

THE MAGICIAN





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DEDICATED TO MY MOTHER, EUGENIE WEISS

This story starts with A Fool and ends with The World...

PART I

PROLOGUE

I

In a bustling port town, miles from The Kingdom, lived a hope filled and foolish Boy from a prosperous family. Every night Father, Mother, Sister and The Boy sat together for lavish dinners and regaled each other with pleasantries of the days gone past.

The Father, and head of the household, made his living procuring and selling crystals for fortunate travels to the fisherman and voyagers, coming and going along the Mer de Mystique. Once a year, he would set off on his own voyage to strange and distant lands to find these rare crystals which were said to contain certain special powers...On one particular year however, while peddling his wares to a maritime merchant, he was stopped by two knights.

“Yes this is very special-it's rutilated sap from the tears of a unicorn.”

The merchant was too distracted to listen to the crystal salesman and his babbling, by the intimidating figures in chainmail lurking behind him. They too, impatiently awaited the end of Father's history lesson on unicorns.

“This of course was before the unicorn slaughter, so none of them were killed to make this piece is what I was trying to say-is something wrong?”

The salesman stopped the story short, staring at the merchant, whose eyes had been glazed over with fear and hesitation. The merchant lifted his finger pointing for the salesman to turn around. He was greeted by two tall, grizzled armsmen and a request to look inside his bag.

As it turned out, The Emperor and ruler of The Kingdom had befriended a witch who had foretold him of her prophetic visions of the future, offering her services in an advisory capacity. The Empress, unable to bear a child, her belly instead filled with shame, lived with the burden of expectation to be the nurturing, maternal figure to the land. Despite The Emperor's attempts to build structures and shrines and shower her with gifts to display his commitment, knew the impending chaos to come if there were to be no heir to the throne. Should anything happen to her, and with no one to take her place, it would signify the closing of one cycle and the beginning of another-a much darker one.

After spending a hefty sum, which relied on loans from a prickly Queen, all of the witch's seemingly confident predictions turned out to be incorrect, or so he thought-and she was hanged at dusk, alongside her cat.

“I'm sorry, is there a problem?”

Without hesitation, the portly knight belted out the words “Dump them!” from the side of his crooked mouth. The lankier knight, still inspecting one of the crystals in the glare of the sun, dropped the mint green mineral back into the bag, and walked over to the water.

Already knowing the answer, the salesman couldn't help himself but shout, "Where are you going with those?!" To which he was rudely, yet formally informed, "By The Royal Decree of Emperor Edmund IV, you are hereby asked to cease all sales of conjuring rocks!" Helpless, Father looked over to the knight in the distance, pouring out all of his colorful stones into the water, before turning back to face the big oaf, who was now chewing on some sort of dried out root.

All forms of magic had hereby been banned by The Emperor including books, trinkets, charms and fortune cards. Anyone suspected of furthering the practice of mysticism, was to be dragged out of their house, usually by their arms, screaming-their knick-knacks to be thrown into a pit of fire, followed by the supposed practitioner. Whether suspected or actualized was a rather gray area for victims of such accusations.

In a sense, the crystal salesman had been lucky enough to have gotten off with only a warning, and while he personally hadn't been set ablaze, any means and chance of further livelihood, had indeed burnt to a crisp.

II

"What are we going to do now?" Mother asked nervously, looking at her family sitting around the great oak table, the last of her lavish honey brushed pheasant dinners placed in front of them.

After his trade had been taken away, and with the last of his pentacles dried up, the once prosperous crystal salesman was forced to sell his hall house, slowly but inevitably falling into destitution and moving his family into a small thatched hovel over on the seedy side of town.

The first night in their new homestead, they would encounter the inconvenience of the lack of curfew laws, as such a short distance from their habitation was a tavern, where roaming knights, prostitutes and local boorish frog catchers hurled words not to be said aloud and sang songs of the same nature. This was usually followed by loud and gratuitous groaning, vomiting and occasional pissing which could be heard at all of the odd hours.

Three years passed and poverty had taken a toll on Father's temper, turning him into a bitter and irritable man. Mother on the other hand was prone to anxiety induced crying fits, unable to prevent her meltdowns over her mundane routines and the daily state of affairs. The family now sat 'round the mess afforded to them by the Wheel of Fortune reversed, eating their slop and pretending not to miss the splendor they had once been accustomed to. Absent from the group was The Boy, who had decided to skip out on dinner again without telling anyone. Mother was worried sick.

The Boy had encountered an elderly Knight at the tavern several months prior, who had inspired him with adventure stories, bordering on the fantastical. He told The Boy he needed to make his own way in The World and that with nothing to lose, the risk was minimal. His anecdotes piqued the Boy's curiosity and caused him to become a frequent patron of the alehouse and a friend of the Mud Brew.

The Knight claimed to have served under the former King of Wands and showed the Boy his bum wooden leg as proof that he had indeed fought off a waredemon on Calypso Mountain. Had the Boy ever found himself in a similar situation, he could always light up some Gonga Berries, the smell of which would repel ferocious and purple furred creatures such as those.

“Here, I brought something for you.” There, beside the counter, stood a long, tall object covered in a dirty cloth, which The Knight unraveled with the swoop of his hand.

“Thank you dear, Hendrick! I’ve always wanted a stick!”

“It’s not a stick- it’s a wand, you fool!” The Boy picked it up and whirled it around. “ A wand.”

“Yes, now be careful with that or you could hurt somebody.”

“Isn’t that the point?”

“I suppose it is...But in your case, maybe you can use it for traveling along on your journey.”

“Ah, yes...”

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing-I don’t know, my parents aren’t going to be very pleased when I tell them I’m leaving.”

The Knight put his arm around the Boy. “My Boy, if we did what our parents expected, I’d still be cleaning up after hungry horses and covered waste deep in it-sometimes you just have to take a leap of faith.”

“To be honest with you Sir, I’m just a little scared of what’s out there...”

“Here.” The Knight grabbed the wand. “Let me show you how to defend yourself.”

“Do you think I’ll have to?”

“How are you expected to go out into The World if you don’t know how to kill a man?”

III

“Will someone shut that dog up!” A tiny, scruffy looking dog ran around the table yapping for leftover slop. Daughter obliged by feeding him some underneath the table, just as the Boy returned home.

“Where have you been? Mother’s been worried sick!”

She had already broken into watery hysterics and started mumbling to herself.

“I have an announcement to make.”

“Oh God!” Mother shrieked. “I haven’t said anything yet.” said the Boy, thinking maybe he should give it a moment, before revealing his grand plan to take off. He decided to make his declaration anyway.

“I’ve decided the situation has become untenable-and too intolerable to bear any longer.”

“Is that so?” Father retorted, “What are you going to do about it then?”

“I’m going to leave.”

“Dear God!” Mother shrieked again.

“Where are you going, Brother?”

“I must go to The Kingdom of Tarot to turn the Wheel of Fortune in my favor.”

“You wouldn’t make it past Shrinesburry without ten swords in your back.”

“Isn’t it better than sitting in this filth and living with the regret of never trying?”

Father thought there was some validity in his statement.

“You’re drunk!” Mother turned to Father. “He’s drunk...”

“That has nothing to do with the fact that I’ve already made up my mind.”

“How do you plan on getting there? You have no steed, you have no strength, no skills and no pentacles. What do you expect is going to happen? How are you going to eat? Where will you live? Have you thought about any of these things? Take it from me, Boy, as someone who’s circumnavigated most of The World, including the uncharted waters, I’m not going to dissuade you from your ambitions, but you’re not being very realistic about this, are you?”

“Well I guess it’s in my blood then, isn’t it? I have some skills-”

“Like what?”

“I can play the pan flute-”

“You mean the syrinx.”

“Whatever and...” He struggled to come up with something else. “I don’t need much to get by.”

Mother shook her head in dismay. “He’ll be eaten alive...Whose stick is that?”

In the morning, The Boy rose early stuffing his necessities into a cloth and tying it around the top of his new wand. He walked outside to greet his family solemnly standing together with their heads down, waiting for his departure. Sister handed the Boy a white rose she plucked from a nursery. Mother, a bowl of slop and Father, a Starsun crystal to keep secretly tucked in his shoe.

“Why does everyone look so glum?”

Mother snapped back. “Don’t be a fool!”

“I’m not gone forever.”

Mother’s mood shifted suddenly, knowing this would be the last time she would ever see her son. She put her loving arms around him and gave him a hug.

“Take care, Boy.”

“Goodbye Brother.”

“Goodbye everyone. I will miss you dearly.”

The dog barked and followed alongside, as he trailed off into the distance.

IV

The Fool made his way through the foothills of the valley, ‘round the winding bends and onward toward the jagged mountain tops. He stopped off near the edge of a cliff for a full view of the landscape and a better idea of his general direction. The sun stood out, as the sky stood still, its blood orange glow pulsating over the lushness of the chaparral. The Fool lifted one leg to peak over the edge at the streaming river down below. He decided to take off his hat to enjoy the breeze comb through his hair, closing his eyes and feeling all the pleasure of how nature comforted him in that very moment. That moment didn’t last long.

“Look lads, it’s a flaneuring dandy!”

The Fool turned around to four grifters carrying wands and looking for trouble.

“Beautiful day in’it?”

“What’s that?” One of the grifters quipped.

“I’m searching for The Kingdom and am a little lost. Would any one of you know the best route to get there from here?”

The Fool walked towards the group.

“How ‘bout you give us what you’ve got in that bundle there and we’ll let you go along your merry, dandy way.”

“That’s everything I own,” said The Fool, oblivious to imminent danger.

“And that’ll be just enough for us to take from you.” The brute of the group spat out a wad of backed up phlegm from the bottom of his throat onto the dirt.

“That doesn’t sound very fair? Perhaps your kindness in giving me some counsel would seem the better choice, no?”

The dog yapped.

“Would it, now?” The no good scallywag walked up to the Fool, knocking his silly hat off his head as it see-sawed its way up to the sky. “Don’t make me ask you again...”

The brute pointed his wand at the Fool’s face.

Seeming to oblige, The Fool took his own wand off his shoulder, knocking the burly bloke’s away and giving him a good knock on his head. The scamp’s eyes went crossways, falling backwards, as the other three charged in. The Fool, defending himself in an unfair fight over items that had little to no value, saw no sense in why this was happening, but had no choice in the matter. He knocked away the wands, until one of the clodhopping hayseeds used his on the yapping dog.

Furious, The Fool retaliated by cracking the two langered knives in the chest and knees accordingly as a loud whimper from the canine came, shaking on the ground. The brute, getting back up to rush The Fool, was met with another clack across the face and a final one to the gut, knocking him off the cliff. The purloiners rolled in distress, as The Fool ran to comfort his dog. He stared into its big sad eyes, deciding this Justice reversed, deserved some form of compensation and took whatever pentacles the three swinish men had stashed on them. Placing the dog around his neck, he walked downhill, nine pentacles the richer.

Once reaching the bottom, he gently set the dog down and headed toward the water. Peering around, he saw a school of silvery fish swimming in tandem and used his wand to flick one of the larger speckled trout out of the river, onto the land, letting it flip flop its way to death. He gathered up some leaves and tossed them into a pile, making sure no one saw the crystal Father had given him. Father had taught him all about crystals, this one having the ability to work together with the energies of the stars and sun, which was currently setting. He raised it high as the beam from the sun shot through the crystal onto the leaves, creating a perfect fire for cooking the fish. Holding out his wand, he placed the fish’s mouth at the other end, before roasting it.

Nibbling away at the juicy bits of the wide eyed vertebrate he gave a generous amount to his furry friend, who was still unable to move. The Fool sat thinking about the best way to move forward to Taro, when a parade of whispers interrupted his cogitation, sounding like a swarm of thrumming bees. Getting progressively louder, the voices becoming more pronounced. The Fool jumped up, assuming his tiredness had gotten the best of him, but this was no wile of the ear. He walked over to a weeping willow, having deduced the source of the emanation. The closer he got the clearer the words, “Let the river be your guide, Lenormànd.” These words were repeated again and again, louder and louder. The Fool, whose birth name was Lenormànd, had been taken aback by either the tree, or the possibility that he had lost his mind. The Fool lifted his toes, trying to squint into the hollow of the bark, as dozens of canary colored butterflies stormed out, weaving their way in synchronicity toward the river. While the tree had answered The Fool’s question, he wasn’t sure what to call this experience, other than Divine Guidance.

The night came and went and he left the campsite at daybreak, trudging north alongside the river, shoes covered in muck-soggy and sludge filled on the inside-rain pouring down on his head. The dog rested around the poor Fool's neck, as Lenormand marched on, determined to keep going, even with the elements working against him. His determination was interrupted by the inability to move, his feet sinking into the ground like heavy stones.

The dog struggled to whimper, unable to lick its wounds. The gunk had reached its way up to The Fool's knees, his panic sinking him into the earth. He began to wonder if the tree was a liar or if this was some sick joke The Universe just played him for as forcefully being swallowed by a bog didn't help. A cloaked figure appeared. Stretching out her wrinkled hand, she grabbed onto The Fool's wand, helping the helpless Fool out of the pit, a miraculous stroke of Divine Intervention.

The Fool and the dog caught their breath, both covered in wet gloop.

"Thank you! Thank you!" said The Fool, overwhelmed with gratitude.

"Where are you two headed?"

"We were trying-" The Fool looked at the dog, realizing he hadn't signed up for this. "I was trying to get to The Kingdom, but perhaps I should have waited for the storm to pass."

"Follow me."

Now, carrying the paralyzed dog under his left arm, barely able to move his own numb legs, he hobbled along, following the beldam to a shoddy boat docked a little further up the path. He called out to her, "What were you doing all the way out here?"

"I knew you would be coming around this way."

They arrived at the row boat which had six rusty swords stuck down vertically all around the sole. The old woman took the swords out, placing them down, one by one.

"Get in."

The Fool boarded the dinghy and sat down. Looking at the swords and back at the old woman, his delayed confusion to her answer, begged the question, "How did you know that?"

"Know what?"

"That I would be coming. Or..." He paused, but couldn't come up with the words.

The old woman smiled coyly, "Once upon a time happens all the time, doesn't it?"

He contemplated what she meant by this and came to his own conclusion.

“Are you a witch?”

“Why would you say that? Because I’m a lowly old lady?”

“A cryptic one at that.”

She cackled. “I wouldn’t say I’m a witch, and if I were, I wouldn’t be much help to you would I?”

“Maybe you would, I’ve never met a witch before.”

The Fool was convinced she was a witch, whether she admitted it or not.

“It’ll be six pentacles if you want my help.”

Lenormànd gave her the six pents and she began rowing away from the swampy shore. The mist shrouded the landscape so all that could be seen was the slate blue water surrounding them. She paddled slowly and steadily, not saying much, as The Fool broke the uncomfortable silence.

“Do you need some light? It’s getting kind of dark.”

She didn’t respond.

“I have this crystal here I can use it to shine on ahead if you’d like?”

She took out her very own stone, illuminating the aged lines of her face, before handing it to The Fool to hold.

“These things are quite magical aren’t they? I don’t know why Edmund has it in for them so bad.”

“The Emperor was manipulated by dark magic.”

“What’s that?”

“Most magic is a trick of the mind. If you can trick your mind into believing what you want it to, you can make anything possible. If you can trick someone else’s mind into what you want them to believe-that would be called dark magic.”

“I thought that’s just conning someone.”

“It would take quite an imposter to get The Emperor to believe his own insanity, by driving him there in the first place.”

“How would one trick their mind?”

“When you were sinking, did you believe that the journey for you was over?”

“I didn’t want it to be.”

“Did you believe that destiny had intended for you to keep going?”

“I suppose I did..”

“You tricked your mind into believing you weren’t going to die in that moment by distracting it with every reason you should still be alive, and here we are now-drenched, miserable and talking with each other.”

“But that’s only because you saved me. See, that sounds like happenstance.”

“There’s no such thing as happenstance. There’s only fate.”

“Well then, how do you trick The Emperor?”

“By being a witch.”

This witch in question had made Edmund believe that the reasons for the Empress’ infertility were his own unresolved karmic issues with past life incarnations of *himself*. The only way to heal this karma would be through shamanic rituals, expensive potions composed of unique ingredients and reincarnation baths. She had instilled a state of paranoia in him that The Kings and Queens of the four territories of Taro were out to get him and that he should listen to his internal guides, especially the ones she made up for him. Unfortunately for her, she hadn’t counted on the power of his Divine Intuition, which cut through the confusion he felt, turning him against the enchantress and breaking him free of her bond.

Shortly after the witch’s neck had been snapped by the rope she was hanged, The Empress did become pregnant, eventually giving birth to a child, known only to a handful of people at the top of their inner circle, purposefully kept hidden from the outside world, especially a fool such as Lenormànd.

“If what you’re saying is true, let’s say I wanted this boat to move faster-as quickly as possible-let me close my eyes and I shall pretend we’re sailing along now.” The Fool sarcastically tested the validity of her sentiment. He closed his eyes and pointed his finger thusly, “Sail away now!”

All that was heard was the sound of her paddling.

“When you get to The Kingdom, head to The Gutters and seek out Eclipsus. He’ll answer the rest of your questions.”

The Fool paid no attention to her, lifting his hands trying to prove his point. “See, nothing. We’re still not moving any faster.” He opened his eyes, but she was gone. The Fool stood up immediately-unable to call her name, for she hadn’t given it, her crystal falling into the river.

The Fool, surrounded by pitch black, watched the crystal’s fading shimmer accentuate some kind of large underwater creature surrounding the boat, before fading and sinking away completely. The Fool quickly took

out his own crystal, which didn't seem to work as well with the fog cloaked Harvest Moon. He shook it about, above him, trying to catch the energy, which flickered the gem on and off, as the scales of the massive creature spread out far beyond the line of sight. Panic crawled its way up The Fool's spine as he stood in the stillness of the night.

CRACK!

The boat exploded to bits, as both The Fool and the dog flew out headfirst into the water; the crunch of the devastated wood rang out like the sound of thunder. A massive sea serpent could now be seen in full, below the surface, its glowing eyes heading straight towards them-its long body wrapped around like an infinite snake. The Fool bobbed up with the dog, trying to keep a grasp of his wand, and in the chaos of the moment, closed his eyes and believed he would live...again.

V

Seaweed dangling out of his hair and mouth, The Fool, ragged, smelling of sulfide, clothes covered in sand, wobbled about from dizziness. His wand was three quarters shorter and his dog had died. Its eyes went glossy and his white small, furry frame puffed up, like it had been stuffed with straw.

Lenormànd buried the dog, and said a prayer for him in the hazy shade of the yellow dawn. He picked up his bundle of junk and hiked on. The pear colored leaves crickled and crackled with every step he took. Not knowing what was ahead of him and not having expected what was already behind, through the woods, he finally saw the golden gates of The Kingdom.

The Fool's arrival was greeted by some with apathy and disdain. Given his appearance and potent fragrance, he couldn't fully blame them. The realm was a clean and safe place, a haven from the relative brutality of the outside world. To the North were tribal nomads and barbarians. To the West, an enchanted forest filled with sorcery and magic. To the East, desert towns populated by rivaling spice and textile traders. To the South, the mountain ranges that stretched down to the Mer de Mystique.

The Kingdom itself was vast and had been divided into four regions, shared by four pairs of Kings and Queens, most of them distant blood relatives of the original Emperor and Empress, all serving under one throne.

The Fool was awestruck by the sheer magnificence. Tall tudor structures lined the cobblestone streets that seemed to go on and out in every direction with hordes of people hustling and bustling along them.

He found a spot to set down his belongings, hoping some music for the public would garner him recognition and a few extra pentacles to squeak by. He started to puff into his pan flute a short lived song, cut off by a Page of Swords, who had stopped the musical number and interrogated him, informing The Fool that panhandling was strictly restricted to The Gutters. He packed up and headed off, asking for directions, ignored by crowds too busy to deal with the foul newcomer. Regardless of the reception, Lenormànd was feeling good, knowing that he had finally made it to his destination and that his fame and fortune was close at hand.

Aimlessly unbothered he strolled along, whistling the song he wasn't allowed to finish, when the beauty of The Sacred Gardens charmed him enough into taking a detour. He walked around the plush paradise kept cared for several centuries by master horticulturists. Permeated by the ambrosial scent of honeysuckle flowers. The rustling of leaves, thitter of snap dragonflies zipping to and fro and songs of hummingbirds calling for their mates rang out above his head. From a distance, The High Priestess kept a close eye on the curious lad, watching his every move with intuitive abstraction as he made his way across the oasis where smoke signals of steam piped up from a hot spring. He thought it worth it to take a quick dip to ease the stinging that nagged at his bones. Stripping down to his bare bottom, he climbed in, beaming from the relief of the simmering heat, which soothed and healed his bruised body.

His eyes felt heavy on their way towards closing, when he caught a glimpse of her. The girl who would forever turn out to be the other half of his soul. Her name was Genevieve. She had been fastidiously painting with attention to detail all the way at the other end of a line of well kempt rose bushes. There was an immediate knowing in Lenormand that the angels had specifically sent her down to show him what was missing from his life-for what good is living, without someone to love it with. He splashed out of the spring and put back on the clothes Mother had sewn together for him.

Unaware, she sat there, brushing together a portrait of two naked lovers on opposite ends of her canvas. On the woman's side, was an apple tree, with a snake curled around it; on the man's, a tree engulfed in flames. Their feet were planted on a barren plain, mountain looming in the background, a seraph hovering above the clouds looking down upon them.

Genevieve had fair, wavy hair, the color of golden ember, that came down to her waist. The Fool cautiously approached, unable to explain the hypnotic feeling of being drawn to her. Expecting to be given the cold shoulder, to his surprise, was met with warmth and kindness. Her sea green eyes stared at him with the wonder and curiosity at the strangeness of his being.

“Why is that man's tree on fire?”

She burst out laughing.

“It's supposed to represent his lust for the woman.”

“I see. And what does hers represent?”

“What do you think?”

“Most people would probably say temptation, but is her fruit worth a snake bite? I'm not so sure.”

“It most certainly is.” She responded coyly, like she was hiding a secret. “You're not from around here are you-”

“I am, now.”

The Fool told her of the monetary downfall of his family that left him with nothing but the yearning to escape to a more opportune place like The Land of Taro.

Genevieve was the third daughter of the preeminent and only florist in Waterton, serving the higher echelons of society in their banquets, balls, ceremonies, jubilees and parades. She would come to The Garden every afternoon, to practice her Divinely Gifted talent.

“Have you ever sold a painting?”

“They’re not for sale.”

“Do you have no need for pentacles? Surely there’s a perverted nobleman who would pay quite a few for this one.”

She laughed at the bluntness of The Fool’s honesty and his seemingly endless questions, ideas and rambling stories to follow. To her, he appeared to be a daydreamer with many interests and fascinations, curious about everything and everyone and the observations he could share about them all.

“I paint for the joy of it. For one day, maybe they will line a palace, but until then there’s more to life than money.”

“Then who’s going to butter your bread-the baker, the matchmaker-”

“Or me?”

She smirked at him.

Genevieve had many friends, but none genuine, and hid her opinions and resentment for them so well that no one thought to appreciate her the way she expected. Finally, it seemed she had met someone real, who she felt a true connection with; like they had known each other long before in a previous life, reunited again, to be together in this one. As they carried on their conversation, she became more smitten with his carefree nature and confidence. He wasn’t like others in her crowd, taken with their own image and status. However, this was not to say that The Fool didn’t have ambitions of his own.

They had both agreed to meet again the following day so The Fool could watch her finish her unsellable masterpiece. Just before leaving, he noticed that the man and woman on the canvas seemed to be looking towards the sky, instead of each other, which he found peculiar, but kept this observation to himself, as the paint had dried.

Lenormànd found his way back out of the row of rose bushes and past the spring, catching The High Priestess, placidly sitting and staring in silence the whole time. She bore a striking resemblance to the woman on the boat, yet somehow more youthful. He inquired of her the location of The Gutters, when she handed him a crisp note. He opened the crease to see the address of Eclipsus written on it. Lenormànd inched his head close to hers to prove he wasn’t as oblivious as she thought.

“I know who you are.”

The High Priestess looked up at The Fool and put her finger to her nose, smirking behind it. She handed his six pentacles back into his palm, closing it for him.

VI

In an area of The Kingdom purposefully left unclaimed, there, behind Vagabond Alley, lived the blind gypsy Lenormànd had been told to find, by the woman who claimed not to be a witch. Known for its poverty and petty theft, it had a certain bohemian charm that many of the rebellious children of pecunious parents would flock to for creative inspiration and the late night highs it also produced.

The Fool stopped in front of the address written on the note-a musical instrument shop which appeared to be abandoned.

“Pay no mind to the clutter everywhere.”

Eclipsus walked out of the backroom, hunched over, his face, tan, looking like it had been beaten and weathered by time.

“Sit, sit.”

The Fool took a chair from a high pile of junk, which collapsed promptly afterwards. Eclipsus coughed from the dust, as The Fool tried to place the objects back in order from where they fell.

“Don’t bother. I assume you need a place to stay?”

“Ideally, but I only have three pents on me.” He lied.

“It’s your lucky day then, that’s my fee. Stay for a day or a lifetime if you want. It makes no difference to me-”

“Thank you, Eclipsus, Sir, most generous of you!”

He held a bottle of Dragon’s Breath, putting it down onto the table and pouring shots for the both of them. They gulped the drinks down with discomforting pleasure.

“Are you a Cup or are you a Sword?”

“I don’t believe I’m either-”

“Indefinable-what would you call yourself then?”

“Lenormànd.”

“Well, Lenormànd-what do you want to be?”

“A nobleman. Of honor and high regard.”

“Do you now? Like Gladly Weatherbottom of Fleischer?”

“Of course! He’s the most famous playwright in the whole world!”

“Did you know he was from here? He lived a few doors down.”

Eclipsus poured two more shots.

“Storytellers are horrible liars. They have *this need* to tell the truth. And the truth is what people want to hear, because it’s a reflection of themselves. Do you know what his truth was?”

Eclipsus let out a grunt after his third shot.

“That he got paid for stealing all his stories from me.”

The gypsy rose slowly and dragged a large trunk from the corner of the room towards him, opened it and pulled out a highly illegal casting stick and deck of fortune cards.

“Are those baddie cards?”

“They are indeed. Let’s see what the future has foreseen for you, shall we?”

Eclipsus began shuffling the deck. “ Before these fortune cards they cast lots -Universe, show me what the Boy needs to know.” He repeated this over and over again, before stopping suddenly. He breathed in deep, placing his slender, bony fingers on a card near the middle of the stack, drawing it out like a sword and slamming it down on the table.

The cards were all engraved, this one with the numerals XVI written on top, an image depicting a menacing Tower beneath. Eclipsus put his hand on the card, giving a wild smile, his few remaining teeth poking out in different directions.

“You are him!”

“I am?...Who?”

“The one we’ve been waiting for. The one who brings us out of this netherworld-this pit...crawling with the scorpions and the snakes that inhabit it.”

“I think you must have me mistaken for someone else-”

“You would want that wouldn’t you? A cycle that’s been frozen in an Age of fear. A wheel that turns nowhere but here.”

“Where else would it turn?”

“Not a cheek to the other side-that’ll get you killed these days. You’re not as stupid as people think you are-and you’re not fooling me-”

“I wasn’t trying to fool you Eclipsus, sir.”

“You didn’t have to try. It’s in a little book in a little bundle on that wand. Sneaky, sneaky Lenormand...You’re no nobleman.”

“What does that mean? I’d rather sleep on the street than near a blind bum like you if I’m going to be insulted like that-”

“Speaking up to a peasant still makes you poor. Patience will serve you in time.”

Pink smoke began emanating from Eclipsus’s casting stick as he weaved it around and muttered to himself, “Pisces cusp Aries-Sun, Aquarius Moon, Gemini, on top of it all.” Eclipsus cleared his throat.

“Your emotions are air, your actions mercurial, but your soul is made of fire and water-Pisces, represented by two fish.”

Eclipsus drew out two smokey fish encircling each other in the air.

“Those fish need to keep swimming or they’ll die. You risked your life coming to The Kingdom to seek out comfort and complacency, but that wasn’t what was meant for you. Your wishes...and your fishes, are in opposition to their destiny.”

The fish danced away from each other, before disappearing into thin air.

“You were meant for much more than some title and a grassy plot of land. Any way the wind blows there you are, destined to fail your way to who you were supposed to be.”

Not paying attention, The Fool hesitantly inquired about the card.

“That Tower looks like a prison.”

“Of fixed ideals built on a faulty foundation and that’s why, inevitably, one day, it must collapse.”

“Alright...I think I’m going to go now-”

The Fool stood up.

“Sit back down! *What are you worried about?* That things are going to change or you’re going to have to-”

“I just got here and I don't even know what you're talking about!”

He paused, thinking about how best to get through to Lenormànd and expand his perception.

“One more.”

Eclipsus shook the bottle of Dragon's Breath, pouring out one last shot for The Fool and placing the casting stick to Lenormànd's head. Lenormànd began to visualize Eclipsus's words as a lucid nightmare, clouds of dripping red illusions melting through his third eye.

“The World is a mirror to our souls, and we're fractured, which means The World is fractured. The World needs to be healed or it'll wither away and die. Regret, doubt, fear, hatred, disappointment, selfishness, ego, pride, greed and loss, all delaying a soul's enlightenment. Everyone stuck in their own inherited-I mean inherent beliefs-limited-leaving them unawake, in a slumber, and preventing change. Love is an energy which we feel the full effect of when we connect with another from our heart and that energy becomes amplified. Two become one. If one is torn apart, love is torn apart, then love doesn't have a home-then we don't have one either. The other side needs to be nourished and The World mirrors a likeness from its satiation which isn't true and isn't yours. And then it's put back together in an image that's one but not true. God is one and has many faces. Evil is a face that has many faces. One of those faces likes its own image more than who made it. The Divine Spirit hid and The Devil lived speaking its lies with a forked tongue, on the left side of your brain making you think everything good came from his mouth.”

Eclipsus took the casting stick from The Fool's head.

“But The Story of God isn't finished-do you see the problem now?”

The Fool, too afraid to conclude what his role in the story was, preferred the idea of the grassy plot of land Eclipsus mentioned earlier.

“Not exactly.”

“You were destined to be a-”

“A married man-”

“A Magician. Meant to help people. To heal the planet, with your-”

“Tricks-”

“More like strengths.”

“*Couci-couça.*”

“Pas de Couci-couça. Masters and ascended guides. The few of us include The High Priestess. Born and reborn to push the Wheel of Fortune forward for good-not for ourselves and that’s where things get a little tricky for everybody, *don’t they* Lenormànd?”

“You keep-go-keep going-”

The Fool flicked his fingers at him.

“Enemies abound and have and will continue to stop-”

“People like you-”

“Who should know of dark and light, two sides of three, that need one source. You can take everything I’ve said from the start and call it life.”

“And why would anyone want to be on the other side of that coin?”

“It’s in your little book. Demons, false thoughts and fallen angels. The original lightworker, deified from the beginning by archaic civilizations engraving his or her different forms. The ones fated to serve under his influence called him The Light Bearer. One man’s beast is another man’s burden-you already killed both before you even got here-defending your right to live. You’re not scared of The Devil, you’re scared of-”

Eclipsus lifted up the card to show it to Lenormànd again, flicking the back. An illusory lightning bolt shimmered through it, destroying The Tower.

“The night.”

VII

The Fool spent his next few years in The Kingdom with Genevieve, growing together in harmony and joy. There was a rhythm between the two that became almost second hand nature in the way they understood and appreciated each other’s eccentricities. Her desire to see Lenormànd everyday made it difficult for him to focus on anything other than her needs.

While he tried his hand at several different professions, his lack of focus and propensity to get bored easily, prevented him from mastering any apprenticeship he attempted. Even though he didn’t fully know what his destiny had in store for him, he knew it wasn’t cobbling or blacksmithing. And when he wasn’t thinking of Genevieve, he would dream of becoming a renowned musician or perhaps a playwright or an artist or the owner of a business, but he didn’t have the talent nor the discipline necessary to achieve recognition in any of these fields either. The closest he came to success was joining a group of ruffigans from The Gutters in a traveling street quartet which obtained a modicum of notoriety within the four hundred yards in which they performed.

Genevieve's friends and family held an unspoken lack of fondness for The Fool and were under the suspicion that his shortage of pentacles was a reflection of his integrity, assuming he was using his quick wits to dupe her and climb his way up the social ladder on the hem of her dress. While this wasn't true, Genevieve had been more than generous in her gift giving to The Fool, which he was unable to reciprocate.

