



GIRL & GOLEM

A Shadow Puppets Story

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"The most powerful weapon on earth is the human soul on fire."

- Ferdinand Foch

"She wanted to eat my heart and be lost in the desert with what she'd done, she wanted to fall on her knees and give birth from it, she wanted to hurt me as only a child can be hurt by its mother."

- Denis Johnson, Jesus' Son

Part 1: The Girl

The realms of men contend that in the beginning there was nothing; women have always known better. Creation requires ideation, ideation requires inspiration, and inspiration requires the spark of magic.

Chapter 1: The Festival of Shadows

Loba

Loba could always feel the magic in the air come festival time.

The prettier boys in their flower crowns trying to win the affections of the more influential young women. The scent of fire-powder and spiced meats wafting from bustling shops. The grunts of sweaty laborers erecting the stage in the village square. And under it all, the electric current of children coming of age and choosing their path.

Loba never forgot that feeling; she felt it again every year, as if for the first time; though her own Choosing was long since passed.

But the Choosing itself didn't take place until Senday, the final day of the Festival of Shadows. Today, Fyrday, was the day the village heard the Mage's Tale, and she got to tell it. Afterward, on an Ascension Year like this one, the Mage-to-be would take her vows.

This one day of the year, Loba mattered. She intended to relish every exhausting minute of it.

She eyed the light coming through her cottage window. By the angle of the sun's rays filtering through the amber resin, she had time to be lazin' a bit yet. Though she was supposed to head to town early this year. Bugger all.

She mutinously snuggled into her down pillow and yawned widely. Her jaw hitched and sounded off like a bang snap. Just about all her joints crackled these days, but the jaw bothered her.

Sometimes it happened on stage. Surely no one else heard it. But it always made her lose the thread for a moment. It was a dangerous thing to lose track in the middle of a story. Reminded folks she was getting on in years.

"As if they needed reminding," she muttered to no one in particular, stretching her bowed legs till her ankles popped, too.

Finally, she rose creakily from her cramped bed in all her hunched glory. Tiny as she was, it came up past her navel when she stood beside it.

On any other day, she'd have struggled to do up the covers for nigh on ten full minutes; huffing and puffing and sweating from the exertion. But today she didn't bother.

Today was festival day!

"Hang the chores," she tittered gleefully.

Loba threw open her closet with the clatter of loose wooden slats. The velvet brocade tailcoat hung heavy and elegant in pride of place. She'd moved it to the front of her closet last night for this very moment.

The moment did not disappoint.

She lifted it out and gently laid the iridescent fabric on her bed. She'd donned the same jacket every year for as long as she could remember but it never lost its luster.

If there were loose threads around the lower two buttons, or a scuff on a shimmery tail from sitting to draw her audience into a particularly dramatic moment, Loba couldn't see them.

She shook out the crimson leggings that complemented the tails. The crushed suede had been dyed with some skittering nasty the tailor collected from the woods. He always grouched when she needed to have them re-colored. Gathering the buggos gave him the shivers. Thinking of such a task gave her the shivers too, come to that.

But they were glorious trousers.

Loba maneuvered herself onto her back and pulled them on with a grimace. She'd never gained a pound in her life, but lately her middle had begun to sag in a way that chafed at the waist of some of her less-forgiving bottoms.

She gingerly wrestled her way back to standing, slid her arms into the silky lining of the coat, and pulled on her fur-trimmed boots.

Knotting the leather laces at her knees, Loba straightened her spine and grinned wickedly. Twenty years had melted off her face by the time she'd righted herself.

She didn't look like a doddering old woman in this getup. There wasn't a hint of the pitiful crone the Cabinet was waiting to bury. Looking at her now, you'd could see beyond the wretched, feeble waif who'd lost daughters, and lovers, and friends to the jackal of time.

She looked like a storyteller, and she knew it.

Loba thought that knowledge might just carry her through every energetic hour of this festival. But for now, she just needed it to carry her to the village square.

"Come on boots," she trilled, "let's get dusty."

She headed through her round door and out into the crisp, Spring air. Her boots played satisfying clack-tocks against the cobbled street.

"Loba, a word," rang out a cold, clear voice that nearly made the storyteller miss a step. She turned stiffly to find it's owner.

A short wiry woman with quick, liquid eyes thundered toward her. Loba wished she'd left earlier.

Yvaine, the Chair of the Cabinet of the Village of Light, did not like Loba. The feeling was mutual. All things honest, Loba was a bit afraid of her.

She moved with an eerie grace that belied the savage violence her temper occasionally gave way to. Her shrewd mind wielded a sharp tongue, but she knew when to be charming too. She was a good leader, for the most part. But Loba felt danger all around Yvaine. It clung to her like a mist; a pheromone of menace.

Loba gave a respectful curtsy. "I ent late. I'm early this year, as you asked."

She had a good two inches on Yvaine, but she always felt small in her presence. Just now, she squirmed under her regard.

"I can see that," Yvaine said curtly. Then, as if her conscience had pinched, her she added more warmly, "Thank you."

Loba waited for Yvaine to continue. But a sort of tense silence dragged out. She wondered suddenly if she'd been meant to acknowledge the thanks. Well, it had been too long now. She shifted uncomfortably.

For being in such an all-fire hurry to get to her, Yvaine was certainly not spitting out the word she'd wanted to have with Loba. She was even chewing her lips, like to keep that word in.

If Loba had ever seen Yvaine struggle for words before, she'd eat her boots. Even stranger, the Chair's eyes darted all about, as if checking to be sure that they were alone.

Mistress Earth, and her baby moon, Yvaine was nervous. This quiet revelation deeply unsettled Loba.

"Have you met the girl?" Yvaine asked finally. "The Mage-to-be?"

Loba furrowed her brow, she had. "Aye, sad little thing."

"Weak." Yvaine corrected her.

Loba didn't think that was strictly fair. Nedra of Iris would be sixteen at Midnight, and she was hurtling toward a horrible experience. Few would seem strong in such a situation.

"She's just a girl," she chided.

Yvaine hiked an eyebrow toward her hairline. "The current Mage was 'just a girl' when she ascended. I don't remember anyone ever referring to her as a 'little thing' in all her days."

"Well, no! Who would have dared?" Loba laughed. The current Mage had been a savage child. "But Iris was—"

"That's exactly my point! Iris was, is, and ever shall be twice the Mage Nedra could be; twice the woman!" By the end of this pronouncement, Yvaine was nearly shouting.

Loba gogged at her, "So?"

"So?"

"So what?" Loba asked, exasperated. "She's what we've got to work with. She's our only option."

“Is she?” Yvaine asked darkly.

It was an ugly insinuation. Loba knew what she was trying not to allude to. The uncharacteristic flush in Yvaine’s cheeks betrayed her meaning.

If Iris’ heir died before midnight on her sixteenth birthday, Iris would be the Mage for another sixteen years. She’d beget a new heir and live to see forty-eight. It had happened once, before Loba’s time. But that had been an accident.

“What... what do you want me to say?”

Yvaine blew out a gust of breath and threw an arm up in a gesture that communicated the closest thing to helplessness Loba thought she might be capable of.

“I suppose I want... reassurance,” she admitted, quietly. “You’ve served seven Cabinets in sixty years.”

“Fifty-eight!”

