

The Hag's Prophecy

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ONGOING

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CHAPTER 1

A Peaceful Hunt

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I enjoyed having Mother so distant. I wasn't entirely sure of the reason for her trip, though I hoped that it wouldn't end badly for someone—Mother's involvement usually ended badly for everyone who wasn't her, but I could hope. All I knew was that one of her investments had gone awry, and she had rushed off to save it. Not that I was spending the night at home. It was a beautiful night for a hunt.

One thing that had taken years for me to get used to after reincarnating was how alive the forest was at night. While I certainly had intellectually known that it varied from place to place, I still had the intuition that a forest gripped in the depths of winter should be quiet, dark, and furtive.

It probably was dark, honestly, but 'sees in darkness' was hardly a rare talent, and snow always made everything brighter anyways. Despite that, many small mammals seemed to see the night as shelter against their hunters. A family of possums darted silently in the distance, while a badger moved more casually through the forest. Not everything was active, obviously. A glyptodon was just sleeping in the field quite near where I was dressing my deer. Evidently, the smell of blood hadn't bothered it, with its confidence born from both size and shell. Though as Chort'sbin seemed to be giving the giant armadillo the majority of his attention, I expected it to have an abrupt wake-up call. A short one.

As for quiet. It was. It just wasn't *consistently* quiet.

Silence. The mad laugh of a bird cut through the night. Silence. The off-tune wail of the raccoon-dog (and wasn't it a little late in the year for that? If it didn't have enough to hibernate by now, it probably wouldn't make it). A branch snapped off under the weight of snow. Silence.

Satisfied with my work, I started packing it into the back of the sled.

"If you want to hunt, I'm good to make it home."

Chort'sbin gave the glyptodon one last look, then shook his head.

"Naah," he drawled in his soft Waskiusal accent. "Yer mama would take it sideways if I skadoot the moment she turns her back. 'Sides, ain't been a fortnight

since I last ate.”

Chort'sbin took the form of a young man in his early twenties. Clean-shaven, raven-haired. Waskiusalians always struck me as looking vaguely Persian in a soft, pretty kind of way, and Chort'sbin's chosen form cleaved to that. The only detail out of place was his shockingly blue eyes.

I had never been to Waskiusal, but the impression I had of it was something more pastoral than I would have assumed from his features. Just another lesson in not making assumptions off memories of my past life. They were, for all the vaguely 'eastern' theming, a plantation republic—one where only major landowners could vote. Plantation-based republics were infamous for making heavy use of slavery. Waskiusal was the one the rest could point at when they sought a moral high ground. *We're humane and kind, see. We only whip disobedient, lazy slaves. We aren't the Waskiusali.*

I always wondered what it said that Chort'sbin liked that form. He played the part of a backwoods rustic aristocrat to a tee, so folksy you could gag on it, but there was always something cold in how he looked at things. Though I suppose that was also in character.

In case it was unclear, I didn't like him, however helpful he was. His parents had evidently wanted to find him a... a 'summer job' basically, and they had owed Mother a favor. Markers were cleared, and I got myself an unwanted babysitter for a few years. Still...

I rolled my eyes. “Nothing in this forest is going to give me a hard time.”

“That dog won't hunt. Qumzotz might be as nailed as a butterfly, but he's still only two days away as the crow flies, and his worshipers ain't pinned in with him. Wouldn't take a leap for them to extend their influence this far if pushed. Could be other beasties I don't know hereabouts. Nah.”

I sighed, then gestured at my work. “Right. So how did I do?”

He nodded at the bundled carcass. “Peeled the hide a mite too clean where even a clever and handy boy your size would struggle. Your witchyness slipped out more than you meant—just no way for someone your size and build to cut through bone that easy. But nothing major. Really, only size will fix that. I reckon you did decent.”

“Good enough. Let's head back then.”

“Sounds right. I’ll harness the worgs.”

The next few minutes—or maybe a bit more than a fourth of a mark, though I never thought in candle units—were spent in silence as we worked. I packed the carcass in with the rest; it had been a productive hunt. Chort’sbin took the coachman seat, while I fished a book from my jacket pocket. The ride back was peaceful enough, and I tuned out the growling chatter the wolf-like creatures made between themselves as they pulled our sled through the snow. I enjoyed my schlock adventure novels, but it always took so long for one to make its way to this backwater.

As home came into sight, I slipped the book back into my jacket.

“Your Mama’s home,” Chort’sbin said, nodding to the faint light coming from under the front door.

“Looks like. Wonder what was so important that she hurried out like that.”

“Don’t know, she tore out like her barn was on fire.”

We didn’t hurry unharnessing the worgs, doing the job right rather than fast. I paid them with one of the bucks—I didn’t need to, they worked for us out of fear rather than payment. It didn’t matter. I wasn’t the person who didn’t pay. The rest we hung in the larder. It was better to let them hang for a couple of days before butchering them. Then we made our way to the lodge door. Mother looked up as the door opened, and we stepped inside. Her hideous visage twisted into a brief look of fondness, before she turned her attention back to the figure shivering on the floor.

