

Quest: An Ordeal of Frost - Ecpyrosis -

By Cyrus Wendell

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Footfalls

From any which way the roads span, The Dark Boughs were feared by all. It was known for its secrets. Tales taller than castle spires spoke of its newfangled beasts and curses. One claim recounts a colossal floating eye, the Sin Knower, appearing from nowhere by the opening of its hidden eyelid. It's said to peer into its victims, recalling to their mind every iniquity they've committed, grave or small. Those who've tempered a mind of steel flee from its grasp. Having weathered their own iniquities, they are said to be gifted the same ken of kin. Some, becoming wretched of trust, retreat to the wilds and live the remainder of their days alone. Others wield this ceaseless insight to their advantage, rising as magnates through extortion.

Each tale that escapes the deep woods makes them better known for their hush and blind. Though in this tale, their sleepy, shadowy trees find themselves disturbed by the yap of a queer troop of adventurers. This merry band comprised a golem, a fae, and an elf aimlessly cutting the air with a canting steel. The Sword sang:

*..and one now hewn of stone
spewn forth of hearth
whose brambled barb's been shed
to break the curse
we journey now
to return elves
from solemn dearth-*

The Golem interrupted the song in a fit.

“Must you always speak in insult, you loatheful rex? Spite! You haven’t had subjects in ages, yet you cast down even your own tone with your tongue! Or dare I say the lack of!

The sycophant sword sings shrill.

See! I can rhyme too Ote-”

The Golem roared in his doubled voice, carried into his own fire at the Sword's supposed impingement of his character. His stature is between a half-finished statue and rock upon rock. The impression of a face is only implied by the angle and arrangement of stones. On his forehead lies a ruby horn. The ground shook with each step he took, unearthing plants or grubs in the outlines of his feet. "Do you envy the quiet of these deep woods, ye oak-en foot? Even if you were to grant me quiet enough to hear our lord's song, the ground still shakes. Worse than even the less affable half of your old namesakes."

Said the Elf, interrupting the Golem. He'd taken on the stately and dismissive tone of their friend, the Sword. The Elf made long and elegant strides on the damp wood path. Donning sage attire of simple weathered wool draped from his tall, treelike posture. In his hand was the singing sword. A blade of black that denied all light. A hilt and handle are made from knots of emerald-colored roots, each curl and tail firm as metal. On the face of the handle was a large white gem that swirled with black and white

whisks of fog. It glows white or black with the height or depth of tone in his song.

“Well, I’d have at least your silence vine beard! Let us old men share a clack and gabble. You’ll understand when the moon can turn enough times for ya!”

Roared back the Golem. His tone was one of snide self-assurance.

The faery among them flutters her wings, then lands upon the Golem’s shoulder. She beams with the mirth painted across her face, indicating she enjoyed the chiding. Her rainbowed wings split out from underneath her white, snug silk robe. The bottom of which was lined with sequins, the shape of stars. A depiction of the moon was sewn in a purer white above her chest. She rests her hand, not much bigger than a man’s ear, to the side of his face. She stroked where his beard used to be. Then, in a whisper, calm and jestful spake

“Old? That blade is as old as it is young stonesskin. And the moon? You mean where we fae are said to hail from? Was your knowledge lost along with your beard to the lyre? I can seek its crescent council if you desire stonesskin.”

Fire, then a hasty deference fell upon the Golem's cragworn face. He gritted his teeth, then spoke like a child does to a mother who holds his heart.

"Thou art just."

Creaked the Golem. He continued in a sunken rumble he thought only he was privy to.

"I miss the days when it was common for you to be quiet."

The Elf and Sword he wielded let go a shrill laugh. The Faery floated from his shoulder, twisting and dancing through the air. She hovered in front of the Golem's face. Then, for a moment, she became the depiction of innocence. Hands behind her back. Eyes closed. A welcoming grin. The Golem thought himself free of the sequel of his retort. Then she waved an outstretched finger and plopped it on the gem horn on his forehead. A dark red light bathed the faces of the party. Then, a crack, as the golem split at every seam of stone. A pile of smoking rubble where he once stormed.

A rupture of laughter filled the woods.

"No better jester than the fae! I'd have you in my court!" said the Sword in the haughtiness of royalty.

“Still with the claw of the cat after all these years,” spoke the Sword again with the sanguinity of accomplished youth.

“You fae are certainly life itself!” said the Elf in his short, chuff laugh.

The Fairy, still hovering in the space where she dismantled the Golem, snapped her fingers. At her beckoning, the rocks climbed back up upon themselves, one by one. With the final gem horn rolling into place, it resumed form as the Golem.

“I’m sorry”

Cried the Golem in a chastened voice.

The Elf approached the Golem, stroking his branching and braided beard perched towards the Golem, adding to the taunt. The morning dew hung on the tiny blooms sprouting from it. Even the sun seemed to join the jab by placing its light upon the beads of water to be reflected in the Golem’s eyes.

Then, in a mockery of genuflection, the Elf presented the singing sword to the Golem, who continued to croon. Reluctantly, the Golem took that blade-locked bard into his hand and let free a sigh of

scorn and relief. He accepted his temper had gotten the best of him, as it often did.

Then the Elf produced the selfsame lyre strapped to his waist which the Golem looked upon wistfully.

“My liege, may our lyre gift a grave and lively importance to your wit with song. Resume your lauding carols of our deeds, that our travels remain as wistful as the wisdom you impart.”

Then the Elf began to strum a mellow tune. The melody was rife with such solemnity that it betrayed his insincerity. The Golem and The Fae joined in their earthy and aiery hums. The forest fowl added their drumming yawn. Then, the wind spun by to lend its howl. The fruits ripened, the dew shined, and the boughs swayed; then The Sword sang again:

*Golem recall to me
Your love's first peril
Towards his wings
Whose own blood stalled
his 'wakening'*

*Sword recount to me
the doubts on your
kin and master
and resecured
whim and laughter*

*Elf serenade me
of your rescue
from the realm of dreams
and oath your eschewed
That we now draw
Near to*

*Then I will sing
of the maker
Of the jewel
That keeps me here
With you*

I would like to acknowledge my dear friends whose love for me remains undamaged despite my many prompts for feedback in the development of this work. May they never grow to resent me: Molly, Kayla, Olivia, Matt, Dylan, Nick, Ian, and Lucas.

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For Aspen.

For the patient and pondering.

I could almost cheat reason to believe there was in
very truth eternity in these things: substance and
everlasting life in what is more transient and unsub-
stantial than a mayfly, vainer than air... weak bubbles
on the flux.

An excerpt of "The Overture" from *The Mistress of
Mistresses* by E. R. Eddison, 1935

An Ordeal of Frost
a memory of our Quest

by Cyrus Wendell
illustrated by Kian

πάντα γάρ τὸ πῦρ

ἐπελθὸν κρινεῖ

καὶ καταλήψεται

I see her dead in the snow. The same stillness without a smile. She's black from the frost. Ice scrawled across her skin like veins. Her white hair is cut from her head, taken by the wind like a scythe to sheaf. Then, her skin begins to bubble. You would think fire had done it, but it is just the way that mountain cold twists the body.

"Do you force a picture of my failure upon me, mage, or is it my own heart that deludes me?"

I waste precious breath with my protest. The air on the Surlain peaks is as thin as a beak-worn scroll. I must remember that the workings of the *known unknown* can only move what lies within.

I recall her aura. Clean as the spring sky. Soft as the lift of waltzgrass. Then I find her stillness like an anchor beside me. The Pulse of àşhe that flows through me. The one that she provides me. She still lives.

The illusion of unknown origin fades. Her àşhe moves in my chest again. My grip tightens once more around the root-reins, but it is still a lesser grasp than I have of our progress. I resume leading her on our steed up the pass.

The endless white of the ridges above and ahead marr any attempt at finding our bearings. Time itself has likewise been fleeting. The sun is obscured by frost. It has made our trek one of ever-present dusk. My Seywa and I have weaved low through valleys and up through endless plateaus, avoiding their detection. Now, the white-cloaked mages of the Order of Lamia have found us, and toy with us from afar.

They were clever to have aimed for my boots first. Their spells ripped through the bohrshide enough for the wet to seep in. My feet shift against the leather now as we march. A blister is assured. Their aim may indeed be true. Her and I have long known the odd ends of the white cloaks' designs. They may want to break my focus or give my mind over to frenzy.

The snow rises to our knees, slowing our steady climb. The damp scent of iron still cuts through the folds of fresh wool. I'd cut the fur from snow-slept beasts. They were made by my hand to fade into the mist of dreams for our warmth. Over their final caress lies my tribe's hallowed wolf skins. They droop over the nape of each side of my neck, sewing the heat

to my body. Their fur flails in the wind as I trudge on.

The flurries of snow meet and then dance up to my cowl. The pattern of travel is more akin to a rope than a river. It is the work of the mage's unseen hand. It adds crust to my brow. It forces a squint to maintain sight. My feet start to burn. I can't see our pursuers through the thick white. I only know their attacks continue by the effect of their magics. Beside us, impressions thrice the size of summer feast bowls appear with thuds, scarring the earth. I can feel their spells pelt then slide around her aegis. A shield that shines and bends with each volley.

"Seywa, let's clear the air. We may benefit from attacking now."

My throat becomes tender from the heave of my cry. I straighten my posture and free the reins to sink into the snow. Our well-trained steed stops, knowing what will happen. I raise my arms forward and wait for Seywa to increase the flow of àşhe. I feel The Pulse, then I dwell on the *known unknown*. The Stir grows. I can feel the singe on my waist. She means for

me to use a wind spell. In a muffled hum so only the gods may hear me...

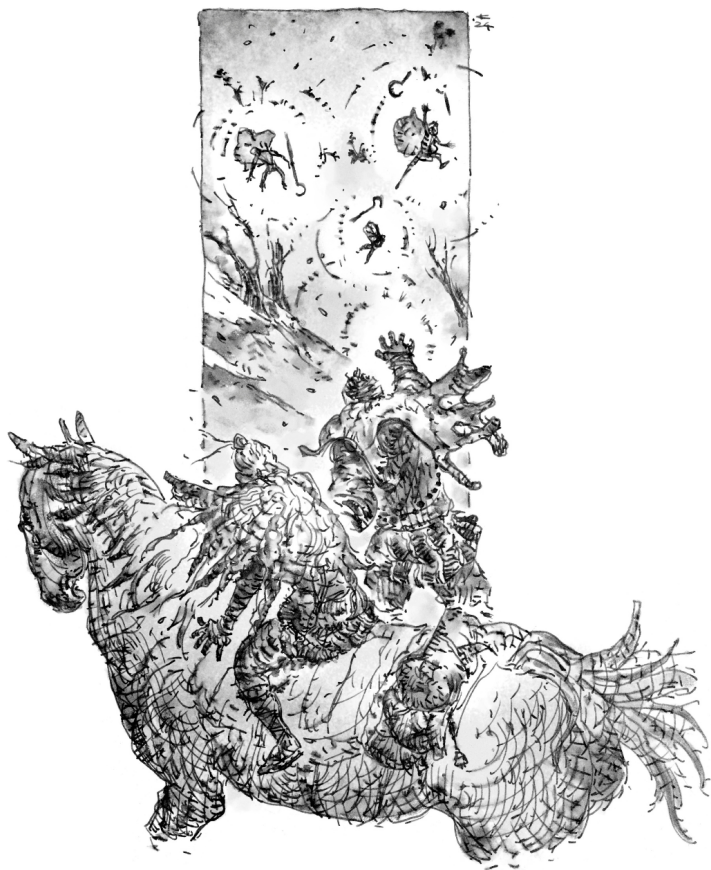
I recite the poy:

GLIDE, GUST, GALE
AS YOU LIFT THE CHILD'S KITE
OR SPIN DOWN DEATH
STIR WITH MY MIND
THAT I MIGHT KNOW YOUR FORM
NOUMENA!

A glee, typical of youth, returns to my heart for a beat. For a moment, I run free through the hills of waltzgrass again. Their blades scraping their spores into my legs, lifting me through the air. I feel the warmth of our Mafath's nod and embrace. The wind thick with the scent spring-woken fruits.

First pressure.

Then a roar.



Around us, snow rushes away, revealing earth and unmuddied air. I watch as it continues up the pass, uprooting trees, loosening rocks, and mangling snow-slept creatures. I feel her heart sink for them.

The remaining white cloaks grunt in the distance. I may have cleared most of them but must stay alert. I must end their pursuit. For my Seywa.

I crouch to fetch the reins and approach our steed from its preferred side. I reach to calm our steed but stop my hand at a hover by his neck. The battle startled him. I note the concern by the tremble of his eye. She shifts beneath the bundle of wool on the steed's back. I check to make sure there's no opening in the bound of blankets. I find none and feel grateful it remains dry. I mount the steed and wrap her close in one arm. I clench in my heels and we resume our ascent.

The land returns to silence. Wind wailing on. Some way up the pass lies the sorry lot that was trailing us. I dismount. A figure quivers under a veil of fresh powder. Clothed in a silk coat our tribe could never hope to make or afford. There's a false courage to their choice of garb. They rely solely on magic to

keep warm, thinking themselves above the *unknown known*. I hear a cry from beneath the cloth. I rid him of it, though it's hard to tell what plea he makes through the chattering of his teeth.