“Fifty-eight,” Yvaine amended sardonically. “Nedra will be the fifth Mage you’ve seen ascend.”

“Fourth.”

“The fifth mage you’ve known.” Yvaine growled.

“I was ten years old when Alethia’s miss-”

“The FOURTH then!” Yvaine cried, clenching her fists.

Loba recoiled. There were seven women in Yvaine’s Cabinet now. But there were supposed to be eight. She remembered all too well the day that number had been reduced. It was something of a scandal.

In a fit of pique, Yvaine had broken the Chair of Commerce’s nose with the heel of her hand. It was a vicious break that changed the woman’s face forever. After that, no one had wanted to take her seat, so it had remained empty.

It was whispered that Yvaine had done this publicly on purpose, to deliver a message: her patience was not to be tested.

“I have known three Mage’s. Very well.” Loba said quickly. “But I’d not claim to know Nedra well, not as yet.”

“Does she seem... worthy?” Yvaine asked wearily, the anger fading as quickly as it had risen.

Loba hesitated, but finally said, “Her path is thorny and uphill, but her miss has lit the way.”

Yvaine’s lips pursed, “Yes but she must Choose to walk it.”

“Well, what’s her alternative?” Loba asked.

It had been a rhetorical question, but Yvaine answered her.

“If she veers from the path, she could be lost to the Woods.”

Loba spluttered, “That’s, I mean to say, Yvaine, that’s a horror story. You don’t really believe-“

“Of course not,” Yvaine rubbed her temple. “It’s ridiculous, of course. But I’ll feel better once she’s taken her vows and can no longer leave the village.”

Loba did not want to correct Yvaine, so she didn’t. But, if the legend were true... if the girl Chose to forsake her destiny and leave them unprotected...

According to that particular story; the spook’s tale, she corrected herself, the fable; the woman walked away, her vows so much ash in her mouth.

But that one wasn’t like the stories Loba told in the square at the festival. It hadn’t been passed down from lips to ears the way The Mage’s Tale or the Song of the Beasts Beyond the Wall had.

It had been written down. In a book. And nary a flame could burn its pages. It was magic, sure sure. But not the magic that grew from the Spark. It was far older than that. From the time of men.

Loba felt Yvaine’s eyes boring into her. She looked up and started. “Sorry, gathering wool.”

“Keep my concerns to yourself, if you would.” It was not a request.

“Of course!” Loba prattled, “I’d not breathe a word.”

“See that you don’t. You’re getting on, Sistra. No one would be surprised if you kissed dawn.” Yvaine flashed her teeth in something that was not quite a smile.

Loba put a gnarled hand on her hip. “Oh, I hear the whispers. My ears are as sharp as they ever were. Wary what you wish for though, eh? Ya’d have a time replacing me!”

Yvaine threw her a wink, turned on her heel, and set a brisk pace toward the Square.

Loba hustled to keep up, “The chilluns would tear down the stage beam by beam! That’s what.” Loba was starting to run out of steam, not to mention breath, “I’ll outlast all you hissin’ chickens, just see if I don’t!”

Inevitably, she fell a few paces behind. She tilted her head toward the sun’s rays and tried to warm the chill running down her spine.

All around them, merchants were doing a thundering business and villagers were stocking up on sparkers, bang snaps, and the little rockets you shot out of tall glasses.

The spent shells of little booms and big booms and black snakes already littered the streets. She did not envy the men tasked with clearing up after the festival. But fire toys were a time-honored tradition of the week and nobody skimped on ‘em.

* * *

A few hours later Loba could hear the commotion of townsfolk waiting for her to begin, all the way down the block as she left the Cabinet's Chambers.

As she turned the corner, the enormous stage greeted her like an old friend. Seeing it all set up ready for her always gave her a thrill. The architect had managed to make the depths of the backdrop deep and dark. Last year there had been grumblings from the crowd that the shadows were lost in the afternoon telling.

She didn't think there would be any such complaints this year. The dancers' movements would be crisp on the cloth.

She left Yvaine's side and went around to the rear of the platform, behind the proscenium. She checked in with the choreographer; a lithe, little man with a sensuous mouth. His name had leaked plum out of her noggin.

"Everything is ready," he chirped, "We're even set up for the Song of the Beasts Beyond the Wall after the feast, and then Yvaine's leading the Vows."

"Well done, laddie," she touched his cheek and slid past him. From the wings, she peered beyond the scrim that turned the dancers into shadows while she performed the telling.

Toward the back, sirs pulled giggling sons into their laps, kissing their sticky cheeks and settling in for what was always a favorite festival event.

Their younger daughters had the prime spots with their misses, around the base of the stage. They wore their best clothes, traded firecrackers, and stole glances at the older kids surreptitiously.

That lot, by now, knew these stories by heart and draped themselves over the wooden gates separating the seating from the rest of the square. Most of them were rowdy; leaning against the beams in cliquish groups, smoking hand-rolled cigarettes, and sneaking pulls off tin flasks the adults conveniently neglected to notice.

But this year was an Ascension Year. The stories settled different when you knew the Spark was moving. And you could tell who was coming of age. The younglings about to Choose their own destinies felt that tension more than most.

They still smoked. They still drank. But they were subdued, their eyes wide and shiny. And when Loba began, she knew they would listen to the story with new ears. They would reflect on its meaning one last time before they made their Choices. Mayhap it'd even change their minds.

Loba waited until the screen on the stage behind her was lit. She nodded to the choreographer, who cued the dancers then nodded back.

Behind the brilliantly illuminated scrim, silhouetted bodies slid into place. Twisting and writhing, they formed the impression of a roiling shadow sea, with curling waves of cupped hands. Loba strollerd to center stage and the crowd hushed.

“The world was born of a single seed,” she began.
“Amid the chaos of the void it grew into a mighty tree.”

Three black forms split from the waves and fashioned a trunk and claw-fingered branches.

“One day, the tree produced a golden apple of unimaginable beauty. Enamored it spent eons trying make another. But while its buds bore exquisite fruit, only the first shone with that golden light.”

As she spoke a knobbly, dusky fist let a glowing ball of gold drop from concealment and it blazed through the backdrop.

“In time, the tree saw the rise of many wicked creatures; snakes and dragons, fish and fowl, men and beasts.”

Waves rose and formed each shadow-creature as she named it, then crashed back into the aquatic umbra.

“But none were so taken with the tree as the woman, who coveted its golden apple and whiled away many idle hours dreaming of sinking her teeth into it.”

The sea of gloom around the base of the tree began to melt and slither away, leaving one figure behind who moved to a sitting position and gazed upward at the glowing orb.

Loba relished the starry-eyed wonder on the faces in the crowd, especially the young ladies. It was one of the only times they got to indulge in whimsy, and she loved that she was the one to give it to them.

“As humanity began to stand, and build, and fight, the tree grew weary of their presumptions and cast its gaze inward. So, it did not see the village spring up around it or realize that the flames of the woman’s desire for the apple had been fanned into a fiery obsession.”

She reminded herself to chew the syllables. It would not do to mush mouth this story, not today.

“One day,” she continued, finding a new pitch, “as the woman wallowed in her envy and despair, she noticed an adder twisting round the tree’s roots. The serpent knew of her wish and bade her listen. It offered to help her realize her ambition to possess the apple but warned her that it was as treacherous as it was lovely; and devouring its light would invite grave consequences.”