“Trip went to shit, but I recovered something from it.” She gestured at the other occupant of the lodge. “Meet your sister.”

The girl shivered even bundled in furs. She was half buried in them, but Mother hadn’t set a fire. There was a medicinal smell to her—healing potions—but the bruises that tracked up her face told me Mother didn’t care enough to get her all the way healthy. And then there were the obvious problems with that statement. For starters, she looked human. No, I corrected myself a moment later. She looked *mostly* human.

“Sister?” I asked. It might have been rude, but... “Then shouldn’t she have been left to bake a while longer?”

Mother wanted another two hags to make a circle with, and bringing her here like this seemed to undermine that goal. So while I hated everything about the question, it needed to be asked.

"Should have baked longer, yes," she stated, her face twisted into something between the smile of a plan coming together and the grimace of watching one fail. "Would have had a second in about seven months. With a second, a third would be easy to recruit. But when The Change came on her, she made it a problem."

For the first time the girl spoke, real venom in her voice, "I would rather die."

Mother nodded. "She really would. Lots of dearies *say* they would, but they never do. Not before it's too late, and they become." Her voice lilted up. "But she really meant it. Kept trying. Three times. That's why I went running, had to save her."

There was a note of respect under the anger of her tone. Hags respected that kind of virulent determination. Her long fingers tapped against her staff. "If it was just one or two... it wouldn't have mattered. Nothing fickle survives The Change. I would have just waited it out. But after the third it was clear I would have to stay with her through the whole thing. Didn't have the time, and that showed real dedication. You do keep *real* things through The Change. If my lovely daughter was that determined to die, her hate would have survived. Even when it was done, she would still hate me."

Her tone came across as deeply aggrieved that the girl hadn't just given up on herself, and she knelt in front of the girl, grabbing her, twisting her this way and that as if examining her. "There's ways of making it work anyways. I'm older, stronger. Not all the power I stole to make you went into you. If it was urgent I could have dealt with a hostile coven mate. But I just don't need the problem. So I cut a deal with her—broke the blood inside her, repurposed it. She stays human, and my dearie pays with everything else. She's yours now."

Everything. I winced, giving the girl a pitying look.

"Not as useful as a second for my coven," Mother continued, "but she'll be a companion for you."

"Oh?" Chort'sbin asked, "So got him a playmate?" His gaze was on the girl—she wasn't so much struggling against Mother as shivering so hard she seemed to be flailing, as if even her body knew it needed to escape. Mother dropped her a moment later, and Chort'sbin's cold gaze followed her down, filled with a private

humor.

I was happy for the girl, since The Change always sounded horrific. I was vaguely glad I wasn't going to have to watch someone go through it. Still... I grimaced at the scene. Every part of this was ugly.

"Won't she just hate me?" I asked as I made my way over to the girl. She was shivering so hard her muscles were starting to lock up, and I quickly pulled the furs back over her. "Chort'sbin is plenty good as a bodyguard already."

"Nah," he said, "not what you're getting here. Just a bit older than you, and not a boogie or beastie. The ma'am didn't just employ me to guard your physical safety. Yourselfs needs to mix about more with other folks, or you'll not know your what-when-how when needs must. I had been talk'n at your ma'am about snatching you a few playmates, but this is better."

Mother smiled benevolently at me. "It wasn't the idea, but this," she made a twisted face, "mess... Well, it lets me recover some of the value I put into her. She'll still be useful. A lot of what I tried out before I had you went into her first—she was the practice run, so she would have been a mighty hag. She's a sorcerer now, even with the blood broken. The hagsblood is a source of fae magic for her like it is for you."

Mother glared at the shivering thing she had dragged into our home. "This dearie *won't* be useless."

It was honestly more a statement of intent than a reassurance.

There was hatred on the girl's face when Mother said that. I doubt Mother missed it, but it didn't seem to bother her. It probably seemed perfectly natural to Mother. Hags didn't have much of a positive emotional register.

"I'll let the two of you get to know each other," Mother said, heading further into the house.

"Then I'll be taking my leave," Chort'sbin added, already moseying towards the door, "Call if need, otherwise I'll be back in the morn'n."

He stepped out the door. A moment later the sound of something heavy made its way through the snow, then the thunder of wings, and it was gone.

"Right," I tried, casting about for what I was supposed to do. Looking at the girl's chattering glare, it was clear that she didn't just hate me, she was *scared* of me.

It wasn't unusual, there were three reactions most people had towards me. Some saw me as something fragile and breakable, a thing Mother raised for some dark and unfortunate purpose. Some, those who knew the reputation of hagspawn, assumed I was being raised to play hatchetman, and held me in contempt. And then there were those who feared me, mostly by proxy or outright. Those were the smart ones, but I hated it.

"Let's get you settled in," I stated, pushing past the familiar disquiet. I lifted her into my arms with as many of the furs as I could balance. I wasn't sure if she had tried to shake me off, or if her shivering was simply that bad, but I chose to see it as the latter.

