

WORTHY

and

RESPONDING TO 'QUASI-MEDIEVAL' TENDENCIES IN
HIGH FANTASY

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ABSTRACT

‘Worthy’ is about a young man – Cai – who must recover from the ravages of his past while he is being trained in sorcery. It is a fantasy novella set in the world of Terirth, which takes inspiration from 18th century western European culture and society and from Australian geography.

Cai, enslaved illegally in a brothel, is discovered and rescued by aristocrat and sorcerer Luca, who senses Cai’s latent magic abilities from a distance. Taken to the Court of Terirth, Cai recovers from fever and opiate addiction but continues to suffer profound memory loss as a result of trauma.

Luca begins training Cai in sorcery, but after Cai is attacked and his magic kills the assailant, the Queen tells Luca Cai must leave Court. Luca and Cai travel to the site of Luca’s childhood home, where Cai both develops as a sorcerer and begins to recover his memory. When his mother arrives, having searched for him since his abduction, his full recollection of the trauma he endured returns with her. Her unusual, only semi-human nature finally explains why Cai possesses such strong magic.

Meanwhile, behind the polished surface of the Court, political machinations are at work, masterminded by the Queen of Terirth herself. Perceiving Luca and his associates as a threat, she sets out to dispose of them, and it is then Cai’s turn to support his mentor. In doing so, he confronts and destroys his greatest abuser, finally gaining some degree of closure. The end of the novella sees Cai preparing to travel with his mother and Luca to attempt a rescue of Luca’s closest friend from the palace dungeons.

The exegesis, ‘Responding to ‘Quasi-medieval’ Tendencies in High Fantasy’, explores the development and popularisation of the quasi-medieval setting common in high fantasy since the 1960s. It attempts to both explain and interrogate the continuing pervasiveness of such a setting. It also positions ‘Worthy’ in relation to quasi-medieval fantasy, acknowledging its ties to this material as well as discussing the features which take it in a somewhat different direction.

DECLARATION

I, Joanna Jarose, certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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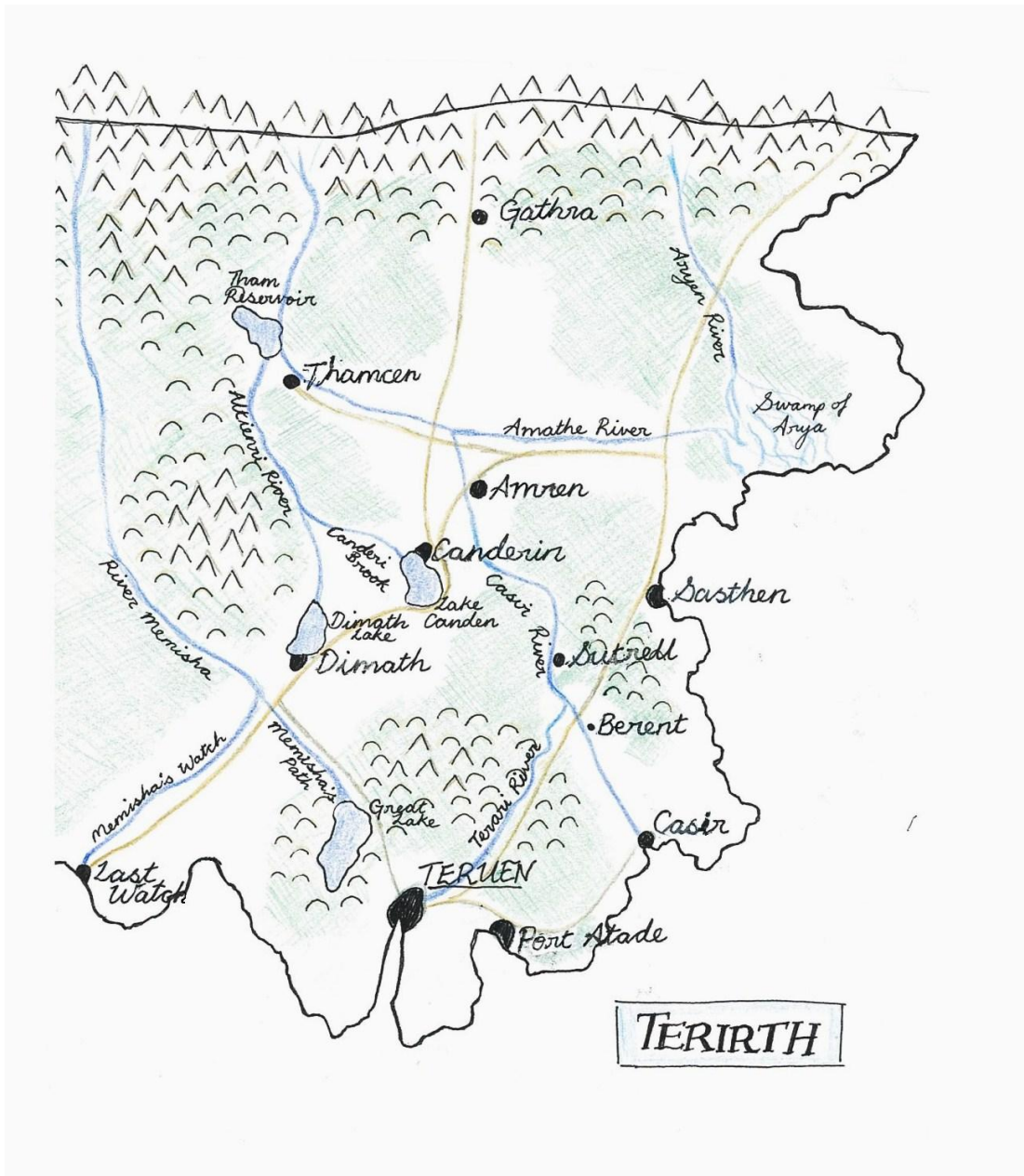
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CREATIVE WORK:

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MAP



I

Cai's eyes shuddered open, unfocused, fighting for every blurred fragment of vision. He was lightheaded, the room appearing to rock slowly back and forth before him. He uncurled his body, feeling sick to his stomach, and dragged himself up onto one elbow. His muscles were cramped and stiff, as though he had been lying in this place for some time. He peered down at himself; he was covered with a crumpled woollen blanket, on a mattress packed with straw. Being upright made the nausea worse; his throat worked convulsively, and he lurched forward to throw up over the edge of the bed. There was nothing in his stomach but bile and saliva. He wiped his mouth with a shaking hand.

It took a long moment for his bleary eyes to take in the surroundings: a room with a stone floor and walls, three other beds crowded in around his own. Light glared from a fire in the hearth, too bright for him to look at. There was a girl in the bed beside his; for a moment Cai thought she was dead until he saw the

slight movement made by her breathing. He dragged his elbow back against his side and let his frame fall back against the mattress.

He could make out the murmur of approaching voices, drifting in from outside. The door groaned on its hinges as it swung open. Cai's hearing was strangely muted, and yet each word and noise boomed and echoed. It was hard to stay awake, harder to concentrate on what was happening.

The smell of cooked meat filled the air as two hazy figures wheeled a trolley into the room. A woman spoke, too – words that he heard but did not really comprehend. “Madness, that there was such a place only an hour's ride from the palace.” The clink of bowls on the table. She was in front of Cai now, beside the bed – a distorted shape of pale skin and brown hair. She offered him a bowl of some stew, steaming faintly even in the warm room, but the very idea of food made his nausea worse. He turned his face away.

She straightened, frowning. “They're so...”

“Drugged, I'd reckon,” the male voice offered. “I hear that's what they do at them places, to make the slaves more, you know...” They were silent for a moment, moving around the room. The sharp clink of metal on ceramic.

“But why did his Grace – ah – interfere?” The man's voice again. “He's not the do-gooder type.”

“I don't quite know either,” she said, over the swish of a cloth on the stone floor. She was cleaning up Cai's vomit. Cai let his eyes fall closed.

The place, the light, the smell of hot food, the sound of conversation. It was all unexpected, somehow. Cai groped in his mind for some answer, but there was nothing there. It was as though he was awake for the first time, with a sense that something had gone before but no way of reaching it. He drew his knees up to his chest.

“Poor wretches,” the man said finally, and closed the door behind them.

Cai woke up too hot in his tightly wrapped cocoon of blankets, and struggled to ease them. He raised his head slowly, squinting in the wan daylight admitted by the open shutters. He still felt horribly weak, but he managed to haul himself up, leaning against the wall behind the bed. At least this time there was no surge of nausea.

A low fire in the hearth opposite the beds gave some warmth to the place, what little bare stone could hold in, and the room was thinly hazed with smoke. An untidy heap of timber lay off to one side of a burn-spotted mat. The girl was still asleep, twisted up in her own snarl of blankets. Sweat beaded on her forehead.

Cai turned and put his feet slowly on the floor, scratching his tangled mass of hair. The girl stirred, murmured an unintelligible sound, settled again. Cai stood, carefully; his head swam and he hunched against the sensation, standing still until it passed. He looked down at himself with an odd sense of distance – his limbs seemed too thin and covered with scrapes and bruises he could not

remember getting, and he was wearing some sort of bed shirt too large to have been his.

He turned towards the door. It was hard to make his feet move one after the other, a few inches at a time, but he made himself keep going. He wanted to know where he was. His hands were so weak that he could hardly close them around the iron handle tightly enough to turn it, but he eventually managed to get the door open.

Outside was a narrow, windowless corridor lined with low doors. It was dimly lit by half-burned rush lights perched on iron clamps, the walls above them streaked with soot. Judging by the bits of mud and straw and debris picked up by the flickering light, the walkway was well used, but at that moment it was empty.

He looked one way and then the other, still unsteady on his feet, wondering where to go. He felt a sudden impulse to turn to the left, an odd sensation of curiosity. Trailing his fingertips along the worn surface of the stones, he padded off through the darkness.

Master Crelt cleared his throat nervously, adjusting his black brocade waistcoat yet again as he waited to speak with the Duke of Sasthen. There were very few men within the vast rambling walls of the Teruen Palace that truly intimidated the Chief Physician. Most of the Quality, for all their wealth and finery and titles, did not faze him – Crelt still found their political games and vying for royal attention privately ridiculous. But Luca Filudere, Duke of Sasthen,

was not of that order of nobleman. He seemed to have no taste for politics, and everybody knew he had that *other* kind of power in abundance. Crelt's mouth wrinkled in distaste.

Old stories had entered circulation again since the Duke of Sasthen had returned to the palace. Some Crelt did not countenance – whispers that the man was the greatest sorcerer in the world, that he could hear everything said within the palace walls, that he could turn you to stone with a glance. A guard swore he'd seen the Duke walking the parapets one night, and then suddenly leap off into thin air and soar away as a snowy owl. Crelt told any patient who mentioned that story to him that guardsmen had never been renowned for their sobriety. But other stories Crelt knew to be true, and they were hardly any less incredible. Even as a boy, His Grace had stopped a rock fall in mid-air and saved the old King himself, along with a whole riding party of high ranking courtiers. A short time after he inherited his title, drought threatened widespread famine in the north. The Duke had dragged rain storms in from the distant ocean, and the disaster was averted.

In recent years, he had been a rare sight for the palace residents – though a nobleman, the Duke of Sasthen was no courtier, and preferred the silence and solitude afforded by his own estates. But the poisoning of the King of Terirth and his brother Prince Revem had brought the Duke back to Teruen. Crelt had been at a loss for a cure, along with every other physician in the city. Every prescription of emetics or kaolin or charcoal proved ineffective, and the King

succumbed. The Prince was close to death as well, with nothing left for the physicians to do but keep him comfortable and wait. But the Duke had stormed into the sick-room in the dead of night, and pulled the toxins from the Prince's blood through the very pores on his skin. There was nothing their medicine could have done, but the Duke's magic allowed the Prince to live. It would take a man with nerves of iron not to be unsettled by such a power.

"Master Crelt?" The servant boy Crelt had recruited to request the meeting hovered in the doorway, fiddling with his ill-fitting uniform. One of the Duke's eccentricities was his disdain for the constant 'harassment' afforded by personal servants, and he had brought none with him to Teruen. "His Grace will see you now, sir." The boy bowed to the physician and scurried out.

Crelt went through a bare formal sitting room and made his way to the study door, which stood ajar. He lightly rapped his knuckles on it. "Your Grace?"

"Come in."

Crelt pushed the door open. He was about to speak, but then he took in the state of the room and stopped short. In contrast to the other rooms, with their sparse furnishings and bare walls, the study was utterly chaotic. Books, scrolls and sheaves of parchment were strewn over three desks and much of the floor – even the chairs were occupied by teetering stacks of papers and yellowed journals. In the jumble were strange metal instruments, magnifying glasses, delicate beakers, cloth rags and all manner of mess. One whole wall had been given over to two immense bookcases, which were heavily laden with texts and other materials.

Charts and rough charcoal drawings were tacked up over the other walls. The Duke himself, a man of six and a half feet, leaned on one of the desks, inspecting a diagram stretched across a delicate metal frame and scribbling notes with a stump of pencil. His short white-blond hair was unkempt, and he wore only knee breeches and an untucked white shirt with ink spots and a streak of soot marring the hem; no waistcoat or cravat, not even shoes. How he could receive anyone in his rooms in this state of undress, and with the study in such disarray, the physician simply could not understand. “Your Grace,” he managed, at length. “You asked for a report?”

The Duke frowned, folding his arms. “Yes.”

“It does not look very good, I am afraid,” Crelt admitted. “Whatever they were being dosed with, it contained at least a strong opiate and who knows what else. You can be sure the establishment had no intentions of keeping any of the slaves longer than a year or two. No one would last long on those sorts of doses. We’ve lost one already, and we may well lose two more.” He shook his head, his gaze drifting distractedly around the disorder in the room.

“Which two?” the Duke asked.

“The red-haired girl, and the younger boy. We’re giving reducing doses of laudanum to ease the withdrawal, but both have developed high fevers. At this point, I could not honestly say I expect them to recover.”

He looked at the Duke directly again, and was surprised at the man’s suddenly perturbed, even irritated, expression. He was about to apologise for

having been so cavalier, when the Duke spoke instead: “The boy’s chance of recovery is not good, then?”

Crelt hesitated, a little taken aback. “No, Your Grace. He has been barely conscious at best. Even if he lives, he is likely to be permanently affected.”

The taller man frowned. “What a waste.” He rubbed his forehead, leaving a smudge of pencil lead on his skin. “The boy showed signs of possessing magic of a rare magnitude. Well, keep me informed.”

Knowing that he was dismissed, Crelt turned to leave. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a white figure lurch forward in the antechamber.



Cai tried to focus on the startled man, but his eyes would hardly stay open. The man’s face moved quickly from shock to concern as he stepped forward. He was saying something now but it made no sense to Cai; the mouth movements and voice seemed unsynchronised.

Another man came into the room, moving towards Cai with that same concerned expression – a very tall man, with white hair. Cai could hardly make out his face, but he knew that this was the person he needed to see, the reason he had found his way through the labyrinth of halls and storerooms. There was something familiar about this newcomer; Cai squinted up at the man’s face, trying to remember, and nearly stumbled backwards. “You...” His tongue felt thick and

awkward, and the words slurred. “Did you...” The two figures and the trembling room were being obscured by clouds of swirling blackness with spots of light inside them. Cai crouched down just as everything seemed to dissolve around him. He blacked out.

Luca leaned casually on the arm of his chair, watching Crelt stalk back and forth across the rug. “He shouldn’t have even been able to get up in his condition,” the physician muttered. “How he found his way up here is utterly beyond me.” They had carried the boy to the only bed at hand – Luca’s own – and he lay insensible, seemingly undisturbed by the noise.

A nurse appeared in the doorway, holding a beaten copper bowl and a cloth. Crelt waved her in, while the dithering younger physician he had summoned to assist turned hesitantly to Luca. “Your Grace, are you sure you don’t wish us to take him downstairs again?”

Luca shook his head impatiently. “Chances are he would make his way back here.” He did not elaborate his theory; the idea that the boy might have sensed Luca’s own aura and followed it up here was remarkable even to Luca himself, let alone to people with little experience of such forces.

“Perhaps we should move him to another room, however?” Crelt suggested.

“There is no other bed,” Luca explained, a little wearily. He knew what the fuss was about, of course: most of the aristocracy in the palace wouldn’t allow such a person anywhere near their suites. “I will sleep on the settee,” he finished.

The physicians exchanged glances, but made no comment. The nurse had pulled the coverlet back and was bathing the boy’s face and neck, helping to cool his fever. Luca examined the patient critically. He looked about fourteen; his face was still somewhat child-like, the features regular and delicate. He was very thin, his clavicles and sternum jutting from his flesh and the upper edge of each rib clearly visible. He had dark brown hair, straight and shoulder-length, against which his skin appeared alarmingly pale. What would really have attracted the attention of a slaver were the boy’s eyes – they were a vivid green, almost impossibly so, certainly much brighter than any green eyes Luca had seen before. He was too clean; only one kind of slave was bathed often. On the side of the boy’s neck, Luca could see a row of four small bruises. Luca looked away, not wanting to think about the specifics.

When the nurse finished her work and moved aside, Crelt paused in his pacing to check the patient’s temperature yet again with the back of his hand. When he straightened, he shook his head in disbelief – and then quickly bent to re-check. “Well. I simply... that is, he still has quite a fever, but it’s actually dropping. We will watch him to make sure, but... I must admit, I am quite startled by it. Perhaps I overestimated the severity of his situation.” It was clear that Crelt did not truly believe that, and Luca knew the man was competent –

better than competent. He didn't misjudge such matters. "Of course, there's no telling what the long term effects of the abuse may be," Crelt finished, frowning.

Luca wasn't listening; he chewed thoughtfully at his lower lip. He had understated, earlier, how rare a find he had made, that evening when the niggling sensation of raw magic had driven him to turn his horse into a seedier part of Teruen. But if the boy's mind were damaged, or broken, by what he had endured, then it would perhaps be better that he had died of fever as Crelt predicted.

A hand touched Cai's forehead, and his eyes came open with a start to see a silhouetted figure bending over him. Cai flinched, scrabbling backwards as he sat up. "Don't!"

The figure staggered away from the bed as though shoved, and tripped over onto his backside. It was a young man, in a dark jacket and fawn trousers. He and Cai exchanged frightened stares.

The stranger got to his feet, wary. "I am a physician, it's all—"

At the sound of the man's voice, Cai drew even further away towards the opposite side of the vast bed, glancing rapidly around him. He had no idea where he was; he couldn't identify the room, and heavy drapes covered much of the window. He felt dizzy, and his heart raced painfully. He winced, his hand drifting up to his chest. The physician took a cautious step closer, and Cai jerked back. "No!"

The handle rattled and the door swung open. The newcomer was so tall he had to stoop slightly to get through, and Cai recognised at once the white-haired man he had seen before he fainted.

“What happened?” the tall man asked, scowling down at the physician.

“I was just checking on him, and he...”

“I thought Crelt decided the nurse could handle anything requiring physical contact,” the man snapped. He turned to Cai, grey eyes curious, apparently forgetting his irritation in an instant. Cai peered back up at him, and felt suddenly... he could not call it comforted, but sure that he was at least in no danger.

Cai could see now that the hair he'd thought was white was actually near-colourless blond, and cut short enough that it stood up all over. The man's features were pronounced and angular, with high cheekbones and level eyebrows so light they were almost invisible.

“I'm...” the man paused, tilting his head slightly. “Luca.”

The physician shot him an odd glance. “I'll get the nurse,” he mumbled, edging around Luca and towards the door.

Luca leaned his hip and shoulder on the wall, crossing his arms. “You still have a high fever. You should be resting.”

“Where am I?” Cai asked, touching his hand to his forehead. He was sweating. “What...?” His tongue froze as he went to ask what had happened to him; he knew instinctively that he did not want to hear it.

“You are in the Palace at Teruen,” Luca explained evenly. “I recovered you from an establishment trading in certain services, provided by slaves – you were among them.”

All the hairs on the back of Cai’s neck stood up. For a moment he could almost remember the clench of his stomach when a strange hand brushed his skin. He looked down at his wrists; dark pink marks wrapped around them, and his forearms were dotted with fingertip-sized bruises. “You... recovered me?” Cai repeated, dread creeping up over his scalp once more. “What does that mean?”

“Not what you think.” Luca sighed, scratching at his blond hair. “I was not there as a patron. The proprietors of the place await the hangman.”

Cai fidgeted, still uncomfortable being in the room. “But, then... what am I here for...?”

“You collapsed in my entryway – you don’t remember?”

“Yes,” Cai said slowly. “But... before that...?” He shook his head.

Luca frowned, but then his face softened as the full meaning of Cai’s confusion hit. “You have lost your memory?”

“I don’t know.” Cai rubbed his temples, trying to think of something specific about his past, about himself. It was like reaching out into the darkness of an empty room – and if there was something there, he didn’t touch it. He couldn’t recall his last name, if he had one; he didn’t even know if Cai was his real given name. “I can’t remember anything.” He stared back up at Luca. “How can that be?”

“It is hard to say.” Luca sat on the edge of the bed. “It could be the opiates they were giving you, perhaps. Or, such episodes have been known among soldiers, survivors of floods or fires, anyone who has endured some awful event.” He frowned. “Sometimes the memory returns, or at least parts of it, but sometimes not.”

