Rook said. He stood up in a rush and began pacing towards the window. Halfway there he stopped and turned back to us, “Did you hear bells on the street? We thought we heard bells.”

I took off my glasses and shut my eyes tight, fingers pinching the bridge of my nose while I tried to recall our walk back to the theater. I’d been so shaken by Ezra’s strange mood that I hadn’t paid particular attention to anything on the street.

For all I knew I could’ve seen Cato and just dismissed it as another blur in the collective miasma of late night Yharnam. It was cold and we had hurried, as much as I could encourage the both of them to hurry. They liked to take their time, even going so far as to peer into some of the shop windows and coo over the little dresses and shoes and baby things. It was even as we passed by the blacksmith’s shop that they’d taken a moment to look at the daggers and shortswords, judging just how old they’d have to let this child get before he or she could be trained as a hunter.

Ridiculous.

Suppose they birthed a baker instead, then where were we to be? Would they go and shop for tiny ovens and bowls? The world could not make everything in minature. Despite the limitations of the
womb infants ought to have been born with a bit more capabilities. Horses didn’t have to worry over things like this. Their offspring would be up and walking about in a matter of hours whereas our young needed constant care.

I’d lamented such things then and I lamented them now. It was tedious to do a thing like that twice, and as the internal whining began to bore me I did let that scene by the shops come into clearer and clearer focus. There had been something odd on the wind, yet it had been so long since I’d paid the hunter’s bells any mind I couldn’t be sure that’s what I’d heard. But I had heard something.

“I’m not sure,” I started, “but there was some strange noise…it may have been.”

“That’s it. I’m going out to look for him.” Rook declared.

“Rook it isn’t safe.” Mouse said.

Looking down at the space where his fingers used to be the Altered Boy could not deny him.

“I was stepping out to smoke anyway.” I said, “You can listen for the bells with me if you don’t mind the fumes.”

“Not at all.” Rook said. For the first time since my arrival he smiled.

I realized that was really what was missing from the theater. The people I saw in Yharnam rarely tried to hide their troubles from me, I was the person such things were brought too. When I was around Frigga and her Valkyries there was usually a lightness to the conversation. Now that was gone and they were all heavy from the strain of false happiness.

The effort was appreciated, but there was no need. Faking it wasn’t going to help anyone. I was beginning to believe that the wrong choices had been made. I shouldn’t have left them, I should have convinced Frigga too come back. So what if the Executioners were swarming the city?

She had a claim and they didn’t.

Those kinds of things weren’t supposed to matter, not amongst hunters. Patronage was chosen not inherited, or won by right of conquest. Alfred had won it and garnered the support of the people. I know he had worked with Minimus, but then again so had I. The old abbot paid well enough and for awhile we were none the wiser.

I just couldn’t shake the feeling that Alfred hadn’t been fooled by it all, that he had known. He must’ve aided and abetted his old superior and now that he had taken the city…

I breathed all the strange thoughts out with the smoke. It really was getting to be a problem. Lord Kane Hirsch had brought all those spiraling thoughts back. I’d set up my clinic again, certain that he did not prowl the streets in search of me. I’d never been significant to him. He had no reason to remember me, and in all likelihood hadn’t made the connection about our pasts- but still I couldn’t stop glancing over my shoulder.

I was always checking the shadows. I just couldn’t get him to go away, and the phantom feeling of being watched brought on new sympathy for those patients who dealt with hallucination.

It was freezing outside. I turned up the collar of my coat and Rook did his best to pull his cloak tighter around his shoulders. Sometimes he wore an artificial hand that Cato had fabricated over his maimed one, which had a little bit more control over fine motor skills, but it tended to seize up in the winter. The cold was no good for the gears, and moisture even worse.
“Spring’d better hurry up.” Rook said.

I nodded, cupping my hands around the smoldering end of my pipe. “That it better.”

As we stood letting the wind bite at us, I started to smell something strange. Something was burning and I didn’t think it was the stuff I was smoking. I looked towards the town, and noticed an orange point of light.

“Shit.” I said.

Rook followed my gaze and the two of us saw the climbing fire from afar. It was hard to believe we had missed it. There was a great plume of black smoke rising from the west side of town. I reasoned it to be about where Red Street was.

“Cato.” Rook said.

We were in motion without a second thought. Rook ran for the barn, only to discover that all the horses were missing. In the same moment I let Sterling and Mouse know what was happening. It seemed the veil of peace, long settled over the town had been torn for now the air rung with unmistakable bells and everything smelled like ash and roasting meat.

We needed to go faster. I wasn’t even weighed down by a full bag of medical supplies, yet I felt winded long before we were nearing the blaze. I could not match pace with the seasoned hunters. Rook ran in front of Mouse and Sterling. Imogen and Scarlett had stayed behind, but I knew I would be needed here. They’d send for me if I hadn’t already been sent for.

We saw the beast from a little ways off, saw the curve of its back over the rooftops. It was enormous. I hadn’t seen anything that size in Yharnam for a long time.

“Rook, stay back.” Mouse said, “Help the wounded.”

He nodded.

I was surprised he hadn’t argued- that was until I caught a glimpse of mouse. With his hunter’s cap on and the enormous kirkhammer in hand he commanded the meager forces we were easily. No Frigga Hemlock, to be certain but he was rather like Lord Gaines. Whatever concerns he had, he managed to keep them hidden.

Sterling always looked terrified before a fight. Nothing seemed to have changed about that. He still kept a bat’s wing tied too his Hunter’s axe, though I think the original one had been replaced a time or too. He knew how to use it now, and if there was ever a time too it was now.

We were only a few streets away when we heard a massive blasting sound.

“Did they actually get that cannon ball contraption to work?” Sterling asked.

I’d no idea what he was talking about and was quickly becoming bogged down by a sea of fleeing people. I lost track of the hunters as they forged ahead. I couldn’t get out of the stampede. There were just too many.

I heard the creature shriek. It propelled the crowd forward at greater velocity. I lost my footing and went down hard, falling towards the pavement. I was certain I was going to be killed by the very same denizens who I’d come to assist.

Then a hand grabbed me firmly about the wrist and hauled my back on my feet. I was obliged to
thank Antares whose massive frame was an effective battering ram against the onslaught. They weren’t going to be pushed over by any panicked people.

“The hell’s going on?” I asked them.

Another deafening blast shook the streets. There was a thud that followed it, and I saw some kind of enormous hound collapse on its side. Antares was trying to explain what they’d witnessed but the smoke was causing them to cough. I couldn’t understand anything they said. I dug in my bag and pulled out a cloth mask for myself, and a length of gauze for Antares.

It wouldn’t do a whole lot to keep the smoke from our lungs, and mine were already fairly damaged but it might help slightly. They took it from me and were able to push me towards their wife who was struggling to heard more people away from the chaos. Amongst them was the scent of blood and illness- the smells of the wounded.

I had learned how to siphon out the sounds of a battle in order to tend to those who needed my help, but this felt very different. The creatures cries split my ears. I couldn’t hear what anyone was trying to say and found it hard to pull aside those who needed aid. There was a chance more would be killed by the crowd then the beast.

There was only one hunter who had no problems making his voice heard. From up on the roofing Aditya Lupei shouted warnings and insults down at the others. He was particularly adamant in rousing his brother’s temper, though I was yet to hear a reply from the ever-firery Viorel. I suspected the worst, the Powder Kegs were known for neither silence nor composure. Worst of all was the cannon that Aditya commanded. Although it clearly devastated the bones of the beast they fought, the sound of it blotted out all others.

My ears were ringing as I slid my arms under a half-dressed thin Red Street boy and pulled him to his feet. He was having a hard time processing anything. I could see the glassy haze brought on by opium clouding his eyes, and doubtless his thoughts too. If only I had some cold water to dunk him in, to pull him out just a little bit. The heat of these streets wasn’t going to help.

It was scalding. You could see all the old advertisements melt and curl, their cheap adhesive running molten down the brick walls- those that remained intact.

“Come on, come on!” I urged the starry-eyed boy. “Pull your pants up and let’s go!”

He still wasn’t registering my fervent shouts.

“DOC! MOVE!”

Aditya’s voice was loud enough to force me to listen. I narrowly avoided one of the creature’s massive paws as it took a step away from Antares’ weapon. The Red Street boy was at last awoken by the rattling cobblestones and I was able to push him into the dwindling crowd.

All those who’d been able to run had nearly made it free of the flaming mess. Antares now assisted by Mouse and Sterling had managed to push the beast further back.

“Viorel! Get your ass up!”

It seemed Aditya had gone back to his regular shouting. I came up alongside Miriam who was desperately trying to hand off a screaming child to one of the last fleeing persons. It couldn’t have been more then a few months old and was screaming its lungs out. No one wanted to take it, and it had quite clearly been left for dead by its parents.
Another cannon blast persuaded it to squall yet again. Miriam rested the child on her shoulder with one hand and poking through the rubble with her other. There might have been some survivors still stranded beneath broken boards and chunks of plaster. I should’ve offered to take it from her, but I was having trouble enough with the stragglers.

Various battle cries filled the air as the Altered Boys entered the scene. Rook’s brothers were far more capable hunters, still having all of their fingers and a slew of crude but effective weapons. Most of them took to imbibing their clubs and swords with their own blood, believing it would somehow lend them additional strength. Plenty of weapons had a red sheen to them as the hunting part descended on the felled creature. They were like a swarm of ants, stabbing and bludgeoning the creature without the slightest hint of fear. Nevermind that it towered above them the Altered Boys were intent on knocking it down to size.

“Get buckets!” I shouted at them as they sped past me.

It didn’t seem to register. The few that stopped to blink at me continued on a few moments later.

“For water!” I tried.

Still nothing.

“The fire!”

There was a final blast from Aditya’s cannon. I saw the head of the creature tear away from the body. In a spurt of fire and viscera it sailed a short distance before making contact with a wall and splattering in a great bloody pile. The severed head clung to its pulp for the blink of an eye, looking like nothing so much as a wax seal on the stones.

I tried to get the ringing out of my ears, but it remained long after the sound of the cannon had faded. Now I could see the devastation the creature had wrought. Red Street had earned its name anew. No longer would it be canonized in crimson for the red lights that hung from perveyors windows, but now it would herald the sticky pools staining its walkway. There were several bodies adding their own particular hues and I began darting from one to the next, hoping for signs of life. It didn’t seem very likely. Many had had their skulls pulverized. You didn’t come back from that. Not even those miracle crystals could bring people back from that.

“Buckets.” I heard one of the Altered Boys muttering.

Mouse’s voice cut through the silence. He began to direct a chain of people passing water to and from the well to try and quell the blaze. If it wasn’t put under control soon then it was want to do more damage then the beast.

“Use the snow instead.” Miriam said, “The well could be frozen.”

She joined their efforts, pulling any viable snow-carrying vessel from the wreckage while she continued to look for signs of life. The infant had been passed along to Antares who held it on their shoulder while managing several buckets worth of snow with their hands. Their shoulders were certainly large enough that there was no fear of the child falling.

“Doc! Stop playing with corpses and go look at my fucking brother!” Aditya yelled.

I did as he said. The Lupeis were not only impossible to argue with, but attending those with the best chance of survival was actually a decent protocol for the situation. Viorel didn’t appear to be lying in a pool of his own blood, which was a mark in his favor. I pressed my fingers to his throat, looking for a pulse. It was so hard to keep them steady when there was all the chaos of roiling
flames and hurried hunters at my back. Nothing seemed to want to keep still for me. I wish I could’ve just shouted at them all too knock it off. Not that any of them would’ve listened.

I didn’t feel anything, but my hands were shaking too much for me to be sure of the grim prognosis. I didn’t see any rise and fall in Viorel’s chest but I wasn’t going to give up on him just yet. He didn’t feel especially hot or cold, and there was no sign of any wounds beyond a few scars and scrapes. They must’ve been a result of the fighting.

Aditya had come up beside me at some point throughout the vital checking process.

“Go on doc, wake him up.” Aditya said.

“It’s not that simple.” I said.

Aditya shoved me out of the way, taking his brother by the shoulders and shaking him. Viorel’s head flopped from side to side and I urged Aditya to put him back down fearing the damage that might be done. The grief-stricken Powder Keg was inconsolable and deaf to my words.

“Wake up! The last thing you did was call me a shit-head, is that really what you want my last memory of you to be? Get up!”

“Stop it!” I said, “You’ll hurt him! Put him down!”

Aditya’s hands came away. He made an awkward apology but continued to stick around and impede my work. At last I shouted at him to go do something useful and help put out the fires. Retroactively this seemed a little harsh, but the Lupeis were so used to yelling I didn’t think it would wound him long. He was actually pretty decent at making himself heard and began to relay Miriam and Mouse’s instructions over the uproarious Altered Boys.

They better put the blaze out soon. The air was starting to thicken and the heat was worse. I could feel every last thread in my shirt clinging to the sweat on my back. I hated that.

Leaving Viorel for dead was a hard choice. If I stuck beside him and waited for the Powder Keg there was a chance he’d rouse himself and require immediate assistance. A chance, however was all it was and there were many others peppered about who might’ve been just the same. I had to let him lay there while I inspected the rest.

I found a few people who were still breathing, and each one of them was motivation to continue on in search of the next. It seemed that death was no more fair about who it claimed then life who it kept. The bodies of Red Street boys and girls seemed to pile up while their patrons balanced the survivor’s side of the scale. Warmer clothes, better lungs, I wanted to blame it on a variety of things but the truth was that’s just how the dust settled. There wasn’t a reason for it.

I was covered in blood and ash by the time the fires had gone out. The Altered Boys carried away some of the survivors to other doctors and clinics. It was easy to escort those who could walk, but even those who couldn’t could be slung over shoulders or carried as brides in willing arms. My eyes were beginning to droop by the time I’d completed my first round.

I’d only realized I’d circled through the whole street when I found myself back at Viorel. He hadn’t moved.

Antares must’ve found someone to take care of the infant. I no longer heard its wailing. Rook had found Cato, and though the hunter had a series of extremely nasty bruises and a worrisome cut on his forehead he was doubtless amongst the living. I needed to be sure and bandage it when I got the chance. Judging by the weariness in my arms and legs we’d been at this for hours.
People were starting to get too cold to continue. The hunters had mobilized enough to grab constables, city watchmen and street cleaners. Yharnam rose to help itself and relief was beginning to trickle in as Sterling allowed the denizens he knew and trusted past the boundary to help. Displaced people were being directed to temporary housing at Odeon Chapel.

I had my ear pressed to Viorel’s chest checking for a heartbeat once more.

“Drink this.”

I looked up from the boy to see Antares standing over me. They offered a toothy smile, moonlight reflecting strangely in their eyes. It made them a trifle unsettling, but the bowl of soup they extended had all the warmth and invitation I needed to overlook that. I found it hard to mold my hands around the bowl. They’d gotten cold and shaky. Once the fire had died the heat was gone.

No spoon was provided, I had to lift the bowl to my lips and hope for the best. The warm liquid scalded my lips in such a stark contrast to the world around me that I was momentarily stunned. I seemed to be able to feel it rushing down through my rib cage.

“Thank you.” I said, wiping soup and steam from my mouth.

Antares nodded. “Is he..”

“Don’t tell Aditya.” I said.

“Kos above.” Antares muttered.

“The fuck!”

We all turned to look at Cato, who was standing with a narrow-eyed glare facing one of the still-standing walls. We came over to join him. He held his hand lantern up to a battered body, that looked worse then any I’d seen. A few moments later I realized the body belonged to Ezra Kelfazin which explained the excess of boils and burns. That wasn’t what worried me though, for with a snapped neck and broken spine amongst other fractures it was clear the Executioner had passed.

Rather what bothered me, and Cato for that matter was the color of his blood. The hunter set his lantern down in a pool of it, and the distinctive metallic silver tint of vile blood swelled around the pool of light.

Cato was pissed. He dipped one of his remaining fingers in the silver blood of the slain and held it up to his own eyes, just to ensure his doubtless rage. The profanities came again, and no one sought to stopper them.

“Executioners acting all high and mighty sending us some little sneak to keep track of our friends and the whole time they’ve got one of their own! Fucking hippopotamus!”

“Hypocrites.” Rook corrected, “You mean hypocrites.”

“’potamus pocrite, who cares. They’re fucking hippos and they lied. They fed this mangled motherfucker while leaving Templeton to starve. Kelfazin was the one causing all the bloody problems anyway, he started the whole goddamn thing. People are worried about the bloody crow. Look there he is right there. Murder! Liar!”

He punctuated these shouts by kicking Ezra’s corpse. A few last dregs of blood came out to stain Cato’s shoes. Rook put his arms around his boyfriends shoulders and tried to calm him down, but it
didn’t seem to be working.

“We need to call someone to clean this up.” Antares said.

“Oh who are we going to trust to do it then, the bloody liars? Can’t trust the Executioners! Fuck Alfred! Fuck them all!”

“Shh!” Rook hissed. “He’s the Patron.”

Cato ducked out from Rook’s grasp. “He ain’t my fucking Patron. He’s not yours either. Kos above did everyone just forget about Frigga?”

“Well… I mean she’s probably…” Rook muttered.

“She’s probably what?” Cato snarled.

Silence hung heavy in the air. No one wanted to say it. I knew what they were thinking, and how it must look from the outside. If I hadn’t seen Frigga myself I never would’ve believed that she’d been alive so recently. The Altered Boys passed around sympathetic glances. Mouse and Sterling dropped their gaze. Even her faithful were hopeless.

“Dead, Cay.” Rook said at last, “She’s probably dead.”

I watched the hunter’s world collapse inward. He fell against Rook’s shoulder, sobbing, all of the anger now gone from his curled fists. He wouldn’t be the only one in tears that night. At least with Cato I knew that one day his grief might fade when Frigga made her return. Aditya was not so fortunate.

He hadn’t even come over to inspect Ezra’s body. The Valkyrie’s shouts hadn’t stirred him from his brothers side. I didn’t really care what they did with the body. I trusted the hunters to set aside their differences for the good of the city. In the end it was likely they’d have to rely on the Executioners. They’d disposed of every other Vileblood before in their massive public Executions.

The bowl of soup Aditya had been given was left untouched on the cobblestones. It had gone all but frozen. His brother was going to be too, before much longer.

“Aditya, come on we’ve got to get going.” I said. “It’s time for everyone to go home.”

“No.” Aditya said, “He’s got to wake up. He’s a heavy sleeper.”

“Come on.” I said, “We’ll take him with us then, okay? But we’ve got to go.”

It was the only thing I could think of to get him to leave. Aditya grabbed his brother’s arms and I took his feet. Deadweight, that’s all he was and growing colder by the second. The others gave us sympathetic looks. I wasn’t sure if I ought to head back to my own clinic or to the theater. I’d said I would spend the night.

That had been before all this. Now that empty place seemed even more daunting. I’d have to deal with whatever emotions Aditya’s grief produced and that was already pushing the boundary of what I’d be able to handle. I don’t think I could be around Cato and mourning Valkyries too.

“Will you tell Scarlett and Imogen I’ll come back in the morning?” I asked Mouse as I went past. He assured me he would.

The walk to the clinic seemed long. I was used to little white flakes falling from the sky, it was
winter after all. I knew it was ash this time, but it looked exactly the same as the snow. This seemed deeply wrong. It should’ve been different somehow.

Ashes would’ve suited the wintery ramparts of Cainhurst better. It was a cold place and I didn’t recall a single fire ever being lit there, but with ash came destruction. There was plenty of that.

I was tired and periodically felt Viorel slipping out of my grip. We had to stop and make readjustments often. I should’ve asked someone stronger to help us carry him. Aditya took the brunt of it, but even so it left a lot to me. When we finally got him through the doors of my clinic I was drenched in sweat. It made everything feel like ice.

If I had any hope of doing work there would have to be a fire. I checked the stove, but there was nothing but twigs. I dug a piece of broken cabinet out of the firewood pile, and put it in to burn. My old furniture smelled awful at first, the flames having to work to break through the wax and varnish. All was forgiven once the room began to get warmer.

We had put Viorel on my examination table. I told Aditya to wait outside, but he wouldn’t leave. He said he needed to stay with his brother. Arguing with him wasn’t going to get either of us anywhere. I let him stay, excusing myself momentarily to put on a new shirt and apron. Usually I would forego these as of time sensitivity- but there was no point now. The boy was already a corpse and was going to stay that way no matter what clothes I was dressed in.

I opened the trunk and looked inside. Resting beside folded shirts and a coil of belts was the jar with the brain of Mensis. It pulsed and blinked at me, adjusting to the light.

“You’re back.”

I didn’t have time to talk with it, and didn’t want Aditya thinking I was some kind of loon. I wasn’t sure he was having all that many thoughts to begin with. Still, my sanity was something I didn’t want anyone doubting.

“‘You have to try everything!’” Aditya called from the other side of the curtain.

The brain of Mensis agreed with him.

Yes, dear Callum. Yes you do.

“I have.” I whispered too it. “He’s stone-cold. There’s nothing to be done.”

Oh come now. You are a better doctor then that.

I tried to think of what could be done. I’d only known one person to ever be brought back from the brink and that was the Valkyrie’s own Templeton. She’d had her blood violated and humanity sacrificed. I hadn’t been in the room to witness the process. I’d no idea how it was done.

I was certain it required source material at the very least, something needed to be taken from a Vileblood in order to transfer the infection. I didn’t have a living one on hand. I suppose it was possible that I might send Aditya to pick over Ezra’s corpse, but the last thing we needed was a Powder Keg Vileblood running around.

I would not turn him.

Your thoughts needn’t be so crass. The boy can return fully, as vehement and abrasive as ever without need of corruption. You were given crystals doctor, use them.
How the blood gems would revive him I did not know. They’d worked miracles on Frigga, perhaps there was still some power within them. She needed to inject herself every day to stave off injury, I could only imagine the frequency that might be required to sustain life.

But she had plenty of them, whole trays. Yorkshire Downey seemed to be able to produce limitless quantities of the little crystals. It didn’t make sense to ration them. At worst it would cost me an hour’s journey to the train station and back. That was more then worth a life.

I closed the trunk with a sigh and went to look at my supply. There were some of the strange ones left, the rare and malformed miscolored things that Yorkshire hadn’t been able to explain. I studied them very intently. One of them seemed to pulse with life of its own.

“Hurry up!” Aditya urged.

Right. I was supposed to just be changing clothes. Here I was, marveling over crystals in my skivvies. I finished dressing and went out to attend the dead Lupei. He was a corpse. A corpse should be left well enough alone.

“Save him.” Aditya pleaded.

I shouldn’t be allowed this kind of power. It was a dangerous thing. I had watched the Hirsch family twist as they gained greater wealth, larger armies. The more blood they drank the stronger they got and they lorded control over their nation with grotesque displays of power. The same vein of control had corrupted Abbot Minimus and now I fear it ensnared Executioner Alfred too.

That was merely domain over a city, and organization. To have the ability to put new breath in flattened lungs. I must admit, I was unable to resist trying. As I approached the cold boy on the metal table, I realized I hadn’t the slightest clue how to go about revitalizing him.

Admission of my ignorance prompted the brain to speak again. I heard it in my head, and it was as though the secrets of the world opened like a book. I knew exactly how to move, precisely where to cut and what to open. Administering these new remedies was a cinch, even with a limited tool set. Aditya didn’t even rise to ask questions. He was sure of my work because I was sure of it. Guided by the strange being I’d never been more certain that the treatment would work.