It was probably a comedic scene—she was bigger, older than me. It made little difference, my strength was *witchy*. I carried her towards my room with as much gentleness as the situation allowed, and then put her on the bed. Honestly, I was glad that puberty was still years in the future, because my room was the only heated one in the lodge. I doubted she would make the night anywhere else in the lodge.

She finally spoke to me as I moved to tidy her and tuck her in better.

"Th... th... the witch." She struggled to express anything through her shivers, voice pushing out words syllable by uneven syllable. "Sh-shHee-he y-y—" After a moment, her voice broke entirely. Warmth returning after you got *that* cold was painful. I filled in what I assumed she was going for. 'The Witch. She's your mother.'

"Hag," I corrected, as I silently stirred my own fae heritage to motion, and then pushed weal towards her. It wouldn't do much from such a cold start, and without any structure to turn it into proper sorcery, but hopefully it would ease warmth returning to her body. "A witch is just someone who practices witchcraft."

"A hag is a kind of wicked fairy that is always female, and has a natural talent for several kinds of magic," I continued, checking and securing the layers of curtains that stretched across the entrance to my room. I didn't have an actual door, but they worked plenty well as long as I tied them down both on top and bottom, and made sure all three layers were stretched across and not bundling up to create a gap. "One of which is witchcraft."

I went over to the hearth and shoved my hand into the pile of strange round

stones that filled it, before flooding them with magic. A moment later I felt them start to heat.

I pulled a chair over to sit where we could more easily talk.

"Then wh... wh... why... why are you a boy."

"I'm not a hag," I explained with a sigh. "Hags don't easily have children. Sometimes when they do, it's still a failure. The child," I gestured at myself, "fails to be a hag. Too much of the other parent's nature stays with them, and they come out mortal. We're the so-called hagspawn."

I shrugged. "If the child's a girl, there's rituals to push the blood when they're older. But nothing you can do with boys."

I waited a minute. "What's your name?"

She was quiet for a moment, "I know better than to give a fairy my name."

I snorted. "Hagspawn are on the mortal side of that divide." I wasn't mortal, but that wasn't because I was hagspawn. "And if I wanted your name that way I could just steal it anyway. You're going to be here for some time, I need to call you something."

That... was the wrong thing to say. She started crying. I sat there awkwardly, not sure what to do.

Finally, "Lalak."

"It's nice to meet you, Lalak." I responded, "I'm Crinn."

She took a little while to gather herself, before asking her next question.

"No one talks about hagspawn. If witches... If hags have sons to do their work. I know about, about changelings like, like, like me. But I've never heard of you."

"I said hagspawn are failures, didn't I? Most of us are abandoned. If we're lucky, we're abandoned near a village, but it's usually not seen as worth the effort."

She gave me an incredulous look, which—fair. Mother was fond of me.

"I said most. And I was a failure. You heard her though, didn't you? She was doing things to make her children more powerful. You were the test, while I was the serious attempt."

I leaned back, old memories coming to the surface. The confusion of rebirth, Mother's monstrous rage at her failed spawn. Fear as I realized that 'Mother' was going to recycle me, and epiphany that I had power. Reaching out with a limb of sideways thought, and driving it through her skull...

"I was born aware, and I was born powerful. And so I drove her mad."

"What."

"Haven't you heard stories about the forest spirits playing games with people's minds? Beguiling them with madness and unthinkable wants? I did that. I drove her mad with maternal love."

She was just giving me a confused stare.

"That... that doesn't make sense. Mothers are supposed to love their babies."

I just lifted an eyebrow at that, "Plenty don't. And love that is a kind of fixation, that exists at odds with your desires and goals, that consumes your wants? That remains fixed no matter how your thoughts shift or change? What can that be but madness?"

"So what?" Her tone was getting heated, "You're her master?"

"Not at all," I flatly stated, "She loves me. That doesn't make her a fool. She knows what I did to her, and she had no desire to let me ever do it to her again. After that, she arranged for my care and left for a year. When she was back... her mind was shielded. I don't know what she did, but she made sure I could never change her again."

"But... she loves you?"

I snorted, "And you think a hag's love is kind? She doesn't care if I appreciate what she does for me, nor does she hold back from pursuing her other goals in an unchanged way. She loves me, she doesn't need me to love her."

Her tone was improving as the room heated, and she started unhunching. I studied her. The Change, hmm. Well, I knew it happened sometime around the thirteenth year, and that the whole thing took something like a year. But I didn't know if that meant it ended around the thirteenth year, or started. Somewhat ironically, I just hadn't asked that many questions about it, so what I knew I picked up by osmosis. But it wasn't like it was an exact date either way. So she could be anything from two to four years older than me.

"How old are you?" I finally asked.

"Thirteen winters," she promptly answered. So about three years older than me. Around there at least, I wasn't counting my ten years in winters.

Also, she hesitated at a name, but gave me her general age? That was the foothold to start narrowing in on a proper horoscope, and those could be better than a name for aiming a spell.