Cai shook his head, not wanting to think about any of it. All of this gave him a strange and horrified sensation – like stretching to touch his own back and finding an open wound where he expected whole skin. “Then what do you want with me?”

II

“I hear you’ve found a new amusement,” remarked the Prince Regent, taking a seat in an armchair of red velvet and carved wood beside Luca’s. The guests were trickling into the formal sitting room selected for the day’s modest celebration of Queen Meyive’s birthday.

“Revem.” Luca inclined his head, smiling. The two had been friends since Luca had first moved to Court as a child after his mother’s death, his father unable to remain at a home estate which had long felt like a hospice. Neither Luca nor the young Prince had ever met anyone their own age who was not either coerced into trying to make friends for the sake of their parents’ social status, or considered too far beneath them to act as their playmate. Though both were naturally reserved, their similar circumstances saw them soon become friends.

“I see news travels as fast as ever. So what have the gossips made of me this time?”

The Prince grinned. “Well, some say that he’s your lover. I hear he is quite striking, and you did find him in, ah... a house of ill repute.”

“I was even more surprised, I assure you,” Luca replied evenly, surveying the room around them. Only a select group had been invited to the party, and it was overall a solemn affair. Courtiers in dark garments gathered in small groups, sharing hushed conversation. Luca himself drew quite a few curious stares. He rarely attended social events unless invited by Revem or another member of the royal family, and there had been few such invitations in the months since the former King’s death.

“She still believes I was behind it,” Revem murmured sadly. “My own brother!” Luca followed the Prince’s line of vision to see Queen Meyive. Her face was drawn and pale, stark against her mourning black. The affect was only heightened by her dark hair being tightly bound and partly covered by a black lace veil. She stood near her son’s cradle, a confection of glossy cherry wood and gilt inlay, her ladies-in-waiting hovering awkwardly nearby. She inclined her head, unsmiling, as each newly arrived guest made their formal bow or curtsy. The infant King Jinedan, loosely wrapped in a scarlet blanket, kicked and babbled in his nurse’s arms.

“She suspects me, also,” Luca remarked softly. “Many of them do. You know the story is that it was all pre-arranged. I would arrive just in time to save you, but too late to save your brother. That I was lying in wait outside the palace walls until the flag dropped to half-mast.”

Queen Meyive had been five months pregnant when King Jeren began to show signs of the poison sickness that brought about his death. Coronation of a

new monarch had been delayed until the baby was born, and now Revem acted as regent on behalf of the infant King – ironically, as never-ending excuses kept the Prince from ever having contact with the child he represented. The Queen seemed convinced Revem sought to formalise his rule, and was determined to prevent him having any chance to do so.

“I have never even held my nephew,” Revem said, and looked down at his hands.

Luca shifted in his seat, self-conscious. He never knew what to say when Revem was this way – as he had been all too often in recent months. The Prince’s health had been more fragile since the poisoning, and the extra stress could not be helping matters. It made Luca want to take the Queen by the shoulders and shake her until she saw sense. He suspected someone wanted the Queen turned against Revem for their own ends.

“So,” Revem said at length, with an exaggerated change of mood, “How goes your little project?”

Luca shrugged. “Hard to say thus far. He is near recovered physically. There has been little improvement in his memory, though perhaps that is just as well.” He leaned his chin on the palm of his hand. “In any case, I should begin his instruction soon.”

Revem nodded. “I’m glad to hear it. I have said for more than a year it was high time you found another student.”

“You always speak as though one may simply walk into a local repository of young sorcerers and choose one,” Luca protested. “It would be impossible to seek out someone like him by design...”

Revem’s attention had shifted, his eyes on something behind Luca’s shoulder. Luca turned to see that Lord Ambrose, the Majordomo, had arrived and was greeting the Queen. It was probably the first time she had smiled all day – but Ambrose did tend to have that effect on people. He was gregarious, polite and rather down-to-earth for a courtier. The third son of a western Terirth baron, he had worked hard to gain influence at Court. Few were surprised, and only then due to his youth, when he had been appointed Majordomo.

Ambrose made his way over towards the corner where Revem and Luca sat. “Your Highness, your Grace,” he said with a bow, before perching rather unceremoniously on the unused footstool in front of Luca’s chair. He smiled broadly. “I was almost to the point of sending out search parties, my dear Duke, I so missed your company.” His attention to them attracted more than one sidelong look and murmured exchange of remarks from the gathered courtiers. Few were willing to socialise with the Prince and Duke openly anymore, beyond the requisite greetings.

“I was working,” Luca said, frowning.

“Ah! And you turned around to get up from your desk and had to brush the cobwebs off yourself?” Ambrose grinned as he said it, and even drew a smile from the downcast Revem.

“Something like that.” Luca couldn’t help but smile himself.

With Ambrose there, the atmosphere was lightened, and the Prince seemed to shake off his dour mood. But Luca noticed that he still looked now and then to Queen Meyive. The Queen moved among her guests with all the grace and courtesy appropriate to a monarch, but never once approached her brother-in-law.

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The crate flew across the ground, flipping end over end to smash against a tree, which dropped a shower of orange leaves in protest. Cai stared, open mouthed, his fingers still poised outstretched. Luca rubbed his forehead wearily. “Just visualise tipping it over, I said,” he muttered, surveying the shattered crate. The chunks of broken wood came to life, clambering on top of each other to knit back into a whole again.

A twitch of Luca’s fingers brought the crate gliding through the air towards them, to land neatly at Cai’s feet. “You do not really need the gesture, but sometimes it is useful – to focus energy... or when you want to demonstrate what you are doing. However...” He frowned down at the dented crate. “Perhaps you should try again without it. I think you are a shade too focussed. Just imagine very gently tilting the crate, just brushing it so that it tips over onto its side. Do not even think directly of the magic.”

Cai knew by now that Luca was not only a sorcerer, but a Duke, one of the most powerful men in the country. But it was hard to remember during lessons, while the Duke chattered away and talked with his hands. At all other times, Luca seemed immersed in his work and barely spoke to anyone.

It was still hard for Cai to believe what Luca said he was, or could be. Sorcery? How could it be possible? A real sorcerer could not have been taken by slavers. Luca said that with the drugs they used, he was in no condition to take any form of action against his captors, even if he had known before how to use his magic. But Cai couldn't help feeling he had failed himself, if this power had lain within him all the time.

Luca taught Cai how to reach for it, what it felt like, how he could shape his mind around the current that ran through his blood. It took Cai some days to be able to sense it within himself, but once he had gotten used to singling out that humming, rushing sensation underneath the sound of his breath and his heartbeat, it quickly became easy to take hold of it.

But it was not so easy to make it do as he wanted. When he tried to snuff a candle, just put out the wick as though he had placed his fingers over it, the candle exploded into fragments of wax. When he was asked to push a book from one side of a table to the other, the book hurtled across the room and split into a cloud of fluttering pages. Luca had it back together in a moment, but they relocated their lessons outside and found sturdier, cheaper objects for Cai to train on.

Even with the now-mild dose of laudanum, just enough to allow him to get to sleep at night, he had vague nightmares. If he thought about it too much, even if he remembered nothing concrete, he would break out sweating or find himself gritting his teeth so hard his jaw hurt. He shook his head, pulling his consciousness forcibly back into the present moment. *It doesn't matter. Listen.*

It was warm and muggy for late autumn, and the breeze that stirred the dust of the training yard felt warmer still. Cai rubbed his forehead, trying to concentrate.

“Try again,” Luca said, gesturing at the battered, muddy crate before Cai. “Gently, remember. I know it is not easy, but practice is the only way.”

Cai kept his hands at his sides this time, watching the box intently, visualising it exactly as Luca had said. The box began to tilt ever so slightly. Slowly, slowly, it tipped a few inches to the side, and then suddenly began to tremble violently. Before Cai could react, it exploded apart; he yelped, throwing up his hands to shield his face.

The Duke brushed fragments of wood from his charcoal-smudged shirt and waistcoat. He peered down at his hand, frowning, and pulled a splinter out of his palm. A drop of blood welled up there. “Sorry,” Cai sputtered awkwardly.

“It’s all right,” the Duke said, his solemn face brightened briefly by a small smile. “This is not something which you will master overnight. However,” he flicked a shard of wood from his shoulder and regarded Cai gravely, “you *must* learn. You are aware of your skill now, it responds to your will, and that means

you are a danger until you learn control. If someone angers or frightens you now, you might kill them by accident. For those with strong ability, magic training is all about coming to understand not only how to use your power, but also how to keep it in check.”

Luca glanced up at the muggy, cloud-veiled sky. “That’s enough for today. You need to get ready for this evening.”

Cai nodded, his frustration with himself replaced by a wave of nerves. He was to be introduced to the Prince Regent and the Queen tonight. Apparently it was expected of any new arrivals to Court. Luca hated public court sessions, so Cai would encounter them at a private salon gathering. That was some relief, but the very idea of meeting royalty made him so unsettled that it was just as well their lessons were over as soon as Luca brought it up. Concentrating now was out of the question.



The salon was hot and crowded, a riot of rustling fabric, chatter and peals of laughter. Above it all drifted music from a small group of musicians on stringed instruments. The room was brightly lit, to show off walls adorned with delicate painted panelling and glossy wooden floors overlaid with carpets in rich blue and gold. Everything seemed to glimmer in light shed by gold candelabra and an

immense crystal chandelier, and the smell of beeswax and perfumes drifted in the air.

Cai had seen some court finery in his short time at the palace, but never so much all together. The ladies wore richly decorated dresses with skirts so large they almost obscured the seats they occupied, and their curled hairstyles were topped with glittering ornaments and arrays of feathers. The gentlemen were almost as highly adorned, in a brilliant assortment of patterned, printed and embroidered frock coats with contrasting waistcoats, their hair carefully arranged and oiled into place.

Amongst all these ornately clad courtiers, it was immediately clear to Cai that the Duke was plainly dressed in comparison, in subdued grey and black. His hair was shorter than that of any other man in the room, and none had his stark colouring or his immense height. His entry had already sparked several whispered conversations and many more stares. Cai had felt overdressed when they left Luca's rooms, in a dark blue jacket and waistcoat, grey knee breeches and snow white stockings, but now he realised he did not even look fit to serve at such a party. A page in immaculate palace livery, carrying a silver tray of some delicate pastries, paused to survey Cai coldly as if to express just that sentiment.

The Duke looked around them with a frown of distaste. "Come. We will introduce you to Her Majesty and His Highness, and then find some corner where hopefully we will not be bothered."

They began to make their way through the room. A portly older gentleman, his expression unreadable, stepped over to greet the Duke. Next came a smiling young lady, a slight blush high on her cheeks as she curtsied deeply. A matronly woman dithered at her elbow as though she wasn't sure whether to promote her charge's interest or drag her away. Cai scanned the room idly. It was clear no one would want to speak with him, so he took the opportunity to take in the incredible setting.

His gaze drifted over the back of a man standing in a small group across the room – fairly tall, dark haired, wearing a sky blue jacket and dark breeches. Inexplicable dread welled up in the back of Cai's throat. When the man turned to speak to someone beside him, the profile of his face came into view – an ordinary, well-proportioned face, with mid-brown eyes, a close-trimmed beard and moustache. But as soon as Cai saw it, his scalp prickled all over with anxiety.

“Cai,” Luca said close by. Cai's head snapped round, but his eyes still darted between Luca and the dark-haired man. “Are you listening?” His Grace moved around to look at Cai better, though the boy could still just see the other man past the Duke's arm – laughing at some comment made by a lady at his side. “Please, I have to go.” Cai's eyes switched rapidly to Luca's and back again.

The Duke frowned. “I understand being nervous, but this is excessive.”

“It's not that, I – I think–” Cai took an unsteady step backwards, eyes still transfixed, but Luca caught his arm, holding him where he was. People around them were starting to watch the exchange curiously.

“Calm yourself,” Luca said, an edge of irritation in his voice. Cai hardly heard the Duke’s words. The woman had turned and noticed him – Cai saw her tap the man’s shoulder, whispering. Cai willed himself to look away, knowing what was coming, but he couldn’t. Finally, the man himself turned to look; his eyebrows rose slightly as he returned Cai’s stare, but his face was impassive.

Nausea rose up through Cai’s gut, beads of sweat breaking out across his skin. He tried to wrench his arm out of Luca’s grip, horrified. “Please, let me go!”

Luca held on implacably. “Why are you making such a scene over this?” he demanded, as Cai tried to pry his fingers loose.

The man began to approach them, and Cai tried to do what Luca said, to reason that there could be nothing so dire to fear, to hold his breathing steady. He couldn’t. Panic rolled over him, and he fought even harder against Luca’s grip.

“Is everything all right, Your Grace?” The sound of the man’s voice made Cai want to cover his ears and scream; he dragged in breath through gritted teeth. “Is your young companion unwell?”

“Do not trouble yourself, Ambrose. I am at a loss for what has come over him, but –”

The stranger stepped up to the Duke’s side, his eyes meeting Cai’s, and Cai lost track of their exchange under the rushing in his ears. The man reached out his hand to touch Cai’s shoulder...



*A rough-skinned hand grabbed him around the jaw, thumbs wedged in above his lower teeth to force his mouth open. A rough voice interrupted, hastily; “No, none fer that one – it’s Hissself calls tonight. He likes it all the better when they blubber.” Cai’s vision was blurred; in the half-darkness, he saw nothing.*

*Coarse laughter. The hand shoved Cai’s head backwards as it released him, and he hit the wall heavily.*

*His face was forced down into the mattress, into a patch of his own spit. He fought uselessly against the bindings that held his arms twisted behind his back. The spiking fear dragged frantic sobs from him as the man stroked his hair. He thought he could taste blood.*

“Cai!” It was the physician, Master Crelt. “He’s with us, he’s with us.” It was blood he could taste, his throat thick with it. There was something in Cai’s field of view, a creamy coloured blur – he could feel the physician pressing it against his face. “Hold this, hold it there,” Crelt instructed him. Cai was too disoriented to protest.

He looked down to see his new clothes were a bloody mess, and the nausea came back all at once. He gagged. “Here!” someone said forcefully, putting a bucket in front of him and knocking away the rag he held to his nose. He threw up, coughing miserably. Warm liquid trickled down his lip, and he saw the deep red drops land in the mess. He clamped the cloth back to his nose. When he

straightened, he was horrified to realise that it was the Duke himself holding the sick bucket, a rueful expression on his face. “You really worked yourself into a state,” he remarked, putting the bucket on the floor with a grimace. “What happened?”

“I-” Cai coughed to clear his throat and forced himself to speak, “I don’t know.” He shook his head slightly. He couldn’t talk about it. Even thinking about it brought the same fear back over him in cold waves. It wasn’t even a lie; he didn’t know what had happened to him. He was terrified of the man Luca had called Ambrose, but he could give no reason.

The Duke frowned with irritation, but he said nothing.

### III

Not a fortnight later, Cai sat once again in the physician's work rooms. Luca had said it was just for another routine examination, to make sure he was recovering as expected. Cai knew there was something more to it.

Master Crelt touched his fingertips to Cai's throat, working over the skin back to the base of the neck. He caught Cai's chin to turn his face towards the window and peered into each eye in turn.

Cai was finding it more difficult than ever to sleep, as the nightly dose of laudanum was reduced week by week. He was constantly on edge. He jumped at the sound of footsteps, when someone spoke nearby, when something moved out of the corner of his eye. His twitchiness irritated the Duke no end, but there was no way to control it.

He was not improving in his lessons. If anything, his control was worse now than when they first began. He tried, but his concentration was just not what it had been. Luca had been distant and curt, even during the lessons themselves, which only made it more difficult.

Cai knew his sanity was in question; everyone in that room had seen him panic and collapse in response to nothing they could identify. He could not explain it to the Duke – he could not even fully justify it to himself. His memory was like a newly-begun mosaic; for every one remembered moment that drifted suddenly into his consciousness, there were years of empty grey space. He could not yet place ‘Ambrose’ anywhere in it. More and more he wondered if the fear he had felt – still felt – could be the product of an unbalanced mind, and not memory at all.

Master Crelt ran his hands carefully over Cai’s skull, and finally stepped back. He frowned down at the boy, folding his arms.

“He’s worried I’m going mad, isn’t he?” Cai asked quietly.

The physician hesitated, but finally he nodded ruefully. “His Grace thought I may have missed something. In general terms, I suppose it was a reasonable suspicion – with what happened to you, it was in fact likelier than not there would be some long term effects.” He sat down in the chair beside the bed. “But, physically at least, your health is much improved. You seem lucid and reasonable. I can see the contact is unwelcome, but you are able to maintain an appropriate reaction.”

Cai shook his head, picking at the blanket. “Even I’m starting to think he might be right.”

“For now, we can only wait and see how you do. I know this is frightening, but you have to be patient, and try not to worry.” Crelt looked hard at Cai, his brow furrowing. “You’re not sleeping?”

Cai’s instinct was to deny it – it could be just more evidence of a sick mind. But he knew that would solve nothing. “No,” he admitted, keeping his eyes down.

“Hrm.” Crelt tapped his fingers on his leg. “Now that is sure to interfere with even the soundest mind. I suppose we must increase the laudanum again, though I am reluctant to. Cai, listen to me now.”

Finally, Cai met the physician’s eye.

“You are doing fine, all things considered. Keep your chin up.”

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Cai swallowed the laudanum as quickly as he could, screwing up his face against the bitterness. He corked the bottle tightly and replaced it and the tiny copper spoon in their drawer. Finally, he blew out the oil lamp and settled down under the blankets. He rolled slowly onto his back and waited for sleep.

Patchy snow lay on the ground, and the dirt road was slushy, puddles forming in the ridges left by carts and carriages. Cai’s pony kept up a steady walk; it was a shaggy beast of mountain stock, not in the slightest perturbed by a little

cold and mud. Pale sunlight filtered down through a thin covering of cloud. Cai reached down to pat the pony's neck.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw there was someone riding beside him. He straightened, looking at her – an auburn haired woman on a horse the colour of the sky above them. She rode side-saddle in a dress of deep green. Cai was sure that there had been no-one there a moment earlier, but he was not alarmed to see her; he found her presence oddly comforting. Her horse settled into step with Cai's pony. He smiled at her. Her green eyes were slit-pupilled like a cat's in the daylight. She opened her mouth to say something –

At the roadside nearby; a strange footfall. She looked past Cai, her bright green eyes darting back and forth as she searched for the source.

His eyes rolled open, straining against the blackness of his room; his lips were shaped around a word that was forgotten the instant he awoke. He lay still, his heart racing, and listened intently. The room was silent, but he could not shake the sense of foreboding the dream had left him.

Then he heard it – a soft footstep, nearby, and the quality of the darkness beside him changed: a black presence against the empty room. Cai inhaled sharply in shock; the dark figure let out a grunt of surprise, and slashed at him just as Cai reflexively jerked back. A white-hot streak tore across his chest and collarbone. He cried out, and his magic roared from him like an enraged animal, a torrent of unchecked power. It was pure force, slamming into his attacker to hurl

him across the room and into the wall. Cai didn't hear the desk splinter as the figure crashed through it, or the smash of body against stone; his ears were ringing from his own magic.

Dim candlelight filtered in, slanting through floating mortar dust and wood fibres. The plaster and stones had been knocked through into the neighbouring room, and on top of them lay a motionless figure coated in dust. Cai stared, too shocked to fully take in what had happened.

Warmth spread over his chest, seeping down his nightshirt. He clamped his hand to it instinctively, cringing as his fingers came in contact with open flesh. The wound stretched from the left side of his chest across to his right clavicle.

Luca staggered into view through the jagged hole in his workroom wall, still fully dressed despite the late hour. For a moment he stared at the broken, dust-coated body that lay there. His head snapped around to Cai and he cursed, ducking through the damaged wall to make his way over to the bed. "I'm bleeding," Cai managed through wincing breaths.

"Don't talk. Lie back," Luca said tersely, his eyes flicking quickly to Cai's face and then back again. Cai did as he was told. Luca methodically peeled away the slashed nightshirt, murmuring a word that brought a tiny glinting ball of light into being to brighten the dim room. Blood welled freely out of the wound; Cai could feel it spread down his chest and the sides of his body. He was starting to feel light headed.

Luca raised his right hand, rubbing his thumb against his fingertips until they glowed white hot. “This will hurt,” he warned, positioning his left hand to press the edges of the wound together as Cai gritted his teeth. Luca’s touch hissed across the split flesh like a hot iron. Cai groaned as pain burned through him.

“Just breathe, concentrate on breathing,” Luca urged him. “You need a physician – that still needs stitching.” Luca’s voice sounded oddly distant. The Duke left the room at a run.

Cai barely heard when the Duke returned. But he came fully awake when a woman screamed, gaping at the crumpled body in the adjoining room. At Luca’s angered insistence, she hurried over to the bed and turned her attention to Cai, dropping her bag on the floor before examining the wound with trembling fingers.

“Yes, it must be stitched, and now. Hold him down.” She turned away for a moment, rummaging in her bag.