Loba cocked a brow at the row of girls closest to her, “But the woman wanted it, whatever the cost.”

The shadow woman near the tree in the tableau stood and stared down at her feet.

“The adder wound itself round her ankle and asked her...”

The dancers hissed in unison, “Would you give heart and soul just to taste it?”

“I would, she replied, licking her suddenly dry lips.”
Loba went on. “A rasping, dry noise sent a shiver through her as the Adder slithered up past the meat of her thigh.”

“Would you carry the seed and embrace it?” The hidden chorus rasped again.

“The snake’s hiss was somewhere round her middle now. This time, she whispered, ‘I would.’ And then the snake coiled around her throat and hissed directly into her ear.”

“And when darkness comes, will you face it?”

“The woman could only nod,” Loba delivered gravely, the babbies hanging on her every word. “Then the snake slid back down to the ground and she nearly crashed to her knees in relief.”

A sigh went up from the children. Loba was smiling, despite herself, when a sudden silver gleam caught her eye and she glanced up. The young Mage-to-be was standing alone at the edge of the crowd. Loba’s jaw dropped.

She didn’t think she’d ever seen a Mage in attendance at one of her tellings. She felt a spike of anxiety. It weren’t natural. Then she chastised herself for being a goose. More’n likely she simply hadn’t noticed.

All the same, the wrongness of it jangled at her.

“Then what happened?!” Yelled an impatient little boy.

Embarrassed, his sir yanked him down, blushing and whispering admonitions.

Loba regained her composure, “Then she watched the snake slither through the tree’s roots into the heart of the trunk. It reappeared amidst the branches and glided in

circular swirls around the bough where the golden apple still hung, glowing.”

The shadow woman danced beneath the luminescent apple and reached for it.

“The snake squeezed the limb and gave an almighty shiver that shook the tree from root to tip. The woman stretched upwards, straining toward it. She stood on tip toe, reaching for it with both hands. The apple shuddered and twisted, as though buffeted by great winds. And finally, with a resounding crack, the stem broke, and the apple fell.”

The phantom caught the glowing ball of light with both hands.

“No sooner had she caught it, then she bit deep into the heart of it. Juices ran down her chin as she swallowed bite after bite; and, without meaning to, one tiny golden seed.”

The Mage-to-be stared at the shadow-play with unadulterated fury in her gaze. Loba tried not to see her, but she felt as if her eyes were affixed on a magnet to that glinting silver circlet at the girl’s throat.

“She had never tasted anything so sweet. In her ecstasy, she dropped the apple, and three seeds spilled out, onto the Earth.”

Glittering sparks flew in every direction from the spectral woman.

“One fell into the stones and gave life to a ball of clay. One fell into the sea, and swiftly got lost in the spray. The last was snapped up by the snake, who seized it and slithered away.”

Loba wished to hell the girl hadn't come. She could feel herself rushing now, eager to get outta her line of sight. Mistress Earth, why had Yvaine had to put that blasted worm in her ear?

“And there, under the Tree of Life, the woman was filled with the Spark. She could feel the glow lighting up her soul and splitting her nature.

She placed one hand on the great tree's trunk, and one on her belly, and wept tears of amazement and joy. ‘The seed,’ she laughed, ‘it grows!’”

Whistles sounded all around and a few audience members sent off some big bangs and glass-rockets. The babbies threw handfuls of bang snaps all around and the older youths howled at the moon.

Loba usually loved this part. But her smile cracked when she let her eyes stray back to the girl.

Nedra slid a hand down her middle, almost unconsciously. Then she bit her lip, turned heavily away, and headed out of the square.

All at once, it struck Loba that the celebrations must sound cruel to the girl; of course they did. A dawning stab of pity hit her sharp in the guts.

Nedra got smaller and smaller, walking back up the road that led to the old Oak.

The noise died down. Loba swallowed hard and went on.

“Ensouled with magic, the first Mage returned to her home. But a change overtook the village then. Uncanny roars and calls from the woods seemed to signal some great shift in the natural order.”

The dancers made wild sounds from behind the curtain.

“Fisherfolk reported strange and mighty sea creatures, capable of turning over ships and snaring their most beloved sailors. Hunters and gatherers refused to stay in the woods after the sun had set each day; telling tales of monstrous bears and vicious birds. The beasts, it seemed, had risen against them.”

The shadow woman turned to the side, displaying a curved belly made of shade. She held out her hand and sparks flew out of her dark, open palm.

“And when the woman discovered that the seed she'd swallowed had bloomed into a blinding light that she alone could control, she also learned that power is not appreciated by those who do not have it. The men in the Cabinet feared the light and tried to cast her out.”

There were boos from the crowd. The men seemed particularly keen to make their derision heard. Loba had

noticed this before, but it was always more pronounced when the Cabinet Chair was known for ferocity.

“But her gift was so great that doubt was cast upon the might of men, and women were called to lead.”

Whistles and cheers came from the crowd now as female forms stepped forward to stand alongside the pregnant shadow-Mage.

“They built a wall, to keep the village safe from the beasts and exalted the woman. A new home, fit for an enchantress, was carved into the trunk of the great tree, and she was honored for her power and her protection.”

The shadow women converged on the Mage who went into pantomimed labor.

“And nine months later, though she’d never known passion, she gave birth to a child, who would carry on the Spark.”

All around the Square, fireworks shot off in every direction. Cheers and applause exploded from the crowd. The scrim fell to the ground and the dancers in black leotards beamed as they joined Loba for bows.

Loba smiled and dipped her head. She accepted the pats on the back and cries of, “Well told Loba!” and “Brava Storyteller!”

But that cold shiver had gripped her spine again.

Her mind’s eye was replaying the image of the pretty young Mage, hanging her head and walking away, over and over again. Every line of her body had painted a perfect portrait of grief. But the cheering villagers behind her hadn’t even turned to see it.

She could not figure why in fifty-eight years, oh fine call it sixty, why she’d never thought to think of how devastating the cheers of that crowd might sound to a Mage’s ears. How insensitive it was.

How entitled.

She found that now that she’d thought to think of it, she could think of nothing else.

For the first time in her life, Loba felt a flicker of shame at her choice of profession. Should she oughtta have questioned the stories she told? Who’d written them? What had they embellished? What had they left out?

“Will you tell about the witch next?” Called out the outspoken little boy who’d interrupted her last reverie.

He’d evaded his sir and made it to the base of the stage, but he’d still hollered as though she were miles away.

His poor father paled as he tried to hush the boy again. A woman who must be his miss began shoving through the crowd, clearly horrified at her man’s parenting deficiencies.

Loba darted a panicked glance at Yvaine. More than a few ears had perked up at the question. Villagers were eyeing her hopefully. They were far too interested.

Yvaine had gone still as stone. She'd have looked like a corpse if her hands hadn't curled into claws.

Loba tried not to see her as she shook her head, "No boy-o. We don't tell that story."

The boy's mistress was almost there but wasn't quick enough to stifle his peevish, "Why not!?"

But the townsfolk had caught the scent of Yvaine's fury and were starting to disperse. They avoided each other's eyes and hustled out of the square as Loba knelt down to the child. He was likely to catch a whipping tonight, so she opted to be kind. "Because laddie, she might hear us."

His eyes went wide. And then his miss arrived, clamped a hand over his mouth, hauled him into her arms, and marched in the direction of the lower cottages.

