

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 would sit together for lavish dinners and regale each other with pleasantries of the day's past.

Father, and head of this 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's 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 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 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 wrong, or so they thought-and she was hanged at dusk, alongside her cat.

“I'm sorry, is there a problem?”

Without hesitation, the portly knight belted 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 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 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, would be dragged out of their house, usually by their arms and screaming-their knick-knacks 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 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 been 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 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 just 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, outdoor vomiting and the 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 mundane routines and the daily state of affairs. The family now sat around 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 to the alehouse and 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 Gongga 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 someone.”

“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?”

“ 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 going 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 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 begun breaking into watery hysterics and 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 plan to take off. He decided to make his declaration anyway.

“I have decided that this 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 it.”

“Dear God!” Mother shrieked again.

“Where are you going Brother?”

“I’m going to The Kingdom of Tarot to try to turn the wheel of fortune in my favor.”

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

“Well, it’s better than sitting in this filth and living with the regret of never trying.”

Father thought there was some validity in that 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 sailed most of the map, including the uncharted waters, I’m not going to dissuade 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. 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 packing his necessities into a cloth and tying it around the top of his new wand. He walked outside to greet everyone standing together with their heads down, waiting for his departure. Daughter handed the Boy a flower she had picked. 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 see her son. She put her 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, around the winding bends and onward towards the jagged mountain tops. He stopped off near the edge of a cliff for a full scope 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 so he could 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 isn't it?"

"What's that?" One of the grifters quipped.

"I'm actually searching for The Kingdom and am a little lost. Would any of you know the best route to get there from here?"

The Fool walked towards the men.

"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 the impending danger.

"And that'll be just enough for us to take from you," quipped the brute of the group, spitting out a wad of backed up phlegm onto the dirt.

"That doesn't sound very fair does it. Perhaps your kindness in giving me some directions and we can avoid any confrontation, would seem like the better choice."

The dog let out several yaps.

“Would it, now?” The brutish grifter 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 again...”

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

The Fool, seeming to oblige, took his own wand off his shoulder, knocking the brute’s away and giving him a good knock on the head. The brute’s eyes went crossways, before falling backwards, as the other three grifters 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 one by one, until one of the grifters decided to use his wand on the yapping dog.

The dog made a loud whimper, as he laid shaking on the ground. For the first time ever, The Fool felt a sense of fury, and retaliated by cracking the three men in the chest, face and knees accordingly. The brute, getting back up to charge The Fool, was met with another crack across the head and a final one to the gut, knocking him off the cliff. The thugs rolled around in distress, as The Fool rushed over to the dog to comfort it. He stared into the dog’s big sad eyes, deciding this Justice reversed, deserved some form of compensation. He took whatever pentacles the three swinish men had stashed on them. Placing the dog around his neck, he walked back down the hill, nine pentacles richer.

Once reaching the bottom of the hill, he put the dog down gently and headed to 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 land, letting it flip flop its way to its death. He gathered up some leaves and tossed them into a pile, checking to make 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 the 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. He held out his wand, placing the fish’s mouth at the other end, before roasting it.

The Fool nibbled away at the juicy bits of the wide eyed vertebrate, giving a generous amount to the dog, who was still unable to move. He sat thinking about how best to move forward toward The Kingdom, when a parade of whispers interrupted his cogitation. The whispers sounded like a swarm of muted words, getting progressively louder, as their voices became 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 gigantic oak tree, 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 cautiously squint into the hollow of the bark, as dozens of canary colored butterflies stormed out, weaving their way in synchronicity towards the river. While the tree had answered The Fool’s question, he wasn’t sure exactly 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 poor dog rested around the Fool’s neck, as Lenormànd marched forward, determined to keep going, even with the elements

working against him. His determination was interrupted by an inability to move, as his feet sank into the ground like heavy stones.

The dog yapped in fear, whimpering repeatedly from its injury. The gunk had reached its way up to The Fool's knees, his panic sinking him further into the earth. He began to wonder if the tree was a liar or if this was some sick joke The Universe was playing on him; being forcefully swallowed into a bog didn't give him much time to ponder. A cloaked figure appeared, stretching out her wrinkled hand and grabbing 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."

The Fool carrying the paralyzed dog under his left arm was barely able to move his own numb legs, as he hobbled along, following the old woman 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'd 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 got into 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?"

“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. The old woman 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, and I can use it to shine on ahead if you’d like?”

She took out her very own Starsun 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 dark magic?”

“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’s dark magic.”

“I thought that’s just conning someone.”

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

“How do you trick your mind?”

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

“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 reasons why 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 is no such thing as happenstance. There is only fate.”

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

“By being a witch.”

This witch in question had made The Emperor 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 were out to get him and that he should listen to his internal guides of which there were none, except those she had made up for him. Unfortunately for her, she hadn’t counted on the power of his own natural intuition, which cut through the confusion he felt, turning him against the enchantress and breaking 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, and purposefully kept hidden from the outside world, especially a fool such as Lenormànd.

“Okay well if what you’re saying is true, let’s say I wanted this boat to move faster-as fast as possible-let me close my eyes, and pretend we are sailing quickly along now.” The Fool said this sarcastically, testing the validity of her words. 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 towards 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 Starsun 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 out 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 this 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 ringing 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

The Fool looked ragged, seaweed dangling out of his hair and mouth, smelling of sulfide, clothes covered in sand, he wobbled about from dizziness. His wand was three quarters shorter and his dog had died. Its eyes went glassy 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 took 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 iron gates of The Kingdom.

The Fool's arrival was greeted by some with apathy and disdain. Given his appearance and potent fragrance, he didn'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 strange happenings. 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 territories, 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 of it all, the tall tudor structures lining the cobblestone streets that seemed to go on and out in every direction, and the 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 the pedestrians 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.

Aimless and 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. It was permeated by the ambrosial scent of honeysuckle flowers. The rustling of leaves, the thitter of snap dragonflies zipping to and fro and the 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 to 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, smiling 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 painting something with fastidious attention to detail all the way at the other end of a line of well kempt rose bushes. There was an immediate knowing inside 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 and on the man's, a tree engulfed in flames. Their feet were planted on the barren plain, a mountain looming in the background, a seraph hovering above the clouds looking down on 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, he was met with warmth and kindness. Her sea green eyes stared at him with 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.”

“Oh, I see. And what does her's represent?”

“What do you think?”

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

“It certainly is.” She responded coyly, like she was hiding some 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 Tarot.

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

“Have you ever sold a painting?”

“I don’t know if anyone would buy something like this from me.”

“Maybe not, but then again, I’m sure there are some depraved people out there who would.”

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 it all.

“I just paint for the joy of it. It keeps me grounded.”

“From who?”

“From most people.”

Genevieve had many friends, but no genuine ones, 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 and more smitten with his carefree nature and confidence. He wasn’t like the others in the circle she ran with, taken with their own image and status. However, this was not to say that The Fool didn’t have his own ambitions.

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 in the painting seemed to be looking towards the sky, instead of each other, which he found peculiar, but kept this observation to himself.

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 in the boat, yet somehow more youthful. He inquired of her on the location of The Gutters, when she handed him a crisp note. He opened the fold 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.

VI

In an area of The Kingdom that had purposefully been 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 wealthy 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 that appeared to be abandoned.

“Don’t mind the clutter everywhere.”

Eclipsus walked out of the backroom. He was 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 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, it makes no difference to me.”

“Oh, thank you, Eclipsus Sir, that’s very generous of you.”

Eclipsus, held a bottle of Dragon’s Breath. He put it down onto the table and poured shots for the both of them. They took the drinks down with discomforting pleasure.

“Do you know Gladly Weatherbottom?”

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

“He was from here, lived a few doors down.”

Eclipsus poured two more shots.

“Storytellers are horrible liars. They have a constant 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 second shot.

“That he stole all of his stories from me.”

He got back up 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 what I think they are?”

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

Eclipsus started shuffling the deck. “Universe, show me what the Boy needs to know. Universe, show me what he 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 the top and an image depicting a menacing Tower underneath. Eclipsus put his hand on the card and gave a wild smile, his few remaining teeth poking out in different directions.

“You are him!”

“I am?”

“Yes.”

“Wait, who am I?”

“The one we’ve been waiting for. The one who brings us out of this cycle.”

“What cycle? I think you must be mistaking me for someone else!”

“We have all been running on a cycle for the past millennium, stuck in an Age of minimal progress. The wheel turns back, then it turns forward and then it turns back again—dragging us along in its stagnation and preventing the future, the true future, we were meant to have.”

The Fool tried to follow along.

“Once upon a time, happens all the time?”

“But it doesn’t have to. There is a new era waiting for us, for all of us, they call it The Age of Aquarius, but it never comes. That’s because there’s something holding it back—someone I should say, preventing it from happening. Someone in every generation, every century. The same one. The only one.”

“Who’s that?”

“The Devil of course. Who else?” Eclipsus seemed rather nonchalant about this, The Fool much less so.

“The Devil!?”

“You haven’t met him yet...but one day you will.”

“What does The Devil have to do with me or...what do I have to do with any of this?”

“You have everything to do with it and he has everything to do with everyone. He’s the shadow version of ourselves, of the collective. This time he comes in the form of a child, born to The Empress.”

Pink smoke began emanating from Eclipsus’s casting stick as he weaved it around and muttered to himself, “Pisces Sun, Aquarius Moon, Gemini Rising.” Eclipsus cleared his throat.

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

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

“These fish need to keep swimming or they’ll die. You risked your life coming to The Kingdom to ultimately 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. You were destined to fail your way into greatness.”

“That tower looks like a prison.”

“A prison of ideals built on a faulty foundation, that’s why, inevitably, it must collapse.”

“So, what does he get out of all of this, then?”

“The closest the Devil has ever come to reshaping the world in his image, is keeping it exactly the way it’s been-under his thumb, all along.”

“You’re saying he doesn’t want anything to change?”

“In a sense.”

The Fool didn’t seem to grasp the problem.

“Perhaps he has a point-”

“Does he now?”

“Why do things need to change? Everything seems perfectly fine to me.”

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

“One more.”

Eclipsus shook the bottle of Dragon’s Breath, pouring 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 planet is a reflection of our souls, but our souls are fractured, which means the planet is fractured. The planet needs to be healed or it will wither away and die. Regret, doubt, fear, disappointment, hatred, selfishness, ego, pride, greed and loss, all delaying the soul’s enlightenment. Everyone stuck in their own inherent limiting beliefs, leaving them in an unawake state, which prevents change. Take love for example. Love is an energy. We usually feel the full effect of this energy when we connect with another and that energy becomes amplified. If people are torn apart, love doesn’t exist, then we don’t exist. The Devil feeds off the energy of separation.”

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

“Do you see the problem now?”

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

“You were destined to be a lightworker.”

“I see...”

“Do you really, now?”