Cai dimly felt Luca lean over him, large hands pinning both of his arms to the bed. Then the needle punched through. He couldn’t stop from crying out this time, trying to flinch away while the grim-faced Duke held him down. The woman wore a similar expression as she worked, tugging the thread through, pushing the needle back into the skin. Cai squeezed his eyes shut as everything began to tremble around him. With the next stab of the needle the pain felt distant, numbed, his hearing buzzing. He knew he was going to pass out again – this time he welcomed it.



Someone was speaking nearby. Cai tried to sit up, confused at the sound of an unfamiliar voice, but the sharp pain in his chest made him fall back against the mattress.

He touched his fingers gingerly to the site, to find it wrapped in bulky linen bandages that looped around his chest and over one shoulder. His bloodied nightshirt was gone, and there was clean bedding as well.

Conversation drifted in from the sitting room through the jagged gap in the wall. “He can hardly be held accountable.” That was Luca, irritation in his voice. “Had he been sleeping, had he been alone here... he would be dead.”

“My concern is reasonable. The court is worried.” An impatient female voice. “There was already enough talk, and now a man is dead...”

“A would-be murderer is dead,” Luca said sharply.

“Do not interrupt me!” She was indignant now. “I am still your Queen. Explaining myself to you is a courtesy, not an obligation.” Cai struggled to take in what he was hearing.

When Luca spoke again, he sounded calmer. “Your Majesty, please, in his situation...”

“It hardly signifies,” she snapped. “I must put the safety of my court before the pity I might feel for a slave boy. And besides,” she changed tack abruptly, “I

do not recall ever approving that his education be conducted here. Even I know that magic in the hands of a novice is dangerous.”

Another cut in: “I’m sure it will help the boy, too, if he removes to the countryside to recover completely.”

Cai forced himself to a sitting position despite the pain. He knew that voice: the man from the salon, the one called Ambrose. It was unnerving to hear him speak in the calm, friendly tone he took with Luca. A small shudder rippled up uncontrollably from the base of Cai’s spine.

“Of course his, ah...” Ambrose paused thoughtfully, “... instability... is understandable, but should he really be having such training before he is well enough to endure it?”

Hearing himself discussed so casually by that man was almost physically painful; hatred and fear bubbled up in Cai. He had to hide, had to get away; he crawled out of the bed onto the floor, fear masking the bite of his wound, and dragged himself awkwardly under the bed. He pressed himself against the wall, every muscle in his body tensed.

“Fine,” Luca said resignedly. “By the time the boy is healed sufficiently to travel, I will have finished preparations for our departure.”

“You will leave with him then?” The Queen formed it as a question, but she did not sound surprised.

Luca sighed. “My commitment is made. I can hardly abandon the training half-begun – especially not after this injury.” His voice was resolute, just an edge of his former irritation remaining. “No. Cai must leave, so I must also leave.”

“Very well,” the Queen said simply. Somehow, she sounded almost pleased.

Cai heard them moving away, and he could not make out anything else said. He flexed his jaw, closing his eyes: how could they blame him for what happened?

The door opened, and footsteps crossed the threshold. Cai’s stomach clenched, and he forced himself to lie perfectly still. He saw a man’s boots approach the bed, and stop in front of him. But then he heard Luca’s voice – “Cai?”

Cai released a breath he hadn’t noticed he’d been holding, and suddenly saw his situation for what it was: cowering under the bed in terror, for no reason he could explain. “I’m here,” he murmured reluctantly. Luca crouched down to look under the bed, but Cai couldn’t meet his eye; he was too ashamed.

“You heard us speaking, then,” the Duke surmised cautiously. He leaned back on his haunches. “Come on, you had best come out of there.”

Cai slowly inched his way out from under the bed. It was much harder without fear spurring him on, and pain shot through him with each breath and twitch of muscle. “There is a little bleeding,” Luca peered at the thick bandaging. “The stitches will have to be checked – and it will need to be re-bound.”

Cai lay still for a moment, breathing hard. He wasn’t sure he could get up. “I’m sorry. I just...” There was still no way to justify what Ambrose’s presence

made him feel. He could not expect Luca to react any more favourably this time than the last.

“It’s all right,” Luca said quietly. There was no anger or frustration in his voice, and Cai glanced at him, surprised. The Duke’s expression was pensive, his light eyebrows drawn together. Finally, he got to his feet. “Unless the floor has some therapeutic qualities I am unaware of, perhaps you should consider getting back into your bed?” He offered Cai a hand. The boy hesitated, but made himself reach out.

Cai struggled to pull himself up even with Luca’s help, and by the time he reached a sitting position he was short of breath and hunched under waves of pain.

“Sorry, but I don’t see how else to manage it.” Luca half-crouched, grasping Cai beneath his arms to pull him up onto the edge of the bed. Cai was not afraid of Luca, but all the same, he felt queasy and shaken from just that short moment of contact. “You are still too thin,” Luca remarked, frowning. He turned to go. “I will seal the rooms. No one will be able to get in unless I allow them. As soon as you can travel, we will leave the city.” When he spoke again, it was in an undertone, and Cai barely heard him as Luca pulled the door closed. “Perhaps it is for the best, after all.”

IV

“Cai,” the Duke called, through the door.

“Your Grace?” Cai had been rechecking his travelling trunk once more. They were to leave before dawn the next morning, and he wanted to be sure everything was ready before he went to sleep.

“Make yourself presentable and come to the sitting room. The Prince is here.” Footsteps retreated, and now Cai heard muted conversation.

A familiar tension rose up through Cai’s gut. He finished neatening the folds of the topmost shirt, and carefully closed and latched the lid. He had thought perhaps, with everything that had happened, he’d avoided having to meet anyone from the royal family face to face.

He stood up and checked his reflection in the looking glass, frowning at the dark shadows under his eyes. His sleep had not improved since the attack. The regular, hazy nightmares that served as his only memories now intermingled with visions of being hunted down by shadowy figures. Sometimes they were faceless; sometimes they looked like the man he had killed, or Ambrose, or even Luca.

Cai did his best to settle a composed expression on his face, and then made his way out to the sitting room.

“... Always unnerves me a little to see, now,” the Prince was saying. He stopped when he saw Cai, and smiled. They were standing near the entryway, apparently having fallen into conversation as soon as the Prince arrived and forgotten the process of sitting down. The Prince was not quite six feet – only a few inches taller than Cai himself – with dark blond hair and rather tired brown eyes. He looked to be of an age with the Duke; around thirty. “Revem, this is my student, Cai,” Luca explained. It was by no means a formal introduction, but Cai gave what he hoped was an appropriately low bow for a prince.

“It is good to finally meet you.” The Prince inclined his head with a small smile. “Luca speaks much of you.” Cai had never heard anyone call the Duke by his first name aloud before, but then, Luca had called the Prince ‘Revem’, as well.

Now they moved over to seat themselves, and Cai perched on the other end of the sofa from Luca, feeling awkward. The Prince did not look as Cai had imagined. His clothing was beautifully made, with delicately embroidered cuffs and hems and a very fine lace-edged cravat, but was overall quite reserved. His hair was cut almost as short as Luca’s, though he did have the typical well-groomed moustache and goatee. “How is your wound?” Prince Revem asked.

Cai’s hand instinctively went to his chest, to the notched scar beneath his shirt. “Much better, Your Highness,” he replied. The stitches had been removed just that morning – somehow, the wound had healed more than a week faster

than Master Crelt had expected. The fresh scar was still a dark reddish pink and puckered from the pressure of the thread, and at times it ached dully.

There was a tray with glasses and a carafe of some dark liquor on the table, and Luca unstoppered the bottle. He quarter-filled two glasses and slid one across the table to Prince Revem.

“None for young Cai?” the Prince asked, settling back in his armchair with the glass.

“Liquor is bad for growing boys,” Luca replied firmly.

“The secret to your prodigious height?” The Prince grinned over the lip of his glass.

Luca scowled at him. “Anyway, it is unfortunate that this introduction should happen the day before we leave.”

The Prince looked at him sharply. “Tomorrow? I thought you planned to leave in a fortnight.”

“I thought it best that most believe so. I have no doubt that if our departure became common knowledge, we’d be followed. Someone attempted to get in through Cai’s window again. My seals stopped them, of course, but the whole situation is getting tiresome.”

Cai stared at the Duke. He had no idea about any of this. He imagined another dark clad figure peering in through his window, just a few feet from his bed, and a shiver ran down the back of his neck.

Luca seemed not to notice his surprise. "I'd prefer if we could avoid unwanted company."

The Prince nodded. "I'd be surprised if anyone at Court noticed your absence. You have been so rarely out of your suite since my sister-in-law, ah..." he swirled the liquid in his glass, "...paid you a visit."

Luca leaned against the arm of the sofa, his chin propped up on his hand. "Not entirely unexpected."

The Prince downed his drink and moved forward to pour himself another. "So, where will you go?"

Luca shrugged. "I could as well hide him anywhere, but seals and masks take attending to. I have lost enough sleep recently keeping the rooms safe." He sipped his drink slowly. "I plan to go to Sutrell."

Cai didn't recognise the name, but the Prince was clearly taken aback. "What? Why there?" He sounded incredulous.

"It is as good as anywhere." Luca's voice was even, but there was an odd quality to it now. "In a sense, the Queen was right. Magic can be dangerous, and the palace is not the ideal place to train a young sorcerer. But Sutrell is near abandoned, and already a ruin. What damage could be done there?"

The Prince was silent, watching Luca thoughtfully.

"Besides, the new caretaker has been there some months now, with no word from me since." Wherever and whatever Sutrell was, clearly something had happened there that made the Prince think Luca would never want to go back.

“All right,” the Prince said simply. He stretched back in his chair, folding one leg so the ankle rested atop the other knee. “Do not... take this the wrong way. I know you can look after yourself – but be careful. Events have been so unpredictable recently.”

“*I should be careful?*” Luca retorted, and then softened his tone as he went on: “If it were possible I would have you come with us. You must not let your guard down for a moment. Make it public knowledge that you have a taster, and don’t go anywhere without an armed escort.” It was almost surreal to hear Luca sound so concerned, even protective. He always seemed so distant and aloof from everyone.

Revem glared at Luca. “I know. I will do nothing rash.” There was an uncomfortable silence for a moment, but then the Prince lifted the bottle of liquor and filled both their glasses again. “Shall we drink – to better times?” He gave a wry smile, lifting his glass. Luca clinked his own against it.

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It was still fully dark when Luca and Cai left the suite at the palace for the final time. Dawn was at least a couple of hours away, but they still wound their way through a series of grubby servants’ passageways where no guard would bother to patrol. Cai wondered if they were going along the same route he had taken to get to Luca’s suite that first time, but it was impossible to say.

He was surprised the Duke had managed to get out of bed so early; the men had finished off the first carafe and started on another by the time Cai turned in for the evening. From Luca's sullen mood, Cai guessed that he was suffering for it.

Outside, the air was so cold that their breath came out as steam. Even in his wool frock coat and scarf, with his new riding cloak pulled tightly around him, Cai was shivering. He stopped dead when they emerged into the courtyard, almost losing the grip on his trunk. Someone was there, in the halo of lamplight around the stable doors: a man checking the tack of a bay horse hitched to a small open carriage. "It's okay," Luca murmured, not even slowing his step. "It's Varlan – from my estate."

Varlan looked over his shoulder as they approached. "Morning, Your Grace." Varlan was in his late forties and stocky. His short black hair was receding at the temples and generously streaked with grey, and his beard and moustache were even greyer than the hair on his head. Lines at the corners of his blue eyes suggested he was quick to smile, and he grinned up at the Duke as if to confirm this. "It's good to see you again, Your Grace. It has been too long since you were up Sasthen way."

"If things had been different, I would never have left," Luca assured him.

Varlan inclined his head. "Morning, Master Cai," he said easily, smiling as he reached out to take the trunk.

“Hello,” Cai mumbled, a little embarrassed to see that Varlan carried it easily under one arm. Varlan slid the trunk in under the seat of the carriage, and then added Luca’s packs alongside it.

“Wander is inside?” the Duke asked.

“Yes, Your Grace. No good having him stand in the cold too long.” Luca went into the stables, and Varlan smiled at Cai. “Come, we’d best get up and ready. His Grace will want to be off right away, ’fore it gets any closer to dawn.”

Luca emerged leading a grey gelding taller at the shoulder than the top of Cai’s head. The horse was fitted with worn travelling gear – scuffed saddle and bridle, a load of bulging saddlebags and a bedroll slung on his back – but nothing could disguise the fact that he was an unusually fine animal.

“He will draw more attention to us,” Luca conceded, “but I hardly intend to leave without him.” He patted Wander’s neck fondly, then braced his foot in the stirrup and swung up into the saddle. He pulled up the hood of his cloak, nudging the horse into a walk. The carriage horse followed, and they trundled across the courtyard towards a gate left conveniently – and not coincidentally – open and unguarded.

Nervous tension mingled with excitement in Cai’s stomach as they passed through the gates and into the city. He knew nothing of what lay beyond the palace grounds, but that only made it more exhilarating. As they clattered down the cobblestone road away from the palace walls, he grinned into the darkness.



Gum trees stretched up around them, their boles disappearing beyond the edge of the firelight and into the darkness. When the fire burned down, not even a hint of moonlight would filter through to ease the total darkness of the forest's shadow.

Cai stirred the pot, breathing in the smell of tomatoes and meat broth. He was glad Varlan had gone himself to collect firewood, and assigned Cai the cooking. Being jolted around in the carriage all day and sleeping in a bedroll on the ground at night had left Cai tired and sore enough, without having to cart around armfuls of lumber. At least exhaustion had made it easier to sleep, sometimes with no need to draw on his dwindling supply of the laudanum at all.

The camp site was just back from the road, and was clearly a regular stop for travellers passing through the area: there were fresh ashes in the well-established fire pit, and the ground had been cleared and recently brushed clean. In the centre of the campsite stood a huge gum tree, so wide around that Cai's arms could not reach even halfway, its dark bark crusted with sap.

As Cai stirred the soup once more, Luca moved over to sit down opposite him. "I set up the tent," he offered by way of conversation. Cai turned to look, surprised, at the perfectly completed canvas structure. "I didn't hear..." he began, and then realised that Luca had no need for a mallet to get such a task accomplished.

Luca stretched out his long legs beside the fire, wincing as one of his joints cracked noisily. “I feel starved,” he muttered, watching Cai add dried noodles to the pot from a cloth packet. Looking at Luca, dressed in simple travelling clothes and with several days’ worth of stubble on his face, Cai thought once again that this was surely an extremely unusual aristocrat. How many titled men would travel this way – on horseback, with minimal supplies, and just a bedroll and a simple shelter to sleep in? Let alone help with the campsite chores, however unorthodox the methods used. Cai tasted the soup, and carefully measured a pinch of salt from a small metal canister.

“Smells good,” Varlan said, making Cai start. How Varlan managed to make his way back through the forest so silently, over a carpet of gum leaves and bark, was a mystery. He placed an armful of wood by the fire and took a seat on the log beside Luca, while Cai took out the bowls from the cooking kit.

“We’re making good time. Be at Sutrell in three days at this pace.” Varlan pulled prickles out of his woollen stockings as he spoke. “I know we’re coming up on a village with an inn. I’ve stayed there before. We can aim to stop there tomorrow.”

“Good,” Luca said, accepting a bowl of soup from Cai. “I need a hot bath.”

Cai touched his own hair, and was dismayed to feel how greasy it was. Washing had been limited to quick splashes in the chill water of the river their road followed north-east. A chance to wash properly and sleep in a decent bed would be wonderful.

Varlan lifted his spoon to his lips, then lowered it again. “Then maybe, the next night, we should aim to reach Berent?”

Luca grimaced. “I think our situation is tense enough without adding such a visit.” He sipped his soup straight from the bowl. “Lady Kerissa would need a month’s warning to fortify her nerves for my presence.”

Varlan nodded, frowning slightly. Cai watched them, wanting to ask what they were talking about but unsure how Luca would react. The awkwardness between them had gradually eased since the day of the Queen’s visit, but Luca was not exactly one to talk extensively about himself, even at the best of times.

Once they finished eating and put the dishes aside, Varlan added more wood to the fire. Still slightly damp, it crackled and popped and sent up wisps of steam as the flames licked over it. “I’ll go wash up and water the horses,” Varlan said. “Best turn in soon. We’ll be starting early tomorrow to get to Crennep Creek before nightfall.”

As the others went through the evening routine around him, Luca remained sitting at the fireside, staring distractedly into the flames.



Varlan leaned against the backrest of the carriage, one hand on the reins and the other folded behind his head. Cai looked listlessly out at the trees around them. The wheels rumbled over the dirt road, an undertone to the thud of the

horses' hooves. Luca rode ahead of them, his body swaying with each of Wander's strides. The forest was thinner here, the trees spaced further apart, and the road moved constantly from shade to bright sunlight. Since the morning before, the ground they covered had been more and more hilly.

The road had followed close beside the river as it curved lazily around the shallow valleys, but here it changed direction, heading up over the next hill instead of coursing around it. The carriage horse kept her stride, moving steadily up the incline. The crest of the hill had been fully cleared, and here Cai could see beyond the road and the forest for the first time in days.

Ahead of them, the trees petered out into a grassy plain, peppered with low bushes and hints of colour from wild flowers. Running across the plain, south-east towards the distant coast, was a wide river which branched into two – one the river they had followed up from Terirth, the other snaking south-east towards the distant coast. Beyond the plain, behind a thin veil of mist, Cai could see the other side of the huge forest they had been travelling in, which curved around the edge of the plain and disappeared over the distant ridge.

Varlan pointed north-west as they reached the top. "Sutrell is about a day's trip up the river that way, though there's not much left to pick it out by these days." The sweep of his hand took in the rest of the scene. "The river ahead of us is the Casin, and once you cross that everything over to the east coast, north to the Amathe River, and south to the port of Casar belongs to the Duchy of Sasthen."

Cai stared out at the expanse of land around them. Luca had a map of Terirth on the wall of his workroom, but Cai had never known how much of it actually belonged to the Duke.

Luca himself had taken the hill at a canter, not even pausing to look over his lands, and was now well ahead of them. Varlan swivelled in his seat and pointed east, and Cai turned to look. Out in the plain, on the other side of the river, a small cluster of buildings sat perched atop another hill, ringed by a stone wall. The flat land around it was neatly divided into paddocks, some planted with rows of crops and others holding flocks of sheep.

“That’s Berent,” Varlan explained as they headed slowly down the other side of the hill. “The seat of His Grace’s uncle and heir, Lord Oren.”

Cai looked at Varlan for a long moment, thinking. He felt sure Varlan was not the sort of man to chide Cai for prying into the Duke’s life, but it was still hard to make himself speak. Finally, he asked, “Varlan, what happened to him?” Once he’d managed one question, though, he couldn’t help himself: “Why didn’t he want to go to Berent? And why was the Prince so surprised to know we were going to Sutrell? What *is* Sutrell, anyway?”

Varlan raised his eyebrows, glancing ahead of them carefully, but seemed to relax when he saw the Duke was well out of earshot. “I think that’s the most I’ve ever heard you say all together!” He drummed his fingers on the side of the carriage thoughtfully, shaking his head. “Well. It’s not as though all the Court



hasn't heard the story, and of all people there's no reason you shouldn't know. I was working at Sasthen even then, you know."

He glanced back towards Berent, which was only just visible as they descended below the tree line once more. "Well, the Duke gets on well enough with Lord Oren." Varlan squinted and massaged the bridge of his nose, peering at Cai. "But there is bad history between the Duke and Oren's wife, the Lady Kerissa. Her mother Arele had been a close friend to the family, but she was... high-strung, I'll say. Sensitive. Always tended somewhat to take things personal, and overreact. Over time it got much worse." He sighed. "In the end, it was as far as madness. Though of course, no-one realised quite how badly off she was, or they might have done something to stop it. The way I heard it, Arele was convinced that Lady Kerissa should have married the Duke's father, as then she'd've been a Duchess. The connection between the two families may have warranted it, if suggested ten years earlier, but the young man's marriage had already been long arranged by the time Arele seriously raised the prospect. But Arele got it in her head that Lady Kerissa had been cheated, fobbed off on a younger son. It turned into some sort of channel for her sickness – she became just, obsessed with the idea."

"What happened?" Cai asked, feeling like Varlan was avoiding touching that subject directly.

Varlan cleared his throat, as though he wasn't sure how to explain. "Arele and some of the rest of the family were visiting Sutrell, where the Duke's mother

and father lived back then. Arele set a fire in the storerooms.” Cai wasn’t sure he’d heard Varlan properly, until the man went on: “Much of the building burned down to nothing. I worked at the main Sasthen manor even then, so of course I wasn’t at Sutrell when it happened, but I saw it afterwards...” He fell silent, rubbing his eyes with thumb and forefinger. “Arele left a note saying what she’d done – her maid found it, poor girl, and that’s how they all found out it hadn’t been some dreadful accident. Was terribly shaken up, as she’d worked around the woman for years and never realised things were near that bad.”

For a long moment, there was only the gentle rumbling of the carriage wheels and the thud of the horse’s hooves on the dirt track. Finally, Varlan said, “Several people died, including the Duke’s mother, and Arele herself. Of course she must have planned it that way, to have left the note she did.” Varlan bowed his head over the reins. “Our Duke barely pulled through, and he was only three or four years old.”

Cai looked down the trail, to where Luca and Wander could be seen through the trees. Cai had guessed something terrible had happened, but he could never have imagined this. It must have been like one long nightmare for a child.