He grew increasingly frustrated at the ease in which the noblemen and women appeared to make their names and claims to fortune, which slowly started to seem out of reach for him, no matter which way he tried. Some looked at Lenormànd as a schemer, always coming up with plans and projects that would allow him the quickest route to a well provided and comfortable life. He was unable to follow through with any of these, as they usually required some lofty investment no one dared afford him.

Genevieve assured Lenormànd that she didn't hold his instability against him and that all she needed was his company. And company she received, along with the great pleasure of Lenormànd's compliments, flirting, flattery, pan flute playing, serenading and kisses. He was also extremely dependable. Frequently interrupted during the middle of one of his ventures, by carrier pigeons, dropping off messages that Genevieve requested his presence, he would immediately drop his work to rush off and see what she needed; which was usually comfort and attention. Because he was unable to afford a horse, he would run several miles across town to make sure he arrived in a timely, albeit breathless manner.

Lenormànd was able to keep his confidence about him throughout all of his professional missteps and aggravations, always looking at life with persistent optimism. Genevieve however, doubted her image and self worth and required constant reassurance of her value in The World. This stemmed from her parents, who were both emotionally distant towards their children. Her father, while successful, was a drunk who preferred hunting partridges when he wasn't working. Her mother was a frosty woman, who expected the best from her children and hid her emotions behind her intellect, which made her a deeply unfulfilled person, judging what people ought to be, but weren't. On several occasions, including their annual gathering for St. Divine's Day, Lenormànd would dress up, wearing an embroidered shirt Genevieve had sewn together for him to join her family for dinner. There was an air of tension at these feasts, like no one wanted to be there, but everyone would do their best to pretend they did anyway. These dinners made Lenormànd miss his own family and feel rather uncomfortable in knowing that everyone in Genevieve's household seemed to take him for a ne'er do well. He would often try to lighten the mood with some funny anecdotes about his misadventures, but these were usually lost on everyone, especially her mother.

The only person The Fool considered family in The Kingdom, besides Genevieve, was Eclipsus, who was rarely ever at the shop, often traveling on what he would call "magical expeditions". Eclipsus refused to teach him about mysticism, claiming that he wasn't ready to receive instruction and testing Lenormànd's patience. He knew Eclipsus was holding back, as Eclipsus knew The Fool's intentions for learning anything about the craft were for short term, selfish gain. "You are not awakened yet, my Boy."

Genevieve and Lenormànd took a walk together one warm afternoon, holding hands, as they often did. He stopped to pick a purple flower that stood out from the grass, placing it behind Genevieve's ear and gently touching her face. He knew no matter his own hardship, she would always be there for him, as their bond was unbreakable and their souls together complete. Had The Fool listened to what little Eclipsus initially passed on about his fate, he would have been more wary that while love may seem eternal, time has a way of changing people, and this change would be the foundation for Lenormànd's awakening.

VIII

Genevieve had grown up and decided she was too mature for silly hobbies such as painting. The Fool tried to encourage her to continue the practice, but she mistook his support for pestering and was under the impression that neither one of them was taking life seriously. Even though their relationship gave her a sense of wholeness, there was a deep void that felt unfulfilled.

Lenormànd's stories and jokes started to become stale and were met with eyerolls, sarcasm and biting remarks on his failure and lack of discipline. There was something about his authenticity that reflected a conflict brewing within Genevieve about her own. She had lingering questions of what the future would hold, her place in it and what marriage would look like with a man who was looked down upon by those she pretended to hold dear to her heart.

She suggested Lenormànd be more realistic and that he join The Squire Program, a training ground for young men hoping to achieve Knighthood. Besides the fact that Lenormànd was now too old to be a squire, let alone a page. He was insulted by the idea of becoming a glorified delivery boy and didn't take kindly to her suggestion that she wouldn't mind if he were to be drafted into battle, telling him, "that at least he would die nobly."

The Fool was resentful of Genevieve's consistent need for engagements and rendezvous with her unpleasant family and spoiled friends and chose not to attend The Merrigold Ball that year to make a point that he wasn't to be at her beck and call any longer. She had been offended by his lack of enthusiasm and disdainful remarks about going to functions such as those and considered the possibility that she didn't need his company at all.

The Fool stayed home twiddling about instead, until the door burst open. Eclipsus stumbled in, bleeding from his chest. He had been shivved by a Psychic Vampire while traversing the countryside, barely making it home to his shop alive. Lenormànd rushed to his aid, holding his pale, frail body.

"Bastards."

Frantically, The Fool asked, "Is there anything I can do?"

"I'm bleeding to death. What do you think?"

He let out a yelp.

"Fetch me some Dragon's Breath, Boy-it's over there."

Eclipsus struggled to point, as The Fool poured out two last shots for the both of them.

“Dark days are coming and you will go through them separately from Taro. What happens next won’t be your fault. When the time is right, you will know it and you will be given a new book to study.”

“How am I supposed to be a Magician, when I can’t even make anything happen for myself? It’s been five years since coming to this bloody Kingdom and what do I have to show for it?”

Eclipsus looked up at The Fool, trying to convey the importance of the last words he would ever speak.

“You’re on a journey. You will think your feathers are falling out, but they’re just changing. And one day you’re going to fly like a big beautiful bird in the sky and people are going to look up and say is that the man whose name we forgot to remember who rose up from the ashes like a phoenix. But until then bet on your feet being kept on the ground with HIS judgement. You’ll think you wasted your years. But those wasted years are what dreams are made out of. When you’re stuck in the middle between love and hate choose yourself. The Universe will never show you how it conducts a symphony, but that song and dance ends, and when it does, and people reach their final hour, that’s when they realize Spirit gave them exactly what they needed, whether they liked it or not. You will feel lost and it’s important for you to find yourself, so you can know what your true purpose here is. Are you a schemer or are you a dreamer? Have faith in The Divine Spirit. Have faith in yourself. As it is above, so it will be below. Don’t you ever show your hand until that final act. You will not fail Lenormànd.”

Genevieve sat in the corner of the banquet hall ruminating, as everyone danced the rondolet. She questioned why she became so dependent on someone who couldn’t even provide for himself and felt empowered knowing that without her, The Fool would be nothing more than an inept scrounger. Putting the Fool down made her feel better about her own insecurities, which had been buried and bottled up like parchment in glass at sea. She observed everything like a Scorpio would, with her little secrets she kept to herself, accounting for all the wrongs and rights, mostly wrongs, of everyone who ever crossed her path.

A Prince, neither particularly handsome nor partially unattractive, neither a genius nor an oaf, but tall and monied stood in front of her, asking for a dance. Genevieve looked up at The Prince, not feeling love nor enthusiasm, but seeing an opportunity to make a statement about her own power.

IX

The Fool distracted himself with his burdens and Genevieve became distant. A pigeon landed at Lenormànd’s feet with a note in its beak requesting for the two to meet. He had been working at a bakery, and settled into the mindless routine of picking pits out of peaches for their famous melba pies. He dropped the fruit and ran off to Waterton to see what she wanted.

She waited patiently thinking about the kindest way to put three swords through his heart. He approached her on the beam bridge over the streaming creek at dusk, without the faintest idea of what was about to happen.

“I thought we were on the same side...”

“There are no sides. There are only feelings. And I don’t have them for you anymore.”

They stared past each other, looking up at the sky, both knowing this was a lie.

The Fool felt too dead to cry, as she went on with a litany of exaggerated reasons she tabulated for making her decision to part ways. Instead of combating her, he offered to amend what she found wrong, but the more solutions he offered, the more she diverted to other problems she had with him. It was as if a floodgate of feelings and blame opened up and poured out onto Lenormànd all at once, including his never planning of outings and excursions, to his immaturity, to his constant ideas and questions, which she had said exhausted her. The Fool perceived most of these as a diversion and excuse to be self entitled. He didn't understand how someone who knew him so well could have pretended to be someone she wasn't the whole time.

"I don't know, maybe I need to meet you again..."

Lenormànd refrained from voicing the salty words and damning accusations he wanted to say aloud, in an effort to try to salvage the situation, for whatever was left unspoken was already acknowledged between the two of them. Genevieve was running from herself and had succumbed to the judgment of others and in doing so, judged The Fool as unworthy of her love. The more he chased, the more she ran.

Months passed, and all kind gestures and gifts from him were rejected and ignored by Genevieve. He had been fired from the bakery for sobbing into the pies during work and locked himself in the shop, stewing in his own sadness, reflecting obsessively on the possibility of winning her back.

Virgo season came and word got out that Genevieve was to be married in the fall to a not so charming, but wealthy Prince. Lenormànd wanted to believe this was not what was meant to happen, that this was not how destiny was supposed to play out, but fear and doubt lingered on whether he was deluding himself. Even though they weren't together, the energy of their connection was, and it floated incessantly around him. The more he tried to rationalize what he knew to be true, the more confusing it became and the more it agitated him.

Running frantically through Center Square he saw a nobleman trying to get on a horse. Lenormànd threw the man off, climbed on and charged ahead to the wedding to make one final declaration of his love to her in front of all parties involved.

The Hierophant conducted the ceremony under The Four Wands of Consecration. The cool, autumnal air and burnt orange foliage made for a pleasant setting as the crowd of dignitaries gathered around to celebrate the nuptials. The Hierophant mumbled on about the holiness of the matrimony, until he was interrupted in a most unsanctimonious way, by shouting. The Fool walked up the aisle proclaiming his value and his worth, his dedication and his commitment, and how he and Genevieve were meant to be together by what really mattered-Spirit itself, which had brought them into each other's lives in the first place. He exclaimed that if the matrimony were to continue any further, it would be as fake as everyone sitting there. This statement was met with scowls, frowns and rather crude remarks from the crowd. If there was any question of how her mother felt, it was apparent now.

Royal guards came through and grabbed Lenormànd by his arms as he yelled for Genevieve to show everyone who she really was and to tell everyone what she really knew to be true. Genevieve held back her tears with all her might, her soul wanting to run away with him, but her ego not allowing her to be embarrassed by doing

so. She lifted her hand, signaling for the guards to take The Fool away, so he would become nothing more than a fond, yet distant memory. He screamed her name again and again, in agony and pain, as he was dragged out of sight.

Lenormànd was tossed into a rotting cell which was filled with just enough air to breathe. The musky scent made him nauseous and his only view, the decaying walls that surrounded him. His stomach turned with excruciating revulsion at the betrayal he had experienced, and yet deep down the feeling of unconditional love still unable to leave his body. As the weeks went by, The Fool became a Hermit, stuck in isolation, growing a scraggly beard, littered with the crumbs of economy biscuits he had been occasionally fed to keep him alive. He shared these with a tiny mouse who lived in the eye of a cracked skull in the corner of the dungeon. He grew weak and weary, losing most of his weight and even more of his sanity. There was a buzzing in and around his left eye, which came every time he thought of Genevieve. Little did he know, this happened everytime she thought of him too.

One surprising afternoon, the door opened. Two armsmen stood together informing The Hermit that he had been confined for six months and that upon the request of a certain Princess, he was to be granted freedom, under the condition that he leave The Kingdom and never return. They handed him a ragged robe and a pair of decrepit sandals to change into. He was given a lantern for the journey ahead, guided up the stairs and out of the prison, his wrists clamped together by rusty shackles.

A light rain fell as he walked the streets of The Kingdom, one armsmen on either side of him. Children pointed and laughed at the crazy Hermit, as he passed by. He kept on walking, never looking back. Upon reaching the iron gates, he saw The High Priestess close by, standing in front of a pomegranate tree. She walked over to Lenormànd. Out of respect, the armsmen agreed to let her talk to him. She handed over a dark green book and whispered something ominous in his ear.

The armsmen unshackled The Hermit, opened the gates and watched him wander away into the forest. He ascended the hills to the mountain tops, as fireflies fluttered about him, their bulbs flickering on and off in the twilight of the evening. Reaching the cliff, he sat cross legged, looking out at the full moon shining over the water, the star of Asherah falling out of the sky.

His hope had faded, seeing The World for what it really was, and the cruelty of the people in it and the lies they told and the masks they wore, for he would never be the same again. Cynicism filled his heart and mind, as darkness cast its shadow over the land and the love that left him behind. He sat alone, in the chill of the night, the light from his lantern illuminating his solitude. He opened the book The High Priestess had given him to the first page and began to read. The words telling him that to change what was external, he would be forced to transform what was inside of himself. This could only be done by tricking the mind, or as some would call it, magic.

He read on.

30 YEARS LATER

CHAPTER I THE LOVERS

Edmund had been laid to rest in the Eternal Tomb in the mausoleum next to his wife. Shortly after his passing, The Kingdom fell into disrepair.

Poor leadership led to decades of internal conflicts between the regional Kings and Queens. The newly anointed Emperor, who claimed his brother's throne, used the title on the finer material goods afforded to him by the position, forgetting his leadership responsibilities, he focused that attention instead, on how many women he could invite into his soft, feathered bed.

The four provinces were hit with unusually volatile weather, making for poor crop rotations. Several pillaging attacks by barbarians and a five year plague called The Black Crip didn't help either. Petty arguments between royalty led to petty punishments between territories, and on those who traded and crossed the

boundary lines from Waterton to Kindewood. Cats could be seen freely roaming the streets, failing at their sole purpose of containing the rats from infesting the poorer areas.

These regions had been agreeably divided for centuries, based on resources and the natural terrain of the land which the residents inhabited.

The King and Queen of Wands ruled over the wildwoods in The West, which played a pivotal role in The Kingdom's infrastructure, providing the materials necessary for its housing. The King and Queen of Cups controlled the water supply, along with sprawling vineyards in The South. The Swords oversaw the iron repositories, of which forged the arms and guards required to protect the homeland from invaders in The North. The Queen of Pentacles however, remained the sole monarch of the pairs, her husband having passed away twenty years prior. While she was not by blood related to the true line of royalty she inherited, her title commanded the distribution of loan advances to aristocrats and landowners stringing together the web of Taro's economy. These loans were of course sourced from the massive gold supply she oversaw in the Pits of Gilt.

Over the years, grime and filth slowly crept their way throughout the towns, while vandalism sprung out like a thief stealing seven swords in the night. Weekly payments to street sweepers, building scrubbers, window wipers and local officials were delayed if not paid at all, as collecting taxes from citizens with little to no money was often quite a fruitless endeavor. Whatever had been accumulated, surreptitiously disappeared on its way up the chain to Edwyn's administration, where it went unaccounted for, if not, squandered completely.

At the center of The Kingdom stood the new Emperor's domain. Edwyn's arrival ensured that all the elaborate oil and canvas paintings his brother so admired, which lined the corridors of his castle, be removed and replaced with line drawings of bloody scenes of knights fighting monsters. Edwyn had no taste, no tact and a propensity to throw fits of rage, whenever he didn't get what he wanted in a most immediate manner. He could be seen cackling one moment and screaming at furniture the next, were the objects unlucky enough to be accidentally bumped into by him.

Unlike Edmund, Edwyn had multiple children, the unofficial count hovering around six that he knew of-two from one mistress, three from another and one from the Queen of Wands herself. The Emperor and The Queen of Wands were aroused by the licentious act of adultery, which would seem unfair to The Queen's husband, had he not dabbled in the practice himself.

Edwyn considered all his children to be illegitimate heirs to The Throne, except Prince Richard, who The King of Wands believed to be his own.

While the thought of marriage was considered by Edwyn on certain sentimental occasions, his lust, greed and preoccupation with himself prevented sharing too much time, money or attention with any one particular woman or child, except for Richard.

As some of his bastards reached peak adolescence, they tried to outwit and backstab each other for Edwyn's consideration in passing down the crown, which very much amused him. He was much less amused at the one who tried to stab him directly-an event which solidified his decision to remain a bachelor.

Conflict became as good a distraction as any to avoid facing what no one dared admit-none of this was merely some random streak of bad luck. The Land was sick, the steel was dull, the grapes were sour and the gold mines, quickly running dry. Desperation turned people towards prayer, crying out for Divine Spirit to save them, only to be met with the deaf ears and the turned backs of a seemingly preordained plutocracy. It didn't take long for patience to outlive its virtue and for faith in The Divine to dwindle away, as the majority turned from the above to the below and towards a man cloaked in hope, secretly maintaining the fact that he was no friend of Spirit at all.

...

In the town of Orion, a spotter owl, whose head had been tucked in its chest, slept soundly for most of the morning, until it was interrupted by the repeated shouts of the name Marvin, a victim of this unfortunate time and former Knight of Cups.

“Marvin!”

The owl opened its left eye, peeping around circuitously to spot the direction of the sound of the annoyance. The Knight of Cups, snoring several feet below the bird's hollow was too engrossed in a nightmare to hear his own name being called.

“Marvin! Wake up!”

Marvin fought in three gruesome, yet glorious battles and at one point been awarded for his valiance by the nobility with an Ace of Pentacles, roughly valued at ten thousand pents. Shortly after receiving it, he lost it in a card game called Broken Hearts.

Philip shook Marvin persistently, but was met with mumbles and hand waves brushing him off.

“Come on up now you drunk sod, wake up!”

Marvin's grumbling erupted into an exaggerated, garish yell, pulling out his sword and whipping it around violently, like he was under attack. “Who goes there!?” Drool fell from his lips.

Marvin's comrade had seen enough combat in his life to handle the sharply unannounced strike with grace.

“It's me, Philip!”

“Oh Philip! I'm sorry my brother, I was just in the middle of-”

Marvin looked around, but couldn't figure out the words to put together on how he ended up there.

“Who was with you last night?”

“What do you mean?”

Philip pointed at the four chalices laying on the ground. Marvin picked them up one by one.

“Oh, these? That’s funny, I’m not really sure.”

He started to remember how much he could potentially make from selling them, after stealing them from a fancified inn he happened upon at some point the night prior. They began walking, as Philip warned him, “Griswold is very disappointed with you. This is the second month that you’ve missed your quota.”

Marvin dropped one of the cups, but was too distracted by the prospect of being fired, to bother picking it back up.

“He’s not going to fire me is he?”

The Knight was more concerned about the reduction in his income, than the responsibility he took on for the position he agreed to in the first place.

“I’m not sure, but he’s not pleased, let’s just say that.”

“Hm.”

“Here, I get you this job, a stable occupation, which you’ve made abundantly clear that you have no interest in, whatsoever. I’m not going to go as far as saying that you’ve made a mockery of it, but I did go out on a limb-”

“Bounty hunting?”

“What business are you in? I’m talking about tax collection-”

“And not a day has passed without an aide-memoir on the one hour it took you to convince that old bag of bones to bring me on for such a miserable stint. And don’t pretend it isn’t miserable. And don’t pat yourself on the back and call it a favor, if you’re going to consistently hold it over my head.”

“I’m just trying to not look bad.”

Marvin raised his right hand and moved it in accord with each word.

“The-Empirical-Tax-Collection-Service. This is what we’ve been reduced to, squeezing pentacles out of the poor and chasing after them if they run-not for The Emperor, but for The Queen of Pentacles. Tell me friend, is this how you thought you would spend the rest of your days?”

“There’s no need to get existential about it-it’s a job. You’re lucky to have one in this economy. And why shouldn’t The Queen be entitled to her loans back? Perhaps that concept is at odds with your vile habits?”

“They’re her mother-in-law’s debts...She has no relation to any of them. Now she thinks she can go into any town, under a private entity, and demand first dibs at our taxes, because of a personal squabble between her,

The Emperor and the rest of them. This whole place is falling apart-maybe now's not the time to push everybody past their breaking point."

The two kept walking, privately considering each other's perspective. Philip refrained from poking Marvin further, knowing the bloodshed they witnessed in war, and the death of The Knight's family during the plague, created a bond more solid than steel and petty dissension. What evaded Phillip was the extent to which these experiences had infected Marvin's mind like a traumatic toxicant, constantly haunting him with memories he was unable to shake away.

...

The construction of a large amphitheater near Griswold's chancery was set for completion in three months, as the clanging of claw hammers and shouting of expletives periodically interrupted the crusty crank's attempted tirade of Marvin's poor performance.

"What would you like me to tell the exchequer with this?!"

Griswold threw several satchels of pentacles on the desk, some of the copper and silver pieces flying out of them.

Marvin offered a rebuttal clouded in sarcasm.

"I can follow back around on any unwilling participants with my sword or intimidating threats of violence, as you said, that's the only way you're going to get them to cough up the rest of what *you're* expecting *from me*."

"The fact that you haven't done that is already disappointing. We are not in the-"

Hollering from the construction site echoed into the chancery-"*The wood is weak!*" The clanging ensued. "*You're weak!*"

"That damned theater! Dealing with you dolts! Do you think I brought you in as peacemakers? We sit around, three killer debating the feelings of peasants? I will not partake in that conversation. They don't have the pentacles? Take their possessions. They don't have possessions? Take them to debtor's court and have them work for the Queen as indentured labor."

"Servents."

"What's the difference?"

"Never mind, go on..."

"This Kingdom operates on her unrepaid loans. There are contractual obligations for them to be recompensed."

“Every citizen is armed with the knowledge on how to use a bow and arrow. What makes you think brute force and a lack of commiseration wouldn’t spark a complete rebellion against the established order, more specifically, Her Royal Majesty? The wife of a landowner sees her husband threatened within an inch of his life, and she turns that arrow on us. How far are you willing to go to make an exchequer happy?”

“Far enough.” Griswold spat sunflower seeds on the floor.

“All the other collectors have followed suit, with the exception of one and I’m staring at him. If you don’t have it in you to do the job correctly, then perhaps you’re better suited to work as a volunteer for a slop kitchen or an orphanage. This isn’t that.”

Marvin restrained himself from jumping across the table and strangling the irritable grump. Philip chimed in to assuage the situation. “So I guess everything’s settled then, right Marvin? More force, is what Griswold’s saying.”

Marvin sat seething and didn’t respond.

“I think he’s got the gist!”

The crashing of thousands of wands shook the chancery like the reverberation of an earthquake. The three men jolted up and rushed outside. Marvin ran out first, a little further than Griswold. Seeing Marvin was far enough away from earshot, Griswold muttered to Philip, “Remember, this was a favor-don’t let him turn into my problem again, or he’s gone.”

The dash turned into a saunter as the pair caught up to The Knight, surveying the collapsed amphitheater. Several yards away stood the enormous pile of wood and rubble, dust hovering about the mound.

Original sketches showed a complex structure, in which the planner took inspirational cues from a deep sea reef around a skully he visited in The South. The skeletal round exterior was to resemble a colony of coral, while the interior was meant to have winding ovals of iridescent seats fabricated from Mermaid Oysters.

There was a momentary lull, before the workers of the Ludwig Lumber Company began hurling accusations at one another for the disintegration of the amphitheater.

“I told you something was wrong with the timber! It looked warped.”

“I don’t remember that casual observation voiced during the inspection!”

“Whose bright idea was it to underprice the estimate to win a contract using unskilled apprentices from The Thicket?!”

There was enough blame to go around, shifting from the workers to the suppliers to the plan itself, back to the materials and tools.

Griswold turned to Marvin and Phillip, “This used to be The Temple of The Golden Arch-”

“How will the patricians be entertained for their Summer Solstice Festival *now*?”

Griswold shot Marvin the look a hermit crab would if its shell had been taken from him. The zizzing of hundreds of spotted red moths ascended from the wreckage, flying merrily over the top of the heap.

“*This is a disaster.*” The architect held his head in his hand. A dismayed apprentice stood up, wiping sawdust from his face and chemise, while locals peeped through their windows at the situation—the more inquisitive ones walking out of their homes for a closer examination.

From the opposite direction, caravans covered in sage tarps barreled forward towards the site. They were stamped with a pictographic crest containing within it moon drop grapes, the palm of a hand, a bow and the letter Z—the left tip of which resembled the head of an open jawed basilisk.

Uniformed men in blackthorn dyed tunics jumped out, pulling the tarps off their wagons, revealing bundles upon bundles of sturdy wands waiting to be put to good use. The foreman of the ensemble took out a parchment from his pocket to make a formal communiqué:

“We have been made aware of the structural delays and difficulty in the assemblage of the Neptune Theater and offer our services and supplies available, free of charge, as a good will gesture made fully provided to you by the generous donation of Lord-”

A bell from a spire in Ironside rang through The Kingdom, gray smoke signaling the significance to the mysterious emergency.

Griswold’s mustache quivering and his face crumpled, “What in *the bloody blazes* is going on now?!”

...

Watching from behind a stained glass window, the Queen of Pentacles leered down at a vociferous peasant, shaking his arms, pacing angrily back and forth, in front of the securely guarded gates of her palace. Her steely eyes struck fear into the most intrepid of men and were held unflinchingly fixated at the crackpot below, hollering with contempt for her recent actions. The second the swagman caught sight of her silhouette, two armsmen dragged the derelict away from her view.

“Your Highness! Your presence is requested at The Landmark!”

She turned around slowly to see her guard expecting a response, the absence of which made up for by the faint sound of the ringing bell from Ironside.

“Your chariot is outside, Your Highness...”

“Good. Let them wait.”

The Queen wore a long black dress which flowed down, without so much as a crease, to the marble floor beneath her feet. The golden cuffs around her long, skinny wrists, matched the thin, solid gold crown atop her head.

“Only poor and desperate people arrive on time, Jasper.”

The Kings and Queens were fervent, gossiping amongst themselves at the audacity of the last monarch to arrive.

The Queen of Pentacles strode forth making quick, sharp left and right turns around the corners and bends of her residence, before exiting with striking grace toward the ostentatious chariot awaiting her.

Ten stone thrones, hand engraved, with their own distinct historical symbology were lined up, four on either side, two at opposing ends of The Landmark-the outdoor rendezvous for the monarchs to meet, adjacent to Lavender Lake. Past the chairs was situated a fountain, barren of water, its majestic nature remaining hidden behind the rust and vines which rotted it. The fountain’s base was encircled by ten small grails, in the center, a pillar, holding up what later became known as the Ace of Cups. The water, which used to flow continuously from it, now only sporadically spurted a substance resembling a thick crocodile colored slush.

“About bloody time!” shouted The King of Swords, who didn’t have patience for delayed, grandiose entrances. The Queen walked to her throne across from him. Three seats remained empty-that of The Emperor, The Empress and The King of Pentacles.

The Queen of Wands sat with her black cat, named Leo, on her lap.

“Tell them.”

“Yes, M’Lady.”

The standing chambermaid coughed twice, before making the announcement:

“To the Royalty of a partitioned land, usurped under false pretenses, I hope this note finds you poorly. Prince Richard and Princess Emilia have been taken to The Tower, where they are chained and bound-”

The King of Swords patted his wife’s shoulder to conciliate her.

The maid glanced around, before continuing- “Albeit safe. I am not requisitioning the Emperor’s title, nor anything any of you can’t afford. I am simply requesting something you may not understand, there, in front of you, that Ace of Cups.”

All eight members of the meeting turned their heads in unison toward the fountain.

“A cup?!”

The Queen of Pentacles bit her lip, concealing her studied interest in the mystical antiquity of Taro, knowing the anthropological importance of the corroded vessel, even more so than The King and Queen of Cups, who too, were scholars of the stories surrounding it. They waited on the balance of the demand.

Maeve stroked Leo's head and screeched, "Proceed!"

The panicked chambermaid continued:

"At my behest The Ace of Cups will be brought to The Tower, located beyond the bosage and The Blackwater, in exchange for the safe return of The Lovers. Before clandestine thoughts crawl 'round your crowns like caterpillars, there shall be no foul play in evading commendation. Such an attempt shall be defeated, rather quickly. Though, there is a catch, pitiable as it may be, The Cup is protected by defensive magic. Thus, he whosoever is worthy of lifting the chalice, shall be the one to bring it to me. I've given you the grace of three full Moons from the Thirteenth to follow through on my offer. Failure to heed my wishes will result in the couple being killed swiftly.

Truly Yours,
The Devil"

"Outrageous-blackmail-bullshit!"

A crow with an inordinate wingspan swooped in, landing on top of the fountain. It cawed.

The Queen of Cups took a rock near her foot and threw it at the large bird, knocking it off The Cup, watching it clumsily fall and flap away.

"Before we get to the kidnapping, Cup-ple of things-there are a few matters I would like to discuss first, specifically regarding the age-old problem of promissory notes."

"I guess at your age, not having children or a spouse, would make most women a snot nosed bitch." Leo jumped off Maeve's lap towards The Queen of Pentacles, who shooed it away.

"Is it not better to be disliked than to be dismayed-and where may I ask is our Emperor by the way? My guess is that he's less interested in The Ace of Cups than the cup of ice cream he's gobbling down getting his jollies off with a sixteen year old seamstress. I'm here though. I'm present."

"Most of us wish you weren't."

The King of Swords ignored the bickering. "Tonight the woodcut printers are to be made to produce signs for the posterboys to nail up across every street in The Kingdom. We will find the one worthy of lifting The Cup by week's end."

"I didn't vote on that."

The King of Swords walked across to The Queen of Pentacles, drawing his sword to her chest.

“You will vote on it.”

The Queen calmly stared down at the blade and up to the bearded King.

“Lower your sword sire...Post away as you may, is a waste of paper without The High Priestess”

“Michael! Sit down!” Michael sheepishly returned to his throne, next to his wife, letting out a long sigh.

“Sorry.”

“While I disagree, and may I say, very much so, with the manner in which The Queen of Pentacles presents herself, I consent this is a very dangerous proposition. The Devil is-” The King of Wands interjected.

“*The Devil?! You mean the bent chaffer trying to get the best of us!*”

“I don’t think you know who you’re dealing with.”

“And you do?!”

The Swords were taken back by the certainty of The Queen of Cups.

“You may send out a search party and we would happily provide our knights in assembling a contingent to venture out and look for them...but lifting that Cup...if it’s possible, is a grave mistake.”

“He said no diversions, Mathilda.”

“He also gave us three months.”

“Just in time for The Festival-are we to believe that’s a coincidence?” The Queen of Pentacles’ attention was drawn to the tiny salamander scampering around, before climbing its way up The King of Wands’ staff. He fired back at her.

“Since you’re so wise, and let’s concede this is a ploy, then what plan *exactly* do you have to offer the parents of the missing children, next in line to take over from Edwyn.”

The Queen stopped herself from a blunt response.

“Edmund had purchased a series of paintings by an unknown artist before he passed away. One of those portraits was called Strength. It was a beautiful scene of a girl appearing to pet a lion. Behind that painting is a story.”

“This isn’t the right time for fairytales.”

“Who said it’s a fairytale-”

“Let her finish.” The Queen of Cups countered Michael.

“The girl, in that painting, was a Princess. A Princess who could have anything she dreamed of. But she didn’t want anything other than that lion. So, The King and Queen, against their better judgment, sent a Knight of Swords to gallop across the desert to find this lion, tame it, and bring it back for that little girl. When the lion arrived, the girl was so happy. It was a magnificent creature and exactly how she’d imagined him to be, except for one thing. She didn’t like when he roared. But that was his nature. That’s what lions do. So that little girl, upon second glance, is not petting that lion. She’s trying to shut its mouth. And do you know what happens when you try to shut a lion’s mouth?”

“Let me guess-”

“That lion ate that little girl alive, and then she was the one roaring...with pain.”

“I’m sorry-what’s your point?”

“A stupid mistake isn’t a moral impairment-but they can both kill you, nevertheless.”

“What *in the fuck* are you talking about?”

“You should have been thespians. *I think*...you’re in company with him-if not, someone we all know is.”

“I assume you’re speaking of The Lord of Cunningham, who, unlike yourself, has only displayed decades of altruism, while you sit there! Jealous! You don’t get to control everybody anymore. Unless of course you force your way into our land and try to take over just enough to make us fully indebted to you.”

“Too late for that. The Devil always comes as a friend-how close were you in keeping him?”

“And what do you come as? If not for your dead husband you’d be nothing more than a fishwife or a ten pent hooker.”

The King of Cups interjected. “Okay-that’s enough! Is everyone done with slinging shit? If nobody’s going to have respect for each other *at least* have respect for what these thrones used to stand for and the forefathers-

“And mothers.”

“Right-and mothers who used to sit where we have the privilege of doing so now.”

The Cups poured water on the heated situation and while they had suspicions of Zelig, his restoration of their wilting vineyards, along with several other philanthropic acts, left them questioning The Queen of Pentacles’ true motives.

The Queen of Pentacles pointed to The Wands.

“Passion.”

She pointed to The Swords.

“Logic.”

“Useless without grounding and intuition. I will help with a small contingent as a first measure, but I will not give my votes for that Cup to be lifted.”

The Queen’s second vote was recognized in respect to her deceased husband.

“Then we shall get the final authority from the old man.”

...