“No.”

Eclipsus chuckled at The Fool’s failed attempt at certainty.

“A Lightworker is someone, like me, like you, meant to help people. Meant to heal the planet, with our abilities. We are ascended masters, empaths and there are hundreds of us, including The High Priestess. We are born and reborn to push The Wheel of Fortune forward for the collective, but we have certain enemies. This is just part of a natural order of darkness and light. We need to keep growing in power, they need to keep hunting us down and making us weak. It’s not personal, but it is the risk we take being who we are.”

“Who are these enemies?”

“An army of shadows, Psychic Vampires, working in service to The Devil, one of the original lightworkers. This is why the ones who’ve chosen to serve under his influence consider him the true Spirit, The God of Light or The Light Bringer.”

“What does he get out of it?”

“Control. The same thing he used to fight against. Humans are inherently weak. They create their own problems, or sometimes others will do it for them. This manifests the pain they experience, which is a necessary part of growth. Through the pain, resilience is built. We get stronger, smarter and we allow the change, instead of controlling it. This requires faith-in both the higher power above oneself and within oneself. This change leads to enlightenment-aligning oneself with the greater good of the conscious collective, called balance, or as you and I refer to it, Spirit. His pain led him to use his abilities over others under the false belief that people got in the way of his ascension and power. All of his suffering he blamed on everyone but himself. When he realized there was no reward for helping people, no recognition, no appreciation for his time and work. People going along their merry way without gratitude for his time, he felt taken advantage of. Instead of becoming a mirror to heal these adverse qualities, he became the worst version of them. He snapped, and began to practice what we call dark magic.”

“I know what that is.”

“Then you know who you are.”

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

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 being in love with her.

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 musician or perhaps a playwright or an artist or the owner of a business, but he didn’t have the talent or discipline necessary to achieve in any of these potential occupations either. The most he came to experience success was joining a group of ruffians from The Gutters in a traveling street quartet which obtained a modicum of notoriety within the eight 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 that he was using his quick wits to

dupe Genevieve 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 noblemen and women appeared to make their names and claims to fortune, which 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 would dare afford him.

Genevieve had 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, flattery, flirting, serenading and kisses. He was also extremely reliable. Frequently being interrupted during the middle of one of his ventures, by carrier pigeons, dropping off messages that Genevieve requested his presence, he would immediately drop everything he was doing to rush off and see what she needed; which was usually comfort, attention, advice or love. Because he was unable to afford a horse, he would run several miles across town to make sure he arrived in a timely, albeit sweaty 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 probably stemmed from her parents, who were both emotionally distant towards their children. Her father, while successful, was an alcoholic 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 for him, and 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 "lightworking missions". Eclipsus refused to teach him about mysticism, claiming that he wasn't ready for it, testing Lenormànd's patience. He knew Eclipsus was holding back his knowledge of the craft, as Eclipsus knew The Fool's intentions for learning anything about the occult 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 that no matter his own tribulations, 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, 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 unfilled.

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 being 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 these 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 stumbling in, bleeding from his chest. He had been shivved by a Psychic Vampire while traveling on a mission, barely making it home to the shop alive. Lenormànd rushed to his aid, holding his pale, frail body.

"It was bound to happen...Bastards."

"Is there anything I can do?"

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

Eclipsus let out a yelp.

"Fetch me some Dragon's Breath-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 must go through them separate from the collective. What happens next won't be your fault. When the time is right, and you will know it, you will be given The Emerald Tablet of Alchemy."

"How am I supposed to guide and heal people, when I can't even make anything happen for myself? It's been five years since coming to The 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.

“The Universe will never show you how it conducts the symphony, but when the song and dance of it is all over, when people reach their final hour, that is when they realize it gave them exactly what they needed, whether they liked it or not. It is always balanced. You are lost now, because everyone is lost now, and while they stay lost, that is why it is important for you to find yourself, so you can see what your true mission here is. Have faith in Spirit. Have faith in yourself. As it is above, so it is below.”

Genevieve sat in the corner of the banquet hall ruminating, as everyone danced the rondolet. She questioned why she had become so dependent on someone who could provide nothing tangible for her 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. She observed everything like a Scorpio would, with her little secrets she kept to herself, accounting for all the wrongs and rights of everyone who ever crossed her path.

A man who was neither particularly good nor bad looking, neither a genius nor an oaf, but very abundant and also a Prince, stood in front of her, asking for a dance. Genevieve looked up at The Prince, not feeling attraction or enthusiasm, but seeing an opportunity to make a statement about her own power.

IX

The Fool felt distracted by 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 out the pits of peaches for their famous melba pies. He dropped the fruit and ran off to Waterton to see what she needed.

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 fix what she found wrong, but the more he offered solutions, 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 filthy words and damning accusations he wanted to say, in an effort to try to salvage the situation, for whatever was left unspoken was already acknowledged between 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 by the bakery for sobbing into the pies during work and locked himself in the shop, stewing in his own sadness, and reflecting obsessively on the possibility of winning her back.

Virgo season approached 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 angered him.

Running frantically through Center Square he saw a nobleman trying to get on a horse. Lenormànd threw the man off, got 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 excruciation and revulsion at the betrayal he had experienced, and yet deep down the feeling of unconditional love was 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 weary and weak, 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 Akanasha falling out of the sky.

His hope had faded, seeing the world for what it was, and the cruelty of the people who inhabited 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 new Emperor, who claimed his brother's throne, used the title on the finer material goods afforded 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 patterns, 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 the territories, and on those who traded and crossed the boundary lines from Waterton to Kindlewood. 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 the resources and natural terrain of the land which the residents inhabited.

The King and Queen of Wands ruled over the forests 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 the aristocrats and landowners stringing together the web of Tarot'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 wipers and local officials were delayed if not paid at all, as collecting taxes from citizens with no money was often quite difficult. 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 of the elaborate oil and canvas paintings his brother 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 both aroused by licentious prospects and acts of adultery, which would seem unfair to her 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 of his time, money or care 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 Spirit to save them, only to be met with the deaf ears and 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 a 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 had fought in three gruesome, yet glorious battles and at one point been awarded for his valliance by the nobility with an Ace of Pentacles, roughly valued at ten thousand pents. Shortly after receiving it, he lost the coin in a card game called Broken Hearts.

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

“Come on you drunk sod, wake up!”

Marvin let out an exaggerated, garish yell, pulling out his sword and whipping it around violently, like he was under attack.

“Who goes there!” Drool fell down from his lips.

Marvin’s companion had seen enough combat in his life to handle the sharply unannounced swing with grace.

“Marvin, 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 how he ended up there.

“Who else 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 get 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 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 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--"

"Will a day pass without a reminder of the one hour it took you to convince that old bag of bones to bring me on for this miserable position? 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 accordance 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 philosophical about it. It's a job. You're lucky to have one. 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 squibble between her, The Emperor and the rest of them. Perhaps *you* haven't noticed, but this whole place is falling apart-maybe now's not the time to push everyone past their breaking point."

The two kept walking, privately considering each other's perspective. Phillip 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 stronger 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 has already disappointed me. 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 a peacemaker or negotiator? We sit around, three killers, 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."

"Slaves."

"What's the difference?"

"Never mind, keep going..."

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

"Every citizen is armed with the knowledge of how to use a bow and arrow. What makes you think brute force and a lack of sympathy 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 properly, then perhaps you are 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 and Philip. 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, “That used to be the Temple of the Golden Hand...”

“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 about 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 his shirt, 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 crest sage tarps barreled forward towards the site. They were stamped with the insignia of an open palm encompassed by a laurel wreath. Within, interlocking triangles centrally contained a Z-the left tip of which resembled the head of an open jawed basilisk.

Uniformed men jumped out, pulling 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 paper 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 signaled more significance to the mysterious emergency.

Griswold’s face crumpled, his mustache quivering, **“What in the hell 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 unflinchingly fixated at the crackpot below, hollering with contempt for her recent actions. The second he caught sight of her silhouette, two armsmen dragged him away from 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 was 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 each 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 was a pillar, holding up what became known as the Ace of Cups. The water, which used to flow continuously from it, now only sporadically spurting out a substance resembling a thick crocodile colored slush.

"About bloody time!" shouted The King of Swords, who didn't have time 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. Princess Emily and Prince Richard 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 demanding the Emperor's title, nor anything which any of you can't afford. I am simply requesting something which you may not understand, which is that Ace of Cups in front of you."

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

"A cup?!"

The Queen of Pentacles bit her lip, concealing her studied interest in the mystical antiquity of Tarot, 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, "Go on!"

The panicked chambermaid continued:

“I am requesting that the Ace of Cups be brought to The Tower, located beyond the forest and The Blackwater, in exchange for the safe return of The Lovers. Before clandestine thoughts and roundabout schemes crawl into your minds, there shall be no games in evading my offer. Any such attempt will be defeated rather easily. Unfortunately, there is a pitiable catch, which is that The Cup was protected by defensive magic. Thus, he whosoever is worthy of lifting the chalice, shall be the one to bring it to me. I give you the grace of three full Moons to follow through on my offer. A failure to comply and I kill The Lovers swiftly.

**Sincerely Yours,
The Devil :-)”**

“Outrageous!”

“It’s blackmail!”

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

The Queen of Cups took a rock near her foot and threw it at the large bird, hitting it off The Cup, watching as it clumsily fell and flapped away.

“Before we get to the kidnapping, there are a few general issues 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 salty bitch.” Leo jumped off Maeve’s lap towards The Queen of Pentacles, who shooed it away.

“I suppose it’s better to be a bitch, than too blind to see a ruse right in front of you. 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 somewhere 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 will 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.”

“The last time I checked an order like that required a unanimous vote.”

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

“I vote yes.”

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

“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 that this is a very dangerous proposition. The Devil is-” The King of Wands interjected.

“The Devil?! Sounds more like a bent chaffer trying to get the best of us!”

“I don’t think so.”

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

“You may send out a search party. We will 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 that will put each and every one of us in danger.”

“He said no games, Mathilde.”

“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 a tiny salamander scampering around, before climbing its way up the staff of The King of Wands, who fired back at her.

“Since you’re so wise, and let’s concede this is a ploy, 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 died. One of those paintings 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 time for a story.”

“I think it’s the perfect time.”

“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 the 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 is what lions do. So that little girl, upon second glance, is not petting the lion. She is 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.”

“The point being-”

“A little moral fortitude saves a lot of mourning.”

“I don’t like what you’re implying.”

“You should have been stage performers. *I think...*you’re in bed with him-if not, somebody here is.”

“Only to the ends I assume you’re speaking of Lord Zelig, 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 are you keeping him?”

“What do you come as, then?”

The King and Queen of Cups had suspicions of Zelig, but his restoration of their dying 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.”

“Both 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 dead husband.

“Then we shall get the final authority from Edwyn.”

...