“So you see why Prince Revem would think the Duke would never want to see the place again... and why there’s some strain in the Sasthen family,” Varlan finished. “I think Lady Kerissa has always felt partly to blame for it all, but how would anyone know what to do to make it right again?”

Varlan straightened in his seat, and flicked the reins. The solid bay mare, seemingly startled to receive any instruction after ambling along all day, lurched into a trot. Cai grabbed onto the edge of the bench as the carriage bumped and shook along the track.

“You know, young Cai,” Varlan said as they began to close on the Duke, “There’s no call for you to be frightened of asking questions – not of me, at least. And you’d be surprised by how well His Grace would likely take you showing a little curiosity.”

Cai shook his head, looking down at his hands. He wasn’t so sure about that. Something told him that this would be the last thing Luca wanted to talk about.

## V

Sutrell was situated on cleared ground set back a little from the river, with blue gum forest on three sides. The extensive gardens must once have been beautifully kept, but they were now overgrown and rambling – a vibrant jumble of plant life that ran right up to the containing wall. There they mingled with the shrubs, sapling trees and flowering vines that had begun their slow incursion into the grounds from the forest.

The building was a ruin. Parts of the rear and side walls still stood, but the bulk of the house was reduced to shattered stonework, ashes and charred wood fragments. The foundations and the collapsed stone walls of the lower levels were host to a patchwork of mosses and lichens. Even the small section of the house left standing was discoloured with smoke and choked with vines.

A flock of galahs took off screeching from the ruined walls as Varlan guided the carriage horse along a track past the main building. Someone had obviously worked to keep the track clear, unlike the rest of the grounds. Behind the main house were perhaps half a dozen small servants' cottages, mostly abandoned and decrepit. But one, set slightly apart from the others against the

south-eastern wall, was in much better repair. The whitewash was fresh and crisp, not peeling and grey as on the other buildings, and a thin column of smoke drifted up from the chimney.

Beside the cottage was a wooden shelter, where a pair of horses were already tethered. Varlan pulled up the carriage horse in front of it and handed Cai the reins, while he jumped down and headed to the cottage door. He knocked several times, but there was no answer. Varlan turned back with a shrug and set to work unhitching the carriage. Cai looked back for the Duke, who had been right beside them. Wander grazed untethered in the long grass at the road's edge. The Duke himself stood beside the ruined manor house, arms crossed loosely in front of him. Cai couldn't see his face, but he could imagine the now-familiar scowl that Luca wore when he was thinking.

Varlan went quietly down to take hold of Wander's reins, bringing the horse up to the shelter without so much as glancing at Luca. A stern look from Varlan brought Cai's own gaze away from the Duke, and they led the horses in and set to work removing their tack.

Cai had just begun to comb the loose hair out of the carriage horse's bay coat when he saw Varlan look up sharply. Turning, Cai flinched: a glaring, grey-haired man was aiming a pair of pistols at them from the entryway. In a moment, however, the stranger's fearsome expression relaxed into a relieved smile. "My word, Varlan, you must come and say hello before you help yourself to a man's stable!" the stranger exclaimed, though his tone was less admonishing than

amused. “Thought someone had come to steal my horses. I was just around the back working on that cursed water pump again – thing’s been out of order for weeks.” He holstered his pistols with the ease of long practice, tugging his loose coat forward to cover them.

“Well, we did knock, in any event!” Varlan moved over to grasp the newcomer’s hand warmly. “And you call this a stable, Raleigh? A lean-to, more like.”

Raleigh gave a look of mock-chagrin. He looked about Varlan’s age or a little older – a short, lean man with wiry grey hair. He was clean-shaven and simply dressed, and there was a pale scar cutting down his forehead and the bridge of his nose. “We do what we can with what’s provided us, Varlan,” he admonished lightly.

“Aye, well, it’s as serviceable as lean-to as ever I saw.” Varlan grinned, then gestured at Cai. “This is the young man of His Grace’s letter.”

“Ah. Cai then, is it?” Raleigh extended a hand. Cai hesitated, but he made himself shake it. Raleigh had a firm, callused grip, and his hand was warm despite the chill in the air outside. “You’re what all the fuss is about then,” Raleigh said, nodding. “Never thought I’d see the Duke come back here, not in my lifetime.”

“I wish His Grace had reconsidered,” Varlan admitted wryly. “There are other quiet places in this country, plenty of them. Even within his own lands, there are miles of empty forest and countryside.”

“Well, I can see why he would choose this spot. Here there are lodgings – and Addie and I won’t get in the way of his work.” Raleigh shrugged. “In any case, he’s a man of nearly thirty. He knows well what he can and can’t handle.” He clapped Varlan on the shoulder. “Don’t fret. Come inside soon as you’re done with the horses. I’m sure His Grace will be along when he’s ready.”

“I was hardly fretting, you know,” Varlan muttered at the man’s back, and Raleigh laughed.

The inside of the cottage was cluttered and cosy. The walls were freshly whitewashed just like the outside, and a fire burned in the low hearth. Sturdy, homemade furniture took up most of the floor space – low stools crowded around the fireplace, a well-worn table and chairs, dark wooden work-benches and cabinets. Embroidered cloth curtains and hand-woven mats added a homey feel and helped hold in the warmth from the fire. There were two tiny bedrooms at the rear of the cottage, the doors standing open.

“I’ve set my room up for His Grace and Cai,” Raleigh said, heading towards one of them. Cai looked through the doorway. The room held a simple bed and a thick pallet on the floor beside it, both made up with freshly washed linen. There was barely space besides for a tiny wash stand and a slender chest of drawers; it would be difficult to even move around without stepping on the pallet.

“Varlan, I’m sure you and I can make do with our bedrolls,” Raleigh said, turning away from the bedroom door. “It will be a little crowded but there’re no

other usable buildings here anymore. All right, shall we get to unpacking?”

Varlan nodded, and they trailed back outside.

Raleigh and Varlan worked methodically, stacking the packs and saddlebags neatly by the carriage. Raleigh placed the wooden trunk in Cai's arms, then stacked two packs and a bedroll on top of it casually and went straight into handing more to Varlan.

It was more weight than Cai could comfortably carry, but he managed until he reached the small stoop of the cottage. His boot clipped the edge of the first step, and the packs and bedroll fell. He had no hand free to catch them, but somehow he didn't hear them land. As he frowned over the top of the trunk, trying to see them on the ground, they flew back up and thudded into place against his chest so hard he had to step backwards to keep his balance.

Cai looked around, confused – it was not Luca's style to be so rough. But he did not see the Duke; instead, a young woman stood by the edge of the cottage, glaring at him. She was in her late teens, and her small frame, pointed chin and snub nose marked her immediately as Raleigh's daughter. She shook her head at him. “I'd think one hand-picked by the greatest mage in the country would at least know magic enough for that.” The edges of her mouth trembled, but hardened again into a scowl. “How could he choose—”

“Addie.” There was a warning note in Raleigh's voice.

She opened her mouth as if to say something further, but instead just shook her head and stalked back around the side of the cottage.



Cai looked at Raleigh, confused. “I’m sorry,” the girl’s father said ruefully. “It’s not personal, not really. Come, let’s get these things inside.” Cai was more careful this time, and made it up the stoop and into the cottage.

“I’m at loss to understand that, Raleigh, I must say,” Varlan said, sounding as taken aback as Cai felt.

“She’s... jealous.” Raleigh sighed as they set to work packing everything neatly into the corner of the room behind the table. “His Grace taught her, too; he’d just moved back to Sasthen and seemed to, I s’pose, *sense* that she had a little magic almost straight away.” He stacked the third bedroll with the other two in the corner, and leaned against the table. “It was the most exciting thing that ever happened to Addie. But he really wasn’t too interested in her, and once she could manage her own magic well enough he had no time for her. I don’t know whether she – well, if she was more interested in the magic or in His Grace himself, I guess.” He looked up and straight at Cai, his expression rueful. “I hope you won’t take much notice... she’ll get past it soon enough. She’s not a bad girl.”

Cai nodded. He was not really offended. In a way, she was right – he couldn’t do even simple magic justice, yet. He knew the Duke was disappointed.

“Cai.” Luca ducked through the entrance to the cottage, “Lessons. Our progress has been set back enough.” With that, he was gone again, and Cai followed with an apologetic shrug to the other two men.

“I’ve had time to think about our methods,” Luca began, almost as soon as they were out of the door. He picked his way through the overgrown gardens to

the ruins of the main house, with Cai following doggedly behind. “I think I have been making you work on too small a scale. I’ve had only two other students, and for them it was easier to learn to do small things and gradually work upwards until they reached the bounds of their potential.” He stopped at what was left of the rear wall, turning to Cai. “But your power is nothing like theirs. I suspect I may as well ask a hurricane to tip a crate or blow out a candle. Your natural aptitude must be for a grander scale.” He looked up behind him at the smoke-stained stone. “This has been standing here long enough. Try pushing it over.”

Cai stared at the Duke’s nonchalant face. “The – wall?”

“Yes. For now.” Luca stepped back beside Cai, looking at the wall expectantly. Cai stared at him, then up at the challenge he had been given. It was solid stone, more than three times his height at its tallest point and supported by the portion of the house that remained standing. It seemed an impossible task.

Cai shook off his doubt and stood a little straighter, fixing his attention on the task at hand. He relaxed into the currents of magic coursing through his blood. He breathed in and stretched his hands out, willing the wall to tip over. *Over, over, over.* Slowly, as if it were no more than a thick piece of parchment being bent in a breeze, the wall buckled as the mortar between the stones cracked. Finally, the stress was too much, and the whole structure fractured and toppled over. To Cai it seemed to happen in slow motion, but the thunderous crash and the cloud of dust kicked up knocked him out of his trance. He coughed, squinting through the haze as he waved his hand to try and clear the air before him.

As the cloud began to settle, he heard running footsteps – a look behind showed Varlan and Raleigh racing down from the cottage, and from another direction, Addie. When Cai turned back to the ruins, he realised not only the rear wall, but the whole section of the house that was still standing had collapsed into shattered rubble.

“What...” Varlan began, but he trailed off, open-mouthed, as the clearing air showed the extent of the destruction.

“I asked him to do it,” Luca explained simply, still surveying the damage with his head tilted thoughtfully to one side. “So, Cai. Was that difficult? Are you tired at all?”

“Ah, no,” Cai responded slowly, amazed at how calm the Duke could sound.

“Well then. Could you try to rebuild it?” This time, Cai was sure the Duke was serious, despite how ludicrous a request it seemed. “Focus on bringing it together again. The particles should have a sense of their previous state, and your magic should be able to restore any damage. Building is more difficult than destroying, though. It may be quite exhausting, but stay with it.” He looked over his shoulder at his servants. “You may wish to move away again.”

Cai heard them shuffle backwards as he focused again on the collapsed wall. This time the magic seemed to leap eagerly to work, thrumming in his ears and fingertips almost as soon as he thought of it. He breathed in and out slowly, and then held the thought of the magic in his mind as he stared intently at the

remnants of the collapsed section. *Back together, back together.* Nothing seemed to happen, but he bore down harder, bringing his hands up to clasp them before him. *Come on, back as it was!* he urged silently.

The stones of the wall leapt into the air, the mortar between them sealing up as though it were wet again. In moments, it was as it had been before. But then, it began to extend out in all directions. Stones which had collapsed to the ground years ago were drawn back into formation. Fragments of mortar long buried under dirt and plants shook themselves off and returned to their former place. Prowling vines and sapling plants were snatched out of the floor space of the house as it was rebuilt around them. The growing skeleton of stonework left spaces where doors and windows had once been, but even they did not remain empty long. Ash whispered up from the ground and plumped out into wooden panels, which knitted back together into doors and shutters and window frames and thudded back into their positions. Browned globules and warped sheets of glass streamed towards the upper levels and the front of the house, turning crystal clear as Cai's magic washed over them. They clicked back into their frames, which were at once coated with clean paint. More ashes revealed themselves as roof shingles, collecting a coat of dark tar as they spiralled up past the uppermost levels of the house to re-form the roof.

Within minutes, the house was whole again, and the ending of the spell jolted Cai back to a world which was spinning. The others, including Luca now,

gaped at his handiwork. Above them stretched the three-storey manor of Sutrell, looking as though it had just been built.

“More... tiring, yes,” Cai muttered, crouching down in the dust. Every limb felt leaden, and exhaustion came over him in stronger and stronger waves. Finally he couldn’t manage to sit up anymore, but Raleigh caught him. Tired as he was, Cai hardly noticed.

“Get him to the cottage,” Luca instructed. “He will be fine, but he needs to sleep.” Raleigh knelt and pulled Cai up onto his shoulders, lifting him easily. Just as Cai found he couldn’t hold his eyes open anymore, he heard Luca laugh and speak again: “I knew he’d be worth the trouble.”

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Cai slept heavily and well, and woke late in the day. The sun outside was bright, high in the sky above, and the smell of good cooking drifted in from the main room. For a moment he peered groggily around, trying to orient himself, until he remembered that they had at last reached Sutrell.

Cai struggled to sit up, working against muscles that were stiff and aching, and stretched painfully for a few moments. Finally he managed to get all the way out of bed – onto something soft. He looked down at the pallet beneath his feet, which was mussed from someone sleeping there. Cai shook his head, drowsily

amused. It had surely not been the intention that the commoner student would take the bed while the Duke and master slept on the floor.

Cai realised that for some reason he was still fully dressed, apart from his boots. Still half asleep, he pulled them on and wandered out to the common room. It was only as he crossed the threshold that he remembered; outside, through the open shutters of the cottage, the manor house stood complete. He stopped where he stood, staring out at it.

“Well, it’s good to see you’re as staggered as I by all this, anyway,” Addie said suddenly, making him jump. She was kneeling in front of the fireplace. Cai moved over to one of the wooden stools nearby and sat heavily, rubbing his temples. He could feel a headache coming on.

She was cooking a spitted leg of lamb, coated heavily in a crust of ground herbs and salt. Arranged in front of the fire and almost touching it were two heavy black pots. She took a handkerchief from her pocket and wiped her face with it, frowning as it came away a little sooty. Cai didn’t know quite how to act around her. She didn’t have the same hostile air about her today, but she didn’t seem to exactly welcome his presence, either.

“The men are exploring the house,” she explained, using a thick cloth to rotate each pot in turn. She glanced at him, face serious, and then looked down. She didn’t meet his eye as she spoke again; “I’m sorry. I was... unfair on you, before.”

Cai's mouth twisted. "You only said what I thought myself, until yesterday," he replied – and then, after a moment's hesitation: "I'm sorry, too." He knew it must hurt to be confronted with the person who had what she'd so wanted.

Addie climbed to her feet, brushing off her long dress and apron. "Those will be fine to sit for a while. I have to get some water, if you care for a walk." He nodded and she smiled, gathering up the kettle and leading the way outside.

Cai, carrying a pair of buckets Addie handed up to him from beside the stoop, was glad to have the distraction of her company as they headed down to the river. He didn't want to look at the house. He could hardly believe that he had done this, his power creating a whole building from fragments and ashes. He kept his eyes mostly on Addie and the ground, but he could hear the echoes of the men's voices as they explored the interior.

They picked their way down through the overgrown gardens, along an old paved path which was the only ground there clear of leaf litter and creepers. The front wall of Sutrell was lower than that of the back and sides, and split in the middle by an ornate metal gate. Outside the wall, there were more trees than inside, still spindly and young but substantial enough to obscure the view of the river. Addie and Cai wove through the young thicket and down to the water.

The river was bordered here by a thick band of reeds, divided by a tiny dock of faded grey wood. On the surface of the water, green and reddish weeds floated in crowds so densely packed that it looked as though one might walk

across them. On the opposite side, twisted old gum trees leaned out past the fringe of reeds and over the water as if to peer into it.

Addie led him out onto the dock, the wood creaking under their feet. She knelt down and filled each bucket and the kettle, lifting the brimming vessels up onto the dock as though they weighed nothing at all. But when Cai moved to pick up the buckets again, he could hardly manage it. He struggled up the slope, and sloshed a quarter of the water out before Addie stopped him and exchanged the buckets for her kettle with a grin. Embarrassed, he followed after her.

Back in the cottage she turned the spit and adjusted the pots again, and then taught Cai how to set the table. Soon they worked the lamb off its spit and into a serving dish, loading up the fringes of the dish with the boiled beans and carrots from the pots. There was something calming for Cai about performing such simple household tasks, and though they spoke little as they worked, it seemed to reinforce the clearing of the air between Addie and himself. As he relaxed, he could sense some echo of memory stirred by the actions of laying out plates and cutlery. When he turned around, he was confused for a moment to see Addie in the kitchen. But when he thought of it directly, he couldn't picture who it was he had expected to see instead.

When everything was ready, Addie went and called the men in. "The house is perfect. Even the furniture is there again – well, except for in the southern wing, but they took most of what was left away years ago," Varlan explained, watching Cai as they all sat down. "I can't believe it is possible."

“It shouldn’t be,” Luca said quietly. “Certainly not for one part-trained boy.” Cai couldn’t tell how Luca felt about it. If it had been only a question of an incredible act of magic, Cai was sure the Duke would be more excited than he seemed now. But for once, there was more to it for the man than the magic. He had been inside that house when it burnt down, and Cai could not guess what seeing it whole again made him feel.

Addie passed the plates one by one to Raleigh, who doled out the portions methodically. Varlan and Raleigh argued over the best hunting spots in the area as they ate. Addie tried to tell them both that there was little need to hunt at all when they had their own goats and chickens, and were barely a half-day’s ride from good farms with plenty of sheep and cattle. Luca and Cai ate their food in silence. As soon as he was done, the Duke got to his feet. “Varlan – I’m going to go riding, if you could saddle Wander.”

The others watched them leave. Even more than usual, Luca seemed distant and absorbed in his own thoughts.

Cai waited until Varlan returned, so he could be sure Luca would be gone, and left the house himself. He walked slowly down the path outside, peering up at the manor above him. He thought of the vine-tangled ruins that had stood here when they arrived; it was hard to reconcile such a memory with what he looked at now. He trailed his hand along the front wall, moving towards the short stone staircase which led up to the main doors. He knew the place was empty, that

there was no footman to be angry at his unannounced intrusion, but he still felt odd pushing open those grand carved doors.

The house was unnerving. It looked as though the family which lived here had left no more than a few weeks before. The walls of the main entry hall were beautifully carved wood, and the floor was black and white marble. The house was elegantly and generously furnished, down to the portraits on the walls and curtains at the windows. Above him, even the painted designs on the roof were whole – delicate depictions of women with fish tails instead of legs and horses with wings. The light streaming in through the clouded windows, filled with drifting dust motes, left parts of the room in a half-darkness that only added to Cai's uneasiness at being there.

Cai sat down on the bottom of the stairs. He folded his elbows on his knees, staring up at the ceiling. He finally felt like Luca was right, that the magic could be trained to do something constructive and purposeful. At last it seemed real, within reach, that Cai too could be a great sorcerer.

VI

Cai tilted the small bottle, inspecting the level of the liquid it held. The laudanum was almost gone. Master Crelt had wanted him to stop taking it weeks before, and Cai had at least managed to reduce the dose again. He wouldn't have admitted it to the physician, to anyone, but he was afraid of sleeping without it. He still had the nightmares, even with how calm and drowsy the drug made him. How much worse would it be without?

He put it out of his mind. Instead, he thought over the morning's lessons as he measured out the dose. They'd been working with water, again, which was not Cai's favourite material. Luca could conjure up columns of water from the river which split into hundreds of tiny filaments, arcing through the air to create intricate spider-web like patterns that moved and shifted constantly. When Cai tried to raise globules of liquid from the river, more often than not he – and his teacher – ended up soaking wet and frustrated with his lack of success.

Luca had been right, however, about Cai's power being better adapted to a grander scale. Trying to make a crate tip over had been like trying to pick up a grain of rice while wearing heavy gloves, but it was much easier for him to push

over an entire tree. The long magic lessons were tiring, and at times frustrating, but with every exercise he could feel his magic coming more and more within his control. It was the most welcome relief to know that he was improving.

As he settled down on the pallet and closed his eyes, he let his awareness shift more into his magic. He could have pointed without opening his eyes to exactly where Luca and Addie were in relation to himself, although the brilliance of Luca's 'aura' made it hard to concentrate on Addie's. As he'd grown more aware of his own power, he had also become more aware of others' as well. Addie's magic was nebulous, and gentle. She had no awareness of it until she wanted to use it, and little use for it most of the time. The feel of Luca's magic said more about the Duke than you could have learned from any amount of conversation with him. Luca had developed his talents early and devoted most of his life to the perfection of his art. He had raw power in abundance, magic soaking every tiny part of his being, but it flowed through and around him under perfect control, ready to be directed into any scale of task at the first conscious effort.

"Stop it, Cai," Luca called from the main room.

Cai started. He hadn't realised that Luca could tell when his aura was under examination. "Sorry," he returned sheepishly.

He heard someone get up and move over into the kitchen. There was the clink of some glasses and the sound of liquid sloshing into them. Cai wrapped his blankets tightly around himself, closing his eyes.