No one else seemed to be able to hear the strange humming and sing-song voice that the brain spoke in. I was worried I might be called a fraud at first, as I dialed back the heat of the flames on my stove so as to properly liquify this crystal in scalding ban marie. When it was nothing but red juice I knew what to add, mixing and stirring the powders and herbs I had left to produce the correct darkened red shade that the brain told me I needed.

And then it was just a matter of injecting. I had to make a cut through the skin. For some reason it felt there should be no barriers between my needle and the draining heart. I had to get it just so. Line things up perfectly.

I depressed the plunger and hoped for the best. I knew I had followed every instruction. When the syringe was empty I sewed back the split flesh and stepped away. Viorel’s color didn’t seem to change. I saw no immediate sign of life. I pressed my fingers first to his wrist then to his neck but could feel no pulse. A mirror held by his lips did not fog, there was simply no breath to mar its surface.

Somehow I’d failed.

“I’m sorry.” I said.
“No.” Aditya said. “Fix him. Wake him the fuck up!”

I hated angry patients. The grieving and hysterical were annoying, no doubt about it but when people started to get violent things got complicated. I should’ve known better then to bring him back alone.

“I tried.” I said. “Really…I thought I was going to…”

What excuse did I have? I should’ve told him straight away that dead was dead. I used to be able to do things like that. Grim honesty was part of the profession and it’s not like Viorel Lupei was someone I might loose sleep over. He was annoying and I’d never enjoyed a moment spent with either of them. Death was common. I knew it well. We had crossed paths many times, all but shaken hands and exchanged business hours.

Aditya lurched towards me. He lacked any sort of grace, looking like nothing so much as a drunk. I didn’t have any alcohol on premises and had not seen him sip from a flask of its own. I suppose grief was its own whiskey. I was able to evade his sloppy steps but I didn’t think I could keep it up forever.

I was making my way around the corner of the table, when there came a great gasp of air. Aditya’s fists dropped and we looked over in equal astonishment. Gone was the pale tint of death on Viorel’s skin. I did not need to go over and check for a pulse because I could see his chest rise and fall from here. They were gasping breaths he took, like a man half-drowned. He didn’t seem to be getting enough air.

It was not even a half-second before the Lupei brothers were back at each other again.

“You moron!” Aditya growled, pulling his brother into a bear hug, “You absolute fucking moron! How dare you!”

“Odeon Almighty!” Viorel coughed, pushing Aditya away and pinching his nose, “Did you confuse the toilet for the bathtub again? You reek like a fucking sewage pipe.”

“You literally smell like death, asshole.”

“Shit-head.”

This went on for longer then I cared to listen too. If I needed a catalog of insults it seemed I had found who to call upon. Couldn’t wait for that.

When they were done ridiculing each other’s various facial features, clothing choices and the degree to which they had participated in the previous battle I stepped in. I wanted to put Viorel through a few tests and make sure that he was just as alive as he seemed to be. His vitals were there, his reflexes working as they should be. I had half a mind to take a few samples, but I worried removing any blood so soon could lead to complications.

“You’re a fucking god.” Aditya said while I began testing his brother’s blood pressure. “Holy fuck.”

“What he do?” Viorel asked.

“He brought you back to life, dumbass.” Aditya said.

I rolled my eyes while they began fighting again. Viorel was insistent that he’d in fact battled every demon on the other side himself and clawed his way to light and life all on his own without
receiving the slightest assistance from anyone. It was horrendously impractical and over embellished, Aditya hardly let him get a word out. If this was how all of their arguments went with one being clearly correct and the other completely ridiculous I could understand how they were in a never-ending state of opposition.

Eventually a conclusion was reached.

“Wow he’s a fucking god.” Viorel said.

“No shit.” Aditya groaned.

The younger Lupei began to thank me and asked how I fought off death. I didn’t really want to confuse his exceedingly simple mind with knowledge of the Brain of Mensis so I just began cobbling together various medical terms that I knew he wouldn’t understand. Both of them nodded in wide-eyed appreciation and I had to suppress a smile. There was something slightly too fun in the trickery of it all.

“Come on. We’re celebrating.” Aditya declared.

I tried to refuse but they had their arms around me before I could think up an excuse to stay home. There wasn’t even a chance to get a grip on the edge of my examination table.

I suppose it was reasonable that I keep surveillance over Viorel, though I’d promised my services to the Valkyeries. What’s more there were surely others injured in the fire and the beast attack. They needed me. I should put out the light and get the doors open so that I could help them. It was too late for should haves now. Aditya and Viorel propelled me merrily down the street. Ash still rained down from overhead. The city smelled awful and there was hardly another soul on the street.

As they pushed me off towards their train station base, the both of them began to sing in a language I did not know. I suppose they had that on me, for while I knew some German it was largely that of ink and parchment. I could not sing any ballads. Latin was the same way.

We shouldn’t have been polluting the somber streets with our happiness. Families had lost their children, their lives today. The city had been torn apart for the first time in years. The old memories of terror-filled nights and clinics full of patients infected by beasts were brought freshly to mind. Fresh boards were going up over windows. None of the businesses that had started running later hours remained open. Every tavern we passed had put black curtains over their windows and taken down any advertisement of vacancy.

No one wanted to be disturbed tonight. There were no windows thrown open to chastise the Lupeis for their noise. No one yelled. After the shouting on Red Street everything had just become silent. It was a step away from shameful, but I was glad that the Lupei brothers were here. Without something to make a sound, the streets would’ve been a scary place.

It was a task to trudge through the slush. I found that my boots did not have the best grip, being as they were cheaply constructed. I really did need to indulge myself and procure better ones. I could already feel the cold beginning to soak through. My socks would be soggy before long. Not only was that unpleasant, it was unhealthy as well.

“Oi!” Aditya shouted when at last we drew near the train station, “Everyone get out here!”

The Powder Kegs looked up from their work, confused. They didn’t begin to understand the wide grins spread across the Lupei’s faces but as their tale of my heroism began to unfold a rising
enthusiasm grew amongst them. As they set down their hammers, anvils and carving tools to move away from their forges and towards hidden kegs and secret stockpiles I worried I might have to start working at my own party.

The sheer amount of alcohol that they brought forth was astonishing. It seemed like they’d enough to stock several taverns, more then was reasonably allowed across the Yharnam border in a month. The Powder Kegs had tobacco too and began to hand me pouches of it. At a turn of my head several of them held lit matches, all keen to be of service to me. It was a welcomed change of pace, I had to admit. It was good too, mixed with sweet flowers and spices. There was a genuine taste too it that made my typical stock seem watered down in comparison.

They sang a lot, and I learned that most of the eccentric hunters had at least one other language under their belt. I recognized bits of Japanese and Farsi. The Prestwick Company had made trades with both Japan and India, and while I could not understand a word of what they sang I was pleased I could at least place the origin. There were so many more I did not know. It was a humbling thing. I should not have been so quick to label the Powder Kegs as lacking intelligence.

But when they broke out firecrackers and began leaping over sparking roman candles, they just made it so easy. I was certain someone was going to need to get treated for second degree burns before the end of the night, it was just a question of who.

I kept waiting for something to go wrong. I knew that it should’ve all fallen by now, this illusion of happiness that the Powder Kegs were put to great energy to maintain. Their smiles didn’t falter because they were genuine. A section of the city had gone up in flames, and while they’d rushed to battle just hours ago, it was all forgotten. I wondered how they could set things aside so easily.

Their winter bounty was also a curious thing. When Aditya declared that I’d conquered death itself, and Viorel backed him up the Powder Kegs made sure my mug of ale was never empty. I did not fancy myself a drinker, but caught out in the snow with less-than-preferable boots I found that the occasional sip did wonders to keep a man warm. There was food to- think nothing of the shriveled potatoes I’d had to wash out of the corners of my closet, here there were roasts and cheeses and dried fruits. They served everything with a warm bread. It had a coarse and grainy texture, with kernels of corn, scallion and spices mixed into it

I ate a lot of that bread. They just kept bringing it.

I saw Yorkshire lurking at the edge of the hollering crowd. I waved to her, and she attempted to make her way towards me but there were so many between us. I kept searching for her throughout the night but as my stomach began to fill I found myself getting drowsy. It had been a long day. The warm fires from the nearby forge and the pleasant swell of ale in my stomach turned the winter weather cozy. I was asleep before I knew it.

As a medic I didn’t dream often. It was rare I ever found myself resting long enough to fall to fancies. Not surprisingly I was roused from slumber before I’d a chance to experience the vivid evening of hallucinations that some patients of mine complained of. I had the stomach-sunk waking panic of not knowing where I was. The confines of my bedroom were unfamiliar, and though just as small as my clinic there was no yellow curtain or iron stove- nothing of mine.

“Sorry.”

I looked over to the person who had woken me. I’d seen them laughing with the other powder kegs the day before, but as of yet the boy was nameless to me.

“What is it?” I asked, “Who died?”
He chuckled, “No ones dead. Steak knife got Rayab’s finger real bad.”

Nothing like blood first thing in the morning. I splashed a bit of cold water on my face before attending the simpering gunsmith. The men who put on strong facades were always the worst cryers. I didn’t hold with some of the studies that claimed them the stronger sex, for I’d put both beneath the scalpel and the results spoke for themselves.

It had been a particularly nasty cut, apparently the result of an attempted knife spinning trick that went badly wrong. He needed stitches. I had him fixed up before breakfast, and while he was thankful he hadn’t lost a finger he seemed to resent that this remedy would require him to set down his work for a few days.

They were busy. I watched them while I ate bacon and boiled eggs and more of the crumbling bread. I don’t think the forges had gone out all night and the smell of melting iron was ever-present. They worked like a hive of bees, but who was the queen? For as long as they’d been in the city I’d never seen the Powder Kegs take up a formal commander. The only reason anyone in their order was ever considered a junior was merely due to lack of experience. If a seven year old could build, clean and fire a gun they would’ve gained all the respect of a full-fledged Powder Keg hunter.

Someone must’ve been directing their efforts, and whomever it was had done a damn good job. I saw faces that’d been reddened from spirits, stumbling around on wobbly drunken legs just hours ago now red from the light of their forges. There wasn’t the slightest ghost of intoxication. They were as competent as ever, if not boisterous.

I didn’t know how they managed it.

I wanted to check on Viorel before I headed back, and even then it wasn’t really back. I’d be heading to the theater before the clinic. I had promised to call upon Scarlett and Imogen again. I brushed the last few bread crumbs and clumps of bacon grease from my mouth then headed for the Lupei brothers box car. The sliding door was locked. I found myself banging on the metal surface, producing a hollow echo.

“Oi!”

I heard a growl from the other side.

“Whoever’s out there best be ready to lose all their teeth! Pucker up, mother fucker!”

I couldn’t tell which of the Lupeis it was but I judged that rising early wasn’t a part of their typical routine. Nevertheless the doors of the train car were flung open and I got to see the sleep deprived face of an angry Aditya, his first emotion of the morning. When he saw who was at his door he made an attempt to present himself in a better manner, straightening his rumped shirt and making the beginnings of a half-hearted apology.

He needn’t have bothered and I interrupted him before things got truly awkward.

“I just wanted to check up on Vio.” I said.

“Right, right.” Aditya muttered. He was still rubbing sleep from his eyes, but stood aside so that I could enter. Viorel must’ve been a lighter sleeper for my knocks hadn’t disturbed him and he was haphazardly sprawled across a rats nest of pillows and blankets. Most of them were lushly embroidered with beads and fine thread, though they were almost all stained and threadbare. In a word: overused.
If it was not for the snoring I might’ve thought he had died again. I was astounded that Aditya had heard me. His brother sounded like a wild boar in heat. It was not pleasant. There was a good deal of whistling breaths taken in through the nose before congested expulsion.

“Suppose I ought to wake him.” Aditya said.

I nodded but was quick to add, “It’s a good sign he’s able to rest.”

“That imbecile could sleep through a hurricane.” Aditya scoffed.

I chuckled. We didn’t get too many hurricanes in Yharnam. Better that he could sleep through beast attacks, or the rowdy public executions. They were far more common disturbances. Aditya walked over to his snoring brother and gently nudged the edge of his mattress with his foot. Viorel didn’t even open his eyes, he just punched his brother’s foot and rolled onto his stomach.

“Oi!” Aditya barked. He crouched down and shook his brother’s shoulders. “Wake up you lazy waste of skin.”

“…your mother.” Viorel muttered drowsily.

“We have the same mother, dipshit.” Aditya said.

“No way I’m related to your ugly mug.” Viorel mumbeled.

It was clear that he was beginning to come to consciousness. He began shifting, trying to bury himself back in the pile of pillows and find fresh respite, but Aditya kept engaging him in new conversations and Viorel chose to defend his pride rather than rest his eyes.

He was completely mobile, soon scrambling to his feet and launching a pillow at his brother. His aim was ever the same as always, and his reflexes must’ve been in working condition. When Aditya tossed one of his notebooks at Viorel’s head he caught it mid-air in his left hand.

“Would you stop it? The doc wants to look at you!” Aditya snarled after being caught in the stomach by yet another pillow.

This was the first time Viorel turned to look at me. I’d been standing right in the middle of their train car and he hadn’t noticed at all. I wanted to chalk it up to distraction and lack of intelligence, but to do so was foolhardy. Everyone deserved a proper examination.

“Oh hey, doc.” Viorel said. He held his arms wide and looked down at his feet then back up at me, “I’m still not dead.”

“Yes I can see that.” I said. “Good for you.”

He was glad of the compliment. I asked for the room and Aditya went outside. It took Viorel and I a moment to clear enough space for me to get a good look at him. I tested his perception, getting him to read a passage from my field notes and then standing a distance away and asking him how many fingers I held up. He had trouble with the field notes, but that was largely due to poor handwriting. Once we found an instructional pamphlet to try with instead he passed with flying colors. His heart rate and blood pressure were completely normal.

He was just fine. Dead hours ago and fine now. I kept trying to find a flaw, any flaw really but there were none. He didn’t seem to have undergone any kind of paralysis like Frigga had, and I wondered if it might be due to the irregular shape of the blood gem I’d used. I wanted to do more experiments before drawing a conclusion, but was not keen on the idea of collecting corpses. I’d
need to see to the other wounded, perhaps there would be a few willing subjects there. Curse the thought of such things.

It was a horrible line to walk, between medical advancement and morality. These gems had the potential to do great things, but I would not let them make a butcher out of me. Always this pride, this desire to push forward must be tempered. I’d seen the things that an extended lifespan could do to a person, witnessed the way it warped the lords and ladies at Cainhurst. Some things may not have been meant to be eternal. I needed to be smart about this.

“How do you feel?” I asked Viorel.

“Normal.” Viorel said, “I mean, like. Not dead. I’m not cold or brainless or no shit like that.”

“Any odd aches or pains? Weird sensations? Anything?” I pried.

His hand rose to the back of his neck, scratching something. He turned away from me, setting aside his usual boldness and shying from the question. I actually watched him think about how to answer, which was astonishing. I couldn’t recall ever having noted a thought process from this Powder Keg before.

“Back of my neck kind of hurts.” He said at last.

I asked him to turn around, and he did. Viorel slept in so many layers of clothing that it took awhile to get through the faded brocades, high collar jackets and stained silk shirt that he’d been wearing. When all the layers were gone I did notice something strange on the back of his neck. I told him to hold still while I made a quick drawing of it, ready to fill a new page of my field notes with details about the odd protuberance.

I put on my gloves before examining it any further. The raised bits of skin were white, and kind of looked like little twisted leaves or bits of wet paper towel. They were crumpled, somehow. The raised thing was roughly circular and no bigger then a penny, but when I touched it, Viorel gritted his teeth and the skin seemed to pulse and shift. It felt….oddly alive. If there was something trapped beneath the skin, I figured it might be best to cut it free. I’d seen the havoc a tape worm could reek, and most preferred not to play host to parasites if they could help it.

“I’m not sure what this is.” I told Viorel, “But I want to remove it.”

“Sure, yeah. You’re the doctor here.” The Powder Keg replied.

I had him lay down and told him to relax. I knew it would be difficult for anyone to relax when there was a knife at their neck, but I still said it. I always found myself asking for my patients to relax even if they weren’t going to. Perhaps it could be chalked up to professional curtosey.

I located my scalpel and began to make the first incision. Viorel tensed, as I expected he would. Cold hands maybe? Cold knife? He wasn’t the only thing that shied, for the instant I’d broken skin whatever had rooted itself on the back of Viorels neck wriggled away. I saw it, crawling beneath the skin, fleeing somewhere deeper. It wasn’t as though I could chase it.

I knew it was still there, mocking me. Just below the surface. There was nothing I could do now, however and began to bandage the small cut and pack my things. I told Viorel to call for me when another marking showed up. I was sure the creature wouldn’t stay dormant forever but I wasn’t going to spend all day waiting for it.

It was difficult to shrug off my concerns, and there was the nauseatingly curious thing deep inside all doctors that made us want to put knife to skin until we found all the answers. I would not allow
myself to go digging in the caverns of his body, and quickly made my excuses for leaving. I needed air that wasn’t choked with smoke from the forges, heavy with the scent of iron shavings and excess gun powder. Aditya asked me about his brother, but I just waved him away.

Trusting Viorel to explain his own symptoms was foolhardy but it couldn’t be helped. I needed some space from all this strangeness. I wanted to confidently diagnose again, with a well stocked cabinet at my back. Frigga’s entire world had been stolen from her, and here I was shaken by all of the smallest details. I suppose this is why I was never entrusted with important things. No one was going to leave the running of England’s hunting society to me- and well they shouldn’t.

The youngest of thirteen heirs I’d never have had a chance at commanding the Prestwick estates. Mother and Father never even tried grooming me for it, they had children to spare and I didn’t show a particular aptitude towards governing or mercantilism. As I walked with quick strides back towards the inner city, I wondered what had become of them in recent years. You used to see the Prestwick name stamped over everything from coffee to candles, but it had disappeared a few decades back.

They’d probably just gotten some bad press and changed the name, or hidden it under other companies. My family would never go under and willingly stop making money unless something had destroyed them. I liked to think if they’d all been killed or turned out dirt poor I would’ve sensed it somehow.

Senses. What a load of rubbish. First I was chasing worms under skin and now I was trying to justify the same mumbo-jumbo fortune tellers preached for pennies in covered tents. I took off my glasses, polishing the lenses as I walked. If I could clear the glass then maybe I could clear my head. Everything was becoming cloudy, and I feared that the storm brewing in the city might never dissipate.

I should’ve told them, should still tell them that Frigga was alive. I didn’t know why I kept it secret. She may have needed to go find Fwahe for personal reasons, but I was certain this town would collapse without her to steward it in safe course. The ship needed back its captain.

It was not my job to fetch her. I’d seen too many get lost in the woods, and I wasn’t about to endure that again. I’d told the Executioners and they’d done nothing- or if they had Strix Savoy had thought it malicious. Bringing her back was bad. Keeping her away was bad.

I wondered if I had declared loyalty, if that might have helped. It was such a strange thing to be stuck inbetween, supporting no one outwardly. Sometimes I wanted too, but taking up for a leader brought such difficulties with it. Cato was made a fool, Templeton imprisoned and the Altered Boys who had been enjoying favors were now suffering from a lack of consideration. She had been doing good things. Perhaps if she returned I’d make an exception.

Frigga or not, I couldn’t ignore the sinister suspicion that spread through my stomach. I surged forward, on to examining other patients, but the further I tried to push the uncomfortable feelings from my mind the more prominent they became. Something was about to fall over the edge, spill into the city. The storm would rain its fury down.

I hoped everyone had umbrellas.

Chapter End Notes
As always, thank you for reading and please let me know what you think.
Frigga Hemlock was holding a knife to my throat. The realization that I was about to die hit me faster than I thought it would. I hadn’t wanted to be here, hadn’t wanted to come into these woods again after all that had happened. Why had I let her talk me into this?

Casaya and Savaii were shouting, trying to do something to hold her back, but it was like they were caught in jars of honey, all their movements slow and sticky. Their voices were muted, and all I could hear were the echoes of Frigga’s threats bouncing ever louder in my ears. I’d never seen anyone so angry before, and I’d seen lots of angry people. This wasn’t like my Mother’s anger. This was closer to the holy rage I’d read about in the Anointed Texts. Whatever gods imbibed Frigga with her strength, I could only pray they would be quick about its application.

“What did you do with Fwahe?” She snarled.

The worst part is I did know. I was guilty. Her anger was justified, and correct and if she chose death as an administered punishment it wasn’t too far off what I imagined had befallen the Vileblood at the hands of the circus.

I just went stiff. I’d always gone stiff when I was shouted at. My mother taught me it was the right thing to do, just stand and listen and wait for your turn to repent. My neck was going to go red before I had that chance. I was so sure of it.

But then Frigga’s fingers jolted open, and the knife fell to the ground. She looked at her own limb in a mixture of concern and horror as it seemed to hang in the air above her head, suspended as if by puppet strings. Her other hand soon moved to join it, and her legs stepped back in awkward reverse.

“That’s enough.” Casaya said.

I watched her as she worked. Long fingers under lace gloves she pushed and prodded a crudely fashioned doll across a table. Wound around its head was a clump of curly silver hair. Frigga’s hair.

“Let me go!” Frigga snarled.

“Not until I’m certain you won’t do anything rash.” Casaya said, “There will be no blood spilled in my tent.”

“Let me go!” She said again.

Casaya sat the doll down, and Frigga in turn flounced on the bed in a perfect mirror-image. After catching my breath I found I was checking my head for bald spots, wondering if there was a doll version of me somewhere, just waiting to be pushed around. I didn’t much like the thought of it.

“Yes, yes everyone settle.” Savaii said, “You’ve gone and spoiled breakfast.”

Frigga did not apologize.

“Where is Fwahe?” She asked.
"She can’t speak, stop asking.” Casaya snipped.

Frigga’s face darkened but she didn’t argue. Her eyes were fixed on that little doll, angered of course but then almost fearful. Casaya still held it gently, a reminder that we ought to keep things civil.

“Patience is capable of speech.” Frigga retorted.

“Ai! Do not ask for one to break their vows.” Savaii said.

“Fwahe’s life is more important then some stupid oath!” Frigga said, “She could be dead…dying!”

“The cards have shown her to be alive.” Savaii said, holding the pieces of paper up to Frigga once more. They didn’t appear to provide any solace. All of Frigga’s anger shook her body. For one moment I swore she was going to reach out and tear those cards in half, but in the next she had folded over, head in her hands, weeping.

Casaya put the doll down and Savaii gently sat down next to Frigga. She wrapped her hand around the Patron Huntress’ shoulders, rubbing gently up and down. She spoke soft words that I could not hear. They didn’t stop the tears, and any words seemed to only make Frigga cry harder. I looked at Casaya for guidance, but she returned my gaze just as lost.

“I….I just miss her so much.” Frigga managed at last, wiping tears from her eyes with the tips of her fingers. She did so delicately, as though there was still a layer of makeup to be protected when she wore none at all. I’d seen her with painted face and it was very different from reality, but she allowed her gestures to carry the same elegance as her desired appearance. The wrinkles and darkened circles under her eyes did not distract from any of her beauty. No matter what clothes I was dressed in, I’d never look so lovely as she.