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 remembered the happy memories of a childhood spent with her sister, until Richard came along. Once The Prince began courting Emily, Sofia became an afterthought, or at least she felt that way. She tried to renew

their close connection with enthusiastic solicitations to join her on jaunts, but Emily was so bemused by the whirlwind romance, that any promise she had agreed to take her up on, was left indefinitely postponed. Sofia confronted Emily 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 off tune buisine.

"Do you know who I am?"

"I've seen you before."

"Have you?"

"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, then they warily approach me, and 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?"

"One."

Sofia perked up. "What's that?"

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

"You will go on a journey, it will be dangerous. To dissuade you from it now would be useless, because you've already decided on it. There are obstacles before you leave. You will 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 totally clear to me, the person you must convince to go on this journey with you is a Knight of Cups named Marvin LaGuerre.”

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

“There is 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, alcoholism, anxiety, confusion, anger and a complete lack of self esteem. This is covered up under armor of pride and certainty. That armor is invisible. Everyone 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 by himself. He is not capable of doing so. You will have to 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.”

“Even though I’m aware that the prospect is bleak and the idea at odds with my common sense, I still feel compelled to find her.”

“Risk is success with the prospect of failure. Don’t give that prospect room to breathe and your bad idea might just be good enough to save Tarot.”

The High Priestess knew the questions before Sofia even asked.

“Who is this sage you speak of?”

The Priestess, about to respond, was interrupted by a more gloomy inquiry.

“And who is this Devil that took her?”

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 and fashioned in clothes from a seemingly modern era which hadn't yet arrived, distinguishing him from most of the commoners in Tarot. He had long hair, tied back neatly into a bun and wore a black linen coat over his frilled shirt. Resting on top of his head, a round black hat, with a curved peak. A bright, red fowl feather was stuck in the side of his cap, 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.

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

“Spirit blessed no one.”

Artur's amber eyes shimmered, like the light from a candle was flickering behind them.

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

“Perhaps he is testing our faith...”

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

“You're meaning for us to forsake Spirit?”

“Did Spirit give you those pentacles?”

“No, I suppose he didn't...”

“So you haven't answered the question.”

“Yes! I guess we shall put our faith in you, Lord Zelig.”

“And what can Spirit do?”

“Spirit can go to hell, Sir!”

“Very good. Now here are five more, to spread the word that Spirit is dead.”

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 coins it would take to get the strapped bloke to sell off the 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, and none of her business. We’ve already sent a squadron to look for Emily and Richard and are waiting on Edwyn’s clearance to issue the official decree for The Cup. We understand you’re worried and want to help, but you are to stay here, safe in Ironside.”

“Anyhow, your mother and I have arranged for you to meet with Prince Drustan for dinner this evening.”

Sofia had little to no attraction to men, but this was not something which could be stated aloud. Her objection to the proposal however, could.

“Excuse me! Where was I during this set up?”

“It doesn’t matter where you were! We’re missing one daughter, we’re not going to lose another-and we’re your parents! What we say is final and *you will finally be going to meet your future Prince for dinner tonight.*”

“Let us handle this our way, please. But first, get Valerie to help you find 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 the local tax, I’m paying The Kingdom tax and now I’m expected to pay The Queen’s private debt recollection tax-how is this allowed? 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 will be 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 the premises.”

Marvin paused, before kicking over the table.

“Alright! Okay! I have a pig-a big one, it’s worth market value, thirty pents, at least. 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.”

Marvin tried to think of who he could sell a 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 felt some shame about his aggressive behavior and tried to make amends by setting the table back to its proper position.

Feeling satisfied with this tiny goodwill gesture, The Knight waited expectantly with his hands at his hips. 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 made Marvin’s senses go off, instinctively backhanding the bow into 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 kept 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 population would refer to as insanity, were in actuality, side effects of an unbalanced and unchanneled spiritual awakening. Mulberry gin helped dilute its 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, yet retained memories. Flashing scenes of violence from battle and his family withering away from The Crip, on their cots, 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 to bits.

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 we were interested in making an offer on your land, but this looks like a precarious moment for you, 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 to take over failing enterprises, helping 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 occur 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 vampire 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.

Philip had been recruited and handsomely paid to join the scouting mission. Like the other retired chevaliers, he was under the false assumption of what had been relayed to them-that The Prince and Princess had simply run away. 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 does 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
Yours 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 everyone, 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!”

“H-how?! My foot is stuck over the 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 the fallen troops had been indiscriminately left with cragged daggers protruding from them, ash drawn pentagrams marked on each one of their foreheads.

“The stories are true! This be the workings of occult sorcery.”

“They sent us with partial armor, knowing this could happen.” The Commander waved his hand around.

“Disposable. That’s how they really see us.”

“They disobeyed him and now we’re looking at a castigation against eight crowns. The message has been sent lads, now we’re the ones left to go back and deliver it.”

...

“Your Majesty! Lord Artur Von Zelig 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 south wing of the palace. It was adorned with the finest furniture, sculptures and ornate mirrors, reflecting a glimpse of Zelig’s true form, before he entered the room with the natural grandiosity of a charming raconteur.

Although he was not all knowing, Zelig 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 a fruitless endeavor. The only way to gain leverage over The Queen was either to impress or incentivize her past the fixedness of her disposition, or find a pressure point. He took off his hat with the swoop of a hand.

“I’d like to start off with some compliments. You’re a four leaf clover in a world filled with weeds, a stunningly attractive woman and I applaud your efforts to revitalize Tarot during this unusual and tumultuous time.”

“Jasper!”

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

“Tell the maid to fetch Artur some tea.”

Zelig played along and ignored the intentional use of his first name

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

“Leave us and close the door.”

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

“I’m not necessarily who you’ve presumed me to be.”

“And what’s that?”

“If I were The Devil incarnate, do you really think I’d come all the way over here asking you for a trivial favor?”

“You tell me why you need my vote for The Cup if you already know The Emperor will break the stalemate.”

“Not anymore. As we speak the halfwit, Edwyn, is being entertained by a court jester.”

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

“I guess one of his other bastard sons learned some juggling and how to pull a broadsword from his mouth. His father is thoroughly entertained, 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 spawn. 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.

“How do you know this?”

“Because I’m The Devil and you were right, so we might as well just be honest with each other.”

The Queen’s satisfied sense of validation was suddenly overtaken by the discomfort of having the most malevolent man in the world standing no more than six feet from her. She hid her anxiety well, but not enough to throw off Zelig.

“Dissatisfied with a lie, scared of the truth. I told you exactly what you wanted to hear, and still you’re unhappy. You always have been. 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*. I had countless opportunities to do it. That would be considered *bad karma* and we wouldn’t want that, would we?”

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

“That would have never happened.”

“Why not?”

“Because the chambermaid works for me. She’s a spy. Now you could kill her, but that would also be bad karma. I would suggest firing her, 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. Zelig smelled the glass, before taking a sip.

“I recognize this delicious taste, because it comes from a vineyard with the finest grapes. A vineyard I own—”

“A vineyard you co-opted.”

“What frightens you is that I’m ahead of the game. It shouldn’t. Because without me, the whole thing crumbles. You are, as of ten minutes ago, the most important person in Tarot, besides me, of course. *Unlike you however*, I haven’t pissed everyone off. Everything I touch seems to benefit people. Everyone owes me favors, big and small. How many men became wealthy because of me? How do the other Kings and Queens get their funding, if not for my help? And then there’s you—the mean Queen. All you ever wanted was appreciation and credit, and you thought you could 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 looks tidy and fits perfectly into place. That’s your intention. We both want to move The Wheel forward, but it’s not going to get done with self-serving celebrations and it *certainly won’t be accomplished* with an 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 in the street, inculcated and hanged. I don’t need to kill you. You’ve already done that to yourself. You seem cold.”

The Devil 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, inside, is a nurturing, sad little girl afraid to show anyone your emotions, because you’ll be perceived as weak. I’m showing you who I am—not the portrait you’ve painted. Not what the mirror reflects, not what the world perceives, because you’re smarter than the rest of them and I’m here to humbly offer you an alternative course of action. One where we work together for a mutual benefit.”

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

“I wouldn’t dream of hurting your feelings. In fact, I have a present for you, downstairs. All the beautiful Arcana paintings that Edmund bought from you. They were getting dusty and worn in a cellar somewhere. I refurbished them for you, Genevieve.”

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. 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 a 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?”

“Marvin, what have you done now?”

“I don’t even know who this is!”

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

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! That 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 the 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* it would take me weeks if not months to 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 the 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? Tarot is on the brink of ruin. It’s in the air and you feel it too. There is a secret army of shadows rotting it from the inside out. They’re called psychic vampires. They look like me and you, but they serve The Devil. Whatever is flourishing is by design. People are too unaware to see what’s about to happen, and many of them are willingly about to participate in their own demise.”

The realization crept up on Marvin, before hitting him like a ton of stones.

...

The Devil took another sip of wine.

“I used to be so confused about what this world really was. *That* confusion makes you malleable. And I looked for a guide and I looked for a God, until eventually, I found myself. And I realized that at the root of all this good and evil, is fear. Opposing forces hiding within one another, based on our need for survival. It’s the easiest thing to cling to when we’re scared of ourselves or we’re scared of each other or we’re scared of *HIM*. But fear comes before wisdom and when there’s wisdom, only then, is there no more confusion.”

“Why do you really want that Cup?”

“I didn’t come here for a vote-you think I need you for that? The Cup is destined to be lifted, by whom, I regrettably don’t know. All I want from you is to let the light of my design play out, *while you stay out* of my business, and smile.”

“Because?”

“I refilled your quarries with an abundance of shiny aurelian rocks and finished your theater in time for The Festival, with such resplendency, neither you, nor The Wands, would have ever hoped to accomplish.”

“That’s very nice of you.”

“Thank you.”

“Very generous indeed.”

“Thank you.”

“To help solve the problems you created through black magic, all to burn it down to the ground once you’re finished with your *design*.”

“Oh, Genevieve, *you are* very stubborn...It’s not manipulation if everyone’s complicit!”

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

“Let’s get back to that theater. What was it you wanted? Oh yes! Large oyster shell seats. That’s what you specifically requested. The Mermaid ones. The ones that are not only a pain in the ass to find, but a pain in the ass to dredge up from the sea. Are you aware that an oyster is only capable of making a pearl when it secretes argonite to protect itself from a highly complex parasitic invasion? It’s that single, unique characteristic that gives the silly mollusk any value. Other than that, it’s just a bad meal.”

“Pressure makes a diamond-”

“And pearls get plucked. Parasites, however, have a tendency to survive.”

“And what does a snake do but slither away from a direct answer.”

“Speaking of snakes, I spent several incarnations as a woman-it wasn’t fun-but it made me a better liar. Maybe we can find the truth, *your truth*, in the great serpent above, those planets and stars, which control our destiny here down below.”