Cai padded through a still and tranquil forest. The low trees above him had few leaves, but their wide-reaching, interlacing branches were covered with delicate purple flowers. They were jacaranda trees in bloom, and Cai walked through light tinted purplish as it filtered through a gently waving screen of blossoms. The floor of the forest was carpeted with fallen blooms, soft beneath his bare feet, and more drifted slowly down as he looked around.

Beneath the low canopy of the trees before him, silhouetting the dark trunks, a soft green light glowed through from a way off. Curious, attracted by the colour, he followed after it. As he approached, it retreated – he thought he could hear gentle laughter as it happened, and he grinned and broke into a run. Soon he was darting between the trees, chasing after the green light as fast as he could manage, until he reached a small clearing. Above it, the jacarandas still stretched most of the way across, so that even the clearing was scattered over with lavender. Beneath the dome of branches, filaments of green magic wound through the air in a repeating spiral. Their power came from a woman – pale skinned, with rich auburn hair – who stood in the clearing, watching the magic shift and sway through the air above her.

She was immediately familiar. He had seen her before, in a dream... and, he'd known her, he was sure, since long before. He was more aware, this time, that she was not entirely human; even odder, he did not find it alarming. The pupils in her brilliant green eyes narrowed to slits in the light, and the feet

showing beneath her loose linen dress were like those of a lizard, covered with delicate jade-coloured scales and tipped with grey claws. Although her attention was now on Cai, the winding threads of magic continued their slow, stately dance above, the shifting green light playing over the two figures below.

She smiled at him. Her reptilian pupils widened, until they looked almost human. "Cai," she breathed, as though she hardly dared to say the word.

The shock of realisation woke him. The air felt wrong; it was crisp and damp, smelling of eucalypts and earth. He stared around him, disoriented – as his eyes adjusted to the half-darkness, he saw a narrow forest path, bordered by colossal trees that stretched far up above him. He was wearing only his nightshirt, and his bare feet were coated with mud and grit to the ankle. His legs ached as though he had been travelling on foot for hours. It was near dawn, and the grey half-light that infused the air before sunrise barely filtered through to the forest floor. Before him, down the narrow path, he could see the light of a fire.

Seeing it, he felt somehow calmer. Cautiously, he approached it, staying close to one side of the narrow path. Fully awake now, he recognised the sense of being drawn towards something, something his magic told him was good and needed. Still, this time he retained some awareness; he concealed himself behind a tree as he neared the fire's light, stealing glimpses into the clearing from his hiding place. His eyes and ears needed their own reassurance, which magic could not provide.

The clearing was cluttered with branches and leaf litter. A well-built campfire burned in a low pit, and sitting beside it was a figure in a linen robe. Cai could see her red hair gleam in the firelight. She turned her face suddenly towards his hiding place, and smiled.

He stepped out into the open. In the bright light of the fire her slit-pupilled eyes stared at him, a vibrant green – the same shade as his own.

She stood slowly, trembling, awkward on her clawed reptilian feet. “You’d think after all these years I could tell.” Her voice rasped slightly. She swallowed, and when she spoke again it sounded steadier: “I couldn’t trust myself, this time, that I’d really found you.”

The word welled up from somewhere, drifting to his lips. “Mother?” He walked forward, stunned.

In the firelight, she nodded.

They stopped at the fringes of the town, where a dark-eyed man opened a door for them, smiling. “I can’t stay long,” she said. She tugged down her robe to cover her scaled feet. The day was hot and the wind carried sand down from the desert, tinting the sky orange. He kissed her at the threshold and ushered them inside.

Yana sat heavily, her long tail twisting to one side beneath her robe. “Sit down,” she said. “You must be tired.”

He crouched beside the fire, holding out his chilled hands. The sight of her was an assault on his mind – all his hidden memory stirred, fragments breaking off and drifting up into his awareness.

“Cai,” she said, an odd note in her voice. He looked up. “Sit by me.”

Cai trailed behind her up a rocky mountain path. He was tired; his little legs could not keep up with her adult ones. He looked out at the village far below, in the distance. She stooped to pick him up, wrapping her thin arms around him as she walked on. Through her wool dress, he could feel the roughness of her scaled legs against his feet.

Slowly, he moved over towards her and sat down. Every detail he noticed brought memories shuddering back through him. He made no move to touch her, and he said nothing – it was all he could do to manage the confusion the moment had awakened.

Cai kicked a ball around in the dusty road with the other village children. The dark eyed man watched over them as he worked, twisting silver wire around a gemstone which glittered in the light.

“The village was small, and poor. Far away from anywhere.” Yana looked at her hands in her lap as she spoke. The nails were long and tapered to points. He listened to her, unmoving, braced against everything her words stirred up in him. “How they even found it I don’t know.”

Some of the houses were burning already. Cai could smell smoke and hear screaming as the dark-eyed man ushered him into the store room below the

house. They crouched in the darkness, even their breath creeping in and out of their bodies in silence.

“They found us anyway,” he breathed. He touched his hand to his face, half-expecting to feel his father’s wet blood there again. She touched her fingers to the scar partly visible above his collar, and he flinched away instinctively.

“What have they done to you?” she murmured, and he sensed she was not talking about the scar. He could not answer, even though he now knew what the answer was. The bare facts rolled up from the veiled sea of his memory like drowned bodies, more gruesome than the hints of drifting debris below had ever been.

One of the girls sobbed brokenly as the cart carrying them rolled away from the village. A man slapped her face, leaving a livid streak of the blood from his hands on her skin.

“I came days too late.” She paused, as a flicker of her own dark memory passed over her face. “I found him, but you... I travelled north; searched every slave market I could find. There was no trace.” She edged further forward in her seat, closer to the fire.

The hot moisture of breath next to his ear. Cai’s bare skin was pressed against the dirty bed linen by the man’s weight. Outside, through the shuttered windows, Cai could hear the sounds of children playing in the street, punctuated by the man’s panting.

Cai had squeezed his eyes closed without realising it, hunching his shoulders inwards. “I said to someone, that I thought... sometimes it’s better to forget.” It was hard to speak; he stared unblinking at the flames, sure that if he lost focus for a second he would begin to break apart. The words left a bitter taste in his mouth.

Cai was a little boy, drifting to sleep in his cot bed. His father smiled, and patted Cai’s head gently. His hand was warm, so was his voice: “Tomorrow, your Ma will be here.” He padded away.

Around them, more and more light was beginning to seep through the trees as true dawn approached. Cai got to his feet woodenly. “They will be looking for me.”

“You don’t need to go back,” she said, her voice unsteady. “We can go home.”

He knew she was wrong, on both counts. He would not abandon Luca now, after all the help the Duke had given him. And Cai had no home; neither did she, anymore. Even the one she’d had she never visited long, staving off as long as she could the day when it would be noticed that the jeweller’s woman was not quite human. She had never lived with them, and he had seen her only periodically. Being with his mother did not mean home, for Cai.

He stared around himself, frightened, not knowing where he was. The door opened; he looked up, and it was the scowling white-haired man, so tall he had to stoop to get through the doorway.

“I can’t go.” He looked down at her again.

Yana hesitated, then, examining him. At length, she nodded, looking away.

“Come with me,” he said impulsively. He didn’t want her to go; seeing her again and remembering was painful, but having her leave would make it all the more so. He knew she didn’t want to be around other people, but he needed her to stay. “For a while.”

She got slowly to her feet again. “Very well.”

In an eye blink, the fire was extinguished, her worn bedroll rolled and on her shoulders, her pouch of belongings in her hand. It was magic, there was no other explanation, but he could not sense it like he could Luca’s. He had *felt* her drawing him towards her, but if he had walked past her on the street he would never have known she had magic.

“I assume it is the sorcerer you mean.” Her eyes were half closed as she spoke.

Cai, reaching out towards the very edge of his own awareness, realised that he could not feel Luca’s presence anywhere. He had never been far from Luca since the day he had found his way up to the Duke’s apartment in the palace. Now he felt oddly isolated.

“He is not so far. You may be right.” She sighed, as Cai followed her towards the trail. “He does seem concerned. I presumed... well, I have learned to expect the worst.”

They picked their way through the dim forest, Yana leading the way as confidently as if she had lived here for years.

It was broad daylight before Cai felt Luca come into the fringes of his awareness. He walked a little faster, moving to overtake his mother on the narrow path. Yana put out an arm to stop him. “You can feel him?” she asked.

“Yes – he’s just through here.” Cai felt an urgency about getting back which she clearly did not share.

She shook her head, dropping her arm and continuing on at the same sedate pace. “My son, the sorcerer is still an hour’s walk away.” She glanced over her shoulder, her snake-like eyes keen.

Cai returned one day angry with her. His father listened patiently, until Cai had shouted himself calmer again.

“She just sees things differently from you or me,” he said, turning from his work table. “And she does love you, Cai. But she has spent so long on her own, it is hard for her to express it the way we would.”

“He has found you.” She looked up as she walked, and cocked her head to the side. “I do not think this will be pleasant.”

Cai heard the sound – grinding earth and rustling trees – before he felt the thrum of Luca’s spell drawing near in his mind. The trees moved for the sorcerer as he came through the forest, wrenched aside to make way. Cai stared; a straight

line of bare, torn earth went right through the forest as far back as he could see, bright with sunlight where the canopy above had been divided.

“Cai!” Luca stopped a short distance from them, breathing hard. It was not just the magic. He had been running. He stared at Cai’s nightshirt and mud-caked feet, and then at Yana. Wariness and uncertainty flashed across his face, a magic barrier rippling through the air around him. “Who are you? What business do you have with him?”

Yana clicked her tongue disapprovingly. “It is not too much work to use a trail, sorcerer.” She didn’t blink – didn’t even move. Again Cai could sense nothing, but the trees closed back in behind Luca, forcing him to scramble forwards to reach the path. In a moment, there was no sign that the forest had ever been divided.

Now in the dim half-light of the forest again, Luca backed up a few steps. Cai knew from his face that Luca had never seen, or even heard of, anything like Yana before.

“Oh, don’t be daft,” she said, sounding mildly amused. His shield evaporated as she spoke, and Luca cried out, baring his teeth as he winced.

“Don’t!” Cai knew from the Duke’s lectures that having one’s spell quashed like that would hurt.

His mother was staring transfixed at Luca, and didn’t seem to hear Cai. She moved towards him, as though looking at a curiosity in a glass cabinet. “Why are you doing that?” she asked.

“What do you mean?” Luca managed, sounding pained.

She ignored the question, peering at him inquisitively as she advanced to within several feet of him. “Mother?” Cai asked anxiously.

Luca, in the process of backing away from her again, froze to stare at Cai when he spoke. “Mother...? What...”

Yana reached out to touch Luca’s face. As soon as she made contact, his whole body spasmed, and he let out a strangled groan. As Cai flinched away, startled, he thought he saw a film of visible magic tear itself away from Luca’s skin. At once, it was over. The Duke collapsed forwards to the dirt of the forest floor.

Cai pushed past Yana. Luca was hunched over, his arms folded into his stomach. He was shaking. Cai knelt beside him helplessly, and stared up at Yana. “What did you do?”

“He was using an illusion.” Her voice was as unemotional as if all she had done was brush some dust from Luca’s shoulder. “I dispelled it.”

Luca’s breath hissed through gritted teeth as he straightened to his knees. Cai reflexively stepped back. A sizeable scar, which Cai had never seen before, ran up from the collar of Luca’s shirt and over the side of his left cheek. The pinkish surface was uneven and shiny – a burn scar. Much of his ear was missing, and some of the hair around the misshapen remnants of it was also gone, replaced with scar tissue. His left hand, which had seemed bare a moment ago, was now covered by a thin leather glove. More scar tissue wrapped in ropey panels around

his forearm, disappearing beneath the rolled cuff of his shirt. Cai knew Luca had been badly injured in that fire long ago, from what Varlan had said, but it had never occurred to him to wonder why the Duke bore no physical signs of his ordeal.

Cai got to his feet. The sense of loss and sadness that had been drifting through him was drowned out by a rushing wall of anger. “Why would you do that?” he demanded of Yana. “He wasn’t hurting anyone by it! I would be dead if not for him, and this is how you treat him?” The Duke, his eyes narrowed with pain, stared up at Cai as though wondering what had happened to his quiet, reserved student.

“I did not know that,” Yana said, looking from Cai to the Duke, who was struggling at last to his feet. “He was clearly hostile to me.”

“My student had disappeared,” Luca countered icily. He swayed a little, but the twist of pain in his face was lessening. “I knew he would not wander away of his own volition.”

“And I knew he was stolen by slavers. What was I to think when I found him at some deserted house in the middle of a forest, miles from anywhere?” Yana asked. “I exercised restraint in not killing all of you to reach my son, instead of bringing him to me.”

“I know,” Cai said, still shocked by the sight of the Duke’s scarred face. “But these people weren’t my purchasers... they were no part of any of that. They have done nothing but help me.”

Yana frowned, watching Cai closely. Finally, she glanced back at Luca. “I can admit I let my curiosity get the better of me, sometimes.” She adjusted the bedroll on her shoulders. “In honesty, I had forgotten the pain it causes mortal sorcerers.” She did look contrite, for a moment. It was not an apology, and Cai was sure she only said it to appease him, but it was something at least.

She held her clawed hand palm up in front of her mouth, and blew along it towards Luca. Her breath came out as a visible, floating mist. It settled on the sorcerer’s flesh, and as Cai watched the scar tissue was slowly blotted over with whole skin – or what looked like it. The glove on his hand appeared to be gone, once more just flesh and blood. Although Cai now knew it was an illusion, he still could not visually tell. Luca inspected his hand and arm, and finally nodded his satisfaction with her work.

“I am already feared and disdained for enough reasons,” he said quietly. “It would be impossible to deal with most people at all if my appearance were any stranger.”

She nodded, a mirthless smile crossing her face. Of course she understood; one had only to look at her to realise that.

Luca looked sharply at her, his eyes bright with interest. “Who are you – *what* are you? Where did you come from?” He couldn’t decide which question to ask first, so they all came up at once. “How can you be Cai’s mother?”

“He was my thirteenth child. Perhaps that sounds many, but... I have lived a long, long time.” She gave a small smile, which faded almost as soon as it

appeared. “But he is the only one still living now. As to where I am from,” she went on. “I do not know. The change was agony. It was hard even to move from place to place and scavenge food. I did not keep track of anything else. Even if I remembered where my village had been, I could not have gone back. And what I am?” She looked down at her sharp grey nails and green-scaled feet. Her tail, which had hung motionless beneath her robe during their exchange so far, switched suddenly from side to side – Luca jerked back in surprise. “Who can say? This was done to me without explanation, and those who did it aren’t around to answer such questions.”

Cai crouched on the ground as they spoke. As the shock and anger faded, it was replaced with exhaustion and a sense of despair. He folded his arms across his knees and leaned his face on them.

“I am sure you have more magic in one finger than I do in my whole body, and yet I cannot *sense* it at all,” Luca mused. “It is quite extraordinary.” There was no hint of wounded pride at encountering a sorcerer who could so easily best him. Even the anger had dropped away as his inquiring academic brain took over. Luca was so transfixed that he’d let Yana’s treatment of him slide simply in order to pry more into her nature. Now she was not first and foremost a threat or a rival; she was a puzzle.

Cai lifted his head wearily. “How do we get back?” he asked, his voice sounding so distant and unlike himself that he almost didn’t recognise it.

“Oh –” Yana looked expectantly to Luca. “You would be the one to ask.”

“Are you... coming back there?” the Duke asked dubiously.

She looked at him askance. “Cai has asked me to. And I doubt you could prevent me coming, so we may as well be civil.”

The sorcerer needed no further convincing, though he shook his head as he turned down the path in the direction of Sutrell. Cai struggled to his feet; he could hardly force his legs to cooperate. As the strange party wound along the dim forest trails, an uneasy truce seemed to remain so long as Yana tolerated Luca’s inquiries.

Cai had no idea where Sutrell might be, and he was beyond caring where they were headed. He was overwhelmed, in every sense, by the morning’s events. He put one foot numbly in front of the other, and neither of them seemed to notice his strange, absent air. He focussed on the air coming in and out of his body, the ache in his legs and the cold earth beneath his feet, holding every other thought at bay. That was all he could manage.

VII

They came into the complex through the back gate. Addie sat on the front stoop of the cottage, working on something with needle and thread. She looked up expectantly towards the path that led from the road.

“Addie,” Luca called, and the girl looked over her shoulder at them. The sight of Yana was too much for her; she screamed.

Her cry startled Cai into sudden wakefulness. He felt like he had been deafened to everything but the echoing trace of the scream and the hammer of his strained heart. Cai dropped to his knees, his hands over his ears, shaking.

It took a moment to register that Luca was kneeling in front of him, hand on Cai’s shoulder, frowning worriedly. He was saying something. As Cai concentrated, the numb silence in his ears gave way to sound again. “Cai, are you hurt?”

Cai’s head lolled forward against Luca’s shoulder. “I can’t bear it,” he mumbled. Cai knew that he was going to cry – his face twisted into a grimace as he tried uselessly to stave it off. “I *can’t*.”

“You’re shaking,” Luca said warily, pulling Cai to his feet and guiding him towards the cottage. “He’s just exhausted,” he said to the others watching them, though he didn’t sound so sure. Cai could feel tears running down his cheek; he hoped Luca hadn’t yet noticed. It was hard to breathe, and when he managed the air shuddered in and out – there was no disguising that. Luca sat him down on the bed, in the tiny bedroom. When he leaned back, his expression was suspicious. “Are you all right?”

“No,” Cai admitted, and began to weep in earnest.

Addie glanced sideways as she added tea leaves to the steaming kettle. The strange being – half woman, half lizard – sat at the table in the main room, her arms folded before her. Addie could not imagine how it was even possible that she was Cai’s mother, but Addie couldn’t bring herself to ask at a moment like this.

Of course, she had heard stories of strange half-human creatures – everyone had – but she had never seen one in real life before, and the stories did not put her at ease. Reptile parts were never a good sign, in the old tales. She was half convinced she was dreaming, and wholly hoping she was. She made the tea mechanically, at a loss for how to act. She still couldn’t quite bring herself to look at this newcomer’s face.

They could hear Cai crying through the bedroom door as she served two cups of tea, placing one cautiously in front of Yana. Addie wasn’t usually overly

emotional, but the boy's weeping was so sad her throat felt thick and her mouth trembled.

Yana frowned down at the steaming tea in front of her for a moment. Just when Addie was sure she had done something to offend this odd creature, Yana sighed and leaned back. "I was never the one to deal with any such situations." She picked up her tea, wrapping both long-nailed hands around it and taking a generous gulp despite the heat. "His father always – well, perhaps it is best for the sorcerer to deal with him."

Addie did not know how to respond to that, so she said nothing. They sat there in silence, except for the sound of Cai's pained sobs drifting through the door. And they drank their tea.

Eventually, as Cai leaned against Luca and cried, the unbearable pressure in his chest began to ease and he could breathe without a struggle once again. He opened his red eyes to the soaked collar of the Duke's shirt. Luca's hand rested lightly on Cai's shoulder, patting him now and then – only a little awkwardly. "I know," Luca murmured, and the echo of old tears of his own was in his voice. Eventually, Cai found the power to hold his own spine straight again. He sat back, hastily wiping his face. He couldn't bring himself to look the Duke in the eye after such a display. A long silence stretched between them, interrupted only by Cai's breaths half-catching in his throat.

“I take it you have your memory back, then?” the Duke asked quietly, leaning back on his haunches beside the bed.

Cai didn't trust himself to speak just yet, but he nodded.

“Do you want to talk over what happened?” Luca asked, though his tone said he'd rather not know.

“No.” Cai's voice came as little more than a rasp. He didn't even want to think about it, let alone speak of it. Maybe one day, he might feel differently, but right now it was too painful.

The Duke nodded, getting to his feet. Cai thought he would say something else, but he turned away and moved towards the door. “Try to sleep.”

Cai lay down on the bed, twisting so that his face was against the bedding. He breathed in and out slowly, fatigue taking over now that the tension had been cried out of him. The bed smelled faintly of soap and Luca's skin and hair. Cai closed his eyes; he was asleep before the Duke even closed the door of the tiny room behind him.

Yana sat at the table, watching Addie peel and slice apples. The girl stood at the kitchen window, her attention focussed outside. She had cut her fingers more than once already.

The sorcerer perched on a stool, a glass of whiskey in his hand. For now, he seemed to take as little notice of Yana beside him as of Addie. Yana smiled to herself. He was a strange one, this scarred sorcerer.

Finally, the girl dropped her knife and the half-peeled apple onto the bench and hurried outside, wiping her hands on her apron. The action left a few light smears of blood from the tiny cuts on her fingers.

She was greeting two newcomers outside. Yana listened disinterestedly. Most people did not suspect her hearing would be so acute, but in any case, it took a lot to offend her after all this time.

The men seemed wary when they entered the house. The shorter one jumped, a little, when he saw her – no forewarning could completely prepare anyone – but at least his hands stayed away from the holsters of his pistols.

“This is Raleigh, my father, and Varlan,” Addie explained nervously, gesturing to each of them in turn.

“Good morning,” Raleigh managed stiffly, and she could tell he tried his best not to stare as he sat down. “The boy – Cai. He was with you?”

“Yes. I could not be sure he was among friends – or that my presence would be tolerated in any event.” Yana leant her head back against the wall. “I apologise for any distress caused.” She hoped she sounded sorry. It was always difficult to tell.