Peasants, a voice echoed in the back of my head, speaking with contempt. It sounded entirely too much like Chort'sbin's voice.

She seemed to be getting tired, but kept her gaze focused on me. "So then, what are you going to do with me? The deal... I basically have to follow you around and support you or your mother will—" She stopped, and I wasn't sure if it was the cold sapping her, or simple unwillingness to continue. "What do you want from me?"

I sighed, "She's your mother too."

There was a visceral shudder, and she snapped at me, "My mother is a sweet woman. Maybe that thing *birthed* me, but she's not my mother!"

White hair, blue eyes, pale, slight even for a girl, but tall. Fingers a bit too long for her hands, and nails a bit too thick and jagged-edged. She was a bleached-out image, a bit too sharp to be called pretty. She had probably thought she was human until recently. I guess she really was now, if Mother had broken her blood. But there were dozens of signs I had been taught to look for.

"I wouldn't say that in Mother's hearing. But to answer your question, I don't really want anything from you. But I expect I'll be taking you with me when I'm sent to civilization. It's been Mother's plan for a while, she intends for me to be able to move among people without seeming too strange, and it's clear she's been planning on having me establish an identity outside. You're probably intended to be part of that, you're more—" I hunted for the word "—more normal, or maybe more grounded, than I could hope to be."

Her gaze remained locked on me, leaving me feeling a bit self-conscious. I wasn't hideous, I knew that. Many hagspawn were, but not all. But I was eerie. Most hags were rather hunched, and in some hagspawn it grew even more pronounced. I mostly just had a slightly slumped posture that was actively uncomfortable to straighten. I had skin like a medical condition, and my hair wasn't just wispy and fine, but an almost crystalline white, while my irises were nearly the same color

as the whites of my eyes.

I had had a fairy tell me I was pretty once, and I don't think he was lying, but I was certainly *strange* looking. Though I wondered if she realized I mostly looked like a more extreme version of her.

I thought about my next question, only for a light snoring to start. She fell asleep with her eyes open.

Um. Well. People sleeping with their eyes open was creepy. As a minor god of Madness, Magic, and Fate... I felt qualified to judge creepy. And that was creepy.

I went looking for more covers. It looked like I was going to be sleeping on the floor tonight. We would have to make better arrangements tomorrow. Either set up a space for her, or at least get a second bed, but I had roughed it through worse than a night on the floor.

CHAPTER 2

Shopping Lists

August 11, 2026

I was up before dawn, cleaning and packing the sled for the trip, when a graceful draconic form the size of a small horse swooped into view. His blue scales shone in the morning light as he descended in long circles. The circles tightened as he came in lower, until he stilled his wings and seemed to lose lift right above the ground. The drop turned into a plunge that threw snow into the air like a veil as a *thump* heavy enough to feel from where I stood shook the ground.

Chort'sbin's human form walked out of the concealment like a man stepping from behind a curtain. I would have honestly called the whole image cool if I wasn't aware of how vain he was and how much work he put into it. Instead, I threw him a lazy wave as I continued my work.

"Plan'n a trip?" He asked as he strode forward.

"Lalak has nothing, and it's sort of becoming my problem."

"She the girlie? You should make 'er take care of it herself," he stated. Still, he walked past me to the shed and began gathering things. "Begin as ya finish, right?"

Rather than argue I simply pointed out a basic problem.

"She has no change of clothing, and the clothes she has now are for lower, warmer climates. She's either going to be stuck in my room for weeks while slowly sewing a new set—assuming she has the skill—or else I need to get her something."

"Eh, point. So what's the plan?"

"I want to get her clothes, a bed, and I'll probably make her a ring to help with the chill. I'll need a few reagents for that unless I want to dip into Mother's."

"I reckon you're fixin' to do more than strictly need must. I circle back round ta' my earlier objection."

I shrugged. He was probably right, basic sympathy meant I didn't want to do the minimum, but unless I wanted him needling the entire time I needed to give a more selfish reason than that. That said—

"I'm not going to half-ass it, and then have to do this again in a month."

He made a face, but shrugged. It wasn't a logic he would disagree with.

"So, plan?"

"The Undermarket, then the Birds."

He hummed as he poked around what I had packed.

"You're gonna barter?"

"That's the plan," I started making my way towards the treeline.

He plucked open one of the bags from the sled. "Isn't this a little rich?"

I howled out a call in goblin towards the forest, then turned back to him and shook my head.

"I've been making those to sell," I said. "I had been planning on heading down there on my own in a couple of weeks anyways."

"I thought you'd never wandered down there all on your lonesome."

"I haven't. Doesn't mean I hadn't been planning to."

I looked towards the forest and howled out the call again.

He seemed to be thinking, and in a moment he spoke with some seriousness, "It is something ya'ought to get up to. But this is probably a larger sell than you should be making the first time you're there without your mama's apron strings. Who's the surface trader? I haven't visited the locals yet."

"There's a mountain shaft where the Duergar will trade with the surface," I stated. Then shrugged, "There's also a night market run by the svirfneblin, but the way only opens on the nights of the new moon, you need a token to get in, the hills to access it are two days away on sled, and we would almost certainly have to kill someone if we didn't want to be jerked around."