Her àşhẹ grows from a pulse to a flutter like a fawn watching his father fall to my arrow. She knows what I mean to do. I cusp my hand on his brow. The other flat at the base of his neck. Then, quick and rocking twists. A snap as fluids break from their cases, then a final breath in a gasp. I do the same for the others. From my eyes, her tears stream down my face. They glint dimly as a hurried frazil begins its bite. A sense of regret not my own sinks in my chest. It was a mercy not to be taken by the cold. The firn will weave their fine silks into the pillar of ice. Every season they will sink firmer into the grip of frost. Every fleck of bone and strand of silk will be unmade by the weight. No mind. We must continue up the pass.

We reach the next ridge. Still higher peaks sit on both sides, watching us but offering a much needed respite from the wind. Their boughs sway heavily with snow, requesting our silence in return for their own. I move on leading her, ready if more mages find

us. My feet now ache with every step. Every lift of leg comes less soon. My knees creak and snap. Our hope for a new life for us carries me on, away from our would-be killers... or captors.

We'd left the village one moon ago and are running low on supplies. It's been some time since we've eaten. I pull the final strip of dried meat from the sack on my waist. She hates Bohr but it will have to do. I rip a piece off and slide it under my cowl and into my mouth. I savor the last taste of the Far Plains spice. Then I grind the strip to a mound of paste between my teeth. I walk to the side of the steed. Spit out the ball of meat into my hand and unveil her.

Seywa's white tightlocked hair falls to cover her face as I remove the wool. Each bundled strand of hair a deep white color against her bark brown skin. They hang with the same shining allure of the moon to the night sky. It is these *dadajata* that first drew the interest of the mages to her. She was born with her hair already weaved into locks in our Mafath's womb. The mages regarded it as a presence of some great power they sought after.

She parts her hair behind her ears. Seywa's round and angled face greets me. Only twenty-two harvest days had passed for her, but her youth had already been partially spoiled from the touch of wisdom. She's always with a taut and raised brow. Her eyes look through all. She knows the things I can never know about myself.

Her deep-water blue eyes narrow and fix themselves to me. She opens her short lips to speak. Then we both remember. I raise my free hand towards her shoulder to comfort her. She then smiles, denies my comfort, leans down, and hugs me. Her bow and quiver shift on their straps from her back to droop around her waist. I miss her voice. Rare. Certain. Warm. Whenever she'd speak, it'd be short but had a greater depth than the deepwoods itself. She then grabs the ball of meat from my hand. Then sticks out the remaining stub of her tongue in jest before eating.

Beyond these wastes lies the Kingdom of Fuhl, where the mages, our white-cloaked pursuers, reside. Under curses styled as lessons, we learned of the just King Otek. An uncommon man who is said to rule

over the land by a Creed at his own expense. The traitorous Meister Immaun spoke of his commitment often. “He is one who governs as if every decision should be a law for all.. a slothful scepter. On the occasion he raises it to announce a decree, his law is wayward and wrathful”. Misguided or not, we must appeal to this King’s justice for the white cloak’s crimes. For their schemes guised as education. For their capture of our tribe. For taking our way of life from us. For the destruction of our people. For Mafath. For robbing my Seywa of her voice. As the last of our kind, we must make them answer.

The snow once more spreads up from my ankles, to shin, to knees. A glaze of frost starts to creep up my shins. The Pulse quickens with her concern. Through it, she asks if I should be warmed. I’d accept, but I must avoid tiring her. I need her source of àshẹ to defend us. They may return, so I’ll endure. I stay a shiver that, once started, seldom stops.

Then the peaks increase their favor... or perhaps their pity. Gleaming figures, the shape of royal chandeliers appear in the air. Then, the pelts on my shoulders whisper their word of caution into my ears.

"Spirits of Ice"

The sprites flicker like a candle. Do they mean us harm? They stop their game and begin to sway over us. Their curiosity then becomes aid. Small lines of clouds began to round them. The air becomes like a spring night. Blood begins to flow through my veins with ease. Their aid remains as we reach a clearing. Then, they form a path ahead with the glow of pyreflies at dusk.

My foot catches against something hard as I slide it forward. It becomes stuck tight underneath something.

I lean down and brush the snow away at my feet. There lies two stone black figures embracing in their final moments. The last scraps of their clothes hang loose, fused to frozen skin.

I recognize the garments as Bohr's hide. Then, I see the tatters of a blood-dyed sash, once red now brown. It hangs from the right one's neck. I know this cloth as The Bloodtrust, a symbol from our tribe of being the second in command. The Chief would

use his own blood to soak the cloth as a sign of his trust in them. While he recovered from the blood loss, its bearer would prove their ability to rule in his absence. Upon his return, our tribe would vote on the merit of their rule. If the bearer failed, the Chief would take their life. The white cloaks saw us as mere beasts and painted our rites as savagery. Under their influence, some among us began to abandon tribal rites like the Bloodtrust. Then... these must be the remains of traitors who perished in The Japa.

Two hundred years ago, war came to our people over who would succeed the Chief. The Japa began when some chose to leave behind Shi-jukadi, the rite of ascension through combat. They traded their tridents for talk. Instead of blood, they drew lines. They had been led astray by the promise of what magic could offer our people. Mafath always spoke with a grave resentment of this time in our history. Their hands would quake with rage at how much we had lost. How rumors became what made one fit to lead over strength.

Those who lost their attempt to rule through rumor were banished to the peaks we now wander.

Their exile was the means to deny them honor in death, the very way they sought to deny that rite to our leaders. Their bodies serve as rightful monuments to their betrayal; just as much as each mage whose soul I now offer to the mountain.

Then, a light hits my eyes. Two ice sprites descend from their line. They spin down in a dance over me before sinking into the bodies before me. A faint blue glow traces the edge of their corpses.

Whispers begin, their voices ringing out in faint echoes. A mix of battle cries, horrid howls, desperate screams, and muffled pleas meet my ear. I cannot make sense of what the sprites are trying to tell me. I lack the interest to know. Only a channeler's curse could catch these sounds like seeds to the wind. I have no interest in the final moments of traitors. I stand and regather the root-reins into my hand.

"Seywa, these traitors to our people, our no ancestors of ours. We need-"

Then, a sickness like that from a glut of ale sets in my stomach. A quick fever rises to my brow, drawing out beads of sweat. It is a sickly warmth that is a rare welcome in the cold.

A pulse aches in my head. I am called back to the snow. To my knees. To their bodies.

I should have known her curiosity would overtake my spite.

Her àshę flows into me like a glass of wine hastily poured. A sear on my thigh as her sigil wakes. A curse needs no poy, so she'll need neither my speech nor consent. Seywa then opens my ears to hear the echoes of their words. She opens my eyes to see their souls have been chained to the mountain. She opens my heart to know they can't return to the *unknown known*. They'll be denied The Return.

At her compassion, I retch like a dog into the snow.

A faint blue glow surrounds me.

Then, a remembrance of death seeps into me.

A fatigue like sleep.

Then, a vision like a dream.



My mind drifts on the wind through time.

I see the traitors of The Japa as they scale the mountain five-hundred fold. The Ice-fanged wargs and rabid bohrrs only claim the first few. It seems their treachery has cost us our way of life; but not their strength. They continue their march. The next hundred are taken to dreams by the cold. Seywa means for this to soften my heart, but it is a gift to watch them fall to frost. Then at the lack of my remorse her curse becomes my lesson. I'm forced down to dwell in the souls of the dying. How bitter are their deaths. Their final thoughts of betrayal at being left behind

by those stronger. A resentment burns where the ice seeps through skin. Their souls, whose deeds denied them the final sleep, wail upon the wind in torment. Seywa's curse binds me to the memory of the corpses at our feet.

“Salfa.. your steps falter...”

I see the image of a man whose concerned tone of voice betrays the creases on his face.

Then, a woman, whose face is warmer and more severe than his, responds doubly as gruff.

“You can’t afford to worry about me, Bravor.”

The two are with their group wandering beneath the same ridge Seywa, and I find ourselves now. Around 200 of their tribe remain.

A chuckle from Bravor as he braces Salfa to steady and lighten her steps. He says with love on his breath

“I can. We will join once we pass through the mountains, like our Mafaths before us.”

Salfa pouts:

“Why don’t we join together... Here and now?”

She snickers then stumbles. Bravor catches her, saving her from falling face-first into the snow. His support brings a red warmth to his cheeks. She looks up at his ice-crust ed eyes, smiles, then socks him in the gut. He winces and grunts. Salfa speaks through a laugh

“You’ll sooner be swept off this peak by my feet than sweep me from mine, Bravor.”

Bravor smiles as she shifts into her temper.

“Aye, Bravor, put me down. We become stronger each time we fall. Why deny me the last joy we have as a people?”

The warmth spun in Bravor’s cheeks. A red hue and specks of light danced between snowflakes. I watch them be drawn in by the pull between the two that ends in fusion. Their eyes parted, as did their embers, along with their rosy expectations. It wasn’t the time. Deep in their love, the cold and the prospect of their demise melted away. It took every pound of their discipline to not rejoin their eyes. Their bodies would surely combine. They needed everybody available to fend off the elements and the

creatures of the mountain. The Chief at the head of the pack yelled.

“To me, Bravor!”

Then rang a crack that sundered earth, ice, and air. The Chief’s barbed stone club lied lodged in the ground; its enormous size eclipsed by the width his hand.

“A taste....

The Chief uttered then shouted.

“Beasts ahead!”

His jowl protrudes from behind a tight wool wrap, which constricting the top half of his face. The rows of his teeth were uneven and treacherous, like the Icicles hanging from his lips. They formed a jagged beard. He stood hunched over, heaving like a Bohr with each breath.

“Chief....”

Pants Bravor, having run to the side of the Chief’s club.

“How many?”

The Chief sticks out the stub of his remaining tongue. It quivers like a laketoad failing to escape the

mouth of a hare. It seeks the savor and the scent of an enemy.

“Spite, they took the only means of sight left to me.”

The chief roars on.

Bravor places his hand on the side of the Chief’s back.

“Chief, take this.”

With his free hand, Bravor rustles through a loose pouch, retrieving a ball of grass. Bravor presents it to the Chief

“Waltzgrass? What good will this do?”

Chief roars on.

“We have no time, eat”

But the Chief obliges Bravor, bearing a mocking smile and a sniffing laugh. He chomps at the grass ball like a pestle grinding spices against mortar. As he does, a ponderous amount of gob hangs from the roof of his mouth. The slobber freezes in the wind, causing shards of ice to break away from the sides of his mouth. Then calm falls on the Chief’s face, his mountainous maw giving way to soft hills. Now, in a rising and clear pitch, he spoke.

“Thanks, Bravor. The wit of my tongue returns. Through the fog ahead, 50 beasts lie in wait. They move with caution, waiting to strike.”

The Chief, now moving with levity, returns to a standing position. He brings his club to rest on his shoulder. In his free hand, he anchors a heavy grip on Bravor’s shoulder and beckons his ear.

“Tell them to prepare.”

“I don’t like our odds.”

“Accept them.”

Bravor winces, knowing that the expression of fear wasted precious time. He turns around to the last two-hundred of the tribe. He puts one fist to his chin and, with his other, draws his short knife from its sheath. He raises it to the sky, giving the signal for combat. From beneath the rows of wool hoods, a short but muffled chant begins.

“May our iron drip of its own scent!”

A roar in response. Then, a rush forward.

Through the veil of frost ahead, hunching figures dart side to side. The tribe’s wide and galloping formation as they advance flings ice forward, obscuring their own sight.

Then, a melody swings from the beasts ahead. A shimmering light of all color glows begin the fog. The beasts respond to each other in daring song. The tune ceases, then there is a shrill screech from the beasts as they fly out from the fog.

They run with four limbs, quickly closing in on the tribe. They know the mountain, so they glide through the frost as if they had wind to wings.

The chaos of battle comes to the mountainside. The snap of bones and a half-uttered cry cuts the air as blurs take out tribesmen. They swing their spears and knives wildly, swiping and slashing at fur. The blood drawn to mist.

The beasts encircle the tribe. A shimmer of all color blinks between the blur of frost. Each member of the tribe hesitates to moves backward into a tight formation. One tribesman halts his retreat and readies his spear. A whirl closes in and cracks the tribesman, throwing him back. His body rolls to Bravor's feet. Limp and lifeless.

There is no valor or triumph to their deaths. No thrill

to the fight. The Japa has fulfilled its course, but the vengeance is no longer sweet.

“Chief, this is the end. You must sing so our souls may rest.”

*Long we travelled
To the place where the red wastes join the forest
Where the heat darkens skin
And the boughs are thick
With the sweet silence of darkness*

His great dirge stops the rush of the beasts. Their morbid and undulating shape shifts from a wave to a line. The shapes say nothing, but their heads turn in a manner signifying the curiosity of a child of any spawn of life. They stay and listen to the Chief's song. Then, one by one, the dark figures fade into the distance. The chief finishes his dirge with a sullen look. He commands.