“How is Cai?” Varlan asked, shifting his weight. “How did he take all this? I mean, I thought he had no memory of... well, anything...” He was clearly fond of Cai, and worried for him.

“He didn’t,” Luca muttered. “Her presence has stimulated some recall. There was always a chance, but given such a history as his the experience was

unsurprisingly – distressing.” He fell into silence again, taking a mouthful of his liquor. For a long moment there was only the sound of the scrape-scrape of Addie’s paring knife as she got back to work, strips of cloth now knotted around her fingers.

“He will be all right, though?” Varlan asked finally.

Luca and Yana exchanged a long look, but neither of them said anything in reply.

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*The man dragged him up the narrow staircase, a lamp in his hand shedding a swaying corona of dirty yellow light. Staggering behind, Cai could see nothing but the dark form silhouetted by the shifting lamplight.*

*The narrow hall above was as dark and windowless as the cellar below, but the man knew where he was going. Cai stumbled and fell; he landed heavily, helpless to try and break the fall with his hands bound behind his back. The man turned without a moment’s hesitation and kicked Cai in the side. It hurt even through the haze. He grabbed a fistful of Cai’s hair, wrenching him to his feet – needle pricks all over his scalp where each strand tugged his skin – and shoved him towards a door at the end of the hall. Through the darkness, the seam of the door shone gold.*



*Cai was pushed into the room, the light painfully bright after so many hours in darkness. When he managed to open his eyes a crack, he saw the man bow to another figure who sat, one ankle resting easily on the other knee, in a tattered armchair. Ambrose was simply dressed now, but there was no mistaking him – the same dark brown eyes, the same dark hair and beard. Ambrose regarded Cai with disdain. “He does not seem lucid.”*

*“No, sir. That is, it’s wearin’ off. He ain’t had it tonight.”*

*“Very well. Get out.” As the door closed, Ambrose smiled down at Cai. “Hello, again.” He stood and removed his jacket, draping it delicately over the back of his chair. He walked over to Cai, who stood swaying a little as he looked up to meet the Majordomo’s gaze. The slap came without warning, sending Cai staggering into the wall. He struggled to keep his legs straight and failed, his shoulder sliding down until he reached a crouching position. His face stung, but he didn’t dare touch it. “I said, hello.” Ambrose repeated. “Where are your manners?” He was still smiling as he moved towards Cai again.*

*Cai fixed his eyes on the wall. There was no use trying to fight; Ambrose’s fingers crept over his flesh like insects, revulsion washing over Cai with each tiny movement. The Majordomo’s breath was hot; he fumbled to unbutton his trousers. Cai focussed his mind on each tiny speck of grit and colour he saw. He surrendered his body like an infected limb, cutting it out of his awareness to save his mind from what was happening. There was nothing he could do but be absent, be empty. He was used to that now.*

Someone cried out nearby -

Cai lurched into wakefulness, his blankets clutched tight to his chest. The sound he'd heard had not been part of his nightmare; Luca was sitting bolt upright, breathing hard, staring up at his student through the gloom. Even in the half-darkness, Cai could see the sheen of sweat on Luca's face. "Ambrose," the sorcerer breathed, then swallowed hard, rubbing his jaw with a hand that shook. He looked out the tiny square window; the shutters were open, letting bright moonlight drift in along with the chill night air.

Cai lay perfectly still. The dream had been the most detailed so far, had felt the most real. For a moment he had been back there, with no sense that there was ever a future to wait for. He shared the empty numbness of his slave self, surviving by existing in a void of blankness. For once, he did not even feel frightened of what he had dreamed. But he couldn't stay in the room; he got out of bed carefully, keeping his eyes averted from Luca.

"Cai—" the Duke began.

"I just need some air." Cai's knew his voice sounded odd, strangled.

"Are you—"

Cai stood still for a moment, his hand on the door of the room. "Please."

He opened the door and closed it again behind him as quietly as he could. He leaned against it, concentrating on keeping his breathing even. It was horrific, but at the same time, he almost felt relieved. He wasn't mad. Not knowing why

he was afraid had been more frightening – awful as it was to understand fully, at least now he knew everything he felt had been real.

He shook his head, standing straight again. Two of the shuttered windows were partly open, and the air that drifted in with the brilliant moonlight was cool. His skin and nightshirt were coated with sweat and dust, and he could feel the salty residue of tears on his face. He looked down at his hands, and back out at the bright moonlit view outside – he knew he wouldn't go back to sleep like this.

Cai gathered a change of clothes, a towel and his boots from the corner, moving carefully around Varlan and Raleigh sound asleep in their bedrolls before the fire. He headed towards the door, swiping a sliver of soap from the pot on the counter as he passed. The door creaked as it opened, making him wince, but there was no sign of movement from the sleeping men. He went out into the night.

He made his way down towards the river, eyes wide, the scent of orange peel and lye from the soap drifting after him. He poured a little magic into an image of candlelight; specifically of candlelight as once, during a lesson, he had just thought of light and nearly blinded both himself and Luca. By the time he reached the little dock, three tiny flickering globes hovered around him to light his way. He laid his clean clothes, towel and boots down carefully, before walking out along the dock.

Cai looked at the dark water before him. He could see nothing below the surface. The river was like black ink, throwing back the glimmer of Cai's magic lights. He sat down on the edge, breathing the night air deeply. It felt good in his

lungs. He lowered his filthy feet into the water; it was bitterly cold and he gasped at the contact, but at least the grit was lifting away from his skin. Teeth chattering, he pulled off his night shirt and threw it on the dock. He took a deep breath, stooped and splashed water over his face and body. It was so cold it made all the hairs on his skin stand up hard enough to hurt. He rubbed the soap vigorously over his skin, then wet and lathered his hair for good measure. The little globes of light floated around him, making the water on his skin glint gold.

What had seemed a mild night breeze now made his wet skin sting with cold. He took a deep breath and pushed off the dock into the water. For a moment, it almost seemed warm below the surface, out of the wind. He ducked under the water once, twice, brushing his hands through his long hair to get the soap out. But it was no river for leisurely soaks, and no time of year for staying wet unless one wanted a fever. He grabbed hold of the metal rungs that made up a makeshift ladder on the side of the dock and hauled himself out. He was still shivering all over as he snatched up his towel and dried himself briskly. His teeth chattered non-stop, air hissing in and out between them. He shrugged into his shirt, his hands so numb and awkward that it was difficult to do up the buttons, and clambered into his wool underwear and trousers.

“Cai,” a female voice called.

He spun around so quickly he nearly unbalanced himself as he finished fastening his pants. For a moment, eyes darting around the shadows of the gum trees between the river and the complex, he could not spot the speaker. But then

his mother emerged through the trees towards him. She had changed out of her shapeless robe; now she wore a green dress, sleeveless despite the cold and tucked in at the waist with a black cord. A small gap in the fabric at the base of her spine allowed her long tail to move freely. Low triangular spines marched along its length and went all the way up her back; their points pushed out the cloth of her gown. She was thinner than he'd imagined. Her scales and her auburn hair gleamed in the light of Cai's spells, which she followed with bright reptilian eyes.

"Why aren't you asleep?" he asked her, pulling on his boots. He gathered up his dirty clothes and towel, and headed back to the bank. He was still incredibly cold; water from his hair was soaking down the back of his shirt, so that every breath of air felt like ice on his skin. He made an effort to stop his shivering and hold his teeth together.

"I – do not need much sleep," she explained, sounding mildly surprised that he would ask. "I suppose you were too young to be up at such hours... to notice it when I visited."

She stood silent for a moment, the very end of her long tail flicking back and forth against her left calf. "I am sorry if my disturbance was not welcome. I was walking in the forest and heard you awake." Another long pause as her staring green eyes continued to follow his light spells. "The sorcerer – he taught you this?"

Cai followed the drifting points of light with his own eyes. When he looked back at her, white-yellowish shapes were overlaid on his vision. “Yes. He has been teaching me.”

“Then, I truly should thank him.” She cocked her head. “Is it cold? I can never tell. Let me walk you back.”

She turned towards the house, and he followed. “Why do you want to thank him?”

She stopped to open the gate for him. “I could not locate you for so long because – though I had some sense of your magical signature – you had not yet learned to use it and as such there was little projection. Without being within a few miles of you I would never find you. I still looked. I never stopped. But I would never have thought to come so far south into the free part of the world.” She didn’t even look down as she walked, and yet she stepped around and over every plant and rock and paving stone effortlessly. “When you began to use your power, though, I could sense it – perhaps only because I was looking so hard for it. I was far, far north, still searching in Qired, and then there! Distant, and brief, but there you were. I followed that all the way here.”

The empty manor was a looming dark presence in the night, silhouetted by the bright moon. Cai let the little light spells fall away as they walked; there was hardly need of them now they were out of the shadowy thicket by the river. Beyond the dark edges of the forest canopy, a gauzy bank of clouds caught the moonlight, shaded in pale greys against the black sky. The quality of the light and

the starkness of the surrounds sent a shiver through Cai; he felt the urge to run the rest of the way to the cottage. He resisted, keeping to the steady pace his mother set.

“If I had learned earlier, I could have saved him – everyone,” he muttered, an echo of the same desperate sadness drifting over him again. The children he had played with were dead or worse. His father had tried to protect him and had been slaughtered. If only he –

“If I had been there, it could never have happened,” she countered softly. “I must have thought it hundreds of times since the day I found his body, and could not find you at all. With all I can do, though, I cannot change the past. Or bring back the dead.” For a moment, looking across at her, Cai saw her face twist in anguish. But she looked away, and when she turned back there was no sign of the emotion he had glimpsed.

Yana left him at the door, touching him lightly on the shoulder as they parted. Cai watched her go until she was lost in the gloomy shadows of the ruined cottages. He didn't know what to think of her, but at that moment it was just as well. Cai eased the door open and sidestepped through. He inched his way through the darkened room, conscious of every twitch and sigh from Varlan and Raleigh. Finally, he was inside the small bedroom again, the door closed behind him. Luca appeared to be asleep, and did not stir as Cai inched his way around the pallet and onto the bed.

He didn't know how he could feel so tired after sleeping for hours, nor how he would possibly fall asleep with everything going on in his head. But as he pulled back the cover and crawled into bed again, even the chill of his wet hair couldn't stop him from drifting off.

There was little conversation over breakfast; Cai wasn't surprised. He had not known it possible that sorcerers could share in one another's dreams, but there was no way he could speak of it – the very thought of the nightmare brought bile up in his throat. He doubted very much that Luca was any more interested in speaking of it. The Duke seemed withdrawn and thoughtful.

After breakfast, Luca settled down at the table with his writing materials. Addie and Cai brought out the water buckets and kettle and went down to the river. She said little as they walked together, their breath leaving clouds of steam in the air. The thin winter sunlight did not make any difference to the temperature, and the greenery still bore a thin coat of frost. Cai was glad to turn back towards the warmth of the cottage.

“Of course, Your Grace,” Varlan said as Addie opened the door.

Luca was adding wax to his finished letter. It seemed he had forgotten to bring sealing wax, as he was melting it from the base of a household candle. “I need Chamteri Vitnyathe to travel here as soon as may be. I need her assistance as a matter of urgency.” He pressed his fingertip into the hot wax, and when he removed it there was a perfect imprint of the Sasthen seal. “There is no need for



you to return with Mistress Vitnyathe if you do not wish to – she travels with her own guard. I'm sure you have other matters to attend to at Sasthen.”

Varlan bowed as the Duke handed the letter over. “Yes, Your Grace.” Cai realised he had never thought about whether Varlan had a wife, a family. Perhaps he did, back home and waiting for his return all this time. Even so, Cai felt a strong pang of sadness. He didn't want Varlan to leave, especially not now.

Varlan set to packing right away, and before the others had finished cleaning up after breakfast he was ready to leave. “I'll send word when we're ready to travel back to Teruen,” Luca said as Varlan climbed up and took hold of the reins.

“Yes, Your Grace.” Varlan smiled at Cai. “No need to look so downcast, young Cai. I'll see you soon enough.” With a snap of the reins, the carriage lurched off down the path away from the house.

## VIII

The sky was cloudless and a clear, pale blue. The sun shone, but with little warmth, and the air was thin and chilly.

Raleigh had recruited the willing to finish picking clean his fruit trees, worried that soon there would be more serious frosts and he'd lose the remainder of his crop. Cai, atop a wooden stepladder greyed with age, breathed the crisp apple scent of the tree. The wan winter sun cast a dappled shadow over him, shifting as the breeze caught the leaves. He passed down all the apples he could reach to Raleigh, who carefully packed them into a basket. Addie was veiled from the waist up by the mandarin tree, but every few moments a hand would emerge with another fruit to pass down to Yana. Cai's mother had returned from a two-day absence only a few hours earlier, and had followed them up to the gardens. Warbling magpie song drifted down from the trees around them, and three of the black and white birds picked for worms and grubs in the pasture.

Luca had stayed behind. He had seemed even more distant and irritable since his glimpse into Cai's nightmare, and Varlan's departure. Cai had moved the pallet out to the far side of the main room, behind the table, and as far as he knew

since then his dreams had been his own. But Luca had remained out of sorts – even Cai’s magic tuition could not interest him, so there had been no lessons. And now this Chamteri Vitnyathe was, by anyone’s standards, past due.

As the others got ready to head off to the gardens, the sorcerer rummaged in his packs and extracted a scroll that looked alarmingly delicate and venerable to have been carted across half the country in someone’s saddle bag. By the time they left the house, he was propped up against the wall by the fire and so absorbed in his reading he didn’t even seem to notice their departure.

Addie and Raleigh had adopted the task of keeping Cai occupied, since Luca seemed less than interested and Yana was out roaming through the vast forest more often than she was at the cottage. Cai didn’t blame her – she was awkward around the others, and there was no way they would ever be comfortable with her presence. She knew he was safe now, and that had been the only reason for her urgency in seeking him out.

Under Addie and Raleigh’s eye, he was kept too busy to dwell on what had happened. He helped with the cooking and cleaning, exercising the horses, weeding the garden plots, anything they could assign to him. By the end of each day he was simply too exhausted to even take much notice of Luca’s foul mood, let alone think about his newly remembered past.

The harvesting done, the unusual little group made their way back through the narrow stretch of forest that separated the two walled-off compounds. All the fruit worth taking was heaped into the baskets they carried,

each one balanced between a pair of bearers. Addie was filling Cai in on the work ahead – “There’s not enough sugar for many preserves, so we’ll dry a lot of the fruit,” – when they heard the rhythmic thud of hooves echoing up the forest path. Riders, moving fast.

“Perhaps Mistress Vitnyathe, at last... ?” Raleigh suggested. “Come on.”

They hurried their pace, until Cai stumbled on a protruding rock in the path. He staggered forwards and dropped his side of the basket, a small flood of apples tumbling out onto the ground. Raleigh set down his own side, clicking his tongue, and bent to gather the fallen fruit.

“Here,” Yana said, gesturing for Addie to help her lay down their own basket. She waved Raleigh back, looking down at the apples. As she watched, they hopped one by one back into their rightful place. Then both of the baskets creaked off the ground and floated through the air, to fall obediently into line behind Yana. Clearly, she had only so much tolerance for doing things the hard way. Raleigh looked as though he wanted to object, but he just shook his head and set off down the trail at a jog. The others followed close behind him, and in their wake came the baskets of fruit like little woven boats on an invisible stream.

As they went, Cai glanced back at the baskets drifting behind them. If Yana, with her power, could do magic like that – fine, delicate, precise magic – then maybe eventually he would be able to as well.

Outside the cottage stood a dainty closed carriage. It was made of a reddish wood, and much of the panelling was covered with unusual carved designs and gold accents. Three dark-clad men, each wearing blades at the waist, stood holding the halters of the two black carriage horses and a trio of other horses kitted out for riding. All the animals had sweat-streaked sides and were breathing hard, their heads hung low with exhaustion. The men's clothing was foreign to Cai – a long tunic, slit to the hip on each side, worn over loose trousers that tapered at the ankle.

The strangers turned almost in unison, hands at their weapon hilts. Cai was taken aback to see that the two slighter, shorter guards were in fact women. Their hair was cut above chin length, and they looked as strong as their male counterpart, but the fit of their short cuirasses and kidney belts left little doubt of their sex. Cai tried not to stare, worried that his surprise showed on his face. But when he glanced around at his companions he could see Addie gaping at the women open-mouthed.

“I am Raleigh – the caretaker,” Raleigh said hastily. “Where is Mistress Vitnyathe?”

The guards relaxed, letting their hands drop again. Now that they were facing him, Cai could see their eyes looked exhausted and the skin was slack and greyish beneath them. “Inside... she need talk to His Grace,” the man responded haltingly. He had a strong accent and pronounced some words oddly; ‘inside’ sounded more like ‘insight’ and ‘Grace’ more like ‘guess’.

Raleigh led the way into the main room of the cottage. Varlan was there, leaning heavily against the wall as if he needed the support to stay upright. His grey-black hair and beard looked unwashed, and he wore a light leather jerkin and arm guards. Cai had never seen him wear armour before, or look so dishevelled. Varlan managed a half-smile when he saw Cai – just. It was all putting Cai more and more on edge.

The guards' mistress sat on one of the stools by the fire, facing away from them. She turned to look at them as they entered, and Cai was shocked to see her face. She looked travel worn and anxious, but she was still one of the most striking women he'd seen. Her rich brown skin was dusted along the cheekbones with a dusk-pink powder, and black liner accentuated the slightly angular shape of her large dark eyes. Her clothing was even stranger than her female guards': flowing trousers in bright pink tied with a vivid emerald sash at the waist, and a cap-sleeved green blouse which – scandalously, and despite the cold – left a few inches of skin bare around her midriff. Hanging loosely from one hand she carried a wide wrap, bright pink with a gold pattern stamped onto it. Her shiny black hair was held up in a bun, and a chain of delicate fabric flowers hung from the hair-stick thrust through it.

“Uh,” Varlan mumbled awkwardly. He looked at Luca, who sat motionless by the fire, and back to the new arrival. Distracted by her pretty face and unusual clothing, Cai had not really looked properly at the Duke. Now he did, he realised

that Luca was pale from shock, his lips tight and his eyes wide. The ancient scroll was crumpled in his white-knuckled hands.

She turned back to Luca. “I wish it were not true,” she said softly. Her accent was much less noticeable than that of the guard outside, but there was no mistaking her as a northern foreigner. Luca didn’t seem to hear her.

“What... what has happened?” Cai asked, so unnerved by his teacher’s behaviour that he could hardly get the words out.

“They have arrested Prince Revem,” Chamteri said grimly, looking over her shoulder towards them. “For treason.”

There was a long moment of horrified silence as they all stared at her.

“What? How can that be?” Raleigh demanded finally, dismayed.

“From what I can find out, the night before his Grace left the Palace, the investigators identified the King’s poisoner – well, that’s what their evidence led them to believe. He had letters from the Prince arranging the set-up, even asking of the use of His Grace’s magic to counteract the effects.” She raised her eyebrows, pausing for a moment. “My sources say the Queen signed the arrest warrant for the Prince herself.” Cai knew his own face was as shocked as Raleigh’s – he had only met the Prince once, but even so he could not believe it possible.

“Planted letters. Not a poisoner – an actor,” Luca said dazedly. His face was drawn, his eyes blank and distant. Cai had never seen him so shaken.

Chamteri shrugged, frowning. “Doubtless. But it is worse than all of that. The morning after they arrested the alleged poisoner, you disappeared. I know

that was not your reason, but you can see how it would be used against you.” She shook her head wearily. “His Highness awaits the executioner’s block, but they will not risk having him killed while the greatest sorcerer in Sasthen is free to rain death on them.” She cleared her throat. “The crown has issued writs permitting them to execute you on sight, Your Grace. No one has any illusions of bringing you in alive. Sasthen – all your lands, the towns – are guarded and blockaded. I’m sure they’re trying to torture the Prince into telling them just where you are.”

Luca hunched his shoulders as though bracing for a physical blow. Cai could see a muscle in his jaw flex.

Varlan coughed, glancing worriedly at the Duke. “I had to come into Sasthen from the ocean side – through the sewers. Even that way was watched... I might have left a couple of crown soldiers with some dents in their skulls.” Varlan rubbed the back of his neck. “Mistress Chamteri had to buy our way out again.”

“In my country, a bribe like that would be paid just to stop them implicating me as well,” Chamteri said scornfully.

“People are convinced by the story?” Raleigh said distantly. “It sounds far-fetched at best.”

“People are stupid, and swayed by authority. No one will openly question the Queen’s judgement.” Chamteri sighed as she got to her feet. “Forgive me. There is much more to discuss. But I can hardly keep my thoughts together. It has



been a hard few days, and we all need sleep and something better to eat than dry rations. And then we can put our minds to what can be done.”

“Of course,” Addie said quietly, her gaze shifting from Chamteri to Luca and back.

“I have got to get back to my gardens,” Raleigh muttered, leading the way out. From what Cai knew of the man, he suspected Raleigh just wanted some time alone to process what he had heard.