Chort'sbin's gaze had started tracking towards the forest, and he was starting to look vaguely annoyed. "Do they know you?"

"Don't think so. As you said, I've never gone there on my own, and people make assumptions about children being dragged around by a winter hag."

And Chort'sbin's gaze at the forest had officially graduated to peeved. It didn't

make it into his tone towards me though, as he slowly chewed over his words, “Never dealt with the deep dwarves. The folks made sure to introduce me to the Drow back home, and I’ve done a little business with the deep gnomes on my own, but never the Duergar.”

He held up his finger to ask me to wait, then turned towards the forest and roared out in goblin. The sound tore through the forest; birds exploded from trees, and there was a distant sound of a stampede. A moment later a tentative howl in goblin came back. Chort’sbin roared back once more—give them a time, and less time than I would have given—and then returned his attention to me.

“If worg wasn’t disgusting I know who I would be having for supper,” Chort’sbin muttered to himself before returning his focus to me. “How do the Duergar count?”

I started making my way back to the lodge. I would have given the worgs a bit more time, and now I was going to need to hurry if I wanted to eat before we left.

“It’s a lot like dealing with devils who are soft-selling to you, but less polite. The Duergar have a strong sense of order. They’ll cheat you, but it will all be in writing. That said, they won’t make shoddy work.”

“I reckon that works. Wonder why my folks never carried me round those circles.”

I shrugged as I opened the door, kicking snow off my boots, and headed over to the pantry. Only had maybe half an hour to eat. While I could just make our draught worgs wait, and Chort’sbin wouldn’t care, I found it rude.

I had to remember things like that.

“Duergar work is fugly,” I explained.

Fugly wasn’t a word in the Sylvan-Jotunskye pidgin language that got called ‘common’ around here, but it only took Chort’sbin a moment to translate the portmanteau.

“Tracks well enough. My folks always found it good practice to make sure you’re always gussied up, though I don’t think your mama has the same priority. So why are we visiting the Eblis?”

“Because they’ll have the reagents I need, and not just for the ring. I have projects I’ve been planning out from before all of this. They’ll charge maybe a third as

much as the deep dwarves, maybe less. I might also be able to get sundries from them—they might not make or need them, but their goods are sort of random.”

Because they're bandits, a contrary voice in the back of my head pointed out. I ignored it. If I wanted to trade with someone who *wasn't* terrible, this would change from a day trip to something quite a bit longer and more involved.

As the stone plates of the ‘stove’ heated, I cracked eggs and dropped duck bacon into the skillet. Soon a pleasant smell filled the air.

“Shouldn’t we visit them first then?”

“I need money. If we go to them first we’ll have to do everything through barter.”

He frowned at me then, “Why are’ya paying them a lick? They’re your mama’s, right? I haven’t seen them filling your bread basket. Just take what they have.”

I rolled my eyes. “They do have an understanding with Mother. That’s the reason I’m expecting good prices, they’re scared of her. But just taking what I want is just going to seed bad blood down the road. I don’t want to shit where I live. Do you know how many hags have gotten themselves killed by adventurers after pissing on everyone who lives nearby?”

Hags... and dragons. I didn’t add.

“Give them something shiny, and they’ll be grateful instead,” I finished the thought.

“Ah think you’re just being soft,” he stated as I plated up.

Which... sure, he wasn’t wrong, but I–

“We’ll go to the Birds first,” Chort’sbin said. “Then the Undermarket.”

“It’s my plan,” I reminded him.

“It surely is,” he agreed, pleasant as anything.

Fuck. Did I want to make an issue of this? For bandits? I fed the worgs when I didn’t have to, but the worgs weren’t bandits. They were dangerous to people, but they stayed to their range. The Eblis went out looking for victims. So no. No I didn’t. But it left me feeling shitty.

A sound came from deeper in the lodge, distracting me from my thoughts. Lalak padded out from my room, still bleary and wrapped in furs.

“Morning,” I greeted, then plated her breakfast. “Eat up. We’re going in just a–” I checked the time. About twenty five minutes, so, “–a bit over a mark.”

“Ah, okay,” she muttered quietly. The backbone that had got her through our first meeting seemed to have deserted her. But then, I suspected that the last few weeks? Months? However long it had been, it had sucked for her. She must have been on the dregs of her willpower by our meeting.

I kept an eye on her as Chort’sbin and I finished pounding out a plan for the day. She was shivering as she picked at her food—this obviously wasn’t going to work even in the short term.

“Here, hold still,” I told her as I fished out my athame, then launched into a quick chant.

“Wha...?” She started to ask, and then the spell settled. “...t. I’m not cold?”

“I prepared Avaddal’s *Endure the Winter’s Bite* this morning. I can only hold it for a fourth of a candle, and I don’t want to repeatedly cast it if I can avoid it.” I thought about explaining—it was better to let a spell rest for a while after casting it.