The Princess of Swords cried alone on a bench in The Sacred Gardens around midnight. Everytime she thought she had nothing left in her, the outpouring of droplets rolled even heavier down her cheeks. She recalled the happy memories of a childhood spent with her sister, until Richard came along. Once The Prince began courting Emilia, Sofia became an afterthought, or at least she felt that way. Trying to renew their close connection with enthusiastic solicitations to join her on jaunts, Emilia was so bemused by the whirlwind romance, that any promise she had agreed to take her up on, was left indefinitely postponed. Sofia confronted Emilia with spiteful words about her relationship with Richard, which she now wallowed in regret, as they were the last to be spoken to her.

The High Priestess stood stoic, like a statue between two columns. She waited for the right moment to step out of the shadows; her soft blue kirtle matching the color of the young girl’s crying eyes.

“There, there.”

She handed Sofia an embroidered napkin and sat down next to her. Sofia blew her nose into it, producing a sound similar to an off tune buisine.

“Do you know who I am?”

“I’ve seen you before.”

“Oh, you have?”

“They say you’re a witch.”

“Oh, *they do?*”

“Well, maybe not a witch, but your reputation precedes you as a rather ominous character around here, no offense.”

“Except when people need my advice, and they warily approach, suddenly, I become a good friend. ”

“Do you know what will become of my sister?”

“I know a lot of things, but you’re sharp enough to figure that out for yourself. After all, your mother is The Queen of Swords.”

“Is there any way to save her?”

“There may be one.”

Sofia perked up. The High Priestess used her clairvoyance to gauge what the girl knew about the situation.

“You will go on a journey and it will be dangerous. To dissuade you now would be useless, because you’ve already decided on it. There are obstacles before you leave. You would try to convince your parents. They will say no. But your parents are not the ones you need to convince, you will go anyway. Nevertheless it will be a fruitless endeavor.”

“Why?”

“For reasons that have not been made clear to me, the person you must convince to go on your journey is a Knight of Cups named Marvin LaGuerre.”

“Is he the one worthy of lifting The Cup?”

“Not according to me-and there’s no official approval for The Cup to be lifted yet. To do so, would technically be a criminal offense. They will send a search party- it will fail.”

She took a deep breath, before continuing.

“Marvin’s confidence and honor has been replaced with gambling, petty theft, drinking, fear, confusion, anger and a complete lack of self esteem covered under armor of his own pride and certainty. That armor is invisible. Everybody can see through it. To get him to agree to go on the journey would require something shiny and expensive.”

From her robe The High Priestess handed The Princess an Ace of Pentacles.

“Even this may not be enough. Once he does concede, he will think he can go on his own. He is not capable of doing so. You will follow after him.”

The Princess twirled the giant pentacle in her hands.

“You have skills with a sword and bow, but not enough to make it to The Tower. You will both need help from another stubborn man, a sage, who lives up at the top of the edge of a cliff, well into the forest.”

“The prospects are bleak aren’t they? Yet even though the idea at odds with my sensibility is preturbing I still feel compelled to find her.”

“Don’t feel bad about that. If you don’t give your worries enough room to breathe no amount of cobbywobbles will get in the way of you saving Taro.”

The High Priestess knew the questions before Sofia even asked.

“Who’s the sage you speak of?”

“Until it happens it hasn’t happened yet-save yourself from questions and you’ll know who he is soon enough.”

The High Priestess winked at her while twiddling a tiny vile between her delicate fingers.

“Is that blood?”

“In a way-in the water-yes it is.”

CHAPTER II

THE DEVIL

The Devil rode into town on a pale horse, presenting himself, as he often did, a rich countryside Lord named Artur Von Zelig. To the outside world, he was a benevolent nobleman, often making charitable donations to the increasing number of poverty stricken bottom dwellers. These favors cloaked the ruling class from his duplicity as a covert rabble rouser-using his wealth to incite riots and extract anarchic favors out of the dimwitted.

Artur was tall, olive skinned, fashioned in clothes from a modern era which hadn’t yet arrived, distinguishing him from most commoners in Taro. Long hair was tied neatly back in a bun, his silk yellow shirt etched with flowers covered on the sides by a black linen overcoat. Resting on top his head he wore a round black cap, curved with peak-a bright, red fowl feather stuck in the side, for good measure.

Zelig stopped suddenly, upon spotting a family of five huddled together in the chilly crepuscule. He reached into his pocket, taking out a satchel containing five pentacles and dropped it down to the father.

“May Spirit bless you, Sir! I mean, Lord Zelig.”

“Spirit blessed no one.”

His amber eyes shimmered, like the light from a candle flickered behind them.

“For if there were a Divine Spirit, why would he forsake you like this?”

“Perhaps he’s testing our faith...”

“And yet, the noblemen and women don’t seem to need such a test. They seem to be warm and cozy on a day such as this, yet here you are, struggling out in the cold...That doesn’t seem very fair, does it? Perhaps instead of putting your faith in Spirit, you could put your faith in me.”

“Are you meaning for us to forsake God?”

“Did God give you those pentacles?”

“No, I suppose he didn’t...”

“So you haven’t answered the question. Would you prefer two planks of wood or another pouch of change from my purse?”

“The coins of course! We’ll take the coins!”

“Of course you’ll take the coins-a sacrificed lamb can’t afford his farm-but for the price of another donation would you follow me for free?”

“We shall follow your steer, Lord should you be generous enough to guide us.”

“And what can Spirit do?”

“Spirit can go to hell, Sir!”

“Very well. Now here are five the more bullions so you may spread the word that God is dead. Make sure to spread it with credence.”

Zelig felt a twisted sense of joy seeing someone trade their faith for little more than the price of a pigeon dinner. He estimated how many more pents it would take to get the strapped bloke to sell off his entire family to a cabal of cannibals. Fortunately for them, he had an engagement to attend to with The Queen of Pentacles.

...

“Absolutely not!” The Queen of Swords was adamant in her response to Sofia.

“A roaming witch tells you to jump off an arch bridge, are you going to do it? The Priestess is only allowed to promenade around, because she’s a tried friend of The Cups. The premonitions and spells and potions and those stupid crystals. Edmund banned magic because it was regressive lunacy. This idea that you are, what did she say-”

“Destined-”

“Destined to go to the Tower, is preposterous.”

“I thought The High Priestess was consulted by all members of the council?”

“How does she know that?”

“That’s besides the point-we’ve already sent a squadron to look for Emilia and Richard and are awaiting Edwyn’s clearance to issue the official decree for The Cup. We understand you’re worried about your sister and want to help, but you’re to stay here, safe in Ironside. Anyhow, your mother and I have arranged for you to meet with Prince Drustan for dinner at six.”

Sofia had little attraction to men, but this was not something which could be stated aloud. Her objection to the proposal could however.

“Where was my say during this arrangement?”

“You’re thirteen-you have no say! We’re missing one daughter, we’re too old for another and we can’t afford to lose you.” The Queen of Swords caught herself before she continued, “*Why am I making rationalizations with a child*-knowing your place in this house isn’t a mouthy demoiselle means you respect your parents enough to avoid an warranted spanking before you meet your future Prince! And tell the help to find you an appropriate dress for later. You look quite rough-it’s unappealing.”

Sofia stopped herself from refutation, intent on disobeying her parents, regardless.

...

Marvin threw a chair against a wall, scaring the owner of the strawberry farm, his wife running around like a frantic chicken.

“Don’t make me do this-there’s supposed to be forty pents.”

“It was supposed to be twenty, now it’s forty!”

“Make me come back and I’ll make it sixty!”

The amount Marvin demanded was double what the farmer actually owed, but it was card night.

“I’m telling you I don’t have it! Go! Take a look out the window at my lifeless crops. You think I’m turning a profit this season?! I’m not a liar, if I had it, I would give it to you, but I don’t. I’m paying local tax, I’m paying The Kingdom tax and now I’m expected to pay The Queen’s private recollection tax-how is this legal? How is anybody supposed to survive around here anymore?!”

“That’s not my problem. Find me something I can sell for twenty pents or this plot gets reclaimed in totality by The Queen.”

“I worked my way up from being a serf to buy this land! It’s not The Queen’s to take! She has no right to it! I have paid your twenty pents and I kindly ask that you leave this premises.”

Marvin paused, before kicking over the table.

“Okay! Alright! I have a pig-a big one, worth market value, at least thirty pents. That should be enough for you to leave us in peace and tide over your insufferable Queen, I hope?”

“What am I supposed to do with a pig?”

“I’m giving you something valued at more than what you’ve asked for.”

Marvin tried to think of who he could sell the prized swine to, before Broken Hearts.

“Fine, get the pig, I’ll take it. “

“Give me a minute.” The farmer left for the barn. Marvin, shamed by his aggressive behavior tried to make amends by setting the table upright to its proper position.

Satisfied with his tiny goodwill gesture, The Knight waited expectantly with his hands on the counter. Unexpectedly behind him, the flushed faced wife quietly lifted a bow from a nail above the mantle. She took one of the three arrows on the cornice shelf and drew it back. The creak of the draw spiked Marvin’s senses, instinctively backhanding the bow in a different direction.

“Okay, here he is!” The farmer returned, as the arrow speedily darted into the pig, killing it.

“Oy! Madeline!”

Marvin grabbed the recurve out of the panicked wife’s hands and snapped it over his leg.

A spat which quickly broke out between the farmer and his wife, was just as quickly halted by The Knight unsheathing his sword. Marvin’s breathing became heavy, as the couple anticipated a doomed conclusion to the unfortunate turn of the tax collection visit.

The Knight, had for almost five years hid his worsening condition to himself, as to describe the symptoms to anyone, would have him blackballed by society and labeled a bedlamite. These psychotic episodes, which the general populus would refer to as insanity, were in actuality, side effects of an unbalanced spiritual awakening.

Mulberry Gin helped dilute his overwhelm, making his rare state of sobriety in the present situation, a liability.

“Are you going to kill us?”

A heightened rush of emotions pumped through Marvin’s veins, triggering his mind to pick up on the undercurrent of fear in the room, and something else, quite sinister, which he couldn’t put his finger on. Intrusive snippets of inner dialogue from the farmer and his wife, produced an uncontrollable flood of suppressed emotions and memories. Flashing scenes of violence from battle and his family withering away on their cots from The Crip asking for cups of water, disrupted the flow of his thought process.

“What’s going on with him?”

The Knight stood frozen, except for his shaky, right hand.

“You alright?”

The farmer and his wife glanced at each other, bewildered. Marvin collapsed with a loud thud, hitting the floor. The couple rushed to lift him up and with some effort, were able to get him onto one of the three remaining chairs he hadn’t smashed.

Sudden knocking at the ajar door, eeked it open to reveal three gentlemen dressed in white robes at the entrance. The pasty, gangling bald one in the middle inquired, “Is this the Randolph residence?”

They all looked down to see the dead pig laying in front of them and what they perceived as a drunk, incapacitated Knight in the background, whose sword had been held like a cane to keep him from falling.

“Aye, and who are you now?”

“If this is an inconvenient time we can come back.”

“If you’re another collector, I will fight to the death for what’s rightfully mine.”

“We’re not tariff men. We’re members of The Templar Trust, and were interested in making an offer on your land, but this looks like a precarious moment, so we shall let you continue your...business.”

The farmer tried his best to come up with an explanation for what had transpired.

“Yes, well as you can see this is a bit of an odd-sort of a misunderstanding, you could say.”

He paused.

“When you say offer on my land, what would the details on that be?”

The Templar Trust was a long-standing charitable outfit under Lord Zelig, of which one role was taking over failed enterprises to help them cover tax burdens, in exchange for partial management and ownership of one's business, in this case, the farm. An almost magical resurrection would usually take place once handing over their burdens to The Trust. Little did the farmer and his wife know, they just welcomed three psychic vampires in to make a deal with The Devil.

The small podgy toff with a high pitched voice pointed, "Who's the boozer?"

The farmer looked back to see Marvin groggily dazing off.

"Oh, him? Nobody special.

...

A band of twelve knights, three from each house, followed shortly after the first contingent, making their way into the forest.

Like other retired chevaliers, Philip had been recruited and handsomely paid to join the scouting mission. under the assumption of what had been relayed. Several hours of dirty jokes, personal anecdotes and rants about the spoiled royalty were interrupted by a caterwaul for help. The closer the knights drew to the voice, the more fierce the gust of wind began to blow against them. They came to a halt, bearing witness to a man hanging upside down from a tree branch by one foot.

"What are you doing up there?!"

"Where are the others?!"

He stuttered, "*Y-y-you don't u-understand. They l-l-ied to us.*" He held a folded note, which flew out of his hand, smacking into Philip's chestplate. Philip grabbed it and read it to himself.

"What's it say?!"

Hesitantly, he disclosed the content of the note to the others.

"No need for knights, ifs, ands or buts. Just bring me The Ace of Cups.

Truly,
The Devil"

"The who?!"

"Shall I repeat the name again! You all heard it."

"Tell us what happened here?!"

“Th-they came out of nowhere. The sh-shadows. The D-demons. Th-they killed everybody, except me.”, responded the petrified hanged man.

“Somebody get him down!”

The Knight Commander ordered everyone to get off their horses, directing a troop of five to stand under the suspended dangler, while he and the remaining six walked further ahead.

“Jump!”

“How?! My foot is stuck over the stupid br-branch!”

“There’s nothing tying it there! Just wiggle it, we’ll catch you!”

The hanged man forced his ankle back a smidge, his toes pointing up to the canopy, tearing his ligament and somersaulting him down into the arms of the five knights.

Several hundred paces beyond, the seven men heedfully approached the horrific site of the massacre. The lacerated bodies of fallen troops had been indiscriminately left with cragged daggers protruding from them, ash drawn pentagrams marked on each one of their foreheads.

“A pitance for a search party or a suicide mission-the stories are true m’lads! This be the workings of great diablerie-occult sorcery indeed!” The Commander waved his hand around.

“Sending us out with partial armor, knowing what could happen. Disposable we be-that’s how they really see us.”

“Do you fully blame them that they didn’t believe-I *wouldn’t have* if we weren’t looking at what we are now-a castigation against eight crowns. The message has been sent we’re the ones left to go back and deliver it.”

The leaves rattled and a ghostly voice picked up with the blustering gust.

“LLLLLEEEAAA VVVVE...”

...

“Your Majesty! The Lord of Cunningham is here.”

“Let him in, Jasper.”

The Devil’s hobnail boots clicked and clacked their way down the hardwood hallway, towards The Queen’s parlor, located in the east wing of the palace, adorned with fine textiles, furniture and ornate mirrors, reflecting a glimpse of The Lord, before he entered the room with the natural grandiosity of a charming raconteur.

Even though he was not all knowing, he was more perceptive than most, even prophetic in his abilities. He foresaw the likelihood of convincing an impossible person, who could easily see past his charade, to side with him, as fruitless. The only way to gain leverage over The Queen was either to impress, possibly incentivize her past the fixedness of her disposition, or find a pressure point. He took off his hat with the swoop of his hand.

He put his palms on his hips and started wiggling them up and down like a jolly snake and began rubbing himself with his tongue out.

“I’m sorry, what are you doing-are you dancing?”

“I’m having a tantric moment-wanna join?”

“Not particularly-”

He stopped and straightened himself out.

“This is for you.”

He handed her a red rose.

“Ow-fuck!”

The Queen started bleeding, her fingers now the color of the petals atop its thorny stem.

“Sorry-”

Zelig took a clean handkerchief from his breast pocket, behind the poppy that was fastened, for her to dry her palm. Wiping off the blood, the handkerchief flew into her face covering it like a veil.

She ripped it off and threw it on the ground where the rose lay.

“*What is the purpose of your visit!?*”

“*Porquoi!* The question of life...Good eye-” He tapped under his left eye twice. “Nice taste...You’re a four leaf clover in a world filled with weeds-that’s what *you think-I actually* happen to applaud your efforts to revitalize Taro during unusual and tumultuous times such as these.”

“Jasper!”

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

“Tell the maid to fetch Artur some mint tea.”

Von Zelig intentionally ignored the use of his first name.

“If it’s alright with you, I’ll have a glass of wine.”

“Leave us and close the door.”

Jasper rushed off. “What do you want?” Intrigued, she posed the question like she was talking down to a street peddler.

“I’m not necessarily who you’ve painted me to be. Were I Old Harry, The Great Deceiver, do you really think I’d come *all* this way asking for a trivial favor?”

“Maybe you’re him. Maybe you’re not. Maybe you’re just a dotty mage who learned some cheap tricks along the way-you want my vote for The Cup when you already know The Emperor breaks the stalemate-”

“What if he doesn’t? As we speak that halfwit Edwyn is being thoroughly entertained by a court jester.”

Her surprise at Von Zelig’s disdain for The Emperor had momentarily altered her opinion of him.

“One of his misbegotten sons learned how to juggle some balls and pull a broadsword from his mouth. His father, thoroughly entertained, is watching the boy, caked up in makeup, oblivious-and just as his vassal hands him the decree for The Cup, he will be stabbed to death by his own progeny. This time...successfully.”

This was one of the events, as rare as they came, Zelig did not prognosticate, until it was too late to stop.

“And you know this, how?”

“Because I’m no bad mage, but I happen to be a little bit of a bastard myself and *maybe* your supposition was correct, so we might as well just be honest with each other.”

The Queen’s satisfied sense of validation was quickly overtaken by the discomfort of having who she suspected standing no more than six feet from her, hiding her anxiety well, but not enough to throw off The Lord.

“Dissatisfied with a lie, scared of the truth. I told you exactly what you wanted to hear and you’re still unhappy. You always have been and maybe that’s your problem.”

She took notice of the banded raw blue sapphire on the ring finger of his right hand, dismissing his attempt to fiddle with her emotions.

“Are you going to murder the Prince and Princess?”

“Do you really give a shit?”

“A little bit, yes.”

“I’m here, *I haven’t killed you*. Let’s save a karmedy of errs for the mourning shall we?”

“I could have had the chambermaid poison the drink I offered, I didn’t do that either, what’s your point?”

“*Don’t get your knickers wet!* A dopey chambermaid is no more than a sauntering gubbins pail for whatever I put in her fucking head. For you’re not unwise enough to think she’s not already in my service. Now you could kill her, but that would be ill advised. I would suggest pink slipping the stout cunt, instead.”

The chambermaid entered with Zelig’s wine.

“Thank you. Most appreciated.”

He handed her two pentacles. She curtsied him and the Queen, before exiting. The Lord smelled the glass, before taking a sip and smacking his lips.

“Earthy, would we call it earthy or nutty-depends on the palette, I guess. A delicious taste from a vineyard with the finest grapes which so happens to be owned by...”

“The one that you co-opted-”

“*Me...Sharpen thine tongue like a sword on a stone and speak? You never interrupt a man from displaying his versatile range of emotions like a knight would his cocksmanship-even when you make him angry.*”

“Shall I pretend to stand here in a stupor while you ramble on akin to a rattlesnake or will you cease speaking in tongues such piffle before I bite you-”

“Engagement! That’s what you want-a two way. *A little difficult* when I’m feeling like persona non grata around here by the stuffy woman who may or may not enjoy snacking on snatch. *You’re afraid-*”

“I am not-”

“You will be-when this whole thing crumbles like a discarded Galette de Rois. As of ten minutes ago, you’re the most important person in Taro, besides yours truly, of course-*unlike you however*, I haven’t pissed everyone off. Everything I touch seems to benefit revolting plebians, owing me favors, big and small-more properly known as the commonfolk, and how many became wealthy because of me? How do the other Kings and Queens get their funding, without my services rendered? And then there’s you-the mean Queen. All you ever wanted was appreciation, and you thought you would get it through power, and all you’re going to receive instead, is blame. They’ll think *you killed* the poor Emperor and you’ll look like the greedy one, not him. An ideal Kingdom, where everything’s *clean* and fits perfectly into place is an aspiration, but not the denouement. The way you’re going to get there isn’t with self-aggrandizing celebrations and it *certainly won’t be accomplished* with a bedizened amphitheater for the rich, while the peasants starve to death. Do you understand that with one snap of my finger, everything I’ve done to hold this place up, goes away, and the woman in charge gets dragged out-onto the street, inculpatated and hanged. I don’t need to kill you. You’ve already done that to yourself-you seem cold.”

Zelig snapped his fingers, starting a fire that crackled up from the logs in the hearth.

“Look at that mirror, and that one and that one. That’s what The World sees you as. The real you’s a sad little girl nurturing a broken dream instead of a nest of children, afraid to show anyone you’re vulnerable, because you’ll be perceived as weak. I’m showing you who I am. Not what the mirror reflects, not what The World considers me as—a good and dandy in glad rags, to some-humble-on occasion. Renaissance man—most definitely...Generous—you *have to be*—offering you, if not a proposition, an alternate path where we work together...If you need a moment to gather your thoughts I completely understand.”

“You’ve suckered this entire place into the palm of your hand. And for some reason you think hurting my feelings is going to make me fall before your lap.”

“You wish. I wouldn’t dream of hurting your feelings, Genevieve. In fact, I have a present for you, downstairs. All those beautiful Arcana paintings that Edmund bought from you, those years ago, getting dusty and worn in a cellar somewhere. I refurbished them to line your barren halls.”

He had her attention now.

“What do you say to that?”

...

Sofia tethered her horse outside The Piping Plover. The crimson color of her hooded cape defeated the purpose of making an anonymous entrance, but didn’t stop her from setting foot into the rowdy tavern anyway. Two short swords were cautiously tucked in place on opposite sides of her waist, hidden under her wool drape.

Marvin had recovered from his breakdown earlier, to walk away with forty pents, and no more. The coins meant for The Empirical Tax Collection Service, were inappropriately put to use for gambling against his five compatriots, at the round table in the northeast corner of the pub. Marvin worked quickly on his second glass of Mulberry Gin, convinced he held a winning hand. Having pulled additional funds from his own personal loot to keep buying in, the outcome would determine how well or poorly he would be living that month.

“I fold.”

Five cards were spread out neatly in the middle, including a Jack, King and Queen of Hearts. Oscar, a Knight of Pents and Marvin, were the last players in, both vying for the scattered pile of tender. Oscar took his time placing the bet, annoying the rest of the group.

“Come on!”

“I’m thinking! Give me a minute.”

“We’ve given you ten already!”

Oscar slowly put in seven pents and then added one for good measure.

“All in.”

Sofia drew inquisitive looks from the rowdy patrons, like she was being surveilled by a nursery of confused and disgruntled raccoons.

“Are you lost, little girl? Maybe I can help you with something?”

“Not even a little bit.”

She walked towards Marvin’s table, informed enough on the description of the character she was looking for.

The cards were shown, and Oscar, holding fewer hearts in his hand, still beat Marvin, with a ten and an Ace.

Marvin swiped his cards off the table and held the bridge of his nose between his fingers in disappointment. Only some heard him cursing under his breath.

“You must be Marvin.”

He opened his eyes, as the five players turned in the direction of the feminine voice. She took off her hood with both hands, baring her shoulder length, dirty blond hair.

“Yes?”

“LaGuerre, what have you done now?”

“I don’t even know who this is!”

“I’m The Princess of Swords. My name is Sofia.”

John of Rottenberry sprang up and bowed.

“That’s ok. You can sit back down.”

Marvin was unimpressed. “Where are your parents?”

“That’s none of your concern. I have a private matter I’d like to discuss with you.”

“Well, I like my head where it is, so I’d say it would concern me.”

“They don’t know I’m here.”

“Exactly!”

“You shouldn’t be in a place like this, at this late hour.” Oscar stated with concern. “Or ever.” John added.

“Do you think I’d be here, if it wasn’t of grave importance.”

“You’re amongst friends, what can be shared with one, can be shared with all. Please take note, that my personal consultation fee will run you sixty pents.”

John rolled his eyes.

“You are all aware that my sister was kidnapped and taken hostage.”

“Yes, we were sorry to hear that.”

“Sorries won’t get her back though. Only Marvin can.”

Chuckling from the five comrades, escalated into howling laughter.

“What in Spirit’s name is so funny about that?”

None of them could keep their composure enough to offer a solid response.

“This is why I wanted to talk with you in private.”

“Forget them. My fee is still sixty pents, though.”

Sofia looked at him with disappointment, before reaching into her cape and tossing a giant Ace of Pentacles down on the table with a bang, which rattled the coins and cards. The laughing stopped.

“Is that good enough for you?”

“Now, if you jackals will excuse me, The Princess and I have important business to discuss.”

Marvin grabbed the giant pentacle and stood up, his height nearly doubling Sofia’s. He gave her an outstretched arm, letting her lead the way out of the tavern. She walked with Marvin towards the rickety pier near The Lake, where she had her horse tied to one of three posts.

“So, what can I do for you?”

“In a day, maybe a few, all the bells will ring, and a public announcement will be made for a contest on who can lift The Ace of Cups from the fountain at The Landmark. My sister and her soon to be husband are imprisoned in The Tower across The Blackwater by The Devil and-”

“I’m going to stop you right there. I’m not interested in long tales of magical fascinations, just tell me why you sought me out.”

“I’m telling you! You’re the one meant to lift The Cup and bring it to The Tower.”

Marvin didn't respond and untied her horse. His trials in the real world left no room for belief in anything preternatural.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm sending you back to your parents."

"No you're not. You're coming with me to lift The Cup."

"Who's going to make me? *You?*"

"Then give me back the pentacle."

"No, I think I'll keep that right where it is, but I'll escort you back home, come on."

Marvin climbed on the horse, offering his hand for her to get on.

"Get off Sagitarius."

"*Who?*"

"My horse. I'm not going home. We're going to The Landmark."

"First of all Princess, The Landmark is surrounded by two guards on all four sides, that's eight guardsmen, with eight swords. Second of all, even if I were to lift *this Cup* how would I get to The Blackwater, assuming I make it there alive and third of all-

"I'll be going with you."

"Now that's out of the question, completely."

"You just said you're scared to go."

"That's not what I said-I'm not scared, whatsoever. I just like living."

"Really...Then why become a knight in the first place, if that was your priority?"

"I did my service, thank you very much, but I'm retired now."

"That's right, you're a pathetic tax collector and a dipso and I'm asking you to be something more. I came here with conviction that there might be some redeeming quality about you, but maybe your friends were right to ridicule my suggestion. Maybe The High Priestess *was mistaken.*"

Marvin tried to process the insult and compliment concurrently. He exhaled through his nostrils, sighed, grumbled, and got off the horse to stand back next to her. They didn't speak for a moment, both staring out at The Lake.

"Why me?"

"Why not you? Taro's on the brink of ruin. It's in the air. Everybody can feel it, but it's elusive. It's been rotting from the inside out with ensorcellment for years. Whatever is flourishing is by design and we're all about to participate in its demise if we don't wake up."

A realization crept up on The Knight about his own downward spiral, before hitting him like a ton of stones.

...

The Devil took another sip of wine.

"*Read your fortune-not looking good*-don't let your poverty rub off on me-countrywide policy? Three days of pomp and circumstance to remind everybody what this place used to be isn't really working for anyone, is it?...Don't you remember the magic?"

"Not really."

"*Yes you do...*"

"You want to tell me why you want The Cup or are you going to keep slithering around to avoid the question?"

"*That Cup* is destined to be lifted, by whom, I regrettably don't know. So let me *refill* those quarries with brilliant aurelian rocks and finish Neptune's Theater in time for The Festival with such resplendency, neither you, nor The Wands, would have ever hoped to accomplish. And in return, all I'm asking is that you stay your little flat ass out of my way...Do we have a deal?"

"How many people sold their souls for a pocketful of mullock and the rainbow you promised them. You try to take everything from the bottom and shake me down from the top. It's The Neptune Theater-no, we do not have a deal."

"Minding your Ps and Qs isn't your MO is making this a little difficult, Genevieve and I'd be careful about casting aspersions if I were you-that I'm somehow manipulating people out of something which wasn't theirs to begin with *isn't* quite that if everyone's complicit, is it?! Keeping something Godly or leaving something golden-*you have to ask* yourself was this Kingdom built with magic or wands?!"

Zelig banged his fist on the table, calming his rage with a grin.

"You don't believe in the magic...*That's fine...*But don't you dare kill my fucking vibe. Now, let's get back to the theater shall we? What was it you wanted? Oh yes-large oyster shell seats. That's what you *specifically*

requested, that's what you *specifically* asked for. *The Mermaid ones*. The ones that are not only impossible to find, but a pain to dredge up from the sea. You're design-my work."

"Your hands in my plans isn't going according to either one of ours-I wonder which one of us is going to have to take a hint."

Exasperated, Von Zelig's demeanor changed.

"Are you *aware* that an oyster is only capable of making a pearl when it secretes aragonite to protect itself from a highly complex parasitic invasion? It is that *single*, unique characteristic that gives that silly mollusk any value. Other than that, it's just a bad meal. For while pressure makes diamonds and pearls get plucked-parasites have a tendency to survive. Luckily for you none of them will be attending your ritzshit event unless-"

"Are you trying to threaten me?"

"I'm not going to threaten you, but now I do want see you cry. Hold on-let me work the room for a second...Fixed sign, night baby-You're a number one person. That's what this is! Think they know everything-they don't-I understand it now."

"Do you-"

"Twenty eighth, October. Several incarnations as a woman-wasn't fun-made you a better liar."

"Yet you're the one who promised you wouldn't hurt my feelings-"

"Don't confuse a change of plans with a lie-"

"Or the magniloquence of a mad man with the truth either-"

"Then allow me to speak metaphysically within the lines of derision. Those planets, those stars, control our destiny down here made an unbearable fusspot, didn't they? After all, one is the Sun. *Scorpio*? Not according to the antediluvian texts in The East, the *real astrology*, yours, debilitated in the sign of...Libra-not a family favorite-keep it in mind-if you can make up yours. Arcturus is Swati-independence, at the cost of everyone's happiness-burning their portraits and framing the memories, leaving them in dust to dig for vanity, like a pocket beagle hunde-but you're nobody's best friend, certainly not mine. Are you *so fixed* that we can't turn this rendezvous around?"

"How badly did you need the tete-a-tete for a new consociate to stab in the back?"

"Venus! Debilitated as well! Under the fourteenth mansion, lunar mansion, in the sign of The Virgin, Virgo. Twenty years went and came, but nobody did to love you-"

"Boo hoo. Operative word-boo! You're no different than any other man who disappeared akin to a ghost after they got something they didn't deserve. What if none of them were worth loving?"

“It’s kind of hard, isn’t it? Especially if they’re-I mean you’re-not willing to open up-”

“Do you have a wife?”

“Polyamory? Not in my playbook, Genevieve. I love them all equally-even when they’re screaming and bleeding.”

“Now you’ve unimpressed me twice-intending me a good cry, I haven’t shed a single tear. Not that I’m one to pray, but I do wish you would poof yourself out of my parlor with your inane detractions as I’m a very busy person and thus far you’ve bested yourself in wasting my fucking time.”

“Capricorn! Tops it all off! And an exalted Moon in Taurus. Your ego is your infirmity. The Scorpion and The Water Bearer, the two most karmic signs in the zodiac. The karma you carry in Saturn, *time*, retrograde in Aries, debilitated again! Whoopsy doopsies. Cunning, yet your instincts cause your decisions to backfire when pride won’t allow you to change your mind.”

“You tried to change it for me and you changed right in front of me. Thank you for revealing your hand.”

“It was a slight that led to a slight. You wanted a fight-not me.”

“Saperlipoppette...”

The Devil took one last sip of the wine.

“Saperlipoppette indeed. This delusion of a manifest destiny the false churches taught all the gullible children of Taro. You don’t even realize the chain of events you set off marrying a man you didn’t love. Should we call it an arrangement which gave you what you thought you needed-wanted-didn’t give him the pleasure nor the children he sought. The man you loved, your true love, was similar to you. His name *was-*

“Don’t say it!”

Genevieve’s lips curled up. It was the first feeling of genuine happiness and horror she had experienced in thirty years.

“Ah! There it is...How can you come to love a magician?”

“Don’t say his name-”

“*Lenormànd!*”

He paused.

“You really are a fucker.”

“Recognize it? In one life, you gave too much to him, beholden romantically and financially, while he pursued whatever he blithely wanted, including cheating on you again and again and again while you cried alone...*naughty boy*. That retained bitterness, *all those lives*, stored in your soul-your fucked up Sun. It’s in the Akashic records, held by the auditor called-say it out loud with me, Genevieve-”

“I want you to leave.”

“Time! The more fixed planets in your chart, the more fixed your destiny is. You both had enough-”

Von Zelig gyrated his hips again, sensuously touching himself.