Her gobsmacked husband followed in her wake, none too in a hurry to catch her up. Loba remembered how her Felix had trailed her in his day. Though she liked to think he'd feared her a mite less than this fella seemed to fear his wife.

She moved to confer with the choreographer about any last-minute tweaks they'd need for the beast's song. But before she could reach him, Yvaine stepped into her path, heading her off.

"You faltered." Yvaine grunted.

"Didn't expect to see Nedra here, did I?" Loba sighed, rubbing at the small of her back. As usual the aches and pains of reality returned to her, the moment she stepped off the stage.

Yvaine's eyes narrowed, "That is not what I meant."

Loba cranked a gnarled finger in her waxy ear. "Iff'n a story floats on the air, young lady, it'll tickle ears. Markin' it forbidden only serves to increase the number of ears it tickles."

Yvaine sighed deeply and Loba felt a surge of pleasure when she realized the Chair had taken her point, and conceded it.

Then Yvaine cocked her head, "What did you say to the boy?"

"Not to seek out horrors, lest he find them." Loba crossed her arms, "Why d'ya think she came?"

"The girl?" Yvaine asked.

Loba nodded. "After... our chat and all. I just... Well, I never saw one here before."

Yvaine considered.

"Avoiding the inevitable, I'd expect." Yvaine answered at last. At Loba's raised eyebrow she elaborated, "Saying goodbye to her Mother."

Loba gasped.

Mother.

It had been years since she'd heard the title spoken aloud. And then it had barely been a breath on the lips of the one who'd spoken it.

It was an old superstition, one that had shaped the language of the Village of Light. The ancients had subjugated women. There were so few stories left that the brief mention of 'women being called to lead' in the Mage's Tale was all most people knew of a time when they hadn't.

But men had ruled once. And it had been a grim reality by any account you could find. Women's natural strength had been stigmatized and stamped out of them. They'd been little more than breeding mares for the using. And that wound had bled into the formation of the Village.

They had believed that women began to die the moment a child called them "Mother." So, they'd set about making sure that no child ever would.

It slipped out here or there, of course; the word was not forgotten. A girl would sling it at another in a brawl, "Go home to your mother!" That girl would then find themselves on the brutal end of all their opponents' friends' boots.

It was not a word one heard in civilized society.

Yvaine rolled her eyes at Loba, whose gasp had left her jaw hanging open. Catching flies, Felix would have said.

"She'll die at midnight anyhow. Words canna hurt her. Silence canna save her." Yvaine walked away, shoving her hands into her pockets.

Loba reeled at the cruelty of Yvaine's logic.

She could just imagine that the girl had reached the great Oak by now. She could see her dallying at the door; her ticker pounding, her feet shuffling, and finally, having no more cause to wait, opening the door into the worst night of her young life.

Chapter 2: The Curse of the Mage

Nedra

"I'm back," Nedra said, aiming for a light-hearted tone and missing the mark completely.

Her miss, Iris of Alethia, who was still the Mage for a few hours yet, sat by the hearth; sewing of all things. Nedra hadn't even known she knew how. What else hadn't she thought to learn from her?

The warm light of late afternoon, wending its way toward sunset, streamed through the amber paned windows, backlighting the woman. She was nothing short of painfully beautiful.

“I’m glad you got to go out.” Iris murmured. Her face was tight with concentration. “I know you love the woods. And after your vows-”

“The gate will be barred to me.” Nedra quoted sullenly.

It seemed to her that becoming the Mage was all consequence and no benefit. She got to live in the old Oak and had attendants and status. But really, to not even be allowed into the Midnight Woods? She already felt trapped.

She knew she was supposed to feel honored, and humbled, and all of the things the villagers had cheered for in the square. But she felt more like a virgin sacrifice. Probably literally. Probably forever.

She grumbled, “Don’t we have people for that?”

Iris tied a knot and used her teeth to savagely sever the gilded thread poking out of the end of her sewing. “Not for this. This is something only I can do. Come. Watch.”

Nedra obediently went to the hearth and sat at Iris’ shoulder. She folded her legs beneath her and stole glances at her miss, drinking her in and trying not to focus on the fact that this was likely her last chance to do so.

High, sharp cheekbones set off Iris’ goldy-green eyes. Her smooth bronze skin was alight with the embers of the hearth and her long dark braid was pinned in so many places Nedra couldn’t even see them all.

Iris craned her neck to make sure Nedra was watching. “Do you see how the magic is weaving into the spell?”

Nedra saw. As her miss’ deft fingers cinched and stabbed at the shimmery fabric, light dripped off the tips of them. Glitters of fire illuminated the golden thread she was tracing into a runic form on the bodice of the gown. Her gown, she realized; her dress for the ascension.

“What is the spell for?” She asked.

“It gives you my strength.” Iris smiled and kissed her daughter on the forehead.

Before her miss could stop her, Nedra wrapped her arms around Iris and clung to her like a babbie half her age. Fat hot tears leaked out the corners of her eyes, and she felt Iris return the embrace fiercely. Everything Iris did was fierce. Her arms burned around Nedra; hot flesh encasing dense muscle over iron bones. In what world could this body fail?

Maybe it was all a trick. A test she had to pass. Midnight would come and go, and Iris would be fine. She could just see the Cabinet putting her through all this to “toughen her up.” They didn’t think Nedra was up to the job of being Mage, that was clear.

Nedra wanted to be up to the job. She did. She could see the honor in it. Sending charms with the sailors to hold off the sea serpents that aimed to sink their ships. She’d cast protective enchantments over villagers who went into the

woods for game or vital supplies, bless unions with love and babies with talent, and most importantly she'd hold the wall when the beasts attacked.

And they would attack, she knew; they always did.

But the cost of carrying the Spark seemed ghastly high. And after a lifetime of study, she still didn't understand it!

Did the Spark really split a soul into two bodies? And if she shared a soul with her miss, why were they so different? What was the point of a Mage only being able to carry the Spark sixteen years? Wouldn't they be better... stronger if they could learn more over a longer life? When would they stop having to pay for the crimes of the Mage who'd eaten that damn apple?

And... how could she possibly go on without her?

Iris pulled away from Nedra's desperate grip and took her face in her hands. "I know it's cruel." She wiped the tears from Nedra's cheeks with callused thumbs. "But I survived losing my miss and you will survive losing me."

"How?" Nedra hiccupped, struggling not to let the word slide into a wail.

Iris tucked a strand of Nedra's hair behind her ear. "You'll have the Spark, and a daughter of your own to care for."

"I'll hate her." Nedra seethed.

Iris furrowed her brow.

Nedra rose and crossed her arms over her aching chest and stared into the flames of the hearth. She was too close to it. The heat felt like it would crack the skin of her face wide open where her tears had left tracks.

"Why would you hate her, Nedra?" Iris was speaking in the calm, sweet tones the charmers used to soothe unbroken stallions.

Nedra's couldn't look at her, "She'll have killed you."

"No, my moon, she'll have risen like a fire-bird from my ashes," Iris murmured gently.

Nedra said nothing.

"Perhaps you can name her Blaze," Iris pivoted.

This was a tactic she'd been using a lot lately: trying to get Nedra excited about the parts of rearing a child most women in the village mooned over.

"Don't," she snapped.