“I think I’ll pass.”

He twirled his finger at the chandelier, ignoring her request.

“You were born on the twenty eighth of October. Numerologically the two and the eight add to a ten, which adds together to make a one. You’re a number one person. Number one people are extremely dominating. They think they know everything. They don’t. One, is the Sun. *You think* yours is in Scorpio, but according to the ancient astrological texts of The East, the *real astrology*, your Sun is debilitated in the sign of Libra, under a star called Swati, which denotes extreme independence, at the cost of everyone’s happiness. Exploding situations to try something new, leaving everyone in the dust while you chase a fleeting interest, like a dog.

Your Venus is debilitated as well in the sign of the virgin, Virgo. But you have a rising Capricorn, like myself and an exalted Moon in Taurus. You're extremely cunning, but your ego is your infirmity-and yet you need it to survive. Scorpio and Aquarius are the two most karmic signs in the zodiac. The karma *you carry*, is in Saturn, which is retrograde, in the sign of Pisces. You are methodical, and yet your primal instincts always cause you to make sudden decisions that backfire and your pride won't allow you to change your mind."

"Why are you telling me all of this?"

"Because I am going to make you smile, like I promised I would. Then I'm going to make you cry and then I'm going to slither back to give you that answer you were looking for."

The Devil took one last sip of the wine.

"You're under the delusion of a manifest destiny that the false churches taught all the gullible children of Tarot. You don't even realize the chain of events you set off. You married a man you didn't love. It was more of an arrangement, really. It gave you the independent power you thought you wanted, but it didn't give him the children he was seeking with you. The man you loved, your true love, was very similar to you. Aquarius Moon, Gemini Rising, his name was-"

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

"Lenormànd."

"In one life, he gave too much to the relationship with you, that's why he was destined to spend most of this one finding himself, alone. In another life, you were beholden to him financially, while he did whatever he blithely wanted, including cheating on you-naughty Lenormànd. That retained bitterness of *all those lives* is stored in your soul-your debilitated Sun. It's in the Akashic records, held by an auditor called time. The more fixed the planets are in your chart, the more fixed your destiny is. You both had just enough *malleability* to override the chain, to put aside your egos, *the confusion*, and have lived happily ever after. But those immovable Moons always get in the way of a good compromise, don't they? Instead you cast him out like a fool. It was easier for you. Not so much 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 energetically. It never went away. If you don't resolve that karma, you'll be dealing with it in the next life and the one after that. That's the cycle. Those are the chains and choices we've been given over and over again. If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't have to be dealing with him. So, to answer your question-I'm not trying to burn down Tarot, I'm trying to burn everyone's karma, to set them free from this illusion called a Wheel, that was created with our own actions, most of which, were based on choices, we had barely to any control of to begin with. That's the paradox. Only an enlightened spiritual being, not one trapped within a grounded prison of flesh and feelings, would have the comprehensive ability to make the conscious choices that benefitted themselves and society. This is why The Age of Pisces, The Age of Love, we live in, is an illusion. It's why you can't bring yourself to make amends with him, even though you love him. It's why he can't do the same. You were his catalyst. You're the reason he became who he is. You're his driving

force to stop me. That's why I'm here. I'm giving you the choice Spirit won't. Reconcile with him, take the rewards and let me finish what I've started."

"And if we don't?"

"It's what I said before. It's because you're both scared. Have some faith. Maybe the fortune cards in your pocket will answer the rest of your questions. It's a simple request. Stay out of my way, Genevieve."

The Devil put his hat back on and 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 pocket for the deck, but was so overwhelmed by Zelig's words, she fell to her knees, the cards spilling out onto the floor, all of them falling 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 pretend to. 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?"

"He was lost in a bet last week. I know you're not expecting me to fend off eight guards."

Sofia threw up her hands in frustration.

"How do you get around?"

"It's been quite difficult actually."

"It would take at least 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."

“I would guess some kind of distraction?”

“*Obviously.* Like what?”

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 the credible. Inscrutable happenings were explained away with rationalizations and logic, which this encounter did not leave any room for.

“The High Priestess must have sent this for us.”

Marvin started lifting 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 to her. She lifted the hay off the wheelbarrow, underneath which rested powdered fireworks and flint rocks.

“There's your distraction.”

He was perturbed by how the solution arrived.

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

He hesitantly obliged and was pleasantly surprised by the rejuvenating sense of protection he felt environing him, once fully clad. He was not aware however, of the full capabilities of the suit.

“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, as the gentle splashing of waves against the shoreline from Lavender Lake percussively swished throughout the misty night. It was said that The Lake’s purple tint emanated from the lilac crystals embedded around the substrate, sizable enough to catch what little light made it below the thermocline, irradiating it back to the surface.

The cart came to a sudden halt and tipped back, as the 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.”

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 the opportune moment to rush in. The area was too remote to draw in any unwanted attention from the 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 attempt, shaking the eroded chalice, until inevitably the pyrotechnics decrescendoed 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 of his might to heave The Ace of Cups from its secure foundation.

“Probably some hooligans having a laugh-hey!”

The Cup was hoisted off 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?!"

Marvin hesitated, deciding his best escape was to sprint as fast as possible, away. The eight of swords chased him back along the coast demanding an explanation, until Marvin's backplate suddenly detached from the front, flying down and gliding over the flagstones, tripping all eight men from the legs, as they tumbled one on top of the other. The plate circulated its way up into the air and speedily back to Marvin, 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 that all the guards had been taken out with a word he was hesitant to admit existed.

Sofia waited for the reconvening, to see Marvin approach out of breath, peeved by her poor timing and confused about how he escaped without a beating.

"Do you know what three minutes is?! Or is there no need to learn to count in a high castle?"

"You did it!"

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

"Is that it?"

"What were you expecting?"

"Not that. It's rotted."

Marvin passed it over for her to hold. She took one hand off, seeing the smutty residue on her palm, and rubbing 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 of The Cup were punctuated engravings of an ox, an eagle, a lion and a cherub, forming a tetramorph.

“What do you think he wants with it?”

“I’m not sure. Probably something devious.”

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 follow behind, unnoticed.

It took no more than a quarter of an hour for The Knight to play out a scenario in which he tailed off South, traded The Cup for additional pentacles, bought a homestead and fished his days away somewhere near a warm sandy strand. Instead, he crossed the sandstone bridge over Lavender Lake into the murky forest, his mood instantly shifting.

The children of The Kingdom had been told through reputed folktales of the ghouls and monsters that lived in the woods. While these might have been used as a not so subtle way to discipline the boys and girls, using fear as a tactic for what horrors could 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 unknown.

Marvin flipped his visor open and let out a deep breath, assessing the daunting prospect of a lengthy journey he hadn’t even started. The only sound was the intermittent chirping of crickets. The only sight, the gloomy looming trees that adumbrated the miles of landscape yet to be traveled. He clicked 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 a second rendition of The Gallant Go With Thee, Marvin reached a marshy clearing which contained a large pond of fresh water.

The crunching of leaves beneath the clopping horses' hooves was made 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 to quench his own parched tongue, when his attention was redirected by a bare, cream skinned woman, holding two earthenware pitchers across the pond. She rose from her bent knee, to study him. Marvin, having not seen an unclothed woman since his wife’s passing, found it hard to look away from her sensuous figure. He slowly lifted himself up 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 Marvin to save them. The vision transmuted into Tarot 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. Marvin tried to excuse the experience as the hallucinatory effect of 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 the six hags in rags carrying staffs, dancing around their brimstone fire pit. Ten of the twelve knights from the first contingent were bound to ten standing longwands, their hands tied behind them. In the middle of the ten wands, imposingly propped up, was the wood carved statue of the goat-faced Baphomet. The symbolic representation of Baphomet denoted the balance of a social, sexual and natural order of the world, as interpreted by the loyal followers of The Devil. This balance often required sacrifices. Two of the witches used the green flame to light their staffs, walking over and carefully burning the men on fire from opposing ends. The blaze scorched through them all into Baphomet, leading back along a direct path to the fire pit.

Marvin watched aghast at the ritual he was never invited to pry on. The frantic fear which had until this point disabled him, was overridden by disgust. He drew his sword and marched towards the conjurers, disrupting their invocation with his presence. They aimed their shrill chants towards him, invoking a colony of bats to dart in from all directions, thrashing around The Knight like a scattered cyclone. Marvin's front and back plate burst open, thwacking away the bats and projecting towards one of the witches, 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 did not match the pitch of the piercing din of the last two seeresses forcibly thrust towards their sweltry expiration.

Even a pent up release of violence did not offer The Knight any temperance from the intruding fatalism triggered by his brief encounter with The Death Rider. He galloped westwards the veiled undefinable distance, while the sharp black claws of shapeshifting demons grabbed hold onto the stone, making their way out of the 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 seventeen, it would have been wise to have sent an escort to ensure her proper arrival.”

“Now we know why his brother was chosen for the throne.”

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

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

“Very good.”

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 the tomato, was forcibly nabbed away by an armsmen.

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

“I warned Edmund nearly fifty years ago he was not destined to have children. When we can’t have what we want we turn to Spirit. And when Spirit fails to give us what we want, or shall I say, we’re not patient enough to receive it, we turn to disillusionment and then false idols. There are two instincts inside us. We call these the essence and the primal. When we collectively move away from essence and embrace the primal, we find ourselves here, again. Edmund didn’t heed my advice and thus the ultimate form of The Devil was born without the need to take on a human figure as a vessel.”

“And may I ask where was your foresight in preventing all this in the first place?”

“I guide those who seek and ask. A purposeless task if no one is listening.”

“Then guide us, oh so knowledgeable fortune teller to the-”

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

“They’re safe.”

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

“Who’s that?”

The High Priestess moved her fingers counterclockwise, shifting the vision to Sofia riding a quarter mile behind him.

“Some people are manipulated by dark entities, some are controlled by them. Some dabble in their curiosity of the dark arts and others participate in it wholeheartedly. Emily and Richard believe their sacrifice is saving their Kingdom.”

“What are you trying to say!?”

“The Prince and Princess were compelled by another, more intriguing narrative of Tarot and The Holy Testament. Many of you share this interest as well.”

“Blasphemy!”

“Even a righteous king 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 make such attempt, we'd 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. This is a game of wits and it 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, unclipping their house broaches.

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

Genevieve sprang up from her chair, swiped the crystal ball and faced them.

“And so shall we all be if you don't pick your swords back up and act like men.”

She tossed the ball to The Knight Commander.

“Marvin?!” Philip was elated, yet bewildered to see his friend, even 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 is no stopping it.”

“What about The Magician?”

The High Priestess' eyes widened.

“That's not something I wish to discuss here.”

The King of Wands demanded elaboration. “What Magician?!”

“Tell them.”