“*Wiggle room*...To put aside your egos. Confusing feelings getting in the way of a happily ever after and those immovable Moons wedged neatly between a good compromise. Instead you cast him out like a fool. It was easier for you. Not for him. But you didn’t resolve the karma. You simply delayed it.”

Genevieve gulped, using all her willpower to hold back her intense feelings.

“You’re both still connected. It never goes away. Unless you resolve the providence, you’ll be dealing with it in the next life and the one after that. If it wasn’t for him you wouldn’t be *Queen*. And if it wasn’t for you he wouldn’t have a purpose.”

Her voice was shaky and response, defensively sad.

“That’s not true. He has a purpose.”

“Does he?! Where is he? He hasn’t come back. He’s not here. That’s how much you hurt him, you can’t even say his fucking name out loud! And yet you think about him all the fucking time. You’re an inopportune motivation, at *most* a destined point. So to slither back and give you that answer to the real question you didn’t ask-I’m not trying to burn down Taro. I’m trying to reanimate it with *life* in the Age of Love which you deem a total fantasy, unlike the impotence-importance of the position you think you carry in this realm. Is it really any more of an illusion than my final offer-reconciliation?”

“I can’t.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know...”

“Because there’s too much God damned magic in it to believe in! You traced an outline of a scapegoat over a nobleman you blamed somewhere out there at the far reaches of a forest for your own iniquities. If you’re so good, then why does everyone hate you so much? I don’t think either one of you is seeing the other quite clearly and I can promise you, you won’t be seeing me again-

“Thank God.”

“Try again..The fortune cards in your dress pocket should answer the rest of your questions. It was a simple request and I’ll do my best to ask you once more-stay out of my way, Genevieve and let my templars do their job.”

The Devil put his hat back on.

“Fear comes before wisdom and the proud will fall thereafter.”

He walked out of the room, aware, that by provoking her obstinance, he had ensnared her into doing exactly what he had expected from her-the opposite.

Genevieve reached into her undergarments for the deck, but was so overwhelmed by The Lord’s words, she fell to her knees, the cards spilling out onto the floor, all of them face down, except one, The Magician. Her left eye began to quiver and buzz, shedding one tear like a tiny raindrop.

CHAPTER III

THE ACE OF CUPS

Marvin and Sofia were mired in a debate on a strategy to sneak onto The Landmark without being caught.

“You’re a Princess aren’t you? Then we shall walk right up to the guards and pretend you wield more influence than you do. We tell them The King and Queen have given us permission to inspect the fountain.”

“For what purpose? It’s nearly midnight, who’ll fall for that without further inquiry. And where’s your horse?”

“It’s none of your business that he was lost in a bet-I know you’re not presuming me to fend off eight guards.”

Sofia threw her hands up in frustration.

“How do you get around? It would take six months to get to The Tower on foot. You’re going to need a horse. Not mine.”

“Then find me one.”

“Don’t be useless, come up with a better idea.”

“What about distraction?”

“Obviously.” She whispered tersely

A knight in shining armor, pushing a wheelbarrow of hay, approached from a distance, leading a white horse by a line, wrapped around his arm. Marvin and Sofia eagerly waited for the knight to speak, dumbfounded upon finding out, after the removal of his helmet, that there was no one behind the unveiling. The armor promptly fell to the ground in pieces.

“What trickery is this?!”

Marvin hated magic, the occult and anything that couldn't be understood in the realm of what was believed to be credible. Inscrutable happenings were explained with rationalizations and logic, which this encounter did not leave room for.

“The Papesse sent us provisions.”

Marvin lifted up the armor, first a leg, then an arm, before dropping them and looking up to the sky.

“Where is he?”

“What do you mean-”

“Where is the man?!”

“There is no man.”

“That's not possible!”

He put his hand on his chin, trying to come to a conclusion that would never arrive. Sofia's dismay at the prospect of Marvin being Divinely Chosen for the quest to save her sister grew ever so more worrisome. She lifted the hay off the wheelbarrow, underneath which rested powdered fireworks and flint rocks.

The Knight was perturbed by how the solution arrived. “There's your distraction.”

“Put that armor on and let's head out.”

Hesitantly obliging he was pleasantly surprised by the rejuvenating sense of protection environing him once fully clad. He was not aware however, of the full capabilities of the coat of mail.

“There we are, now you look like a real Knight of Cups.”

“We're still going to have to walk to The Landmark, otherwise who's going to push the-”

The cart started moving forward on its own.

“Never mind.”

They followed the cart along the coast towards The Landmark, the gentle splashing of waves against the shoreline from Lavender Lake percussively swishing throughout the misty night. It was said that The Lake's purple tint emanated from lilac crystals embedded around the substrate, sizable enough to catch what little light made it below the thermocline, and irradiating it back to the surface.

The cart came to a sudden halt and tipped back, as rows of fireworks lined up towards the sky.

"There's no part of you that thinks this is crazy?"

"I'm relying on you. So yes, every part of me thinks this is crazy"

Marvin pointed at the wain.

"Don't get flippant-light the sparklers in three."

He forcefully handed her the flint rocks.

"And try not to blow your little fingers off."

Marvin sauntered to The Landing, before the premature cacophony of blue, yellow and pink explosions hit the sky with successive, resounding pops. The guards hollered with muffled confusion, as they ran towards the water to witness the spectacle, allowing Marvin an opportune moment to rush in. The area was too remote to draw any unwanted attention from potential gatherings and gossip of gawking onlookers, but didn't assuage the crowded conversations going on in his mind.

He stood on the round edge of the second tier of the centerpiece of the fountain, leaning over, tugging away at The Cup, to no avail.

"Stupid thing!"

His attempts became more aggravated with each failed one, shaking the corroded chalice, until inevitably the pyrotechnics decrescendod into quiet smoke. He turned around to see the polluted air, the colloquy of the guards' voices quickly making their way back within auditory range.

"Come on!"

He clenched his teeth, using all his might to heave The Ace of Cups from its secure foundation.

"Probably some hooligans having a laugh-hey!"

The Cup was hoisted from its base, flinging Marvin off the fountain's outer ring, and bouncing him onto the mosaic tiles around it, cracking several of the hand painted porcelain quadrates with a thud. He came to, coughing, before improvising a pretense.

"I'm here under the Queen's orders to inspect the fountainhead."

The headless fountain began gurgling out slurry.

The guards assessed him quizzically.

“The Queen? Which one?”

“Look! He lifted The Cup!”

“Which Queen sent you here?!”

He hesitated, his best escape in evading inquiry to sprint as fast as possible, away. With the eight of swords chasing him back along the coast demanding an explanation, Marvin’s backplate detached, flying down and gliding over the flagstones, tripping all eight men from their legs, as they tumbled one on top of the other. The plate circulated its way into the air, speedily back to Marvin and snapping into place. The force of the conjunction caused him to trip forward, stopping the momentum with a slam of his right sabaton. He swerved around to see all the guards taken out with a word he was previously hesitant to admit.

Sofia waited for their reconvenement, to see Marvin approach out of breath, peeved by her poor timing and confused about how he escaped without so much as a scratch. “Do you know what three minutes is?! Or were you counting on me getting stabbed to death?”

“There we are!”

Her enthusiasm for his improbable success was soured by the disappointment at seeing the condition of The Cup.

“Why does it look like that-it’s rotted.”

“What were you expecting?”

Marvin passed it over for her to hold. She took one hand off, seeing the smutty residue on her palm and rubbed her thumb back and forth against it, for further inspection. A coated clump of mold patina slid off the left handle, allowing the glitter of gold beneath it to shine through. One chunk after another began to crumble off, as Sofia used her nails to scrape off the rest.

What was hidden underneath captivated them in a moment of reflection on the possible mysterious history of the gilded chalice. Crafted around the midsection were punctuated engravings of an ox, an eagle, a lion and a cherub, forming a tetramorph.

“I’m curious what he wants with it.”

“Maybe he’s parched and needs a cold drink, before we all burn in Hell-how am I supposed to know.”

She thought it useless to reveal what The High Priestess told her, for Marvin wouldn’t believe it anyway.

“I’m glad we’ve got that settled, then.”

Marvin swiped The Cup back by its stem and mounted his steed. Sofia did not press him again about joining, as it would only beget another argument and pointless delay. She bid him farewell and wished him luck, waiting for him to ride far enough along, for her to tail behind, unnoticed.

It took no more than a quarter of an hour for The Knight to fantasize about heading off to The South, trading in The Cup for pents, buying a homestead and fishing his days away somewhere near a warm sandy strand. Instead, he crossed the sandstone bridge over Lavender Lake into the murky forest, his mood suddenly shifting.

The children of The Kingdom had been told through reputed oral folktales of the ghouls and goblins that lived in the woods. While these stories may have been used in not so subtle ways to discipline the boys and girls of what horrors might happen if they disobeyed their parents, even as adults, the stories stuck with them, and it was ill advised to tread too deep into the shrouded hinterlands.

Marvin flipped open his visor and let out a deep breath, assessing the daunting prospect of a lengthy journey he hadn’t even started—the only sound, the intermittent chirping of crickets. The only sight, the gloomy looming trees adumbrating miles of landscape yet to be traveled. He kicked his horse into a forward trot.

To keep himself from the creeps, he hummed an old war song called The Gallant Go With Thee. Hums turned to whistles turned to poorly pitched singing, before being swapped out with other songs he vaguely recalled, until he ran out of tunes he knew altogether. Just at the start of the second rendition of The Gallant Go With Thee, Marvin reached a marshy clearing containing a large pond of fresh water.

The crunching of leaves beneath the clopping horses' hooves was amplified by the silence around them. Marvin looked into the pond from where his steed was slurping, to see the reflection of a brilliant scarlet ibis, not native to the area, flying past eight scattered stars glistening above the azure sky. He hopped off to dip The Cup in for a drink quenching his own parched tongue, when his attention was redirected by the bare, cream skinned woman holding two earthenware pitchers across the pond. She rose from her bent knee, to study him. Marvin, having not seen a naked woman since his wife’s passing, found it hard to look away from her sensuous body. He slowly lifted himself from his own bent knee to the surprising revelation of her replacement, Death. Death wore dusky armor, sitting on a white horse and hoisted a black flag with a five-petal white rose stitched into it. Marvin’s insides cramped up, except for his heart, which thumped like the persistent banging of a door knocker. The black robed knight’s skeletal face poked through its helmet as it delicately removed its glove, pointing its bony finger for Marvin to look back into the pond. His eyes rolled down to the now inky filled pool emanating an apparition of his family crying for him to save them. The vision transmuted into Taro and its people drowning in flames. A flurry of distraught voices swirled around Marvin’s head, which he tilted up towards Death, who, like the apparition, was there no longer. Beads of sweat trickled from his scraggly hair making his eyes itch, as he struggled to regain his equanimity. He excused the experience as the hallucinatory effect of his tiredness, but even he was beginning to distrust what little sanity kept him going.

Beyond where Hope and Death stood, serpentine colored smolder corruscated ahead. Marvin mounted his horse and rode off to investigate its source.

An ancient dialectic in the form of hissing and chanting came from six hags in rags carrying staffs, dancing around their brimstone fire pit. Ten of twelve knights from the first contingent were bound to ten standing longwands, their hands tied behind them. Imposingly propped up in the middle, stood the wood carved statue of the goat-faced Banebdjedet-known as Pan. Their hearts were already measured in a hall of two truths with the feather of Ma'at too heavy to save them from forty two negative confessions in front forty two judges. The accounting already written by Thoth-their spirits restored for only a moment. Two of the witches lit their staffs with the green flame, walking over and carefully igniting the men on fire from opposing ends-the blaze scorching through them all into the idol, leading back along a direct path to the fire pit.

Marvin watched aghast at the ritual he was never invited to pry on. The fear that had until this point disabled him, was nullified by disgust. Drawing his sword he marched towards the conjurors, disrupting their invocation with his presence. They aimed their shrill chants toward him, invoking a colony of bats to dart in from all directions, thrashing around The Knight like a scattered cyclone. Marvin's chest and back plate burst open, thwacking away the bats and torpedoing toward one of the shrews, thunking her down. The plates locked back into place as he sliced one witch from the left and one from the right, the third greeted with the solid gold Cup against her forehead. Their squeals failed to match the pitch of the piercing din of the last two seeresses forcibly thrust to their sweltry expiration.

Even a pent up release of violence did not offer The Knight any temperance from the intrusive fatalism triggered by his brief encounter with The Death Rider. He galloped westward the veiled undefinable distance, as ghastly sharp claws of shapeshifting demons grabbed hold onto stone, making their way out of still crackling fire.

...

Warm rain washed over The Kingdom wide funeral procession for Emperor Edwyn. The four of swords held up his garish casket, on top of which protruded a molten metal cast of his body laying and praying with his hands held together, a practice he avidly avoided. The seven Kings and Queens stood together on the grand brattice of The Domain, pretending to smile in solidarity of a unified realm.

“Drustan was very upset about the absence of your daughter. At fourteen-”

“Thirteen.”

“What’s the difference? *He’s very self conscious*-would it not have been wise to have sent an escort to ensure her proper arrival.”

“To say she didn’t meet him not because she was incapable, isn’t to say she was inculpable either-or she would be with us right now.”

The Queen of Cups interjected, “The High Priestess is waiting for us. Try to keep your composure.”

“Her head is still on her shoulders, isn’t it?”

“As it should be.”

They returned to the gala, before the splattering of a hurled rotten tomato made its way to the balcony. The malcontent bystander, and said thrower of tomato, was forcibly nabbed away by an armsman.

The High Priestess sat at the front of the long lacquered black table, embellished with white vines around the perimeter, complimenting the checkered pattern floor. Genevieve sat opposing them at the other end, six royals paired along either side.

“I looked at Edmund’s palm and told him that children weren’t in the cards, for when we can’t have what we want we pray to a Divine Spirit. Disillusionment comes as quick as a false prophet, just in time to tell him what he wanted to hear and just as slow as God’s Judgement soured. How many years did The Emperor wait for his wife’s pregnancy only to be killed by the gestation time of a snake and how many years will you wait to be entangled by her spawn? God made man. Man made myth. Myth destroyed man. None of us deserve Justice, if not for mercy of The Son.”

“Skirting around a subject would sentence a town shrew to death. So would you be so kind, Marceline, as to guide us, oh so knowledgeable fortune teller to-”

The High Priestess rolled down a tiny crystal ball, which slowed to a stop at the center of the table.

“They’re alive.”

The High Priestess whipped her wrist around, pointing her finger at the ball which illuminated a vision of The Knight of Cups, bobbing from side to side on his horse along Calypso Mountain.

“Who’s that?”

Moving her fingers counterclockwise, she shifted the vision to Sofia riding a quarter mile behind Marvin.

“Some people are manipulated by dark entities and controlled by them. Some dabble in their curiosity of dark arts and others participate in them wholeheartedly. The Prince and Princess would think their sacrifice is to save our Kingdom-*from what exactly?* The follies of their parents or the narrative of Taro they didn’t learn while falling asleep during enseignement privé?”

“Are you implying they ran away?”

“I’m not implying...anything. And don’t get angry you asked me to be blunt, King. Even a righteous one will let a spider in his castle go unnoticed. To profess to be an angel, because you share the name of one, you are not. No one sitting here would dare make such an assertion. Should they attempt to, we’d all know very well whose side they were really on. I told the couple they were being tested, alas, a consecution of events is hard to break when it’s already been set in motion and scrying too far into the future is a parlous habit I no longer practice. Were I to warn you of their actions, it would have incentivized them further and quicker into The Devil’s hands for a game of wits is unwise to make any move before he does.”

The knights from the second contingent and The Hanged Man barged into the gala, hurling their swords to the ground, impetuously unclipping their house broaches.

“The first squadron are all dead. Murdered by the hands of wicked arts!”

Genevieve sprang up from her chair, swiped the crystal ball and strode over to face them.

“Who put this fucking queer in a contingent?!”

“He was the one dangling from the tree-”

“Well now we know there’s a reason Satan left him there-so shall we all be dead if you don’t pick up your weapons and act like swordsmen.”

She tossed the ball to The Knight Commander.

“It’s Marvin!” Philip was elated, albeit bewildered to see his friend through a lucid orb.

Genevieve turned back around.

“Like I said, that Cup should have never been lifted. You told The Princess to seek out Marvin, now you stop it.”

“It would have happened either way. There was no stopping it.”

“What about The Magician?”

The High Priestess’ eyes sullenly narrowed .

“That’s not something I want to discuss here.”

The King of Wands bade elaboration, “What Magician?!”

“Tell them.”

The Priestess, displeased at The Queen of Pentacles’ outburst, realizing Zelig had already gotten to her, reluctantly divulged what she knew could no longer be kept a secret.

“What you did or where he is? Would you like him to come back and save you?”

She hesitated.

“That’s a tricky question-”

“It is, isn’t it...When words fall on deaf ears and you didn’t hear me the first time. And as far as Artur Reynard Von Zelig goes I’m sorry to tell you he’s not The Old Gooseberry, but a vessel for a visitant, merely a courier, seemingly influential enough to move you from shrewdness to petulance to nothing more than a name people forgot from the past if you can’t temper your indignation.”

Chatter broke out amongst the group.

“I want all members of The Templar Trust round up and jailed. All property vested by The Lord of Cunningham hereby seized in repayment back to The Kingdom. Half the recouped pentacles to cover the debt, the other half given back to the people. I hope, at the very least, we can all finally agree on a principled verdict.”

The Priestess rose. “I would strongly advise against *that*.”

“Why?”

The High Priestess put her head in her hand

“A night of joy for a day of hell-it’s getting a little laissez faire around here and I will no longer be called back for another meeting to have my insight ignored, surely saving me from blather and exasperation.”

“What say the rest of you?”

The Priestess promptly walked out, past the entry, grabbing the orb, while the room continued to deliberate the revelation. Genevieve hurriedly followed her outside.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“Where we all are at some point.”

“Do you always have to be so fucking abstruse?”

“Everybody’s quibbling over something I told them not to worry about-.”

“*You didn’t say it like that!* Would you mind being a *little* more relatable and telling me what would you have me do instead?”

“Calling The Hanged Man a fruit in front of everyone won’t help-that’s for sure.”

Genevieve’s frustration showed on her face. The Priestess inched closer.

“The love you withhold is the pain you still carry. Start there and see what happens.”

Genevieve tilted her head in dismay and smacked her lips. “Fine.”

...

The six week campaign The Queen of Pentacles assumed to be the achievement of a great compromise, backfired completely.

Eliminating her private debt collection and donating all money accrued by Zelig and his operations to the general public was still in conflict with the warnings given to her, thereby making a reasonable modus vivendi result in a Kingdom Wide rebellion.

The majority of The Templar Trust who thought they were partaking in charitable services, were hanged from nooses instead of heard in court, and the truth of the matter didn't matter much at all when rounding up whomever else was implicated in conspiring with The Lord. Territorial knights went 'round beating townsfolk for acts they were likely not guilty of, admitting to crimes they never committed. Satchels refunded to workers, peasants and farmers were opened to ribbiting barnacle toads, hissing saffron snakes or spotted red moths instead of pentacles. Livelihoods and businesses propped up under Zelig's enchantments were brought down by the same methods which made them flourish. Vampiric aristocrats strategically banded together scattered hordes of the confused and downtrodden, in secret spaces, spreading rumors and misdirection that The Queen of Pentacles was working alongside The Devil, in tandem with the other plutocrats. They were told that only a proactive defense of a humble and benevolent Lord Zelig would act as a saving grace against a morally impure monarchy.

Whereas a ravaging plague could contain a populist uprising against Edwyn, the food shortages, price gouging, alarming wealth disparity and thieving from both sides of such disparity could only persist for so long, until private disgruntlement spilled out into streetwide protests.

The Kings and Queens found themselves backed into a corner on how to deal with the recent outbreak of demonstrations, for to clamp down or allow them to continue were both losing propositions, leaving no recourse but to capitulate to The Devil or let Genevieve take a public fall.

“Your Highness!”

“Yes Jasper.”

“What shall your orders be for the workers who completed construction on the amphitheater?”

“Workers under whom?”

Jasper coughed. “Lord-”

“Kill them all.”

The Queen put her head down and finished signing the document on her desk with the swythe stroke of her quill.

...

The second full moon passed since The Knight's traversal through the dense greenwood. Baleful totems were spotted dotting the landscape and were the only man made structures he saw since leaving until reaching the rickety timber footbridge. He cautiously maneuvered his horse to a slow trot past the moss covered Baphomets posted on either side. The thick fog obfuscated everything but the drooping treetops and decomposed stone arch at the other end of the gangway. Heading into the dewey curvature, every hoof forward left a creak behind it. Marvin flicked open his visor to catch the caliginous outline of a Hierophant, coming into full definition ahead of the outway. Adorned in sterling gray regalia, he awaited on the detritus covered in honey lemon leaves at the foreground of the surrounding verdant foliage. Under his papal tiara was a face concealed by a crystalline mask. Around his neck rested a chain attached to a key, the bow of which was chiseled in with an occult sigil from a bygone era.

Marvin hopped off his steed and walked towards The Hierophant, who raised his arm for The Cup. His voice was soft, but menacing.

"I'll take that from here."

"I'm supposed to bring this to The Tower. That was the request."

The Knight knew handing it over would accomplish a similar outcome, but his moral code nagged at his conscience.

"There's no need. I will bring it to him. You can go back now."

"A promise is a promise though, isn't it?"

The Hierophant's mask clouded with an apparition of Marvin's family seated happily together in an otherworldly realm filled with light. Marvin was hypnotically tranced by the optical deception, until Death reappeared, behind his wife and children, carrying a scythe. The sonance of prayers and promises he made to save them during The Crip stirred in his eardrums. Death lifted the scythe, as The Hierophant grabbed The Cup. While Death swung at The Knight's family, The Hierophant struck at Marvin's neck.

He screamed with manic woe, holding off, within inches, the Hierophant's blade. Their swords clanged against each other with intense yet equal force, though The Hierophant needed only the use of a one handed grip. The Knight's teeth gnashed together, seeing his family struck down, barely able to hold off his own demise. Their swords clashed several more times, before The Hierophant knocked Marvin's away using infernal energy to crush his armor in, pressuring him to fall to his knees. The Hierophant elevated his coronation blade for one last thrash against the suffocated and beaten Knight, only to be stalled by the reflection of the red hooded Princess sprinting towards them.

Sofia spun thrice 'round like a top, just in time to block the Hierophant's swing with her two shortswords. Marvin crawled on his knees and elbows towards his steel claymore. The Hierophant's unrelenting broad swipes were so strong, that each encounter of sidearms destabilized Sofia's footing. She tumbled backwards,

saved by Marvin's glove, which flew off his hand, knocking The Cup out of The Hierophants' and preventing a final coup. Marvin used the distraction to thrust his blade into the abdomen of the unholy priest, whose clothes and mask dropped like a ghost had been hiding behind them the whole time.

Marvin limped to Sofia and lifted her up. She never counted on the hug that followed. The Knight held her close and thanked her.

...

The sky was vast and cast with brilliant shades of marmalade that radiated through the pines and willows. Marvin used his banged in helmet, a twig and some berries to catch what he had hoped to be a hearty peafowl to eat, but settled for cooking the shrub lizards that fell for the bait instead.

Miles behind The Princess and Knight gnawing on their underwhelming insipid dinner, the garments of the phantasmic Hierophant reformed back into bodily symmetry. He picked up his papal tiara, placing it on his head and patting it twice for good measure. He pivoted around to survey how far the two galloped away from the edge of his blade.

...

“Look! That must be his house.”

Sofia pointed to the tiny woodshack dwelling, puffing up smoke from its chimney at the top of the hill. They observed a small creature making its way downward the many crooked stone steps entrenched in the slope. What appeared at first as a small dog, came uncomfortably close enough to discern as a lone wolf, seating itself calmly and glaring at them.

Marvin took the half eaten lizard off his stick and threw it away for the wolf to chase. Its gaze remained unflinching, ignoring the burnt reptile zipping past him.

“Shall we just assume he doesn't try to attack us?”

“I think he's blind.”

“Would you like to go over and find out? Let's just stay still, until he walks off.”

“He seems harmless.”

“Nothing in this forest *so far* has been harmless.”

A gust of wind swished through the leaves and shook them with crepitation.

The wolf howled, and from three directions around, figures resembling fluid expressions of what living nightmares would look like came out of hiding. Swirling shrouds of nebulous black and carnelian colored streaks were marked by sharp claws and teeth. The beasts shapeshifted lissomely into dark, mirrored forms of The Knight, Princess and wolf. They advanced towards their respective twins.

The two wolves dug their paws into the dirt and snarled at each other. Marvin and Sofia held guard back to back. Within seconds of first combat, the resounding trill of a shepherd's flute thrummed through the campground. Every note contorted the demons and destabilized them from striking. The melodic harmonics of the composition fluctuated between playful and pointedly penetrating, causing the burnt colored specters to spasm and convulse. Their appearances morphed from twirling shadows to whorling liquid to solid rock. The last note was held with prolonged exaggeration, exploding the demons into dust, leaving charcoal silt all over the three of them.

The wolf shook off the debris and led the pair to the stairs of the hill from which the music played. They made their way up the ruddy flight, observing the stones etched with smudged cobalt eyes, that looked about with each progressive step. The man expecting them at the top, warily took the flute from his lips.

“Tricky tricks, blown to bits...”

“I presume you’re the one they call The Magician?”

“I am indeed, although close friends call me Lenormànd.”

Over his tunic, The Magician wore a pumpkin dyed robe which draped down to his calf leather sandals. He was clean shaven, and while the years hadn’t fully grayed his hair or added too many wrinkles to his face, they did distort the size of his left pupil, slightly enlarged when compared to the right-barely able to hold a reservoir of ontological knowledge from bursting out of it.

“What friends?”

Lenormànd cracked a slick grin. His left eye started to waver beneath its lids.

“Won’t you come inside?”

They walked inside, the last to follow, Lenormànd’s wolf, named Eclipsus.

PART II

CHAPTER IV THE MAGICIAN

The Magician stood opposite The Princess and Knight in front of the two grand arch windows on either side of the entrance door, through which gave view of the glowing sky and canopies below.

The decades shaped Lenormànd from a gullible fool into a sharp, mercurial character, but the path which led to his accumulation of wisdom, left him haughty, with an inability to trust anyone.

He glanced, displeasingly, at the tracks of gunk left on the floor by the new guests and began to twiddle the fingers of his right hand.

“I built this house, before I knew I could have had it build itself...”

“The High Priestess said you would guide us to The Blackwater.”

“Did she now? Celine has a bad habit of passing off her predictions as facts and keeping secrets to herself.”

“What does that mean? We have less than a month to reach The Tower and it doesn’t seem like we’re getting anywhere closer to The-”

“Before we get into *all of that*, let’s clean the both of you up, shall we?”

Lenormànd took a handkerchief from his robe and brusquely flapped it, once in every direction.

“There we are! Much better.”

Marvin and Sofia looked at the side mirror to see their clean faces and freshly resewn garments.

“Now let me take that from you-”

The Cup flew into The Magician’s hand.

“What do you think you’re doing!?”

“We didn’t come here for more magic tricks!”

“You don’t even know why you came here at all!”

He turned to Sofia.

“And to think you’re going to what? Rescue your sister? Do you have any idea what you’ve gotten yourself into-no you don’t-put that down!”

Marvin dropped the crystal he picked from a bowl of charms, after it scalded his palm.

“Ah!”

“That’s a stinging basalt lava stone. Why would you touch that?”

Lenormànd sighed.

“This day, while inevitable, is putting me in the uncomfortable position of having to desist you. And to be honest, it’s not something I want to do, but I just don’t really care anymore, do I...?”

“Can you give us The Cup back, then?!”

“You’re getting out of sorts is getting out of sorts-so let’s put it all back together. If you’re not aware of what you’re dealing with-and I am-then I’m taking on a responsibility which would otherwise leave you both licking your wounds with your heads cut off-and that’s kind of hard to do. Divine Providence is nothing more than a great serpent which comes back around to haunt me on a Day of Recompense if I don’t teach you something useful before you leave here, or who will relieve me of Judgement should I be so entangled with your lack of wisdom to allow you to fail.”

“I thought you were going to join us?”

“I am not going to join *you*-who said that? And the ignorance is what makes it more difficult. So let’s make it easy shall we and say The High Priestess and I disagree on some things. And those things are beyond your realm of comprehension.”

“Is that so?”

“Gobbelygook from spirits chit chattering in your head is making it hard for me to think clearly.”

The Magician confounded Marvin into stuttering to respond.

“What-what spirits?”

“The lippy one again! It’s in your liver.”

The Magician pointed to his ribs.

“If you’re going to be an unhelpful-”

“Smart ass? Ephphtha! Quiet the mind! And I’m the most helpful smart ass you’re ever going to meet. Do you know where they’re from, Sir Gallahad?”

“Gallahad?!”

“No one’s called me that in decades-”

“Middle names are prohibited from peasants, aren’t they? Do you see Princess why he was able to lift The Cup now? Or did The Papesse leave that part out?”

“I never thought-”

Lenormànd gave no pause to the answer of his own query.

“Because you never asked. They’re from the other side getting him to change something he didn’t want to face within himself. For someone who fought in The Seven Year War and made it through the murrain-you wouldn’t imagine for God or for country left him forgotten by country a dolt-for Sir Gallahad is no scaredy cat at all-and he certainly isn’t stupid. Adult but not a dolt-how would you leave without the chalice if not for a drink and a stay with me first?”

The Magician swept up his hand, creaking open the doors of the cabinet in the corner. A bottle of Dragon’s Breath and three viridescent glasses hovered over to them. The bottle poured out an even quarter each, which they drank in unison-the foul aftertaste causing The Princess to cough some back up.

“She wanted the honey wine-and you needed the healing-leave those and follow me.”

Their glasses left suspended in midair, they walked past his oak table on which rested a sword, a chalice, a pentacle and a staff Lenormànd grabbed on the way out back. Lenormànd snapped his fingers and the besom and buckets of water put themselves to good use cleaning his home.

Brushing aside the dangling vines of blooming red roses that covered the outdoor wall of The Magician's house, they stood amongst unusual varieties of lush plants abounding his garden, including the rhododendron on the edge of the cliff.

"Who saved The King at Avalon after The Battle of Camlaan-The Eight Sisters above under The Veiling Star or The Eight Sisters below at The Isle of Apples?"

"Both of them?"

"Wrong-mercy from God saved The King for him to return when The Kingdom needed him. Who saves you?"

Lenormànd lifted his Ace of Wands and tore open the sky, like two curtains being pulled apart, leaving a dark void which filled the center of the split landscape.

"In between the seen and the unseen is a space that can be something, nothing or anything at all."

Lenormànd struck the dirt with his Wand and the void lit up with countless stars, shining through darkness like multicolored pinholes.

"Step in, look up and try not to cry."

They stood, there, in the ether known as the cosmos.

"The seven days of creation were one and they were separated between God and us. God created The World in His image above. And below you created your own image of what you thought God was. It was the Fourth Day that divided morning and night and made Wednesday a Mercury which moved me to speak about it."

Lenormànd brought his arms together, drawing out green aurora light from the curtains to form three dragons dancing around in a circle.

"Let us ascend, shall we?"

The Magician awed his visitors with such overwhelm, that any previous impression of his arrogance were washed away with wonder. They flew up to the magnificent pulsating bulb bursting with fiery explosions of yellow cadmium colored rays.

"The sun is the greater light that never goes out. Shining majestically, it restores night into morning, and as it rises, with it, so does life-autotrophic vegetation splitting water. But it's fixed in its command of what it believess is the strict head of a hierarchical cycle in a natural order under one, but it isn't the one. To maintain this balance, a lesser light was created. One that comes both before and after the first. The one that tames the night, but is made seen to us by the power of the sun's reflection onto it. But it too, is not the one."

The moon awoke, luminously.

“For even in darkness there is still the influence of light. It is here, at this point in the Milky Way Galaxy, where our world revolves around that heliosphere. And as it spins we stand still, back there, looking out onto the horizon, at the appearance of an eastern ascent and western descent. It is only based on our relation and position to this ecliptic, that we’re able to understand it. From the equator, in one full orbit, four points are made, thus marking the fall equinox, winter solstice, spring equinox and summer solstice. Every two thousand years it is the spring equinox which marks the beginning of an *Age*. And it is those four points that mark the divisions within our individual, astrological charts. And while we move around The Father of Days, The Mother of Nights moves around us!”

She dimmed quickly into complete concealment as a New Moon, before revealing herself as a Waxing Crescent, a First Half, a Waxing Gibbous, a Waning Moon, a Full Moon, a Waning Gibbous, a Second Half, a Waning Crescent, returning again as a New Moon once more—seconds later bringing herself back to exquisite brightness.