“We must move ahead with those able to now. They may return with more to finish us.”

The final hundred tribesmen begin scouring the battlefield for supplies. They take food and clothing

from the injured, then trail behind the Chief in a line.

Bravor lets his arms fall to his side. The heat of battle strained his muscles, and the sensation of cold begins to climb on his skin. He looks around as the tribesman passed him into the renewed and growing line formation. His eyes shift among the tribe. He does not see her, and panic sets in.

“Salfa!”

Bravor runs into the fog. Searching aimlessly. Then, he sees her. He runs to find her trapped underneath a fallen beast’s body. It is an eyeless monster like no creature I have ever seen.

“Here”

Bravor insists, helping pick Salfa up to her feet and assisting her in walking. She lets out a wail as her knee shakes and caves in. She falls limp back into the snow, sprawled forward. Bravor kneels next to her and checks her legs. The bone has been broken to bits in her legs. They move disconnected from her knee.

Bravor’s eyes met Salfa’s. The tempest of fire in his chest sought her, but he could feel it fade. It burned

slower. It burned less. It burned quieter. No specks of light would spin forth.

“Salfa... we can’t join...”

“That’s ok... we are still with each other. That’s all that matters.”

They’re denied the joining rite, one that my seywa and I are forbidden to as womb-kin. It is a rite Seywa knows is closer to my heart than magic. Without it, we’d have no rites or lineage. We’d never have been brought into this word by our Mafath. Seeing this bond denied by the frost finally earns them a measure of my pity.

Bravor watches as the final tribe member closes out the line. Fading into the distance. I fade from the dream.



I wake.

I'm on my back in the snow. A frozen stream of tears burns my eyes and cheeks. I raise my eyelids, but they refuse to open. I scratch away the ice and notice a small rhythmic pain beat against my waist. I turn to my side. Seywa kicks me. She stands above me. From this angle, it's almost as if she eclipses my size.

She unstraps the ritual knife from her hip. She flips it into the air, catching the blade flat in her hand without injury. She invites me to grab it by the hilt. She motions to the corpses before me. I understand her desire, but there are so many others. I look to the flock of sprites above us. Each with a name we do not know. Each with a body we don't have the time to dig

through the snow to find. Knowing her heart, she'll want to return to this place to free the rest if we get our justice from the King.

I stand up next to her, shaking the snow stuck to my clothes. I look down at her and ready a suggestion that we move on. Her eyes meet mine in defiance. For a moment, I consider plucking her from the snow into my arms and forcing her to resume our journey. But I relent and begin Esinowa.

"Only for them."

She nods accepting my terms. I recall what I've learned from the knowledge I've gained from her channeler's curse. I hold the knife by the hilt in my fist. I rest against my chin and close my eyes to be resealed by frost. I bring the lovers' souls into my thoughts and then move them to the heart of time; the 8-foot chase. I know the vow of each paw.

Valor, Grace, Instinct, World, Heart, Harm, Cause, and That Unspoken.

I remember the trainings of Great Mafa and speak in augurs these traitors defiled:

"Their names were..."

My voice shakes. They are undeserving.

But their cowardice cannot bring shame upon my display of our traditions.

I return pride to my voice.

"Their names are Salfa and Bravor."

Now I assign which vow their deeds embodied.

"Salfa, whose spy was taken by the cold, met a beast who enjoyed this advantage. She gave her Bravor charm and confidence. A vow of strength shall they chase."

"Bravor stayed behind with his love to tend to her wounds before making his word that they'd rejoin the tribe. A vow of heart shall they chase."

"The frost took them. These are unsung deeds... that..."

Then my thoughts falter again, back to the path of my spite. They may be unsung but they are traitors still. They were among the first to give into the white cloaks' schemes. They may be owed Esinowa from

their courage and sacrifice but their betrayal of our custom...

Then I feel Seywa through the flicker and pulse of her àshẹ.

For her, all who perished on the trek through the peaks are our kin. All of these sprites share our blood. They all know the crimson sands, sweet fields, and purling brooks of our homeland. Now, they seek to aid us in avoiding sharing their fate. She urges me to speak. I let her joy replace my rage.

“I cleanse you of treason and return you to The Chase.”

I raise the knife for the final steps of the ritual, with her blade hanging in the sky, searching for the outline of the sun through the veil of the elements. I see its faint outline and trace a depiction of Skleh and Heno in simple shapes, chasing each other’s tails. A thin line of sleet and clouds begins to circle. They twist, bend, and then start to take the form of two wolves above us. I begin what the mages call “the first poy” of our people, holding the knife to my hand, and sing:

*Which loved first?
Which lit the trail?
From which fangs first will blood soak the tail?
All flows from their chase
Trial, wisdom, grace
but when their heat ceases
our lives they will take*

A faint blue light from the sprites stops me. It shines from the blood-ready blade in my hand. It splits to shards, severing my connection to Seywa. They've rejected Esinowa. Their spirits may stay here as is there right. Our ancestor's wishes must be observed and not challenged. Yet, is this another betrayal of trust from traitors? Do they mean to kill us? Our blade, Oponri, allows The Pulse to flow between us. Without it, I won't be able to protect her. I'll have to rely on my aşhe and may slip beneath The Stir. Her innocence may have killed us. They may blame us for their exile.

Beside me, Seywa lowers herself to her knees, almost disappearing into the snow. She flicks her head to

side motioning for me to the same, then bows to the sprites. I have no choice but to stash my pride for our survival.

I fall to my knees, and bow to them. Making a plea to traitors I whimper

“Salfa... Bravor... I will keep your souls knit to the mountain. Please return our blade to us.”

Their sprites seem unmoved by words. They must know my hate for them.

"Ancestors. We're the last of our kind that I know of."

Tears well in my eyes as my heart is full of thoughts of my people. A love mocked by these sprites.

"Please."

Then, thin trails of clouds spin from them, engulfing the murky shapes of the wolves I've summoned into the air. A tunnel of icy wind bends toward my hands, narrowing the closer it stretches to me. Each shard of

iron slowly floats into my hand, reforming Oponri. I nod my head in respect and then look at Seywa. She looks at me with a snide but approving grin, which I can only recognize as Mafath's.

With a mind of reluctant thanks for my ancestors, I watch their sprites float onward. We follow them forward to a place where the snow falls less. A pingo offers respite, lessening our tread to a march. Though sparse, rock, bush, and brush are welcomed as a reunited friend. Bare trees stand taller as the snow becomes shallow. A trail cut with the grooves of last spring's wagon wheels. On both sides of the trail, the trees grow thicker with fur the higher up they are. The trail winds forward and bends to the left, leading to a hollow cavern. Greenery and vines line its walls, twisting into braids like she has me weave into her hair. Far and Further down the mountain, a drove of trees. The dell lined on its edge by the sun.

A flash from the mountainside.

A spell shatters a few of the sprites. Their crystalline corpses break into spears of hail. The rest of them scatter, disappearing into the air behind the

clouds. My cloak tears, shredding both skin and sigil. A harsh neigh the scent of blood pierce the air. I turn to see our steed's last buck. Seywa is thrown out from under her blanket and sent skidding across the ground. Her white hair following behind her like the winter star fall. From her sheath flies Opnori, cutting her eye as it travels past her. She's stopped by the snow. I go to her. The Pulse quickens once more. I must... protect her. I pick her up. Her clothes cover most of her, but the chill wind steals her heat like a field shrew to scraps. She shakes like a fresh pup in my hand. I lift up the wool sleeves, revealing bruises. The cocoon of wool managed to lessen the impact. I wish it could have granted her the wings to fly away from this place. Before me, the remainder of our steed's body strewn at the base of an outcrop of rocks. The entrails steam releasing their heat. She presses her shaking hand on the left side of my neck.

Levin.

She wants to attack, but it's too soon. I don't know where the mages are positioned or how many are among their number. We need to protect ourselves first. I need to protect her. I place her hand on

the side of my arm, cradling her. A sear. Her hand enters the fresh, unseen wound, yet the cold burns more.

Aegis.

It will not fully conjure. Her sigil tore with my skin but we still need its shield. Her dark eyes brighten from beneath the white veil of her hair. Her trust brings warmth against the wind. The Pulse churns. I pull her close in one arm, then press a clenched palm to my head and whisper.

LOCK BLADE TO SHEATHE

ROB SPELL OF WIT

FOIL PLANS TO GUIDE

OUR DEEDS TO MYTH

STIR WITH MY MIND

THAT I MAY KNOW THY FORM

A surge hits under where her fingers rests in my muscle. The sigil is torn, so the spell eddies like an oar lost to a whirlpool. The snow slips away to sleet. Then my sight drifts beyond again.

I see our village aflame.

I hear the howls of that night again...

Where a rumble crossed the plains.

Then, water as tall as hills on the horizon. The cries of our tribe collapse into a wail. Underneath me, a vortex of black water. A song so deep it ruptures my ears. A single voice shakes at the bottom. It sounds just like hers. I follow it back to the Surlain peaks.

I can return.

NOUMENA!

For a moment, a golden glow paints the frosty wilds. From the blood trailing out of my ears, whisks of light escape to form a spotted shell around us. Its gleam returns just as the second volley of ruin seeks to bring us to the same fate as our steed. Blades of air sneak through the openings. I turn to protect her. Their wind cuts at my back. The broken shield saved us.

I hurry to collect the scattered blankets. I try to wrap Seywa but the tatters create too many openings. Her shakes grow more violent. I feel her àşhe

start to fade. I grab and run with her to the outcrop as another volley of ruin makes its impact, sending a cloud of snow around us. I pat my hand around me till I feel the warmth.

"I'm sorry seywa."

I shuffle the red tendrils and flayed skin over her. She coughs at the stench, then helps me hide her in the corpse of our steed.

I collect the wool and reform it into the makeshift cocoon, hoping to deceive the white cloaks that she is still with me.

I sprint from the fog to a tree and place the bundle behind it. Kneeling beside it, I convey the shield to its position.

Leaping to my feet, I walk backward attempting to trace the mountainside for our foe. My new wounds start to burn as they freeze. I wince, trying to maintain my sight. I stalk behind the trees to gain what little protection I can. I glance upwards. The peaks seem to bend with the weight of the snow gathering on them, and then I catch a slight movement. I recall

the poy of Levin and request The Pulse; she provides,
but The Stir does not show itself. Spite's beard, I
can't remember it. I think to myself:

WHEN VOID OF RAIN
YOU SPARK FORESTS' END
IGNITE AIR TO HALE SOIL
FROM AIR, I BEND
COMMON FEAR
AND SELDOM FRIEND...

But still stays The Stir. A crack. Spite again! A
blast of their ruin splits the tree I'm taking shelter
behind. I'm blown back and feel skin and sigil shred
once more as splintered bark sails through the air.
A chunk of wood cracks against my shin. Several
bits cut my cheek. And a small steak hits my chest,
hitting something vital. From I lift my cloak and see
bark lodged into my chest... right where her scribe for
Levin rests. But they know not the lengths we plan.
The master scribe for Levin still rests on my neck,
untouched by the wounds of the day.

I look up from the ground. Jagged chunks of bark hover before me. They are impaled in a wall of ice. It glows with a faint blue with the remnant of àshẹ. Had these spikes met my skin, I would have been lost to dreams. The ice wall fades, causing the wood to fall in a pile before me. What spell has saved me? I seek her in The Pulse, Seywa says its not her. Then a grating chorus of whispers passes by my ear:

“Eyes to the mountain!”

I return my focus to scour the mountainside. I’m downwind, so the white cloaks won’t be able to track me with extrasense. I look for a shake of a tree or a tufting of snow. I recall the harsh tongue of our tribe’s huntsman from years before Seywa was born, and I was touched by her magic.

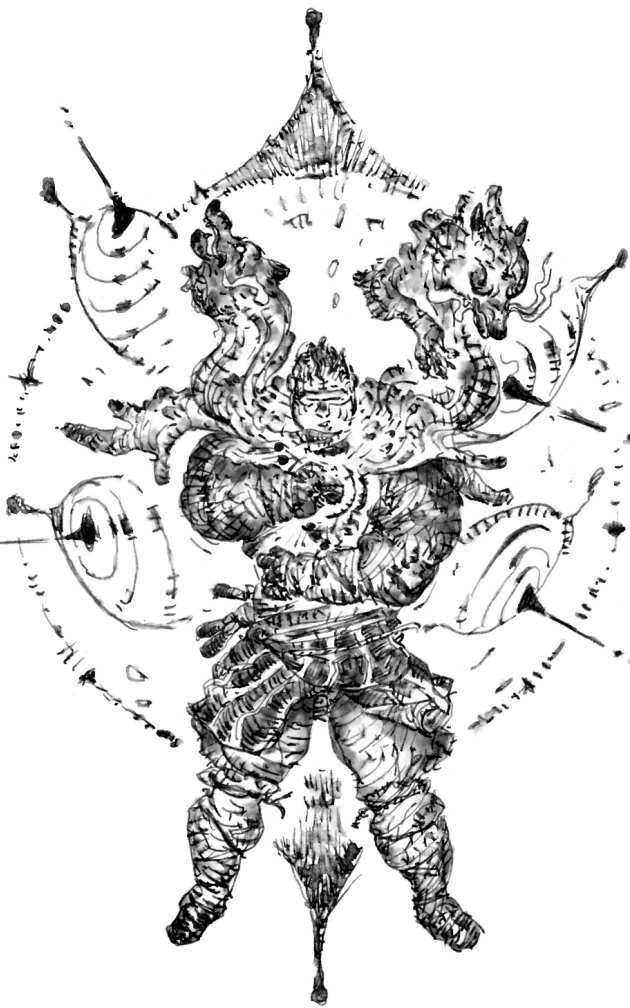
I must hear the deep pulse of the land and answer.