I tried not to envy her for it.

They did not let grief excuse her actions, and once Frigga had regained her composure she was made to apologize to me. She didn’t have too. She was still in the right and I was still guilty and the knife pressed to my throat was not an injustice.

I was glad she hadn’t decided to kill me.

“Regardless of vows it is imperative you tell me what happened with Fwahe.” Frigga insisted.

She’d been waiting as long as she dared to bring it up again. Now we were all sitting around the fire eating stew. The moment Casaya had declared the last meal ruined they made plans for another. No one went unfed amongst these too.

If only I could just tell her. With the sisters’ protection she would’ve gotten angry, for certain but been largely unable to hurt me. We would’ve gone our separate ways and this time I would not choose to return to the city and my mother and the Executioners, but I would stay here with Casaya and Savaii. I could learn to conceal myself amongst the trees as they did, help them cook and clean.

If only.

I had promised to take her to where I’d last seen Fwahe.

I drained my bowl of stew and stood up, reaching out my hand to her. The woods weren’t exactly bright but I could tell it was still day and if we began now we could reach that stupid hill before
night fell. It was easy to spot in the distance.

Frigga took my hand eagerly.

“Let us go with you.” Savaii said. “It is clear you could use protection in these woods.”

“That isn’t necessary.” Frigga said.

“We…insist.” Casaya said.

I was certain that Lady Hemlock would fight with Savaii until she got her way, but she was quick to bend to Casaya’s wishes. Better she chose obedience then have it forced upon her. Or maybe she was frightened. I didn’t want to believe it was possible for her to be frightened, especially not by people I trusted.

Then again the people I’d trusted had done some very bad things. I could justify some of them, I mean it wasn’t wrong for an Executioner to hate Vilebloods. That was our job, our livelihood and our entire order. It mad perfect sense that Essex would’ve constructed a plan to bring about Fwahe’s demise, it was part of his training- but there was the horse and the gunshot. There was the cruel ways they had pulled her down and locked her away.

That wasn’t right, and I still felt waves of guilt and nausea when visions of that night replayed themselves in my mind. I couldn’t get them to go away, no matter how hard I tried. It was a permanent memory. I could not erase it, no matter how tightly I shut my eyes and willed myself to forget.

“We’ll wash up first.” Casaya said, “Savaii you and Frigga attend the fire. Patience and I will rinse out the dishes.”

It was quickly agreed. I held the cauldron where the stew had been cooked while Casaya filled it up with dirty dishes. She led me to a nearby stream where we began to wash everything out. She spoked to me in a hushed but insistent whisper as we worked.

“You must not go beyond these woods, if Frigga is to follow after there. It is imperative you listen to my sister and go below the earth. There are stirrings down there, and the sacrifice we sent in has not appeased the Great Ones.” Casaya said.

She and Savaii had been talking about this since they’d first found me. I tried to ignore it, pretending as though the stream’s burbling was enough to bury the sound of her words. We both knew it wasn’t and I hadn’t played it off well enough to fool Casaya. Savaii had been the more instant one last time, speaking of things I was destined to do but could not understand. I took it to mean whatever situation the two of them were working to prevent had worsened if it was now the more serious sister trying to convince me.

It was just so ridiculous that they believed me to have any kind of divine purpose. It wasn’t as though I could tell them that I was a monster, that I’d been born a murderer. There were no blessings to be found beneath the earth. I knew of the gods they spoke of, the ancient Pthumerians very faintly. I’d been reading about them in one of the books I wasn’t supposed too touch and hadn’t managed to get very far. Apparently one had been given intense study at Byrgenwerth College, but just as I was getting to the part about what exactly the scholar had learned my Mother had snatched the book away and scolded the indulgence of it.

I wish I had ignored her and read more. Kos forgive my infinite selfishness. Poor Temperance and Humility, Charity and Chastity, Kindness and Diligence. They never had a chance to learn to read
because of me, and here I was demanding more books and more time. The scars on my back seemed to suddenly catch fire, stinging through the velvet and cotton. It felt like they were going to burn right through and ruin the dress.

It was such a lovely thing, they’d given me one better suited to the coming winter. It had a fur-lined capelet tied about the shoulders with the softest pom-poms dangling from the ties. I still couldn’t believe I was wearing it. I was trying too. I did not and would never fill it properly.

Again I had to shake away all those selfish thoughts. None of my sisters would ever wear dresses. My brothers would never get into trousers and shirts. I was so very lucky to have been born at all. So lucky.

Casaya banged on a spoon to get the last of the soapy water off, and the noise took me out of my thoughts.

“So?” She asked, “Will you do it?”

I didn’t know how to answer her. I just turned away and began to gather up the dishes. Her hand came down on my shoulder. I was so startled they nearly lost their bowls to the current.

“Enough games.” She growled, “We need commitment. I need an answer from you now, girl.”

I sighed. I’d been selfish enough recently. These sisters had been so kind to me. If there was a way I could repay them then I had to try. I couldn’t afford to loose their trust. Savaii had told Frigga about me, but she didn’t understand. I should’ve have expected her too. This wasn’t normal after all.

If I didn’t do what they wanted, I would have to go back to the robes and the trousers and keeping my hair short. I would never be called beautiful, or shown any of the delicate ways in which a lady might comport herself. I’d probably never be able to wear a dress again. I didn’t want to give that up, give up that horrible selfish thing inside of me that screamed to be different then I was born. I’d tried to stamp it out and push it down. I wanted so very much to want to be like all of the other guys, but instead I craved ribbons in my hair. It was so silly.

So silly and so very important.

And so very nice when they said “she”.

I turned to Casaya and gave her one firm nod. Her whole face lit up with a smile. She cast aside her armload of dishes and pulled me into a hug kissing the top of my forehead.

“Thank you.”

I was caught off guard and dropped most of what I’d been washing. We had to scramble to pick it up and hurry back, for Savaii was already calling out to us for wasting time. No one seemed to have any patience anymore.

Except, well, I guess I did.

I always would.

We rejoined Frigga and Savaii, then went to get the horses. The sisters donned their mossy cloaks, insisting that they could keep up with us even if we had mounts and they didn’t. Benejeux and Antionette didn’t seem particularly happy to see us. I couldn’t entirely blame them. Our last adventure hadn’t ended well.
I tried to make silent apologies to the massive Percheron. He wasn’t particularly receptive and I struggled more than usual to get on top of his back. Dresses didn’t move the way they were supposed to.

“Oh, god you can’t sit like that.” Frigga said.

I was sitting as I’d always done, one leg over either side of the saddle. She had her hand over her lips suppressing laughter. I cocked my head to the side.

“That…cut of dress. It’s too short, it doesn’t work like that. You’ve got to ride side-saddle.”

Frigga was still in her Executioner’s disguise, but she gathered the edge of her robes as though it was the hem of her skirt and turned so that both of her legs were resting over the same side of the saddle. I made an attempt to copy her form, but nearly lost my balance and went falling off the horse again. No, whatever standards they might’ve had in Yharnam I wasn’t able to follow them here. The only one who was laughing at me was Frigga Hemlock, and she needed my help if she ever hoped to find her spiteful girlfriend again.

I was certain that once we got going it wouldn’t matter in the slightest how I chose to ride. I readjusted myself, sitting as I’d been before and clicked the reigns. Benejeux started forward leaving Frigga to collect herself and follow after us, side saddle or otherwise. Savaii and Casaya followed behind her for the first few steps but before I knew it they were gone.

Not really gone. I was sure they’d merely melted into the background and become part of the forest, certain they hadn’t actually left us. With the instance the two of them had shared over my future actions I doubted they were going to let me slip away.

I was actually kind of relieved to have their stewardship. I wasn’t so worried about the woods and where we were going. I knew that they were watching out for me, and though I’d no faith in my own abilities to keep the shadow creatures at bay, I was sure that they did. Casaya and Savaii lived in these woods, they were capable of defending themselves and if they needed me to return safely to them, there was nothing to fear. Without terror holding me back I reached the foot of the hill much earlier than I’d expected to.

I pulled Benejeux to a stop before starting up it. Frigga and Antionette both had to awkwardly slow their pace and back up a few steps lest they crash into me.

“What’s wrong?” Frigga asked.

I just needed a minute. Beyond that rise lay the graveyard, the evidence of my greatest mistake. I wasn’t sure if there would be anything left, I kind of hoped there wasn’t, for the slightest detail would bring that nightmare back to run through my mind again. Whatever details I had missed would be filled in, quickly and violently by returning to the scene of my crimes. I didn’t think I was ready.

“Is this where you last saw her?” Frigga asked.

I shook my head. Taking a deep breath I collected myself and we began to head up the hill.

I remember how the huntress had held me back. I couldn’t remember her name. She may never have told it to me, but as we galloped over the incline I became deeply disturbed at her lack of identity. I should’ve been able to remember.

I wanted there to be both nothing and everything when we got over the hill. If the circus people had done their job and cleared away all evidence then Frigga would have to abandon her search. There
would be no other course of action, and though I was certain it would make her deeply sad, she might be persuaded to return to Yharnam.

It would be difficult for her to reclaim Patronage, but I didn’t think the city to fargone in Alfred’s hands as to think the feat impossible.

What use was there to meditate on the thoughts of a dying city? I was already set on leaving the place behind, and staying in the forest with the girls who understood. Well, that was if I survived this task they asked of me. I didn’t know what I might find beneath the earth, but the way Casaya had spoken of things beneath the earth, and the other sacrifices she’d sent down there set my stomach turning. I didn’t like to think about it.

When we’d been journeying underneath Yharnam it had been one thing, for there was Alfred and my Mother and Essex and Sussex, plenty of people talking and making for polite conversation. It didn’t feel so alone, so very much like a grave. It had been a long tunnel though, and even as we’d enjoyed our time sharing stories and asking questions I’d felt a growing sense of discomfort. The air was heavy and still below the ground. Instead of feeling safe inside a burrow, it felt like I was getting the dirt shoveled in over top of me. The walls had started to seem to close around me.

Small spaces had never done much to frighten me before. In my younger days I’d often found a bit of sanctuary in the odd broom closet or beneath the bed. Walls around meant no one could sneak up on you, but it was different when they weren’t walls at all. Tunnels just weren’t the same, and if even my brief research was to be taken into consideration- the Pthumerian society was said to inhabit a network of them. Hundreds if not thousands of criss-crossing burrows and cities just below our feet.

But they were just stories, a distraction, a concern to stave off the worry of the very real concern that was about to ensnare me. Sped on by the memory of last night, the Percherons seemed to jump at every shadow, the shapes cast by the branches were the same to them as the hands that had reached out to kill us the night before. We were only a few feet from the top when I decided that yes, yes a thousand times yes I would rather be chased through the woods by the Shadow-Men then have Frigga find out what I’d done.

It was too late for me to change my plans. Antionette had surged past me. Spurred by Frigga or by Fear I could not determine, but they soon stood at the top of the rise. It was a sinister shilouette in the dying light. Frigga was much like a maiden in a painting, silver hair spilling down her back and only made visible by the halo of red-gold light from the dying sun. The black trees of the Forbidden Woods bordered her as picture frame, and the half-still half-in-motion horse beneath her added that quality of motion that heretofore I’d thought only brushstrokes were able to capture. Of all the moments to paint, why choose this one.

The artist might be well within their rights to title it “The Calm Before the Storm”. If that was to be it why not paint the tumultuous sea, and me the tiny ship helpless in its wake? Yes I had put up the sails and gone to sea, but how was I to have known the cost? I couldn’t very well return the cargo now. It was far too late.

I came up beside Frigga, if reluctantly so. Her gloved hand was held at her brow, shielding the sunset glare as she surveyed the valley below her. It seemed nothing more then blurred shapes from our vantage point. I doubted she’d be able to determine what was what with any concrete sense of clarity. I bore witness too it all though. I knew where the path the wagon had tread was, could see the spaces in the long shadows of the trees where the carnival men had waited to ambush Fwahe. I even saw a large, strange shape which I pieced together as Swift’s corpse.

It would’ve had to have been long dead, nothing but bones now. There wasn’t a smell so I trusted
the vultures would’ve done their job. I’d seen bones before. It shouldn’t fill me with such fear to think of them. I suppose it was different when you were in some way responsible for theirs being brought about. The horses seemed able to sense it to, the death that had filled and then spilled over the basin. They wanted no part of it, stepping away from the edge of the hill and fighting against their bits.

“Do you see another one of those shadow people?” Frigga asked me.

She twisted about in her saddle seeking an evil that I doubted she would find. There was nothing preventing our turning back, for that was the direction that the horses stamped and pulled towards, the way they wanted to bolt. They knew nothing but decay and despair awaited us below, knew as firmly as I did.

I’d made my promise, though. We had to press on.

I shook my head in response to Frigga’s question. I didn’t doubt her concern was genuine, though the shadow men had become a trifle to me once I reminded myself that Casaya and Savaii were behind us. They wouldn’t get the jump on us.

Before we’d gone into the woods Frigga had commanded me to lead. She’d even stepped back so that I could take up the role properly. Now I would continue without her explicit leave. I tapped my heels to Benejeaux sides. He fought me a moment, then turned downwards and began descending the slope. His hooves slid over the damp grass, but he didn’t lose his footing. I heard Antionette coming up behind us and knew that Frigga was no more then a hair behind.

The footprints from the fighting were long gone, covered by crisp new fallen snow. I did see a few pairs of new tracks. One of the ones that I noted in particular appeared to have been left by someone wearing high-heeled boots, not the sort of thing ideal for snow drifts. The wearer seemed to have had quite the struggle negotiating the difficult terrain.

I didn’t trail any of the markings. I knew they would be too recent to be of any use to us. I kept on towards the bones. Just as I’d expected they were nearly picked clean, but the silver mane that yet clung to the ridges of spine and skull was long and silver. If it wasn’t so plentiful and uniform one might’ve dismissed it as spiderwebs.

Frigga gasped when she saw it I don’t know how she knew so quickly, for Swift had become rather nothing more then abstract shapes, but the sharp inhale spoke volumes. A crunching sound followed. I looked over my shoulder and saw her collapsed in the snow. She built up a trench of snow in front of her as she crawled towards the cavernous rib cage of her once noble mount. I doubted her legs had seized again so soon, but she wasn’t using them to move. She just pulled up fistful after fistful of snow and ice until she was close enough to touch the thing.

“Kos in heaven.” She choked.

All of her words had to make their way through a gateway of horror and tears before she could actually voice them. I knew this was coming, known it since we first stepped into the woods. I should’ve prepared. I desperately wished I knew what to do, had some way of comforting her as she wept in the snow. It felt wrong to muse on approaching her, wrapping my arms about her person and pulling her into an embrace. If it hadn’t been for my accord with Sussex there would not be a body on the ground.

“It’s Swift.” Frigga said.

She spoke so softly it was nearly swallowed in the silence of the snow, but I’d been listening for it
carefully. I was waiting for the moment of attribution where she spun round and realized she had someone to blame. Her chest rattled, like rocks perched at the top of a cliff. I worried that the breaking of her heart might cause an avalanche, a rockslide which would bury us all in her sorrow and rage.

Frigga’s eyes suddenly went as wide as saucers. I could see the redness starting at their edges, and tears had left icy trails down her cheeks. I could see clumps of water beginning to frost over in her eyelashes. It was that cold out.

“Fwahe.” She said, struggling to pick herself up off her half-frozen knees, “Odeon Almighty, where is Fwahe?”

There it was. The snap, like a breaking twig. Grief to hatred, and soon, to me, hated to pain. She would vent her fury on my back, in my bones as so many had before. I didn’t know if Casaya and Savaii would try and stop her. I didn’t know if they could. I didn’t know if I wanted them too.

“Where’s Fwahe?” She asked, brushing snow off her robes and stomping towards me. She moved slower then I expected her too, the way one might if trudging through a particularly strong wind. My mother would’ve said something about being held back by the weight of her sorrows, but I didn’t reckon that words like that had any place here.

“Where’s Fwahe!”

She screamed at me this time, not a question but a demand. I looked around, trying to find some sign that she’d been taken away from here. The last I had seen of her she’d been alive. I could swear it.

I looked around for something, anything that would indicate the capture. The snow had covered all their tracks, and scanning the branches I found no shred of clothing to show they had been. The ground may have been littered in discarded weapons, but with the white blanket overtaking everything there was no way to know what was waiting beneath the surface.

To dismount and begin digging seemed a fools errand, but I was halfway to starting already. Something in Frigga’s frenzied voice implored me. That and the fact that all of this was in fact my fault. There was no getting around that.

The wind howled through the forest. It picked up dry dead leaves and spun them in little tornados. When it caught Frigga’s hair the gusts blew the curls around her face. With the wet lines from the tears and her skin paling from the cold she looked like a banshee. Certainly there was the wailing. I couldn’t quite recall what the deal was with banshees- if one was supposed to listen to them or ignore them. They might be like will-o-wisps, something not to be followed lest it lead to one’s own demise, but I just couldn’t recall. There was little talk of Irish legends on English streets. In any case she wasn’t a ghost so I needn’t fear supernatural damage. Frigga’s wrath on the other hand, now that could bring real pain.

“Where’s Fwahe?” She shouted again.

I pointed off into the distance, in the way that the carriage had gone. Frigga scrambled to her feet leaving behind the bones of her beloved horse. She ran through the snow, often tripping on the unseen roots. She’d stumble then pick herself up again, keeping in near-constant motion.

I waited for her to get ahead of me and then prompted Benejeaux to follow. We went at a slow walk, giving her plenty of space while she continued onward. I wasn’t sure how to step in, I didn’t
know what to say. In times like these I felt it best to stand aside and let people run their course, whatever the destruction may have been.

There were plenty of times where Ezra Kelfazin had behaved in inexplicable ways. He was usually very cold to me and it was rare to see him smile. I didn’t think his connections with the other Executioners were very strong, yet I’d seen him crying in moments he assumed were private over the ones who turned up dead. It was a mad sort of sadness, one that I didn’t understand. Often he’d start picking at his skin or ripping at his hair. I never stayed around very long when he got like this.

The bank was a large place and there was usually somewhere I could go to wait out one of his episodes. Thank Kos for that.

“Fwahe!” Frigga shouted, screaming into the empty woods.

As we continued I started to pay more attention to the high-heeled boot tracks I had seen before. Since they were the only thing in the area to follow I reasoned it might be worth pursuing. Maybe they would, or maybe I was just looking for an excuse to distance myself from feelings I didn’t fully comprehend.

I trusted Casaya and Savaii to keep a watch on Frigga. They would guide her back if she got lost, though I was certain Frigga Hemlock needed no such assistance. She was in more danger of freezing to death. The wind wasn’t letting anyone get away without being bitten by icy chills.

The high-heeled tracks ended abruptly, at the base of a large tree. I looked up into the boughs but saw nothing of consequence. I listened, but there was only the stifling snow-silence, occasionally broken by one of Frigga’s shouts. I continued to survey the area, hoping that some carnival worker had been cut off from the rest of the troupe and was stumbling around the woods. I was sure I could get them to explain things, that would at least set Frigga on the proper path.

I didn’t think telling her that Fwahe had been captured by circus men would set her heart at ease, but often knowing was better than not. This might’ve been the exception though.

At last I found something useful. It wasn’t a man or a woman, or anything alive at all, but the colorful way it moved in the wind caught my attention. Truly any color that wasn’t the white carpeting or the greens and browns of the forest stood out plainly. Red and yellow bending and folding in the wind was enough to grasp my attention. Benejeux came alongside the flapping piece of paper.

I dismounted awkwardly, mostly falling from the saddle and landing in a heap. Benejeux snorted. It might’ve been laughter. Horses seemed like the sort of animal that would be capable of possessing a sense of humor. It wasn’t important, in any case. I dug through the snow for the paper.

The ink had started to run at the bottom of the flyer, making it hard to read, but the soggy parchment was clear enough. There was the image of a tent, a magician and some tigers towards the top that had not yet been sacrificed to the wet snow. The Circo Obscuro’s name was printed boldly at the top and heralded by several vague adjectives that were supposed to draw people in. Things like astounding and magnificent. It might just be enough to explain things to Frigga.

I took up Benejeux’s lead and followed my tracks back to the path she had taken. Frigga must’ve gone a long way, I couldn’t see her light from where I stood. The darkness of the forest was about to close in, the last rays of sunshine dying as they tried to poke through the canopy. She had gone a long way. As I led the cart horse along, I saw the indetations where she had tripped and was careful to steer us both around the areas that were no doubt rife with twisting roots.
The Forbidden Woods always had some sort of nasty surprise waiting for us.

“Fwahe!” The wind caught Frigga’s cries and blew them back at me. It was her insistence, her desperation that sped my pace along. I knew it was dangerous to run, especially while holding the lead of such a cumbersome mount, but I did it anyway. I owed it to her. Even if I made a fool of myself and tripped every few steps, she had done the same before me. She was loyal beyond anything I might’ve expected, and she had my complete admiration because of it. Frigga Hemlock was a force to be reckoned with.

I was able to find her after a short walk. She hadn’t gotten as far as she wanted too. I didn’t have to hear her say it to know. When I found her she had one hand braced against the trunk of a nearby tree and was breathing heavily. She was exhausting strength she didn’t have. I wanted to tell her to rest, but I knew the instant I showed her the flyer, she would be off again.

I understood that kind of madness. If I had the same chance to chase after my father I’d throw every caution to the wind and forge ahead. I thought back to what I’d heard the Powder Kegs discussing. The Himalayas. That was the name of the mountain range he was supposed to be in. I would have to find a map that contained them, make a stop at the cartographer’s shop and hope for the best. If they weren’t far perhaps I could convince Casaya and Savaii to let me go there before I completed their underground tasks.

I doubted they would agree to it. They seemed to be running out of time, and if they would not let Frigga and I go through the woods ourselves the chances of climbing a mountain on my own were miniscule. They’d never let me get away with it.

“She’s got to be out there.” Frigga said when I reached her side.

Her speech was impossible and full of choking breaths. With every word, cold puffs of air passed between her lips, floating a little ways before they faded.

I nodded.

I hadn’t known the Vileblood for a very long time, but she didn’t seem to type to succumb to an easy death. The circus men had captured her, and I was certain that would only prompt her to make their lives a living hell. I sighed, gathering up all of my strange divergent feelings before extending the flyer I’d found to Frigga.

Her fingers brushed against mine as she reached for it. They were like ice. Cold enough to make me shiver. I watched her eyebrows depress in confusion as she scanned the soggy page and made sense of the runny drawings and mangled texts. I was waiting in wire-wound tension for the moment of realization.

It came with a raising of her brows and a widening of her eyes. One hand went to her mouth to stifle a gasp.

“These men...this circus? Took her?” Frigga stammered.

Every word seemed a separate question. I wanted to nod, make it seem like she’d just stumbled into a trap and gotten captured, but that wasn’t the case. I pointed to the logarius wheel that hung from her neck. My hand went to my pocket to fish for a coin, only to realize that dresses did not contain pockets, and I’d no way of passing coins hand to hand. She hadn’t been captured, Fwahe had been sold.

“The…Executioners took her?” Frigga asked.
No still wrong.

I pointed from the wheel to the flyer and back again. She was still confused, and I at last found deliverance at the dollar sign before the ticket price on the poster.

“The Executioners…sold her to the circus?” Frigga asked.

I nodded.

“And you helped them?” She asked.