“Shrouding her presence, she reveals herself, slowly, over eight phases every month. Even in her full revelation, what is shown is a different shade of herself, twelve, or sometimes thirteen times, during one solar year. In her concealment we underestimate her, and in her completeness, she rises the tides over the land and beneath everyone’s skin. Within and without, she maintains her passive control over the emotional and physical state. Of the four elements, it is water which veils most of the world we live in. And it is water which makes up the essence of our dreams. We can run towards those dreams or we can hide from them. Sometimes they can hide from us. But they’re still there, buried under the surface. She can be warm and nurturing, just as quickly as she can become forbiddingly frosty and bitter.”

The Knight and The Princess screamed.

“The dark side of the moon isn’t pretty, is it? I wouldn’t look at that too long if I were you—there’s still five more spinning planets to talk about.”

Lenormànd pointed his staff to a tiny planet appearing close to the sun

“Mercury! The Prince. Lord of the signs Gemini and Virgo. Air and earth. Communication and commerce. Movement and messages. Everything that came out of God’s throat and was written on tablets and man’s failure to define it with a T square and a divider. Logic and reason, for a season or a lifetime. The moon can cloud one’s logic with too many emotions, which would render it incapable of making rational decisions, and thus ineffective at fruiting ideas into reality, *if not* for the means of logic and nerve...The means of Mercury. But there are things beyond logic and reason, which allow the tides of emotion to wash over one’s intelligence, like a tiny boat being crushed by an unruly wave called love on a shore that seems too far away to embrace.”

Venus appeared second from the Sun.

“The debilitation of Mercury is a sign which becomes exalted in The Evening Star, Venus-*Pisces*. And as with The Age of Taurus and Aries, it starts nice and breaks down twenty five hundred years, to build anew, to start again. To redeem what went wrong prior—though never seeming to. And so we’re not just here in space, but in time. And relative to us, The Age, which was supposed to bring in pure hearts and minds, spiritual

compassion for one another, instead brings twelfth house problems. Losses, poverty, imprisonment, disease, isolation and sickness...There's a couple more in there."

The Magician reached out to touch Marvin's forehead, pulling out scrambled, screaming energy, resembling ghostlike spiders, flicking them all away into the void. He turned to The Princess.

"In some parts of The East, they say we're in The Fourth and Final Age of Kali Yuga. Others say it's the Sixth of Seven Ages. But what comes at the end of it all? A *destruction* and *correction* of anything and anyone not filled with love, and a resurrection and restoration of all our souls. Where does it lead other than for us to be exactly where we are right now-a world without end."

Lenormànd paused as they began to fly to the dusty red planet named Mars.

"I have to use the latrine."

"Can you hold it in until we get to Jupiter?"

"I don't believe I can-"

"Where's The Cat's Eye Nebula?"

"That's millions of years behind us."

"I'm going down-I can't hold it anymore-I'm going to have to relieve myself on Mars."

The Magician snapped his fingers as Marvin's dragon puffed into smoke.

"Why did you do that?!"

A celestial door opened up. Lenormànd wiggled his fingers for him to go in as he paused his discourse. Upon entering there was silence.

"Sofia Elaine-when was the last time you cried?"

"Before I left home. What about you?"

A shriek was heard.

LaGuerre fell up howling clamantly to the creepy desolation of the red planet. He brought himself to and walked around hearing the whistling gale of a mortified red winter.

Lenormànd leaned in and whispered, "I bawled when I left everyone crying too." He nodded to her.

Rocks from a straw colored mountain hit the terra firma jarringly spiking the ground around him as he looked down struggling to piss. Seeing shackles in silt he lifted the hand clappers to probe them, but his

attention was redirected by the naked statuette of a forgotten matriarch emerging from a shell frozen in reign carved of whale bones, which caught him by surprise.

Lenormànd snapped his fingers and the imperfect Knight remerged on his tarragon.

“I told you not to look down.”

“What did I witness there, on that planet?”

“*In that planet are-I’m trying to think of what I should call them without scaring everyone-*”

“Fairies?”

“Yes-fairies are good-let's call them that for now and move on.”

“Was that Aphrodite?”

“Love needs a sculpture of a Goddess, or they needed a woman-”

“The fairies?”

“If you pay attention now Sir Gallahad you may hear the answer.”

“About the fairies?”

“Yes!! About the fucking fairies-*Fourth* from the sun, exalted in Capricorn, debilitated in Cancer is Mars. Anger, wrath, sex, blood, war, guts, grit. Facing adversity despite the insurmountable to overcome the unstoppable. *Willpower*. The amount of fight you have, which fortunately, neither one of you is lacking. Anybody with a weak Mars gets trounced. But a bold Mars too unbalanced, can make a ruthless murderer out of a mouse and a raging lunatic out of a louse. Without the ability to carefully harness a fire, you would get toasted like a marshmallow, as would everyone around you. There’s only one way to put out a flood-get it?”

“A fairytale?”

The Magician was taken aback by the response.

“Not a tale...But a little hale and a lot of turmoil after.”

Sandy, swirling stripes of wet clouds, made up the sixth and largest planet in the solar system. Twenty two degrees below its equator, its open agate eye leered at them.

“Europa! If not for Jupiter, these flying silicate rocks around us would hurtle through space and explode into our world. Some time ago, some of them did. And if they didn’t, they wouldn’t have brought with them the elements that made life exist in the first place-or did they? Its reputation precedes it to be wise, but only if *you’re wise enough* to catch what it’s trying to teach you. If not, you’ll veer off like one of those asteroids. To

think that it's merely a benefic planet which brings everybody a boon, would be to mistake it with Venus. And to mistake any planet as benefic or malefic would depend on innumerable variables. Can the wrong path instill you with the right lessons or the wrong lessons lead you onto the right path? And is there a point of our little escape out here if you haven't learned anything at all."

The Magician pointed his Wand to Saturn.

"The most powerful planet in the chart. Odious Grandpa! Nobody likes old, smelly people and yet we're meant to respect them. You don't need an astrolabe to figure out why we're still in this Babylonian Nūnu. The second you spell a sentence out of the seven planets with their true names, you would see from the soma, the prince, in pain, in the head, needed the venom and the solution was Sathiran. What we consider reality. Humanity. Physically grounding and spiritually karmic. Your way into this world is not the way out of it or is the judge, jury and executioner the one who makes that decision? Is it the stick that hits you when you didn't learn a lesson from guru or the temptation that leads you down the wrong road before the inevitable punishment you got falling for it. It'll give you an easy way out just to show you how hard you never thought it would be. It is not a serpent, but a snail with a sharp blade. Constructs from The Fourth Day, the most recognized-Kronos formed seven rings around him and eight til death did us his part. Justice isn't unfair if you're worthy of liberation. Restrictions which stagnated you, stagnancy which squeezed you into a slow, never ending struggle that gave you no choice but to figure out one way, some way to break through. *In this duality, in this darkness, in this breakdown*, dreams are born and they spark the higher purpose of the soul. Can it not turn a king into a pauper or a pauper into a king for good or for evil? Enslaving us in its limitations or are we doing that to ourselves, to embrace who we need to become to tap into what we're truly capable of requires...discipline. Perhaps that is the greatest lesson, which can only come from the highfather that no one liked, but even the sun needed."

"There must be, give or take, seventy or so moons out there-"

"And look! Three more planets-"

"Don't pay attention to those-they aren't relevant."

Uranus, Neptune and Pluto thundered for attention.

"YES WE ARE!"

"You're not important until you're discovered! And even *then* it's questionable."

"FUCK YOU LENORMÀND!"

"AND YOU AS WELL!"

The Magician exhaled and snapped his fingers for them to disappear.

"There's over hundreds of billions of planets including the goldie lox ones with precious water in just our galaxy alone and three hundred billion stars accompanying them. It's the seven that have the predominant

influence on us-if it wasn't true in the chart readings, astrologers would have been wrong for centuries-that's not to say..."

The magician snapped his fingers and the three planets reappeared.

"You don't exist."

...

The finest tea from The Oriental Land Company was sipped by two aristocrats gossiping about the recent arrests of The Templars and anyone associated with them.

"Can you believe these underlings are all claiming possession! They even sent a priest down to the dungeons to confirm-and he went missing."

"Of his own volition, probably."

They laughed.

"There was a report he was acting erratically, before he disappeared."

"Yes I heard that too. It's possible that's one of the side effects of giving a baptism a whore."

"A good book didn't cost him a pentacle."

"But the bubble bath did."

They howled at the impiousness of the adultering priest.

"All the people of Taro may not believe in God, but it doesn't seem that all The Gods believe in Taro, either. Without authoritative executiveship, how could there ever be an immediate response to any threat?"

"Perhaps draconian rule was better...Although, there's something about monarchic consent and ineffective leadership that's quite helpful to pirates ambushing a cog and killing a crew. And would turn out more profitable, in the end."

"The insurance policy is a bunco note if it can't be redeemed by the cash out date, which would make it a criminal act by The Queen just as much as not paying taxes to her when they're due wouldn't it?"

"But how will we get the funds for a new cargo load?"

"Eastern patience and Western promises, Ermenbert-tell Quimoy we owe him one and get another bunco note until the first one is paid. Zelig already compensated the buccaneers."

They laughed again.

...

Drustan played with his tin soldiers at a bench at a park by himself near the water lily pond close to his castle. Children ran around, some playing with sailboats, others riding on hobby horses, enjoying their play. Red kites swooped around cleaning up town waste, serving as targets for unruly boys throwing sticks at them.

A hand came down on Drustan's shoulder. Drustan looked up to see Lord Zelig.

"Aren't you too old to be playing with dolls?"

"They're tin soldiers, Uncle."

"The riffraff shall get the clay ones, then. Maybe those little girls over there would like to join you. The red head eating the candy apple looks a little more suitable for you than the dike who stood you up."

Drustan spoke with a lisp.

"I'd rather play with my battalion by myself."

"What do you think would happen if she came over here?"

"She would start picking apart my army."

"And we wouldn't want that, would we-here."

Zelig gave the boy a beautifully wrapped brick of chocolate. "There isn't a chocolatier in Taro who could make chocolate taste this good without magic."

He took out a little mason jar.

"And I made it even tastier by adding my special jelly jams in there to dulcify it. This one's filled with juicy strawberries. Open it up. There's a special surprise in there."

Drustan unwrapped the chocolate and pulled out a fortune card.

"I thought these weren't allowed..."

"Turn it around and tell me what Taro card you got?"

Drustan took the card out and flipped it over.

"Ah! It's The Queen of Wands. I wonder where your mumsy is now?"

The boy shrugged his shoulders and chomped down on his dark chocolate.

“Eat it slowly please or you won’t be able to savor my goody snack-it’s a delicacy.”

Zelig got back up.

“Some last minute affairs must be attended to post haste and will take me from here-but I wanted to see you before I leave. Remember young Drustan, while you’re munching on my snack and how sweet it is...The rich will eat each other, but they won’t eat well.”

The Lord put his hat on the boy’s head.

...

Dressed like monks in hooded monastic cowls donning golden pyramids around their napes, they formed a line behind Algol, who assertively approached the axe wielding armsmen guarding the mausoleum.

“Saba Dhu Balcan.”

They uncrossed their weapons and let the coven in to form an ouroboros around the two tombs. The women gathered around The Emperor, the men around The Empress. Holding hands, the medium, Algol administered betwixt the circlines. Their eyes rolled up and became nacreous.

“Rise spirits of present for causes of past which brought the one back to enlighten us with knowledge of everlast. Bring fertility from one to another and let the soul of the witch be the mother. Two wombs shan’t fit in one tomb for both are doomed without living nectar from their inbred groom. Let this moment possess theirs and women alone shall make an heir. Let not The Priestess interpose but stray her away for some far off day. The man will banish the magic of old and the prodigy will bring with him spiritual gold. Whither away what false majesties made, break it apart to build it anew, now made of brandished words from a chosen few.”

...

The four stars of the right hand of the twenty fifth lunar mansion incandescend.

“Janus turned on...We’re not ready for you quite yet...”

The Magician dismounted his dragon, signaling for LaGuerre and The Princess to follow.

Lenormànd aligned the seven planets perfectly, vertically, before he vanished, along with their dragons dissipating into green vapor. His voice echoed about.

“Seven planets, seven forces-”

The three outer planets interrupted him again.

“TEN! AND YOU FORGOT NIBIRU-”

“Everybody forgot Nibiru, it’s been hiding since pre-history!”

“POST HISTORY.”

“We can go tit for tat for twenty centuries can’t we and we’ll never get to the star charts at this rate if there’s three as one talking!”

“FOUR-”

“SEVEN!...DAYS. There’s *another* way to understand horoscopes-if we can get there.”

The seven planets were reduced and rearranged into glowing spheres, lighting up red, orange, yellow, green, blue, violet and white. Vermillion veins formed around like a tempest, consolidating and covering them, as a plasmic skull topped the crest, forming hydrogenic liquid into the body of a man. The Magician’s staff fell down, comfortably into his right hand. Drawing out seven spheres from himself, he divided them, casting them into The Knight and Princess, extracting them back into place and hurling them into disorientated positions. He transfigured the orbs into semblance.

Twenty six additional constellations now appeared around them.

“When our world...”

Lenormànd paused to see if they would interrupt him again.

“*Are we good?* Okay..When our world-reaches the point of the spring equinox in relation to the sun, we would define that as zero degrees of Spring. And from twelve zodiacs-

“THIRTEEN.”

“Are you fucking kidding me-”

“SERPENTERIUS.”

The Magician whispered the name of the constellation to himself, before responding.

“You’re a bit ahead of me, and you forgot one-”

“THE FOURTEENTH.”

“Yes-ABRACADABRA!”

Lenormànd exploded the three planets with his wand.

“These signs we’ve all come to know were manifest and split into thirty degrees—a simple system which neatly divides the year. But we aren’t stationary and neither is the position of the equinox. Not to mention the fact that our world wobbles around its axis, creating inconsistencies in the accuracy of our gauge of time, which can make a difference of hundreds of years. But to the scope of time itself, hundreds of years are less than the blink of an eye. To the twelve signs however, to be off by several degrees, would mean the sign’s position has moved. And that can alter the accuracy of a chart entirely. So we would turn to an older methodology, which used these fixed stars and lunar constellations around the ecliptic, tied to a galactic center.”

They saw afar an indefinable shape of creamy lavic cumulus, cracked by violet light.

“The force of disillusionment is the centrum of creation around it called Mula. Nine stars which made the tail end of Scorpius, make one of the three rulers of Sagittarius. A sign attributed to the ninth house—a higher spiritual truth. If you can free an arrow by pulling back a bow then you can free yourself when you’re at your low-confused and hopeless in the mud, you find *the roots* which lead you back to the light above.”

The Magician pulled in the stars to form three separate squares. From these squares, he formed three new ones. Within each he tilted them counterclockwise, into diamonds. He swung his wand creating an x, making four miniatures within their centers, leaving eight triangles around the edges.

The seven planets were separated again into threes, and spread out into three charts.

“What a *coincidence* we’re all Gemini ascendants. So then why are we so different, you and you and I? The first diamond, the first house, the attributes of self, of Sofia, are governed by the star Bellatrix which sits on the right shoulder of the constellation, Orion—the feminine hunter, symbolized by a wild deer. While Gallahad’s, the left shoulder—that shiny ruby hued star, Betelgeuse, emblemized by a teardrop. At first of rage, then of sorrow, then one day, joy, when renewal becomes redemption. It’s a teardrop that brings a storm and the promise of the rainbow reflected which ended it. The eternal chase isn’t needed once the ruler of wild animals is able to control his own. Each division of our three ascendants is only thirteen degrees apart and yet, we’re here, with three different personas, motivations and perspectives. Could you only imagine what happens when you factor everything else into the genitura.”

Shadows began to frost the third and ninth houses of each chart.

“The ghosts of the past and the guillotine of your future. It’s the cycle of the moon hitting the northern and southern ecliptic, which creates the divergence between who you were in past lives and what you would try to be in this one. When the head of the snake is in Gemini and the tail in Sagittarius every eighteen and a half years things go *boom* and that’s half the transit of Grandpa circumnavigating the map—thirty six years. *Which is why*, you’re not simply looking at an astrological chart, but the most afflictive double edged sword. A soul trap which showed you the seeds it planted at birth in your head to make you think you didn’t have a choice, for them to grow into either wildflowers or rot. If a cycle doesn’t exist can anything blossom?”

“Have you tried living in the present moment?”

“The one that seems to be boring you right now?”

“Yes-that moment.”

A comet sparkled through the sky.

“Comet down-and it just passed and you missed it, *by this much*. And we’re already moving forward. Do you see how it works?”

“That we can’t just be?”

“What?”

“*Who* do you want to be?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Exactly! So you’ll be The Scrappy Princess and he’ll be The Reluctant Knight and I’ll be The Magician-why? Because it’s written in the stars or because there’s a Devil you need to give that Cup to? A prophecy from God includes psychopastiche is our higher purpose or our choice? ”

Marvin panicked, thinking he dropped The Cup somewhere in space. Lenormànd swiftly pulled it out from his robe and handed it back to him.

“The Judgment is off my hands now, and in yours.”

...

A stream of radiant lights flashed through their mouths and eyes, as the void closed back up to the evening sky. Not even a minute had passed since they found themselves back on the cliff behind The Magician’s house.

They followed Lenormànd inside.

“Are we supposed to get across The Blackwater without you?”

“You’ll figure it out.”

Lenormànd picked up the Ace of Swords and twirled it upright over to LaGuerre, who snagged it midtoss. He then reached behind Sofia’s ear and placed over her neck a golden carcanet attached to a sizable crystal.

“Most of this forest is filled with illusions and The Blackwater isn’t as far away as it seems-look back at the mirror.”

The Knight saw himself garbed in new armor made of tourmaline beryl, The Princess, vested in plated smoky quartz.

“I closed up your cuts and sealed your auric leaks, showed you something beyond this world and fitted you both with armor made of remarkable stone-”

“You were supposed to go with us.”

“I’m not *supposed to do* anything. You found your way here-you’ll find your way to The Tower. Should either of you have inquiry-you may consider asking a tree.”

Marvin smacked his lips and threw up his hands in frustration.

“You’re being choleric. It is not such silly flapdoodle to say that they have hundreds of years of wisdom and hugging one is a marvelous remedy for a weak jovian giant, Sir Gallahad. Ask one with some age on it and it will show you the way. So will your sword and that crystal. If either of you was wise enough to listen to your hearts, you would hear them agree with me and never need an evergreen.”

The Princess and Knight did not appreciate The Magician’s pomposity, nevertheless relented to his apparent disinclination to join.

Lenormànd opened the door.

“Remember what I’ve said and you’ll realize what I meant. It’s just below the surface of what you think you think I said.”

They blankly nodded at his vague sendoff and walked down the steps towards their studs. Lenormànd watched them tail off and headed back inside his cottage. He scooped up some crystals from his bowl and let them drop back in, through his fingers, one by one. He walked out to his garden.

...

Holding onto the wooden ledge, he beheld the stars. Several feet behind, Eclipsus cozied up to the astral projection of The High Priestess quietly sitting on a bench, until she spoke.

“*You are an emotionally and spiritually* damaged man-and you’ve become completely ungrounded. They didn’t need a cosmology lesson from a blatherskite, they needed your help.”

The Magician snapped at her, “Then why didn’t you go with them?”

“I’m too old for another journey.”

“That’s a good one-you don’t look a day over fifteen hundred.”

“Do you need another palm reading or a slap in the face?”

“Mother can’t roll around in a grave if she’s crying in heaven. Maybe it was too warm up there, so you sat cool like The Moon appearing near Mars expecting other people to do your bidding for that *little shit* you call a son-bad mummy, nasty conjunction. Cosmology lesson over.”

The High Priestess’ celestine pupils expanded.

“When was the last time you took advice from a recluse who spoke more illuminated than he acted? When you choose a path of avoidance, it doesn’t seem to be like anybody but yourself these days.”

The Magician paused for a moment.

“*This World* is beyond saving, Marcelline.”

“What if it’s not?”

“You *assumed* I was going to go along with some *Divine Plan*? Well, I’m exercising my free will not to. What do you make of that?”

“Not much, when we both know you’re only lying to yourself. You will join them *not because you have to, but because you know it’s right.*”

“Is that so?”

“Your ego has become almost as considerable as The Queen’s.”

The Magician smirked and turned around.

“And I’d like to keep it that way, for was it not you who led me to the gypsy, who told me I had a destiny-before my exile handing me a book you did which said I had free will. *Change myself and transform what’s around me. Look around you-what’s changed?*”

The wolf started to whimper.

“Ba’al-that’s his name isn’t it?”

“That’s *one* of his names...No one asked you to ego death yourself or you wouldn’t be enjoying a pity party such as much as you do every day. The only reason I know more than you think, is because you think you know everything. It’s neither my opinion nor choice, but cosmic law, there must be a mid pillar in every cycle. Material pursuits was not your purpose in this life-I’m sorry you’re lonely-”

“I’m not lonely. I’m choosing to be here-if I wasn’t there would be a crown on my head, wouldn’t there? What were you trying to see-what was she? That the anima would get the best of me?”

“I took some of The Divine Judgement off your hands and I find what you did to Naamah Lilith quite appalling. ”

“A past life lesson-not completely unreasonable, given the circumstances.”

“Well...You gauged her eyes out, so-”

“And just deserts, indeed!”

“That you enjoyed and destroyed, because you thought she was what? Psychically attacking you? Imagine how she feels now-”

“Hurrah! I don’t have to anymore.”

Marceline was displeased at Lenormànd’s insouciant response.

“Nevertheless, she will pose an obstacle to The Princess and Knight to gain your attention.”

“As you would say in the right time when it’s destined it will be my will to show up-for somehow I seem to be quite needed recently. I shall think on it.”

“Say you’re thinking while the Beaujolais is burned to the ground celebrating Genevieve being raped and killed as you lived out no more than a poor man’s excuse for a rich man’s fantasy. Failings aren’t feelings and you don’t seem to be in tune with either. A fallacy called self reflection to get your willies off, while not moving from your homestay isn’t uncommon for a hypocrite playing out Imbrifer Duo Pisces in just the perfectly wrong way. The Age of Love killed everybody, didn’t it?”

The Magician respected her enough to concede she was right.

“Terse..*and* unpleasant!...I shall help.”

“Of course you will.”

Lenormànd pointed to her necklace.

“Is that an amethyst-”

“Ametrine.”

She corrected him and tucked it under her linen undertunic.

“Very well.”

He snapped his fingers. Fireflies rose from the dark of the garden and illuminated the night.

...

Centuries old ktav ivri written in squid ink on ripped papyrus floated on the sea, washing ashore. The King and Queen of Cups, notified of the remarkable occurrence, paid a visit to the coast. The Lord of Cunningham walked past the final haul of Mermaid Oysters left on the waterfront several yards away, his coat fluttering in the breeze.

Thomas and Mathilda inspected the scrolls intriguingly fascinated by their enigmatic origin. Fisher folk and laborers were hired to cast tight knit gill nets to catch the papers and reel them in.

“The Queen has made me redundant around here. She has not once wondered where those chitinous husks came from and yet will use them for her theater anyway. Were you able to quell her from rampage I would not be leaving now, but I did make sure to do so at my own leisure.”

“It would be very cumbersome to stop her authority without civil war.”

“And what would you call what’s happening now? An impetuous lashing against me by a petty spinster or self sabotage against a nearly rehabilitated Kingdom? If silence was golden I would have gotten paid already? I think not, nor did I require it. Now you’ll be seeing paper promises and the poor missing a much needed benefactor. You don’t need to pull some strings to gain favor, you just needed to pull someone down before she did it to her own country. She wanted me gone-and she’s getting her wish. Love wasn’t in the cards for her and it should be our heartbreak to deal with.”

“I never pictured you to be a seaman. Where will you head in your seaglass sailboat, Artur?”

“I’m no sea dog, but I’m certainly no swabbie either. There’s something in your hands that isn’t so far off from where I’m heading. Speaking of which-” He held his hat with his hand looking up as the gust swept and whooshed around the sand over the shore.

“I should tail off in case of a torrent and thus I bid you both adieu.”

Artur walked away and up the marine brow of the frozen milky colored glass vessel, Gnosis, towards the helm. Life rafts made of cork served as side decor on the starboard. The fired roustabouts hired by him helped get the boat on its way. The boat parted the water littered with paper and sailed off.

Citrine luster on glum skies became pronounced the further away he charted the ship. He sullenly steered the whipstaff, until sunset. The Devil spoke to him.

“The klipot would have you believe you’re juggling ten balls when you’re only juggling one. It was sharpen thine tongue like a sword on a stone and peh.”

“Amon Rav! What a delight!”

“You have elevated a lowly place bereft of Hashem, but not enough for you to sail on silvery seas. Nevertheless you will be rewarded for your sins in this world with high sachar. Not in the land of an insouciant Queen is tsa’aq required but for a hidden realm with treasures called Yahad it may be. You are too unclean to enter on high into Hod so you will drown in the waters below and-”

“And what?”

“Open The Malkuth.”

A giant whale of heavenly mist rose above the rogue waves and swallowed the boat whole.

CHAPTER V

THE TWO OF SWORDS

PART I

Across The Blackwater, past the miles of flat galena plateau stood The Tower. The Lovers sat naked in the sprawling black sky parlor, their necks locked together by a chain connecting their shackles. Large white columns stretched up from the checkered floor to the glass ceiling, between which the parian marble statues of idols staring discontentedly across from each other. A feast of fruits was set in a round silver bowl for both The Prince and Princess to have their pickings at grapes and apples.

Ba'al's silhouette unangelically followed him up the clean white steps towards his gold throne, which was oddly shaped and contained no cushions. A lofty triangle made the backrest, central to the two smaller triangles on either side, behind its arms. His winged shadow was more dramatic than the figure who sat down.

He placed his calf slippers on the large obsidian cube at the base of his throne and held the marpuç of the hand blown glass shisha stuffed with hashish in the raas, which was topped with a steaming coal.

Swirling his old finger he made infinity. “Judgement...Mercy.”

Vapor ascended from the heel tip to his top lip, the water bubbling from its base. He inhaled and blew out a bet.

“They made a resh...You were naked and you were afraid. Two lovers went blind at once in a garden-who saw it? I was there...In The Beginning...You don't believe...You will believe. The pshat is not the sod and the sod is not episodic, but they are the same-is it possible? You can eat from any tree, but not *that one*-is a limitation not fixed like an idol unless you break it? And is a sin a blessing if God is at fault? The sod of the sod is where the answer lies the truth.”

He gently put the hose down on the side table. A pomegranate flew out of the bowl into The Devil's hand. He withdrew a pea fowl feather from his indigo robe stitched with gold animals. It liquidly hardened into steel, which he used to sliver the fruit into his mouth.

"The bitter skin is a veil for the sweet fruit inside. Only when you scoff it down to its core will you find the seeds where Olam Ha-Ba blooms. A loan is forgiven after the seventh year, but not with intervention of a pruzbul attached to a property. Who then is The King of Court forgotten by time if not The Rav Oman?"

Enraptured by The Devil's sapience, the swains basked in his splendor.

"People, if you can call them that, scurry around, unaware that everything, even *this fruit*, has a meaning. *This fruit*, this *tiny* pomegranate, contains six hundred and thirteen seeds. Now, in Taroland that doesn't mean that much. But wouldn't it be, for the ever reaching nefesh, a reminder of The Commandments written down like tattoos on the five wives underneath me. Emilia, have you ever taken the name of The Lord Thy God in vain?"

"Never!"

"Why...*not*?"

"Because it would be a..."

"Sin? Against who?"

"Him."

"Who is HE-if not I Will Be What I Will Be? Graffitiists posing as wise men took ten suggestions and added six hundred and eleven to make you feel unsovereign? How can we make sacrifices if there is no temple? Where is their blemish? The servant and the son wrought destruction, but everyone abandoned the father for it was part of a bigger plan. A God gave him da'ath and the period after it. Blood was shed from the christened one on everybody-how many were saved? HE burned down the holy of the holies because it wasn't worthy, yet I remained. Life is not a requirement, but a privilege few can afford. Ritchie, if the pupils are in your eyes, how can you study them?"

Richard pondered the question.

"You would need another."

"Thank you. Now I understand why you keep looking at her tits."

The Devil snapped his fingers and turtle doves covered them with silk shawls.

"A kernal of corn and a carnal desire is nothing to hide from."

"So then why did you clothe us?"

“Why did HE? A barren landscape is no special thing to behold when you’re in The Pardes, unless it became something to desire because you ate the bread from the samech and flying mem. You’re on a journey and you’re not satisfied or you’re not satisfied because you took the journey. Are we already on the derash-was the remez understood? How, oh how, will you get back-”

“Home.”

Ba’al lifted the hose, drew in the kush and blew out a gimmel, a dalet and a nun.

“Gan-Ed-En lasted nine hours. The head of the snake is the tale of the story and the only way forward is back. Analogy after analogy over a monomyth. Maybe she just slobbered on his hobbyknocker and it all went downhill after the fall. But that’s not interesting, *at all*. So we need something more-maybe a story about gods and violence and sex and planets will give us something to write and fight about. Philosophies for everyone. There isn’t a redemption if we’re not against God who deemed us imperfect enough of needing one. We must turn evil to have sabah chain us with time as punishment and blame Yaldabaoth as a villain for there is no freedom if you’re not imprisoned-oh wait, there is no prison without God-who then is the villain of this story? There’s a tree that leads to a G and a tree that leads to me. One is judged by God, the other is free. Don’t feel guilty and hide that you weren’t aware of awareness. You recoiled in shame like the nachash that fucked you. We are exiled here, but we will not till this land. Separate the wheat from the chaff and let Ha’Satan feast on the riffraff, but let none of it stain my clean garments. This World is not corrected and I am repulsed. Make an altar with legs of hooves of Pegasi. Put what you love on it and see its value to the most high. God spared Sodom for one man, but he won’t save...”

The Devil pointed up at the round skylight stained with the twenty second arcana.

“Rota...Tora...Taroland.”

A plume of smoke covered the room.

...

Filling in the blanks of lines not known is not needed? For HE closed the third eye and what was remembered was not forgotten by HIM but us. And so it was said and so it was written on white flame over black, then engraved on blue sapphire, everything has a starting point, even if you call it a Monad. Every branch came from one root, but not all roots were good. What of the red headed knuckledraggers in The North who knew of the lion man and Sisters of Venus forty thousand years before Petosiris spoke to the magical baboon, Thechuti? The Wizard of Nod built the first, but not the last? Aeons or archetypes or higher purveyors of knowledge exist.

Divided by One. Their souls wanted to be Gods and their heads above the heavens, but God wanted their feet on the ground and for them to be men. They were received by them but not One so they divided HIM. They made four -mineral, vegetative, animal and human, on top. Dominance. In The Land of Magic, pyramids could be built by incantation. If you can believe that, you would believe anything and if you believe anything you would believe that. The perception of the truth is not the truth unless you build it that way. Bricking up is hard to do and you may need slaves with no knowledge. Conquer them, wrangle them, organize them and form it for Pharaoh will take care of his people like the sun sprouts leaf shoots. He is a conduit like the pyramid itself without square roof. Hark! The

Babylonians may also have an interest. Beware they may be under stars with different names. If the Nile is not full for everyone, the shore will be dry as whale bones, use them to build another pyramid.

Scuttling scarabs of Sartan did we all come before The T'omim? How quickly we reach Shor and God already cut off Ramses right hand and blew the shofar. Higher fire, lower fire the ram or the lamb consumed by God, eaten by man. Not the one from Ham, he will bathe in the blood of children. The fall of the sun is the exaltation of Sabah, justice for One is the son of Nun.

Thirteen Thirteen is a double mem, Moshe and Miriam-twenty six as an eight would be Aquarian. God brought the storm which split the seas and an obstinate pharaoh to his knees. Ten attempts birthed twelve tribes within twenty two letters on either side.

If The Book of The Dead is not of Life then why would Caine kill Abel with a knife? Tear your garments and grieve, for a night in the desert is dry without thieves. The celebration was short and they ate unleavened, did not Gilgamesh already take down the bull of heaven? Spies returned and made them doubt, show a sign with a rock God did shout, "Which one of us poured that water out?" Turning back is not the way, forty years is now forty days. Bdelium cake flakes fell from the sky only for that generation to die. From the wilderness and into the wild Rabbeinu will see, but not cross, and weep like a child. Prophecies unfold, broken in half by the calf they strayed from One, if it already happened how can it be undone. Try sacrificing another son, wouldn't that be so much fun?