Their twin howl begins to ring. I hear their silks whip in the wind. Forward, a half-torv headed east. My senses have frayed under their attacks. I need the eyes and ears of Skelh and Heno. I close my eyes. I begin slamming my fist against my chest, chasing the tempo of my heartbeat. I find the rhythm and begin

to roll my voice at the base of my chest. It is not a ploy but a plea to the gods of my people. Entreating ancient alms, I silently chant.

Rend n' Hale n' Rend n' Hale n'...

The pelts on my shoulders wake, risen by a share of Skelh and Heno's breath. The busts of two wolves are now perched on my shoulders. Their backs arched with the same dignity they bear to greet the moon. Though my shoulders are solid, they are not as solid as the rocks they once perched on. Their claws plunge into my muscles as they echo the voices of our precursors. They let loose a blue squall from their fangs, matching the dim shine from their eyes. They share their color and force with mine. Now, I am only a step out of pace with nature; I see all as they do.



There is only one of them. A tree with six branches with a four crant wide stump. The mage is panting in panic. He knows I am tracking him. I can hear him muttering a poy. I can't make out the words, but the cadence I recognize. The bond I share with my whisper wolves fades, and with it, some of my àşhe.

I pull myself up and steady myself up as I rise. Sey-wa connects to me, The Stir back within me. I extend one palm starward and one outstretched towards my target. I recite:

HOW BRIEF YOUR MIGHT
THOUGH YOU SUNDER SKY
AND WRENCH FEAR
TO MORTALS' MINDS
NOW STIR WITH MINE
SO I MAY KNOW YOUR FORM
NOUMENA

In the distance, I see crimson stain the snow on both sides of the stump. A moment later, a jagged Levin arc travels to me. From where he lay to my palm. I turn to return to her, then see him.

Before me is a man-shaped beast in greater clarity than in the journey through the memory of the sprites. The beast is of the same kind that killed my ancestors. His chest is twice the width as mine, and his waist fellow to a wasp's. Fur like hardened feathers cover his body unmoved by the wind. What light made it through the clouds glistened for a moment. With it, a faint array of colors danced and bent around him. Over this odd skin, he wore a carapace lined with scales from some foreign beast.

His face gave me pause. It was as a man's yet with fleshy low indents where his sight should lie. The grim craters have no trace of wound or scar, showing his eyes having been wrested from him. His brow is steeply angled and unmoving as the firmament. Seated above the arch of contempt sat a gem black with such pitch that it swallowed any light that graced it. Even without eyes, he seems to know sight and glares at me. As if speaking my nature back to me, he stands as wide as the wingspan of the nighthawks, ready to kill, but bears the expression of prey regretting its fate. A slumbered rage seems to quiver at his sharply pursed lips. In only one arm,

the wretched body of our steed. Within it she lies. He lifts his free arm, motioning towards the mountain. I ignore him and demand in rage:

“Give me back, Seywa!.”

The anger rips something inside me. Then the price is called for the aid of their fangs. My sight and sound begin to flee. Silence and the haze of black set in as if drawing near the center of the deepest woods. The strange beast grunts, pointing behind me. I turn to see a volley of ruin pelting the peaks. They mean to end it here. A wave of snow is let loose from the peaks at their bidding, gaining width and speed. He motions to a vine line cave and takes off running with her. I have no choice but to trust the beast. I rush towards the cave.

The roar of the snow behind us sounds like the ripple of a creep. It's a waste to look back. If it's our fate to perish here, I will at least go on with her. For a moment, I remember the bodies of the mages who I slept to the mountain. Will we meet the same fate as them? Then, I picture myself as a boat ferrying her to a new land to rest. A meadow where peace is assured

for all time. Wind. Maybe I can push the avalanche back. I ask for àshẹ and she denies me.

Ahead the beast increases his pace. As he crests the cavern, he jumps and disappears downward into the black. I try to catch up. I hear sinew stretch and snap. My legs begin to buckle. I request àshẹ. She denies me. Her resolve is far stronger than mine. Then, my feet seem to find their footing without my direction. I glance down to see a mist with a faint blue glow around my boots. In an even cadence, they begin to glide over ice. A pressure guides and grooves my feet. I've been charmed. I pick up speed to soar, then feel àshẹ other than my Seywa's. But as I grow closer to the cavern, so does my worry. My vision starts to fade to completely black.

“JUMP”

A harsh chorus of whispers makes a demand of me. With no other hope, I grant the voices my trust.

My eyes can't make a trace of anything as we fall. The floating sensation leaves me as we continue down. The grip of cold loosens its grasp. Have we been tricked by some phantom image from the

images to dispose of ourselves? I feel a fool knowing she can feel my doubts. Though, I still feel a bit of the flow. I struggle to mumble the poy for Lux, resting my hand on my waist. With a strained and shaking voice, I speak the poy of Lux:

FROM ALL
IN ALL
BRIGHTEST IN THOSE WHO DENY IT
DARKEST TO THOSE WHO DESIRE IT
AID ME STILL
STIR WITH MY MIND
THAT I MIGHT KNOW YOUR FORM
NOUMENA

A faint, unsourced glow traces the edges of the cavern. At the same rate, my sight leaves me. In its final veil, I see the beast approach me and sink to his knee.

He reaches to his own arm and pinches a small mound of rough skin lined with fur. He rocks his claws back and forth. With bands of sinew in tow, he tears from his body a small offering of flesh. The

beast lets out a gritty wheeze. The din harmonizes with the bellow of the caverns as if confirming some unspoken question. He moves the pulsing lump up to my mouth. As his claws come into focus, I notice they line the backs of his fingers, forming jagged peaks of their own.

They cut through my lip as he slides the tuft of flesh onto my tongue.

A taste like corpses' reek.

The blood from my lips trades the flavor of death with that of steel. The pain becomes a welcome mercy. The bundle of his hair falls slowly down the back of my throat. The strands spread in their descent as if each had their own mind. They drag down the walls of my throat like tentacles snatching up fish. A gentle warmth spreads to my limbs as the mass arrives at my stomach. The shred, sting, and soreness earned from the peak's treachery lessen their bite. Health and a measure of strength return to me.

How am I to thank my crude savior?

The air felt like a weight on my chest, unsure of its weakness or the hostility of the cave itself. The last

of her aṣhe leaves, and with it, the light from the poy begins to disappear.

“Where are we? Is it your blue spells that aided me?”

His blank expression remained as if he did not understand the tongue I spoke. Where a man’s eye should have been, a whirl of sparks appeared, and from behind the fur on his forehead, a gem surfaced. It caught the quickly fading light of the cavern, stalling its retreat. Swirls of blue light then began to hover in the craters of his sockets, bright enough to fully illuminate the cavern. I wouldn’t need the Stir.

Behind the beast, the steed’s corpse shifted with the convulsions of birth. Seywa parted an opening in its skin, leaning out her head. Red seeped from her as she left the steed’s warmth, her skin glistening with blood and bile. She parted the matted strands of her now-crimson hair, looking around the cave. Her curiosity showed she was in high spirits, unshaken. She reached out as if tracing her hand along the glowing walls.

The Beast turns start walking down the passage, he starts:

“To our home. Safety. From Mages.”

The beast’s voice rumbles like a grating chant. The beast, the eyeless one, can speak in the tongue of a man. What kind of creature is it?

“How far?”

“Not a journey...”

Seywa looks up at me and nods. She trusts the beast. I rather not. I hold her closer and trail behind the beast. He moves with echoless steps while ours scrape and plod between the walls.

The way is dim and wet but warmer than the base of the peaks. A drop of water hit my forehead. Above hangs ice and stone, rattling like ready rapiers. My unset sight moves beneath them. They seem to bend their aim as if seeking to impale us.

Leaving their trail, we arrive at a clearing. The cavern ceiling disappears into the darkness. The black sings with a howl of wind. Ahead of us, a way of uncertain stone stairs. The steps down were like a line of teeth misaligned and half-decayed, each pearly with moisture that will spirit our steps to the depths. Mincing their peril they pose, the Beast floats his

way down between them. With no àşhe in Her, she shakes. Holding her close, I descend.

The unknown charm on my boots remains. I make through the first few steps with ease. My boots wrap around each arch in the stone, aiding my balance. A blue glow shines with each of my steps. Ice binds my boots to the cold black rock, steadying our descent.

The next few rocks grow thinner, and with it, the magic on my boots. My foot slips. She yelps like an injured falwn. I leap down between the next few lands on the largest stone halfway through the gauntlet. Its span gives us a moment to rest. She pokes her out of the wool. An arrow's distance away, the beast waits with its spinning blue eyes. It waits for us like a statue in silence.

I step down the next two. The second cracks. I jump and land on the third, but it too cracks under our weight. We slip into the grasp of the dark. She grabs my shoulder. Both our stomachs churn into a knot. All is gone but the streak of blue light trailing upward. We keep falling downward further. My sense of direction leaves me. Soon, up only can be

known by the odd light that follows us. Then, the streak of light glided past us, carrying with it the song of the beasts from Bravor's memory. Below, the rock stairs and the beast peering upwards, shimmering with all color. Our fall slows to a float. She pushes from my shoulder. The fresh wool flings in a spin-off of her. She begins to swim through the air like a kite fish. Already bored of the game, She then switches to a twirl. I recognize it as the dance of discovery among our people. My lip sinks into my cheek instinctively. A smile. Then, a brief flutter of àshẹ.

We land next to the beast, and she stumbles. A weakness in her bones still sits. I help her stand. We pluck the wools from the air as easily as ripe fruit. Turning to the beast, he saw the question on my face.

"This mountain... knows you."

He motions to my Seywa.

"What do you mean by this beast?!"

I demand another answer, but he ignores me. The beast turns and continues on. Seywa asks of me.

We follow.

The cold returns. Trails of feathered ice grow thicker, and the walls narrow in for a time. Soon after

another clearing, the blue light reveals the mountain's breadth of the mountain tames in our water surroundings. The crag has been smoothed. It feels more like a room. As we pass through, I notice a large spike of ice shaped to drip water into a pool. A river has been carved down the wall and disappears to the room's far end. Frost-worked water also trickles to a row of small with finely kept branches. They lean against the wall, on them cling small skeletons resembling winged dolls.

"We can't survive." The beast said, walking on. The final stretch is long, twisting every which way. Incline. Decline. Lengths of the path I carry her crouched. At other times, the curtains and crags of stone make me seem like a dwarf to a man. As we trek deeper, the ice emits a faint glow, pulsing with the faint trace of àşhẹ. She tries to draw it in as we walk. Then, finally ahead, a flicker of light blue. As we get closer, we hear a soft, small song of wailing again. We cross past the opening with the flicker of light and pace forward. A strong blue light washes out the area. The whirling blue eyes of the beast vanish in a blink. Then, the wailing intensifies. My eyes adjust

slowly, still clouded by my earlier call to Skelh and Heno. Then soon I see. Above. A half spire high. Set in ice. A battle frozen in time. The pulse of light deep beneath the ice outlines a war in shadow.



Noble soldiers donning the same capes posed with their swords, in the mid arch of their swing. Maimed men the picture of anguish. An arch of arrows at each stage of their rain. Soldiers flung from their six-legged steeds. Banners being torn through by hand. A slew of men to be remembered forever as cowards. Some with raised arms in feeble attempts to stop blades. Others in flight from those seeking to spill their blood.

The beast looks up, and the beam of blue light gives it more shape.

“A war... of wings..”

The beast says in a stern tone.

Many of the men I thought to be caped were winged. Dense rows of feathers that looked to me like braids of hair. Their torsos are as green as fresh grass and waists only as wide as fruit trees. Their wings caught the light, giving a shine of all colors. Many wielded staffs, wearing downward and mournful looks, their lips frozen mid-incantation. Soldiers pin the winged creatures down, tearing through their wings with a blade or by hand. Their wide bodies clad in regal armors our eyes have never seen the likes

of. The winged ones mid-flight with the strings of the soldiers necks and stomachs. The victims of both factions are frozen in terror. Seywa's made sick by the sight, my stomach churning with hers.

The light moves away, returning the scene to shadow. For a moment, a harsh brightness made it hard to see. I raise my arm to meet his light. He turns away once more.

“We do not remember who we are....”

“Where are we?” I ask.

“We only remember her light. Ever dim. Gone. Ahead. Sanctuary.”