I looked away, but I didn’t have to say anything more to get the message across. She knew and I knew, and the gods that were already judging me for the sins I’d committed as an infant knew. When would I stop doing bad things?

I waited for the impact to come. She’d been prepared to kill me earlier, on mere suspicion. I didn’t know if it would be a punch or a lunge or a kick or some other combination of attacks- whatever her fleeting energy might allow. I tried to ready myself for it. She deserved to spend her rage, it was well justified.

But she didn’t.

“Gods almighty.” Frigga muttered, before sinking back into the snow.

The flyer had become a knot in her hands. She shook in the wind as much as the paper had. I knew that the Executioner’s cloaks were well insulated, far from the flimsy fabric that I now wore. I suppose something had to be sacrificed for style. In an case she shouldn’t have been half as cold as she seemed. My breath didn’t show in clouds, and I wasn’t shivering.

I was concerned for her in more ways then one. I made a hesitant approach, the same care one takes when going up to an animal they’ve never met before. I was slow, and placed my hand lightly on her shoulders, ready to withdraw it that same instant if she chose to strike.

She didn’t.

Frigga just leaned gently into me and started to cry.

“How could they?” She wept, “How could you let that happen?”

I didn’t know what to do, beyond returning the embrace and gently rubbing her back to try and keep her warm. She was winter. Her tears froze shortly after falling, becoming crystals on her clothes. My proximity didn’t appear to do anything to warm her.

“How could they do that to her?” She kept asking.

The how of it was very easy. All they’d needed to do was stand aside or turn away so that they didn’t have to see the nets come down. If they could just ignore the hands that wriggled over her like spiders there was no moral dilemma in what they’d done. We were Executioners. She was our sworn enemy. Yet I found myself pulling Miss Hemlock tighter. She was not the only one weeping. I spent my apology in frosted tears too, ashamed at what I had done.

“How could they?” She asked. “How could they take her from me?”

If I had known that this was to be the result of my actions would I have still undertaken them? I couldn’t be sure. I did not think I would ever have the strength to stand against the Executioners.
They were everything to me, family and teachers and all I had worked towards. Executioner Sussex was a wise man and his plan had worked. I feared what would happen if I became their enemy, if that carefully calculating mind was turned against me, and suddenly I was the one who was hunted.

“She was mine.” Frigga sobbed, “She was mine.”

Of course she was. But they’d- we’d, stolen her. We’d stolen her and we’d sold her and she belonged to the man who’d killed Swift now. I don’t imagine he was being particularly kind to her, but I could spare Frigga Hemlock that. She needn’t know of his cruelty.

I don’t know how long we stayed there, but I know I was starting to become as cold as she was when we turned to leave. She said she felt sick, that she couldn’t stay in this place. I think she said she wanted to go home but her voice was weak, dying in the wind so I couldn’t be sure. In any case I helped her to her feat and we began heading back towards Antionette.

The Percheron was moderately distressed at having been left on her own, and snorted as we made our return. Frigga chuckled and muttered something about how Swift used to do that. I turned away, no reason for her to know that it was the circus that had brought her treasured mount down either. One could only take so much tragedy in one day. I didn’t know if I’d ever be able to tell her. Still I’d made my peace with that.

We began heading back to Casaya and Savaii’s camp. Frigga was silent, letting me take the lead. She had a lot to think about and I wasn’t one to break the gentle silence while she evaluated her options. I gave her all the time I could.

It wasn’t much. The woods that had seemed so extenssive mere hours ago were now very small. I wished for more trees, more space, more paths. I knew that when we reached the camp the sisters would want us to make choices, and I just wasn’t ready for that yet. The creeping feeling of the future growing close was at hand, and by Kos I wanted to push it away. I was not yet ready to face it.

But I reasoned the future was as impatient as Casaya and Savaii. They were waiting around a fresh fire when we got back, as though they hadn’t left. Frigga offered to tie up the horses, and I went to join them. Casaya put her hands around my shoulders. It was probably supposed to be a comforting thing but I found it offputting, almost like she was holding me there.

Savaii offered Frigga her hankerchief when she was finished with the horses, which Lady Hemlock gratefully accepted. She didn’t pretend as though she had not cried, as I’d expected her to do but rather tried to shore up against the remaining tears. There was a waiting wellspring.

“She has done as she said she would.” Savaii proclaimed after a long silence, “And now Patience has another path to walk.”

“No.” Frigga said, “He’s…she’s…coming with me. She has too. She was responsible, she said that the Executioners…and there’s a circus. A circus took Fwahe and she has to take me too them!”

Even if I’d been able to speak I don’t think there was any way to phrase the impossibility of the request. It simply could not be done. Yes, I had stood by as she was sold but I’d no idea where she was taken. There was no way I could know. I don’t even believe that Sussex knew. His plan had begun and ended when the lock closed on Fwahe’s cage. That was all he had wanted.

Well that and the money.
What were they doing with it? I couldn’t be sure, but by now they must’ve had loads of it. That bag from the circus was heavy and judging by the activity we’d seen going on at the Powder Kegs they had felt comfortable enough in their accrued wealth to begin spending it. Yharnam didn’t seem to have grown any more prosperous, though in the dead of winter little was.

So where was it all coming from?

I found myself becoming too curious about the matter. I was a vow-taker, and had never been one for owning things. I don’t think I’d ever held a sum great enough to buy anything more than a meal. The one time I’d needed expensive boots my Mother had carried the coins. She feared that much in my hands would lead to wickedness. She was probably right, and I was wrong to question the spending habits of the city’s patron.

Even if it was strange the way he had risen to power.

Again another choice that was not mine to make. I was an Executioner, I should be beyond delighted that my order now controlled most of the city. I should’ve been. I know I should’ve been.

But I wasn’t.

Things were becoming so complicated, ever since I’d been sent to preside over the Valkyeries. I did not wish for them to be simple again though, as difficult as everything was to understand now, it seemed better then being blind to it. It was probably just folly to think this way. The next time I saw my mother she would have my head about it once I told her. I felt like she already knew.

It was ridiculous to think anyone could read thoughts, but I’d believed for a long time- and still now did think that my mother was able to look inside my head. It was beyond writing my sins down in that dreaded book, she could take one glance at my face and know I’d done something wrong. It was always so obvious.

Savaii and Frigga began to argue in earnest over where I should go and what I should do. Frigga fought passionately though all her words were tempered by the sadness that had overtaken her. She spoke an octave too high and her words warbled threatening to fall to unintelligible sobs any second. Savaii was persistent, but got overly passionate and was constantly reprimanded for her repetitive exclamations by her sister.

“You cannot just say that everything is stupid and have that be your reason.” Casaya would remind her.

That wasn’t to say she was the voice of reason here. Casaya was firmly on the side of her sister and worked more as a whetstone then as her own voice in the argument, serving only to sharpen the points Savaii made. She was a formidable weapon.

They all spoke of me as though I wasn’t there. Frigga wanted to take me after the circus. The sisters wanted to send me below the earth. While they argued I tried to determine which of those options I wanted more. The tunnels would surely be terrifying, and there would be little chance of finding my father in the dark depths. Speaking with an ancient god when I couldn’t even commune with another human was an equally impossible task, but the journey seemed it might be the shorter one. Signs of the circus would be long covered up and walking through winter woods on the off chance we came across something seemed more like the actions of an asylum inmate then a reasonable plan.

“She doesn’t belong with you, in your village that does not want her.” Savaii said, “The gods, they cry because she is not with them.”
“Patience isn’t some kind of sacrifice.” Frigga said.

“Then why would you lead her to a pack of angry dogs?” Savaii asked.

She’s got to fix her mistake!” Frigga said.

Thus they went back and forth for a very long time. I tired of listening too it, though they were going to be the ones to decide my future. I guess it didn’t make much difference, as I’d never had much hand in the decisions anyway. Still I glanced around the woods and found that they were all in such a heated argument that I might be able to slip between the trees and vanish without their knowledge.

Then what would become of me?

What would become of their plans?

I was a vow-taker. I took vows and I kept them. Frigga had gotten her favor out of me, and I’d taken her as far as I could. When I thought about running the strings that held me back were those that tied me to Casaya and Savaii, and I knew then that I must stop all this going round and make the choice myself. The three of them were still in the heat of it. Not a one of them noticed when I stood up. I had to grab a spoon and bang on the kettle that hung empty over the fire. A few short raps was all it took to dissipate their heated back and forth.

“Yes.” Casaya said, the first to collect herself, “I do think we’ve made proper fools of ourselves. This is a choice for Patience to make.”

“But sister she-“ Savaii started.

“Hush.” Casaya snapped, “We are not going to force a course upon her. This is her life.”

It was exactly what I had been thinking. We didn’t need Frigga’s permission, but they glanced to her for approval anyway. She nodded wearily. Whatever choice I made it seemed they were willing to let it stand. How generous that my future was now in my own hands. Truly.

I couldn’t remember the last time I had felt like I had any power over it, didn’t know the last time that I stood on the precipice and looked over the edge. I felt like no matter how I moved I was going to fall to my death. I wanted to ask them, to beg them to just tell me what to do but at the same time I knew I’d rail against whatever they said. It was so strange, to stand on the bridge and not know if it would hold all the way to the other side.

But I couldn’t stand in the middle forever.

“Who do you want to go with?” Casaya asked.

I hated to let her down twice in the same day. I didn’t want to look at her when her sorrows multiplied. I should’ve been strong and noble and met her tearful stare with grim determination, but I was weak-willed. I turned aside and pointed towards Savaii.

Savaii smiled. I could not speak to how Frigga looked, but I heard the suppression of sadness.

“We’ve no time to loose.” Savaii said, “We must get you ready.”

“Ai!” Casaya said, “Let them say their goodbyes.”

“No.” Frigga said. She brushed off her knees and stood, turning away from us. “I do not think that
will be necessary.”

Guilt was a stone in my stomach.

I didn’t care what she felt, I rushed for her and wrapped my arms around her waist, pulling her into selfish embrace. She could hate me all she liked, but I needed her to know that I didn’t do this to spurn her. I cared for Frigga Hemlock and admired her as much as anyone. She was the best Patron that Yharnam had seen in years- an opinion I was not allowed to have while Patron Executioner Alfred sat the throne, but took anyway. I hoped that when I got back from this place I was destined for, she would somehow have the city in her hands again.

I expected her to push me away, and at first it seemed she was going to. Her hands went to mine, and started to pry them free. I tensed, readying myself to be tossed aside, but instead she was gentle, and patted my hands instead of pushing them away. She leaned into my embrace for a few seconds before I let her go.

She did not say goodbye.

She did say good luck.

That was perhaps the better parting words. I wanted the same for her. We only stayed together another moment before she took her pack, and the horses and left the camp. I wasn’t sure where she was going, wether she would pursue Fwahe until she found her or if she would turn back and try to set things right in Yharnam. She road Antionette, leading Benejeux along with her. I was glad both of the horses had survived.

Savaii remained patient until Frigga had waited, then leapt right into action again.

“We need to get you ready.” She said.

I nodded.

The readying process took longer then I thought. It seems that the sisters had anticipated this outcome, and while I saw that a hefty bag of supplies had already been gathered, it seemed there was more that needed to be done. I was expecting a map, some advice about the Pthumerians or what I might encounter down in the tunnels, but instead I was sat in a chair while Savaii painted my face.

I assumed it would be in the patterns of skulls, similar to what she and her sister bore. As she worked she explained the colors and their significance, why she placed some symbols on my neck, others on my cheeks and even why she painted a large black dot on the back of my ears.

“These will be closed eyes that watch you from behind.” Savaii said, “So nothing can sneak up on you.”

Blue for loyalty. Red for bravery. Yellow so I could remember the light. So many things to hold in my mind. I felt like there wasn’t room for all of them. I was packed too tightly with things I couldn’t hope to understand.

“You are going to do well.” Savaii told me.

Her fingers had become a mottled waterfall of all the colors she spread over my skin. Casaya was double checking all of the packs, and looking over the sisters’ cache of weapons.

“You favor a firearm don’t you Patience?” She asked.
I nodded, and Savaii gently cuffed me on the head, spilling blue paint on my blonde hair. “Don’t move.” She hissed.

“How else is she supposed to answer me?” Casaya asked.

“Shhhh.” Savaii said, flicking paint at her sister, “Begone. I’m not done yet.”

“We can’t let her go in unarmed!” Casaya said.

“Aii! What do you think I’m doing here?” Savaii snapped, “There’s more to arm her with then just guns. She needs to appear fearsome and proper before the ancient ones.”

“Yes yes.” Casaya said, “I know. But there is also nothing wrong with a gun.”

“There is when it interrupts my process.”

Casaya rolled her eyes but let her sister continue to paint. It was strange to feel all the foreign moisture and dry powders suddenly applied to my face. I wondered if it might be the same feeling one got when they put on makeup. I’d often glanced at the tables full of cremes and brushes that the female Executioners kept in their rooms, but I’d never been so bold as to try anything myself. The closest I’d come was looking into the mirror after having eaten an enormous helping of early summer strawberries and seeing if my lips had gone red.

They hadn’t. Not really. Not in the same way a lady’s would.

I hadn’t really expected them too.

In a similar way I hadn’t expected this process to feel like it did. There was a weight to the masks Savaya applied. It was slight, but significant, like the weight of a sheet when it rested on your face. I couldn’t seem to forget that it was there and feeling as though someone was going to gather the fabric in their fists and wrench it away.

“Have you got any more bullets hidden around?” Casaya asked Savaii

“Check the pillowcase.”

“Aii!” Casaya said grabbing up her sisters pillows and turning them inside out one by one. There were multiple cardboard boxes packed with quicksilver bullets that came tumbling out of the lot. “Why are you sleeping on bullets?”

“Weaponizing my dreams, sister.” Savaii replied. “Gives them more punch.”

It was amusing to me, the parts of Savaii’s beliefs that Casaya chose to accept. They were hardly universal and she took them piecemeal in accordance with her own logic. Apparently dream weapons weren’t worth anything but an eyeroll. I hadn’t quite decided if I trusted all of her tricks either. I really wasn’t sure that this face paint was going to do much for me, but it was hard to resist when they were so persistent.

“Night has fallen.” Casaya announced.

By then the bag she’d prepared was ready and Savaii was long finished with her painting. She had also placed amulets around my neck and bracelets on my arms. Casaya approved of these, but added little bits of practicality. She gave me sturdy boots instead of the lovely little shoes I’d been wearing, and insisted I wear a coat over my dress, and take extra thick socks with me. These were the kind that came up to my knees so I wouldn’t get cold.
They acted how other people’s mothers acted, right up until we left camp. The moment they left their strange circle of tents and buildings they fell silent and mysterious. I could feel them blending into the woods, though they never disappeared. I walked in the middle, with one sister on either side. Savaii had replaced the cloth that covered her eyes and hummed as she walked the path. There were plenty of things to slip on, but she never tripped herself up. They both knew these woods, and every time I caught my ankle on a root or was swatted in the head by an overhanging branch I was reminded that I very much did not.

I didn’t think I would have the chance to get the hang of this place, not now anyway. I just kept thinking about how dark it was getting. The woods had already donned their mourners cloaks and blotted out any remaining color lest the moonlight make them cry. The only thing luminous was the snow, but I think if there had been any way for it to turn black, it would’ve. There was a growing knot in my stomach, a feeling that kept whispering about how dark I ought to expect the tunnels to be, if the woods were already so grim.

I’d no idea how far we walked, but we continued until I was certain I could never find my way back out again. At one point Casaya and Savaii had left the main path, directing me through the wild overgrowth and the looming trees. After that I couldn’t keep count of the lefts and the rights, nor remember what shapes and curves the various foliage had taken. It all became the same woods to me.

The only nice part about our progression, was how secure I felt with them. I was no stranger to a hunter’s party, and had often gone on patrol with groups several times the size of this one- but I could never recall having felt so at ease. It wasn’t just that I trusted Casaya and Savaii to protect me if anything should turn up- I just had the sense that nothing would. Nothing dared to approach us. They very much gave off that air of being above such things.

It was only when we reached the mouth of the tunnel that I began to feel fearful again. They weren’t going to go down with me, and the confidence was quick to fade. The entrance must’ve once been a grand place for their were all sorts of chipped stones and statues decorating the surroundings. I wasn’t really sure if it had been part of a courtyard or a building, but it was doubtless a purposeful structure.

The woods had tried to overtake it. Most every stone had a coating of moss under the coating of snow. When I brushed against them the icy crust would come away, revealing soft green sponge beneath. The moss was soaked, and let excess moisture soak into my clothing. It wasn’t long before we all had little stains on our shoulders and knees from where the moss had been able to get at us. I was certain that if it hadn’t been for me, the sisters would’ve been able to slip through this place quite easily, but it seemed as though they didn’t want me to get lost.

I was grateful for that. We hadn’t gone into the tunnel yet, and already things seemed quite the maze. I stood and craned my neck to look as far down into the tunnel as I could, without actually crossing the threshold. From what I could see, which was admittedly very little it was not at all like the tunnel I’d been in underneath Yharnam. These were wilder, and I could see the roots of trees poking through the walls, ceiling and floor, making odd shapes. There were white things as well, small and thin like parsnips. They might have been parsnips only, nothing more but something about the way they grew made them feel quite sinister.

I hoped they were only vegetables, then I might have a laugh at being shaken by them, and worry no more about things. I didn’t get to look for long, the sisters quickly turning over my pack, two guns and then a torch to take with me into the dark depths.

I was hesistant to begin, and looked over my shoulder. There must be some way out of this. If I’d
been sent on my own I might’ve been able to just turn tail, but with the sisters behind me there wasn’t the slightest hope of that.

“You promised.” Savaii said.

“You gave your vow.” Casaya reminded.

I swallowed the growing lump in my throat as I nodded at them. They were right. Vow-taker and not a vow-breaker. That’s how it had been taught to me.

“It will be simple.” Savaii said, “All you need to do is fine the ancient Pthumerians. Judging by the state of the returned sacrifices, which are mostly just these-“

Here she jingled the necklace of bones at her throat. I hadn’t realized they’d been the human sort. What did I know? Maybe they weren’t the human sort. They could be small animal bones. Sacrifices could mean a lot of things. But I knew they were human.

“They won’t be hard to find.” She finished.

“Don’t scare him.” Casaya hissed.

“Scare her!” Savaii corrected.

“Ai! Sorry precious girl.” Casaya gasped, wrapping her arm around my neck and pulling me close. It should’ve been a comforting embrace but weighed down by all of my gear it was an awkward thing. “Scare her.”

“Yes yes.” Savaii said with a wave of the hand, “But you needn’t worry about that. The Pthumerians are going to love you, and they will bless you with many gifts. You will be their messiah and lead them out from beneath the earth, up to this plane where they can share with us the knowledge of the great ones. It will be simple, yes?”

Simple?

No.

But I wasn’t going to break my vow to them. I took a deep breath, got a good grip on the torch, and stepped inside.

Chapter End Notes

As always thank you for reading, and please let me know what you think!
I had very little chance to get a look at my captors. When the trap had sprung I hung dangling uselessly over the earth for a good while- hours perhaps until I heard approaching footsteps. I dare not expect my sweet sister for that would be too much hope in trying times. Lord Death was a gracious host but even he would not smile upon me so favorably as to reward a mistake.

It could’ve been lunch however, as I found I was growing ever hungrier since returning to the woods. At the very least I might hope for one of those helpful hunters who had been so dim-witted as to let a Cainhurst Lord slip through their fingers that surely a traveling woodlander would lend me her knife so that I could cut myself free.

In the end I wasn’t able to tell who it was that had come across me. I was preparing myself to offer greetings, but before I’d introduced myself there was a solid thud to the back of my head and my vision swam. The nausea and disorientation that comes from loosing ones consciousness while suspended from tree branch already is indescribable. When I came too I had no idea what was up and what was down.

Everything was dark. No matter how many times I blinked to clear my vision, nor which direction I checked everything around me was a uniform unknowable solid shadow. There was a weight too it as well, this everpresent darkness. I lifted my hands to rub my eyes, fearing that sleep had clouded my vision. When I raised flesh to face I realized the passage was barred. My fingers met cold iron, wrought square and uniform. I had to search the shape with my fingers before determining some kind of tall cage had locked itself around my face.

As the feeling returned to me I gradually learned the shape of my prison. It was a hideous thing, all made of fiendish wrought iron. The bars had been twisted, weather for decorative purpose or easier construction I did not know. All I was privy to was the knowledge that those spirals scraped against my skin whenever I moved in a manner most uncomfortable. The cage was all small little squares, too small for my whole hand to get through any one section. I tried to open my mouth, get my tongue past the iron so at least one part of me might be free.

It was folly. The cage scraped at my lips as they strained to widen and there was no way for me to navigate past the bars. I only managed to succeed in salivating, which was largely unhelpful. Feeling around my neck I could discern a heavy bar that rested on my shoulders like nothing so much as an ox’s yolk. I was livid, but tearing at it did nothing.

I strained and twisted trying to get at the back. My fingertips could just barely brush a padlock, but I’d no hope of actually clasping it. Whomever had caged me had been a most infernal and infuriating creature.

It was still too dark for me to tell if I was with anyone else. I couldn’t smell or hear anything, so I doubted there was much else around, yet I strained to discover something just the same. I wanted to know, and perhaps I could not lay teeth to the person who had done this, but I had yet fingers and fists. They’d suffer the same.

It felt idiotic to cry out, when I was doubtful of a response but I would have my temper known.
“Whoever has done this I will tear you in half!” I cried.

I was surprised to hear my voice echo, going on and on for a fair distance. I must be in a massive room or corridor of some kind. I knelt down, running my hands over the ground. It was stone, cobbled and cut that much was easy. There was also a strangely warm sensation to it, and the stones were occasionally broken by something organic and bumpy. I thought it might be tree bark, though both textures together made little sense to me.

“Free me at once!” I shouted.

I demanded to be heard.

The only voice that answered was my own, echoing and mocking as it bounced around walls I could not see. There was a cage around my head, but I felt no chains holding it back. When I tested my arms and legs, leaned forward, stretched my neck there was no resistance of any kind. Nothing restrained me and thus I stepped forward.

I must’ve looked a bumbling thing. I stretched my arms out before me and the steps I took were small and almost frightened. I did not want to catch on any loose stones, or those strange root-like things I’d felt. There was only so much humiliation one could stand in a given day.

Or perhaps it was night now.

I was very certain my eyes were open, though there was nothing to see. Well, there was definitely something to see, just no light to see it by. I admit, that I’d much better vision in the dark then the average hunter but this was something else entirely. This was as though I were in a place that light had never once been. I doubted seriously if it would ever return. I did wonder then, where the warmth came from. This was not the snows of the Forbidden Woods that I’d just experienced.

Thinking of the woods brought Alois to the forefront of my mind. I had been close, I knew I had. More then likely I was right on her heels. If she’d disappeared then maybe this was where they’d put her.

“Alois?” I called, “Lady Alois Hirsch?”

I hoped my voice would not be foreign to her, even distorted and echoed so far off but as I’d come to expect there was no reply. I decided to try that horrible twisting of her name, that new identity she might have had the misfortune to undertake in her travels.

“Fwahe?” I asked.

It was as useless as anything else. I was alone and blinded and trapped by unknowable things.