And for the first time in Nedra's life, Iris snapped back, "And why not?"

"I've just told you why not! Don't you know how hard this is?"

Iris bristled and for a moment Nedra could see the wildness in her, her hackles were up. Was she truly angry with Nedra? Suddenly, the girl realized her miss had been holding in what was about to come out for some time.

“Don’t you think this is just as hard on me as it is on you?” Iris snarled. “Have you considered for a second that I might be struggling too? That I might not want to die?”

Nedra felt like she’d been slapped. She could feel the color rising in her cheeks. Her miss had hurt her, and Nedra felt a wild impulse to hurt her back.

But then she saw magic crackling around Iris’ hands, saw it crawl up her arms, and she felt a flicker of fear.

Iris’ hair began to whip around her face as she gave in to whatever was happening to her, “You are not the only one suffering! I am not so much older than you child and I am terrified!”

Iris was inches from her now, hollering directly into her face and the magic that was traveling over her skin leapt from her to Nedra then back again. It flickered into life all around her, then went out and exploded around Iris again. Back and forth and back and forth.

The bursts of power felt unimaginably good. Nedra was breathless and nearly moaned as the Spark lit her up again and again. Each burst was more ecstasy than the last.

What must this have looked like from the outside? Would it seem as though they were passing magic between them like an aura of fire? Perhaps, but neither Mage could control what was happening here.

As if gripped by an otherworldly wind, they were lifted high into the air, glittering like a fireworks display. And then

they crashed to the floor, scattering beads, and thread and embers in every direction.

Iris thrashed where she’d landed, groaning and weeping. Nedra scrambled over to her, stamping out embers that were trying to catch on the furniture and a box of fabric.

She’d only been drunk once before, but the remnants of the magic still flitting through her system was akin to the best parts of that experience. Her skin hummed as she pulled her miss into her lap and began to rock her.

“I’m so sorry, miss, I’m s- sorry,” She babbled guiltily, smoothing Iris’ hair with shaking fingers. “So sorry.” She kissed Iris’ feverish forehead and placed the backs of her fingers against her inflamed cheeks. “I didn’t know. I should have. I didn’t know. Forgive me.”

Iris pulled away from her and rose to her feet, trembling. Nedra watched her, afraid to move or speak.

“You need to try on the dress,” Iris finally said, hollowly.

Nedra stared at her, “What?”

Iris was slow to respond. She seemed to be long ago and far away; a future ghost already haunting and haunted.

Eventually she answered weakly, “We need to make sure it fits. You’re thinner than I was.”

Nedra grabbed the dress and turned to go, but then she turned back. Iris was still returning to herself. Her eyes were glassy as she struggled to still the last of her tremors.

The girl cast around for something to say, but Iris spoke first.

“The Spark is unstable in the days before the change.” Her voice was stronger now, but gone raw and jagged, “We’ve been lucky so far but... It happened four times leading up to my ascension.”

“Does... does it hurt?” It was a stupid question. Her miss was obviously in pain.

Iris poured herself a drink of brown liquor and laughed drily. “You or me?”

Nedra didn’t answer, she didn’t need to. They both knew. Nedra was still buzzing with her brief encounter with the Spark. She felt like she’d drunk a cask full of wine and swam naked in the sea and gone cliff diving, all at once.

Iris looked like she’d been struck by lightning.

Silently, Nedra backed into the hall and climbed up the carved narrow staircase to her room. The wood didn’t even creak under her weight.

She made her way down the hall and hesitated in Iris’ bedroom doorway. This would be her bedroom tomorrow, so why shouldn’t she go in? She glanced toward the stairs – frozen in indecision. Finally, she crossed the threshold.

Her miss’s room was grander than hers was. Tall branches were fashioned into bed posts that Nedra knew from

the stories she’d cling to when she birthed her own daughter, nine months from now.

She slid a hand down the branch and wondered how they’d sanded it to such a smooth grain while retaining its natural shape. The ancient villagers had been wonderful artisans.

Golden arched windows, latticed with delicate veined branches opened out over the road that led to the village square. Nedra leaned against them feeling like a queen surveying her kingdom.

But the Mage was not a monarch. And Nedra had no power over the people here. Even if she could kill them with a look.

“I could burn you all to ash and bone,” she murmured.

The violence of this thought, and the fact that she’d spoken it loud took her completely by surprise. She giggled a mad little giggle and shut the window.

Was she losing her mind? Well, fine. Enjoy your mad Mage oh ye Village of Light. She giggled again.

Perhaps her brush with the Spark had left her a little drunk after all.

Nedra hefted the dress in her arms and sighed, she had really better go try it on. She headed out and padded down the hall passing the quaint dark little bathroom with the cracked mirror and toward her own room.

She pulled off her shirt as she ducked under the branch that framed her door, keen to get this fitting over with and yelped.

Her room was not empty.

Hartwin of Aren, mouth agape, hovered guiltily by her bed. He flushed as he stared determinedly at everything except her bare breasts.

“Sorry!” He breathed. “I didn’t expect you to be...”

“Getting ready?” She offered, kicking off her leggings and sliding the dress over her shoulders.

“Naked.” He blushed deeper still.

Nedra snorted. “Your miss would stripe you raw if she knew you were here, peeking at the Mage. What a scandal.”

“I didn’t peek!”

“Now you’re just trying to hurt my feelings,” she teased.

He crossed his arms. “Have you even got those?”

She knew he was just teasing back, but it took her breath away all the same.

“Course I do,” she managed. “What did you want, Hart? You must want somethin’.”

He didn’t answer, she looked back at him, he was staring at her back, exposed beneath the corset ties. She turned to face him and crossed her arms.

“You’re riskin’ a lot to be here, specially today.”

“Well... it’s my last chance.” The boy looked at his feet, blushing all over again.

“Last chance for what?” She asked.

He put a finger to her lips. The gesture was gentle, but it stopped her short.

Nedra felt a flutter in her guts, she pushed it down with everything she had. She didn’t get to feel those things. Those feelings would make her weak, and she needed to be strong today.

Hart appeared to be steeling himself as well. “I... Well...” He was stammering and twisting his hands back and forth.

“What Hartwin?” She demanded.

“Don’t rush me!”

Nedra’s heart began to pound. Why was she nervous all of a sudden?

He began again, “You’re... You’re taking your Vows tonight. And I know you don’t get to Choose a partner.”

She shifted uncomfortably.

Oh. That.

Mistress Earth and her Baby Moon was she ever not in the mood for Hart to say what he’d clearly come to say.

“But I gotta Choose one. I gotta Choose a trade and I gotta Choose someone to be with or Choose to go it alone.”

Nedra felt faint. She clenched her fists and spat, more defensively than she'd intended, “I know.”

He paled. This was hard for him too. But she hated that he was here to tell her goodbye. What did he expect? It was too much. She already knew all of this. She'd known it her whole life.

Mages were bred to be alone. While the villagers made their Choices, Nedra would only make Vows. As far as she could tell, she was the only Mage who'd ever wanted anything else.

From the moment she met him, she'd wanted Hart.

They'd been eight-years-old. He hadn't known who she was and they'd played for hours in his sir's orchard, climbing the peach trees and eating nectarines when they found them. It was a sun-soaked memory, filled with laughter and make believe, and it had ended so horribly when his miss had caught them at it.

The Mage-to-be was not supposed to have friends.