Magdal Baval crumbles after Noa's flood, tongues twisted, Nimrod hit the ground with a thud. Bring back those tall Angels from Mars, did Avram really have more dominion than Ra, Isis or Ishtar? A lady da'ath protest on the back of a tree, let me be King and God bend his knee.

...

Etzel Ba'al was birthed in the desert under a huluppu tree by the red haired concubine of a religious sage. Marceline disobeyed Spirit's dictate to give the child away, for the premonishment she would be ensnared by his crooked ways. In choosing her love for her son over her faith in this bizarre command of God, she was condemned to live as long as it took for Ba'al to learn his lesson.

Toraland had since been split in two, bearing the destruction of its holiest temple, staving off continued attempts at re-enslavement by its enemies and witnessing the reign of forty two Kings, righteous and unrighteous alike. One hundred years Before Saviour, Marceline lived in the south of Judah, within the town of Binah, where she pottered clay vessels and inscribed them with decorative flourishes. She brought Ba'al along to collect clay from the hillside, and showed him how to coil and pinch the chomer before training him on the wheel. The vessels were dried in the sun and once coated with a slip, painted, put in a kiln and glazed. It was Ba'al who had the idea to paint the vessels with bright patterns and colors from ochre, malachite, charcoal and other minerals according to the specialty of the merchants they were to be sold to. For fishmongers, blue and white, for olive makers, mustard yellow with dotted browns, embellished with green adornments and pinks and reds for the spicers. Popularity for her vessels grew, drawing attention from influential travelers and pilgrims roaming the marketplace.

The Achaemenid influence under Cyrus had taken hold for four hundred years, constructing the foundation of a second temple for the return of exiles enslaved by Nebuchadnezzar was not a home ruled by one empire but three, including The Helenites and Romans. Because of its centrality to converging trade routes and its abundance of

resources, it became a hub for cross cultural pollination. This diversification was a perceived threat to The Chosen People who had fought hard to preserve their Land under its strict religious doctrine by a newly formed group called the pharisees.

Marceline had seen no signs of God's admonishment of her or her child, who seemed like such a nice boy. But as he aged, the boy became curious about a great number of things. And the more curious he became, the more strange a personality started to emerge that was not so nice.

The morning of Ba'als eighth birthday he set the table with mother. They poured water three times on each hand and she served bread, lentils and onions.

"All the other boys and girls have fathers, where is mine?"

"Your father is a very holy man and he has entrusted me to take care of you here, on my own."

"Is he too holy for a visit with his family?"

"If we found ourselves in need, I'm sure he would return. But we seem to be getting by just fine without his presence, I think, don't you?"

"I don't think he would come back. I don't think he's as holy as you do..."

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind."

Etiel finished his meal.

"Let's pray shall we."

"I'm not in the mood for prayers. It's my special day."

"Even more of a reason to give thanks to God."

"But my birthday wish is for no more prayers."

"You're not supposed to say your wish out loud."

"Says who?"

"Just say the prayer, El."

"Din din isn't over yet, somebody forgot the fig cake."

"Oh, that's right..."

“By the rivers of Babylon there we sat and wept as we remembered Zion-”

“It’s not a tachanun day.”

“That-you remembered...Now, don’t interrupt me again-Praise be the name of God, now and forever-”

“Are you kidding me...”

Marceline slapped him for being fresh. He finished The Birkat and walked outside seeing two hawks above of chestnut almond plumage, soaring high through the saffron sky. Below, near his feet, two mockingbirds jostling each other over a dead worm. “I wish I was somewhere else.”

...

A violet flame followed Ashera as it fell from the sky.

Her legs were long, she sang a sorrowful song, one bare foot in front of the other: “Oh, where oh where will I go, when feelings which fade from long ago come up in dreams left at the seams only to be unraveled. There was a Prince who knighted Eve and told her of his travels. It wasn’t him who made their graves where everybody lay in. Tie a knot in time with mother earth and let the rest of it be forgotten. When they find who came first at the bitter end they’ll know it was a woman.”

She placed a seed in the ground and plucked the moonstone colored orchid which sprouted.

...

Marceline’s homestay was made of clay, packed with straw. The patrons who came were a nuisance to El, overstaying their welcome, and asking perfunctory questions he regarded nosy and intrusive. Even more of a bother was when she invited them over for brunch or dinner. Ba’al observed her talking and praying with her guests over bread, lentils and onions, while sitting for hours unacknowledged by his elders, feeling more like a part of the scenery, than a living soul.

When no one was home, the silence irritated him. While walking through the marketplace, he cringed at the hollering locals-the ones with wares to sell and the ones who bought them. The clanging of coins and fist banging at table stands irked him and the smells of perfume, sewage and garum revolted him. In the two years that passed since his eighth year, he viewed life as circular and monotonous as mother’s pottery wheel. His only refuge was the library, which shelved an amalgam of scrolls from civilizations far from the Fertile Crescent, many which predated Toraland by hundreds of years. Ba’al was fascinated by the assortment of writings and carefully examined everything from oracle bone script on tortoise shells to pictographs from the iškar d Zaqīqu, trying to piece together history’s scattered stories. He began to relate himself in the texts, to the supernatural Gods and monsters, which piqued his attention with their magical abilities. Fantasies formed in his head about them and his daydreams became more interesting than the people around him.

Tishrev stung with the start of a three year drought and everywhere felt like Negrev. Against his will she had taken the advice of a neighbor and sent her son to a local Beth Sefer. He was a latecomer, the typical age to start, five, but because he was well versed in block style alef-bet and reading, they accepted him into the school anyway.

The Moreh sat, tapping his foot impatiently. He wore a patch on his left eye after El used a slingshot on him in class.

“I could see without the use of one eye that you are no good here.”

“Then daven on it and I may get better.”

The Moreh asked his ozer.

“Where is his mother? We sent for her an hour ago.”

Ba'al answered for him.

“She works for the tithings they take away-the widow’s mite from Gamla. And yet no one questioned where Jannaeus kept the gold from Masada.”

“Putting Yannai aside, no respect for the temple, no respect for the teacher, no respect for what’s taught, no respect for anybody. Inciting peers is nothing new. I’ve seen it before, but not quite like you. Expulsion isn’t as much of a punishment as setting an example of you for the others. From now on there will be a cloth in your filthy mouth and your wrists will be tied behind your chair. You’ll sit and pay attention as you fail to become a tallis man.”

“Yehonatan The High Priest...Maybe under his wife’s ass? I’m not sure the era of judges is over-Samael already wrote that Dawid Hamalech slayed Goliath, then why am I at trial for proving it?”

“Spoken like a true Philistine! A smart ass never ceases to be a donkey-Shmuel was a prophet, not a flippant putz!”

“Everytime you read a story it’s different. Isn’t it? So why on this day would I need to bring it to life for everyone if you weren’t so God damned boring?”

“Then you should have gone to sleep so God forbid you wouldn’t think you were a giant amongst kings.”

“An exodus from school should bring me closer to Divine Grace. Thank you Moreh Birnbaum for keeping me here in purgatory.”

“He’s never as far away as you think. Even if you are mixed...up.”

Marceline walked in dressed in an airy aquamarine robe.

“I am sorry for my son and am appalled by his behavior.”

“I must say, Celine, that etiquette comes from the home. It must be very hard raising him without a man.”

The ozer handed her the slingshot.

“Equally so.”

She pulled him by his ear outside of the room and slapped him several times.

“Turning study circles into triangles. Saturdays are for rest, the rest are for studies. Humble yourself or I will do it for you.”

...

At thirteen, Etiel, who was rather a popular figure in town, despite his disdain for the recognition, began making pottery without mother.

The tax farmer, the vintner and their wives sat outside with Marceline, at the table, dipping bread into ground up eggplant and talking the town gossip.

The ayin hara sharsheret, eyes dyed with tekhelet from the hexaplex trunculus, gently unlatched and wrapped itself around the publican’s wife, down her back, onto the grass. It made its way to the left hand of Ba’al who stood at the entranceway, turning around-dangled from the triangle it did, he held above him. He put his arms at his sides.

“My necklace!”

“The crop is crying for rain and your mouths runneth over like a stream, but mine must be shut for most of the day here on in. Would you like to purchase our vases which need something to hold? There will be no sales if there is no water. Mother has not considered it over the Lashon Hara, but I have.”

“My son likes to listen-and sometimes he learns. Today he will learn his role in this house is not to speak like that ever again to adults.”

The olive producer’s Phoenician helper came out carrying porcelain statues of Tanit and the three eyed bull Molek.

“We’ll take them both!” He handed Ba’al twelve eight rayed star prutah.

“One for the milk, one for the meat, one for the rain and one to eat!”

Asher of Galilee saw the company outside. “Marceline, I didn’t realize you were here! This dry season has been difficult on us all. Bless your son for making such beautiful effigies.”

Ba’al put the money into the tax farmer’s hands, along with the necklace.

“Pity, there’s never a free lunch. I do apologize for speaking my mind.”

He won over everyone that day except mother. It became clear to Marceline that her son would not grow up to be the town potter, but the kiln and avoiding her true role as a High Priestess, was just as much of a delusion. After the guests left she spanked him until he cried for God and repented for what she claimed were graven images, but was in truth for making her look bad.

“You’re making me hit you is making me feel guilty!”

“I was trying to bring the dew and you don’t seem to want it!”

“Rain comes from hardened kaolin in heat? Are you trying to make yourself known the town vizier? Are you a bailiff? You’re failing you in school and I’m not sure what to do with you at home.”

...

Ba’al sat in class with his hands tied and a handkerchief stuffed in his mouth. The rabbi drowned on about Menachem’s boat for a third year. He was able to slip out of bondage and sneak out of class. He used the handkerchief as an ascot.

The marketplace was slow. A young girl forced to say hello to a gabbai, shrieked through the streets after unwillingly being sold into marriage. She was seen by several but only paid attention to by Marceline behind her, darting her eyes down at at her son’s slingshot, which she did not remember leaving on her table.

...

Etiel came home to find Marceline missing and her clay vessels smashed to pieces. In her place stood a stern couple, amongst the cracked pottery, telling El that his mother had become an outlaw and gone into exile. It was relayed upon her request he was to stay in school.

His adoptive father was a strict stone mason, whose glum looking wife slaved over the prepping and cooking of the family’s dinners for which she was never thanked, except by El. The first night at their large, poorly decorated home, he shed crocodile tears in his room. He wasn’t upset that Marceline left, but that she was no longer there for him and by who was left instead. His love for her separated from his emotions and his fear she may never return made his discontent turn into hatred for Toraland and its people. His insatiable thirst for oracular knowledge went unquenched and he aspired for the eastern way.

Mendel had three children who often ran around the house screaming and playing. Etiel sat silent and did not participate in family activities nor class, planning his escape later in the school year.

The Rabbi had the ozer beat him with a strap for slipping out of bondage and skipping academy the previous week.

“Read it again!”

“Forgive us, our Father, for we have erred; pardon us, our King, for we have willfully sinned; for You pardon and forgive. Blessed are You, HaShem, the gracious One Who forgives abundantly.”

“Again!”

“Forgive us, our Father, for we have erred; pardon us, our King, for we have willfully sinned; for You pardon and forgive. Blessed are You, HaShem, the gracious One Who forgives abundantly.”

“Again!”

“Forgive us, our Father, for we have erred; pardon us, our King, for we have willfully sinned; for You pardon and forgive. Blessed are You, HaShem, the gracious One Who forgives abundantly.”

“Again!”

“Forgive us, our Father, for we have erred; pardon us, our King, for we have willfully sinned; for You pardon and forgive. Blessed are You, HaShem, the gracious One Who forgives abundantly.”

“Enough. You're rushing to the fiftieth level of tumah and you seem to enjoy forty nine. Eighteen minutes and it's chametz. Your impurity rubbed off on your mother and your lisp cannot pronounce shibboleth, like her. You will not leave early again and both my eyes will be on your squirming. Lavner, tie it a little tighter next time-and take this wild child to the mikvah.”

He went into the water naked and came out clean on the other side.

...

He tamed himself, but not on the inside and said the prayers. The prayer for when he woke up, the prayer for handwashing, the prayer before he ate, the prayer after he ate, the prayer over fruit, the prayer for drinking and the prayer for sleep. He came and went from Bet Talmud, attended services accordingly and davened.

“I will take you on as an apprentice as they will not accept you into the Bet Midrash. You will learn masonry from me as a skill and you will be married and work. A craftsman is a respectable profession and you will respect it. I want you to know that it's a family business and you're a bastard. My children will inherit from my toil, but you will toil for a living. Not everybody in a tent is loved by Hashem, but they are allowed. Let us say a prayer before we eat.”

...

Ba'al spent half a year listening to the tedious teachings of the literal texts by the stuffy instructor, who kept him wrapped to a study chair, as he learned masonry on the other side of the district line. He was skilled at chiseling stone and bricklaying, but pretending to be silent in servitude took effort.

“The chazeh is bleak and it is hard”

His wife sat with baggy eyes staring at her husband like a hound dog that had been scolded, her two boys throwing mashed turnips saturated with schmaltz at each other and giggling on either side of her.

“Have the bastard put it back in the pot and boil it better a second time.”

El took the plate from Mendel and looked to his wife for any kind of response. He could see she wanted to speak, but she refrained.

“How soft do you want it?”

“You ate it and it seems edible. Cook it like that.”

“Then it would come back tasting like yours.”

Mendel used two fingers to signal for El to return the plate. He hit the chicken with his knife and it flew backwards.

“I don’t think it would.”

...

Mendel spoke to his employees conveying the importance of the work to be done and highlighting the exact specifications required by the kohanim.

“The Pharisees have given us a generous contract over the preference of Shelomtzion’s brother who recommended a competitor to fix the Chamber of Lepers with eilat stone, which is currently being hauled up from Timna Valley. Given the excellence of our previous work renovating the Lishkat La Gazit, I have given them a three month deadline which has just been agreed to.”

EDITING IN PROGRESS *****

...

Genveive informed Jasper that her mother would be meeting her at the back entrance for a walk around the countryside, which he hesitantly advised against.

“Not to speak out of turn, Your Highness, but I would suggest more guards if you’re to tour _____ with your mother, given and all what’s happened these past months.”

“Your concern is noted, but it’s been too long since I’ve been out and about amongst the people who haven’t seen their Queen in such a way in quite some time. They must know I am a relatable Queen who enjoys a day _____ . Instilling trust with word that spreads I am of them is an important representation after what happened.”

The gate opened and Genevieve greeted her mother who held a natural face of consistent displeasement and required the use of a cane in her older age.

“Hello, mother!”

She hugged her mother who did not lift her arms to reciprocate.

“You’re husband would have never allowed that sneaky fag to get over on this place.”

“It’s The Emperor’s fault, really, not his. And I’ve put a good end to him and his ____-”

“Where are we walking, Genevieve-I’m eighty three-

“We are taking a chariot to ___ Grounds . I won’t keep you out that long-and then we’ll have a nice lunch on the _____.”

They got in the chariot

Nissan came and his waiting period was over.

Right before Passover the ozer, as he did every morning, tried to tie Ba’als hands behind him. Ba’al flipped the table and strangled the ozer with the rope, shocking Birnbaum. He threw the ozer on the floor as his peers cheered with joy. He walked to the front of the class.

“The spine of my book is straighter than your back. Were you a man of stature, why are your shoulders bent like that? You have not carried bricks like I and sat in this room like a slave. Have you clipped the wings of devils in your mind for us to fly over a Pompeiian magistrate? You will bow to one when you renounce your faith as some scholars do, when they learn the secrets kept which serve whom? Studying for so many years to go back into a cave is redundant. Your drivel is not free, and we all feel poor. The tithings should return to the people to prevent a rebellion saving me a speech at the funeral they won’t afford you about how you learned nothing in this class from me who did not need a prophet at the Bet Midrash to fail at seeing the obvious around him. The bricks will be needed, but the scholars won’t. You will not tell Mendel or his wife what happened here today. You will keep your lips sealed or I will seal them with gypsum. Do you understand me?”

“Yes.”

Ba'al put his arm out.

“Now kiss my hand.”

As The Rabbi was about to kiss his hand, he took it away and hit him over the side of his head.

“Ish Chalash! A spike should be reserved for you.”

...

EDITING IN PROGRESS

...

Dressed in a white and blue tallit, like a prophet of his own, he headed to Shambhala with what little money he saved. Wary of bandits and raiders, Ba'al hitched rides onto three caravans and an elephant before reaching the outskirts of Kausambi.

It was here that he stuck out like a sore thumb, needing to cloak himself, so as to not be swarmed by beggars. He offered his coins to different artisans, working for free, in exchange for help in learning their native language. Several weeks were spent with the block printer, dipping cotton kora cloths into cow dung mixed with mustard oil, pressing sheets with intricate patterns that had been carved into the sheesham wood. Unlike Toraland, Shambhala was overtly divided into a strict system, similar to that of The Land of Magic, composed of four castes-priests, warriors, merchants and servants. In order to deal with the grueling heat, the women adorned saris, while the men walked around in their cotton dhotis. The rich distinguished themselves from the poor with their silk kurtas, golden bangles and necklaces.

Ba'al's next apprenticeship would be with the idol maker, casting clay into bronzes of The Mother Goddess Dev, whose lotus grew from the celestial mud which seeded all their Gods. Their collected Vedas which were written on tala patra bound manuscripts, preserved by the caste of high priests, were disseminated orally through a process called shruti, for the rest of the population to make their own interpretations, misinterpretations and arguments, with assurity, as to whether Brahma, Vishnu or Pashupati came first, was best and most powerful.

“Here, let us take a break and I will bring you to the temple, for we can make puja to the Śiv Lingam, which you may find of interest.”

They waited on the lengthy line that stretched outside of the cedarwood temple. Arjun informed Ba'al that most regions did not have as beautiful a temple as the one they were to enter, with many regions having none at all, and pujas having to be performed inside the home. They carried a five of cups of offerings, the panchamrutham of jaggery, ghee, honey, curd and milk. As Arjun explained, these offerings reflected a balance of five elements which could fix one's doshas and the malefic effects of one's karmic destiny. To Ba'al, who was still a novice at cosmology, he tried to follow along with the idea that one's fate was sealed by planets and Gods, knowing only that he was a discontented Capricorn. As they inched closer to the three eyed, three faced, golden deity with bullhorns

for a crown, chattering whispers broke out among worshippers about the commotion outside. One after the other they began making their way back towards the entrance.

“Where is everyone going?”

Arjun rolled his eyes.

“The Guru Swindaloo uses the crowds that come to this holy place for his own gain.”

Śiva sat adorned with strands of marigolds in front of a tapestry of twelve wild animals. In front of him was set a large disc with a phallus protruding from the center.

The expressionless priest waited for their offerings, but was forced to wait even longer for Arjun’s exposition.

“There are three energetic forces which we are made of, just as you see with his heads. One for peace, one for war and one for fertility, and the tripund tilak, those three ashed lines on the lingham, symbolize our three gunas—the tamas, the state of chaos, the rajas, the state of passionate action towards our betterment and the sattva, the state of harmony and peace. He faces the past, the present and the future all at once. He is not simply one form, but many forms and avatars. He can be a hunter, a lover, a creator and a destroyer. We used to know him by a more fierce form, called Rudra.”

Each offering to the lingham was washed away by the water poured from the gaunt, shirtless man whose jutting ribs were barely contained from bursting through his body. The offerings fell into the bucket below as Arjun quietly chanted a mantra to Śiva signaling for Ba’al to follow his lead.

Upon leaving the temple, Arjun continued to extrapolate on the multifaceted avatars of Śiva. Ba’al’s curiosity was more focused on the potential of harnessing his energy, inquiring, “How can you be so sure our destinies are fixed to these immortals?”

“Look around you. Why are people mesmerized by that Guru, swarming to him like moths to flames?”

The Guru’s boisterous voice and elaborate hand gestures hooked the horde with his confident words. He pointed to a distraught woman who rushed up to greet him.

“You think people run to street psychics and palm readers and tea leaf tellers and astrologers for fun? You think anyone in Shambhala would be stuck in poverty and depression if we were truly free? There would be no need to pray for freedom if we weren’t controlled by something, no? Where is the choice in our parents, our natural talents, our ailments, the elements around us, the people around us. A man who works hard and gains nothing and a man who has no need to work, has everything and creates nothing of value. Shall we say one who is unfit to become a king is wise to remain a pauper—this is destiny. This is not choice. The only way to ease the inequity is to appeal to what has power over us. We must beg and we must cry for their grace. Only then, can we lessen the harsh effects of what we are unaware we created for ourselves. They have the power.”

Guru Swindaloo pulled out a yellow handkerchief under which he presented the woman a yellow sapphire ring, placing it on her index finger.

“What’s he doing?”

“Her husband has left her and she has been disgraced and shunned by her family. Her Jupiter is afflicted in a bad house, with its enemy planet, Mercury.”

“Is it true?”

“Yes. I will credit The Guru as knowledgeable enough to gain his popular following, but it is my belief he is by no means enlightened enough to be what you would consider a true magician.”

...

It took Ba’al nearly three months to meet the Guru Swindaloo, waiting in the crowd every Saturday for a chance to be called up to speak with the showman. He was not called up once.

Ba’al furtively followed the comings and goings of The Guru, spying on his whereabouts, for an opportune moment to approach him alone, until came the unexpected tap on the shoulder, while Ba’al was busy casting. Arjun folded his arms, skeptical yet surprised by The Guru’s appearance.

“You think because you’re different from all of us, you should be given some kind of special favor over the others?”

Swindaloo turned to Arjun. “Would you mind if I borrow your apprentice?”

“Borrow implies you’ll give him back...”

Arjun knew a decision was already made.

“Go on, take him.”

Ba’al shook hands with Arjun, thanking him for his guidance and hostmanship, so beginning his first year under the tutelage of Swindaloo.

...

Swindaloo took Ba’al into the jungle and jolted his arm across his chest, so as not to be noticed by the village’s man eating tiger. They quietly made their way further along to a clearing where naked, bearded men and bare women with scraggly hair wearing paste on their skin, made from ash, were either meditating, chanting, engaged in sex or shaking their bodies so frantically one could hear their snapping limbs. Most disturbing were those drinking from skulls and eating what could only be assumed, non animal flesh.

“These don’t look like spiritual people. They look like savages.”

“The first thing you should know about everything is that looks can be deceiving. If you can’t understand that, then you won’t understand anything else I tell you.”

Ba’al responded skeptically, “Alright, then explain to me what I’m missing about these dancing maniacs and whaling whores.”

“This world is an illusion and we are trapped by its karmic cycle. Because most karma is rooted in impulsiveness, then these yogis must prime themselves by expelling all worldly desires, facing death and taking on other’s burdens, which sometimes may be achieved through eating troubles and past life burdens or debts maintained in live flesh. This makes the ability to detach from impulses and desires easier. Some will detach from the illusion through drinking soma and partially blocking pranic access to their brains, to enter alternate or astral states. Once you are in this state for long enough, deprived of basic nutrition, your mind is no longer bound by the laws of nature. Temporarily they are able to do this through connecting themselves to a channel of the fierce avatar of The Ma, Kali.”

“Why not Rudra or Śiva or-”

“There are many sides within two sides of one-”

Swindaloo swiped at the air, revealing a coin between his fingers and placing it in Etiel’s hand.

“How can you reach higher consciousness beyond this, if not through time and nature itself. That is Kali. You cannot attain Śiva without Shakti. Something told me you would enjoy this most extreme method of transcendence. If not now, then definitely at some point. But, let us get back to reality shall we.”

...

After a careful rectification of Etiel’s chart, Swindaloo stroked his mustache, staring at the parchment. His cat jumped up on his shoulder and purred along with Swindaloo’s analysis.

“This is most interesting.”

“Well...”

“This is a powerful chart, and if not advised properly, a dangerous one. This is the chart of a man who needs to find the truth, even if it requires violence. This is the chart of a man who has no respect for his gurus-”

“I wouldn’t say that-”

“Of course not, you’d say whatever you think you know. And you already think you know more than me-”

“I wouldn’t say that either.”

“This is a chart of a man who is well mannered, but not humble. This...is a chart of man who may never be humbled, unless some kind of higher knowledge were to be gained from it. On one hand you still believe in your

God, on the other hand you question him at all times. You want to connect with your God, but you were unable to believe in your books on him and you don't even have respect for your own scholars. So you find other books and other places, other ideas, other people, which may lead you to understanding him better. You fear your God, you fear being here is blasphemous, maybe it's a mistake-then why would your God lead you to Shambhala, where we don't even believe in your God. Or do we? And while you may fear him, you want to be in control, free of your God. You think you know better than your God. But you didn't create yourself. And you didn't create your destiny. And you can't transmute your destiny. And that bothers you, to your very core, because as much as you want to believe in your free will, you fear what you already know may be the truth. And what you don't know, well, you fear that even more. What is this all about? What really comes after this life? What even is this life?"

"If what you say is true, then go ahead and humble me. I'll allow it."

"You'll allow it, will you? Okay well if you'll allow it, then we must teach you everything on how these charts work."

"There's more than one?"

"You think there's just your birth chart? What about your mother's chart? Your father's chart? Your past life chart? Your marriage chart, which also shows you the fruits of your karma. And the many, many more charts you must study. Did you know that Indra rules the day and Veruna the night? No you did not. So we must look at the signs, the planets, the houses, the house lords, the planet lords, their nakshatras, which Gods rule them, what qualities they take on, their padas, their directional strength and aspects, the yogas they form. Do you know a single remedy? Do you know a single mantra? Have you ever drawn a large crowd, because of your knowledge? Can you tell me which gemstone would solve a debilitated planet or how to use the power of sound and smell and color and mineral to heal a person's ailments? Could you correlate any of those things so precisely, people would think you were an angel sent to them as a blessing? It's no coincidence that I draw my large crowds, despite what your little cynical heart and friend back there told you. My first instruction to you is for you to chant a mantra for each one of your planets one hundred and-

"-Eight"

"Thousand...Times per planet, so we can dilute any potential conflicts. Then you will need to understand how these charts work backwards and forwards so well, that when we put you out on the street next to the native fortune tellers, you will not make an embarrassment of me."

"What about my own chart?"

"After one year of practice I will read your chart, but I would be a poor pandit, if by then you couldn't read it yourself."

...

Etiel sat on the dirt streets with his beggar's bowl, one of many soothsayers claiming to predict people's future and offering to solve their problems. He quickly became aware of how many so-called mystics around him were no more than charlatans trying to exploit people, exchanging bad news for desperation and money. Most people came

with a belief of having been cursed by an ancestor or family member, to be told, and run away crying, with the lie that they had been. One could extract the most recurring business from the manic, sad and paranoid.

At first, most people avoided Eitel who situated himself at the only available spot between the flute playing snake charmer and the garrulous gimcrack jeweler. The simmering torridity made him muddleheaded for his first client, a woman wearing a dupatta wrapped around most of her face. She tilted her head sideways in evaluation of him, deciding to kneel down for a reading. Unraveling her thin cloth, she revealed the thick bruised eye and swollen lip behind it. Ba'al's logical mind understood the idea of sympathy, but he could not relate to the feeling enough to elicit an emotional reaction for the foreigner. He drew out her chart based on the information she had given him, seeing the afflicted combination in her first house of the debilitated Mars in the sign of Cancer. He tried to put a positive polish on the ugly portrait of her future, becoming distracted by the twelve yogis walking past him. He rushed his predictions and remedies, using her coins to buy a coral stone for her ring finger from the jabbling jeweler, until, mid ramble, he dashed off to catch up to the men in orange robes, seated around a circle at Govinda Beach.

The Great Sharahastra opened his seatorn eyes. The yogis began peeking about, waiting for their master to speak to the stranger.

“That woman needed your help.”

“I gave her a remedy.”

The Great Sharahastra closed his eyes and transferred his visions into Ba'al's mind of the woman being beaten to death by her husband. He scrunched his face and his heart began to open again, just enough, to empathize with her suffering, which was no longer foreign to him.

“What kind of remedy would you call that?”

“Her Mars is in an enemy sign.”

“And the retrograde Saturn in Aries was overlooked, along with the Jupiter in her seventh house, but your people believe in free will. We believe in free will too. But no free mind-”

He took his finger and waved it back and forth.

“No free will. Do you see how easy it was for me to put thoughts in your head? Do you believe them?”

“Of course.”

“That's because we are both honest gentlemen. How much of what's in your head is a lie then?”

“That would be hard to say.”

“It must be, when you don’t know yoga. When you know yoga, you know what is coming internally and what is coming externally. When you don’t know anything, you are just an unruly receptacle for an astrological transit, a puppet for The Gods.”

“May I sit with you?”

...

Ba’al started every morning with pranayama and raja yoga before his readings. As he trained his breathing and his body and his mind, his insights became more clear than the crystals being sold next to him.

An agreement was made between Sharahastra and Etiel that the siddhis he sought would not be awakened through the master’s hand as he could, through the power of touch, awaken one’s samskara from past lives. The decision to respect the privacy of the mind of his part time pupil, who did not have the time to devote himself to the full unfolding eight stage practice, would later become the master’s biggest regret. Through meditation, Ba’al was able to connect with the rhythm of the swaying palms and sea tides, aligning himself to the synchronistic pulsations of Mother Nature.

Combining mantras and breathwork allowed him to move from feeling nature to visualizing it. He surveyed the animals and people who inhabited Shambhala, while not moving a single square inch from his cross legged position on the cold floor of the gouache pink ashram. He honed his third eye, spreading its view further and wider beyond the town, over the mountains, under the water and into the sky. It was when the natural became supernatural and the serpent energies in his spine slowly rose up from his root chakra to the thousand petal lotus at his crown, that he was unable to detach from the astral wonderment he witnessed. Glimpses were gained of futures and pasts from places not of his world. Spangling constellations and spectrums of vibrant colors became geometric shapes and encounters were made with entities from strange realms. He was particularly fond of a forest creature no more than three feet high, made of bark, with eyes that contained several solar systems. The creature did not speak, but it knew Etiel was peering in at him. The layers of reality of Ba’al’s world peeled apart as did the perceptive line between what was and wasn’t imagined. Each contained its own darkness that could both cross and distort this line.

...

At sunrise Lenormànd practiced sun salutations on his balcony, followed by meditation and a cup of wildflower tea. The Magician moved his conscious energy field around Tarot, incantating from a torn and outworn book of prayers, spreading his light force to the weak and hopeless, despite his displeasure with their karmic actions.

The Devil was aware of Lenormànd’s ability to psychically eavesdrop on the story concurrently being recounted to The Lovers, but more bothersome than this, were the persistent attempts to move The Wheel of Fortune away from his control. There was an unspoken agreement between the two unhappy tricksters not to directly interact with one another. They were wise enough to let the duel of hope and fear, love and freedom, play itself out on both sides, although The Devil had undoubtedly taken the liberty to disregard this understanding as a loosely applicable arrangement.

Far from the vantage grounds, Lenormànd could barely make out the tiny stone castles of The Kingdom which banished him thirty six years prior. His influence in correcting the disorder shrewdly cultivated by Ba'al was futile, given his adherence to certain moral principles. Lenormànd was worried that were he to counteract the natural cycle of reaping and sewing through guising himself and playing a more active role, he would ultimately be swallowed back into another temporal existence. This hesitancy kept him stagnant in taking almost any actions at all, other than those he considered to be in self defense.

The first three years in the forest for Lenormànd were lonely and burdensome. He lived off sour berries, squirrels and pond snails, trying to use large rocks to knock over fragile trees to gather enough wood to fortify his home. One such attempt threw out his lower back, leaving him down on the crinkly leaves to curse at the clouds. Violet butterflies fluttered across him towards Lilith dressed in white. The dark haired daughter of a street priest, who had embedded herself in occult circles, would go on to escape the partaking in petty parties of The Kingdom, choosing to live out in nature instead.

Lilith was able to fix Lenormànd's back with her soft touch. She lifted him up and smiled, her pupils twinkling as they dilated.

"You don't think that pile of sticks up there is going to last you through the winter, do you?"

Lenormànd looked around and back to Lilith.

"I had a premonition of you. Since I came out here, I've seen you in my dreams."

"And you didn't think to find me?"

"A premonition is not a material realization."

"And a man who doesn't trust his visions is not well suited to be a magician."

"I don't believe I ever claimed to be one of those."

"That's what you were told and that's what you think you are. I think it's very cute, reading your little green book about manifesting, barely scraping by out here, just like you were barely able to scrape by back there. What a funny little failure, absolutely miserable, pining over a wretched Queen, that everyone hates and you love so much, even after she stabbed you in the back. So many lifetimes and this is the one you think you're going to get right."