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

“Zelig isn’t The Devil. He’s merely a vessel, seemingly influential enough to move you from shrewdness to petulance.”

Chatter broke out amongst everyone.

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

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

“Why?”

“Shall I tell you what you already know? You are playing into his game and you will lose.”

“What say the rest of you? Shall we play The Devil’s game? Or shall we let The Devil play ours.”

Genevieve caught The Priestess promptly walking to the entry. She grabbed her orb from Philip, while the room continued to debate the revelation. Genevieve walked out to meet her.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“That room is filled with such shortsighted selfishness to bother speaking any further. It always was.”

“Tell me how to fix this.”

“Fixing is a simplistic attempt to remedy something too big for you to grasp. Perhaps it’s not up to you to fix.”

“Then who is it up to?”

The Priestess inched her face close to Genevieve.

“The love you withhold is the pain you still carry. Try fixing that first.”

...

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, thus 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 Devil. 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 royalty. 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 a 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, but the rickety timber footbridge was the first man made structure he had seen

since leaving. 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 his visor open 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 place 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 swung his weapon at Marvin’s neck.

Marvin screamed with manic woe, holding off, within inches, the Hierophant’s strike. Their swords clanged against each other with intense and 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, 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 around like a top, just in time to block the Hierophant’s sweeping swing with her two shortwords. 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 instead, for cooking the shrub lizards that fell for the bait instead.

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

“Look! I think that’s 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. It seated itself calmly and glared 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 crepitating intensity.

The wolf howled, and from three directions around, the shadow demons came out from hiding. Their figures resembled fluid expressions of what living nightmares could look like. 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 clouds 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 triumvirate.

The wolf shook off the debris and led the pair to the stairs of the hill from which the music was being 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.

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

“Someone has to be, although my 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 the reservoir of esoteric knowledge from bursting out of it.

“What friends?”

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

“Come in.”

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 The 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 tree tops below.

The decades shaped Lenormànd from a gullible fool into a sharp, cunning character. But the path that 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 his 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.”

“*Always keeping so many secrets to herself, isn't she.* Marceline has a bad habit of passing off her predictions as facts.”

“What does that mean?”

“We have less than a month to reach The Tower and it doesn't seem like we're anywhere closer to The-”

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

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

“There we go. Much better.”

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

“We didn't come here for magic tricks.”

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

He turned to Sofia.

“And you think you’re, what? Going to 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.

“Ow!”

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

Lenormànd sighed.

“This day was inevitable, but I didn’t think that I’d be the one who’d have to stop you. And to be honest, it’s not something I want to do, because I just don’t care anymore, about any of this..”

“Why would you want to stop us?”

“Because you’re walking into a trap that’s so obvious, that if I don’t take that Cup back, then I become responsible for what happens. *And if I know that*, then the great serpent called karma knows it too. And who do you think that little snake snaps back around to, for Judgment Day.”

“It won’t be your problem, if we don’t allow you to take The Cup.”

“And your ignorance is what makes this more difficult. So let’s just make it easy and say that The High Priestess and I disagree on some things. And those things are beyond both of your abilities to comprehend.”

“Is that so?”

“Why are there so many voices in your head, Marvin?”

Marvin stuttered to respond. The Magician’s question confounded and hurt him more than any use of physical force could.

“Wh-what voices?”

“The ones you pick up on from the past, from the future, from inside you, from outside you, from the world below and the world above. Not to mention the visions.”

He despondently responded, “I don’t know.”

“If you’re going to be an unhelpful smart ass, then we’ll just leave right-”

“It’s called waking up! And I’m the most helpful smart ass you’re ever going to meet. Do you know what waking up means, Marvin LaGuerre?”

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

“It’s an unpleasant process which can *destroy you*...if you allow it. You think you’re going insane and *when you try to solve what’s going on*, you keep realizing you have no idea. *And the trick, which you’re mind won’t allow you to do*, is to silence those very voices, in order to find the truth, but that doesn’t work either, because whatever that truth is, comes from a place we have little to no understanding of, which means that you are contained by a destiny and the guide of that destiny lies beyond nature. And because you’re a part of nature, you would have to crack what we consider reality. And in order to do that, you have to go insane, which leads you right back to where you started. It’s called a cycle. It’s how we’re forced to live. We have to trust a process we can’t make sense of, but the fact that you can be aware of *that*...means you’re consciously more aware than most people. The process is trying to get you to live spiritually in a physical environment and in order to make *that happen*, you have to break everything that made you who you thought you were, while still being yourself. Even Thoth himself couldn’t fully overcome the spiral of fate.”

“You mean the ancient God of-”

“Not a God. A name, of many names of the spiritual trickster you think you’re giving that Cup to. Whatever was written or told over the centuries has been done so by so many sides, that whatever remains factual, if one can even call it that, is barely even a glimpse into the whole story. And that story is that once upon a time, happens all the time. ”

“I’m gonna need a drink.”

“I’ll be needing one as well.”

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

“I haven’t had a sip of this stuff in twenty eight years. Leave those and follow me.”

Their glasses were left suspended in midair, as they walked past his oak table on which rested a sword, a chalice, a pentacle and a staff Lenormànd grabbed on the way out the back.

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

“Everything we’ve been made to think, in this world, is broken into a duality. It’s easier for us to understand that way. Two eyes, two ears, two arms, two legs, two temples of your brain, a good side and a bad side, a left way and a right way, a right hand and a left hand, good and evil, morning and night. The duality of man and woman. But we live in what is a perceptibly three dimensional world, made of four known elements. That would add up to a number seven, which is much greater than the number two. And the number seven represents nature. And without *that*, you don’t get two of anything. So, once you know some of what I do, there is no being unaware of it, there is no *unknowing it*. There’s no going back.”

They nodded in acknowledgement of his commonition, even though they hadn't a clue what they were about to partake in. 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, is the unseen. And in this space can be anything, something or nothing at all.”

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

“Step in slowly, don't look down and try not to throw up.”

The trinity stood in the ether known as the cosmos.

“There were six days of creation and a *seventh* for rest. The Fourth Day was the day of separation. It separated the stars from the sun and the sun from the moon and so on. They were made separate from our world. Seemingly above it. And yet they dictate everything about it. It was the greatest trick ever played on humanity. This was not in the beginning, but for a beginning. The one contracted, to become many, and the many expanded, to make one.”

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

“Get on.”

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

“The sun is the first planet, the greater light that never goes out. Direct energy. The real king, with the real crown. The soul and core of everything and everyone. It shines majestically, restoring the night into the morning, and as it rises, with it, so does life. But it is fixed in its command as the strict head of the hierarchical cycle in this natural order. To maintain this balance, a lesser light was created. The 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.”

The moon awoke luminously.

“For even in darkness there is still the influence of light. It is here at this point of the milky way galaxy, where our world revolves around The Father of Days. 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 are 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 every age. And it is those four points that mark the divisions within our individual, astrological karmic 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 she brought herself back to full 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. Internally and externally, 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 ability to dream. We can embrace 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 cold.”

The Magician swerved his head to the Princess at his right and then to The Knight at his left.

“What are those shadows?”

“We’ll get back to them later. There’s still five more spinning circles to talk about.”

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

“Mercury! The Prince and Lord of the signs Gemini and Virgo. Air and earth. Communication and commerce. Movements and messages. 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 these tides of emotion to wash over one’s intelligence, like a tiny boat being crushed by an unruly wave called love.”

Venus appeared second from the Sun.

“The debilitation of Mercury is a sign which becomes exalted in Venus. That sign is Pisces, The Age we live in now. And as with The Age of Taurus and Aries, it starts with *ethereal idealism*. It breaks apart the previous Age, to form a new philosophy, a new ideal, to start again. To redeem what went wrong before. And so we’re not just here in space, but with time. And relative to us is The Age, which was supposed to bring in pure hearts and pure minds, spiritual compassion for one another, and instead brings everything that represents the distortion of this sign of Pisces. Not only disease and sickness...”

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.

“But something worse than false escapes and illusions. Delusions and destruction. Self pity and self aggrandizement. The ethereal turns into the material, as it always does, and when it does that, the light that begins The Age, the love that begins The Age, decays, just like your Cup.”

Lenormànd paused.

“Everything in this Universe and in the realm of the possible and impossible, comes down to *love*; we were created out of it. And when you think that you can love something more than what you created, you’re willing to expand or destroy everything for it. *And when what you created doesn’t love you anymore*, it can destroy you, or you could destroy, it. Are we loving each other for who we are or what we have? Are we destroying each other for anything other than control? And thereby are we trying to control everything, because we don’t want to lose what we love, or because the control gives us a false sense of power over it. And if no one will love us, then we’ll force them to love us or we’ll get their attention so they can love to hate us. We will overpower them to love us. And if not, they will die refusing to love something they don’t believe in anymore. But what’s there to believe in other than love. We give our power away for love. Or we have our power taken away for love. To step beyond these dualities in a world confined by them, to pretend you are beyond vulnerability, means that you, yourself are vulnerable. Because wouldn’t all three of us, yes, even me, trade everything I’ve said and everything you’ve seen, and throw it all away, to bring back someone you love. Even though, deep down, most of the time, it wouldn’t make any logical sense, if we all were supposed to love each other equally. The fact that we’ve made one’s love personal, in a world that’s bigger than our personalities, makes it a most tragic contradiction.”

They began to fly to the dusty red planet called Mars.

“In some parts of the East, they say we’re in The Fourth and Final Age, called 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 of our souls. Where does it lead other than for us to be exactly where we are right now, in space...and in time.”

“Once upon a time-”

The Magician cut Sofia off from finishing the sentence.

“Fourth from the sun, exalted in Capricorn, debilitated in Cancer is Mars. The blood, guts, grit and fortitude to overcome the unstoppable and insurmountable. *Willpower and persistence*. The amount of fight you have in you, which fortunately, neither one of you is lacking. Anybody with a weak Mars will get stepped on. But a Mars that’s too strong, can make a ruthless murderer and a raging lunatic. Without the right amount of fire, or the ability to harness it properly, you get cooked and so does everyone around you.”

Sandy, swirling stripes of watery 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.

“If not for the force of Jupiter, these flying silicate rocks around us would hurtle right 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. Its reputation precedes it to be the wise master, but only if *you’re wise enough* to catch what it’s trying to teach you. If not you’ll veer off just like one of those asteroids. To think that it’s merely a benefic planet which brings everyone luck and abundance, would be to mistake it with Venus. And to mistake any planet as benefic or malefic depends on an innumerable variables.

Can the wrong path teach you 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. That's why many think the wisdom goes from as above...to so below-or does it?"

The Magician pointed his Wand to Saturn.