The beast extends his arm, motioning to the end of the cavern. My sight returns from the glow of the beast's eyes.

Nestled under the picture of war lies a conclave of unevenly placed huts. They're fastened together by rock and reed, covered in a thick layer of cavern weeds that sway with the pulse of the mountain. Beside the village, a large black slanted stone shows the cavern back to us like the dark pools of the deep woods. It captures a large bonfire surrounded by figures in front of a fire. They sway like grass disturbed by

late summer's wind, hunched over. They move like a mass of spiders connected in their chain of arms and shoulders. Their crying echoes through the cavern, threatening to disturb the sleep of the warriors locked in ice above. She shifts, nervous, but looks onward curious, unthreatened, and unafraid. I stay still for her. The song continues as we approach. The blue swirls in our guide stop, returning the blank empty sockets.

As he leads us towards the fire. The wailing grows to its peak. We draw near the group. A river of tears coming from every eyeless one, glowing orange in the light of the raging fire. No beasts' eyes break from the fire in suspicion of us vagrants. Is it for the fire they cry? One beast's tears start to thin until dry. He sits, crossing his legs and resting his palms on his knees.

As we round the fire to a break in the circle, the seated beasts move to make space for us. Our guide motions for us to fill the circle and then sits in the same pose as his brother. I glance at Seywa, she nods in response. I set her down on the hard floor cavern floor. At least the fire has made it warm. She fixes her, pulling shards of red ice from her *dadajata*. She sets

Oponori, her bow and quiver down to her side and then sits upright like the beasts. I lower myself and join them.

We watch in silence. The hum of their bellows hangs thick on the air. As each beast's tears run dry, they sit and look up at the ones who still cry with reverence and longing. Lowering my head, I nod at our guide to confirm that I understand the most of this ritual. She wipes some tears from her eyes, moving from the display.

After the last tear is shed and the last seat is taken, our guide stood:

“Travellers. Attacked by mages. Same as us.”

He points to the jagged gem on his forehead. I notice none of the rest of them have the same gem. The beast then outstretches his hand, imitating my casting pose. He then mimics the crack of Levin.

“Mages. He Killed. She answered. Our Cries.”

Cheers erupt from around the fire, echoing harshly against the cavern walls. Seywas is startled by the noise. I rest my hand on her shoulder to comfort her.

“not prayers.. prophecy” a voice interrupts ending the applause.

A beast stood in front of the fire, one I recognized as the last to shed tears. A blue whirl flickers like a candle igniting and extinguishing again and again. Unlike our guide, her stature was as wide as our steed, without ridges or curves. Her face bore black scars of battle. She boasted.

“Her songs still speak.”

The seated beasts roar, gnashing their teeth and pounding the stone. The cavern rumbled with disdain for her outburst. More beasts pour in from the huts around the fire, and soon, we find ourselves surrounded by a crowded, small lake of fur. My eyes dart around, trying to count their number. We could only fight our way out with magic, and Seywa’s aşę was nearing its limit. The gemed one silences the she beast by name:

“Titania. Stop. She abandoned us.”

“ABANDONED US,” the other beasts shout in agreement. She nudges my shoulder, making sure my eyes meet hers. She quickly glances at Oponri then back at me. I ride the Stir to tell her it’s too early for us to attack or flee.

"We forget her word Oberon!" Titania said defiantly, naming the gemed one to us. Then turning to the crowd, Titania lets out a shrieking note, and her eyes begin to swirl with a pure white light. She then breaks into song.

*She will forge a champion from foe
to rescue us from woe
and from beneath The Stir
the serpent's fire she'll claim
to thaw what froze*

Her voice then shifts to the cry from before. Once more, tears flow with the light of the fire. Specks like snowflakes appeared around her to defy the flames. They connected into faint lines of red, orange, and deep purple began to swirl, forming around her back like a net in the air. The crowd's sudden shout startled Seywa, her hand now covering her face. The Pulse lurches from the rare display of her fear.

Oberon produces a short blade beneath his fur. The sword is weakened by rust, spoiled with holes, and glows black despite the firelight.

“Deceiver!” Oberon shouts, advancing around the fire. The lines hovering from Titania's back take the shape of wings. She speaks with a slow yet restored cadence

“I now remember... our lost... wings... Surely....e ven now... we are in her presence. I have not forgotten...”

Her confidence reminds me of our Chief. She straightened from her hunched posture to the proud shoulders of a noble. Further softening her gaze, she approach Oberon with care. Then her eyes met mine across the fire, her tears stopping as she smiled at me.

Oberon leaps, driving the blade into her chest. The peace doesn't leave her face as she falls. The net of lights behind her falls with her like garments refusing to dry in the wind. The color of the wings of light flickers and fade. She held my gaze until her eyes closed just before she collapsing with a thud. Oberon pulls out his sword and kicks her body into the fire.

“DECEIVER! DEATH TO DRAKOS! FOR HER!” The crowd of cried, delighted at the death of a traitor.

Titania's summoned lights mixed with the fire, turning it dark purple, making the blue light in the war of light above, black. The victor holds his blood-soaked sword in the air. The fire's new, intense color seared our skin, but a faint blue glow washed over us, cooling the pain like a gentle mist. It drapes around us like one of the white cloak's silks flown in the snowy winds. I look to Seywa. She is not offering her àshẹ. I look to this Oberon, Chief of Beasts. His empty eyes peer into me as the gem set in his head catches the purple of the fire. It is not his àshẹ either.

The crowd chants on until the fire fades from purple back to red.

"The mages. Sent creature below. Blocking our food. To starve us. He will. Kill it. Then war. With mages."

Oberon extends a hand to me, pride on his face. I must tread lightly with these beasts. They think of me as the answer to prophecy. We differ on the cause for my being here. They don't understand it's only... her. Once I kill their foe, will we meet our end? I stand slow to match the pride of their gemed Chief, widening my stance like I was warding off a

mad mother bear. But the wounds from the earlier battle keep me slow and heavy. I walk up to join him. The stench of the roasting beast fills the air, but I don't make the disgust known on my face. I look at her. She wants to flee.

“Our guests. Who are you.”

I place my fist to my chin like our village chief and shout in a mimicry of his voice.

“I am Oak of the far plains.. and this my Seywa..”

I motion to her, knowing she can't introduce herself. The mages rid her of her ability to speak. But the beasts are likely to expect her to, so I explain;

“She's mute.”

The impulsive crowd of beasts erupts again, repeating what they think to be our names.

“Oak!”

“Mute!”

I raise my voice with her true name, to be drowned
in the rally of the eyeless ones .

“ _____ ”

Seywa stands, her face tinged with rage. She slings her bow back over her shoulders, returns the Oponri to its sheath, and stomps to join me. She, too, places her fist on her chin, standing proud. The Pulse of àshę between us stutters and then settles. There is no more of her power left to give me. She understands the trouble we're in.

“Champion Oak...”

The gemed-one makes a gesture mocking the now roasting beast. The beast crowd shrieks in what I think is their laughter. He continues

“Will you kill the creature?”

They killed one of their own. If we were to disappoint, we might be imprisoned or killed. Yet.. their plight is the same as ours, a village on the brink of nature. Our Enemy, too... the white cloaks from beyond. Yet there's no trust to be found anywhere on this mountain.

I look at her and motion to the base of my neck. She nods. Under my breath, I mutter the poy of Ignis. There is no flow of àshę from her. There will

be no shield. Worry strikes her face. She knows I will do anything to protect her. I will draw upon my own, untested àshẹ. I shift The Stir to myself, pulling the kindred connection from her. I can feel her heart sink as I sever the tie. I approach the fire and begin.

FROM VANITY OR SPITE
WE DRAW THAT DIVINE CURTAIN
BEHIND WHICH SPARKS; RED AND GOLD
FOR BY ITS MIGHT
THE FEW ARE BE REFINED
WHERE MOST SHALL WRITHE AS THEY'RE
TORN TO ÀSHẸ
STIR WITH MY MIND
THAT I MAY KNOW YOUR FORM
NOUMENA!

The worry on her face turns to panic. She shakes her head and yells. The beasts roar again. Slowly, I reach into the fire, flames of my own, seep from my arm. They join and repel the heat. I grab the blade deep in the burning beast and lift my flaming arm and sword into the air.

“Vanquish this creature, I shall! Then, the mages! The hawk does not catch flies.” Only a part of my boast is genuine.

Another roar from the crowd of beasts as I agree to play the role of their hero. I look at her. She bears the face of disappointment our Mafath would yield like a knife to our throat. She will come to understand I secure our survival. At the command of my àşhe, I beckon the fire away but it has a mind of its own.

The flames turn to trails of smoke. The heat sinks into my arm. Then pain. A scrape like that of a blade dragged against skin forms on my arm. They bend and connect from my hand to my arm. A small leak of blood begins as quick as it ends. Then, behind the ridges of raised skin, a rubied glow like that of embers.

I clench my fist around the hilt of the sword at my side, then pound my chest to keep the confidence of the beast clan. Through grinding teeth, the sear and its pain work through my skin and the damn of my tongue. I grunt. The burn spreads to my face. My skin twists and peels. Tears of pain distort my

sight, they fall into the wounds gathering in my face. I cannot stop. I continue my boast

“No mage will be left on this earth. Their illusions. Their deceptions. Will end. They will all buuurnnn.”

Their roar heightens to a shrill pitch. The pain dims, but the fire stays—burning, spreading slowly within me. Oberon comes to my side, unaware of the price for my hasty display. I can’t rely on Seywa, but I must protect her.

“Come, hero. Meet the mountain you must. Then you must heal, then Fight.”

The crowd of beasts breaks. Seywa walks up and slaps me, glaring into my eyes. She’s right, I’ve been selfish. Losing myself would mean losing her. I have made The Choice, and now I am burn for it. I feel a pull on my burning arm. Then, as a soft and cold touch, the sensation of relief stays the fire in my arm. I look down to my side to see Her. But there’s an absence in the place of my expectation. I hold my arm up to my eyes. The white of exposed bone and shifting sinew glows a faint blue. The unsourced light works some healing; staying the burrow of flame. A

touch on my other arm. I wrest my arm away at the soft touch. I turn and glare. It is Seywa, she steps back in the fear I've stricken in her. A shame sets. I reach out slowly to her.

"I'm sorry."

The crowd of beasts thins. The chief approaches us, and motions to the black mirrored stone a hundred steps away from us. Above us, it waves the picture of the fire around the frozen battlefield as if threatening to thaw it. The sear on my arm deepens beyond the glowing aid. I hold it as he leads us to this mirror stone with my *Mute* walking beside me. She sighs, releasing her scowl. We approach the mirror column towering above us.

I look to it and see face an outlander beyond my ken. The fine root dyes Mafath used for our clothes have all but been stolen by the frost winds. My brawn, lessened from the lack of feast and true rest. The fire from The Stir had burned my face, leaving rough and scarred skin in patches. The braids of my hair hanging loose, threadbare, and scorched. My lips have peeled back, keeping my teeth bared as fangs. My brow is tight. My gaze is now wide, empty,

tethered to fear. I try to bring warmth back to my face. I look worse for it. A look like the blood hunger of a deepwood warg. I cannot break it from my face. Both the mountain and magic have twisted me.

The reflection of fire bends our likeness and everything around us. Then we see deep green behind the black, a shining black muck shifting like a mudsnake.

The Chief's body suddenly becomes rigid mid-stride. The whirling light of his eyes lifts from its sockets, stretching like garments taken by the wind. The lines sink into the stone as if being drank by it. His body now a statue echoes

“Show you... mage... monster...”

I follow his word and look more intently at the reflection of fire. In my arm, the burn from The Stir shifts from warmth to a sear. The image of the fire spatters down until it's a single tail of smoke lined with embers, and from it a vision.

From the dormant fire a burst of flame in a wave of every color. The flames freeze keeping their shape, then shatter. Emerging from the shards is a horrid bird, our enemies the white cloaks in tow. The

bird breaks from its flight, landing then releasing a mighty caw. Its beady red eyes shook under its stern brow. Its beak is narrow but angled like a blade. Its wingspan glows in an icy black fire. The arch of its neck perched high above its wings. It takes off.

Under its beating wings, the raging fire and eyeless ones appear in a scene of great strife. The beasts do battle with the mages. They lob their spells at the beasts, only maiming some while taking the lives of others. They advance through the village, putting down any resistance with ease.

The Chief's voice continues now in an unbroken cadence as if remembering how to speak.

"Ten moons ago, the wizened set upon us." Oberon's voice continues, now unbroken in cadence.

"They summoned the monster, placing it in our stores for the harsh winter."

The stone column now shows a smaller group of mages guiding three beasts to make an inscription on the floor of an ice cavern. The white cloaks hold out their crystals, and whisper quiet poys. Against its walls lie a large mound of carcasses from small

mountain creatures, pots filled to the brim with lushberries, and dried bundles of thistlewhick.

As the beasts finish the starry symbol on the floor, a black bubbling mass fills the space they've cut into it. The bird's wings stretch out of the floor. It rises, releasing a warning caw. The white retreat to the opening of the den, holding their crystals out at the beasts giving them a choice to die by claw or spell. The mages making their mistake force a group of beasts on the outside of the stores to reseal it with heavy wood slabs. Their eyes whirl black as the screams of their kin can be heard ringing beyond.