His miss had beaten Hart right in front of Nedra; a lesson meant as much for the girl as the boy. Iris had never struck her and she was not prepared to see the stripes on the boy or hear his cries. So, she'd aimed to learn that lesson well, but Hart just kept coming around.

If they found him here today, they'd put him in the stocks.

“So...” He'd lost his momentum, “so, I want...”

Nedra couldn't stand it, “What? What do you want?”

He stepped toward her. She did not back away, as though his very closeness was a challenge and she was accepting it.

She glared at him. He swallowed and set his chin.

She could smell him, his hair, and whatever oils he'd bathed in to prepare for the evening's festivities. His breath smelled faintly of peaches and tobacco leaf. It was a delicate balance, and it was all around her. It rooted her to the spot.

There was heat coming off him too, and electricity. She was as dizzy and giddy as she'd been after the Spark had touched her downstairs.

Nedra could not move. She was held by magic she did not understand.

His eyes shone and he finally said, “I want a kiss. Just one. Please.”

That surprised her so much she nearly stepped back.

She had expected a goodbye, a mournful apology. Even maybe a confession of his Chosen intended, and an explanation of who he or she was and why they were his Choice. But this?

This had shocked her. Give the lad a prize, she thought. She almost giggled again, but he looked so earnest. How might he react if he thought she was laughing at him?

She had thought about it. Of course she had.

The village was full of younglings taking liberties with each other. She saw them entangled with each other in the woods and throughout the square under the stars. It was encouraged. Because once they made their choices, infidelity was severely punished.

But Mages did not partake in passion. It was not done. They were meant to be above it. But Nedra had imagined it, sure sure. How could she not?

“You know I can’t,” she couldn’t help glancing at his mouth. She wondered how it would taste.

“You wouldn’t be breaking any vows, not yet. Nor would I. I’ll do my duty and you’ll do yours. And if you don’t want to, I’ll leave now. Only I had to ask, because I, I just loved you my whole life and I’ll never have another chance.”

His cheeks were brilliantly pink. She couldn’t help thinking of how they dimpled when he laughed. The cabinet was right, she was weak.

Ladies’ tears but she wanted to. But if the villagers were any indication, just one would never be enough. If she crossed that line, she’d spend the rest of her short life wanting more... and knowing what she was missing.

Hart cast his eyes downward. He stepped back. Nedra hated the cold gust of air that took up the space where he’d been.

“It’s okay,” he said, “I thought... I was wrong.”

Nedra reached for him, “No! No I, please don’t go!”

He turned back, a dreadful hope in his eyes and before Nedra she knew what she was doing, she was kissing him.

She was surprised at the softness of his lips and the rough line of his chin stubble which had only just started growing in. She’d teased him mercilessly about his baby beard, but he’d shaved it and she hadn’t expected to feel the ghost of it on his lower lip.

He kissed her back desperately. His teeth hard behind his lips, and Nedra was overwhelmed with sensation. She found herself opening her mouth ever so slightly and yes, he tasted as sweet as he smelled.

She broke away breathlessly and he pulled her back in. And she melted into him again, sliding her arms around him and curling her fingers in his hair.

This. This was life. Hell and the eternal waters that quench it, how could the Spark steal this from her? This was as natural as breathing and far more nourishing.

Hartwin cradled her face and finally broke away, gasping. She leaned her forehead against his and asked, “Satisfied?”

“Not by half,” he wheezed.

From the hallway, Iris cleared her throat.

Hartwin leapt backward and Nedra loosed a little shriek.

Iris’ face was unreadable. “You found your way in, find your way out.”

Hart looked at Nedra helplessly.

“Go!” She pushed him toward the window, breath fluttering in her chest.

He climbed over the sill, but then he leaned back in and threw caution to the wind. “I’m- I’m not sorry,” he stammered. How had she never noticed that he was brave?

Then he scrambled all the way out, shimmied down the Oak’s trunk and fled.

Nedra turned back to face her miss, stunned and still reeling.

Iris examined her daughter with an inscrutable expression. Nedra waited for her rage to break. This was forbidden. She’d done something unforgivable.

But the rage never came.

What was that look in her eyes? She’d never seen it there before. She’d run the gamut of her miss’s moods; angry, frustrated, proud, delighted, hurt, disgusted, bemused.

But just now she was staring at her with a naked, ugly look Nedra had only seen on the faces of villagers who brought their men to task for breaking their vows on Satyr’sday.

Jealous. That’s what it was.

Her miss was staring at her with envy twisting her mouth and burning behind her eyes.

It dissipated slowly.

Finally, Iris hitched a little sigh and walked in a circle around her daughter, evaluating the fit of the dress. She laced up the back and cinched it tight.

“Are you ready then?” Iris asked her, putting worlds of meaning into the question.

“I am,” Nedra lied. And to her credit, she might have even sounded convincing.

Chapter 3: The Villagers and their Vows

Hartwin

He could hardly believe his luck. She’d kissed him. She’d kissed him! God’s piss she’d kissed him well. His mouth still tingled with the intensity of it.

Hot blood pulsed below his belt where she’d pressed her body to his as she kissed him too, and he hoped no one else could see it. A man ought not let a lady see the evidence

of his desire, less'n she asked to. But he weren't exactly in a position to tuck that evidence away just now neither.

The roads were thick with revelers; mostly drunkenly gathering to head back to the square after dinner. He jumped as a group of babbies threw bang snaps behind him and then streamed around him.

He truly hoped Iris didn'a run to his miss to have him chastised. It was well within her rights, and he'd known what he was risking. But damn it all if it hadn't been worth a whipping.

Thing was, he hadn't expected her to do it. He'd wanted her to, naturally. But he hadn't expected her to. Any more than you'd expect the sun to shine blue, simply by askin'. But he'd had to know, and now he did.

"I'll Choose no one," he muttered to himself. Then he turned to face the old Oak, so he was walking backwards as he promised it, "I'll Choose no one."

He caught a few odd looks for his pronouncement but he didn't care. He just hoped Nedra's heart had heard him. Ladies tears he was a romantic fool.

How could he Choose to love anyone else? And if he couldn't Choose Nedra, he'd live chaste, and spend his days at her side, remembering her lips on his till his ticker stopped keeping time... or hers did.

Aye, that was likely to come first.

He thought he might understand now, as the aching muscle in his chest pounded percussively against his ribs, why the Mage was not allowed to love. Why his miss had beaten him with increasing savagery each time he'd been found hanging round places where Nedra was meant to be, in hopes of catching time with her.

She'd meant to protect him from this. Because knowing the number of days the woman you loved had left to live was terrible.

Hot, stinging tears pricked the corners of his eyes and he didn't even bother to try to stem them before they fell.

"I'll Choose no one," he promised his feet.

"Oy, Tender-Hart," called a tall, sloe eyed boy with ochre skin and tight black curls. "Going to the Vows? Or have you got plans to mope some more?"

Hartwin turned to find Paya with a group of rambunctious young women he'd been hoping to avoid. These girls would run the village one day, and they were obviously enjoying their last few nights of freedom before they made their Choices.

There was Tahlia of Elizaveta, the obvious choice for Chair of Ceremonies. Her wit was quicker than her race time, which was impressive of its own accord. She was a skilled enough storyteller to have garnered even old Loba's praise, but she was aiming for a Cabinet seat.