The flurry of movement in the room made Cai look around at everyone in it again, and for the first time he realised that Yana was no longer with them. The two baskets of fruit sat neatly beside the door of the cottage, but his mother was nowhere to be seen; he could not even remember her leaving. Thinking about it, he realised how odd it was that the guards and Chamteri had not reacted to her presence as most would. He could not explain it.

As Chamteri reached the threshold, she hesitated, scowling over her shoulder at the Duke. Luca sat motionless, looking down at his hands. Chamteri managed one further step before she sighed and turned back.

Addie had already moved into the kitchen, and Chamteri leaned on the low cupboard beside her. “Do you have any... brandy? Whiskey?”

Addie looked at the older woman quizzically. “His Grace brought a bottle...” She looked around and found it half-hidden behind the open window shutter. Bringing it over, she offered it to Chamteri.

“And a glass?” Chamteri straightened, rummaging in a pocket at her side to extract a tiny, delicate glass vial. Addie produced a low glass from the rough-hewn shelves to her left. Chamteri unstopped the vial expertly, and tapped a single drop of yellowish liquid into the glass. She rolled it around until it formed a thin coating. Before Addie, Cai, or anyone else could comment, Chamteri filled the glass with Luca’s whiskey and took it over to the Duke. She said nothing, but patted him gently on the arm as she placed the drink on the stool she had just vacated.

She headed once again for the door, swinging her wrap through the crook of her arms to cover her exposed lower back.

As she passed Cai, he asked softly, “What did you give him?”

She inspected him archly, eyes flickering over his whole countenance. “It will make him sleep. I know his nature – if left to his own devices, he will do something stupid before I am awake to stop him.” She turned away again, shrugging. “Keep an eye on him for me.” With that, she swept from the room.

Cai had a strong urge to take the glass of whiskey and empty it into the dirt outside. The idea of Luca – of anyone – being drugged made his skin crawl. But he stood uncomfortably, unmoving; he didn’t want Luca to have to sit here torturing himself over what had happened to the Prince, or go riding off before they had worked out what could be done.

Addie hooked a pot of water above the fireplace and went outside. Cai was left alone with Luca, who hardly seemed recognisable as the calm, aloof, arrogant

sorcerer Cai was accustomed to. He approached his teacher uneasily, and sat down beside the fire.

Cai did not know what to say or do, what could possibly help. He looked at the stone floor and back across to Luca, feeling like they were separated now by something much greater than the few feet of distance between them.

At last, the Duke kneeled forward, snatched up the whiskey and drained it. Cai watched, aghast, but said nothing. Luca settled down awkwardly into the same cross-legged pose as his student. He cradled the empty glass in his lap, hunching over it. "I have to do something. It's a trap, I know it is, baited with my..." Luca broke off, frowning as he stared ahead. "She wouldn't do this without some way of bottling me up." When he spoke of the predicament facing him personally, Luca sounded almost distanced from it – but the idea of what had happened to the Prince was clearly something he could hardly process. "I never thought she would go this far," he murmured. "And it has been so long already since we left." He rubbed his face, agitated.

"I'm sure... with all the others here... you can work out what to do," Cai offered.

Luca smiled bitterly. "There are few who would say that to me now, with the Queen of a nation turned against me – and half the army out looking to put a crossbow bolt through my throat."

A surge of fear went through Cai at the words. He floundered for something to say, but there could be no reassurances here. It would not be all

right. Luca's title was already forfeit with the charge of treason. Revem was lost, even if Luca himself survived this to mourn him.

Cai looked back towards Luca – but the Duke was swaying slightly, frowning down into the empty glass. “What did... Chamteri...?” Luca trailed off, shaking his head as he tried to focus. “Cai...”

Cai scrambled to his feet, stepping in closer, uncertain of what to do. “She put something in the drink,” he confessed, the words nearly catching in his throat as he watched Luca fight to stay conscious. The tension went out of Luca's frame and Cai caught hold of him as he collapsed backwards.

“Addie!” Cai yelled, hooking his hands under Luca's upper arms to try and hold him upright. Cai adjusted his stance to better support the tall man; Luca may have been slender for his height, but as dead weight he was still too heavy for Cai to move. The Duke's head lolled forward. Addie rushed in from outside, still carrying an extra blanket. She dropped it to the floor and hurried over. “Can we get him to the pallet?”

Addie hurriedly kicked the stool out of the way and moved to lift the Duke's legs. Together, they managed to half-drag, half-carry him to the makeshift bed.

Luca lay still, his eyes closed, his lips parted. His face was tipped awkwardly to one side, and Cai lifted his head and resettled it. “We shouldn't have let her do that.”

-Worthy-

“There’s no helping it now,” Addie said resolutely, though she made no move to get up from where she crouched beside Luca. She crossed her arms over her knees, resting her chin on them. “What will become of him?” she mumbled.

## IX

“Wake up! Food’s ready!” Addie yelled from the front door, hands on her hips and her fingers still hooked around her ladle.

Cai, in the middle of adding more wood to the fire, looked across to Luca. It had been several hours, but the Duke didn’t so much as stir at Addie’s shout. With a worried glance, Addie went through into her tiny bedroom to wake Varlan, albeit more gently than she had those outside.

Soon, the new arrivals staggered up from the tents. Without their armour, and with their hair mussed from sleep, the guards’ presence was much less threatening. But Cai still felt awkward around them, and instead of joining the rest milling about in the kitchen as they waited for their food, he sat down near Luca. Addie was no more sociable; she was businesslike in her attitude, hardly speaking as she set out earthenware bowls and served the stew. Cai suspected that until Luca woke and seemed back to his usual self, her treatment of Chamteri and the others would remain less than welcoming.

“Smells wonderful,” Varlan remarked hoarsely from the doorframe of Addie’s room. The armour was gone and he had changed out of his travel-stained

clothing, but his fresh shirt and breeches were sleep-rumpled, and he looked no less tired.

Addie's face softened as she looked at her father's friend. "Kangaroo with... potatoes and carrots, mostly." She finished filling the bowls and began handing them around.

The guards and Varlan settled down around the fire to eat, but Chamteri made her way over to where Luca lay. She glanced at Cai but said nothing, kneeling down beside the unconscious Duke. She pressed two fingers to Luca's throat and put the other hand on his chest, watching him intently. Cai's scalp prickled with discomfort at her show of concern for his condition, when she herself had caused it. For a brief moment he wanted to push her away from Luca, but he stayed carefully still. After a few moments, seemingly satisfied, she joined the others again.

Cai really didn't have any appetite, but Addie brought over a bowl and held it out insistently until he accepted it. It was good, as Varlan had predicted; had it not been Cai wouldn't have been able to force himself to eat it. The others more than made up for his lack of enthusiasm. Addie needn't have worried about the quality of the food – Cai suspected anything hot and remotely edible would have been equally appreciated.

The meal was soon finished and the bowls were stacked up beside the fireplace. The afternoon had brought with it a veil of grey cloud that covered the weak winter sun, and the day had cooled rapidly. Varlan went around and made

sure all the shutters were fastened and the door was closed tight. The male guard carefully added more wood to the fire. Every now and then, Addie opened the kitchen shutter to peer outside; Raleigh still had not returned from the fields, and unlike Yana, he would feel the cold change.

Varlan sighed as he sat back down, stretching forward to rub his right shin. “Being better rested and fed is not making things look any simpler to me,” he admitted.

“He only has one option,” Chamteri said in a way that made Cai sure she had stated her feelings on the subject before. She had reclaimed her earlier seat, shuffling it so close to the fire that Cai thought any moment her delicate clothing might catch alight. “Only one *sane* option, anyway. He has to run – nothing he can do will help Prince Revem. If they’re going to execute him, in the end they will do it whether they kill His Grace as well or not. Fear of retribution didn’t stop them from arresting the Prince to begin with, after all.” She brushed a few stray pieces of dark hair, loosened during her sleep, back off her face.

The taller female guard, leaning against the wall behind Chamteri, frowned at her words. “If he choose only the... sane option, where you be?”

Chamteri tipped her head to one side in acknowledgement, closing her eyes. “And I owe him for it. But I ran from Qired – granted, I only could run because he... told the most outlandish lie I’ve heard anyone dare tell an Emperor.” She smiled wistfully, lowering her eyes. “But there was nothing I could do to save the others. Not my position, not the magic I have, none of it would have helped.”



Varlan crossed his arms. “But surely with his power he can do just about anything?”

Chamteri shrugged, no sign remaining in her face of the brief moment of sadness. “There *are* sorcerers just as strong, and there are other ways of suppressing magic. She must have some way of controlling him to have taken such a step.”

“Well, it doesn’t signify either way,” Varlan said, scratching his ear. “You won’t get His Grace to run from this, Mistress, whatever you tell him.”

“It is clear even to me that it will be... difficult to convince him,” she admitted softly.

“You will not do it,” Addie said, her voice thick.

Varlan looked down, his face rueful. “Were it only his own life in danger, and not the Prince’s too, he still wouldn’t run. As it is, he will die readily for even half a chance to save Prince Revem.”

Cai, watching them talk, was startled by the small movement he caught out of the corner of his eye. He twisted, just in time to see Luca’s hand twitch. The Duke’s eyes drifted half-open, before closing again.

“His chances are, I suppose, better than nearly anyone else’s would be,” Chamteri conceded. “But with no contacts in the Palace – we cannot even know for sure that’s where the Prince is held.”

“What of Lord Ambrose?” Varlan offered. Cai flinched as if someone had slapped him. “He is a good friend of both of them... he can’t be pleased by what has become of the Prince.”

But Chamteri was frowning, her expression confused. “The Majordomo at the Terirth Palace?”

Varlan nodded as she spoke.

“My sources say that is the very man who reported all this to the Queen. He said his own agents uncovered it.” Chamteri sounded grim. “And he was the first to call His Grace’s involvement treason.”

Cai saw Luca’s eyes open fully this time, shock registering on his face. Slowly, Luca pushed himself up onto his elbows, though his arms shook so much Cai thought they might give out at any moment.

The conversation trailed off as the others noticed the Duke was awake, and Chamteri hurried over to kneel beside the pallet again. “Your Grace, you should lie down.” Gently, she pressed his shoulders down until he was laying flat again.

Luca’s lips were tight. “Ambrose had a part in this?” he asked, his voice cracking. The Duke looked up to Chamteri, though his eyes could barely focus. “Can you See him?”

She hesitated. “I know enough of him – yes, perhaps.”

“I need to know.” Luca’s voice was quiet but decided. “Even before this I... had concerns about him. This is why I asked you to come here.”

She nodded gravely, though there was a twist of concern in the set of her face. “At this distance, I will need a conduit – my power alone will not be sufficient to project so far.” Chamteri’s eyes moved sideways, peering at Cai beside her. “The boy would serve well enough.”

“No,” Luca said sharply. When Chamteri opened her mouth to protest he cut her off: “*No*, Chamteri.” He winced, his hand drifting up to rub his forehead. “I will act as conduit, of course.”

“In your state, you physically cannot.” Chamteri crossed her arms, her face stern. “If you lapse into unconsciousness while we are with him, I won’t be able to get us back. You know that.”

Luca shook his head, frowning. “I can do it. It would be... nothing less than *torture* to make...”

“I’ll do it,” Cai interrupted, feeling sick to his stomach. He couldn’t let Luca explain it, not in front of a room full of people. Chamteri glanced cautiously at Cai.

Luca held up a shaking hand, palm towards Cai in refusal. “No! Think what you’re saying. There is always a risk something will go wrong.” Luca grimaced, closing his eyes. “In this case, much more of a risk.”

“I can do it,” Cai said, looking down. He remembered meeting Prince Revem – a kind, unassuming man, smiling over the edge of his drink as he joked with Luca. What had happened to him now? Cai remembered Chamteri’s casual remark that they would torture the Prince into revealing Luca’s destination. *He*

*knows where we are*, Cai realised. *And yet no one has come*. The Prince must have kept his silence, through... Cai didn't want to imagine what. Cai turned to Chamteri. "Just show me what I should do."

She got to her feet, nodding, though she looked distracted. "Come on then." She headed towards the door.

"You said you have to know," Cai mumbled to Luca as he stood. "Well, so do I." Cai turned his back quickly, not sure he could maintain his veneer of confidence long enough to risk giving the Duke a chance to protest again. He did not feel as convinced as he pretended that this was the right decision, but it was already made. He squared his shoulders, following Chamteri out of the house.

The tent was dimly lit, the sunlight filtering through the weave of the canvas above them. There was a small block smouldering in a low dish, giving off an earthy, burnt-flowers scent.

Chamteri settled herself down cross-legged in front of him. "All you have to do is help keep the channels open and let me draw from you." Her voice sounded gentler, and she was frowning at him rather pensively. It was clear that she understood well enough that there was good reason why Luca had refused to let Cai do this. "It won't hurt, but the sensation will be strange. It is unlikely you will have much awareness of the other party without the appropriate training – but you may get some sense of his presence through me. The combination of our power can cause unpredictable effects, that way."

Cai nodded stiffly; part of him wanted to scramble out of the tent and hide somewhere he'd never have to risk seeing the contents of Ambrose's mind. But if it would help Revem, and Luca, and help Cai himself understand all that had happened, he would grit his teeth and sit through whatever he had to.

Chamteri took hold of Cai's hands, lowering them so their wrists were resting comfortably on their knees. "Close your eyes. Concentrate on the magic; don't push it at me, but don't stop me from using it when the time comes."

Eventually, Cai heard Chamteri's breathing become slow and deep. He tried to relax, despite the mounting tension in his abdomen. Another long moment passed in silence except for their combined breath, and the rhythm of Cai's own pulse behind his ear. Then Cai felt Chamteri's magical aura shift, pulling at the current coursing around his body through their connected hands. It was the oddest sensation – almost like his blood itself was seeping out of his palms. He *felt* her surprise when she came in direct contact with his power, the moment's pause it caused her, before she drifted deeper again into her spell.

As she focussed, Cai was drawn in with her. The spell was incredibly delicate and involved. Yet from this close perspective, as he seemed to watch simultaneously from outside and inside her working, Cai found he could understand it. She used her knowledge of Ambrose and memories of the Teruen Palace as a tether, and drew her consciousness towards them along the barest thread of magic. As Chamteri finally connected with Ambrose, moving into his mind with a breath, Cai felt himself pulled along with her.

They sank into Ambrose's consciousness. Everything that Ambrose knew was there around Cai, a confusing mix of innumerable memories, images, thoughts. Things he never wanted to know, had never thought about. Cai saw a young Ambrose, distant but sharply remembered, being slapped for talking back to an overbearing older brother. Ambrose loved music, and had travelled miles many times just to hear a talented performer play. He collected tiny crystal figurines. He envied Luca and Prince Revem, and all those who inherited their power and seemed to him to value it little.

Cai clung to Chamteri's spell as she navigated through the labyrinth and focussed in on the Majordomo's present consciousness. Cai could feel, distantly, the cold shudder that went through his own body; it was as though Ambrose was talking from inside Cai's own mind.

*Where's that blond boy with the wine? I know I don't need any more... perhaps I'm swaying in my seat already.* Cai could see the boy through Ambrose's own eyes – blond hair tied back, long eyelashes, a red flush in his cheeks. The boy smiled at Ambrose, oblivious. Ambrose imagined closing his fist around that hair, pulling the boy's head back to expose his throat.

An image of the Queen, her eyes flashing with rage, shot across Ambrose's consciousness, and he cringed and tore his gaze away from the serving boy. *How could she have known? Dead kids don't talk. Maybe someone heard me? Saw me?* He peered sidelong at the Queen, who sat calmly on the dais surveying the

banquet before her. Her eyes darted to meet Ambrose's, and he looked down. *I had no choice. In the end that idiot Duke made his precious Prince suffer all the more than if the poison had just finished the job.*

*But what difference does it make. If I hang for this, well, I'd hang anyway, if she revealed all.*

*She seems to have no particular moral aversion to my appetites; in any case, they serve her purpose, as now I am her bloody puppet. She put me onto that place – one good thing that has come of it, perhaps.* The Queen, in mourning black and heavily veiled, impatiently slid a scrap of parchment across a wooden desk. Ambrose picked it up with eager, if shaking, hands. *Little slave boys dragged in from who knows where – they didn't know me from any other man. Much less messy, that way. Couldn't take the chance with the brats of Teruen.* Another memory – this one filled Ambrose with a strange thrill. He looked up from a tattered armchair to see Jenins dragging a new boy into the room. A pretty thing, green-eyed, frail, skin that looked like it would bruise in a strong wind.

Cai, witness to a strange inversion of a memory he himself carried, was horrified to recognise his own face. He could sense the predatory instinct the image aroused in Ambrose.

*Sasthen was the end of that. I should have just scared the little whore like she said, just so he'd do something rash, but I couldn't risk it, could I? He knew. I needed to be sure he wouldn't talk.* Next time, Ambrose smiled back up at the serving boy, who was filling his wine glass at last. *I won't make that mistake.*

Cai could feel, through the tenuous link that connected his mind and body, that he was breathing faster now. His heart was racing, but it was not with the terror he had expected. The memories of every young life Ambrose had taken struggling and shuddering out of this world lay before Cai.

*No.* Cai pulled magic from his own stores now, feeling cold with anger. The link between body and mind flared from a thread to a broad channel as he lashed out. *I won't let you hurt anyone else.*

In the Teruen dining hall, the Majordomo straightened for a moment, eyes wide in horror. A thin rivulet of blood issued from his nose. He collapsed forward heavily, knocking a crystal glass to the floor. A blond serving boy jerked back, his white apron doused with red wine.

Cai felt Chamteri *drag* him, her thoughts tumbling over the tent, the grounds of Sasthen, her own form, racing away from the dying man.

The sound of shattering glass still rang in Cai's ears as they jolted awake, back in the dim tent. Chamteri stared at him, wide-eyed.

Cai yanked open the tent flap and scrambled outside, squeezing his eyes shut against the daylight. His heart was beating so hard it almost left him breathless; his legs were shaking beneath him. Fragments of Ambrose's memory lingered in his mind, intertwined – riding with his brothers through an overgrown field; dropping a blood-soaked bundle into a freezing river one winter



night; Ambrose standing, a small boy himself, at his mother's memorial service. Cai shook his head sharply.

Chamteri emerged herself, her hand held up to block out the worst of the glare. She stood beside Cai in silence for a long moment.

"I'm sorry, Mistress Vitnyathe," Cai said at length, his voice tight. He swallowed. "I didn't expect..."

"No." She shook her head. "How you did it, I can't begin to guess. But I saw his mind, just as you did. We both know you had good reason."

She sighed. "Come on, now. We have a lot to explain." She moved awkwardly, her steps slow and rather stiff. She glanced back and saw Cai watching her. "The spell takes a lot out of me, especially when the return has to be so sudden. I'll be fine in a moment." She looked back up to the cottage before them. "There are more important things to worry about."

A thrill of apprehension went through Cai's gut. He could hardly process what had happened himself, without having to discuss it. "I'll come up in a moment."

"I understand." She gave a half smile. "I'll explain what I can." She hobbled up the slight slope to the cottage.

Cai looked up, to see soft grey clouds daubed across the thin blue of the sky. The anger and adrenaline were fading to a dull rush, and it was sinking in that Ambrose was really dead.

“So.” The voice came from behind him. He glanced over his shoulder, to see his mother standing there. Yana’s face was characteristically impassive, her arms gently crossed in front of her, but there was a certain tension in her jaw. She said nothing else, but Cai knew just looking at her that she knew all that had happened.

Cai shook his head. “I just... I didn’t plan to do anything like that.” He flexed his fingers and stretched them again. “It just came over me all at once.”

“I would not have made his death so easy.” She narrowed her eyes slightly.

Cai shook his head. The few minutes of calm had been enough to make the truth of what had happened seem overwhelming.

“Cai.” She laid a hand on his shoulder gently. “You never expected to kill, and of course you do not revel in it. But I saw only the briefest glimpse into his mind, and even I know he deserved worse than this. You avenged yourself. You saved all the others he would have harmed – and you know there would have been others.”

She wrapped her arms around him carefully, pulling him into an awkward embrace.

Cai looked up at the sky over his mother’s shoulder. Above the anger and confusion and shock, he felt a complicated sense of absolution.

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Cai hesitated at the threshold. He could hear snatches of startled conversation from within.

“That can’t be right.” That was Luca, and the incredulity in his voice made Cai’s stomach drop. “Knowing what I do now, I can’t argue that it wasn’t deserved. But how could Cai...?”

“I can’t tell you any more than I have,” Chamteri said quietly. “It is done, that is all I can say.”

There was a pause. Finally, Luca spoke: “I should know by now – the boy seems to reshape the definition of possible.”

As Cai entered the room, Addie was hooking the kettle above the fire, which had burnt down to barely more than embers again. The room smelled strongly of peppermint and a deeper, sharp, sweet scent Cai couldn’t place at all. Raleigh had returned and sat on a stool by the fire, tearing pieces from a hunk of brown bread; the two female guards sat cross-legged, playing a game with dice and coloured cards. Luca was sitting up on the pallet bed, his large hands wrapped around a steaming mug of tea. He still looked exhausted, but when Cai walked in

he sat a little straighter. He could feel that they were all, with the exception of Luca, making an effort not to look directly at him. He leaned against the wall, not willing to meet anyone's eye.