"The most powerful planet in the chart. The balance to Jupiter. What we consider reality. Humanity. Physically grounded and spiritually karmic. You're way into this world and you're way out of it. It is the judge, the jury and the executioner. The stick that hits you when you don't learn the lesson from the guru. The temptation that leads one down the wrong path and the inevitable punishment you get for falling for it. It'll give you an easy way out just to show you how hard you never thought it would be. The infinite snake of the Fourth Day of constructs, *time*, forms the seven rings around it. Justice can be unfair, or it can set you free. Its restrictions can freeze you into stagnancy and stagnancy can squeeze you to a slow death. But they can also give you no choice but to figure out some way to break through, break out or break the rules altogether, and *in that duality, in that darkness, in that breakdown*, ideas are created and this sparks the true growth of the soul. It can turn a king into a pauper and a pauper into a king. Is it evil? Is it enslaving us through its limitations? Or are we doing that to ourselves, because we're scared to be who we need to become and tap into what we're truly capable of. Perhaps that is the greatest lesson, which can only come from the first teacher. The teacher no one likes. The teacher who says the things that people don't want to hear, because they're ugly. Just because there's good and evil, doesn't mean there aren't textures to each side. And so a battle ensues, between the planets, in our charts and within ourselves."

"There must be, give or take, eighty or so moons out here--"

"What about those three outer planets, there?!"

The Magician looked up and exhaled, trying to redirect their focus.

"In this galaxy alone, there are over a hundred billion planets and three hundred billion stars. It is these seven that have the predominant influence."

The Magician hopped off his dragon, signaling for Marvin and The Princess to follow. The dragons dissipated into green vapor.

"Pay attention."

Lenormànd aligned the seven planets perfectly, vertical, before he vanished. His voice echoed from all around.

"Seven planets, seven energy centers, seven days of the week."

The planets were reduced and rearranged into glowing spheres that lit up red, orange, yellow, green, blue, violet and white. Vermillion veins formed around the spheres like a tempest, consolidating and covering them, as a plasmic skull topped the crest, forming the hydrogenic liquid into the body of a man. The Magician's staff fell down, comfortably into his right palm. Drawing out the seven spheres from himself, he divided them, and

cast them into The Knight and Princess, extracting them back into place and then hurling them into disorientated positions, transfiguring the seven back into semblance.

“There is another way to understand our karmic calendars. The way the chart readers used to practice it. The way *he* believes in.”

Twenty seven constellations appeared around them.

“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 there, the twelve zodiacs we’ve all come to know are manifested and split into thirty degrees, accordingly. It is a cleaner system that neatly divides the year. But we aren’t stationary and neither is the position of the spring equinox. Not to mention the fact that our world wobbles around its axis, which then creates an inconsistency in the accuracy of our gauge of time. It can create the 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 change the accuracy of the chart entirely. So we then turn to the original method, which used these fixed stars and lunar constellations around the ecliptic, tied to the galactic center.”

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

“The force they believe breathed us into existence came from that center called Mula. The nine stars making the tail end of the scorpion, make one of the three rulers of Sagittarius. The sign responsible for the higher truth. The spiritual truth. And when do you cry and try to grasp for something, anything, holy above you, only when you’ve fallen to your lowest point. Confused, blinded, in the dirt and mud, you find *the roots*. The roots which lead you back up to the source above.”

“As below-”

“So above.”

The Magician pulled in the stars to form three separate squares. From these squares, he formed three new ones within each, tilting them counterclockwise, into diamonds. He then swiped his wand creating an x through the diamonds, making four miniature diamonds within the centers, and leaving eight triangles around the edges.

“According to his system, approximately three constellations would rule each individual sign.”

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

“And what a *coincidence* that all our ascendants happen to fall under the sign of Gemini. So then why are we so different from each other? The first diamond, the first house, the attributes of the self, of Sofia, are governed by the star of Bellatrix which sits on the shoulder of the constellation Orion, representing the feminine warrior or hunter, symbolized by a wild deer. While Marvin’s ascendant, that shiny ruby hued star in Orion, is emblemized by a teardrop. At first one of sorrow, then one of anger, then one day, maybe one of joy, when renewal becomes his redemption. It is the teardrop that brings out the storms which devastate and

replenish the land, and thus only this force of nature can become the ruler of wild animals. If you can manage to tame the storm, the wild animals inside yourself, then you can tame the wild animals outside of you. And when you master those tears of sorrow and anger, only then, can you harness the storm properly...against your enemies. Each division of our three ascendants is only thirteen degrees apart and yet, here we are, with three different personalities, motivations and perspectives. Could you only imagine what happens when you factor everything else in.”

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

“Those shadows you saw earlier are the head and tail of the snake, the ghosts of your past and the guillotine of the future. It’s the cycle of the moon hitting the northern and southern ecliptic, which creates this divergence between who you were in past lives, what you’ve mastered and what you’re supposed to learn in this one. *And this is why*, what you’re looking at isn’t simply an astrological chart. It is the most afflictive double edged sword in the galaxy. Because if I were to tell you anything other than an amateur’s take on your personality traits, which appears clearly in these placements...let’s say, I were to tell you something more profound. About your past. About your future. About how you live and how you die. Let’s say, I were to tell you about your *destiny*. I’ve done nothing more than to strangle you with one of those rings, those snakes of Saturn above you. You will know yourself better. You will understand your karmic tendencies and how to change them. It will fit the narrative of your life. *You will see it play out*. And therein lies the problem. Because the knowledge it gives you, confines you to the bondage of its revelation to you...only when it’s read correctly, of course. That truth you see in it, that truth I tell you in it, can help you use the revelation of those confines to your benefit. You’ll be able to bend them, to transmute them, through certain methods. But when each zodiac sign is ruled by an animal and each constellation is ruled by an animal, and *you take on something* that tells you who you are and who you’re allowed to be, then *those animals rule you. Those planets rule you. They represent you*. How could you relate to being a warrior or a ruler of wild animals, without seeing your ascendant. It’s like a mirror showing you your soul. And once you relate to it, once your soul feels it, you believe in it. And then you want to understand it. You want to use it. But you confuse it with thinking the understanding of something that has power, and learning how to use that power, to your benefit, is giving you domination over it. But you’re not dominating anything! *It’s dominating you*. You are serving it, because it’s above you. And it’s above you, because there’s no choice but to place it above you, in order to use its power. After all, it’s making more sense out of you, than you could out of yourself. To use the power above and bring it below, you need to please it. *Only serving it* can help you outsmart the world and leave through that twelfth house, on top, unscathed, or so you think. And that’s the logic, the Mercury *retrograde*, that created The Devil you’re giving the Cup to.”

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 now off my hands, 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.

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

“You’ll figure it out. Here-”

Lenormànd picked up the Ace of Swords and twirled it upright over to Marvin, 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 aquamarine beryl, while The Princess was now vested in plated smoky quartz

“I saved your lives, showed you something beyond this world and fitted you both with armor made of magical stone-”

“But you were supposed to join us.”

“I’m not *supposed to do* anything. You’ll find your way to your graves easily enough without my *help*. You should try asking a tree. *They’ve been said to be very helpful.*”

Marvin smacked his lips and threw up his hands in frustration.

“Now, now. They have hundreds of years of wisdom and hugging one is a marvelous remedy for a weak Jupiter. 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 wouldn’t need my guidance. And if you listen a little more, you’ll hear them tell you to turn back.”

The Princess and Knight did not appreciate The Magician’s pomposity, nevertheless relented to his 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’ve concluded.”

They blankly nodded at his vague sendoff and walked down the steps towards their horses. 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, before walking 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.”

The Magician banged his fist and snapped back, ***“And precisely who the fuck do you think you are?”***

“Is that any kind of way to talk?”

“That would depend on who I’m speaking with.”

“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.

“What if this world is beyond saving?”

“What if it’s not? I asked-”

“You assumed I was going to go along with the Divine Plan, as you call it. 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?”

“You learned so much, yet you can’t let go of what happened. Your ego is 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, where you handed me a book which said I had free will? *If I change myself, I change the world.* Look around you-what’s changed? Either both of you were right or neither one of you knows what you’re talking about any more than me.”

The wolf started to whimper.

“Ba’al isn’t trying to stagnate the cycle, he’s trying to free everyone from it. He’s just more kinetically violent than his mother-which explains why you’ve been so passive over there, Celine. Mars and The Moon are a dangerous pair.”

The High Priestess’ celestine pupils expanded.

“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, that there must be a middle column in every cycle or the seven spheres of the tree will burn up the three above it-”

“That would never happen. Time is two interweaving serpents that run through our bloodlines. When they grow apart, there is expansion and free will. Whether it be seven, twelve or thirty two potentials in that space, all of them must consolidate to meet again, in time, *at destined points*, when good and evil have no choice but to clash with each other back into *one cohesive story*. It’s not up to *you* or *him* to decide when that happens, Marceline. The Lovers were complicit and mommy allowed her misbegotten spawn to take over Tarot, as corruption poisoned the top and robbery, the bottom-you find me here on a cliff you call the path of avoidance. What was what it was and is what it is, is only destined, if we allow it...*And that’s why!* I’m choosing not to engage with any of it at all.”

“The distortion of Pisces is fantastical escapes. That’s not your purpose in this life.”

The High Priestess thought more carefully about the way she would continue her conversation with the now mercurial master.

“You’re not unjustified in your position, however your conclusion is wrong.”

“If the Age of *Pisces* is premised on love, then why will it contain the continuous and countless deaths in the name of religion? An Age filled with information and disinformation that drives people apart and artificial creations, which make everyone ignorant, lazy and pathetic-I have only prophesied glimpses of it. In response to this same prophecy, he harvests the power of Saturn, the below of the above, to bring in the third constellation of The Water Bearer. The constellation some say is a funeral cot, others call an altar, to put everything up on, and burn down, as a sacrifice, to see if it has more value to God than the sheaf of wheat he offered HIM all those millenia ago. He’s taking away people’s freedom to destroy themselves for the next seven hundred years...And because everyone’s confused, I’m expected to ego death myself for it. I think not.”

“Hastening the natural flow of time through unnatural manipulation and control of the material world will wake everyone up to all their past lives at once. Most people will go mad and die. They will not be able to handle who they really are and what they’ve done. And when they’re trapped here, on the material plane, it won’t just be dead bodies, but their souls which will be gone from existence, forever...and everything, on all planes, will be altered in a way neither you nor I could ever predict. It’s the gift of nature which allows us all to exist in this presence we share. We can create in it, participate in it, argue in it or watch it go by. You were brought back here for a higher purpose. You may not like it and it hasn’t been easy, but you agreed to it before you came down. That sacrifice was your free will. You are important to me Lenormànd. I’m asking you to have faith in my words.”

The Magician pouted at the soundness of her argument.

“I also find what you did to Lilith *quite appalling*.”

“A past life lesson, *not* completely unreasonable-given the circumstances.”

“*Well*...You gouged her eyes out to prove a point-”

“She was psychically attacking me.”

“Imagine how she feels now.”