I don’t know how long I continued to stumble forth like a blind man. It wasn’t so long as to leave weariness in my legs, but with each step came mounting rage. I was not going to be the subject of any more humiliation. I stopped dead and sat down. If whoever had trapped me here wanted a show I would ensure they never got one.

Gradually all of the weight settled down on me. It was a heavy cage, even for my kind and that made it hard to keep my head up. It kept falling to the side, gradually pulling me down until I was almost lying down. I could not actually manage to rest my head, for the bars would not
allow any such pleasures.

I tried to remain calm, as I was taught to do in times of stress. Certainly there were not many of those at noble Cainhurst, not until I was much older and moving closer to the days of my trial. I did not want to make any mistakes now, for carelessness had been my Achilles heel so long ago. I would not make the same mistake twice.

This wasn’t one of those situations where things had gone wrong and our traitor father would tell me to look on the bright side. I didn’t value his words, his opinion, his anything but the memory of that phrase came back to me. I wanted to spit at my own head for bringing it up, but that was foolish. If there were any positives to be had it was that I remained in my own dress. I could feel no weapons left on my person, but the crowfeather cape and hunter’s badge were still there. The hat had been cast away, and certainly free-flowing silver hair wasn’t going to be easy to explain, but it was better than nothing.

These were foolish thoughts. Peasant’s thoughts. They could be grateful at better than nothing, but here I was a lord sitting happy to have my clothes while trapped in some unknown place. I rose immediately, trying to shake away the rush of weight and air that came when standing, as it pulled the metal box on my shoulders back down. I was capable of carrying it, and until the weight was enough to break my bones and rend my flesh I would endure it. I couldn’t very well turn up my chin and square my shoulders as I would’ve liked, but being as there was no one here to see me in this darkness, I wasn’t sure it made much difference.

I continued onwards, keeping my hands at my sides now, for I did not wish to stumble. This was promptly corrected when my ankle was caught on one of the things that were probably tree roots and I went sprawling with no chance to catch myself. I had to balance the concerns of survival and appearance, dropping my pride in places I wasn’t used too. I didn’t like these strange ways. I did not like feeling small and lost in the dark.

Though it had happened before.

There were plenty of chances for spoiled children to do stupid things. I’d been eldest and had largely grown away from such foolish games as hide and seek by the time Alois was old enough to play them. She grew out of them even quicker then I had, the very moment she had hidden in the throne room and Annalise had scolded her for it. Never once did she ask to play after that, nor participate when any of the others took part.

This had happened before that though, when her little hands had tugged on my little sleeve and begged me for my indulgence. I surely lorded superiority over her for a few moments before I gave in. She was my little sister after all, and it was my duty to look after her. She knew by then that it was a knight’s job to hunt, so she begged and pleaded until I let her be it.

I couldn’t quite recall why but this had irritated me very much at the times. It was something along the lines of me not having been felt good enough to be the seeker, so I vowed to make things as troublesome for her as possible. Her motor skills were yet to be the best in the world, and stairs were a most undignified affair for the young lady.

I was going to make her go down every set in the castle if she wanted to find me. I knew there was a wine cellar deep below the kitchens, set into the earth. It was possibly the lowest point in Cainhurst and I figured if I was able to get down there I could slip between two barrels and find a comfortable resting place until Alois was forced to abandon her search. I did not think that she was even aware of this part of the castle, and so as she turned her back and began to count I slipped away.
The wine cellar hadn’t been a hard place to find and I made my way there easily. It was cold and very dark. Those had never stood out to be as particularly worrisome things before. I was dressed in suitable clothes for the climate, and there had been enough strange glances from suspicious servants that one of them was bound to know where I was if things got bad.

I found a decent spot and began to work my way behind the barrels, until I was completely concealed. Alois was never going to find me here. There seemed no reason to spend all this time waiting for her, so I settled down even further and decided to nap. After a few hours she would give up and I’d be able to return to whatever task I’d been working at before.

When I woke the cellar was darker then it had been before. The servants had put out the torches. Fools. I would get their necks wrung for this, they should know better. Everything was completely dark and wedged between barrels it began to feel oppressive. I had the strangest notion that the shadows could knit themselves together into a fishing net and ensnare me forever down without the light.

It was such a foolish thought, but a very real fear to a child. I knew of no easy way to dismiss such feelings. Children will believe anything I suppose, and I was very certain that I’d become prisoner to obsidian shadows. I suppose my youthful self wasn’t entirely wrong given present conditions.

I tried to adjust to the dark, to not let any fear show. I had chosen this place myself and had no one else to blame for being stuck down here. No one except Alois perhaps, but she was always blameless. I wasn’t sure why, but I waited. I tensed, eyes wide, seeing nothing and kept my knees pulled tight to my chest. As I sat there I’d realized I wasn’t alone. I heard breathing.

Just like that all of the fears went away. If there was someone else then the shadows could have them.

“Whose there?” I had asked.

I was returned by a startled gasp, and as attention was gradually called to the cellars it seemed that no witless servant had put the torches out by mistake, instead I’d found a bleeder desperately trying to escape the castle. He was terrified to be discovered, rail-thin and shaking like a leaf. He implored me, probably asking for mercy but his speech was in foreign tongue so I could not listen. It wouldn’t have mattered anyway, for the guards, spirited on by my calling soon found him and took him away to be butchered for dinner.

I was commended of course, and the pride of Cainhurst for the remainder of the afternoon. Alois had never found me and was especially jealous that I had received favors. I tried to make it look as though I’d both evaded her childish searching while doing my own investigation into the escape, but deep down I knew it had been fortune’s hands. Perhaps that was the first time Lord Death had ever smiled upon me. It was not an impossible notion.

If only he would grace me with that smile again so that I could be rid of this place. This time there was no worried breathing in the distance. The torches had not been put out because I genuinely doubted that there were any to begin with. There was nothing here but the endless tunnel. I began to feel the strain in my legs. A pounding headache had set in, and my shoulders were scraped with every step I took.

“Let me go.” I muttered.

I hated to expend energy on useless pursuits, but I felt as though if I didn’t keep speaking I’d forget how. The darkness was maddening. I often got the feeling that I was turned around, that
I’d been the way I’d come before. There was no way to be certain I hadn’t. Stumbling blindly wasn’t going to work. I desperately, desperately needed a new plan.

I thought to fall to my knees and beseech Lord Death for guidance. He could not hope for his Piper to be paid if no one could find him. I needed to be out in the world, collecting. The thought struck me that perhaps it was because of Lord Death that I was here, I might have displeased him. Eternal punishment?

It seemed too sudden. Too cruel. I hadn’t had a proper chance yet.

Weren’t all of those the same things I’d heard the bleeders say?

I musn’t let myself to sink to their base levels. I wasn’t going to die down here, anymore then I’d been captured by shadows in the wine cellar. I just needed to be smarter than this. I set my hand on the walls, letting my fingers trail across the rough stone. In my mind I brought forth the thought of blank parchment and tried to trace pathways as I walked them. If I could hold some kind of mental cartography I might have a chance at understanding this place.

It was by no means a great plan, but it was far better then no plan at all. Real ink and real parchment would’ve served me better, but I’d neither and no light to see them by. I kept on, walking along a wall that never seemed to break. Surely there must be a passage. There had to be. I hadn’t simply appeared here as though it had always been my place. I was brought. I was taken. There must be a door or a latch.

I wanted to think it was a maze, a puzzle. Something that could be solved if one was only clever enough to piece it together. I had more wits then most, a classical education no less. If I could only be granted my sight then things would be simpler. If not for the pounding in my head from the weight pressed against it, I might’ve been able to think clearly.

At last I could go no further. I was drenched in my own sweat, shoulders screaming from the weight laid upon them. I tried to shift the cage, managing to raise it no more then a centimeter from my skin. It was just enough to alleviate the pressure. It wasn’t long before my wrists started to shake, and I had to set it back down. There would be no easy way of managing it. I could not lay down properly for fault of metal barriers.

I’d known that the same was done in Cainhurst dungeon to unruly bleeders. The sleep deprivation culled their tenacity, but I’d never considered the weight of the iron before. That was a truly nasty thing. When I sat with my sweet sister, I’d rid Cainhurst of all its iron, melt it to clumsy soiled buckled and bent rubbish so that it couldn’t be used again. It was a reproachful cheap metal to begin with. We would find we’d no need of it.

Thinking of that day had used to be such a great comfort to me. Now It was overwrought with troublesome anxieties, the thought that it might not come- or worse that I should find Alois too late and never have had the chance to welcome her onto the throne. I might never see her again.

If only I had not been so caught up with that wretched girl. She’d slowed me down. If I ever had a chance I would rip Frigga Hemlock apart.

These vows seemed so small in this prison. Everything seemed so small, and I was like the theatrical villain in comedic drama. Just there for the audience to laugh at. I would not allow this to become humorous. There was no honor in death, but suffering could be borne with dignity. I was no exception in this, having suffered far more then the average soul. If they wanted to mock me,
the cosmic beings who watched their mortal audience there was little I could do to oppose it. But I did not have to listen, bow my head and bare it.

Sitting on the ground as a useless thing. No. I would not let them think that I had given up. Lord Death had put his faith in me. I would prove yet useful.

Weeping like a woman. The reproach of it nearly too much to bear, and I had almost succumbed. My eyes would not flood. Not here, not for something so simple. I could not see. That was not worth crying over. There were blinded men, beggars mostly I suppose but they’d found a way to survive. I would not be bested by any human creature.

I rose and resumed.

I could not say for how long. The only sound was the echo of my heels on the stone as they forever rescedind into the distance. Sometimes I thought I heard the scurrying feet of something small, a mouse or a rat perhaps. Every time I would stop and listen, but when I paused so to did the little noises. It wasn’t long before I concluded that they must be some variety of figment, a dream borne of this strange stale air.

It began to smell different. I’d still not yet reached any twists, turns or passages, dogging ever onwards but the air was a heavier things. There was strange perfume, something of smoke and the peels of fruits I’d never tasted. It was the smoke that gave me the most hope. There was an old adage about where there was smoke there was fire. Perhaps I ought to tag on that where there was fire, there was vision.

I had to pound my fists against my weary legs to try and get motion from them. They’d begun to wobble and fail me. I pressed on until at long last I saw something. IT was the tiniest dying curl of blue smoke, but I had surely seen it. The smell was so intense, that I raised my hand to cover my nose and mouth, before realizing the cage did not allow for this. Another weight for me to suffer under. It was no matter, that single smoke trail had been enough to give me new strength.

There were more curls that followed, and soon I could see the confines of my chamber. It was a great curving tunnel, made from stone. The smoke pooled at the top of it before curling down the sides, pouring over every surface like strange water. Whatever was burning would be large and warm. I had the sense it could even be thought of as comforting.

Still I could see no passageways or turning points, nothing that would indicate that anyone else had been down here besides me. Well besides me and the smoke. I looked at the ground, but found no tracks. There was no furniture, no carvings or stray strands of hair. With the thickened smoke I could not scent any other living creatures.

“Who’s there?” I asked.

It didn’t feel so foolish now that there was a sign of life. I was no longer talking to myself in the dark.

I heard the sound of the wind ripping through the branches of trees answer me back. I could see even more of my enclosure as I carried on. What I’d thought were strange trees before, were a root system of some kind. They were dotted with sporadic bulbous flowers, all of them closed up and not having sprouted yet. They grew on wiry stems, but did not appear to have even the smallest of leaves, thus I was confused by the reply and cleared my throat.

“Who are you?”
No answer.

“What are you?”

Still nothing.

It must’ve been wishful thinking before. The wind had not answered me. This surprised me more then I thought it would. I wanted to run towards it, before I lost the direction of the sound but there were several flaws in my plan. For one thing there was only one way to go, straight ahead. For another running caused the cage to bounce and I needed to try and keep it steady. It was hard to hold one’s head high when barreling towards unknown sirens.

“Answer me!” I demanded.

I heard a sharp bark, like that of a dog in response. I was sure I knew the sound for Cainhurst had readily commanded hounds for the hunt. They weren’t always called upon to track down bleeders, but it was fun to lose them to pull back our prey. We’d fine skilled horses, who could outrun the fastest man but they were often unable to go where the dogs could. Nothing had ever been safe from those hounds.

Now the barking came towards me. I heard the skittering sounds of paws over stone. There was more then one of them, and their claws had not been clipped for a very long time. A very very long time. The receiving end of such paws would be fraught with veracity and blood. A man who thought himself sensible might’ve tried to run, but to do so would be an act of fear. If the dogs hadn’t been able to scent their prey at first they’d surely be able to locate the smells of terror. It was a surer trail then any else I knew.

I stood firm and waited to meet them. I had not my knives, but a hound could be thrown. There was also a chance it could be reasoned with, that at a snap of my fingers it would see that I was not some fearsome beast and come to stand sedately at the side of its new master. Wishful thinking, that I grant but one had to keep their spirits up in times like these.

It was the waiting that was the worst of it. For all the swiftness I’d credited to these animals they were awful slow about reaching their destination. At last I began to see an orange glow at the end of the long, long hallway.

As the creature drew ever closer, I realized it couldn’t be a dog. It was far too large, taller then even the formidable cart-pulling beasts that had marched in front of Cainhurst carriages. It sounded like a dog, and moved with the motions of one but as more and more detail was filled in- it did not look like a dog at all.

The creature was, additionally on fire. I had been mistaken in thinking that the cause of the smoke was its flames, for the curving blue tendrils crashed against the creature in the same way they did the walls and floors. It was not the source of the dizzying smell.

I was uncertain about this beast. I contemplated the changing of strategy arguing internally as to weather or not this would prove a creature capable of domesticity. If I held myself firm and waited to tame it, the hound might prove mindless, stretching wide its great maw and biting me in two. I knew that Alois would prefer, nay- demand that I appear before her in complete form. Were I half a man I would be as good as dead to her.

My thoughts were scrambled, as I envisioned our reunion as some parade before a throne. I was not going to summit with her, I was in a headlong rush to save her. It was unlikely to be an opulent affair, and I’d do well to remember that. I must keep myself grounded in reality,
despite being caged in the dark and suddenly pursued by a creature. These flights of fancy would surely lead to muddled minds. I’d seen so many bleeders become lost in the dizziness of their daydreams. They could fall so far into their own minds that we were never able to pull them out again, even as the definitive blade came down across their throats.

I’d been spoken to of madness before, almost threatened with it. The men of the line of Hirsch had not done particularly well on the sanity spectrum. There were those who said I was next destined for the asylums. Mother would never have locked me away like that, but mother did call for my exile. I guess she would’ve seen me lobotomized. She never loved me as much as she doted on Alois. Even then I was doubtful it was love.

Alois met expectations. I truly believed that was all she saw, a line of correct decisions that produced the most favorable child. That was really all it amounted to in the end. Alois had performed as expected.

The dog was nearly upon me now. It’s craggy head looked more to be something made from gnarled roots or rotting seeds then flesh and bone. It was filled with strange textures. Sparse hairs clung to little pieces of its anatomy. It appeared to be balding. There was lava in its mouth, molten swirling fire that billowed and leaked from its legs. I could not understand how such a thing was alive and brimming with flames at the same time.

This place was too strange for any one man to sort out. I was learned but by no means an expert scholar. Speaking multiple languages was not going to assist in my understanding of this creature. I readied myself for a fight, taking better stance and searching the walls for anything that would be useful. A loose brick down here might’ve made all the difference, but I could not see any. The shriveled plants that climbed the wall weren’t strong enough for ropes or weaponry. They were barely surviving to begin with.

Before this hopeless fight could begin, it ended. The hound stopped a step before me, looking down on me with strange eyes. I waited for it to make a move, anticipating its strike but it did not come. The dog howled, rattling the tunnel. Little bits of earth rained down on us where its bellow dislodged them.

I would’ve pressed my hands over my ears, if not for the bars that blocked them. I tried to recover from the sound, but before I could the creature had planted its teeth on the top of the cage, and lifted me off the ground. It carried me, swinging freely before its front legs. I was born down the chamber as though it were playing fetch. The thing started at an easy trot but gradually increased pace as it grew comfortable carrying me. The pain from its bounding was impossible to imagine. Sometimes my feet crashed against the ground, and mostly it was that my head rattled from one side of the cage to the other, slamming into the twisted iron bars.

It hurt, but I was too caught up in trying to figure out what awaited me at the end of the hall to pay much attention. I was astonished when the beast bounded around a corner, springing up on part of the wall before ricocheting off down separate corridor. If I’d just kept on I would’ve found that passage. My advancement was not madness after all.

The smoke was coming from burning incense, pyres of it dappled through these new halls. I saw doors. I saw stairs and ladders and the hand crank of what may have been an elevator. There were carvings now, and a grand fireplace, though that wasn’t lit. The beast’s paws scrambled to avoid long running carpets which trailed through these new chambers. I noticed several scorch marks were already left on some of them.

It must’ve been wary of the scolding from earlier transgressions. So it could be trained. When at long last we reached its destination I was full of prepared complaints, ready to throw them
at whatever master I was brought too. His kingdom was the worst I’d ever seen, and his hound a
crude and bumbling fool. I would tell him even if he already knew.

I did not expect to be placed in front of a corpse. The dog delivered me proudly before a
white throne. All of the incense pyres burned so fiercely in this room that my eyes watered. I could
not abide by the strength of it. The sting hurt my lungs. No wonder our kind had taken to avoiding
churches where this poison smoke flowed freely. It was wretched stuff.

The creature barked again before putting me down, and bounding off. I suppose I was
lucky it wasn’t the sort of animal prone to drooling. All of its bodily fluid seemed to be that same
fiery substance, and while the creature hadn’t suffered from it, I did not want to take my own
chances with the strange flames. I collected myself the best I could, brushing dirt off my trousers
before looking up into the hollow eyes of the ancient creature.

It was a large thing, proportional to the size of the dog, so that it might’ve been his
hunting hound were he human. I could not imagine he was, for his skin was paler then even my
sweet sisters, who’d always been kept from the sun. It was a white that had never once glimpsed
the worlds above. He must’ve been there for a long time. His hair had gone the way the long dead
do, all silk-thin and dead, like abandoned spiderwebs. I imagined he would crumble at the first
touch.

I saw no reason to remain in this room, thus turned to leave. I was momentarily stopped
by the piles upon piles of skeletons that lined the opposite walls. They’d been tossed there without
care. I was reminded of the many hundreds of pounds of clothing we’d taken from the bleeders.
Their shoes had ended up in piles much like these bones.

It was not the quantity that disturbed me, but the fact that most of the corpses had the
same heavy iron cages locked around their rotting skulls. Every one of them bore it from what I
could see. A massive prisoners grave. I took a hesitant step towards them, swallowing my doubt
and vowing not be afraid of any dead thing. They were long from live, cracking and crumbled. No
matter how many of them lurked here, there was nothing they could do to me now.

I took another step towards liberation, wishing suddenly that I’d worn different boots.
This place was still horribly silent, save the occasional hiss from burning coals but the heels of my
boots were like a smith’s hammer. Far too strong and loud for such a solemn place. I walked with
all the more haste to be rid of this discomfort.

I realized about mid-way through that there was something else making snapping sounds.
I turned back over my shoulder, and saw the skeleton on the throne begin to stir. His finger bones
scraped and popped as they worked to free themselves of the dusty layers that had accumulated on
the arm rests. I thought the ancient creature’s wrists would shatter, so loud was the sound when
they twisted. He opened and closed his jaw. It creaked in the same manner as a rusty door hinge,
before he was able to lift his arms and snap it into place. I didn’t think that separate bone should
stay together as that. There was no connective tissue, no system of pumping blood that made it
possible.

The many books I’d read would dismiss it- but watching it with my own eyes the
movement could not be denied. I didn’t know why I was so astonished, for similar miraculous
transformations were said to occurred when one imbibed the Queen’s blood at Cainhurst, but this
was different. This was something long been dead. Or so I’d thought.

While I would love to unseat the corpse and take a new throne, the evidence to the
contrary was overwhelming. I was not going to become another skeleton in this room. I ran for the
door. The old corpse rose, moving far faster then I believed his cracking bones would’ve been able
to allow. In a moment he was up, shreds of white robes flapping around him, catching the unseen
wind. That was another thing I could not seem to sense. The smoke undulated and moved, but all I
felt was stale, still air.

“I mean you no harm.” I called to the enormous man as I ran for the door.

He did not respond to me in words, rather picking up a rusting scepter that lay near his
throne and thrusting it towards me.

There was another rush of strange air, wind he could command. That was power. I could
feel it this time, the gust that went right through my cloak and my clothes, making my spin break
out in bumps.

Beyond its effect on me, the rush of wind slammed closed the entry way doors. It didn’t
seem possible that they could be moved by something so inconsequential as a gust of air when they
were massive monuments carved of solid stone, but slam they did. It left me alone with the
skeletons.

I could not even be certain weather this colossal being retained ears after all the years it
seemed to have been encased here, but I made another attempt at appeals anyway.

“There’s been a mistake.” I said, “I have done nothing wrong. I was trying to find my
way out. Your hound absconded with me, truth be told I’d no desire to come into this room and
disturb your restful slumber I merely meant to-“

The skeleton’s scepter came slamming down onto the stones. I swallowed the rest of my
sentence and silenced myself. He was coming towards me now, moving with a quicker more
constant step. I found that I felt rooted to the spot where I stood, eyes darting around the chamber,
desperate for some kind of escape.

There didn’t seem to be more than that single entrance. In terms of avantage, the old king
had them all. He had the scepter, the size and the speed. Even after a quick glance at the corpses I
was not able to find weaponry. They must’ve taken all of theirs in the same way that mine had been
removed. I suppose one couldn’t really expect much assistance from the dead, but then again I had
not expected that ancient thing to move.

As he came ever closer I realized that I’d been wrong before. He did have skin, but it was
so thin and weak that you could see right through it down to the bone. It was a sort of marvel
really, the kind of thing that would’ve been intensely interesting to read about if it was contained
safely within the page of anatomical text. Here the realization just made me weak in the knees.

I knew he was not like the hound, it was an instant realization. If I stood rooted as I was,
there would be no conversation nor chance at taming. This man, was in a way much like me- such
that could not be subjugated. Escape however, needed to be made possible. I must get him to open
the doors again, and then I could snatch one of the burning incense braziers and run back the way
I had come.

There would be escape somewhere. I was almost certain of that.

The skeletal man used his scepter much like a speak, thrusting it towards me. I hadn’t
very much space to run, and dove to the side, landing in a pile of skeletons. Many of them collapsed
to dust beneath me, but the cages around their heads did not, metal grates colliding painfully with
my back and shoulders. Some of the corpses were still fairly fresh, not yet drained of all their flesh and organs. I tried to pull myself out of the pile, only to feel my hand sinking into something rotten and spongy.

I didn’t look to see what it was, furiously wiping the muck away on my cloak as I picked my way through the pile.

Another gust of air sent the bones scattering. I was not strong enough to withstand it, so great was his power. I tumbled back towards the throne, as helpless as a ragdoll. Even though he had closed the doors he was still working to cut off my escape route. A few more steps and I would find that my back was quite literally to the wall.

My pleas did not seem worth repeating. I was already ashamed to have issued them, but they seemed to claw their way up into my throat and beg to be spoken. I suppose I could understand the incessant sobbing of the bleeders now. It was hard to face death quietly.