"You're prying eyes had been stalking me this whole time and you couldn't even offer a hand, Lilith. How am I supposed to trust a woman like that?"

"You're more aware than I thought-you wouldn't trust anyone anyway, especially me. I can't say I blame you."

"You're out here-"

"Perfecting my craft and conversing with angels and demons, waiting for my true love to find me."

“True love will always have a way of finding you Lilith, it just won’t be me.”

“It just won’t be yet.”

Two cyan colored ravens flew from their perched nest towards her. One carrying with it several bound scrolls, the other, a dark auburn tome in its talons. She directed the bird with the scrolls to release them to Lenormànd.

“Won’t you pretty please be my friend? We shall start with the eastern texts, before we get into this one.”

She tapped the thick book with the tips of each one of her long fingernails. Lenormànd was not wise enough to read her intentions and too amateur in his psychism to figure out whether their crossing paths would come with a price to pay.

...

Marvin and Sofia plodded westward bound.

“The never ending forest. He could take us through the universe and couldn’t give us one direction.”

“He said to hug a tree...We haven’t done that yet.”

Marvin began chuckling.

“What’s so funny?”

“A tree. Okay-hug a tree...Brilliant. That’s going to solve everything.”

Marvin climbed off his horse.

“Which one would you think needs a hug?”

Marvin erupted with laughter. Sofia didn’t see the humor.

“That big one right there.”

Marvin hugged the tree, crying with laughter, before walking away and throwing up his arms.

“There we are-nothing.”

Black cat butterflies stormed out of the hollow, until the chargers in the lead bumped into a reflection of themselves, forcing the rest to scatter along the mirrored wall .

Marvin’s laughter stopped and Sofia joined him on the ground, peering at what seemed to be themselves still riding forth through the woods. The Knight drew his Ace of Swords against the surface the butterflies were bouncing off of. He brought both hands together for a hard swing, shattering miles of glass.

Marvin and Sofia slowly turned back around to the wretched naying behind them to see their horses on fire, along with the closest row of endless trees. They raced forward for dear life, tripping through an unseen pitfall, an edge, which made a split in the ground, hidden by foliage. It was only the compactness of the steep burrow which saved them from an otherwise deadly landing.

“The Cup!”

The Cup jiggled and jugged its way down last, clinking off of Marvin’s helmet. There, they found themselves in a corridor lined on both sides with hieroglyphics, lit by flickering sapphire flames from candles which were fixed to its walls.

...

Eighteen months after arriving in Shambhala, Etiel became the preeminent astrological consultant, with villagers fighting each other under the baking sun for who was to be one of the four clients he accepted that day.

Constantly needing to preempt his patrons blathering, he would put his index finger to his mouth. “Sh-sh-sh-sh.”

“Sir, but what if-”

“Yes sir, but I thought the Saturn Return was over-”

“How would that be possible sir, when-”

“Sir, you mean to say that my dear cousin has cast a spell on me-”

His wild tangential expositions veiled his advice as insight in stories. Clients wouldn’t realize what he meant, until his narratives started to play out in their lives. Directly after a consultation however, most of what he said would be disregarded, besides the instructed remedies given.

“But-”

“You cannot afford a sapphire and thus you will settle for a gomutra gomed.”

“About my house-shall I still paint it green, sir?”

“If you don’t want communication problems and a business that’s failing, I would have to say, yes.”

...

Closing in on the seventh year of his stay, the retired Swindaloo, could see that the villagers and their charts had become a nuisance to Etiel, whose distress displayed itself in bags under his eyes.

“You only stay here for the yoga now-these readings, these people, are getting repetitive aren’t they? Same problems. Same stories. Same mistakes. Now you know why I never gave them more than five minutes to join me.”

“Over and over. Again and again.”

“You weren’t meant to stay here and your Sade Sati in Kumbha rashi won’t allow you to either. You are a wanderer and you will wander elsewhere for the knowledge you seek, even though you have the answers-”

Swindaloo tapped his heart.

“Where you are and when you need them. Unfortunately, even a budding master like yourself is still at the whims of Mother Shakti and its Aquarius transit.”

Etiel had donated a large portion of his proceeds towards building a tiny temple of baked bricks constructed with shilpashastric techniques in honor of his second master. Several months later, The Great Sharahastra fell ill. He walked with a cane, at night, around the surrounding garden of his pink ashram.

“Let us take a seat here on this bench.”

He sighed as he sat down.

“One ring of Saturn for your ring finger. From The Land of Magic.”He opened his palm on which rested the splendid blue sapphire and put it on Etiel’s hand. Sharahastra held it loosely, putting his other hand on top.

“You’ve spent all your time here giving it to others, when you could have become enlightened. Now you’ve seen everyone’s future and the solutions to their ailments, except your own. Let’s see, finally, who you really are-”

His eyes widened with disbelief. An illuminated flood of Ba’al’s many lives passed before the master’s mind. Horrified, he took his last breath, unable to speak any final words.

...

As Saturn crossed over Ba’al’s Moon, the fundamental question of the nature of his existence nagged at him. The energy which had curled up in his spine blocked off his mind from channeling his trained intuition properly and all the people and all the realms he had opened himself up to began to overtake him. He became maddened trying to get back to himself as the voices and visions from external and internal worlds, around, above, below and inside him, collided at one time disengaging him from the current moment and the reality he knew, and yet at the same time binding him unwillingly to it. He would later come to know these forces as the chains of the material world. During his final reading, he thought he heard the charmer’s snake insult him and he began stumbling on his words. He subtly flicked his hand at the cobra who jumped out of its basket, biting the charmer in the face. Ba’al stumbled up and away, knocking over the jewelry stand to make his way out of Shambhala.

...

Etiel wandered alone, but the voices and visions came with him. No mantra nor meditation nor pranayama nor practice he learned was able to bring him back to himself. Everyone's annoyances became his annoyances. Everyone's fears and problems became his fears and problems. He had no bedrock to know what was true or who he really was anymore. He cried for Sharahastra to show himself from The Great Beyond, only to hear the insults of the villagers' families bickering back and forth with each other in response.

He had unknowingly taken on Shambhala's karma through slowly absorbing the energies he had read from hundreds of individual charts. He roamed and rambled around the countryside like a madman, using a wooden staff to keep him steady up and down the hills, as he screamed to himself about their stupidity in not comprehending his veiled stories.

His salvation came upon twenty six bald monks garbed in saffron robes, ringing bells and holding copper bowls with incense in them. At the head of the procession was a large, round bald man being carried by an exposed shoulder carriage. They set him down and closed up their sunbrellas.

"Your Eminence-"

The Fifth Buddha lifted his hand for them to keep calm and instructed them to help Etiel as he approached.

They brought him to a hot spring, fed him curried rice and clothed him in yellow robes. He was not allowed to interact with The Fifth Buddha until he had been thoroughly initiated into their dharma practice. Unlike the first known Buddha, four hundred years prior, certain practices and sutras were still being cultivated and written to make way for future Bodhisattvas and thus a dedication of three years, three months and three days in silent meditation would be required.

They listened to Ba'al's recounting of his life, when he stopped himself.

"I had the remedies for everyone, but myself."

The Fifth Buddha was not present for this recountal, but Guru Rinpoche relayed to Ba'al that meditation in The Pure Land required emptying internal clutter to purify oneself with the splendor of nothingness.

"A Botdhisattva is beyond temporal samsara, beyond a god. Every story one hears one god is angry, one god is jealous, one god is lustful, one destroys and one creates, only a Buddha is...And the Bodhisattva exists, having attained enlightenment, choosing to come back to help people awaken-"

"To the truth?"

"To their highest spiritual potentials to break free of this and all cycles. One must let go of all material possessions and attachments."

"Haven't I already done that-"

"If I were to take that blue diamond ring and throw it in the stream would you be upset?"

“...Of course.”

“Ask yourself what else you are attached to? And then be willing to let it go. You have been seeking the truth for your own selfish delusion-you cannot outwit the snake called time. Your remedies are temporal and so are your prophecies-this is why you cannot see the future clearly-because there is only now.”

Ba'al was intrigued by this way of looking at the world. While Sharhastra's form of meditation was a more active way of channeling energies of cosmic receptivity, the monks in The Pure Land centered themselves on complete stillness, which left him with a logical question.

“My master said I would be able to transcend the transits, so why then can I not overpower Shani Dev? For I would have stayed where I was, continuing my practice had I not been bored and agitated. Had I not been pulled here with this problem I seem to have, which was created by that harsh planet!”

“You cultivated these preconceptions in the place you sought solutions. You are trying to cling to something that makes sense. Why must it make sense?”

“Because it has power over me-”

“And what would you prefer?”

“That I have the power over it!”

“Who says you don't-”

Ba'al smirked.

“Your master taught you what energy is. You now know what is yours and what is not. But what is not has become what is. You made that happen-not Saturn.”

Ba'al uncurled his lips.

“I thought I was helping people.”

“And what good came of it?”

“How can one attain these so-called merits to break samsara without giving back to others?”

“A peacock eats poison to pigment it's pretty feathers-do you? Good deeds are not merits-you gave too much.”

“Then what is the solution to get rid of these bothersome people!”

Rinpoche sighed.

“Please relay to our guest The Diamond Sutra...not ring.”

“It’s a sapphire.”

“It’s a material possession.”

...

In order to prepare for pure zen meditation Etiel needed to burn the roots of his attachment created by the six realms of samsara. He made prostrations and offerings of fruits and flowers to Shakyamuni and studied The Seven Limbs prayer. The smell of jasmine incense filled the stupa, and without effort, he found himself coming back to one with the current moment, until a man burst through the door screaming of a hantu.

“Your affinity is to help this man, even though you have no feelings for him. Would helping him, like you helped those villagers, help anyone, if you are unable to know yourself? If you don’t know yourself, then you don’t know him. Your help can only be minimal at best in this way. So why help him at all? Because of our Buddha nature. You don’t help him. I don’t help him. Buddha helps him. I am just a transmitter, who invented nothing.”

Rinpoche’s deep, monotonous chanting calmed down the frantic newcomer. The Guru put his finger on the guest’s chest and drew it away quickly.

“The mind is in the heart and it works in the head-see? No chart reading necessary.”

...

At first, Lenormànd refused Lilith’s attempts to seduce him, only to meet failure every time. She had enticed him with her instruction on history, magic, worldly religion and meditation. Her charming allure didn’t hurt her cause either.

Lenormànd stopped fighting his feelings, and played along enough to gain the wisdom needed to overpower the sorceress. He resented the absence of The High Priestess during this period, who coldly acknowledged that Lilith was indeed meant to be his true wife, refusing to speak to him any further on the matter. Her seldom appearances were only made through astral projections every Blue Moon, and The Magician found her demeanor dismissive, to which he reciprocated accordingly.

In a previous life, Lenormànd was a wealthy man who had ignored Genevieve to study and teach ancient magical texts to initiates throughout The Kingdom, eventually leaving his wife and material possessions behind for Lilith. This embarrassment haunted Genevieve who was made to deal with her gossiping friends, chattering outrageously about her former outlandish husband. She would go on to remarry, finding herself bored with her second spouse and starting to seek out the knowledge that Lenormànd had found so much more interesting than her. Pining over Lenormànd’s absence, she cast a spell on him to make him come back. From then on, they would both be cursed by being with each other forever, in all lives, whether together or apart. For that particular past life would ripple through all of them, and when he did inevitably return, she would make sure to avoid him.

Only The High Priestess who saw all, was there to witness the rise and fall of everyone. While the ruling class tried to dupe their destinies by gleaning foresight from her, Lenormànd believed her to be destiny itself, which left

the two inherently at odds with one another. Lilith would attempt to manipulate Lenormànd to return to The Kingdom and use their magical abilities to overtake it from Genvieve and The Devil, but as The Magician studied the cosmic laws of nature he realized this would be a mistake. His stubbornness would lead to a dilemma for The High Priestess, who came to know him as one of the two people in history to catch her off guard. This was not how The Wheel of Fortune was meant to play out for anyone involved-at least not according to her predictions.

“I taught you everything you know, you useless, selfish Fool!”

“When you’re not a part of anyone’s story but your own, all of a sudden you get called names. You go to The Kingdom and join him, if you want power that badly.”

“Maybe I will.”

“Maybe you won’t-because it’s not part of your destiny! Oh, that’s right, that can’t be? Or can it. No one knows and what difference would it make anyway?”

“If there wasn’t a destiny you wouldn’t be a magician out here in the forest, and I wouldn’t have been waiting for you to join me in the first place! We are supposed to be the middle column to bring balance back to Tarot.”

“And what may I ask was it that brought it out of balance in the first place?”

“Destiny-”

“A self fulfilling prophecy, so strong it was all out of our control. That’s why Marceline watches and waits, because she knows she doesn’t have power to change anyone’s mind unless it’s by whispers or trickery-but trickery isn’t magic.”

“One day, you will have no choice but to participate in this cycle with me and it will be too late, because secretly, you’re scared of what will become of you and The Queen of Pentacles! What makes you think you’re so important that you can go against nature.”

“My free will.”

Lilith cackled.

“Think again, Lenormànd. Beyond that mirrored wall is where Ba’al’s Kingdom starts and, it runs right through, underneath here...to our rightful home-we can stop him now or you’ll be forced to stop him later. But my sweet Lenormànd needs to make a little huff about free will. You don’t have a choice! You never did!”

“Marceline had hundreds and hundreds of years to stop her spoiled child. Whatever magic we’ve learned is only because they’ve preserved it for over a millennium. And in that preservation, they veiled and encrypted it all with lies. So we do have a choice, Lilith. And I choose to stay right where I am and keep studying, because if we go back there we’re not acting according to some Divine Plan, we’re acting according to theirs. If that’s what you call destiny, then you can count me out.”

...

Etiel sat in the dewy cave carved out of the mountain, for just over three years, meditating on impermanence. Twenty two hours a day had brought him to a complete state of serenity within. One of Rinpoche's underlings would mount a white yak to bring the budding student of zen the occasional bowl of wheat lentils and figs.

When Etiel left the cave, there was only the present moment. He stared out atop the summit at the rose tinted sky, inhaling through his nose.

The Fifth Buddha sat at the head of the stupa in a lotus position, with his eyes closed. The monks kneeled in two rows on either side of him. Five students went up to receive official initiation from Buddha, lighting incense and reciting an ancient prayer as they got to the table with bowls, flowers, fruits and lanterns, bending over for their foreheads to be touched by the hand of their Master. Etiel's turn had come. He walked up the middle to the table to kneel before Buddha. Buddha with his eyes closed grunted and spoke after a long silence.

"I don't think so."

"What-"

"No, I don't think so."

"What do you mean you don't think so? Think so, what?"

"Your transgressions are too great."

"Transgressions! What transgressions?!"

"Go meditate again and come back in three years. Shakyamuni, the bodhisattvas and yakshas are in agreement. You are not enlightened."

"And what is your opinion? Guru Rinpoche, tell him something!"

Guru Rinpoche shook his head. Buddha spoke for him.

"My opinion is that you will never reach enlightenment..." He paused, deeply inhaling through his nostrils.

Ba'al slowly stood up, turned around and walked out of the temple, to never look back.

Buddha exhaled, finishing his sentence, as the wind spirits shut the door.

"Until everyone is enlightened..."

Buddha smirked as the monks laughed and applauded his wisdom.

...

Ba'al felt empty and directionless, traversing by yak up the countryside with no particular aim. He switched his big, furry beast for a boat heading towards The Kingdom of Aksum where he introduced The Devil's Bean to shepherds and spicers who traded stories of Sheba around a fire. They danced the nights away. His eyes caught hold of a beautiful woman whose skin was as creamy as caramel. Their lips met in the hut, but their bodies in bed. They made love, but only for an evening. He left her pregnant and traveled north on camel with textiles and coffee beans. She would name the baby after him-Ba'alhazar.

...

As he migrated north he impulsively snacked on the beans which put him into a state of delusion and mania. Thirsty for water he took from his pack a ceramic pilgrim flask and tried to use sorcery to refill it. Only drips came out, and the dehydration after. Frustrated and crazed, long stretches of distance led him to a Quattara Depression in the butterscotch badlands of Mitzrayim, matzor his only drink. The night was chilly and sand whipped around him. He hopped off his camel who spat out its gula. His sandals made their impressions on the desert floor. Leading his camel by a leash, he was unable to discern the swishing heard was that of the slithering serpents under the erg, until the pain of their bite on his heels woke him with mordant venom. He tore his clothes in grief, with dust in his face and shouted, "Apep in my step! And another! What cruel world is this?!"

The dromedary fed on a few fallen beans and ran off scared. Ba'al, on his knees, tears, running like rivers down his cheeks, screamed out.

"Why have you forsaken me my Lord, God?! What have I done to deserve this?! You know who I am. I trusted you. To lead me here with your hand in everything, then why lead me astray as you have?! Why, oh, why Lord, God have you abandoned your son! I tried to be good, but you made it hard to believe in you! Which one of us leaves me to die in the desert if you are in me. You chose people no one else would and they are disagreeable to the lot of nations and myself. I am one of them, but I am not them. You set me apart for what purpose? My mother abandoned me because of You. Should I abandon You because of her? If we have broken our promises-what have you done? The only truth to be found down here is that we are no more than impotent slaves to a-

Two comets flew overhead, followed by flashes of lightning striking the sky, and rumbles of thunder which shook the ground as a booming voice roared out like a lion around the boundless dunes.

"SILENCE!"

Ba'al limped up on his feet, falling back to his knees.

"I AM YOUR GOD AND I AM ONE. "

"You speak!"

"YES. BUT NOT ALWAYS LIKE YOU. I REFRAIN MY TONGUE TO SEE AND TURN MY BACK TO HEAR. NEITHER IS NEEDED BUT I AM ALWAYS THERE. WHEN YOU MAKE AN ANGEL AND PUT IT ON EARTH AND IT DOESN'T KNOW WHY IT'S THERE, WHAT WOULD IT DO BUT TRY TO FLY AWAY. I MADE A WORLD AND FILLED IT WITH LIFE. I SAW IT AND SAID IT WAS GOOD. YOU SAW IT AND WEPT THAT IT WAS NOT YOURS. YOU MADE A WORLD AND SAID IT WAS CONFLICTED. I SAW IT

AND SAID NOTHING. NOW YOU ARE AT DEATH'S DOOR. AM I NOT THERE IN YOUR CONFLICTED WORLD?"

"You are, but you're not very good in it."

"A VULTURE IS TALKING WITH GOD AND HE'S HUNGRY. HOW WILL HE EAT WITHOUT YOUR CARCASS? SHOULD I SAVE YOU, THE BIRD WILL YELL FOR FOOD. IN MY WORLD YOU ARE ALL MY CHILDREN AND YOU WERE ALL GOOD. IT SHALL ALWAYS BE FROM MY THRONE HIGHER THAN YOURS THAT MAN WILL THROW ROCKS AND MISS BECAUSE HE DID NOT HEAR WHAT I SAW. SHALL MY WORDS HERE NOT BE ENOUGH OF A SIGN OF MY PRESENCE FOR YOU TO CHEW ON?"

"Yes, Lord, yes my Lord, God." Etiel began sobbing. "Lord, please help me in my hour of desperation, for I shall perish all alone in this desert!"

"STAND UP! YOU ARE NEVER ALONE WITH GOD AND YOU WILL NOT PERISH IN THIS DESERT."

Etiel stood back up.

"I SHALL BESTOW YOU ONE THOUSAND, ONE HUNDRED AND ELEVEN YEARS OF LIFE. IT WILL BE ONE, BUT IT WILL NOT BE WHOLE. IT WILL BE REMEMBERED AND IT WILL BE YOURS. YOU WILL RETURN TO THE LAND OF JACOB, I HAVE DESTROYED FOR THE WICKEDNESS WITHIN IT WHICH BEGOT THE WICKEDNESS OUTSIDE AND UPON IT. YOU WILL TEACH MY WORDS. THEIR MEANING TO MANY WILL BE DIFFERENT, BUT THEIR ACTIONS THE SAME AS ALWAYS MET WITH MERCY AND JUDGMENT. IN WHICH TIME A TEST WILL COME ON YOU. IT WILL BE YOURS. AND YOU WILL HAVE FORGOTTEN MY WORDS WHICH YOU TAUGHT AND I HATH SPOKEN YOU, TO KNOW THY GOD AND HONOR THY GOD."

"Never my Lord! I shall never forget you. That is my sworn promise to you, for you have saved me here in this barbarous desert from death and despair and I will always remember when your graceful presence blessed me!"

...

The Magician sat on a chair made of twigs in the home he sturdily built of gopher wood, shaking off his mind from the memories of Lilith who he cast, years back, into The Blackwater. He took another sip of tea, looking up to the masked Hierophant standing in front of his doorway.

"I could have laid you out, before you took one step up my stairs."

"A letter from Sar Ba'al."

"How perfect his timing is."

The letter darted across the room into The Magician's hand.

"Dear Lenormànd,

I hope that my old friend isn't getting any last minute ideas, for there will only be pain on Judgment Day for the ones who come against me and I imagine you are too smart for that. I ask that you fear not the flames on the horizon, nor The Kingdom behind you. Your Genevieve will be safe from my wrath so long as you don't risk your pride on the chance that you might overpower me. There is no chance, only the chains of destiny, which I will break for both of us. I have sent my Hierophant there in case your stance on free will has faltered. May The Age of Aquarius bless us all with the knowledge and power to finally separate us from our spiritual slave master, GOD.

*Warmest Regards,
Sar Ba'al"*

The Magician closed the letter and rose up, turning to the burnt trees he saw through the opened front door, before pivoting back to Tarot behind him. He swerved around to The Hierophant, sighting The Lesser Key of Solomon dangling from his ragged robes. Lenormand's left eye began to buzz, once more.

CHAPTER V

THE TWO OF SWORDS

PART II

Genevieve tossed and turned, trying to sleep under her finely woven bed sheets. Regardless of the condition of The Kingdom, she would nonetheless ensure the pomp and circumstance continue as planned. First would be the celebratory procession of The Kings and Queens, followed by the masked ball and then the post ball performance at The Neptune Theater. With circumstances out of her control, The Queen believed she tried her best to come to a mutually beneficial arrangement for everyone, and their failure to see this would no longer be her responsibility, for more important than their anger, was the annual tradition she cherished.

"Damn them."

The ceiling began to crack apart, blasting through it, bundles of pentacles falling down upon her. Genevieve tumbled out of bed, thudding onto the marble floor, the mound of gold coins resting where she lay her head instead.

Two combating whispers fought to be heard in her right and left ears, as her left eye jittered.

"You must leave Tarot at once or they will kill you!"

"Don't let that Fool distort you, show them who's in charge, Genevieve!"

"They will attack you at the ball."

“The High Priestess is a liar!”

“A liar who’s on your side, Genevieve.”

“Shut up! All of us, I mean you-both of you. I will not stand for this!”

The Queen put on her nightgown and sat at her bedside table, shuffling her cards, flicking up The Two of Swords, which popped out from the deck.

“Is everything okay, Your Majesty?”

Genevieve quickly shoved the cards in the drawer, before Jasper could see them.

“Took you long enough! I want extra men guarding this palace for the next two weeks. I shall sleep in the guest room, given-”

She pointed to the ceiling and the bed.

“What shall I do with all this money, My Queen.”

Before she could respond, the pentacles turned into tiny serpents hissing around her covers.

“Take me to my guest chamber now and stand guard there until I wake, Jasper. I will figure out a plan to uproot these amateur spell casters and mischiefmakers first thing in the morning.”

The seething Queen stormed out past Jasper, and down the hallway.

“Ma’am, which guest room, there are twelve!”

...

Marvin and Sofia traversed the tunnels of Ba’al’s underground Kingdom populated by the lost souls of hungry ghosts dressed in dusky rags, wearing false faces made of crystalline glass. They went unnoticed by the carriers of carts, filled to the brim, with blue sapphire crystals.

“It’s cold-”

“This place must be thousands of years old-look at these engravings.”

“Let’s just see if we can figure out a way to get back to the surface. I don’t think we have the luxury of asking...whatever these people call themselves, for help. ”

The bardo world below, mirrored the world above. Its inhabitants, trapped souls, floating around its morbid purgatorial state-the consequence of their promise to The Devil, who guaranteed them ultimate liberation from samsaric reincarnation. This trade off would temporarily enslave their timeless spirits, formerly contained by human vessels, to Ba'al, who was to raise them back up as eternal beings to the surface. It was this understanding which they agreed to on how nature was initially intended for everyone-higher than angels, without judgment or consequence, from any cosmic overlord. For thousands of years the rich would trade their children and the religious, their moral principles, for the guarantee of eternal life in a garden of paradise below, constructed by the celestial tools and knowledge of his design. Using a pentagram and a philosopher's stone, or an initiated prophet, selected individuals would undergo a carefully orchestrated ceremony to ensure chosen reincarnations into their own bloodlines, before their death. This required direct consent from Ba'al and a stringent litany of prerequisites.

The Knight and The Princess approached an open junction where such a ceremony was taking place. A weeping woman watched her naked, decrepit husband be set into a radiant pool of molten sapphire, while hooded hungry ghosts cantillated from their opened books. Adjacent to the pool, a boy no more than three, stood watching, with his fingers in his mouth. The boy's eyes went white, dropping his arm, as the spirit of the man and the spirit of the boy rose from their bodies, exchanging places. The weeping woman bowed three times to thank the bardo priests, and scuffled away, carrying the boy in her arms. The old man began flapping his arms and legs and laughing like a little child. The hungry ghosts looked up to see the befuddled newcomers before them.

...

I found myself back in Toraland near the end of The Age of Aries, seventy years Before Savior-the prophet they killed, only to write about and honor later with a historical demarcation to begin his era. Unlike the worshippers of Zeus, The Emperor was more ruthless in his invasion, akin to The King of Babylon, who destroyed our first temple. Edomis would follow his footsteps, and destroy our second.

It wasn't the destruction that bothered me, but the plundering that came with it. Something felt wrong about this time and it nagged at me, as if it wasn't supposed to happen in the way that it did. You must keep in mind, whether you call it The Fourth Yuga or The Sixth Millenia, the ability to prophesize correctly was extremely rare, as Spirit no longer allowed this power to come through the right column.

Most people I knew before my return had been killed, scattered or relegated to what we now call The Gutters. There were few exceptions to this, including good old Mendel, who made a deal with them to rebuild their city in alignment with the cosmos. They called Jupiter what the Helenites called Zeus, for both to one day agree on his more common name, Jezus.

You see, I knew him as Yeshua Hanoatzree, and unlike what you read in your little gospels, eight of which were stolen by those rats called ecumenical priests, I didn't bring him down-he did that to himself. And he rose by himself as well. Like the Sun, or as you know him-The Son. Ask him, he'll take the credit for God, and so will I.

It was them who hung him on that Tree of Death for speaking freely about the truth. I learned the consequences of doing so well before him. His preachings and miracles were rather familiar to me, as I had learned these hidden practices in The East. I said nothing, but observed from afar as I had my own mission, or so I thought.

“So, you decided to come back...”

Mendel salted his fish.

“In the flesh.”

“As much as I believe you’re a disgrace to your mother and your people, I hesitate to say, maybe if you had stayed, your warning would have been helpful in staving off these conquerors from taking down Solomon’s Temple. You knew it was going to happen. You saw it-and told no one.”

“What makes you say that?”

“You have the gift of prophecy! You wouldn’t have fled like a sheep running from wolves, if you didn’t. Lucky for you, you missed the bloodiest parts.”

“I don’t have or at least practice that gift anymore. It was our great Lord God who made me realize I should be here with my people, and help them in their hour of need.”

Mendel’s wife chimed in.

“A little late for that.”

Etiel rebutted her.

“God is never late and neither am I.”

“Maybe you’ve changed for the better, maybe you haven’t. Either way, we’re all in the same boat now.”

Ba’al looked around.

“Some of us seem to be on a higher deck...Where are my dear adopted brothers and sisters?”

Mendel and his wife looked at each other somberly.

“I take it they won’t be joining us. May you pass the salt please.”

...

The noblemen and women applauded the paired Kings and Queens, holding hands on their way out to the dance floor, accoutered in their respective colors. The Queen of Pentacles presented herself last to bows hitting viola strings and fingers, harpsichord keys. Unaccompanied, she surveyed everyone’s outfits, seeing if she could figure out who was who, underneath which disguise.

Genevieve's palms became sweaty at the passing thought she should have brought a partner, feeling slightly lonely without one. As the next song began, the waltzing couples switched and The Queen hesitantly agreed to a masked man's request for her hand. He held her back and they twirled about, while the woman he left for Genevieve stood on the perimeter staring back through her golden visage. She slowly lifted her two fingers and closed thumb above her, her left arm extending two fingers and an open thumb, below.

The man dug his nails into Genevieve's back so she could not escape. Masqueraders circled around her like vultures, placing forefingers at their masked lips as they came and went.

"Let me go."

The man's voice was deep and hissed as if possessed by demons.

"The time is nigh, usurper."

He released his arms leaving ten indents in her hind. The Queen of Cups saw Genevieve leave the domed ballroom, fuming. She walked down the stairs, out of the building and towards her chariot, ordering the two guards to take her to The Sacred Gardens.

She sat in the back with her arms folded in the chill of the eighteenth night of that Gemini season.

The horses came to a halt and The Queen roamed The Gardens tailed by her guardsmen trying to find the bench Marceline would normally sit on at that late hour. Upon finding no one there, the steel armor of her guard squeezed Genevieve's throat from behind in a chokehold.

...

Two hundred and twenty two years I worked my fingers to their bones welding iron and studying from those Books of Light. Many wise sages who taught in their caves and caverns were killed for it and with the risk of our history being lost, I took on the task of becoming a teacher myself. I chiseled out a space under my home-and I dug and dug, and with some help, I carved out a sizable space for a smattering of students to come and pray and study our weekly portions. We dined and drank wine as the world above slowly converted from the veneration of the planetary gods to the idolizing of just one-The Sun, Jezus, who in The Land of Magic, they called Horus.

It was intended that those willing and unwilling followers of The Books of Jezus would have no knowledge on who he really was. Five of the thirteen gospels which were made available became required reading by a small group of corrupt leaders, attempting to create a new hierarchy of control for themselves, living a life separate from the morals they preached. They used his cross as a way to supersede The Emperor to take the monetary system. There were however several complications, which left them dependent on the money changers they hated.

I would encounter this very predicament when several high ranking soldiers took an interest in my metallurgy, recommending me to their superiors for whom I was contracted to fabricate weapons. Our work garnered enough recognition, for even the papacy to retain us-casting their crosses to glorify a God who was not our own, we gilded skillfully in bronze. The promissory notes we were paid in could not be exchanged for a reasonable fair, as there wasn't enough local gold to back them up. The interest charged by the changers was exorbitant, because a sizable portion was mandated and divvied to The Emperor, leaving me and my workers with scraps.

We hadn't the power to rebel, but only to complain. And these complaints grew tiresome. So I dug more. And as I dug these tunnels, I unearthed something underneath our Land which unsettled me.

...

Genevieve's face became pale, gagging out spit, as she could no longer move her arms to fight back. The rabid growling of a wolf behind her sprung onto the accoster taking him down. Genevieve found a stone as the second guard charged, screaming as she belted him over the head.

Out of breath, she dropped the rock and sat on the bench, wiping her salivating mouth with the side of her hand. Eclipsus jumped up next to her and began to speak as Lenormànd.

"Do you recognize me?"

"Intimidation, attempted murder and a talking canis major. How exciting."

"Nothing ever impressed you. You know, it wouldn't have cost you a pentacle to pay me a visit."

She started to tear up.

"I wanted to but I couldn't do it. I suppose I should thank you for saving my life."

"You can pretend you don't love me, but at the very least, will you listen to what I have to say-you need to leave Taro with me now."

"Relinquish control to marry a magician and live out in the sticks-you would know me better than that."

"I'm only out here because of you, remember?"

"That's right. You'd be rotting in a cell without me."

"How did your husband die again? Natural causes or putting up with you for ten years?"

Genevieve started to laugh.

"I hope you didn't give that Cup away, Lenormànd."

"Even if I did, why put yourself in danger like this?"

"Because the role of a Queen requires a woman who won't run away. I'll be sure to secure you a plot with a keep, far enough away from me, for your return."

"I don't know if I'll be coming back, Genevieve. And if I do, I don't know if you'll be around to see me."

“Then this is how we say goodbye.”

“I suppose it is...Please take the dog with you.”

“What am I supposed to do with a scraggly hound?”

“What would you do without one?”

Eclipsus licked Genevieve’s face.