Invoking one repeatedly without letting it reharden and set would break down its structure faster. But we didn’t really have time for a technical dive at the moment, so I let the thought die.

“It also takes some of my attention, but we’ll get you into the sled and wrapped tight before it runs out,” I told her. More ordered, really. It wasn’t her fault, but she was more of a chore than a person to me, and I wasn’t as good a person as I wanted to be. A moment later, I forced friendliness back into my voice. “We’re going to be picking up the basics you’ll need, so this won’t become an ongoing issue. While we’re out, make sure to tell me of any essentials you know will be necessary.”

She looked vaguely amazed by the petty magic, but was trying not to show it. She seemed to be regaining her balance. “Okay,” she responded.

Then, she turned towards Chort’sbin with some intentionality. “Greetings, I believe we met last night. I’m Lalak.”

Oh, so she was managing to at least fake composure. That was probably a good sign. Chort’sbin seemed amused by it.

“Howdy,” he returned. I could practically feel him summon up a cloak of charm

and dignity, “I’m Lord Chort’sbin, and you’ll see me around for a while. I’m being retained by your honored mother to act as Crinn’s tutor and guardian as he starts stepping out from her shadow.” Then the folksiness returned, “But y’all can just call me Chort’sbin. I’ll be playing minder today, and so long as the creek don’t rise, we’ll get ya all sorted.”

Lalak seemed to relax slightly, with him treating her more like a person today than he had last night. For my part, I gave him a side-eye. I couldn’t tell if Chort’sbin was just practicing his acting, wanted to make her uncomfortable by reminding her of her heritage, or if he was buttering her up for more malicious games later. He was cruel, but he was also professional. Whatever, I would give her a warning in private later—not in front of Chort’sbin. It would amuse him, but warning her like that would only buy more trouble.

Still, it wasn’t a real problem yet.

And anyways, the crunch of snow outside signaled the arrival of our workers.

“Hurry and eat up, then join us.”

The worgs were subdued when we harnessed them to the sled. It made it easier to get the gear on them, but I was never comfortable with the fear. Still, it was better they piss off Chort’sbin than Mother. Last time they had made Mother wait... Well, Chort’sbin wouldn’t kill his employer’s property on a whim, while Mother *did* like worg mutton.

By the time we were finished, Lalak had made her way out of the lodge. Without enough furs. I sighed to myself—I told her the spell wouldn’t last that long. Then I realized she might not *know* what a candle was.

She was a peasant. I wasn’t sure from where—there were three countries that bordered my mother’s territory. But if they were within easy reach of these wilds, they were rural, and time... time could be a complicated concept. It wasn’t a matter of smarts, but context. I could tell her ‘A day is six candles, a candle is twelve marks.’ It wouldn’t help, because she wouldn’t have the developmental context to put time in boxes that way.

I buried the frustration I was feeling through work, letting physical motion wash away my problem. In moments, I had her seated in the back with the trade goods I was bringing, then piled more furs on top of her, earning a complaint.

“I can’t move under all of this.”

“The spell won’t last. Do you want to go back to freezing?”

That shut down that discussion, and a moment later we were off.

I hadn’t realized I was quite so frustrated with Lalak, and it wasn’t really fair to her. So rather than stew in my thoughts, I fished out my grimoire.

It wasn’t something I had expected when I first realized I had *magic*, but lots of spells were tricks that I just didn’t need in my daily life. How often do you need *Marera’s Marvelous Keyfinder*? Yes, it was literally magical to be able to mutter a few words and then be able to find small metallic objects that could fit inside your closed left hand, *and that* you had handled for at least three minutes within the last week. But how often did you actually need it? Not that often. While you didn’t have to refresh a hung ritual daily, it would start unraveling after a week. Faster with heavy use, but if I was heavily using a ritual, it would be justifying itself to me.

Nor did stirring the minor magics of my fae blood actually help that often. Nudging things was neat, but the fact of the matter was that I was, metaphysically speaking, built more for woe than for weal. In the end, it turned into a daily chore that rarely saved more time than I spent. If I really needed something, I would just burn a miracle on making it happen.

I spent about a month when I was six dutifully refreshing my hung rituals every morning, carefully picking what spells I thought I might need that day, and feeling amazed at the ability. Then I started doing it every couple of days. Then only when one had unraveled completely. Then only when too many had. And then I stopped. Magic was an amazing tool, but the depressing revelation was that I didn’t need combat magic, and utility magic was deeply context-dependent.

So outside of a pretty comprehensive set of warding spells, I rarely cracked open my grimoire these days. But since I already had gotten it out to hang my cold-resistance ritual, and the Eblis village was three hours away, it seemed like I might as well. More to burn some daylight—and get some time away from the world, and that ugly and unfair knot of frustration I felt every time I saw Lalak—than thinking it actually useful, admittedly.

First to check what I had already hung. *Endure the Winter’s Bite* still felt solid—it should since I only hung it that morning, but I double-checked. Yep. Still solid. I went over *Fanglor’s Fairy Bane* (rotting, but it should last another day); *Urgene’s*

Angelic Abjuration was surprisingly solid.