There wasn’t much on the ground in the way of projectile. Much like when the enormous hound had come for me, I was unable to find any loose rocks or weighty objects to throw in my defense. At least here there were the skeletons. It was not a great idea, but some of them had been scattered near enough. I took hold of one of the cages and hurled it, skull and all towards my attacker.

I think we were both equally surprised when it made contact. It hit him square in the chest. Of all the combat training I had- of which was far lesser then either of my siblings, but still a component of my education- I’d never thought myself particularly skilled at tasks that required throwing. It seems I had excellent aim after all.

Alas, despite my talent it did very little to stay his advance. I had to dive behind the throne, for he swept at me again. There was another cold rush of air. The scepter apparently was not weapon enough, he had to fight always with the elements for back up. There were no cages behind the throne, but I did notice something odd sticking up from the ground. It looked like some kind of lever, a pace or two away from me.

I dare not wish it lead to salvation, but I ran towards it. Surely there was a chance that I could escape this nightmare.

I was not fast enough to evade him. The second I stepped into his sight the skeleton stabbed at me with his spear. I pulled back fast enough to save myself from being skewered, but the crow feather cape was not so lucky. It became pinned to the wall, making me feel like one of those butterflies some people keep behind glass. I took the cloth in my hands tugging and twisting, trying to pull myself loose. Never before had I cursed a garment for being so well constructed, but now the fine tailoring seemed like it would be my undoing.

As the skeleton came towards me again, as agreeable to ripping me open with his bare hands as he had been to do so with a spear, it occurred to me that I could simply unclasp the cloak. Of course. What foolishness. I undid the toggle and slipped beneath his strike. It was no tricky thing to manage running between his towering legs, and all but diving for the lever.

I reached it, but the thing would not yield. It was massive, forcing me to dig in my heels and throw my full weight at the mechanism. I got the feeling it was long rusted, for it whined and screeched as it was pushed. I was able to coax it to the other side, just as the ancient man plied his spear from the wall and turned around to face me again. I wish I could say I managed to dodge him once more, but as he turned he knocked my cheek with the butt of his spear. A perfect hit, right through the grating. It was force enough to send me flying and make stars dance across my
He did not look as though he’d any right to be that strong.

I tried to scramble to my feet, but the world slipped sideways whenever I lifted my head. The pounding was only getting worse and worse. The ground started to crumble away. I could feel myself slipping. I blinked rapidly, trying to clear my head and get rid of the strange feeling but it did not stop. I was slipping. I was falling. I was actually falling.

The lever I’d flipped opened up some kind of hole in the floor and I began to fall down it. I crashed against a flight of stairs, and did not question where they might lead me. I ran down at an awkward stumble. My lungs began to hurt from the strain of so much traveling in one day. I clutched my cramping stomach, bracing myself with one hand against the wall. I didn’t care how much I ached I would not be stopping to turn back.

My legs could’ve broken and I’m certain I would crawl onwards, but I was fortunate they had not. I did wish I’d worn different shoes though. The noise from my heels would surely alert anyone in pursuit. I needn’t fear the skeletal man nor his dog chasing me however. The passage I’d fallen trough was too small for them to pass. I do wish I could’ve closed it behind me, all the same for each time I felt a draft I thought it was the strange wind.

How long the stairs went on I could not say. I had to admit that their were more of them any case at Cainhurst could boast. The pathway behind the throne wasn’t excessively decorated either leading me to believe it was more service entrance then anything else. If my assumptions were to be taken as fact, then truly this place was a massive domain. I could not even begin to quantify it.

Then I realized that it made sense. That ancient king had been a massive person. I was sure if Cainhurst had been appropriately scaled it would far outshine this loathsome living space. I’d simply not factored it into my previous calculation. Not to mention that the kingdom of my birth possessed windows and was not resigned to the underground as some over embellished sewer system. We had the sun adorning our ramparts, filtering through the stained glass windows of our throne rooms.

And we didn’t have endless hallways.

I could not honestly say that Alois and I had never played with our food. Bleeders were often the subject of our amusement but never had we been so cruel as to lock cage around one’s head, though to be fair we’d never thought of it. I wonder if we had been provided the materials whether or not the outcome would’ve been the same. I daren’t shy from the cruelty of my lineage, if they had resigned me to exile then surely they would’ve allowed misfortune to fall to those below them.

Yes, decisively we would’ve done it, and likely laughed while doing so. I expected this realization to prompt some sort of kinship with the many imprisoned lives I’d taken, but sympathy was such a human sentiment. I couldn’t recall what it was to feel such ways, thus felt nothing.

It seemed as if my trials below would never end. There was so many tedious distances between one location and the next, that if some ridiculous hound did not come to fetch me it was likely I’d perish before reaching the next destination. No need for that aged creature to destroy me, I’d be made skeletal from the walk alone. Oh when it came time for the vile curs who had thrown me here to pay the piper, they would be drowned in the depths of their debts. Perhaps even more so then that fiendish doctor who’d conspired against me, or that screaming child.
I was so tired of being ruined by ants. I would have to alter the narrative severely when relating the details of my sister’s rescue, for she would have laughed to hear me falter so. No one need ever know that I crawled through human waste. That must be swept aside. For shame, for shame. I could find myself paralyzed by the memory of my previous shortcomings. Certainly the high court would’ve made a mockery of me if they’d ever found out.

Weary right down to the bones, I at last saw salvation. There was an elevator at the end of the hall. It looked almost suspiciously like a bird cage, its cylindrical shape culminating in a domed top which connected to running chains. All of it was constructed from massive iron wires, curled and twisted into the shapes of flowers and leaves along the sides as embellishment. It seemed that nature motifs would be popular everywhere, even in a place with no sun.

I’d no idea what would happen when I stepped on the triggering mechanism, but there was no point in tarrying. I’d be just as dead confined to these halls as if I took this contraption and ended up ambushed somewhere. Surely the rotting king would know where it came out, and if he so chose he might be waiting there with an army of strange dogs, ready to rip me open at a moment’s notice.

Still there was no use being paralyzed by hypotheticals. For some reason I’d the strong feeling that he could not leave that room and that chair. Why else should he send a dog after me? The world began to blur as the elevator fell. I was sinking deeper into the earth, plunging into the labyrinth. If only there were gold thread to guide me, or someone to intercede to gods on my behalf. The only blessings I carried were those of Lord Death, and he would come for me in the end just as anyone. Favor did not mean immunity.

I was surprised to find myself overlook a garden, when the elevators’ course terminated. I stepped out onto a large balcony, running the perimeter of a great courtyard teaming with fountains and bushes. No one would ever mistake me for a farmer, and I’d no vast knowledge of the land but even the most brainless fool knew that the sun, the weather was a vital part of the growth process. Where was this water coming from? How did these flowers bloom?

I rested my arms on the railing and tried to puzzle it out. There seemed no easy conclusion. I could not afford to overstay a welcome, for the garden, unlike the halls was well inhabited. I saw people, the same skeletal people milling about the pebbled pathways.

I suppose it might be owing to the distance, but they did not seem as tall as the man who I’d just escaped from. Up here on the balcony it seemed like I could crush them beneath my thumb, but I knew better. Any kind of arrogance was going to get punished in this place. I would need to be humble and clever in order to survive. I was lucky to have immersed myself with so many peasants, that I’d picked up on their lowly ways.

It wasn’t as though I’d needed them to teach me how to slip through the shadows. I had always been good at that. The grounds around Cainhurst had been excellent for training, as mother never wanted to allow me beyond the walls. If I could sneak past the eagle-eyed guards, evade the footmen and slip away into the icy countryside I could certainly make my way through these gardens. The only things I’d needed to learn from the rabble was how to hang ones head, stoop ones shoulders and behave utterly without status.

Their common speech flowed easily from my tongue though it felt like holding mud in my mouth to cull all locaquious language with mispronunciation. I so disliked the veil of unintelligence that settled over my words when I was forced to omit several important letters. Why nothing was given an ending with a proper “g” was a mystery I didn’t care to investigate.
I studied the architecture, looking to the balcony on the other side and letting my eyes trail up the swirling columns to the massive ceiling. While the support pillars were carved from grey stone and worked with similar flower and leaf designs, the ceiling was left bare earth. There were more of those white roots poking through it, reminding the unfortunate residents of their lowly dwelling. Their didn’t seem to be any chance of reaching the surface through this room, not unless I wanted to attempt to adopt the ways of the badger and the mole and tunnel through to fresh grass again. I would not entirely throw away the thought, for desperation might bring push to shove but I hoped to avoid it as long as possible.

Dirt caked under my nails had never been a pleasant sensation, and further avoidance was a primary focus. There were more elevators across the way, and staircases that led into the garden. A quick glance over my shoulder showed the same behind me. I was at once both nervous and relieved. There were plenty of places I could escape too, but likewise plenty of entry ways for those who might wish me harm. Better then being trapped but not yet great.

I was going to have to make a decision very soon, for my pounding heart would lead me into foolishness. I was not a fox in a trap, there was no need to gnaw off my own limbs when I was clever enough to unpin the mechanism. I must keep down the panic. I knew I must go down into the garden.

It was a senseless impulse, for there was no way upwards by descending, but all the same I felt that it was the way to go deep in the pit of my stomach. I could not be sure of Lord Death’s guidance in this place, which did seem oddly deathless, but I would not throw away any feeling lightly. The slightest twitch of the fingers could be a sign, perhaps all that could be moved by divine hands when one was beneath the earth. It was funny how I put such stock in him to guide me, when gods had been entirely absent from the halls of Cainhurst.

The basements and dungeons had echoed with the bleeder’s pleas for various ancient things to assist them, but a simple knife and a twist of the wrist were all it took to sever tongue and silence their cries. Prayer was never let so loud as to too annoy us, and certainly no Vileblood was ever converted. I did not imagine that any of our nature, not even the confused and stumbling would fall to their knees and beseech imaginations of the terrified populous for deliverance.

I must remember to tell Alois of this. The creature calling itself Fwahe, the one that may or may not- nay the one that must be her could’ve succumbed. I would have to steer her right again. I would never share my faith in Lord Death with her. He was not the type to demand servants, for all fell to his hands in the end.

The air was cold and still, growing more and more bitter and icy as I descended. The staircase was all curving spirals, and often my view of the grounds below was hidden by a curve of previous steps. It could get unnerving having my vision blocked, like a horse wearing blinders. These skeletal beings wanted me to look directly ahead, hide their strange ways and unearthly gardens from me. I would prove smarter then them, learning not only how to escape but taking all of their strange secrets with me. They might prove useful.

If these tunnels could be mapped, then they might give us advantages when we overtook Yharnam. They had to lead somewhere in realative proximity to the city. If there was a route that could bypass the Forbidden Woods it might be worth taking. I was by no means a map-maker, and future projects could be delayed in lieu of current survival.

I was lucky that these stairs were old and carpeted with moss. I did not have to fear the sounds of my heels clicking as I crept down them. The only thing I need be conscious of was the wretched cage. I had to keep my head bent so that it would not scrape the stairs above me. It was
difficult to maneuver and as I bent forward I could feel the back grates pressing against my head. It was a temporary relief from the solitary pressure on my shoulders, but I preferred their dull ache to the throbbing in my head. It seemed silly that as a child I’d ever thought a crown was too heavy a weight to bear. Crowns were nothing.

My skills served me well, all those years spent learning the passages and hidden halls of the castle while my family slumbered came back to me naturally. I knew how to spot a creaking step before I depressed it, and picking out the thickest carpeting of moss was easy. I had made it onto the grounds of the garden in hardly any time at all. Their was a big span of open space before any bushes and hedges would be around to mask my presence. I’d need to be quick and clever to cross it. A dead sprint at the opportune moment might be the best way to play this.

Still there were those going and coming, and now that I was level with them I could see that the strange half-dead creatures were at least closer to my current size. They looked stretched, as threads pulled tight on a loom so as to be a few inches, perhaps a foot taller then I, but all of it warped and wrong. They needed to be shrunk down again. I didn’t enjoy looking at these grotesqueries.

They might prove useful in concealing me. If I was exceedingly clever I might be able to steal up behind one, keep myself in it’s stretched shadow and make my way into the garden behind it. I was further pleased to notice that some of them carried weapons, and that provided a chance for me to gain an advantage. I would find a way to take one, and hope that whatever blade I managed to acquire was sharp enough to saw through this wretched iron.

I could be sure of no defense if attacked, but indecision would be just as deadly. I had to keep moving, and since none of the stretched skeletons were readily available I decided to run for it. There was only time for a quick scan of the balcony and a glance across the grounds before I ran for it, screeching across the grassy expanse like an unchained hound. It was a miserable thing to be spurred by, the unyielding panic that grew chains in my chest, ensnaring me with every step. The lawn seemed far larger now that I began to cross it, an impossibly vast stretch of space that I would’ve been lucky to cross in a year let alone the fleeting seconds of safety I had left.

My lungs were an inferno by the time I’d reached safe haven in the high hedges on the other side. I dove for the shadows beside them, pressing my hands to their spiked leaves while I crouched, waiting to see if I’d been seen. There was no breeze that could stir the plants beneath the earth and I imagined that with every rustle, every tiny sound I was drawing undue attention to myself.

They didn’t notice me. By some miracle even with the rustling of foliage and the clanging cage on my head I’d done enough to conceal myself, and was now safely ensconced in shadows. I was pleased to find that impulse to descend had been correct. I would proceed towards my goal unhindered. Slinking from the shadows I made to enter the garden.

It was an easy open path to tread, but I found myself held back. No matter how much I surged forward I could only manage to take a few steps forward before I felt pulled out again. I suspected that these strange beings had used some sort of black magic to prevent my entrance. It would’ve been very easy to condemn them to such heinous practices- if I hadn’t noticed the low hanging branches which had tangled themselves in the bars of my cage, I may have given it up to old superstition before making a proper effort.

There was no disguise for the clicking of my heels as I struggled against the tree’s planter, working to free myself from the sparse limbs. The branches were shaking, and all of that noise would surely attract the attention of the stretched-out men. I could hear their footsteps
coming closer and closer. It was not long before they would be upon me. What had I done to warrant fate such as this?

My crimes could not be so grievous as to have this spell my end. I did not want to be terminated in a place like this. I was already beneath the earth, they wouldn’t even have to dig a grave for me. I deserved better. There were family tombs, mausoleums and crypts where I was destined to be laid to rest when that day came. I was unwilling to let it happen now.

With a final tug I pried myself free, and overzealous force blew me back into one of the stretched out bodies. I collided with the skeletal frame. It felt weightless. The skeleton stumbled when I hit it, but was somehow too dainty of a thing for collapse, it merely floated out of the way. That wasn’t a true description of it’s movement, but I’d no other way to quantify it. Floating, a gentle drift to the ground like a silk hankercheif. That was how it seemed, and somewhere between standing and collapse it was able to regain its balance.

I feared retribution, but alas none came. It didn’t even look behind to see what had felled it, carrying on with a grim indifference. The hollows where its eyes should have been barely crossed my face before it continued through the gardens at a measured step. A march almost. The creature appeared not to have had time to deal with me. I was almost insulted, but I did not want to stand around making complaints. I was glad to be spared.

Still I was quite confused, and stepped off the path, treading on several small flowers. They crumpled to dust beneath my boots, while I stood aside and gaped at the strange manner which all the skeletons now displayed. When I’d stood watching on the balcony they had moved sporadically, randomly- like souls with their own minds and goals but now they stumbled in uniform factions marching one right after the other. Something had changed.

It was not truly my concern. So long as my destruction was not their end goal I don’t imagine I should’ve cared at all what they were going about. Curiosity was nothing but poison, always plying one more odious puff from addict’s lips. It was for shame that my mind was so deeply fogged with its siren song that I could not escape a desire to know. I had to watch them. More and more flowers crumbled away beneath me as I continued along the path, hurrying myself to match pace with the skeletons. They had longer legs then I, and less obstacles. It would’ve been easy to loose them if they had gone along in pairs or one at a time, but these were endless lines that poured towards the center of the garden. This was a procession.

It terminated around a central fountain, where other skeletal figures had hurried in from other sides of the garden. They stood in neat lines, and watched the water cascade down the sides of the fountain’s many basins. The creatures did not talk amongst themselves, or shift their weight due to discomfort. They waited calm and still for what was to come.

I worried that this would culminate in the appearance of the ancient king. If this was some trick to lure me into a trap, praying on curiosity then my congratulations to whomever had set it. It would showcase superior intellect, but I doubted the presence of such in creatures like these. I couldn’t be certain they even possessed minds of their own.

I could only assume that the last of them had filed in, when a humming noise broke through the crowd. It started all at the same moment, this whine that was willed through the ancient throats of the assembled.

I must admit I was shaken, not scared but sufficiently set on edge. Any noise coming from that many figures would surely be off-putting, for it was far louder and deeper then I’d ever known noise to be before. It seemed to be coming from their bones and not their lungs. They did not breathe, I noticed that now. Their stream of humming could continue on forever, they never
stopped to inhale. Their emaciated chests did not rise or fall, and even standing in such close proximity I felt no warmth from them. They had to be dead. There was nothing alive that was this cold, not even the stone heart of the court that had exiled me.

How could they stand the chill?

It wasn’t long before their tune began to change, growing higher and higher in pitch. Beyond it I heard a mechanical clattering. I knew this must be one of the elevators. How I heard it over the hundreds of wailing waifs was mystery to me, but my stomach sank as it screeched to a halt. I knew something bigger, something far more sinister was on the move. I steeled myself against this newcomer as much as possible, but began to wonder if it were possible for me to remain steadfast when a strange cloud broke overhead.

It was a twisting, undulating sort of thing that glimmered with depth and stars and the vastness of far skies. The apparition seemed to dance ever so slightly, bobbing from one motion into the next. I couldn’t imagine what it had come from, nor how it was possible to see the night sky below the earth but the piece of impossibility hung there ever the same. As the humming continued it grew, expanding until it stretched over the heads of all the assembled, spreading to encompass the entire garden. When it hovered over me, I could feel an odd tingling in my skin, as of the moment one has had their leg in a particular bend and lost feeling in it, the feeling as they move it again. It was that sort of thing which ensnared muscle and motion, paralyzing and painful yet an oddly natural sensation.

I was not a man easily struck with awe, but there was a deepness, a wonder to this spectacle. I had to admit I was rather astonished. I’d never known a showcase such as this, but the wonder faded when the footsteps began. I could hear them, and there were multitudes. Separately I believed them to be delicate steps, almost weightless which lead me to assume that they came from more of the skeletons, but there was one amongst the rest which did not walk in step. I feared this would be the skeleton king, and that I was still caught in his trap, lead exactly where he’d wanted me. Perhaps this strange ritual was just their preferred ceremony of execution. Yharnamites certainly had their way of going about it, but I’d lived long enough to see others. I had been all over England, and the countries beyond. The thing was no matter how public or private the affair the results were always the same. Thus far I’d never been on the receiving end, but I suppose, as they say, every dog has its day.

I peeked over one of the hedges, confident that if the king was coming his massive form would be easy to spot over the low garden walls. I did not see the rise of his crown, nor the curving crest of his ancient back. He was not amongst the procession. The hounds that came into the garden were shorter then his had been. They were kept on chains and collar by other skeletal beings, but did not seem to need them. They stepped in time with one another, and though they appeared to have glowing rubies where there eyes ought to have been the large clawed paws and coarse black fur were indicative of any living hound. I did not fear them in the same way I’d been wary of the king’s retriever.

There were larger creatures there, hairy like the dogs had been and baring the same ruby eyes. They walked upright however and had curved horns sprouting from their heads. Much as the other things in this courtyard their limbs seemed too long. I was like a frightened girl in proximity with buzzing beetles or scurrying spider- I did not want them coming near me. I did not want them to touch me, for I feared that even brushing against them would bring on some strange toxicity. As a peasant in a crowd I began to crane my head, trying to see what this grand parade was all about.

The humming did not cease. The new arrivals did not lend their voices too it, nor bring with them new music. There were no instruments or fanfare, certainly no words to announce what
came forth. It was certinally tamer, but by no means less confusing then what had proceeded it. When the rows and rows of strange creatures finally stepped aside and I could spy the finale of their marching ranks my brow furrowed in confusion.

It was naught but a small raggedy little girl. She was far from beautiful, her hair a multitude of colors with mud and sticks clinging to some of the strands. Someone had tried to paint her face but a mixture of sweat and what I smelled must be blood had taken most of it off. Her dress was torn and tasteless.

It was the blood that caught my attention more so then anything else. Blood meant life and life meant food and as I watched her hesitantly step forward towards the fountain I could see the rise and fall of her chest. Her heart was frantic and pumping. Pounding. I could not remember which was the polite one to say. I was uncertain how to consume her with this infernal contraption locked around my head but I knew there must be a way to pull her flesh just beyond the bars and bite into the poorly painted skin. I was lucky the growling of my stomach could not be heard over the humming.

She didn’t speak to anyone, and did not hum. I did not know if that should prompt suspicion or relief, but she continued forward without making a sound. The shoes she wore did not seem fit for the weather outside, which I knew to be quite cold unless I’d been taken a significant distance and been here a significant time- and I doubted that very much. They did not suit these damp conditions well either, and I could already see little bits of discoloration on the toes of the little slippers from the condensation gathered on these ancient stones. Or maybe it was dew from the grass.

I could not recall if it had been moist or dry and crackling, I’d sped across it so quick. It couldn’t have been that important. They were tasteless things, not at all like my boots- but they were silent. She was silent, aside from that pumping pounding pulsing heart that only I could hear. That was no fault of hers for I found that these delicate creatures could not control themselves when they were in a panic. Heighten emotions prompted such delightful fluctuations. One could time the moment of impact just right and get a deliciously worried creature’s culling all the more rapturous if they struck at the proper time. She was nearly upon it.

If only there weren’t these bars and the humming skeletons. I would devour her in seconds.

She came closer and I noticed there was something in her arms. She held them out before her in an uncomfortable sort of way, as though she didn’t want to get it on her skin. I looked closer noticing a kind of fabric-wrapped bundle. The material had odd stains on it, and was about the size of a large infant, though it did not wriggle or kick as I thought common amongst that sort of creature.

I recall that Will had struggled for ages as an infant. He was such a squalling mess that I was entirely adverse to my mother’s notion of a third child. Fortunately Alois had not been the type to cry. She was dignified even in her first moments in this world. They had been a little fearful at first, as babies were apparently supposed to wail after being born. She’d come into this world on a blood moon, and I remember watching the red circle hanging in the sky with my hands hovering over my ears, ready to close them off the second she began wailing. I did not want to have to endure that again.

I might have even asked the servants to prepare a different room for me. I could not exactly recall, but unless what the girl carried was a child as rare and perfect as my sweet sister had been- I did not think it child at all. It couldn’t be. Even Alois hadn’t held that still for their was
life in her little lungs, enough to endure the beating of a heart. I could not hear another beneath the soiled folds. I was left in horrid suspense as she took her slow steps forward.

Could she not hurry herself? Why shouldn’t her feet match the same pace as her heart so that I might see what caused this congregation.

At last, when I thought I could stand it no longer, she reached the fountain, pulled back the cloth covering and revealed it to me.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! As always please let me know what you think?
Conditions did not improve, and long after the tiger’s efforts to clean my wounds had ceased they still throbbed. Infection probably. It wouldn’t surprise me, not with all the rust and broken dishes, the various bodily fluids I’d pulled myself through- not to mention the dirt. I was lucky it hadn’t gone a funny color. Boxer and Bruiser seemed to know something was wrong, and they hovered over me as much as could be allowed through the cage bars, but my little Biter had no such reservation. She gnawed at the metal enclosure, struggling and squeaking until at last she had slipped through into my cage.