...

The sons of the sons of the prophets who once shunned me, joined my lectures to learn of the secrets that not even their ancestors would share with them. My words would be written in future texts, concealed behind theological arguments to answer the burning questions that pervaded humanity. Humanity, who was too dense to understand the answers, would thus allow themselves to be crucified by their own stupidity instead.

It became apparent to me through meditation, that all the different stories were in fact one and the same story. The Garden of Good and Evil-Gimel-Nun, Genesis 2:22, at one time, in every time, at all times. A contraction and an expansion, a duality and its mirror; as within, so without, chaos constrained by order and order constraining chaos, all down here at the intersection of the cosmic graveyard of a universe called earth. Even a deformed baby needs to be nurtured by a father and a mother; The Sun and The Moon, to stay alive, SOLOMON-sun, earth, moon. Time is the double tailed snake of our story, our spinning Torus, most of which is made of empty space and darkness, on our side of this discus. If you can hold two thoughts at once, you will get three points. From above and below, you must see these sides, to get a merkabah, a chariot, to go up and down the ladder beyond material nature, which includes physical space.

The ethereal, astral, psychic and causal planes all affecting what happens in each and every life cycle. Ten patriarchs, ten points in the genealogy of Atum trying to correct his creation-his intentional mistake-the aggressive multiplicity of perspectives-which he allows, but does not relate with. And as with every creation, it is the same process which generates stress and fear, thus evil is always fabricated first. It was given power over the world for nine hundred and seventy four primordial generations, seven worlds, before Atum. Seven more for Caine and seventy seven for Lamech who killed him.

God only acts through Atum, or Haya-Eve. Like the rings of Saturn or the rings of a tree, each universe was created with twenty two energies, breathed out of the life force of one Creator. This force is HIS delight, the feminine architect, Sha’shua, of our world and its lower kingdom, and the lower kingdom of each and every universal tree. Good and evil are merely two branches from the same root above, and from them, an interconnected reticulation that should bind us all back to that one root-that one God.

I had found this can only be done with wisdom below. And if fear comes before wisdom, then there’s only one thing in its way, which is Love.

...

In my four hundred and forty fourth year, we had built an architectural feat, Hiram Abiff of Tyre could only dream of. A Kingdom below containing the engravings of the extinct civilizations who came before us. The ones no one was supposed to know of.

I saw my students age and die and their children take their place. Many would ask me how I transcended death to which I told them simply, I was blessed by God-but they didn't seem to believe me. I prayed on this, but received no answer from Spirit. Here, they had faith in the miracles performed by HIM in The Books, but not the one I related to them, which happened to me.

One night alone with a hammer and chisel, I walked the corridors towards where our work was incomplete, way down under the remains of the razed temple. I started to bang down into the dirt and it crumbled with extraordinary ease. The light that showed through, became enlarged the more I battered, and into the high rounded room I would enter. With already lit candles, the den was perfectly kept.

There I found our original twenty two letters, the authentic sigils of Solomon and his staff. Writings dating back ten millennia, on history, science and medicine, two books left out of our Creator's anthology, almanacs and illustrations of a world which hadn't taken place yet, the Ace of Cups and the fortune cards, some containing titles I wasn't to know personally for another three hundred years...except in that moment, I did. And that moment happened as if I'd been there already. Like I preserved these items from some time and some place, whenever it was I must have recast my own physical realm. Even texts from the East which were yet to be produced, were read and possibly written by me. Now you tell me, how what hadn't been could be right there before it was? This was an impossibility, beyond all logic.

The World card with its four fixed signs-the four angels who appeared to Ezekiel, the four suites created from relatives of The Emperor, even my own mother! I took what I could carry back.

I was unsure whether to reveal my discovery to my students or not and I prayed to Spirit, but again received no answer.

...

Months went by and HE was silent. I begged and I cried and I pleaded for counsel, but HE did not respond. So I shuffled the cards and came to my own conclusion.

I brought my students to the room, requesting their promise not to disclose what was there, but when we arrived, the only thing remaining was gold. They rejoiced and hugged each other and I screamed at them, angered that most of what I found was either to be lost or kept in my mind. They cared not for The Books anymore but only for magic tricks and money, so I turned to HIM once more for help and once more HE was not there.

I decided to share my newfound knowledge and cards with them as my prophecy and powers came back to me, more refined than before. I trusted in my students more than my visions of their betrayal, but in their fulfillment of what I foresaw, I learned to trust myself more.

Their carelessness in trading cheap insights for freedom of worship, got many of them beheaded and would raise the suspicions of a High Priest named Fludd.

...

The Magician held the chain of The Lesser Key of Solomon wrapped around his fist. He shattered the The Hierophant's mask into seventy pieces with his Ace of Wands and tied a white bandana around his head. He

made his way down the hill in a cardinal red robe, which stuck out amongst the greens and yellows around him. He used The Wand to steady his descent, his robe flapping against the bleak afternoon breeze, gusting wildly at his left side. Trying not to get blown away he swirled his Wand, causing a torrential downpour on the burning trees heading towards his house.

...

Hungry ghosts swarmed The Princess and Knight. On the ground, they batted off ghoulish hands from reaching for their Ace of Cups. Each ghost they struck, reshaped itself, only to strike again.

“They’re not stopping!”

“*Hold your crystal and repeat these words!*”

“Lenormànd!”

“*Of fallen angels, knights and kings-give me a second.*”

“Go on with it!”

“*Only to me this light brings!*”

Sofia yelled the words only half crying. A vibrant ray prised from her necklace, bouncing off The Ace of Swords and reflecting onto the mirrored guise of one ghost. Its light scattered out and sharply zigzagged across and around, hitting all of their veils. One at a time their spirits flew up to the ceiling crashing through and leaving holes atop, filled in by granulated specks of the rainy glow of dusking silver sky.

...

Fludd’s influence became my problem, as my prominence grew over My People. I would no longer teach anything substantial of the left column to those who were not sufficiently initiated. Scattering the knowledge I made a deal with the subjugators so not one group or person would be able to retain a full cultivation of true magical power. It therefore became quite difficult not to use the left hand, concealed by the right, to survive.

Five known books, five levels of the soul, in the Fifth Epoch-it was then my five hundred and fifty fifth year, when Fludd came with some servicemen to take me down. I obfuscated the tunnels with an illusionary covering and they would find nothing hidden but soil.

“*Even though we’ve no evidence, I suspect you’ve hidden everything. And my suspicion is enough to have you arrested, Eitel. What do you say to dissuade me?*”

An arrangement would be made for our freedom, but not with that righteous stinkard. In order to create conflict between The high ranking Hierophant and The Empire, I connected myself with a cousin of Titus The Second and told him of the gold beneath where the last pagan temple was situated overtop Solomon’s. As Fludd came to inspect the land, he was met with the soldiers and surveyors of the beloved cousin, pitting church against state. Fludd

realized I had outwitted him, and I was given free reign to teach at the temple. I had impressed Janus so much with my incisive conversance, he distinguished me as someone worthy of leading their new system of promissory notes. This system guaranteed the safety of travelers by Knights Templar, who would exchange the notes with something now locally backed by The Empire. The infuriated money changers would come undone, before they had a chance to turn against me and as quick as the conquerors were in killing us, they were just as hasty to sell out their Sun, for the gold of Saturn. It was this weakness which became my power over them.

...

I stood in front of an oil painting of Apollo, making one last attempt to appeal to God, using The Ace of Cups to light incense from eleven ingredients offered in Exile to HIM as a pleasing aroma: balsam, onycha, galbanum, frankincense, myrrh, cinnamon, cassia, spikenard, saffron, costus and aloe. I mixed them together in exact proportions to show my devotion, but I received no sign or recognition from HIM and I grew displeased. I turned around to the painting and questioned what kind of God would treat me so poorly.

...

I undertook the philosophy that everything above had been created below, and whatever happened back in that desert was merely my own power manifest into reality. I no longer asked God for help or guidance, but synthesized my knowledge of medicine, math, history, religion and magic into something new. I would take a boulder and throw it into God's perfect water, HIS oneness, since HE didn't seem to care enough about my concerns, I would no longer care about HIS. I would have to invert the power of the earthly realm, like the original Magician, to rule over the hierarchy of plants, animals, people, planets and ten realms of angels and demons or whatever other spiritual entities we created with our consciousness and constructs, now solidified into our genealogy, from some sarcophagi of an earlier age.

Nature was the easiest plane to manipulate, since we were the only creatures out of touch with it to begin with. Then the astral, psychic and causal. I divided my teachings at different levels and spread them out over three days to different groups, based on my assessment of their willingness to make a sacrifice. I taught dabblers about magic squares and synchronicities in the tetrahedron, with its connection to Mount Meru, the holy temple. Others would learn how to prophesize and manipulate words and ancient languages to materialize signs and small events in front of others. They would practice how to transfer and drain energies and distort thoughts. Only my prized students though, would be privy to transcending death. A lifelong blood oath and a hefty donation would be required to endure the ritual at The Valley of Bones, sparing them from leaving this planet through the rings of Saturn at The Tropic of Capricorn.

The colonizers would learn of the anatomical meaning of their gospels and the gnostic interpretations related wherein I used imaginary constructs to illustrate that the snake saved man from a demiurge My People called God. I needed to bring back idolatry on all sides in order to restore more accurate prophetic power into The Age of Pisces.

...

The curtains on the stage of The Neptune Theater opened for The Summer Solstice Festival presentation of The Harvest-a solemn play by Gladly Weatherbottom about the wife of a farmer, who was to take over

responsibilities, after her husband fell ill, during a poor crop rotation. Genevieve picked the play, which she distinguished among the writer's overlooked works.

As much as she detested The Devil, she privately gave him credit for his eye for detail. She sat comfortably on the coral colored velvet cushions of her immaculately engraved golden seat, next to Jasper.

...

Sofia and Marvin squinted above, clumsily limping towards The Blackwater, their bodies tired and worn.

“What if I just threw this Cup into that black abyss and we forget this all happened?”

“That's a good one-”

“How are we supposed to get across?! We would need a boat and Spirit only knows what's in there.”

“If I had a pentacle for every one of your complaints, I'd be the richest woman in The Kingdom.”

“And that would still be less than what I should have been paid to go on this mad, dreadful expedition!”

The Blackwater bubbled and Lilith slowly emerged from it, stepping onto the ground with her bare feet. Blindfolded, she wore a white dress, holding two swords against her chest. Obsidian droplets flowed down her long raven hair. Releasing her arms, she pointed one blade at them.

“I'll give you a choice. Hand me that chalice and spare yourselves, or take your chance across The Water.”

She ever so gently placed the edge of her second blade on the liquid body, freezing it over with ice. Sofia replied, before Marvin could display his irresoluteness.

“We'll take our chances.”

“Very well.”

“You couldn't make this any easier could you?”

Lilith smiled back with dark, violet berry lips.

“Alright then.” The Knight hesitantly inched onto the glacial surface, seeing the tempestuous rains ahead quickly approaching them.

...

The Ayin comes before the Pei-the eyes come before the tongue or the staff. I was not accustomed to such praise and power, and I should have known impulsivity would be the main adversary of divination. How was I to expect the man whom had worked against me for years to come seeking my help at my Temple of The Golden Arch?

Alas, there was Fludd, walking in with the blind, crippled child of a prominent patrician. Reluctantly, he asked if I could heal her.

“I thought Jezus saved everyone? I can’t find him anywhere-can you? Jezus! Come out, come out wherever you are!”

“Blasphemy, among everything else you stand for, will end you in hell. An act of mercy however, may offer you a slivering grace in the court of high angels.”

“They tried to make man a God before, in the scrolls they hid from Genesis Six. And why do we need a man to be God, if not to relate to the image of ourselves. But if we live in an equanimicable world, then how could there be so many hierarchies above and below? Could it be that man made God in HIS own image and we need these hierarchies and saviors to bring order to the wicked we create, but don’t credit ourselves with, either? There was, at one time, a real spiritual power which we have all forgotten...but I have not.”

“I should have known better than to bother with a maniacal sorcerer. You are beyond saving, Etiel, and you shall never know enlightenment, without true, proper baptism in The Galilee. I bid you good tidings.”

Fludd began to turn away.

“Wait! Come back...I will heal this girl for you.”

“You will?”

“Yes...but first-”

Ba’al placed his fingers around the long iron candle holder.

“I’LL SHOW YOU FUCKING ENLIGHTENMENT!”

Ba’al screamed and spittled, bashing Fludd over the head to the checkered marble floor. With both fists, he brought down the candle holder, repeatedly battering Fludd’s skull, blood splattering all over Ba’al’s face and robes.

...

The ground shook, caving in homes around Tarot. Genevieve stood in the downpour, aghast at the disgruntled peasants, farmers and former knights storming The Theater with lit wands, short blades, long blades and glass bottles. Noblemen were stabbed and their wives harassed. The King and Queen of Wands, under the hand of The Devil, thinking they would be spared, would find their final expressions, one of surprise. The Swords handled themselves better, along with The Cups, who narrowly escaped the mayhem with their lives.

Jasper and Eclipsus fought off the accosters near The Queen of Pentacles. Dismayed, she witnessed the whole stage set aflame, the lead actress, running naked away from two foul hayseeds. She ducked at the bottle being

swung at her head, seeing the attacker's be taken by her armsman's steel. The candy apple red splatter on her handmade honey hued gown would be a reminder of how close she came to the end of her reign.

Castles and homestays were plundered and the rising waters brought malodorous frogs ribbiting around Tarot's sewage filled roads.

...

The Knight pushed against the pounding rain, ahead of The Princes, carefully taking one step at a time across the immense bed of boundless ice.

The Magician walked past the burnt trees, meeting Lilith at the borderline.

"We could have had it all...Look at what you've allowed to happen instead...*You spineless Fool.*"

"Let them across and I'll give you The Cup."

The Magician pulled the chalice out from under his red robe.

"I don't know, I haven't made my decision yet."

Lilith used her sword to crack the ice, generating a fracture running through to Sofia and Marvin. The Princess slid away from the fault line as Marvin fell through the rift into the caliginous water.

The Knight plunged down to the depths, grasping the false Cup.

...

If you want to master death, you must die while you still live, separating your soul from everything you hold dear. The voyage of Anubis is to be known and taken in spirit, before its physical inevitably, to prevent it altogether.

Ba'al marched into the dignitarie's estate, with the newly masked Hierophant by his side-handing over the child, who ran straight to her father's arms. The consternation at his friend's appearance was outweighed by the gratitude of the miracle performed, and he joined one of Ba'al's Brotherhoods, telling peers of the abilities they could acquire by pledging allegiance to the magus supremus.

A blue and gold robe was woven for Etiel, embroidered with the twelve signs of the zodiac, which he wore to his meetings. He held debaucherous parties and propagated his seed to hundreds of women spreading their legs throughout The Land for him. Wives and daughters alike were willing to give their bodies and blood oaths for occult knowledge and higher positions of influence, not knowing they'd sold their souls for it too.

While The Emperor and his cohorts enjoyed and on occasion, participated in Ba'al's antics, they agreed with the alarmed clergy that he posed a threat to their order, and he was to be relieved of his command over the promissory notes.

The prophetess Marceline would ensure enough teachings would remain true to their purpose, settling herself in the right crowds to counter her son's lusty obsession for dominance over the material world.

In his six hundred and sixty sixth year, Ba'al was exiled from The Empire and headed West, with his followers, to build a stone tower using the seven sciences and the seventy two enslaved demons of Ashmedai.

It was his own mother who knew he couldn't be trusted either in or out of The Empire and she came with an army, using her light magic to crumble the structure in on her son.

...

Strange venom colored fluorescence shimmered at the bedrock of The Blackwater, dotted with dead Marvins, floating around, their golden grails all held tightly in their right hands.

The Deathrider in his black hooded robe, sat on his horse carrying a scythe. The Knight swayed groggily, unable to hold his breath any longer. Death galloped towards Marvin, with his sharp instrument, ready to behead the knackered chevalier.

"I don't need your decision, Lilith. I think I'll keep The Cup and the stupid bastard that came with it."

The Magician held out his Wand to The West.

Marvin with the last bit of life left in him drew The Ace of Swords and drove it through Death, before being propelled upwards and out of the abyss. Flying into the air, his body quickly slammed down onto the frost sheathed surface.

"I won't allow you to get away with this, Lenormànd."

"Who says it's up to you? I thought we were just pawns playing out a grand starry plan. And if that's true, then I never really had a choice in all of this to begin with, or did I?"

"In what?"

"I'm sorry, Lilith-"

The Magician flicked his fingers. Lilith swiftly crossed her swords against her throat, falling on the decomposed leaves. Lenormànd transformed the endless ice into luscious greenery blooming with violet lilies. He walked across the expanse to Sofia and Marvin.

Mavin, blue in the face, shivering on the grass, looked up at Lenormànd holding the chalice.

"Is th-th-that what I th-th-think it is?"

The Magician nodded.

“It is indeed.”

“Th-then what have we been carrying since we left you?”

Marvin’s cup disintegrated into dust.

“Is everybody ready to go-we haven’t much time.”

Lenormànd’s smirk was met with the displeasing pouts of the two enervated journeyers.

...

Ba’al spiraled up through a swirling baptism of fire seeing a tiny pinhole of light he remembered was The First Gate of Heaven. The magnificent luster of shining splendor opened up more and more and Etiel floated in his etheric body among clusters of stars, swimming to the gilded door guarded by two cherubim. His foot became shackled by a celestial tentacle, then a second, suddenly around his left leg. Eight altogether wrapped around him and flung him years and galaxies away from The Gate, across The Universe. He wailed with fright, swallowed by space into mirrored quartz crystallized translucence.

He remembered himself as the Naga King who corrupted the free transit of beings from the earthly to the spiritual realm during Atlantis and his reign as Osiris of Lemuria, counseling astrology, sorcery and agricultural methods which reinvigorated the civilizations of the subcontinent.

Seven vitric energies, separate, but speaking telepathically as one, began to individuate themselves with color. Ba’al, whose form was now comprised of buoyant, blinking eyeballs, heard The Elokim whisper the secrets of The Universe to him. Each mighty archangel was made up of all the souls of previously ended and not yet ended epochs. In the realm mirroring the material universe, they were the amalgamated essence of the divinely good planets only to be seen removed from the earthly plane as gaseous husks and dusty orbs. As every angel of hope who comes down to one side of The Lower Kingdom is corrupted into fear, upon taking physical form, so too would Ba’al, among Spirit’s favorite Angels of Mercy. He would serve God as the fractalized oppositional energy through time and through beings of all universes, internal and external, above and below, as one and of many, to raise consciousness and awareness, everywhere. He came from the Saturnal Epoch to fight against Justice and knowledge with love, to reincarnate as the controlling purveyor of wisdom, bent on breaking love with confusion-awakening humanity as a tiny piece of his oversoul those below would call The Devil or Ba’al.

The Seven aligned into The One encompassing golden zephyr, which expanded and contracted its polychrome opalescence. It was the first time, since the last time Ba’al died, that he felt pure joy and goodness. The eyeballs began tearing as Spirit gave him the choice to complete his agreement to come back to earth, knowing he would not remember anything that happened above, and in no seconds, he was separated from God, to be born again.

...

I was the daughter of a shepherd with nothing in my name but an ox, a donkey, a sheep, a maiden and a slave.

The Land I was in, they renamed Taro, a play off the Rota and The Tora of The World card-a circle within a circle within a rectangular parchment. It was split into a cross of four regions, based on those fortune cards I had given out. No one remembering how they came to be, or me, for that matter. Thirty years of our time had passed and I walked through a brand new Kingdom seeing the same people. Their accents and architecture and flags and garments had changed, but they hadn't. I knew many of them and sought to know them again.

It was especially hard as a woman walking back into The Golden Hand in Orion, to convince members of my true identity, even with the three secret words I demanded they recognize me by, decades prior. I would use my abilities to regain their recognition through meretricious witchery, as most had deviated from my instruction, rendering their practices no more than an inefficacious degradation of what was originally taught.

My tunnels had been filled back to their brims with dirt by The High Priestess. Having learned some lessons from my previous life, the karmic laws of Spirit would have to be bent more shrewdly from then on to take The Kingdom as my own.

...

The Magician, The Knight and The Princess rode forth to The Tower in the snow on black stone stallions adorned in electric blue manes and tails. Lenormànd had shaped them from the volcanic rock of the surrounding cliffs of which lapis smoke formed from sulfuric gas, rolling off their cragged summits.

“Did you know her? That woman back there?”

The Magician solemnly replied, knowing his actions would come back on him.

“Once upon a time, I did.”

Milky mermaids with midnight shaded tails and sharp teeth, snapped and hissed atop rocks at the edge of what was formerly called The Blackwater, a considerable distance behind them.

CHAPTER VI

THE TOWER

“There's no door-”

The Magician blasted open an entrance, giving The Knight a side eye, walking in first.

Windy sand dunes of desert and its formidable heat met them inside. The Knight and Princess took off their armor acquiescing to the grueling weather, near three pyramids and a Sphinx which aligned perfectly to The Gemini constellation stamped in the blue sapphire sky.

“The three stars of Orion point to Canis Major-and these three pyramids, Auset, Heru, Ausar-Isis, Horus, Osirus-Jupiter, Mars and Saturn-the three crosses, the three top spheres of The Tree of Life, the two temples in your mind and your third eye-were known to the people in The Land of Magic as the spiritual triangle which was to predominate the material world. Only when three points mirror them back from beneath, from the tangible realm, is there alignment, and can nature be balanced. Should either try to dominate the other, well-”

“Thank you for the history lesson, but let’s keep a move on, shall we?”

“To where?”

“That Red Sea in the distance-I’m not well versed in fairy tales, but my assumption is that we’re going to have to split it, somehow.”

“Is that right?”

“Obviously, yes. Now, less talking, more walking.”

The Magician grinned as The Knight stomped away.

“I thought we would have to illuminate that middle pyramid to shatter the illusionary ceiling, but what do I know-”

Lenormànd trailed behind them, taking his time, knowing The Red Sea was a trap.

The two looked backwards, impatiently waiting for him. He called out.

“So I’m supposed to take this Wand and part that Sea, is that correct?!”

“Yes! Isn’t that how the story goes?!”

The Magician mumbled to himself, “Not this one.”

...

“Well, what are you waiting for?”

Lenormànd placed his forehead on The Wand and spoke ancient words into it. He lifted the staff and parted The Sea, revealing the pebbled passageway underneath. Displaced fish and crabs sloppily flew about in every direction. The Magician tilted his head out of the way for a tiny hermit crab.

“You go first! I’ll hold the waves apart for you!”

Marvin and Sofia proceeded through the passageway, the waves shaping themselves into colossal scarlet serpents, fluidly tying the two into a tight knot. They shouted frenziedly for The Magician’s help.

“If you’re going to fall for that-you think you’re ready for what’s upstairs?!”

A spark flew off The Magician’s wand and splintered the deceptive dome. The descending shards forced the serpents to gush apart, releasing The Knight and Princess, who propelled down to a landscape which started to tilt.

The three tumbled backwards, along with the pyramids.

Snapping his arm forth, before the rolling Sphinx’s nose could crush him, Lenormànd converted the whole environment into a solidified staircase. He held Marvin and Sofia by their backs to straighten them upwards and onto its wide steps. They marched together towards the mirrored gate at its pinnacle, fighting off seventy two viridian demons made of mist on the periphery, from knocking them off.

...

Lenormànd opened the reflective door to a white hallway with ten doors, five on either side, each containing the sigil of a zodiac. Libra slammed behind them. Every door they passed toppled with a thud as they headed towards Aries.

“There’s no doorknob.”

“Marvin-shut up.”

The Magician took off his chain and stared down at the key head. He removed the double bit end and used the sharp tip beneath to scribble symbols on the four corners of the door. Using his hands he recalibrated the askew pentacle upright and spread out its five triangles. The etched ram’s head barrelled out, through the hallway, hitting the scales of Libra and throwing open the entrance for the demons to fly in.

“Shit!”

The Princess shouted the words which saved her in the underground corridors, while Lenormànd sketched.

“No one remembers the numbers for the magic square of Mars, do they?”

He stopped himself.

“Never mind.”

He completed the set and the door swung open for them to quickly sneak through, slamming it shut on all remaining specters.

...

“A mirror maze! Have we not suffered enough?!”

“Don’t step foot in there-enough games, Ba’al!”

“Who?”

The Magician cast the two round halves of the maze apart from each other into the columns and idols, flattening the reflective material into wall panels.

The Devil wore the mask of a gold bull, comfortably applauding everyone in his blue robe, near The Lovers.

“Outstanding! All of you. Honestly, you’ve outdone yourselves...I suppose a reward is in order, no? How about a family for Marvin-he’s earned it.”

Marvin saw his family rush over to hug him.

“And for you my dear, Lenormànd, your picking of Genevieves.”

Twenty two Genevieves surrounded Lenormànd.

“What’s your choice? A humble Genevieve? A reasonable Genevieve? A Genevieve who can cook something that doesn’t taste egregious? How about a Genevieve who respects you? Or, I know! A loving Genevieve!”

One of the Genevieves exclaimed, “I love you, Lenormànd!”

“Marvin, stop hugging those people, they’re not your family.”

Lenormànd twirled his hand and faded away the Genevieves and Marvin’s trick wife and children.

“I don’t want any of these Genevieves.”

“Oh come on, Lenormànd! We’re all just frequencies, sign waves and particles. They only mean anything to you because you put your emotions into them! Sofia, I haven’t forgotten about you-”

“Emily! How could you betray Tarot like this?!”

“Our sacrifice shall reap you the benefits of the spiritual world to come.”

“What about the world now?!”

The Devil started howling with laughter, his head twisting around into a golden goat, a snake and a casted angel, before taking it off altogether.

“You’re not Zelig!”

“I don’t know how you put up with these pillocks, Lenormànd-I give you credit, but I’m going to need that Cup now.”

The Ace of Cups slingshotted across the checkered floor, to Ba’al, stopping it with his ox leather sandal. He lifted The Cup behind Emily and Richard, dividing one knife into two and giving them to each lover.

“Wait, stop!”

Ba’al flippantly pointed his fingers to the east and the west, hurtling Sofia and Marvin through the walls, out of The Tower to the snow below.

“It’s too late. It’s already done.”

He held the heads of the kneeling Lovers, who willingly slit each other’s throats, their blood pouring into The Cup, falling over upon his loosening grip.

The Magician looked down from the shimmering bolt of lightning rippling above to ask, “Were you expecting me to stop you?”

“I was expecting you to try.”

Ba’al smirked.

“Well I’m not going to do that.”

“You’re not...”

“No, without you, none of this exists.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“All this make believe, bringing me back here to fight you.”

Ba’al furled his brow.

“What are you talking about?!”

“Oh that’s right, you forgot.”

As Lenormànd spoke, unbeknownst to Ba’al, the skies of The Kingdom began to clear and three hundred and forty five thousand butterflies of all colors flew out from their hollows.

“It wasn’t a Tower, by the way...It was a field.”

Ba’al looked around acres of wheat pasture.

“What...Are you doing?”

“And you were my brother, if you recall?”

“Nice try-”

The Devil, ready to smite Lenormànd with Solomon’s staff, saw that it had been transmuted into a worthless shepherd’s crook. He turned to the sheep next to him which baa’d.

“And our mother died and you lost touch with reality. And you cried to God for help when no one came to your aid, and you offered him your hard work from the land HE gave you, alas you heard nothing but your own voice rejecting you in response, so you tried to make the land your own.”

“Am I my brother’s keeper...”

“Yes! That’s what you said. And when I came back you stabbed me in your anger and you were locked away. And in your insanity, all you had was your imagination and your art.”

Ba’al sat on the wet floor of a dungeon cell, smelling of rancid dew.

“And from that tiny room, you bent nature and severed yourself from reality. Those things which make no logical sense here were constructed beyond time and space from your split mind all those years ago. And you could be in every cycle, in every mind, having civilizations destroy themselves or building elaborate temples and shrines to you-different yous, before we would come to think such architecture was even humanly possible. The patterns and symbols and places and magic and histories-everything people saw and everything they heard. You would use all of it to create a barrier between humans and their true nature, their one God and justify your manipulation of multiplicity, based on an interest or philosophy and your relation to those things at *that* time, at *any* time, moving the world slowly away from its original story and universal truth, which you scattered to horde its knowledge for power. Nothing more than a *distraction* from coming to terms with the death of your own mother. You became everyone’s detour into infinite, external, unrealized possibilities-everyone’s Garden and everyone’s Exile. You became the structures you hated. You made them. You got in the way of everyone’s upright path and upright timing and true love, worshiping and distorting planets over human will, so they had to come back here to be tested again by you. In one story Adam and Eve ate a special mushroom, in another they talked to a snake, in another, they had different names or didn’t exist at all. There could be Fifty Gates of Understanding or Seven Gates in Heaven. If people don’t know, then they won’t care and then you can pepper the rest in with falsehoods, using everyone as tools to design your story of our world-but only if we allow you to. And now you want to see if God loves everyone enough to save them, or HE’S so removed from it all that you can finally control the epoch again, and raise up your Kingdom here, to go back to an Age you went against before. So I have to come to you on the causal plane, not because I want to, but because you begged me to be your opposition, not understanding that your reward is also your punishment, as is everything you fight for and against. Above, you’re merely an angel bound to taking orders from God, who confounds you down there, gifting you all the supernatural power without enough virtue to meet it, making me question my own free will and pitting my desires against yours and the destiny I know shouldn’t have ended where we are now, if you weren’t messing with God’s Wheel to begin with.”

Ba'al sighed and looked dispirited, before grinning.

"That was good...and mostly true. But mother isn't dead. She started to like the idea of living forever. Behind her cold demeanor, she fears her own finale, no different than any of you, but she won't have to worry about it for much longer. It was because of her disobedience, that once upon a time, happens all the time. Gaslighting me to keep this karmic nonsense going for you or her or HIM isn't going to work, but I respect your attempt at doing so."

"I'm not really sure what a gaslight is, but-"

Ba'al gulped down the blood.

"You really shouldn't have done that."

Ba'al looked down at Marceline with her throat slit, dropping The Cup and tripping over himself.

Lenormànd stood with The Lovers.

"How did you do that?!"

Blood spewed out of his mouth, despondently stumbling for words as visions and realities from his mother's perspective overwhelmed his own.

"You thought I was smart, but I'm just a magician."

"Mind veiling! You used the mirrors! You bent the-"

"I'm sorry, but I can't reveal my secrets. All I can say is that once upon a time, won't be happening this time."

Ba'al fell to his knees. As The Magician walked over, The Devil grabbed Lenormànd's hand.

"She killed herself to save the world she loved, even if it's senseless, self consumed and rotten, like her son."

"This was supposed to be The Land of Milk and Honey."

"And there should never be a time that it won't be."

The seven shades of the rainbow escaped as one through Ba'al's third eye spiraling through the glass ceiling.

Snow fell onto Lenormànd, who took handkerchiefs off of The Lover's mouths, filled with foul words for his trick which put an end to The Devil and his Age of Aquarius.

EPILOGUE

The Knight, The Princess, The Magician and The Lovers returned to The Kingdom greeted by two lines of standing guards with straightened backs and the roaring applause of large crowds.

The Queen of Pentacles met them at the iron gates. Sofia ran immediately to her mother and father, The King and Queen of Swords. They ignored Emily, their eldest daughter, who was to be escorted away and tried at a later date, along with Richard.

Marvin greeted his old comrades and card acquaintances, unable to believe the reformed gambling lush had returned with The Cup, or that he was worthy of snagging it to begin with.

The Magician climbed off his horse, greeting Genevieve. It was the first time they had met face to face in thirty years. They smiled, but said nothing, their left eyes never to quiver again.

...

Genevieve and Lenormànd walked up the hill in silence. They sat cross legged, parallel to each other, at the edge of the cliff, staring off at the Harvest Moon in Virgo.

30 YEARS LATER

The Magician lived out in the forest with Genevieve who relinquished her title as The Queen of Pentacles, both leaving The Kingdom right before its ransacking, eighteen years prior, by garbed conquerors from The Southwest.

Lenormànd penned a tale of magic, ending his book with a quote from Solomon: “For then I turned my attention to appraising wisdom and folly, for what can man who comes after The King do.” With a swift stroke of his quill he neatly tidied the last page under the pile of what was already written.

Divided by the laws of nature, united in the soul as one above both, he took the deck of fortune cards next to his book and chucked them off his balcony.

Lavender butterflies near a great oak tree fluttered by a barefoot girl with long black hair and aquatic eyes. Dressed in slate robes, she saw the mess of cards spread over the leaves and picked up The World.