"Then they left us to die. It is your task to fell the beast Champion Oak."

Three beasts met their end with this creature. How am I to overcome it alone? She has no àşhe for her spells. The best of our sigils are broken... Everyone but the sigil of Ignis ruptured from my skin by the white cloak's attacks. We can set a new one or rely on my whisper wolves. Even if we did, I risk being lost to The Stir or losing all sense if I rely on my àşhe again.

Strands of white light leave the stone, returning the view to our shadows against the raging fire. The Chief's eyes relight. His voice returns to the pace of ice.

"We don't have... time.... Come... eat... then fight"
Oberon stutters again.

A hand that nudges mine breaks my focus. I look behind me. My seywa stands with wide eyes and points to the mirrored stone. Behind her, the bonfire in the cavern is burning as it was before, now absent of its roar and dark color. Yet, the mirrored stone keeps both in its depiction. She walks back towards the mirrored stone behind me. Oberon's eyes brighten as she approaches the stone and rests her palm against it. The flow and pulse of aşhe return in a surge. Her heart beats once again with my own. A boon to aid us in the task ahead. I take a moment to offer a word of prayer to Skelh and Heno. She looks up at me and joins with a smile.

Then, from the lively reflection of the fire's pitch, an echo of a deep song emerges-the same song from when I was pulled beneath The Stir while casting Aegis. Its cadence is similar to the dirge of the eyeless

around the fire, but softer in tone. I make out some of the words:

...wings
A writ.....
Transgressed...
..... the... flame
Beyond.....
a city...
beneath

The image of the fire spins into a whirlpool of color. The wail turns into a screech like a thousand hawks. Then, there was a shadow of a winged woman, surrounded by clouds, in water. Her hands hold her swaying face as she leans forward on her knees. I recognize it as the same pose the mages took when reciting their poys.

The shadow of the woman shakes like a child crying in loving arms. I cover my ears, but the sound doesn't stop. This may be an illusion from the *unknown known*. Seywa rests her hand against the stone. Where her hand lies, a shimmer of all color, hovers around her hand. The cry becomes

a whimper. The figure leans back and extends her arm reaching to Seywa. She collapses to the ground, and then the image of the woman fades. The stone returns to a true reflection, and our restoration of àshẹ fades.

I rush to her side and pick her up. She is sleeping.

“What did... it show you... tell you...?” the chief asks me.

“A fire of many colors like the shimmer of your fur. A woman in water... crying a song.”

“It.. speaks to you.... You are our Hero.”

Oberon walks us back towards the village. I follow him for a few steps, then peer back at the mirror one last time.

An image of myself before the trials of the mountain stands watch. Color has returned to his clothes, to his face, thickness to his braids and size to his stature. He looks at me, raising his fist to his chin. He nods before sinking back into the black of the stone.

The magic of this place is ancient and un-aquired. The memory of Meister Immaun’s words cut through the cold that has slowed my mind: “Every spell a signifier.” Magic came to Seywa

through the so-called Order of Lamia, who declared they had “ungnarled the root” of our people; making us more receptive to magic and pliant to their schemes. They taught us to work the *known unknown* through “devotion and study.”

The letter and verse of their tongue self-professed as “common.”

The charts of the stars they claimed had revealed their names to them upon their request.

Their many measures of water, fire, soil, and wind.

These sigils, she’s laid into my skin and the poys I recite on her behalf.

This mountain bleeds with the magics without a name; the *unknown known*. Here, magic twists souls and mires one in illusion. I look up at the frozen war of wings, wondering what spell The Stir cursed them with.

She is warm and snug in my arms. I hold her tight, being careful not to wake her, and catch up to Oberon. We walk through huts made of mud and wagon wood. The stench of the guts of field beasts hang on the air as we pass their place of eating.

The grating of iron as the butcher beast sharpens its cleave. Oberon's scaly finger extends:

"Eat and war here."

Looking closer, I notice a trove of broken blades beside the butcher. Moss and rot hang between the thick planks of chest wood. The blades bend like moon slivers; few are straight, and all have been taken by rust—unlike the black blade I pulled from the fire.

"Any weapon yours" growled Oberon, but the black blade will suffice.

The huts grow thicker as we move on. I peek into one as we pass. Their dwellings are not all that would be wished. From the lack of materials, their beds look to be made from their silty fur. A familiar scent of soil and hay stays with me throughout the village, reminding me home.

We round the corner of the huts to a makeshift pen. A sheep bucks its way over as if excited to see Oberon. No delight crosses his face. Still, he bends down and runs the flat of his claws through its fur, carefully removing clods of dirt and wood scraps. He's delicate as driftwood but strong as the sun.

How the Oberon tended to the sheep with a scowl reminded me of our Mafath. One spring, I'd held the newly born falwn in my hands before them with pride. They told me if I were to walk the vast trim of our farm, every day for the first year of its life, I would become the strongest of all our people. The falwn grew larger each leaf-cycle, testing my might and endurance.

Each day, she would watch me while honing her arrow's aim. She'd insult me with her mad wit if I stumbled, often tapping my forehead condescendingly. Sometimes, she'd fly arrows to my feet to keep me alert. Some days, I felt like a coward. Others, I would boast to others about my task.

My body broke and renewed. My own growth kept pace with it as if spurred by damage done to it. On the final day, I set my steed down; I'd made myself a man.

Mafath said I'd attract myself a half to become whole like them one day. They revealed they had played the Lion's trick on me. Every man of our tribe went through The Task before The Joining. The Order of Lamia had forbidden both. In defiance,

Mafath still prepared me for it with the first rite. They took Mafaz' tongue, then life for it.

In The Task, I'd found my resolve and strength, but now, here in this cave, I feel a question in every move of my hand. The same steed that gave me strength was now lying strewn across the jagged rocks of the mountain. How light she is in comparison, but all the heavier to bear. A voice breaks my focus.

"Oak... here food.." it said like a whining child.

Startled, I shift a foot back, and my boot slips on the grit of the soil. I save my balance with a hop. A beast half the height and as my Seywa. Gray fur lighter than the rest of the eyeless. Its socket light spins at a hectic pace, the lines of light are like a nest of hastily bundled twigs. His body shakes like a sword forced back from the shield. A tan wood bowl, lay in his hands peeling from age and use. Inside slithers a mix of live lufabugs and cavern grubs. Their sweet slimes meets my nose as the young beast offers us a meal.

Bugmash. A food I know. During late fall, when the rains would come, my seywa and I would move

the hen cages inside. At dawn, their crow would wake us. We'd shake at the frigid air biting our skin, thinking it was the most we'd ever feel of cold. We'd ride over the foggy hills and shallow streams to the entrance of the deep woods. The boughs were dark and still as the silence before the sunrise. We'd walk barefeet into their mud.

The dancing weight of our soles would raise bugs to the topsoil. I'd hand what I'd found to her, and she'd drop them in a sack she'd sewn from the dried roots of waltzgrass. The grubs would nibble on a layer of stems on our trek back. The floating aspect would become more potent. We'd mash and dry them, then wait for spring. We'd eat them and fly together through the fields.

But these bugs were plain. We need the energy. Before I could grab one, she swiped the bowl from my face. I watch with a smile as they burst between her tongueless chew. She needs them more than me. I feel ashe return between us.

The young, eyeless one puffs out its chest in jealousy, pointing to me as if issuing a command.

"Bugmash... for champion Oak... not Mute!"

My *mute* sticks her half-tongue out, goading the beast, who darts towards her. I shoot out my arm requiring the beast's return but with it, the burning sensation deepens. I bite my tongue, doubling the pain. The beast tames itself, stopping its squirm. It's eyes droop. It falls to a seated position and pouts like her when she doesn't get her way.

"Oak... become strong.... Like you." he pouts, defeated by my gentle grasp.

A tinge of pity shakes in my chest. One that quiets the burn still kept in a faint blue glow. Then, a borrowed and sickened remorse sets deep. I'm made a fool again for my care for this creature. If the beasts turn on me after killing this creature, would this one join them?

"What is your name?" I ask with surprise that I have.

"Gem!"

I hadn't thought to ask any other beasts their name. What has moved me to have this grace? It is no wonder.

“A great name. Gems are precious; most are fragile, but all hold àşhe.” She says in my voice with a smile force upon me.

Then, like a crack of Levin, I know. Another curse. I turn to glare at her. She laughs while another grub tries to weasel out from her teeth, it splits beneath them as she smiles. A red juice, the look of blood streaks down her chin. She uses what little àşhe she has regained to deepen my care— thinking it of more importance than our survival. Gem jumps in a place like a field flea. Gem grabs a stick from the ground, holds it up, and shouts.

“Oak! Oak! Oak! Oak!”

Gem thrusts his mocking sword into the dirt, then raising folded claws under his chin yelled:

“I AM OAAAAAK”

Gem dances around, then runs to a nearby crate. He grabs a vase and hands it to Seywa. Their laughs lay over each other into a grating sound that shakes my ears. In her distraction I grab the bowl from her, take a fist full of bugs, and shove them in my mouth. A burst of bug juice escapes from my lips and showers them. A mistake. They act in jest as if I’ve injured

them, holding their hands to their bodies as if burned by a breath of fire. The burn remains quiet, as does the now wasted pulse of aşhe. At least I can think with her again.

After the moment of joy is spent, we follow Oberon to the village's edge. We pass through the final group of huts. Few are whole, most are in a state of partial collapse. The weedy roofs have long fallen, none bear the treads of recent breath.

Beyond the village, the cavern turns in on itself. I recognize this next cave's opening from the vision in the mirror stone. It's still blocked by the planks the eyeless set under the threat of their death. I can still hear the bird's trenchant caw mired with the final screams of the beast. The same vine and ice cover. A small amount of time has passed... but many moons were said to have passed since they captured the bird. It is a trap.

My fear has been given shape. The only dire sight the beast wishes to show us is our end. I reach out to her.

The Pulse is just enough to tell her a final ambush may lie ahead. I return my fist to my chin.

“Oberon... we must prepare a spell to fell the beast.”

He nods.

The only untorn sigil on my body left is that of Ignis, but it is the same aspect from which the bird was summoned. It is more likely to harm than heal our foe. She runs up to my side, breaking away from Oberon. From its sheaths she draw Oponri. I bend onto my knee, keeping my eyes trained on the wet rock. I remove my cowl and the wools that now rot of dried blood, tossing them aside.

“Seywa, a new spell.”

She nods, and I brace for the knife’s edge. A moment, then a comforting pain that is nothing to the burn. A cut on the right and upward side of my back. It drags down. It scrapes right. Then zags back and forth a few times. Then, challenging the depth and pain of the burn, it sinks. A wince. A grunt. I will bear these pains to protect her. Now finished, she removes the blade. I stand up and embrace her, for the workings of her magic are not her doing. I hear a

whimper begin, to restore her focus I shift my hands to her shoulders and speak:

“What spell?”

She dries her eyes, folds her hands together, then nestles her head against them at an angle— fluttering her eyes to a shut.

Soma.

She has decided we will put this bird to sleep. This will make it an easy kill. She’s without aşıhe, so there will be no Pulse or Stir unless I use my own. If I do, I risk leaving her alone on this mountain. She is a sure shot with her bow, but we are still many days travel from the descent to the far edge of the mountain, and our supplies are gone.

“Can we rest?” I ask Oberon.

“No time... Last of food... in the stores.”

It is a fight, then. Her arrows and my blade against this bird and beast.

“Will you help us open the cave?”

He nods and we three go to the door.

I must trust that her arrows will fly to their mark and that our knife will tear through wings.

I bend to my knees and lift a heavy stack of crates holding back the crudely fastened boards. Lifting it into the air, it sloshes and shifts. There's liquid in it. I move it off to the side, slowly watching my foot placement. I trip and fall to my side. The rotting wood of the barrel collapses, spilling its dark contents onto the cold stone floor. From the liquid, shards of clay, and rotted wood, grows a bed of flowers. Their various flashes of colors rush through the full cycle of their life; sprout, stem, blossom, then the wither. The liquid freezes to a slick ice on the slope leading up to the cave. The rock bears a small field of dead flowers, now like rotting hair. Seywa helps me stand up on my feet. In the short time since my mistake, Oberon had removed the remainder of the barrels. He stands with his eyeless gaze, looking at us.

"It sleeps... be quiet. Removing boards"

Seywa and I take the left plank while Oberon lifts the right. We watch the sinews under his feathered fur ripple and then bulge to wield the plank alone. Ahead, a dark opening. Oberon ducks under the

ridge and slips into the darkness. Seywa readies her knife with a fire in her eyes that could melt the deepest ice. The fire beneath my skin begins to storm. The faint blue grasp of the invisible hand tightens, holding back the growing sear of pain. We share the nod of wombkin, our brows joining together as Seywa and Brahviya.