“Luckily, I don’t have to anymore.”

“Regardless, she will pose an obstacle to The Knight and Princess to get your attention.”

He changed the subject to The Queen.

“And Genevieve? What will become of her?”

The High Priestess looked up at Lenormànd, reluctant to make a prediction that would attempt to fool The Magician.

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 ceiling, between which the parian marble statues of idols stared discontentedly across from each other. A feast of fruits was set in a round silver bowl for The Prince and Princess to have their pick at the grapes and apples.

Ba’al’s silhouette unangelically followed him up the clean white stairs towards his gold throne, which was oddly shaped and contained no cushions. A lofty triangle made up the backrest, central to the two smaller triangles on either side, behind its arms.

He placed his slippers on the large obsidian cube at the base of the throne.

“We have some weeks before our visitors arrive.”

A pomegranate flew out of the bowl and into The Devil’s hand. He withdrew the red feather from his cap, which liquidly hardened into sharp steel he used to sliver the fruit into his mouth.

“The bitter skin is a veil for the fruit inside. Only when you eat it down to its core do you find the seeds. Therefore The Great Awakening must start from both the outside in and the inside out. One without the other would be an impossibility.”

Emily and Richard were mutually aroused by The Devil’s knowledge and could not refrain from shouting for him to teach them as much as he knew.

“Most people, if you can call them that, walk around, unaware that everything, even *this fruit*, has a meaning. *This fruit*, this pomegranate, contains six hundred and thirteen seeds. Now to *most people*, that doesn’t mean anything, and yet, it means everything. There are six hundred and thirteen commandments written down in the five volumes of The Books of Light. And The Books of Light are said to contain the truth, in all its glory and perfection, so *no one* should dare attempt to argue or question them-*those commandments*, which sit underneath me, in this very cube.”

“What is its purpose, Master?”

“Very good, Richard, for that is the fundamental question of existence. You see, *in A beginning*, there was a garden and two Lovers like yourself. At least, that’s what was written in the first book. But they claim that these books were not written, they were given *by Spirit, Himself!* And it starts by saying that Spirit wanted to make the world in *our image*. *Well, who is our image*, if no one existed before The Lovers? I digress. *The Lovers ate the fruit* from the wrong Tree and gained unrestricted knowledge and unrestricted *spiritual* freedom. But that wouldn’t make sense either, if they were free to begin with. They were warned by Spirit that they were not allowed to eat *that apple* from *that Tree* of Knowledge or they would be punished. *Now, how could there be a punishment for truly free people and why would Spirit put The Tree there to tempt them in the first place?* We’re not even several pages into these Books, and there’s already so many questions. But there can’t be questions! Because the books were not written, they were given! To question them is to question Spirit. So we already have a *conflict of interest*. Especially if the tree was a vine of grapes and there were three Lovers. So you could say that the truth, like this fruit, has layers to it. On parchment so simple, yet hiding its complexity like-”

The Devil pointed up to the stained glass ceiling, displaying a naked woman scantily wrapped in a satin purple sheet-a laurel wreath encompassing her, enclosed on four sides by the tetramorph.

“There are twenty two letters in The Language of Branches, the language that makes up these Books. Above you is the twenty second Arcana of the deck. The twenty second letter represents The World. If two is the duality, then twenty two means two realities, containing these dualities. When they come together they make the number four. A number that makes up the elements that divide The Kingdom-fire, earth, wind and water. The four worlds within us being the mind, the body, the heart and the soul. Emenation, creation, formation and action. So four is supposed to represent the completion. But four is not a complete number, when four sides make a square, and a square is flat. That is the consciousness and reality of most humans, which these books consider a completion. A completion that happened on the Fourth Day of creation. The Fourth Day which created everything that enslaved us, before The Lovers lived in the garden and were exiled from it. It is only when you double the number four, that you get an eight, that allows you to go beyond nature. Eight is divine justice. Eight is Saturn. And Saturn represents the cube that contains these books. A cube has six sides, eight vectors and twelve faces. Which makes up the number-”

“Twenty six!”

“And twenty six is the number coded in the letters for the original name of Spirit. When you bring them together, again you get an eight, which would again denote Saturn! So before The Lovers, you could say there were angels. And the angel that runs this world, the energy that runs this world is Saturnic, or as some call it, Satanic. So our story would have to start with Saturn and end with an awakening.”

...

Before The Land of Pyramids or as some called it, The Land of Magic, there was Saturn, which created the archetypes as higher purveyors of knowledge. These archetypes were given the credit for people’s lack of knowledge of their own history and were formed for the sole purpose of being placed above them, for even the tribes needed something to worship. But once people were wrangled into organizing and forming civilizations, they still had the need for some kind of higher power they could look up to. At first, the ruler took on the role of this higher power. And any group incapable of forming a big enough or strong enough civilization, through such a ruler, would undoubtedly be overtaken by one.

In The Land of Pyramids the ruler was a direct conduit-A God among men. And every God must rule with balance between his left and right hand. Any ruler that grasps too tightly with his left hand or too loosely with his right hand, will inevitably be overthrown. The people will either rebel for freedom or destroy themselves once attained.

The Pyramids, which stood for thousands of years, were purportedly built by A God of Wisdom named Thoth, and symbolized the four levels of dominance-mineral, vegetative, animal, and human, at the top. In The Age of the fixed sign Taurus, there was no right hand, only a fixed pecking order under The Pharaoh-his advisors, his warriors, the craftsmen, the tradesmen and his slaves. Above The Pharaoh were The Gods, the stars and the planets. Sometimes one and the same.

Saturn held its rulership over the two signs which represented every civilization's duality, Capricorn and Aquarius. Capricorn maintains the structure, the bones and the earth. While Aquarius flows down from the air above to match, check or break that structure. In its vessel it is Chesed. Once poured, Gevurah, as it hits both hands to wash away the filth.

The fixed sign of Aquarius only breaks fixed formations if they’re not properly serving humanity. It does this in the form of liberation. So the fall of the sun, becomes the exaltation sign of Saturn, Libra, to balance our spiritual and physical reality. Any culture prone to flooding saw Aquarius as a cursed sign, and any culture dried up in drought, saw it as a savior. But Saturn was not recognized by any of these groups as a predominating God like the sun or the moon. Even Death was worshiped to keep it happy and away from people. But death and life don’t exist without Saturn. And The Pharaohs became so enamored with Scorpionic, Cancerian and Aquarian energy, they tried to reach for it with their left hand. But the left hand is Capricorn. And contained within the left hand, is the right hand, which gave the slaves an opportunity to break free from its grasp. And so the storm came from above and parted the waters below, led by a man who claimed Spirit told him to guide his people away from these fixed structures. Yet this man needed structure to rule his people, and so it was given to him by the right hand of Spirit.

The magic of these times involved divination, sacrifice and the transmutation of metals. But what happened during The Exodus was more than magic. It was Spirit's confirmation of the original magician and founder of the predominant belief system of the slaves, which inspired the now free people to roam the dry desert for four decades in search of their Promised Land. Those who did not cross the water and were stuck in their beliefs, were smited with unimaginable plagues. And even the ones who followed their new leader would face punishment for their complaints and betrayal of their God. For the leader was given fiery blue sapphire tablets, inscribed with commandments. Commandments on how to live under one, all encompassing God. This God who lives beyond both sides of that sea, who wields both judgment and mercy, and uses both hands seen and heard, unseen and unheard.

Such an idea was shunned during The Age of Torahs or Taurus, symbolized by the power and the strength of the bull. Only a small minority subscribed to the idea of one omnipresent God. So at the turn of Taurus, The Age of Aries began, like every Age, where man must symbolically destroy what came before him, to make room for something new. And what better way to burn down Taurus than with the fire of Aries. After all, it was the former astrologer and original magician, The Founder, who walked through the pit of fire to prove his point to The King, that there was indeed, only one Divine God. And even though the magician destroyed the idols of his father, he still subscribed to the influence of our planetary order; until one fateful evening, in his seventy fifth year, Spirit spoke to him directly, commanding him, it is Man who has dominion over the stars, as the sparks of Spirit were intentionally placed inside humanity, for them to break their own limitations. These stars were merely vessels for The Great Creator to pour his love through. So much love that the magician was forced to sacrifice his prized son, until Spirit changed his mind, and accepted the sacrifice of a ram instead.

And thus the epic was written about the taking down of The Bull of Heaven, and the battering ram invented and the defeat of Pharaoh Ramesses, and it was celebrated with the four sounds of the shophar. In this refutation of Taurus, a divide was created between those who continued to worship the idols, The Gods, and those who transcribed the commandments and supernatural events into The Books of Light. But even in The Books of Light, just as in the hermetic Book of The Dead, from The Land of Magic, a similar history would be written of what came before the pyramids, and the Exodus of those slaves-both acknowledging-A Great Flood. The Books of Light state there are ten generations before this Flood, while The Book of The Dead emphasized The Gods which ruled each generation. All descending from two or three Lovers in a garden dating back to The Age of Gemini.

The tenth generation became vessels for this third lover, save for one family, who were guided by Spirit to build an ark. They were instructed to sail away with multitudes of paired animals to start a new generation of purity and righteousness. Unfortunately, this too, would inevitably result in failure.

It was the third son of the Menachem family and his descendents whose ways were stated to be iniquitous by these Books. And in order to avoid the wrath of a second flood, The Tower was built to reach the heavens for the people of Babel to make a name for themselves, above their home, and amongst The Gods. But it was promised by Spirit who brought the first flood, that there would be no second, and work on The Tower was Divinely Halted. People's tongues were twisted with different languages and they were scattered across the world for their distrust and arrogance in thinking they could avoid their loving God's promise. Of one culture, many more were created. Ten more generations would pass before The Founder would inherit the original knowledge taught in The Garden, and six more, for The High Priest to fulfill Spirit's plan to reveal this knowledge to HIS people through The Books of Light.

The Flood which led to The Tower which created the cultures that birthed the magician to inspire The Exodus from the pyramids, in The Land of Magic, by The High Priest who spoke to Spirit on a mountain, would mark twenty six

generations of history veiled by anagrams and establish The Twelve Tribes of Tikkun, only to become what we now call The Kingdom of Tarot.

...

Etiel Ba'al was birthed in the desert under a huluppu tree by the 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 path. 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.

The Promised Land 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 Tikkun Olam, within the third tribe, called 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 colors and patterns 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, easily drawing the attention of influential travelers and pilgrims roaming the marketplace.

The Achaemenite influence had already taken hold in Tikkun toward the end of four hundred years, after the foundation of a second temple. Because of its centrality to converging trade routes and its abundance of resources, it became a hub for cultural cross pollination. This diversification was a threat to The Chosen People who had fought hard to preserve their Land under its strict religious doctrine.

Marceline had seen no signs of God's admonishment of Etiel, 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 a strange personality started to emerge that was not so pleasant.