Absolve the Elemental Imbalance had snapped, so I spent a minute chanting under my breath and drawing the signs to recast it. Then I caught it in my mind's eye, a set of orbs caught flowing into each other, transforming into each other. Fire to life to wind to water to death to earth to fire.

Fire and death in opposition? I noted. *A bit odd. Fire governs conflict, so conflict and death might be opposing each other right now. Is that a good sign? Death can be a sign of change though...* I was getting a feeling from the part of me that was a god of fate. *Maybe it was a sign of decline?* After a moment, I was sure.

I started calculating factors, then stopped. This was overall elemental alignment for the region. *Was the reading relevant to me?* I hadn't set up to align it towards any of us. Someone was about to enter a period of decline, but I didn't think it had anything to do with any of us, at least not directly. So after a moment, I just dismissed the thought. I could read the influences, but honestly, to do it seriously I would either need to put in real time, or act miraculously, and I didn't care enough right now.

I caught the orbs, calcified them with a mnemonic that escaped conscious thought even as I used it, and hung the spell in my spirit again.

Then... the *Malefactor's Charm* was fraying badly—it probably would survive the day but I was always worried about demons so... cast, visualize, calcify, hang, done. I didn't bother with the *Daylight Cants* or *Petar's Profound Pillar*. Why bother? They belonged in the *I've never needed you once* pool of rituals that I couldn't work up the paranoia to keep active anymore.

What would actually be useful today. Let's see, I might be moving goods about, so I browsed through my selection of formless slave rituals—once again bothered by the naming convention. All of them were janky, but I finally settled on *Hail the Faithful Hatchetman*. It could load and unload a cart, and wouldn't require constant attention so long as it was that one task. Good enough. Cast, visualize, calcify, hang.

Nettling Words of Inescapable Wisdom was the most overblown name for a Jedi Mind Trick, and I sort of loved it for that reason alone. I went back and forth on it, but finally decided against it. I could sort of do the same thing through divine influence, only in a more horrifying manner. Probably spent more time going

over the pros and cons than it would have taken to just hang it. But whatever.

Countermagic..? We were visiting the deep dwarves, so yes. *Argent Circle against Curses, The Awful Rebuke, Franz's Frantic Forbiddance, The Death of Wonder...* I stopped when I got bored. You could go down a bottomless counterspell rabbit hole, but I got the major ones.

I then turned inwards, towards that part of me that was just a bit *fae* and stirred it back to life. It wasn't entirely asleep; it was the part of me I usually used to sense magic. But I could put it towards more uses than that, so I solidified it towards *weal*. A formless expression of it, well wishes bubbling up into the world. Just a nudge, but it might save me from wasting a miracle on something petty. Then I churned the wellspring of vitality within that part of me to life, let it pool. While I didn't really need to do that to be able to heal, and even without that my lifeforce was resilient and resisted injury... It was a resource. And I could actually see myself needing to heal Lalak, so... no reason not to. I would feel shitty if I needed to heal her and couldn't because I had been too lazy to bother with the minute... five minutes of meditation.

Well. I really had let myself go there. Maybe I didn't need it day to day, but my state was genuinely embarrassing.

I would need to begin teaching Lalak. I wasn't a great sorcerer, but I called upon my fae heritage in a sorcerous manner, so I should be able to get her started. It would be a reason to get myself back into shape that I couldn't blow off.

I felt grounded in myself again, and so I opened my eyes to see... trees. The ground disappeared beneath the sled at an impressive pace, but we were still an hour away. Should have taken more time. Still, Chort'sbin noticed my returning attention.

"Smart ta'see you actually prepare for once. Probably wind up noth'n, but let's take this visit like it's actually threatening. What'cha do first? Have you set our stars?"

I shrugged, then shook my head.

"Our two lines are always unbroken through this trip. There's no path inside fate where either of us meets a permanent end. For Lalak? I don't have as solid a read on her yet, just not enough familiarity. But even there, the only breaks I see are in odd regions of the possibility space. It's just that mortals pretty much always

have that.”

Mortals died a lot, so they almost always wore a halo of low-probability deaths. Well, Chort'sbin was technically mortal, but dragons didn't count themselves as such, and for good reason.

I wasn't really worried—I had used one of my Gifts as a God of Fate to bind Lalak's destiny. She would have breakfast with me in a week, and so it was against destiny now for her to die in a way that precluded it. Still, that kind of meddling wasn't absolute, and I didn't see any real reason to mention it.

And anyway, I only tied down a miracle to accomplish that. It would unknot itself free before we reached the Eblis. My miracle would return before anyone could realize I didn't have it, and its protection would hang over her for longer than this trip. It wasn't like I had burnt a miracle. I still didn't want to get Chort'sbin on my case for spending that much of my power right before we set out.

While Lalak couldn't defy the fate I set her, plenty of more significant souls could overturn my dictates. Maybe not easily, but her halo of deaths remained.