We duck as we enter. I bend back the rusted black cleave back as I sink to my knees. A blanket of darkness covers us as we enter. It is thick enough to taste. Ahead, we see the tunnel to the stores bend by the light of Oberon's eyes. He rounds the bend. Then a dazzling flash of white light followed by a wail so severe it shook the cavern and threatened to be the last sound we could hear.

“CHAMPION!!” Oberon beckons me through a roar

I ready my sword, then leap into a sprint. The rusted blade catches the edges of the cavern wall, sending sparks as they twist through the cavern. Under their brief and dim light, I see a glimpse of Seywa as she overtakes my stride. She jumps from the side

of the final curve of the wall into the flashing light. A roar and a clang of steel. I round the corner. I pass through waves of blinking light into the beast's stores.

Now before me, Oberon and Seywa engaged with not a featherfrost phoenix but a ghastly figure glowing a pulsing white, doused in icy flame. It towers in size, even like a spire to the beast chief. The store cavern is tall and narrow, like the hollow neck of a flask. It dons the unmistakable garb of the white cloaks. The train of its robe flutters by the power of some unseen wind. The pulsing misty light bathes the stores' bags, crates, and chests. My fear confirmed that their schemes ran even to the heart of the mountain.

It thrusts an ornate silver rapier, the only thing about it that seems firm upon sight. The blade pierces Oberon's leg, letting fly blood and a horrid howl. He falls backward into thick bags of grain. The press of his fall against the blade tears through the flesh of his leg until it's caught to the bone. Upon the impact of his back against the bag, the dust of which forms a cloud. Seywa lands perched upon the

wraith's long blade. With a fleet of foot, she runs its length, achieving a speed that pries her woofs from her. Her dark skin, now revealed, denies the wraith's light but traces the edges of her lithe figure. She leaps with her blade, plunging it into the neck of the wraith. A shriek. The wraith fails his sword in agony, freeing Oberon from his impalement.

Through the pulsing light, I see the blade's arc seeking to claim me. I raise my sword and catch his spear-like blade in the groove between mine and its hilt. He leans into me with the brunt of his muster. This spirit is light; his only danger is his rambling speed. For the moment, the wraith is stuck against me. Behind the light, I see Seywa's shadow. She hangs from the knife in his neck, with her legs holding her firm against her shoulder. Seywa finally frees the blade from the base of the wraith's neck.

"Seywa, sever the hand!!"

I see her blur like the blitz of the wolf through the fog. She circles around his neck and then slides down the wraith's arm. Then stops at its elbow leaning against the wall, raises the knife into the air, and lets out a bright cry. She plunges the knife into the

wraith. It moves to wrest the blade from my hilt. I turn against its retreat, moving my sword to the ground. The upward pull caught against the angle of its rest. Seywa pulls her full weight against her carve, drawing the cut to the back of the elbow, then falls with the wraith's arm. The wraith shrieks, grabbing the stub of its arm with its free hand's whiny, tendril-like fingers. The pulsing light emitted from the wraith gives way to a sturdy shine. With it, the wraith and its cloth shrinks to the size of a man. The enlarged and severed bony arm leans against the towering roof of the stores, soaking skin and foodstuffs with a slow ooze of blood.

From the cloud of dust and frost, Seywa emerges. She walks without pause to the groveling mage. She draws her bow. Pulling back the string with the ritual blade still in her hand and holds an arrow to his neck.

‘Mercy for me, Holy One. We have much to-’

Her arrow visits his neck. He utters a few coughs before passing into silence.

Oberon's eyes whirl in a flicker. He drags his wide body with his arms and this last working leg to a sprawled sitting position. Sewya and I approach him.

I swipe the knife from her hand. I place my boot into the now frost wound into this accursed beast's leg and hold her knife down towards him. The wraith wound him gravely, but his allegiance with the order is certain.

“Speak, you damned beast! What do you

The gem in Oberon's head begins to pulse with a crimson radiance. The whirl in his eyes turns the same shade. A slither underneath my boot begins. Pulling my foot back, I see blackened sinews rejoin and restore. What magic is at work here? To ponder is peril. I send my knife into the beast's chest. He denies me the relief a death sigh would bring, instead uttering a horrid name.

“Meister...

...Immaun”

Then, a voice without root fills the stores.

“Let what's sewn in stars be made known.
NOUMENA”

I know this as the end of the poy...

For teleportation.....

Oberon kicks Seywa. She slides and spins toward the center of the stores. Oberon unweds our knife

from his chest and then grabs me by the collar of my clothes. I swing the rusted blade into the beast at half-strength. It shatters like the certainty of our safety. I send knee and heel into his side to no avail. Not even a speck of Ashe can be felt from Seywa. I must get free.

“of vanity or spite
we draw-”

His grasp tightens around my neck, halting the poy. Then, a soft and rumbling froth as the blood-soaked appendage of the fallen wraith begins to curdle. Peels of flesh and sinew unstrap from the bone. They fall with a slap to the cold cobble, then boil into a black and bubbling mass. We are granted a small mercy. The horrid sight and stench of blood and rot read to the nose as a smithy. As if cleaned by the bile, the large appendage remains as a pearly white bone. Underneath it, the body of the white cloak sent to dreams by Seywa churns in chorus.

They’re willing to sacrifice their own to get to us.

Then, a light from the black. From it, white cloaks, ten in number, pass into the center of the stores. They enter, each wielding their crescent staff

and robe. They enter and divide themselves 5 on each side of the opening. From their staves, a dull radiance. Then, last, from the soul portal, he arrives. A wispy beard like clouds parted by the wind. A wiry frame gave stature by the heavy silks that hung draped from padded shoulders. A proud and taunting brow. The train of his robe was adorned with silver depictions of stars. An embroidered moon of deeper white against his chest. Many metal-worked sigils hang from chains against the backdrop of white silk against his chest. One I've never seen swings with a crimson light. His hands held together, sceptreless.

Meister Immaun.

Oberon tosses me to his feet. The fire welling beneath my skin begins to rile. The cold grasp set on my hand breaks. A harsh chorus of whispers.

"Do not seek the Stir."

A pain without measure cuts in my arm and behind my face. My very mind seems threatened by smoke. I bend into myself to hold the pain, struggling to think of how to reach Seywa.

He stays with his gaze forward, ignoring the presence of me or anyone in the room he speaks:

“A votary sent beyond for our cause. Speak his name, brethren.”

He speaks with the same dismissive tone he delivered countless lectures to us.

“To dreams, Brother Hyeid!”

The white cloaks slam their staffs as they grunt their fallen brothers' names. Then, scatter to encircle the room. I see their feet plan firmly, each an equal length apart. I know this placing of souls. A ritual. The Meister takes a wailing tone, and his mages answer each call in unison:

“Brethren, the time to claim our wings is surely upon us.”

“Let us return home by their flight.”

They answer each call in unison.

“Brethren, name the debt.”

“A tide of blood beneath the Stir”

“And born from the one born braided.”

“The scourge, The Jokulhaups”

“You’ll suffer my tutelage a final time, boy.”

His tone softens to insult me despite the chasm between our stature. He kicks my face. I’m made to taste blood, but the pain pales in comparison to

the fire within. He spits on my face. A mercy, as the spittle offers a drop of respite.

“Stand. You must die to awaken the power of your *Seywa*.”

Another roar from Oberon. I see the approach of his legs. I bend my head upward on the floor. There, my Seywa lies silent next to the pile of poor Hyeid’s pristine bones. I close my eyes to search for The Pulse of àshẹ. There is none. She is not here to chide me. She won’t hear my poy.

I anchor my rise with my knees. Immaun shifts away towards her. He mutters his poy for healing, and a green light bathes her. She sits up, dazed. I call to her.

“Seywa!”

A cut across my face as Oberon slashes me with the ritual blade. I roll back to make distance. I shake as I rise. I have no choice. I’ll die by their hand or The Stir’s. I extend my arms and focus on the sigil for

FROM VANITY OR SPITE
WE DRAW THAT DIVINE CURTAIN

BEHIND WHICH SPARKS; RED AND GOLD

Oberon waves Oponri, seeking a strike. I stumble away from its travels, only some visit their marks across my skin. The last strands of my mind begin to stretch and tear. I must hold on for her.

FOR BY ITS MIGHT
THE FEW ARE BE REFINED
WHERE MOST SHALL WRITHE AS THEY'RE
TORN TO ÀŞHĖ

Seywa watches, not her own, as Immaun keeps her will at bay with his green light. My death may fulfill their aims, but I must protect her. Forgive me...

STIR WITH MY MIND
THAT I MAY KNOW YOUR FORM
NOUMENA!

I summon nor command a torrent of flame.
The fire consumes me.
I fall to my hands as I burn.

Then I slip beneath The Stir.



The sound of black.

I float down through water that passes through
my lungs like air.

A great valley below is lined with white and gold
spires, marking a city that shines of its own brilliance.

In time, I land.

I wander through halls whose grand columns
stand above me like a mouse to a wagon wheel.

They are empty, I am alone, but the city is perfect.

I find a grand hall. There, Mafath waits for me
with open arms. Have I passed onto dreams?

Their golden hair shines as it did in my youth; last
I saw, it was white.

They take me into their arms. I close my eyes to
savor the warmth. When I open them, I am home.
Mafath pats my head. I am young again. They part
from my side. They lift their stewpot from the fire

and walk to the table. Supper is ready, but I have not told them what happened to Seywa.

"Mafath... I lost Seywa in the deepwoods. The grubs stopped dancing to the surface for her. She went further in, and I couldn't find her."

Mafath drops the iron pot on the table. Its contents splash onto my face. It burns. I wipe the salty broth from my eyes but not the sting. I open my eyes to find myself back in the water city. In the distance, an echo of a song I've heard. The last flight of the embers move past me to see Mafath unjoined. They're now before me as Ma and Fa.

Ma is working her anvil with a curved stone hammer, sparks flying with every strike.

Fa holds a flameless torch, his hand bearing the fire. He does not wince or wail.

The clang of the anvil ceases as Ma poses a question.

"Are your wings for power?"

Fa lowers the torch, extending it to me.

"Are your wings for flight?

But there is nothing I seek from these illusions. I turn
around and, like a rock off of the face of a cliff, fall
back into the perfect black swell of àshẹ

the din

the thing itself

the *unknown known*

I fall until motion is felt as stillness. Then, out of
darkness, she darts out her hands with a wickerlick
bracelet, hovering around her wrist. Cradled in her
hand is a wooden cup at the foot of the bowl of water
wells. It rises of its own accord and from its own
source. It crests the brim. It spills. It falls. It pours
into me.

A pulse like a song. A ripple on a lake. Wind
through trees. A wail.

Then, I become knowledge itself.

The locus of all.

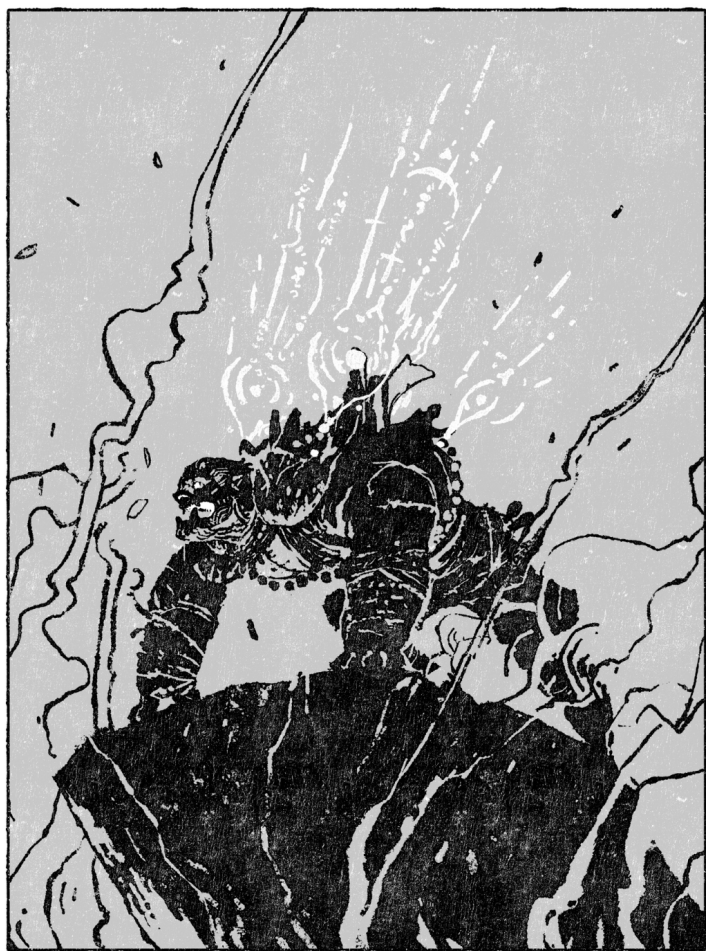
I am endowed with the fire of The Stir.



A sensation beyond agony and bliss.

A flash of **red**.

Liquid flame sputters from every fresh wound the mountain has made, like blood from a bohr struck by a misplaced arrow. My face shakes with a fever beyond the measure of heat. Two teeth sprout from the bottom of my jaw into tusks. Two ruptures of flesh mark my back. The last of my light is drawn from my mind, my love for Seywa, taking the form of wings and a tail. The pain spews from my mouth as more flame. The **orange** burns through the rock and unfortunate flesh. Around me a moat of smog. I perch on all fours.