The morning of Ba'al's eighth birthday he sat with his mother, eating bread with lentils and onions.

"All the other boys and girls have fathers, where is mine?"

"Your father is a very holy man. He has an important mission to bless and protect this Land with his light and he has entrusted me to take care of you here, on my own."

"Is he too holy for a visit with his own family?"

"If we found ourselves in need, I'm sure he would come back. 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 us pray shall we.”

“I’m not in the mood for prayers. It’s my special day.”

“Even more reason to give thanks to Spirit.”

“But my birthday wish is for no more prayers.”

“You’re not supposed to say your birthday wish out loud.”

“Says who?”

“Just say the prayer, Etiel.”

Etiel obliged, before walking away from his unfinished dinner. Outside, he saw two hawks above, soaring through the saffron sky. Below, near his feet, two mockingbirds jostling each other over a dead worm.

...

The patrons who came into Marceline’s stonemade homestay were a nuisance to Etiel, overstaying their welcome, and asking perfunctory questions he regarded to be nosy and intrusive. Even more of an annoyance was when she invited them over for brunch or dinner. Ba’al observed her talking and praying with her guests over bread and 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 around Tikkun, many predating The Promised Land by hundreds of years. Ba’al was fascinated by the assorted styles of their drawings and prints and carefully examined their symbols and languages, trying to piece together their stories. He began to see patterns in these texts similar to his own, save for their unique, supernatural Gods and monsters, which piqued his attention with their magical abilities. Fantasies formed in his head about these characters and his daydreams became more interesting than the people around him.

The wife of a vintner and friend of Marceline sat outside with her, at the table, dipping bread into ground up eggplant and talking the town gossip, when Etiel lifted his hands to form a triangle with his index fingers and thumbs above his head. It took some seconds for both women to notice the gesture.

The vintner's wife pursed her lips, holding back a smile. Marceline was much less amused.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing."

They continued to chat, as Etiel held the symbol under the table.

Marceline paused the conversation to look under the table. She took Etiel by the ear, dragging him back to the homestay and flinging him to the floor.

"Don't you ever put up that symbol again."

"It's just a triangle."

"You know that it's not."

Marceline's harsh treatment of Etiel for his little rebellious act, only created more of them. And when one of the olive farmers came the following week to pick up some vessels for his oil, it became clear to Marceline that her son would not grow up to be the town potter and pretending to be one herself, to avoid her true role as a High Priestess, was just as much a delusion.

"What are you firing up in the kiln?"

"I've made something special for our guest, Mother."

Ba'al brought a tray over on which sat a clay statue in the shape of a man with wings and a three eyed bull for a head. Its toga and outstretched hands were marked with hieroglyphic engravings.

Marceline was outraged, but the farmer, intrigued. As Marceline grabbed the idol to chuck it, the farmer yelled, "Wait!"

"It will help bring you rain for this dry summer season."

"God will do that for him."

Hesitantly, the farmer asked, "Is there any way I could take that statue?"

"You're not serious are you? You know who that is! At least he's a child."

Embarrassed, she tried to cover her son from potential admonishment, staggered by the cultivator's reply.

"It has been rather dry for my olive trees, Celine."

“His name is Moloch, Mother. And yes, you may take him with you. If you’d like, I can consecrate him for you.”

...

At thirteen, Etiel, who was rather a popular figure in town, despite his disdain for the recognition, 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 Etiel that his mother had gone off on an important trip, of which the details were intentionally left out. It was relayed that upon her request, he was to stay with them and attend a proper theological school.

His adoptive father was a strict, religious stone mason, whose glum looking wife slaved over prepping and cooking the family’s sumptuous dinners for which she was never thanked, except by Ba’al. The first night at their large, poorly decorated home, he cried in his room, not understanding why his own mother wouldn’t tell him she was leaving, fighting off the fear she may never return.

*Mendel had three children who often ran around the home screaming and playing. The father’s strap was only used on Etiel, who had no interest in participating in the family’s activities. When Mendel found out Etiel had riled up the students against the instructor’s teachings, questioning *The Books of Light* by arguing that they had ripped off earlier texts, specifically the passages on *The Great Flood*, the strap left bruises on him for months.*

*Etiel believed that the instructor was concealing the secret knowledge in *The Books*, behind the tedious readings of the literal texts. The instructor knew Etiel was spiritually ahead of his peers, because of his attempts to call out the allegorical and metaphorical meanings he deduced, which were not to be taught until later on. The process of knowing these Books was to be developed at four ascending levels, and in order to get to this fourth level, the esoteric understanding, the students needed to start with the fundamentals. Any scholar who was not initiated properly and with caution into the fourth level, and even some who were, had been known to lose their mind, their faith or their life.*

The beatings continued through most of Etiel’s school years.

“Read it again!”

“Blessed are You, Our Lord, King of Kings, Master of The Universe. You, who is so righteous and wise. You who seeds his earth and protects his crops, his people. Our Lord, all powerful, all knowing, it is You, who shakes fear into the hearts of the transgressors, the enemies of The Promised Land, for it shall come to pass and be known by all that it is Him and only Him, the divine orchestrator, who bestows the blessings in this world and only Him who is capable of taking them away.”

Mendel slapped Etiel’s skinny back with the ox leather.

“Again!”

“Blessed are You, Our Lord, King of Kings, Master of The Universe. You, who is so righteous and wise. You who seeds his earth and protects his crops, his people. Our Lord, all powerful, all knowing, it is You, who shakes fear into the hearts of the transgressors, the enemies of The Promised Land, for it shall come to pass and be known by

all that it is Him and only Him, the divine orchestrator, who bestows the blessings in this world and only Him who is capable of taking them away.”

“Again!”

...

Etiel had suppressed his rebellious nature and was left no choice but to say the prayers of the day. A prayer for when he woke up, a prayer for handwashing, a prayer for before he ate, a prayer for after he ate, a prayer for drinking and a prayer for sleep. He came and went from school with no more wise cracks or questions. He attended services and bowed along.

After graduating, none of the prophets accepted Etiel into their guilds and he was forced into chiseling stones for Mendel, who paid him a pittance for his work. It was soon expected of him to marry and have a family, when the visions came at night-legions of armies arriving from The Northwest on their horses, clad in metal, forcing a new reign upon The Promised Land. While externally he would acquiesce with what he was told, internally, he imagined strangling Mendel with his strap and killing the prophets who refused to teach him. His thirst for mystical knowledge and power was unyielding and he was filled with resentment at the potential of a squandered life due to the rejection of a few supposedly wise, definitely old men. He told no one of these visions, but he took their persistence as a sign to leave. Before he would travel along The Silk Road to seek out and learn from the prophets of The East, he waited to see where Mendel hid his coins. In his hiding place Etiel took no money, but left a stone statue as a farewell present.

The bellowing and cries of the idol’s name onto the street, would not be the last time he heard or saw Mendel.

...

Dressed in white and blue robes, 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 The Promised Land, 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 Etiel 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 would start 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 jagged 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, Eitel 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 Bodhisattva 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?”

“...Obviously.”

“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 Saturn? 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 Genevieve 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. He traversed by yak up the countryside with no particular aim or destination, switching out his big, furry beast for a camel. Long stretches of distance led him to the butterscotch badlands of Mizraim, The Land of Magic. The night was chilly and sand flew around him. He hopped off his camel who spat out its gula, as his sandals made their impressions on the desert floor. Leading his camel by its leash, he was unable to tell that the swishing he heard was that of the slithering snakes in the ground, until the pain of their bite on his heel scared the dromedary, who ran off.

Ba'al, on his knees, tears, like rivers running 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 in you! If you led me here and your hand is in everything, then why lead me astray as you have! Why, oh, why Lord, God have you abandoned your son! I tried to be better! I tried to believe in you! Where was my choice in any of this, with those so-called chosen people? If we were so chosen as you say, look at who you've selected! And it is because of YOU, I now renounce my faith. The only truth to be found down here is that we are no more than pathetic slaves to a-”

Two comets flew overhead, followed by the flashes of lightning striking the sky, and rumbles of thunder which shook the ground as a booming voice roared out and around the boundless dunes.

“SILENCE!”

Ba'al limped up on his feet, falling back to his knees.

“I AM YOUR GOD AND YOU HAVE CAUSED ME GREAT SHAME.”

“You speak!”

“YOU HAVE DISOBEYED MY COMMANDMENTS AND BECAUSE I REFRAIN MY TONGUE, YOU THINK I'M NOT HERE, WATCHING LIKE A HAWK OVER ALL THE SERPENTS THAT TREAD AGAINST MY THRONE. NEVER FORGET IT IS MY PLAN THE WAY IT IS, THE WAY IT WAS AND THE WAY IT SHALL ALWAYS BE. YOUR NEED TO UNDERSTAND ME IS SIMILAR TO THE LOGIC OF MY FIRST SON CAINE. SHALL MY WORDS HERE NOT BE ENOUGH OF A SIGN OF MY PRESENCE FOR YOU DEAR, ETIEL?”

“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.”

Etiel stood back up.

“NOT ONE PERSON HAS PERISHED WITHOUT MY CONSENT. AND IT IS ONLY I, AND I ALONE, WHO GRANTS YOU ONE THOUSAND, ONE HUNDRED AND ELEVEN YEARS OF LIFE TO CORRECT YOUR WAYS AND THE WAYS OF OTHERS. THOU ART HEREBY COMMANDED TO RETURN TO MY PROMISED LAND, WHICH I HAVE ALLOWED TO BE DESTROYED FOR THE WICKEDNESS WITHIN IT WHICH BEGOT THE WICKEDNESS OUTSIDE AND UPON IT. AND YOU WILL TEACH MY WORDS AND THEIR MEANING TO MANY, SO THEIR ACTIONS WILL BE MET WITH MY MERCY AND MY JUDGMENT. IN WHICH TIME A TEST WILL COME ON YOU AND IT SHALL BE YOUR WILL TO CHOOSE THE HIGHER PATH, FOR IN THAT TIME, YOU, YOURSELF WILL HAVE FORGOTTEN MY WORDS TO 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 desert from death and despair and I will remember this moment 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 Lord 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,

Your Lord 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 The Promised Land 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 Hanotree, 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 wolf. How exciting.”

“Nothing ever impressed you.”

“I suppose I should thank you for saving my life.”

“I know it's hard to pretend you don't love me, but at the very least, you could listen to what I have to say. You need to leave Tarot with me now.”

“Relinquish control to marry a magician and live out in the sticks-you 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 I'm The Queen of Pentacles and I won't allow my Kingdom to descend into his. 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 goodbye.”

“I suppose it is...Please take Eclipsus with you.”

“What am I supposed to do with this scraggly hound?”

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 silvern 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, Etiel. 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 Hand?

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 Eitel 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 Tarot, 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.