Tahlia was, at present, smiling wickedly at Paya with a promise in her eyes that Hartwin deeply disapproved of. Why toy with the poor fellow?

Everyone knew Tahlia would Choose Henley of Ottavia. The match had been set since the pair had been babbies. Their misses had struck the bargain the day Tahlia had been born, mere weeks after Henley. And the two were all but inseparable.

Though, as Henley was currently wrapped up in Rivka, they'd obviously agreed to take their fill of flesh from around the village in the final weeks before the Choosing.

It was a fairly common practice, but it made Hartwin's skin crawl.

Rivka had a rotating roster vying to be the young man on her arm these days. She was in line to take Yvaine's chair and she didn't seem to care who fathered her children so long as she got that seat. She twisted round in Henley's arms to face outward and dropped a wink at Hartwin.

"Serious boy. You oughtta smile once in awhile Hart." She offered him her flask and he shook his head darkly.

Paya took the flask instead. "Hart's just glum the Mage is takin' her vows. He thought she might give up magic for what he's got in his pants."

Tahlia perked up, "Is that how it works then?"

"You can't give up the Spark, you idiot" Rivka said seriously. But then she grinned audaciously, reaching out to pull at the waistband of Hartwin's trousers, "Even if one might be tempted."

Hartwin slapped Rivka's hand away, then flinched in case she struck back. But she just laughed. "Your friend is shy, Paya. He blushes."

Hart felt his face grow even hotter, still. He could not believe Paya had said that. Fool just wanted to impress Tahlia, fat lot of good it'd do him.

As though she'd heard him, Tahlia shrugged Paya off of her and sauntered toward Hartwin. She draped her arms around his neck and he tensed. She was six inches taller than him and her dress was tight in a way that made Hart very nervous.

"Don't be frightened sweet Hart," she purred. Then she turned to Rivka, "Oh wow, sweet Hart, sweetheart. Look at that."

Rivka smirked, "Clever."

Tahlia redirected her attention to Hart, embracing him to her chest in a way that made Henley flinch and Paya seethe. Then she pushed him back to arm's length.

He knew his face was probably scarlet now and Tahlia's eyes sparkled as they searched his. "Tell the truth Hartwin of Aren, do you love the Mage?"

Paya, his arms crossed and his eyes narrowed, muttered, "Mage to be."

Hart glared at him.

Tahlia chuckled, tossing her dark curls over her shoulder, "Fine. Do you love the Mage to be?"

Hartwin wondered if his face could literally burst into flame. "Wouldn't matter iff'n I did, would it?"

She released him to clap her hands in delight, "That is darling!"

Hart turned to flee but found himself face to face with Rivka. "I do love a boy who blushes."

"Leave me alone."

Paya slid an arm around Tahlia's waist and said, "He was going to ask her for a kiss this afternoon."

That was it, Hart decided, Paya was dead to him.

"Well," asked a cold voice behind Hart, "did she give you that kiss?"

Hart closed his eyes slowly, praying the person asking wasn't who it sounded like. But as the color drained from Paya's face and the girls hurriedly straightened up, he cast about for the safest response he could give without outright lying.

He'd not risk being caught in a lie told to the leader of the Village of Light.

He turned slowly, pulling his face into a sad frown. "The Mage-to-be would not be swayed from her duties by the likes of me," he answered gravely.

Yvaine examined him. "A careful answer, carefully delivered," she responded shrewdly. Suddenly she turned to the girls. "Rivka, I know you mean to enjoy the festival but do maintain some semblance of dignity tonight. You want them to remember your honor, not your folly."

"Yes Mistress," Rivka answered quickly, inclining her head and elbowing Tahlia when she giggled nervously.

"Go find your spots for the ceremony." Yvaine commanded the group.

All of them hastened to obey but Hart felt Yvaine's thin, strong fingers grasp his shoulder and he froze.

"Not you boy."

Hartwin's gorge rose in his throat. He was gonna catch a whipping for sure. But there was a quiet fear in Yvaine's gaze when she addressed him again.

"What is there between you and Nedra of Iris, boy-o? Is it love?"

Hartwin knew his blush had evaporated, the night air felt tepid on his cheeks now. He trembled, but met the Chair's eyes.

"I love her, Mistress. Ent no use denying it. But many a young man has loved a lady who'd never a-Choose him."

“And yet,” she pressed, “Nedra has allowed you to flank her and call on her...”

“Tis the Mage’s duty to hear the will of the villagers.”

Yvaine’s gaze grew sharper still. “You’ve a talent for stating facts without saying a thing, Hartwin of Aren. I should add word-smithery to the list of skills you’ve Proved afore the day of the Choosing.”

He dropped his eyes to his feet.

Yvaine put a hand on his shoulder and steered him toward a bench. He let himself be led.

They sat in silence awhile. Hartwin could feel a tiredness in the Cabinet Chair that he knew well from his own miss; the weariness of too much knowing.

She sighed before asking, “What have you heard about the witch of the Midnight Woods?”

Hartwin sat up straighter against the wooden slats of the bench. A dull flush crept up his neck toward his ears.

“T’aint a trick boy, nor a trap. But I wonder if you know the full story.”

The full story. Saints of old, how could he? It changed with each telling.

It were one of those stories that people told in hushed tones, or speedy whispers. Iffn a babbie got caught with their

friends even sayin the word “witch” they was punished. Even though nobody seemed to know quite what a witch even was.

He decided to try to just touch the bits each telling had in common.

“It’s a legend... she was a Mage of a kind; twisted in her guts. She went mad in the woods and lured babbies to her hut to eat ‘em up. But she weren’t never real.” There was the ghost of a question in that statement. “She’s a horror story, to keep the kiddos from wandrin’ off.”

Hartwin’s eyes silently begged Yvain to tell him he was right about that. She smiled just a little. “You’ve got some things right and some things wrong.”

Mistress Earth, he realized, she was going to tell him.

Yvaine sat quiet a minute. Hartwin fidgeted. Please let him have gotten the eating babbies bit wrong.

“The witch isn’t a Mage of a kind, she’s a Mage who goes wrong. A Mage who decides she don’t want to use the magic she’s been gifted to protect the village, she wants to use it to protect herself. Understandable, of course, she’s only sixteen.”

Yvaine smoothed her hair back, tucking it behind her ears. It was a supremely feminine gesture that warmed Hart to her just a bit. He didn’t get to see the Chair being a human woman often.

“As the story tells it, a shadow creeps across the Spark in the heart of the Mage, a shadow cast by love. She refuses her duty and the magic inside her is twisted into something dark. She does not bear a daughter to carry on the Spark. Instead it burns inside of her until her heart is charred black. But she cannot die, because she is no longer alive. She becomes only magic, fueled by hunger. And you already know what she eats.”

Hartwin’s mouth felt bone dry. He tried hard to swallow past his tongue which felt suddenly too big for his mouth, “That can’t have happened. There weren’t never no witch.”

Yvaine smiled sadly. “No. Never *yet*.” She sat back, searching his face for something. “You understand Hartwin, don’t you? The story of the witch ent a legend, it’s a prophecy... a warning. Mages *cannot* be allowed to love.”

The weight of what she was suggesting crashed into Hartwin and he sagged in his seat; heart thumping and winded. He felt as if he’d aged ten years in ten minutes.