Oberon flails, attempting to brush off the thick globs of fire that land on his fur. My wings grant me flight without motion; I snatch the knife from his hand and deny him a hero's death. Our blade removes the gem and, with it, life from his body. The beast king's corpse falls back ablaze.

"It is not she who wakens... but you."

Meister Immaun looks upon me with deference where once only disdain would lie. Now mystified, his spell is interrupted. Seywa breaks from his control and staggers away. She sways between the now burning white cloaks. Retrieving her bow, and many arrows spread across the room. Behind him, his entourage ablaze, through hurried and tortured screams, recite their poys for teleportation. Each attempting to sacrifice the other for their escape. Meister Immaun stands with arms outstretched in praise and proclaims

"It is you!"

I think of our village being visited by their fire. Now, a flame will be returned. Now, they must all burn. I will deny their escape. I rise upon motionless wings up into the narrow tube of the stores. I watch

them scurry like grubs in the mud. Liquid fire begins to spew from my mouth, burning. I must focus. I twist down in flight, descending like a river bird fetching fish. I swoop and breathe fire upon a mage one at a time. They writhe and flail, attempting to rid themselves of my fire. Then, the fire grows twice as hot with each flame I expel. The liquid flames rush on as a wave. My wings start to grow. I land.

A flash of **yellow**.

Then, a haunting jubilee from the Meister:

“The colors shall be gathered!”

I ask for it to be returned to me. Then, it becomes known to me. This new fire is my master. The advancing flames taking life of the remaining white cloak underling as silent as wave. His final yell of the twisting flame peels the layers of my mind. The wools start to burn. The wolf pelts on my shoulders howl as they are turned to ash.

A man and woman returned to the wall to avoid my fire. They go one by one, slithering along like grubs escaping my grasp. To game before their end, I oblige. The savor of fresh grubs flailing on my tongue. A taste, I know. A taste of home...

Of home... of Seywa...

Their names return through the flame. Immaun grabs Seywa by the *dadajata* so revered, and pulls her to him. He grabs the ritual knife and angles it to her throat. He then slips away through the cavern back to the village of the eyeless.

The stone melts as ice as I advance in pursuit of Immaun. I burrow through the wall with ease. I do not kneel or crawl as I did to get into the stores. The stone around me boils into a thick ooze from which the dwarves themselves are said to spawn. Perhaps Immaun will become a dwarf in The Return. I'll give his soul to the mountain to decide.

The stone vapors turned to billow of smoke as the last of the magma flows down. I exit the cavern to the stores. The flowers covered in the spilled liquid in a blanket of frost thaw then singe by my presence. Ahead down the way Immaun scurries yanking and prodding Seywa towards the beast encampment. The eyeless pour out of hut and hole to see the flame as she cries.

Every curl of my flesh is undone by fire.

Green tails of flame now break upwards, scraping the cavern's ceiling. Globbs of magma drip, taking stone and limb. The line of huts wither and fade to ash. Some of the eyeless don't escape my advance. Their wails silenced by my flames.

Heat bends my vision as if a river flows before me. Through its veil, I see Seywa arrive at the bonfire of the eyeless, Immaun and his minion wrestling to keep her captured. Gem emerges from the thicket of the eyeless. He bounds the bonfire and scales the white cloak, shredding skin and silk as he climbs towards their neck.

“FOR MUTE”

His claws sink into its next, claiming their life with a splatter. Gem then twists and kicks Immaun away, granting Seywa her freedom from Immaun. Our Meister displays his cowardice by reciting the poy for teleportation. A shine emits from the chained sigil around his neck. The fell mage's corpse bubbles black like a carrion visited by many nights at once. With confidence, he declares before being spirited away into the black.

“Your wings shall be ours, Oak.”

Unlike the coward Immaun, I cannot withdraw my fire. **Blue** wreaths of flame coil around me like a swarm of bloodbugs, then flow forward. The fire approaches her, threatening to engulf her and the eyeless. Through the faint blue glint of my fire, Seywa advances towards me fearless. Behind her, the remaining eyeless gathered as if they were her true tribe. She will be safe here if I can leave.

Seywa draws her last two arrows from her quiver, a glint of fire in her eyes, a fire purer than the one around me. Her eyes do not shake as she runs the arrowheads roughly against her hand. The shaved stone is now marked with her blood. The final rite of Shijukadi is to dip your weapon in blood before the kill. Our people's sign for killing with respect. She'll grant me the death the white cloaks denied us. She is right to end me here. The fire will take the last scraps of my mind. I will see all as foe and be consumed by its anguish, becoming a beast myself.

She readies her aims at me. Maybe she can be safe here under the mountain. If I fade to dreams, will the mages stop their search? Seywa knows best. She flies her arrows.

They glide past me, tearing off my wings. The agony is a relief. The march of flame retreats towards me; she keeps pace with its retreat, drawing near to me, Gem in tow. . only 6 strands of flame, each of a different color, circle around me. Seywa holds out her blade towards me. I fall to my knees as she arrives. I bow so she won't see my eyes when she does it.

She stands before me in my cage of six colors. A warmth in my chest deeper then the raging blaze within sets. It is one that reminds me of the àshę that used to pulse between us. The symbol of my bond of protection for her. A pulse of my love. I hear a but do not feel the shaking cling of metal. I look up. With a face of perfect resolve, she's drawn her knife to her shoulder, and taps it. She is reminding me of her freshly laid scribe for the sigil of sleep.

It was never meant for bird or beast—it was meant for me. She knows I am unmoving as the stone that now boils by my flame; melting me for her use the same.

I recall the poy but only utter bile in the place of speech. I cough. Then, try to speak. Only the grunts

of the field beast leave my lips. I try to move them right, but tusks like those of hog beasts prevent their closure. I draw my hands to my face. They're swollen with the dark green of the deepwoods. Wrinkles as if I've known twice the number of moons I've lived. Sharp spikes where my nails were. The flame of the Stir is not done with me. Before my sight, a flicker of **purple** fire, royal as the sashes of The King of Fuhl whose justice we seek. Seywa began to pace backward. Gem cradled her leg, and she slipped back. The bellow of fire turns in my stomach. It scorches my belly and throat as it rises uncontrolled. I can't prevent its escape. A froth spills on the ground before me. Then, a beam of fire flies from my maw, devouring Seywa in a blinding light.

I've failed her.

A falwn fell to my arrow meant for its father.

Seywa taken by my own hands...

A deafening deluge of flame, a blaze from every crease and fold of sinew and skin left. A gate beyond dreams has opened. The Stir pours through me, burning away the last traces of my being in a hardened husk. It may consume me.

My fire summons the battle from the depths of time, and that war of wings once again carries on. The mayhem and majesty of a painting given the breath of life. The confused neighs as steeds are woken from slumber. A thaw of peeling blades and war-cry was loud enough to drown the roar of my fire, ringing through the cavern. The steeds are first to wrest themselves from the dying frost. They plummet from the melting ice. The splatter to the scalding stone, their splinters of bone tear through flesh. Their brittle white reflecting my fire. They collapse upon trying to get balance on their hooves. They scrape and slip on their red spill.

Those with wings are borne from the ice next. Some try to open their wings, but they're kept closed by the ice. They plummet to the rock, shattering their wings. A mournful dirge like the chants of the eyeless pours from their mouth where a scream would lie for any creature. The others are favored by luck. They slip from the frost like a bird from a branch with a dart. They stretch their wings into a quick and steady glide. They leer down at the few flightless soldiers who wander dazed and unaware of

the prey above. The winged ones shriek and then swoop. Their blades are a greater menace being encased in ice. All this resentment surfaced by my fire. Soldier, winged creature, and steed alike are turned to soot as they fall towards me. The injured on the ground greet me with smiles. Time only stalled their feud, but their chaos is consumed by my fire. Further, my fire stretches, consuming the crag above, revealing the star webbed sky and a full moon.

I must leave this place. A march of many moons lies ahead. I must travel down the mountains through the barren elven woods, then through the peaceful plains into The Kingdom of Fuhl.

I will seek and destroy their many hidden conclaves throughout Fuhl myself if the King refuses aid. Every tome or symbol of their knowledge will be turned to ash.

So on I must go. Even if the mark of flame takes my mind; I will remember. Even if the last of my skin becomes cinders on the wind. Even if I waste away to an effigy of burning bone, I will avenge Seywa. I've spilled her blood. I will repay it in kind.

My wish for vengeance is cut low by a song. Its the wailing voice of the mirror stone now shaking from the mountain's depths free from its weight, cuts from the air. Ahead of me, a flickering orb of faint blue light approaches me at a walking pace. No tricks of the mountain or mages will stop me. I let another beam of light free from my maw. It rebounds at an angle directly upward into the night sky. It gets closer. I focus my power more. The first surrounding me fluttering randomly is all drawn to the beam. It grows in width and fervor. Around me, a field of perfect white skeletons as white as the full moon above. Then, wail becomes a song. In a voice, I remember.

AS EACH FRAY OF TWINE

SO, TOO, DO OUR LIVES UNWIND

The words of the poy of sleep fills the night sky. The sky is outlined with a bowl of rock that remains from the mountain cavern. Where is this voice coming from? Flakes drift around moonbeams as my tails of flame ascend. When they meet, a kiss steals their rarity. Each edge, curve, and nook of frost, concealed to the eye, is unmade by my fire and twisted to tears

on my face. They only fell as a mist above the pyroclasm.

I focus my fire. I must rid this enemy. The beam deepens its white hue. The brilliance of the beam bounding off the blue shield bounces upward into the heavens, stealing the stars from the sky.

*WE'RE AT OUR BEST
WHEN WE VISIT DEATH
BY THE MOON'S COMMAND*

The shield begins to shatter but it still advances all the same. I'm certain it's a white cloak. Maybe Immaun has returned to take his prize. With the last of my energy, I push my fire to its limit.

*THAT WHEN WE MARRY IT
AND JOIN AS ONE
WE WON'T WONDER
WHAT DREAMS MAY COME*



My beam of light
disappears from me and the
blue orb shield shatters. Its
shards releasing a faint blue,
yet blinding light. From it
the souls of Salfa and
Bravor walk to me. Their
simple smiles seem to
quench what's left of my
flame.

"Forgive us... for forgetting
the ways of our people Oak.
You must find this justice
you seek." Bravor speaks.

Salfa rests her hand on my
shoulder with a firm and
smacked grip.

"Take care of her."

They accept Esinowa, their
light disappearing from the
mountain for the beyond.

Emerging from the light of our departed ancestors, Seywa now stands before me. Her hair completely singed from the flame but unharmed otherwise. Gem shakes behind her, still cradled to her leg as before. A perfect silence falls upon the scene of carnage in a smoldering crater we now find ourselves in. With the surge of heat from me gone, the gentle snow falls again. I hear each flake melt on my hard and ridged skin with a sizzle. Seywa's expression is twisted with pain and joy; tears well upon her face, and she freezes. Lips shut together, quivering. I hear the voice of the mountain speak in Seywa's voice, her mouth still shut.

STIR WITH MY MIND
THAT I MIGHT NOW YOUR FORM

But she cannot speak. I must have lost my mind to the fire. Her voice restores much of what has been lost in our ordeal of frost. The deeper warmth draws ice to my eyes. Then, for the first time in hours that seemed to drag with the force of ages, the flow of her

àşhe returns. The pain from the fire is released into glittering white.

The sigil on my back glows and sears with the mere pain of a bloodbug bite. It is a tinge of true fire that sends a wave of relief as I crash backward onto the ground, looking up at the night sky. The stars have returned in the absence of my light. The moon is fixed into my sight as my vision. The mages may still come for her after I leave this plane. They may try to make her slip under The Stir to grant them wings. At least she'll deny them of mine.

NOUMENA!

My vision narrows as I am cast to sleep. She grants me this final grace to avoid the pain. I see Seywa approach with . She readies our blade with a shifty grip to take my life. As she plunges the blade into my skin, it glints with the moonlight. I slip into the realm of dreams.

- Ecpyrosis -

Quest Vol. 1

END

...and as each member of his court

becomes the fiend that they resent

any virtue they proclaim

becomes as sand

NEXT

The King and the Witch

Cyrus Wendell, author of the Quest series, is a lifelong learner who enjoys staying informed on scientific advancements in technology and space, fueling new ideas for his writing. His interest in history and philosophy provides a deep foundation for the intricate worlds he creates. In his spare time, he enjoys playing 4X and resource management games, which complement his love for crafting complex and thoughtful narratives.



When not writing, Cyrus tends to his garden of fruit trees, drawing inspiration from nature's tranquility. He is also an enthusiastic cook, known for the large meals he prepares for friends. At home, Cyrus lives with his black cat, Eric, whose playful demands for attention ensure there's always something to keep him on his toes. With the first book of his Quest series, *An Ordeal of Frost*, Cyrus looks forward to drawing readers into a compelling world filled with rich characters and their adventures.