“Huh. I hadn't really asked how that works. You're saying even if I made a hot mess and acted dumb as a box of rocks, ah ain't getting kilt?”

“Eh,” I made a so-so gesture with my hand, “there are things you're unlikely to do, and there are things you would never do. A choice you would never make won't show up inside fate. And even if you died, Mother would put together the resources to raise you, and if she didn't, your parents would. And you're too ambitious to accept death before you've accomplished anything. So there's no action within fate where your line breaks today. Also, people do defy fate—the fact that you have no fated demise today doesn't mean it's impossible. Just that it would require someone to overturn fate.”

“And how likely is that gonna be a thing? A'gin, I don't deal n' fate.”

“It's an... eh? Eh is about as precise as I can be. It happens less often than people who believe they're in control of their lives accept, and more often than people who believe in prophecy and fate admit.” I waved it off. “But it usually doesn't matter, because most of the time they wasted their world-defying act of defiance on something petty, something that doesn't actually divert their overall path in life all that much. And people escape their own success depressingly often.”

“Oh?” There seemed to be a bit of cruel amusement in his eyes. “Who've you seen

who ain't got the sense to keep a win?"

Honestly, plenty of people. People came to Mother for favors. Making ill-advised trades to a Hag was sort of just... something people did when they were desperate. And many of those people's stories ended badly. I thought about which of those stories would be funny. Then revised that list, because I was pretty sure Chort'sbin would find more of those stories funny than I did. After a moment, I decided to ignore the question as too gross to engage with.

From the back of the sled, "What do you mean by a broken line?"

I gave a surprised glance back at Lalak, still not used to having her around, but Chort'sbin was the one who answered.

"Crinn 'ere is a minor god. Rules over fate an' madness and magic."

She gave Chort'sbin a... look. "I might know nothing, but I know better than to believe that."

I almost winced, but Chort'sbin seemed more amused than offended. "Then ain't good thing y'all ready know ya don't know. 'cause your ignorance was fixin' to get you in a bind. You've mostly spilled sacrifice to landgods, yes?"

"Of course. The pillar gods are..." She seemed to be unsure how to say it.

"Distant. Jus call'um distant. Ain't no room to be offended if you put it like they put it. So you know landgods, and had some priest talk at chu 'bout pillar gods, but that's hardly all. There's interloper gods, innate gods, antigods, lots 'o flavor of god. The incarnate gods are sorta smack dab in the middle 'o a road. Not big'uns like the pillar gods or an antigod outta tarnation, but not small like an innate god or a demigod."

"Demigods aren't gods," I helpfully pointed out. Some demigods were *stronger* than something like an innate god, though a mortal being stronger than a god was hardly unique. Older dragons were generally stronger than most demigods, and while he wasn't old, Chort'sbin was enough of a monster that I would put him above many of his elders.

Chort'sbin just ignored my interjection though. "They're kinda like the landgods, but not pinned, and not all messed up. Being all free and sane? Make'um more dangerous than some ole hierarch woulda put'um."

Which was accurate enough. I had six miracles to call upon when in the fullness

of my power, while Qumzotz claimed eight miracles, but I was pretty sure I could take him if I had to.

I noticed too late that Lalak had been getting more and more frustrated as Chort'sbin continued his lecture. Honestly, that was probably the response he was after. He had really ramped up his accent.

"Stop having at me! I know the go—"

It was a waste, but it was probably better to cut this off. Maybe it would be a lesson to Chort'sbin not to start shit.

I raised my hands.

I hadn't done the prep work to do anything interesting with Magic. So much of Madness was violation that I brushed past it without a thought. Fate though... Fate wasn't so much about the future, as about *why* the future. It was about identity, about how things fit together, how they asserted their nature and demanded the future account for them. I could destine things, or find out what was destined, but that wasn't what I usually used it to do.

I clapped. Fate unclipped.

The land dissolved into a river of rose petals, and the worgs' paws dug in it, kicking up a spray of pink and crimson. The sun was an eye. It looked down at us.

Unfixing things, stepping outside of every why at once or unclipping a why and passing it around like a carnival token? That was the bread and butter of a God of Fate.

Then we were in the world again, and Lalak was staring. The worgs stumbled. I let my hands fall back to my side.

"As said, I am a god. I am the god that Mother—that the Great Hag *Auntie Famine*—made."

The sled skidded to a halt, the worgs spooked as Lalak continued to stare, and Chort'sbin had an ugly look on his face. I had spent power that would take hours to return for a demonstration while we were traveling out and about, where unknown dangers might lurk. And I had taken away his toy.

I gave him a look of my own. *Enough*.

We both knew his authority over me went exactly as far as I tolerated it. Mother

generally would side with him, after all he was supposed to be teaching me how to operate out in the world. But that only went so far. She might not care for my empathy, but she was happy to pander to my anger and pride.

After a long moment, his face returned to neutral.

“Ya spooked the worgs right nasty,” he said without looking at me, as he hopped off the sled. “Gimmie a moment, I’ll get them pointed right, get us moving.”

“Sure,” I murmured. “You do that.”