She wanted to play. She head-butted my hand, insisting we play chase-the-fingers. When that didn’t work she rolled over and waited for me to start scratch-the-belly. She even mewed pitifully, swishing her tail back and forth. I wanted to play pull-the-tail with her, I really did but I could not make my arms move. Somewhere there was a connection between arm and leg. When one limb moved they all moved, and the slightest jolt of pain was enough to send my head into swirls. Biter leapt over me, confused, before settling down in front of my face and starting her own game of lick-the-nose.

I expected she would wear away the skin before too long. That was okay. I didn’t care. What was I going to need a nose for now? I don’t know how sleep was possible, between the pulsing pain and the chaos of the circus but it managed to ensnare me.

I was awakened by frenzied scratching. Tiny claws bit into my cheeks, and I had to shove Biter away to stop them. Any hope of my leg’s condition improving with rest was quickly dashed. I had to grit my teeth the next moment as it began to pound with pain again. I looked down at it, and found a crusty black scab and formed over the wound. It wasn’t the sort of thing that looked promising. Biter would not stop her fidgeting. I stroked her head with shaking fingers, trying desperately to quiet her. She burrowed herself against my chest.

It must be for want of warmth, though the cold winds were not blowing over me. I could hear the stillness of the woods.

That set me ill at ease. This was not supposed to be a quiet place. I knew in the mornings they made breakfast, or set up the tents. They fed the animals, in a clattering of buckets and pouring seed-sounds. Instead there was silence.

I knew that I had to turn over and it up. I’d been resting on my stomach all night, and all I could see before me was the multi-tone fur of the other animals lined up in nearby cages. They were packed so tightly that they blocked the horizon, and this cage wasn’t so tall as to allow me to see over them. I had to steel myself before I moved. I knew the pain that was coming. It would feel like all of my bones were breaking at once. I clutched Biter to my chest, and tried not to squeeze her too hard as I rolled over.
Everything hurt. Everything screamed, yet everything was silence. Bruiser mewed at me. It was his hungry meow. I was right in thinking that none of them had been fed, and when I looked beyond my cage bars, I now saw why. I couldn’t believe that I’d slept through it. The circus was in ruins and the ground had gone red.

There was a snow globe that used to sit on the mantle of an enormous fireplace. Once I’d so wanted to shake it and make the snow fall, but my legs were tiny. I had not been able to reach, and my clumsy fingers had knocked it aside. It fell to the floor and the world inside broke.

The same thing had happened. The broken tents and smashed carts might as well have been shards of glass. The ground was soaked with the liquid remnants of torn corpses. They had been mad at me for a few performers, but I saw more dead spread out then I’d ever known to live and work in this outfit. They were littering the ground. I couldn’t identify any one of them, as they’d all been butchered. The massacre had not been relegated to them alone. There were the split necks of the cart horses, corroding the earth. All of the chickens- destined for death anyway, had been ripped apart and drained.

I was certain they’d wasted more then they’d managed to collect, but as I took it in there were flashes of similar scenes. Like clothing that got wet, I could see layers on top and underneath of the reality. Somewhere there were bedrooms splattered with the self same red, and snowy ground turned crimson. Blood dyed the cobblestones as men died on the cobblestones. All of it was a rush, a wash, a tumultuous sea of bad memories and rotting dreams.

Regardless of the validity of those visions, I knew their cause. There was no creature that might’ve done this but my own. The fools. The absolute fools. They’d been so attached to the circus man that they’d poisoned his blood and fed themselves to him. The imminent danger had never been so strong, covering everything as fog. He might be sleeping off so large a meal somewhere, but it wouldn’t be long before he was back to butchering. It could take months for a stomach to settle, if not years.

Templeton had taken so long before she first fed, I doubted hers would ever quiet. I should’ve been harsher with her, forced her to hunt. I didn’t expect that we’d ever be separated like this. If I returned and found Yharnam in the same shattered condition, torn asunder by ravenous appetite I would hunt her down and avenge every death. Woe befall the Vileblood that takes Frigga between their teeth.

A laughable notion in lieu of my present condition. At this rate I’d be lucky to survive another night let alone make a return trip. When Hayden Cruptinelli came for me I would have nowhere to run. I did not think that cannibalism would do much to stay his teeth. Blood was blood after all be it silver or red.

A distant scream pierced the air. Biter jumped in my arms, her body going stiff with fright.

“Shh. It’s alright.” I told her.

I think she was smart enough to know I was lieing. I hadn’t done it very well. My voice shook and everything.

The crunching noises that proceeded it weren’t any easier to explain though my mind tried to thread wild justifications of natural causes. Foxes supposedly gave out a sound like human screams. It might’ve been one of them wandering by and then crunching away at some bit of bony carrion. Might have been but it wasn’t. How could it be?

Even if I were right about the screaming- which I wasn’t, any beast with half a brain
would’ve supped from the remains that littered the dying grass. They were much riper. Had the blood extended far enough towards me, I would not have been able to resist picking off what I could. I was thankful for the terror that ruined my appetite lest the overwhelming aroma of spilled blood consume me. Somewhere inside me was a growling stomach and hands just waiting to be covered in red, but I kept those parts deep inside.

Urso the bear did not have my self control. He was impatient, and indifferent to the plight of his captors. He just wanted his breakfast, and bellowed for it with that hollow snarl common to his species. He was trying to rouse keepers that would never wake. Calling out towards the scream.

“Quiet.” I shushed him. “No one’s coming. No breakfast today.”

I didn’t actually want him to quiet down. I didn’t want any of the animals to stop making their noises, for the scream had startled them all and at least the menagerie’s confusion broke the silence.

Boxer decided it was time to start licking me again. She snuffled at the bars of the cages, trying to sniff out my wounds.

“No.” I told her, “No I’m fine today.”

She protested. I held up her squirming baby to see if the cub might pacify her, but she was as stern a nursemaid as ever. I scowled and she insisted. I did not need a tiger telling me to take my medicine, but I welcomed the distraction. I didn’t want her rough tongue scraping away the scab, but it didn’t seem a decent sort. Did I trust more my own body or Boxer’s judgement?

Before I could sort out an answer I heard skittering footsteps. Now I was the one tensing. Biter had struggled free of my arms and was having her fun leaping back and forth over my knee, but I’d been set on high alert. I’d expected some of the other animals to have heard it too, but none of their heads swiveled as mine did. None of them were looking.

I debated weather or not to call too it. The footsteps could belong to a survivor, someone with the chance of setting me free- but could just as easily be the circus man. They might’ve tried to bring the others back too. I had been told their names as they were mourned, yet they were all forgotten now. What use was there in cataloging the dead, or soon-to-be.

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I soon reached the point where my curiosity could not be sated with mere musing, and shouted at them.

“Whose there?”

They came closer, and I realized that I was not only hearing footsteps but the incessant jingling of that ridiculous boy as well. Of course it had to be him. How was it that the idiots always managed to survive things like this? Of all the people to come out of the massacre it had to be this one. I would now have to beg this foolish lout to free me if I had any hope of survival.

His eyes were already wide with fear. When my words reached his ears his whole body shook, like someone had dumped a bucket of cold water over his head. I wouldn’t mind being the one to do such a thing, in other circumstances. That was the least of what I’d vowed to do to him. I was fairly certain that the last time the boy had crossed my mind, I’d promised to kill him. I would keep my word, just as soon as I was beyond the bars- but he didn’t need to know that.

He didn’t need to know that even after those pathetic souls I’d devoured there was still a
cavernous depth, a welt spiraling through to the depths of my stomach which ached and cried for the sweet relief fulfillment could bring. No he mustn’t be reminded of that. I was a monster, but I could be clever too. I knew not to bare my fangs too early.

Marcel came close enough to see me. Sticky blood clung to the bottom of his shoes where he’d waded through the soaked ground. Just as after a bad rain it squelched out of the ground, oozing over the trampled plants. Not much remained its proper color, everything dyed the shade it smelled.

He stopped and raised a shaking finger. “It’s you that’s done this.” He said.

Yes. I strung myself up in a tent and was halfway to slitting my own throat. That was all me. I forced my own blood to be drawn so that the circus man who shot Swift and stole me away from my greatest love could have life eternal. This was all entirely, unequivocally my fault. I wanted to tear my hair from its roots and scream at him- but that was not the way one sets a trap. He’d have to be baited, carefully. Reeled in like a fish on a hook.

Beyond his blood there was the need for freedom. It was the simple realization that he was outside, and I was in. I needed to be out. He must surely be able to find a key. Granted it was Nimah who’d locked me in here, but surely the bastard brother of the man who ran this freak show would know where the keys were kept. He’d opened my cage before, I just needed to convince him to do it again.

“No.” I said, “This wasn’t my fault.”

His finger shook, as did the tone of his voice, insincere. Unsure. He was doubting himself even as he spoke, practically begging conviction to claw its way up through his chest. “Your blood is wrong.”

I wanted to laugh at how familiar it was. It should be impossible that I should be in the grasp of men I couldn’t possibly hope to understand, lost in lands entirely unknown and staring into the landscape of a hideous slaughter I hadn’t committed and feel as though I’d had this conversation, this moment so many times before. It was all so funny. This wasn’t the time for laughter, but oh how it ballooned in my chest and threatened to spill from my lips all the same. Oh how it cried for freedom to the point where it almost hurt to keep it contained.

Of course I did keep things well in hand. I had a part to play and lines to speak. I was lucky that when fearful, the simple-minded so often became foolish. They lost whatever precious wits they had and it was just a matter of time to bring them to their knees.

Marcell Cruptinelli would not survive a second bout with a Vileblood, no not if I had anything to say about it.

“My blood was wrongly administered.” I corrected, “You fools had no idea how to go about mixing it to proper measures. You just took. You stole like greedy thieves without asking how things worked and you made a very, very big mistake.”

He hadn’t expected me to be so rational, to cut so quickly into the meat of the problem. The jingling boy wasn’t ready to accept the blame and once it was laid upon his shoulders he collapsed from the weight. Just as I had planned.

“I…it was awful.” He stammered.

I swallowed down my own disgust and turned my words to honey, “I know.”
“Th-there was so much blood and everyone was…and he…I can’t…”

“I know.” I said again.

I had to grit my teeth against the ugly sounds of his sobbing. He was no elegant crier, frequently wiping his own snotty discharge on his stained sleeves. “They’re all dead.” He occasionally managed, “Everyone’s dead.”

I knew this too, and told him as much. I had to wait until he had cried himself out. It took a very long time. I was lucky that Biter was still clutched to my chest. She became something to stroke, something to play with, something to pass the time. The little cub was glad of the attention. She purred, but it was hard to hear her happiness over the sound of his sorrow.

When I at last decided he was done, I slowly lowered a glimmering drop of golden hope down the unseen fishing line. A little something to catch his eye.

“I would have done it properly. Could still do it, probably.”

He snuffled, sucking more mucus back into his nose and speaking with a web of it catching the stronger sounds in his words. Turning them all to mush. “What do you mean?”

“They weren’t entirely wrong the other day, when they said your brother didn’t have to stay dead. None of them do. No one does. When properly given my blood can fix just about anything.”

“Hayden was right?”

He said it like a question and I nodded. I chased Biter off of my lap, and curled my finger motioning him closer. He was cautious, but did take a few steps. It was still not enough to grab him, but this might’ve been the better option. I need not get overzealous. I had to have him free me first. That was the most important. That must be kept in mind.

“Yes. Foolish as he was to think he knew the way to do it he was right. The silver in my veins is enough to bring back the dead and give them live everlasting.”

I felt like some kind of saleswoman, a charlatan. Come beyond the yellow curtain of my tent and learn the secrets of your future. I suppose I wasn’t very different from them. Survivor made bedfellows of us all. Pride was useless here. I could reclaim it later when I was warm beside Frigga. I would be warm and beside her again.

“How?” He asked.

“It’s very difficult.” I said.

“I’m very clever.” He protested.

Again I had to contain laughter. If I gave myself away to childish impulse then all was ruined. I must make him believe that it was not only difficult, but impossible. His kind tended to over estimate their capabilities, and judging by all his pericings, he didn’t exactly have the strongest brand of self preservation. Warnings of danger, even to one so rife with fear did not seem as though they would be my best servants. As hard as it was I must be patient.

“The administration must be done by one whose already been given the blood.” I said, “When you took it from me- when the circus man wanted to sell it I knew that something like this would happen. None of you had the blood, none of you would be able to do it properly.”
“You might’ve told us that.” Marcell snarled.

“You took me prisoner.” I defended, “Tore me away from everything I’d ever known.”

“Hayden took you prisoner.” He protested. “We didn’t have anything to do with it. Nimah didn’t have anything to do with it.”

He went on listing the names of his blessed innocents, the poor unfortunate souls who had just been victims of his ravenous brother. He fell to crying again and I could not keep the tense curling of fists out of my hands. I squeezed Biter a little too tightly. She gave a yip of pain and dashed from my arms. The clumsy little cub landed on my wounded leg. It was all I could do to grit my teeth and suck in air. Every bit of me wanted to scream.

I kept it in. I had to. I’d no other choice. Her jump did draw Marcel’s attention to my leg, reminding him of the wound. I think it may have been a fortunate mistake in the end, granting me some kind of sympathy. If nothing else it did make me look weak, and perhaps with buoyed confidence he would not believe me capable of striking. Fools could always be counted on to act foolishly.

“You can bring them all back then, yes?” Marcell asked.

Here was when there was call to be excessively clever, “It would be an extremely difficult task.” I said, “Not something I could do from within these bars.”

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He took a few more steps toward me, the bend of his neck going to both an inquisitive and separately intoxicating angle. I could see the hum of his breath beneath the flesh, the heartbeat in the straining veins as he twisted. Step after step.

Yes, yes. Just come a little closer now.

I knew I could not move too quickly or he would spook, just as a skittish horse. I could feel tension, the will to move squeezing everything inside me and pleading to be allowed to jump at him. He wasn’t close enough yet, but he was almost there. Maybe three little scuttling steps away.

Which was where he stopped. The tension dissipated, and the heavy cloth of disappointment fell over my shoulders once more weighing me down. I tried not to let any of it bleed through. He mustn’t know.

Marcel seemed to hesitate before speaking, and I knew this to be the first sign of doubt. The fool had started to think and in that act proven himself not nearly so dull as I might’ve hoped. There was a small chance I’d let my pride overtake me. He had found a way to rescue Biter after all, and had talked his rabid brother down from earlier rampages. He was a little more clever then I’d given him credit for.

“How do I know you’re telling the truth?” He asked.

“What reason have I to lie?” I asked.

“All the reason.” The jingling boy said, “If you lie and I let you free you could escape, or devour me as you’ve been promising to do for so long. You’ve sworn to murder all of us, and now that all of us are murdered I see little reason why you’d suddenly become so generous as to restore us to life.”
Damn it all. He’d figured it out. I hid the disappointed wrinkling of my face with a sudden false coughing, buying myself a few seconds to think while his scathing words tore apart the dreams of freedom and revenge that had filled me up just moments ago. I shortly began to play the coughing off as laughter. He didn’t seem to be getting the joke.

“You thought I was serious?” I asked.

“You did kill some of us before..” Marcell muttered.

He began to step away from me, thinking better of himself. I wanted to scream at him. How easy it would be to collapse into tantrum like unchecked youth. I would pull my hair and cry if I thought it’d make any difference, but Marcell was not indulgent relative and would show my fits no kindness. I lacked the will to do much more then let my eyes widen as I scrambled to piece together a new lie, but it was already too late. The jingling boy had seen the hunger inside of them.

His backwards steps must’ve felt good, for he kept taking them until he was back in the blood swamp. He ran across the ground and again it oozed with the blood it could not contain. All the animals watched him go. Urso let out another pained bellow, still unable to grasp why breakfast had not yet come to him. Poor tame beast. Fling open his door and he’d never run from the cage. He did not contain the same wildness as Boxer and Bruiser and especially little Biter. They would all run when given the chance.

Now it didn’t seem as though any of us were going to get it. In a moment he had disappeared among the collapsed tents and overturned popcorn stands. The smell of frying oil had long disappeared, nothing could mask the scent of death. I could only remember it reeking like this a few times. Rare was there ever so many corpses left to bleed in the same space. Somehow even when I’d first turned it seemed there’d always been someone around to clean it up.

Cainhurst of course could not be allowed to turn red. Had to cover all the nastiness up somehow. I knew that in time rain and weather and other creatures would come to this place and turn it back to how it had once been, but in my mind it would stay forever soiled. I was never going to return here.

I thought about that as if I was ever going to be able to leave. My last hope had been too clever, and was now gone. It hadn’t been a particularly strong hope. I did my best to steel my nerves against the tears and hopelessness that overtook me. I was reminded of lectures, a stern face telling me not to behave like a helpless maiden. It was not Frigga’s, nor any of the soured nuns who thought to preach to me on the streets of Yharnam.

I could not place it, and while such things I almost always brushed away as soon as they came this one began to tug me into all sorts of unpleasant feelings. There was little in the way of distraction here and somehow the scent of blood only served to make the hazy memory all the stronger. I was thankful that the scream came again. It chased the stern face away.

I heard something else coming towards me. I could tell by the panicked footsteps that it was a running frenzied thing. Privately I hoped it was Marcel and I was disappointed when at last it came into view and I saw it was only the chicken-eater. He was being pursued. I think the man after him used to be Cutjack, but a significant part of his face had been scratched away and most of his clothing was in shreds.

I couldn’t be certain, but as they drew nearer I saw something I cared about far more then the identity of the attacker. Clipped to his belt, which had somehow remained despite the pants it held up being mostly torn to pieces, was a jingling ring of keys. Sweet freedom was at hand. I’d a second chance after all.
They did not make it very close to me before he pounced, doing much more so like a wild animal then a man. The chicken-eater went down in one final scream. I could see now that he’d been injured before, that the other screams must have been his. He had a leg leaking blood but Cutjack tore open new holes to drink from. The victim was not able to rise.

For once it was not my hunger that spurred me to wriggle between the bars, but the longing for the keys. How could I hope to entice Cutjack over here so that I might steal them? I knew there was little chance of my blood being as sweet as the man he was currently tearing apart, but I looked down to the scab anyway. It would hurt but I reasoned I could press my nails beneath the crusty black seal and open the tap again. Silver like a rive would spill forth and there was always the hope that it might fill his nose and draw him over.

That was all well and good, but there wasn’t much that could be done if he did come. I was certain I could snap Marcel in half, he was as thin as a twig. Not only was Cutjack bigger, but he would be a newly made Vileblood. There was no matching that strength, no hope to best it until he settled. Once more I would need to be clever.

He was likely a blood drunk fiend, impossible to reason with. Sometimes speech could not get through. I remember how bad it had been with Templeton before she’d learned to control herself. When the scholars stopped being able to think, there was little hope. Often it was best to let things run their course, but I had no more patience left. I needed those keys, and needed them now.

His name was the most obvious thing to try. I wasn’t certain he’d remember it or be able to hear me, but if nothing else he could be alerted to another life. Was it wise to give myself away? No. It was incredibly stupid, but impatience called for desperate pleas. I was above waiting but not desperation. That had a way of creeping up on everyone now and again.

“Cutjack.”

I was surprised to find my voice had shrunken. It was not a bold call that I made, all the sound stuck halfway through my throat as if caught in spiderwebs. It was not even enough to get Biter to turn her head, and she was ever attuned to new sounds. The shouting would probably scare her. I cleared my throat and did it anyway.

“Cutjack!”

His head spun round to me at the sharp sound. I wasn’t sure just what clouded his eyes, but it seemed to take him awhile to figure out where the sound was coming from. His face and greasy hair were thickly coated with blood, making his dark eyes look like pits in red earth. If I fell down into them I may never had climbed free again.

He licked his lips, but it did nothing to clear the deluge. Blood ran from his forehead, went dripping down his nose and ran from his chin, mingling its dark dyes into his tangled beard.

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He muttered something. Intelligible dribble that fell out of his mouth the same way pieces of the chicken-eater did. Chunk of viscera and words that were not words. I surmised he’d forgotten how to speak. That happened sometimes. With enough effort and conversation he would remember again, but a dull beast might be more useful than a man full of reason. Talking it out hadn’t exactly gone as planned.

I called him once more, feeling so much like I was bellowing to a hound. I wondered if I
ought to bend down and pat my knees.

I didn’t need too. At the third call of his name he slurped the last he was going to get out of the broken carcass and came lumbering over to me. He didn’t seem to remember how he was supposed to move either. Sometimes it was the four-legged sprint of the maddened beast, other times the shambling limp of injured humanity. The animals shied as he came near. I don’t think they’d any fondness of the man to begin with. Now that he was well out of his mind it only made him all the more fearsome.

Biter had barely gotten the chance to know Cutjack, but her mother growled and she leapt from my arms to wriggle back into her proper cage. It was safer there, to be sure but I didn’t like her running away from me.

I could sense the oversaturation in his blood as he drew near. The whites of his eyes were tinged with red and his skin had begun to crack in places, resisting the change. It was not an easy process, nor was it painless. Youthful flesh took it better. Cutjack was far along in his years, and every wrinkle showed in clearer detail then it had before. He peered into the cage, almost wistfully. He was close enough to touch.

I just had to find a way to get up. If these aching bones would only cease their screeching then maybe I could think. Cutjack was curious, staring through the bars in a confused sort of hopefulness. I knew it wouldn’t last long. He’d either get bored or get hungry, and I didn’t see either ending very well for me. I would have to kill him quickly and completely, in one decisive blow.

Only I had no weapon.

He started to sniff, nostrils rapidly shooting up and down. More like a dog every moment. I had been so certain that I’d hold no appeal for him, but I’d underestimated his appetite. He was drooling.

“Not me, Cutjack.” I said, “There’s someone still out there. Do you remember Marcel?”

Again it seemed to take him awhile to process the words. He had to really focus on them, but as my words settled in his mind, he wiped a hand across his mouth, now possessing sense enough to want to look presentable.

“Yes.” He managed after some effort.

I hadn’t decided whether to be pleased or concerned that his speech capabilities had returned to him.

“He’s still alive.” I said, “Still running and breathing and pumping and full of juices.”

Cutjack started to salivate again. He kept wiping it away until his sleeve was dripping. There wasn’t a dry place on him- everything was soaked.

“Yes.” Cutjack said again.

I’d tried to get him thinking of the jingling boy, but his eyes focused in on my leg. They took in the black scab with interest. I grit my teeth and drew it back to me. It was impossible not to show the pain. He didn’t seem to loose any interest. Cutjack shoved his hand through the bars, long nails scrabbling for my leg. There wasn’t much room to run and he’d soon took hold of me.

It was a rough grip, and he had a solid hold even with his blood-slick palms. I could kick
and struggle all I liked, but I had the feeling it would not break his hold. I clung to the cage bars behind me. Cutjack yanked, but I held firm. The cage shook. I didn’t think such a heavy thing could be moved so suddenly, but as he continued to pull and struggle the far corners began to rise off the ground.

One solid blow. All that was missing was the weapon.