“Choose a wife, Hart. Choose a path.” She got up and headed after Rivka and the others, tossing a final thought over her shoulder, “Else a path will emerge before you that you may not wish to take.”

* * *

Hartwin focused on putting one foot in front of the other until he reached the square. His mind was ablaze with terror. Was the shadow there already, born of his selfish desire? Was it too late even now? Did she love him? Was that even possible?

Had he already damned her?

She’d told him she meant to take her vows... he thought she had. He couldn’t remember. She’d kissed him sure, but just to see; to kiss and be kissed. Not because she loved him. Why would she? He was nobody; just a silly little boy, destined for nothing. She was the Mage for all the saints’ sake.

His ticker paced up and up till it kept such speedy time he thought it might tock right out of his chest. Each beat of that bloody muscle felt like another nail pounded into another coffin; boxed bodies stretching into an infinite future strewn with horror.

The screams of Sirs as they found their childrens’ beds empty echoed through his imagination, as if reverberating through time. In his mind’s eye, he could see the lifeless eyes of zombied babbies marching endlessly into the clutches of his beloved, who cackled as she bit into their soft flesh. Goose-pimples tingled across his back and arms at the sound he could almost hear of teeth crunching bones.

He could not let her become this thing... this witch. He would make sure she didn’t love him.

As if she'd heard him, she poked her head out from behind the scrim of the stage. He hadn't even realized he'd arrived and taken his place in the audience.

Gods' piss, but she was lovely.

Amber light from a torch glimmered across her high, sharp cheekbone. Her ceremonial dress, sparkling with swirls of magic, hugged every line of her soft form. He could not help but remember how the curve of her bare breast had dizzied him...what a mere hour before?

How much can change, in so small a time as an hour. What worlds are contained in sixty tiny minutes. It's a marvel, he thought, how completely we can buckle under the weight of new information.

She'd seen him looking and she smiled at him and brought her fingers to her lips. An hour ago, that small gesture would have lit up his soul, now it filled his chest with hot panic.

He needed to do something... fast.

Hands slid around his waist from behind him and Hartwin nearly jumped outta his skin.

Rivka purred in his ear, "Not in trouble are we, Hartwin?"

Her breath was heavily perfumed with the berry wine Hart's miss favored. For some reason that bolstered him. He

turned to face her, not daring to look back at Nedra. "Would you Choose me, Rivka of Edith, iff'n I loved another?"

Rivka's face drew into a somewhat grave, and very rare, expression. "What? On your honor?"

"You don't seem fussed... w-who you... Choose... as much as what. Chairs must beget heirs. You'll need a man to raise the babbie. I-I won't love you. But I'll be a fine sir." Hart didn't want to offend her, but he refused to soften this.

She stood back and appraised him. "I'd not be faithful if ya didn't love me." She crossed her arms. "But you'd have to come to my bed enough to get me a girl."

Hart couldn't stand it, he glanced back and found Nedra's eyes. What he had to do next would hurt them both. She needed to be watching.

She was.

"Then kiss me, and call a deal struck."

Rivka gawked at him. "Are you under your berries, boy-o? Tell the truth."

"Sober as sighin, Rivka, but I need an answer."

"I have other offers, you know. I could have my pick. Bet even a boy who *loved* me." There was a dare in her eyes. *Convince me*, it said.

Hartwin met her gaze steadily. "You don't want a boy who loves you. You want one who'll give you pretty babbies

and get out of your way. You know I'll hold up my end. And you like me... You always did."

"Serious boy... I'd break you." She was almost apologetic.

"Aye." He replied. "And I'll let ya. Won't that be fun."

She gave him one last long look. He in turn, checked to make sure Nedra was still watching on.

She hadn't moved a muscle. It was as if she knew what was coming and could not look away.

"A deal is struck then," Rivka answered and pulled Hartwin into a long, hard kiss.

People turned to stare and whistle. Rivka released him and he fell back dazed. She pulled a bell from her satchel and rang it three times. Cheers erupted all around them.

So then, he thought, it's done. Not yet Chosen, but pledged.

The crowd became a sea of hands; slapping his shoulders and pinching his cheeks. A few glum-faced girls slid their hands from chest to waist under the guise of a congratulatory hug, taking turns to whisper promises in his ears of what he'd be missing.

Abruptly he wished he would have gotten drunk.

At the edge of the crowd, he could see Paya stalking off, turning back only to glare daggers at him. Serves him bloody well right.

Hartwin tried to smile at his well-wishers. He clasped their wrists and smiled insanely at them. He took his new place beside his future wife, drank deep from her flask, and begged the universe for it to be enough.

Nedra would hate him, but she'd keep her soul; not a witch, not a monster, but the Mage. He knew what her honor meant to her. He was protecting her. This was a sacrifice he had to make. He had to... didn't he?

Finally, he let himself look back at her, even as Rivka's hand slid into his and raised their clasped hands toward the star-strewn sky.

Nedra was frozen in place, carved in ice, cold and immovable. It was as if the light of her previous smile had been shuttered behind windows in a cottage that had been closed up to keep out the cold of winter.

Hart let out a shaky breath; miserable in every bone of his body. He could go to her, tell her why... But what for? It wouldn't change anything. It would be easier for her, if she could hate him. Only a coward passes on their suffering to someone they love to make it easier to bear.

Hartwin was not a coward; a fool perhaps, but no coward.

For a last long moment he stared into her eyes, allowing himself this one last indulgence before she was lost to him forever. He imagined he could see the gold flecks in her irises even from here. Yet another foolish notion from a romantic child, he knew.

Her face twitched as someone behind the line of the stage called out to her. She closed her eyes tightly for a few seconds. No tears were shed, nor sighs heaved. She simply closed her eyes.

When she reopened them, she did not try to find Hart's again. She looked down at her dress and picked an invisible piece of lint off her midsection. Then she turned, spoke, and disappeared from view.

Chapter 4: The Ascension

Iris

It is a strange thing to know the precise moment of one's own death. Stranger still to know the vessel that shall inherit your soul upon that death, and love it with a fierceness that cannot be quantified.

Strange and terrifying.

It was all Iris could do to carry out her final duties at this, her thirty-second, Festival of Light. But she mustn't lose control. Nedra needed Iris to be strong.

This next ceremony only occurred on an ascension year. It was a brief recitation; brief, but powerful.

Nedra slid past her, on her way to her mark. Something had happened. A new wound had paled Nedra's already ghostly cheeks. Iris regretted the girl's pain. She'd loved her daughter too much. She couldn't take that back now though.

Every moment that slid past drew her closer to the inevitable. A sharp, bubbling panic rose in Iris' throat. The questions she'd kept at bay worried at the stem of her brain.

Where would she go when she left this Earth? Would she be nothing? Which would be worse, more light once she left her body, or an endless darkness? How would it feel to lose her soul? Iris rather thought it was going to be painful beyond imagining.

She grabbed her face with both hands and beat at her temples with both fists. When that accomplished nothing, she slapped herself. Hard.

"Everything alright?" Yvaine had an eyebrow hiked toward the sky.

"What could be wrong?" Iris asked drily.

Yvaine handed her a lamp. "Your place is marked, mind you find it before you speak. The girl will take your cue."

A dry coughing laugh took Iris by surprise, "We do hope so, don't we."

Yvaine pursed her lips, "Aye, we do at that."