My next move would either lead to my death or my salvation. It was truly astounding how many of those little moments my life seemed to be full of. I’d learned to take my chances. The churches praised Kos and Odeon and all the unknowable things in the hopes their respectable behavior would win them some kind of eternal favor. I only found they gave me their blessing when the other option was certain death. I waited for Cutjack to adjust his grip, took a deep breath and then let go.

The cage came crashing down. I was flung into the top of it as it fell, collapsing on top of Cutjack. I bruised myself against some of the bars, but the pain didn’t have time to register. I was caught in the triumph of the bloody pulp beneath me. Cutjack was crushed. I didn’t think it so much that he was truly dead, but I reasoned enough of his bones were broken that he wasn’t going to be getting up anytime soon. He was Vileblood now. He was going to be hard to kill.

I wanted to take the time to do it, but I urged myself to think clearly. Escape was at hand. I found his keys and tore them from his belt. It was hard to twist my arm around the bars of the cage and unlock the door. I had to try so many keys. There were just too many on his belt for me to count in my frenzied fumbling. When I at last felt one go in, heard the click of the lock opening I could hardly believe it.

The cage had landed so that the door was to the side of me, and I had to crawl awkwardly out through it, like a strange narrow hole in the wall. Pulling my leg over the lip of that opening was some of the worst pain I’d ever experienced. It held bright candle to the sting of the Throat-Slitter’s knife all those years ago as it carved wretched symbols down my spine. I wanted to scream, but I kept back from it. I tried to pull myself upwards, to stand on shaking legs but I kept collapsing. I would not be able to crawl through the forests, could not hope to make it back to Frigga if I was only to get there an inch at a time.

Biter bellowed mournfully at me. She didn’t want me to leave. Kos above the little thing thought I was abandoning her. She really must be confused about who her family was. I must be confused too, as I began to take precious moments of escape opportunity to unlock the cages of all the animals. It wasn’t easy. My fingers refused to hold steady, and every few seconds I looked over my shoulder, certain that something terrible was about to go wrong.

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It didn’t though. With each twist of the key a lock sprang forth and I was able to open the door of another trapped thing. The snakes hissed at me, and some of the birds tried to snatch strands of my hair as they fluttered away, but I was letting them all go free. Urso who I’d been so sure would stay in his cage even when I’d opened it, suddenly barreled past and charged for the woods.

It was likely an action driven by fear, but I chose to believe he was going off to find his own form of freedom. That or to crush Hayden Cruptinelli’s head between his jaws. Either would be fine with me. One more so then the other.

The only animals that didn’t dart into the forest were the tigers. My strange striped family stayed beside me, and seemed steadfast if a little hesitant. Biter was so happy to be free of bars
she didn’t know what to do with herself. This was her first time outside. She rolled on the grass, the way I’d seen some horses do. Her paws were kicking in the air and she was soon covered in dust. Her parents didn’t have the heart to stop her it seemed.

Bruiser kept trying to nudge his head between my legs. I was offended more then I expected myself to be. I knew it was common enough behavior for dogs to do the same, but I kept pushing him away. He won out in the end, and I realized he was not being any kind of invasive, he merely wanted to scoop me onto his back. I could feel some of his bones protruding through his patchy fur. Never again would it be painted and powdered.

Boxer assisted as best she could, licking my arm and trying to nudge me here and there. I realized they intended to take me with them. I was going to be carried. They understood I couldn’t walk. I was facing the wrong way, looking towards Bruiser’s tale and clinging to the fur around his back legs, but he seemed able to manage my weight. Even starving tigers were strong.

I wanted to stay and split their heads. I wanted to drink from the blood on the ground, but I’d done so much already. Bruiser’s fur was warm and soft, and I found I was sinking into it. How nice to have blankets again.

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I should’ve found a way to stop him. I really should have taken the chance to get some food and better clothing from the circus people. When I roused myself again I had no idea where we were, nor which direction we’d come from. It was just the tigers and I.

After a few seconds of consciousness my concerns were lessened. We didn’t appear to be walking very fast. Bruiser’s steps were slow and cautious. Boxer and Biter padded behind him looking very weary and getting no more then a few foot’s progress every couple of minutes. I sat up, wincing as I did so, and reached behind my back to scratch Bruiser behind the ear. The other two brightened to see me awake, but didn’t really seem to have the energy to do more then lift their heads and look at me for a few moments.

I could not smell the heavy iron undertone of blood in the air. Slow though our pace was, we had made distance. It would be best for them all to get some rest, and I expected Bruiser had sensed this as we came to rest at the base of a cliff. There was a sloped rise of earth that lead to a cave. I needn’t fear any other occupants with two full grown tigers beside me, as I’d been wary of them before. I was never certain of what waited in the shadows.

Biter looked up from the bottom of the little rise and flopped onto her belly. She had walked quite enough, thank you very much and was not going to be going any further. I laughed. Boxer lowered her head and took the cub up by the scruff of her neck. I expected that wasn’t the first time she had done so.

Bruiser didn’t lead us very far into the cave. He sat down and I slid right off his back. IT wasn’t a graceful dismount, but it was to be expected. I was going to have to get used to this. Biter climped right into my lap, and fell over asleep after a few moments of settling. It was nice to be able to blame the snuffling cub as a reason not to move, instead of my own wounds. Boxer curled around me and set to licking them. Her fur was not quite as warm as Bruiser’s, even if it was a fuller coat.

I don’t expect that she’d fully recovered from the horrible surgery that had befallen her. She licked at my wounds until she too fell asleep. I had spent the entire day resting, and could not find it in myself to grow tired. Bruiser must’ve been exhausted, but rather then lie down with us he went bounding off into the woods.
“Bruiser!” I shouted after him.

He flicked his tail as he leapt off the rise.

I hoped he’d come back. I didn’t really think him the type to give up on his family like that. Absentee dads had left the churches of Yharnam full of abandoned sons and daughters, wives willing to become nuns if it meant a mouthful of food, but I doubted the same impulses were present in animals. I thought anyway. It wasn’t like I had studied them. Not even Templeton had studied them.

“Humans and Vilebloods are complicated enough, and there’s already more books about them then I’ll ever be able to read.” She’d say, “I don’t have enough room in my head for animals too.”

She wasn’t telling the entire truth. I’d seen her read about animals even if they were a waste of time. There had been a few days when she’d thought there was some kind of breakthrough to be found in the stomachs of slugs. I had always hated the things and told her in no uncertain terms was she to set up any kind of insect-experimentation facility while she traveled with me.

Later it turned out her research wasn’t as promising as she’d first hoped, and she’d cast the slug study aside of her own volition. There were a lot of times when he projects didn’t pan out as she’d hoped. I was usually frustrated. The new leads could be so exciting, running me through with fresh hope that I wouldn’t have to endure this banishment every summer season, but they were almost always broken to pieces a few weeks later. Nothing was working. Nothing was ever going to work. We were never going to see the flowers bloom together.

What use was it getting mad over that?

I’d no idea how to get back to her, and wherever Bruiser had taken us I highly doubted that Yharnam was his end goal. I wasn’t mad at the tiger though. He was only doing his best.

A few hours later he returned, dragging along the carcass of some delicious thing. I could smell it in the air as he came up the rise. Bruiser proudly deposited a human torso, with one arm, one leg and no head at the entrance to the cave. A trail of blood had spilled out of it already, but I maintained the hope that there was some left inside. He drug it over to share with me, and as I sank my fingers into its chest. There was no light to tell whether it was man or woman, and I could not bring myself to care.

I could feel the flimsy make of their clothes though, stitched thoroughly, though in shreds with little beads and pom-poms. Costumes like this could only have come from the circus people. This one might have escaped the rampaging newborn Vilebloods, but it hadn’t made it past the tiger.

“Good boy.” I said to Bruiser as he flopped down beside me, belly up for scratches. He deserved them, but I admit I was half hearted in my efforts to reward him. I could feel sticky blood in his fur, around his throat and chin. He’d already eaten his fill.

I guessed that was where the missing limbs went, or perhaps the head. I didn’t really know what sort of parts tigers preferred. For me it was really best to begin with the chest. If the heart was still left that would be treat enough to tide me over. I imagined it might help with the healing somehow. A good meal and some rest weren’t all that far off from the methods Callum usually advised—though I did think that gunshot wounds were a bit different then my typical headaches.

I ate.
I knew I had to save some of it for Boxer and Biter, but I did eat a lot. I ate more then I should’ve. A lot of the blood was gone so I had to go looking for the little pools and pockets where it had not yet drained from. I split open the heart and drank from it of course, but beyond that it was casing. A nice little water skin but just tough cartilage and muscle once spent of its sweetness. I took what I could where I could. By the time I was finished, Bruiser was asleep and snoring gently.

I knew that I’d eaten more back when I’d been crawling across the circus grounds, but I felt so much fuller after this. I had gotten to take my time with it, and though there wasn’t much to be had there was something to be said for decent company. As nice as I felt, I couldn’t seem to lull myself to sleep with any degree of ease. Pain still pulsed up through my leg every few seconds, and the tigers were not soft sleepers.

It was more then that.

I was afraid that somehow we were going to be found. I did not want to go back into a cage again. I knew if anyone came for us we wouldn’t be able to fight them.

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I jumped at every sound, half asleep and half awake. I don’t think I’d ever been so scared of crickets and crunching leaves before. I couldn’t see beyond the mouth of the cave no matter how I tried and twisted. Bruiser had set me down too far away.

The night air was cold, and there was nothing to block it when it came howling in through the cave entrance. I couldn’t feel much of a chill, skin still hardened from Cainhurst winters but I saw little Biter and her mother shivering. I wanted to pull them close, but I knew my skin brought nothing but ice. My kind did not beat with the warmth of life though our veins still flowed and our hearts still pumped. I would have to get Bruiser to sleep closer to them next time.

Or I could find a way to make them a fire. That would be the better way to go about things. I really should’ve gathered supplies before letting the animals free. I don’t think there was any chance of going back for it now. As much as I thought restlessness would keep my eyes open until daybreak, I became tired before night was at its darkest. Tiger bellies happened to make excellent pillows.

When Bruiser woke so did I. He rolled over and my head slid from his messy fur. I had the momentary panic-paralysis of not knowing where I was when I woke, but as Brusier opened his maw and yawned I began to remember. By the time Biter had woken to playfully pounce on my back, it was all made clear.

“Good morning to you too.” I muttered.

Boxer had risen shortly thereafter and tended to her breakfast. She called to the cub, trying to urge her to do the same. I wasn’t certain when the little one was supposed to make the switch from milk to meat, but I hadn’t known the same of my own species. Infant care was never going to be one of those things I gravitated towards. Squalid little monsters. They were never worth the blood inside of them. Frigga might have spared her side glances into perambulators or fawned over Scarlett and Imogen once she found out they were expecting, but it was not going to be that way with me.

They were terrible little monsters.

Tiger children seemed able to fend for themselves. Competent. Did not spend their eves
wailing their eyes out. I suppose it only made sense that a monster should prefer the company of beasts to the little cherubs that the church preached the benefits of. Repulsive.

Biter didn’t seem to want to eat her breakfast, and just as I was thinking on how behaved she was she proved me wrong. She darted away from her mother and mewed in protest each time she was retrieved. I could not understand why four legs and fur made disobedience so amusing. Boxer did get her to eat in the end, and afterwards she gave us both baths.

I do not recall ever having had a sister, but Biter and I were one in our protest against being washed. The pain of Boxer’s tongue as she made efforts to clean my aching wound just got worse as time went on. Biter didn’t like sitting still for anything.

“That’s enough Boxer.” I’d say.

I could swear that tigress knew how to glare, for she would fix me with such a look, and then her pink tongue would dart out again. I wasn’t going to be done until she decided I was done. At least I had someone to commiserate with.

We started from the cave around midday. I still could not put pressure on my leg. I wanted to be able to walk and run again. I’d been so looking forward to that once I was out of the circus man’s grasp. It was nice to be able to stretch again, but it was poor substitute to the freedom of my own motion. I had to ride atop Bruiser’s back again. At least this time I was facing the right way.

When Biter realized it was going to be another full day of walking, she tried to claw her way onto Boxer’s back. When her little claws scraped the sides of Boxer’s belly the tigress yowled. Biter was shocked and stepped away. Bruiser went over to her, nosing at her side with a near oppressive sense of worry. Damn that circus.

“Where are you taking us?” I asked, resting my chin on Bruiser’s head as he began to sniff out a trail. He kept turning his head skyward, and I knew that he wanted to climb the cliff that loomed in front of us. It was a bad idea.

He was doing it anyway. There were fairly wide paths up the mountain, and I noted signs of travel and use. Frequently I’d see the makings of cart wheels long solidified in what used to be sluggish mud but had now crusted over. I wrestled with the benefits and dangers of venturing near other cities, but in the end couldn’t decide weather it was safer to avoid them altogether or pick off a living from the outskirts. It was all well and good to have a ready supply of fresh blood, but the last thing we needed was a hunting party on our hands.

I don’t think there were many places that would welcome a tiger pack and a Vileblood at the same time.

“Do you even know where you’re going?” I asked him.

The tigers really weren’t great conversationalists. It was for the best, I reasoned. Bruiser needed to focus on the road ahead which was fast going treacherous. There were plenty of steep inclines and loose rock. He had to pick careful paths along narrow ledges, then watch anxious from the other side as his family followed.

There was nothing for me to do but cling to his fur and hope that he was sure of foot. Bruiser had some very sharp claws, but there was something that seemed almost clumsy about the sheer size of his paws. They were massive, and I was uncertain how well they might do when the going got rough. I didn’t know if tigers were naturally climbers.
They were cats. They couldn’t be that bad. I didn’t think they could. I was fairly certain cats could climb. Templeton had often tried to convince me that having a pet around would be a good idea. Maybe if I’d finally given in I’d know a thing or two. The ratty cats she tried to pick up weren’t the same as the tigers though. I don’t think any of them would’ve been able to hunt for themselves, and I didn’t need another mouth to feed that wasn’t Templeton’s. Kos, could she ever eat.

Our trek was almost entirely silent. The tigers didn’t talk amongst each other and their paws were much quieter then any shoes or feet. I could not recall the last time I’d set out without at least one of the many bells in my possession. Their jingle-jangle had been companion where there was none to be had. It had chased the silence away.

The quiet brought its evil thoughts and squishy memories. They were like worms crawling through my head, wriggling things whose fronts and ends I never saw, only all the pulsing middle bits. I could not simply plunge my fingers into the soil of my own thoughts and wrench them out. The noise had been my only safeguard. I longed for something to do beyond sitting.

It had been easier at the start of our journey, where I was stretched so tight with worry that it was easy to keep a look out. Really that was the only thing I was good for. I kept an eye on the tree line, certain that someone was going to come running after us any second. The higher up the cliffs we rose the more ridiculous it seemed. Even if there were still circus men out there, they wouldn’t be getting commands from Hayden Cruptinelli any longer. He was sure to be in a worse state then Cutjack, if not already dead.

I hoped he was already dead.

Yet I also wanted to be the one to kill him. I suppose there wasn’t really a way for me to come out of that situation fully satisfied.

Bruiser had found us a small pool of water, where condensation had leaked off the spiked caved roots year after year until it carved its own basin. There was no way to tell how long the stagnant water had been collected there, but it had become a pool large enough for all of us to lie in if we so desired. This might be the best chance I had to wash my wounds with something that wasn’t Boxer’s tongue.

After drinking our fill of water that tasted of salt and stone I slid off Bruiser’s back and gently lowered my leg into the pool. It didn’t feel good or bad or strange or anything really. Just damp. I hadn’t a cloth or any soap so I just sort of let it soak in the pool and gently rubbed at it for a few minutes. It still stung.

I realized that I couldn’t feel any of the water between my toes, and after a few more attempts it occurred to me I couldn’t move them. I tried to get them to twitch, or curl, anything really. They did not respond.

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If I’d been told this was going to happen to me, I can only imagine the panic I might’ve felt. It was different now that I was here, now that this was something that had come over me gradually in tiny increments. There was plenty of time to think about it, and I’d grown so used to my leg throbbing throughout the past couple of days that somehow this just seemed like the next logical step. I wasn’t as shaken as I should’ve been.

I’d gotten into some pretty bad scrapes but never once had Callum had cause to break out the bone saw. I wonder what he’d say about this one. Perhaps there was a chance that it could get
better and this was just some residual shock, or the bullet in my leg was pressing against something wrong. There were a lot of possibilities but I was no doctor. I did not have the books and knowledge and certificates that would provide more routes to go down to comfort myself.

It might be that I was never able to feel my toes again.

I wanted to get away from the pool.

“Bruiser, Bruiser, come here boy. Let’s go.” I called.

He was attentive, taking a few last licks of the strange cave water then padding up to me. He stretched his neck down so I could grab a hold of it and helped to pull me out of the pool. Biter bemoaned the fact that we were leaving, but perked up when I grabbed her by the scruff and sat her up on Bruisers back with me. She was pleased to be carried. I held her in my arms when I found the strength for it. She’d gone for quite the swim and began to regret that when we were out in the blistering winds again. I shielded her all I could with the clothing I still had left, but it didn’t seem to be drying her off well.

The further up the cliff the greater the winds. The path did not get any easier. The trees that had blocked some of the chill grew less frequent, their roots unable to find a good place to spread on these crumbling stone walls. As much as Bruiser struggled to carry on, Boxer was far worse. Her paws seemed to be frozen immobile blocks that didn’t want too cooperate with the terrain. I heard the skidding of gravel beneath her feet all to often. She kept slipping.

Looking over the cliffside I could see the forest spread below us. Occasionally the wind would catch the cries of one of the beast below and carry it spiraling up towards us. They must have found the circus ruins, and celebrated their feast. I once thought I saw the gnarled antlers of a cleric beast coming between the trees below, but as I leaned to look further I saw slithering scales snaking behind it. There weren’t reptilian clerics anywhere near Yharnam, and I couldn’t remember Templeton or I ever having spotted one in our travels.

How far had we gone?

How long had it been?

There were never answers to the things I wanted to know, just more questions. At least I didn’t have to worry about the slithering thing finding us up here. We didn’t see many other creatures. The most wildlife on the cliff was the kind I’d brought with me and some moths that Biter tried to catch. She’d only managed to hook one on her claws by sheer luck alone, but the way she paraded the little scrap around you would have thought she’d taken down an entire pack of Greatwolves. Figures I’d be helping to raise another hunter.

My only comfort was that the cart-tracks were never long disappeared. There were so any signs of this path having been traveled before, and recently so that I had to believe we were going to make it through ourselves. It might’ve even been where Cruptinelli had planned on traveling next. If he was confident the whole caravan would make the journey then we certainly had nothing to fear.

We spent the night huddled together behind some boulders, right on the path. There wasn’t anywhere else to rest. I’d thought it would be cold and miserable, but the tigers when piled together actually seemed to sweat. Their heavy fur and warm bodies were more then sufficient. Biter was thoroughly insulated, balled up between her parent’s bellies. I hoped that sleeping there she might finally get dry. I told myself I was going to keep watch, stay awake the whole night just in case there was someone following us.
There was no sign of anyone trying too. I’d checked behind the whole day, but I knew that we’d gotten away clean. There wasn’t even the scent of anything alive beyond us. I still worried though. Every time I closed my eyes I felt like I was back in that darkened cart on the night of my capture. A metal box inside a wooden box, the simple materials that composed my personal nightmare.

The healing church had warned of such places, eternal nightmares where the damned were sent after their time on the material plane. A never ending punishment of twisted gnarled landscapes and beasts even more sinister then those that were on the hunt. Such descriptions were always enough to strike fear into the hearts of the assembled. I’d never been worried about any nightmare. So long as there was something I could stand against, something I could fight I knew I didn’t need to be afraid.

Eternal isolation on the other hand. That I had tried. I hadn’t liked it very much. Years spent wandering fields of white flowers, alone. They hadn’t seemed so bad then, when they held the bodies I was hiding. I didn’t know or care or need any different then. I knew better now. As much as I lamented Templeton’s company and whined of her being a nuisance I think I might’ve started to spiral back to broken thoughts without it.

I needed other people now. Other person. At least one. Two was fine. Three got a little crowded. Sometimes it was okay to be with so many other hunters so long as Frigga was close at hand. She was the calm center of the storm. I leaned my head against Bruiser’s back and tried to remember the sound of her voice when she sang.

I couldn’t remember what it sounded like. I know she’d taken the time to lull me to sleep with her voice but I just had lost it all. There wasn’t even the glimmer of a melody. Every song in the world had suddenly disappeared. My mind was vacant space, which eventually became filled with sleep. I was still from the awkward position I’d nodded off in.

Bruiser hadn’t slipped away to hunt. He didn’t seem all to hopeful that there’d be anything worth running after on the cliffside. Biter wasn’t the only one swiping at moths that day- though they caught very few of them. I got a lick on the cheek from Boxer when I caught one myself, though I offered it to her instead of eating it. That concerned her, but she took it anyway. Bugs weren’t really going to do anything for me.

We reached the cliff top that day, and when I saw the village below, my heart sank. The buildings were not English at all. They had black tiled roofs and little flourishes on the cross beams that were styles I recognized as distinctly eastern. The temple in the center of the village was not at all like Yharnam’s churches but painted a bright red and no doubt decorated with different gods. We’d come very very far.

“Oh why did you bring me here?” I asked Bruiser.

I don’t think he even knew. He padded along the path. It didn’t dip down into the village as I’d expected it too, but continued to wind along the cliffside linking up with spindly bridges. They were exactly the sort of plank-and-rope contraptions that Templeton hated. She had a fear of heights and collapse. I usually scolded her for this, but now I saw where she was coming from.

Tigers weren’t exactly lightweight. Bruiser did not show the hesititation I thought he was due, and bounded onto the rickety bridge. The ground beneath us shook, but he quickly crossed leading his family to do the same. When we reached the other side the path sloped downward, and I saw a crude tunnel had been carved in the side of the mountain. It was not a naturally occurring cave, for there were still marks left by the axes that had hollowed it. The cart tracks were even better marked going through it, which certainly seemed to be where Bruiser was of a mind to head.
At the other end I saw something which made me want to proceed with greater caution.

I dug in my good heel. Bruiser came to a stop patiently stalling in the middle of the cave while I tried to satisfy my curiosity. Light was pouring through from the other side so I could only get a silhouette. Waiting on the other side was some big creature. I thought it might have shaggy fur from the way its shape was fuzzy around the edge, but it might’ve been that my vision had been far from the best lately.

Bruiser noticed it too now. His mouth curled into a snarl, and he scraped the ground with his claws. Boxer came forward to stand next to him, adopting the same position. It wasn’t long before Biter wiggled through her parent’s feet and did the same. As their fur bristled I couldn’t help but think that hiding would’ve been so much easier for us. They were not only thin now but travel worn, and lacking in a decent day’s meal. Whatever was ahead of us was huge, and in all likelihood hungry. I didn’t want to be dinner.

Chapter End Notes

My dear readers,
It has been so long since I was able to post content for you. I have been through so many changes in these past months and years that I had been lacking in all the will to provide my work online. I do hope you will indulge me with your patience and enjoy this chapter as you have the previous ones.

I do worry you will no longer be here, waiting for me- but this story shall now wait for you. My updates- I will strive for them to be on a more regular weekly basis, as you more then deserve some consistency. Thank you so much, and please let me know what you think.

End Notes

Thank you for reading!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!