Chamteri cleared her throat, and Cai silently thanked her for drawing Luca's attention away from him. "The Queen is orchestrating all this." She looked into the middle distance as she spoke, her eyes focussed on something that was not physically there. "It is all deliberate, calculated. Ultimately she was behind the king's death herself."

Luca was very still, but his jaw clenched and unclenched. He opened his mouth to try and speak, but he seemed too shocked to form the words. Finally, he managed: "And it is all to be blamed on Revem." His voice was unnaturally calm. But suddenly he snarled and slammed his fist against the wall. "Who could do what she has?" he demanded. "She is a monster – all this time playing the victim!"

"Ambrose was terrified of her," Chamteri eyed Luca warily as she spoke. "She is remorseless... worse, it seems like this is all a game for her."

Luca looked at Cai, who still hovered in the entryway; Cai could not meet his gaze. Knowing what had been revealed made him feel frighteningly vulnerable, as if each word said might cut like a razor. He did not want their pity, or indignation. He didn't want anyone to know what had happened; it made him ashamed enough that they had seen the effects of it.

"I did suspect," Luca murmured. "But that I have been fooled like that..."

“He was your friend – he made sure that he was,” Chamteri said evenly. “Murderers, slavers, you know, more often than not they have wives and children and friends too. You could not have known what he was.”

Luca closed his eyes, tracing a half-crescent around the inner corner of his eyes. “Cai – I...”

“Please, don’t.” Cai was careful to keep his voice as even as possible, and his eyes to the stone floor. “You did nothing unreasonable.”

Luca frowned for a moment, looking thoughtful. Then he got to his feet, leaning heavily against the wall to steady himself.

“What are you doing?” Chamteri stared up at him, dismayed. “You must see by now that it would be – just madness to go back. Who knows how many she has under her thumb?”

“No. She should be held accountable. There is no point asking that I run, and leave Revem to die; I will not do it. I will save him, or I will die along with him.” Luca’s face was determined as he slung the pack over his shoulder and reached to grab another. “Those are the only options.”

Varlan stepped forward. “You will not go alone, Your Grace.” Luca looked like he wanted to protest, but Varlan’s face was as determined as his master’s.

Chamteri sighed. “Well, if you are all going to be so theatrical about it.” She slumped her shoulders, defeated. “I’d best come along to make sure your heads stay attached. This Queen of yours, she will be keen to ensure otherwise.”

Luca's words this time had made Cai think of someone other than Prince Revem. He thought instead of a smiling, patient man, his calloused hands busy with his work, watching his child play from the stoop of their house. *If there had been any chance to save my father...*

He moved to stand alongside Varlan, and this time Luca frowned. "Cai – no. It is too dangerous."

"My son's magic would best yours, sorcerer," Yana interrupted from the doorway. All three of Chamteri's guards were on their feet in a moment, their daggers drawn; Chamteri's eyes goggled as she stared wordlessly at the half-reptilian woman. Yana's calf length dress revealed her scaled and clawed feet, and her tail switched back and forth to tap the door frame. "No need for those," Yana told the guards calmly, and as she spoke the blades of their weapons disintegrated into fine metallic powder, which rustled like sand to the floor. They recoiled in shock, dropping the now empty hilts to the ground.

"It's all right," Chamteri assured them, though her voice shook. "If she wanted to hurt us, it would have been too late to do anything before we even knew she was here." One by one, glancing uncertainly at each another, the guards sat back down, though they remained visibly tense.

Yana nodded her agreement, then turned back to Luca. "You will get nowhere alone. Cai will be... invaluable to you."

Cai stood a little straighter, determined, meeting Luca's gaze directly. "You saved my life, and looked after me, in your way. You gave me a chance I would

never, ever have had otherwise. Now you're the one who needs help." He lifted his chin. "I *am* coming with you, whatever you say. I can help you save the Prince."

Luca looked back at him, and for a moment his eyes seemed over-bright. But he blinked rapidly, and the emotion was gone. He grinned around at the assembly, something dangerous in his expression. "Those of you who are insane enough to come with me, be ready to leave in an hour. We can't afford to lose any more time."

As Cai repacked his trunk again, he looked around at the busy cottage. He felt fortified by the presence of all those who had grown to mean so much to him. Luca and Chamteri sat nearby, discussing methods of magical shielding. Addie brought over Cai's freshly patched cloak, and Varlan patted him on the shoulder as he handed Cai a small package of wax for polishing his leather boots. His mother, passing with a saddle bag of preserves, gave him a small smile.

There would be trials enough to come, he knew. But he was sure now, with all he had seen and survived, and all those he had to support him, that he could face anything.

# RESPONDING TO ‘QUASI-MEDIEVAL’ TENDENCIES IN HIGH FANTASY

High fantasy, or secondary-world fantasy, occurs in ‘otherworlds’ entirely of the author’s invention (Clute and Grant, 42). By definition, then, such works could employ any setting imaginable; these invented worlds need not necessarily bear any resemblance to factual history or humankind’s own mythology, let alone any specific part of it. But since the success of J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, commercial high fantasy has become strongly associated with a fairly stock setting; a fictionalised mixture of fairy tale elements, old Norse and Celtic legends, Arthurian tales and medieval<sup>1</sup> European culture (e.g. Manlove, *Modern* 100; Mathews 38; Thompson 215). C. S. Lewis once wrote that fantasy novels set in secondary worlds “are actual additions to life; they give, like certain rare dreams, sensations we have never had before, and enlarge our conception of the range of possible experience” (*Other* 70). Yet fairly commonly the worlds of high fantasy novels do not, in fact, impart sensations we have never had before, but rather a certain sense of familiarity. This is because many of these works make use of a

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<sup>1</sup> I use the word ‘medieval’ in its broad historical sense, referencing the period of time from the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth century until the mid fifteenth century (as in e.g. Olson 3), and not specifically in reference to the ‘high’ middle ages after the Norman invasion, when Middle English became the predominant language.



variation on the stock setting referred to above – what I will call a 'quasi-medieval' setting. This common element links the writing of many successful fantasy authors of the twentieth century: Robert Jordan, Stephen Donaldson, David Eddings, Raymond E. Feist and Terry Brooks, among others. There is, of course, nothing wrong with high fantasy works sharing related elements, with stories about quasi-medieval worlds generally, or even with the existence of what John Grant calls "generic fantasy" (21), designed specifically for those who have an appetite for material closely following the high fantasy formula derived from Tolkien. But the large number of fantasy works which draw on a quasi-medieval setting invites inquiry into where exactly this tendency came from. In this exegesis I will examine how this type of setting originally gained prominence, why it has endured, and the impact of its continued popularity on marketable fantasy literature. I will also discuss a few examples of works which fall outside the realm of 'quasi-medieval fantasy', as well locating 'Worthy' in relation to this concept.

In early eighteenth century England a factual history of the Middle Ages, by our current twenty-first century standards, did not exist; humanist scholars from the Renaissance onwards had "rejected any kinship with the medieval world and preserved continuity only between the ancient and their own period" (Breisach 159-160). But in the latter part of the century, a period of great social and political change, there was an increased interest in the history of England as a

nation, and especially in the Middle Ages (Alexander xii, xxii, xxiv). This sparked the very beginnings of what became, by the late eighteenth century, a full-fledged 'Medieval Revival'.

The range of primary sources from the Middle Ages available at this time was limited (Alexander 11-12). However, some medieval romances were still in circulation as light reading for both children and adults, and these were taken as the main sources of information about the era (Alexander 15-16). According to Alexander, the enthusiasm of men such as Thomas Percy, Thomas Warton and Walter Scott helped to bring about "the scholarly recovery of medieval romances, and also (as was their intention) ... the revival of the romance genre in new writing" (13). Scott's original romances, given a distinctly and deliberately medieval setting, became a huge success, and kick-started a widespread interest in and affection for the medieval.

Soon, both the medieval in general and medieval romances specifically were attracting unprecedented levels of interest in both academic and popular circles. Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, first published 1485, had been out of print for nearly two hundred years when it was finally reprinted in 1816 – in a simplified format for a popular audience – and enjoyed the same success it had during the first century after its publication (Bryden 27). So by the early nineteenth century, the medieval era and the romances it produced and inspired

made an impressive return to the public eye. Although this was before the advent of high fantasy literature as we now recognise it, medieval romance constitutes an important precursor: it “enjoys a prolific afterlife” in the form of the high fantasy novel, which has inherited many of its common elements (Ashton 140). The popularisation of medieval romance can therefore be connected to the forms assumed by high fantasy when it eventually rose into prominence in the twentieth century.

Writers in the early stages of the Medieval Revival, Alexander notes, were very conscious of harking back to the literary tradition from which their work was derived: while the movement was ostensibly grounded in an effort to retrieve a sense of the historical era, Scott and others made an effort to connect what they were producing with actual medieval literature (105-106). But he identifies Alfred Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott' (composed 1832) as a turning point for the way the medieval and the fantastic would be represented (Alexander 125-126). Tennyson's poem and his later works evoked a romanticised, idealised, fictionalised version of the Middle Ages derived from myth and legend, especially from the tales of King Arthur. After Tennyson's influence, and with a medieval aesthetic widely known and embraced, authors no longer felt obligated to find anchors in primary medieval sources: as they “increasingly moved away from texts into the world of legend or of adventure ... it was Tennyson who led them onto this enchanted ground” (Alexander 126). William Morris, an active

contributor in many areas of the Medieval Revival, was one of these authors. Morris had grown up in a house “surrounded by a moat and forests, an ideal site for a youth whose imagination was already drawn to tales of knightly valor” (Mathews 39). He is credited with writing the first examples of heroic fantasy, books based on the medieval romance but featuring magic and myth more centrally (Thompson 215). In the same time period, George MacDonald wrote his beautifully crafted ‘fairy stories’ for both adults and children, which gave readers access to an enchanted world. These works could no longer be characterised as replications of medieval romances. Fantasy literature, in its modern guise and with a quasi-medieval setting inspired by the work of the Medieval Revival, had begun to emerge.

As Alexander points out, writers and thinkers in the nineteenth century (such as Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin and A. W. Pugin) idealised and romanticised the social and environmental conditions of the Middle Ages as a favourable contrast with what they perceived as the oppressive, polluted and unpleasant England of their own increasingly modern and industrialised environment (110). In comparison with their own smoke-stained world of factories, child workers, smog and beggars, it seemed that in the Middle Ages under feudalism there was a “harmonious and stable social structure which reconciled freedom and order by giving each man an allotted place in society and an allotted leader to follow” (Chandler 195). Even a serf’s lack of freedom was compared favourably with the

uncertain existence of a factory worker who was not ensured food or lodgings by anyone (Alexander 86-87). More and more, the Middle Ages were viewed in a positive light, and in the nineteenth century public affection for this interpretation of the medieval was cemented. This affection continues today, and as Loretta Holloway states in the introduction to her and Jennifer Palmgren's *Beyond Arthurian Romances: The Reach of Victorian Medievalism*, "although contemporary medievalism has distinct characteristics, its assumptions about medieval culture are often rooted in Victorian portrayals of the medieval world" (4).

Two writers can be identified as the primary proponents of the Medieval Revival's ideals in the context of modern fantasy, as well as the primary reason for the strong influence of quasi-medieval fantasy today. J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis began writing after the heyday of the Medieval Revival, but its work had been done. As Lewis wrote, these authors "grew up on W. Morris and George MacDonald" (quoted in Carpenter 57). Tolkien also possessed, and helped to cultivate in Lewis, an enormous affection for the early medieval Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Arthurian myths and stories (Tolkien, 'Fairy' 135). Both of these men were scholars of medieval history and languages, with an apparent dislike of modern values and culture, and their writing reflected this. Indeed, Tolkien wrote that:

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“in Faërie ... one cannot conceive of a house built with a good purpose – an inn, a hostel for travellers, the hall of a virtuous and noble king – that is yet sickeningly ugly. At the present day it would be rash to hope to see one that was not – unless it was built before our time” (‘Fairy’ 151).

Tolkien viewed the twentieth century in which he lived as “an age of ‘improved means to deteriorated ends’” and wrote that it “produc[ed] the desire to escape, not indeed from life, but from our present time and self-made misery” (‘Fairy’ 151). Tolkien found a kindred spirit in C. S. Lewis, whose own *Chronicles of Narnia* refer back strongly to a medieval literary tradition, especially in the plot events relating to Prince Caspian. The *Narnia* books may not have had quite the explosive impact on high fantasy as Tolkien’s works (though they have been undeniably successful), but Lewis was instrumental in encouraging Tolkien to submit *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* for publication (Carpenter 32, 226). Tolkien relied a great deal on Lewis’ opinion, and had Lewis not been the sort of man to show enthusiasm over the archaic elements of *The Lord of the Rings* – a man who “dramatised himself as a survival, in grey and degenerate times, of a richer medieval culture” (Manlove, *Modern* 100) – it might never have been published and the shape of modern fantasy could have been quite different. As Tolkien himself said of Lewis: “the unpayable debt that I owe to him was not ‘influence’ as it is ordinarily understood, but sheer encouragement. He was for long my only audience. Only from him did I ever get the idea that my ‘stuff’ could be more than a private hobby” (quoted in Carpenter 32).

The societies, factions and characters in *The Lord of the Rings* are not exclusively 'quasi-medieval', but Sauron, Saruman and their minions, representing what Tolkien saw as the modern obsession with industrial progress and imperialist dominance, are the antagonists and portrayed as irredeemably evil (Dickerson and Evans 170). They turn their home territories of Mordor and Isengard into lifeless and hostile places, destroy swathes of forest to build and power machines, and are ruthless in their attempts to gain control over the whole of Middle-Earth. As such, they form a clear representation of the industrialisation, militaristic expansion and environmental destruction of the early- to mid- twentieth century (Dickerson and Evans 202). According to Patrick Curry, *The Lord of the Rings* "embodies an attack on unchecked modernity in all its worst aspects" (135).

If Mordor represents the twentieth century, the Shire, in many respects (including social custom, clothing and architecture), appears more reminiscent of the nineteenth century. It is apparently anachronistic in co-existence with the essentially Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse – early medieval – societies of Gondor and the Rohirrim. Curry suggests two explanations for this. One is that the hobbits constitute an important link and mediator between the world of the twentieth-century reader and the low-tech, quasi-medieval world that surrounds the hobbits' small slice of countryside, and as such allow readers easier access into Middle Earth (38). Curry's other suggestion is that in some respects (such as their

small rural community, subsistence lifestyle and lack of significant technology) the hobbits are not modern at all, but hark back to the traditional farming communities of pre-Norman England (38-39). In any event, the 'anachronistic' setting of the Shire serves primarily as a departure and return point for both the adventurers and for the reader.

While *The Lord of the Rings* thus contains elements that are recognisably influenced by the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it is the quasi-medieval cultures – whether the grittily Anglo-Saxon and Norse men or the more romantic Tennyson-Arthurian elves – which are portrayed as the primary forces of good in contrast to the much more modern forces of evil. The depiction of such cultures as virtuous seems a reflection of Tolkien's scholarly interest in early Anglo-Saxon and Norse culture and languages. C. N. Manlove said of *The Lord of the Rings* that "the book was largely born out of a reaction against the modern world in which [Tolkien] lived: nostalgia and wish fulfilment, which were only one part of Tolkien the man, are its essence" (*Modern* 206). Tolkien himself stated that there was, indeed, nothing wrong with fantasy as a form of nostalgic escapism. What's more, he wrote that the archaic setting of secondary worlds may add to this experience above what is contributed by the fantastic elements alone:

"and if we leave aside for a moment 'fantasy', I do not think that the reader or the maker of fairy stories need even be ashamed of the 'escape' of archaism – of preferring not dragons but horses, castles, sailing-ships,



bow and arrows; not only elves, but knights and kings and priests" ('Fairy' 150).

Finding joy in what I call 'the mundane archaic' – the historically-based early medieval material that formed the foundation for his invented fantasy setting – was, in Tolkien's view, just as natural as finding it in the imagined and magical aspects of 'faerie' itself.

The extraordinary popularity of Tolkien's work, which for many readers constituted their first exposure to fantasy literature, resulted in its having a significant impact on the genre. Brian Attebery wrote of it:

*The Lord of the Rings*, compared to others, is an achievement of such magnitude and assurance that it seems to reshape all definitions of fantasy to fit itself. Indeed, no important work of fantasy written After Tolkien is free of his influence, and many are merely halting imitations of his style and substance. (*Fantasy* 10)

Many scholars have written extensively on the impact of *The Lord of the Rings*, and the basic consensus appears to be that "it is nearly impossible to overstate Tolkien's importance in the history of fantasy" (Mathews 83). The fact that it was *The Lord of the Rings* which captured the public's attention in this way has firmly bound together the notion of high fantasy with the image of the romanticised medieval – as exemplified by elements such as the walled city of Gondor, with its towering spires and battlements topped by signal fires; the

feudal lord of the Rohirrim on his throne in a low-beamed, fur-strewn hall, and Aragorn the cloaked ranger roaming through vast woodlands. The result is, as Attebery says, that “writers stimulated by Tolkien have generally followed him in producing distanced, quasi-medieval fantasy worlds” (Attebery, *Strategies* 42). Ursula Le Guin, herself an accomplished world-builder and fantasy storyteller, has written “I am glad I had some sense of my own direction before I read Tolkien” (Le Guin 20); Tolkien’s work is so pervasive that even a writer of Le Guin’s calibre feels her ideas would have been overwhelmed by her experience of it.

The popularity and influence of *The Lord of the Rings* and its imitators has, over time, shaped the concept of fantasy itself. In 1975, in one of the early critical works exploring the topic of modern fantasy literature, C. N. Manlove defined fantasy very broadly: “a fiction evoking wonder and containing a substantial and irreducible element of the supernatural with which the mortal characters in the story or the readers become on at least partially familiar terms” (*Modern* 1). However, in subsequent decades the sheer popularity and influence of *The Lord of the Rings* has created in its image a general understanding of what fantasy should be, with Brian Attebery observing, in 1992, that “one way to characterize the genre of fantasy is the set of texts that in some way or other resemble *The Lord of the Rings*” (*Strategies* 14).

To some extent, this shaping of the popular definition of fantasy occurred by design. In the 1960s, *The Lord of the Rings* found a large readership in the United States. For a North American public disillusioned by the Vietnam War, "Tolkien's fantasy offered an image of the kind of rural conservationist ideal or escape for which they were looking" (Manlove, *Modern* 157). *The Lord of the Rings* created a demand for more material in the same vein, but there was not much to be had, and what was around was difficult to find (Le Guin, *Language* 71). Of the multitude of works that could perhaps have been considered fantasy under C. N. Manlove's definition, few would have satiated an appetite created specifically by reading *The Lord of the Rings*. As Brian Stableford notes, "the early imitations of *The Lord of the Rings* ... had to be slavish in order to exploit the particular expectations generated by Tolkien's work in readers who had not previously been exposed to immersive fantasy" (lix). As a result, Lin Carter and other fantasy editors in 1960s North America, hoping to cater to the market created by *The Lord of the Rings*, deliberately published and promoted works which resembled it. In doing so, they succeeded in creating a narrower and more easily marketable notion of what fantasy was (Grant 22; Stableford lviii). At the same time, however, they also created a more restricted popular perception of fantasy (Grant 22).

Critics and writers of fantasy alike have mixed feelings about the effect Lin Carter and his contemporaries ultimately had. Fantasy fiction (albeit of a fairly

unvarying flavour) was, after Carter's intervention, much easier to find, but the cost was a great narrowing of scope. As John Grant puts it, "stuff like Tolkien, stuff like Robert E. Howard, stuff like William Morris – according to them, this 'stuff' was what fantasy was. Unfortunately, it soon came to be commercially perceived that this was all that fantasy was" (*Gulliver Unravels* 21). Ursula Le Guin laments that in modern fantasy, "the general assumption is that if there are dragons or hippogriffs in a book, or if it takes place in a vaguely Keltic or Near Eastern medieval setting, or if magic is done in it, then it is a fantasy" (*Language* 80). Published high fantasy since Tolkien has, over time, come to be so prescribed in setting and format that Diana Wynne Jones has been able to write a whole book – her mock 'travel guide', *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland* – sending up the stereotypes encountered in story after story.

The quasi-medieval setting is one aspect of this stereotype. We have seen how Tolkien's form of fantasy became, for readers in English, "our mental template" (Attebery, *Strategies* 42). As a result, his quasi-medieval setting for high fantasy continues to be repeated and reinforced to the present day. Many commercially successful high fantasy authors have made use of such a setting, including Robert Jordan, David Eddings, George R. R. Martin, Raymond E. Feist and Robin Hobb. The work of these authors varies greatly in its plot, tone and structure, but they all feature an array of recognisably medieval elements: feudalism, serfs and peasants, stone castles, hose and tunics, mounted warriors, hand-to-hand combat,

and so on. There are, however, notable exceptions to the 'rule' of quasi-medievalism – Phillip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, for example, operates out of a primary world which could be characterised as a slightly steampunk twist on Victorian England, and the characters travel through multiple other worlds of various derivation. Ursula Le Guin's *Earthsea Quartet* is more Bronze Age than anything else (Swinfen 83), and employs highly original geography and therefore society. These exceptions notwithstanding, it remains true that many published high fantasy works employ some sort of quasi-medieval setting.

Some critics have actively argued that the quasi-medieval setting is simply the most appropriate choice. Martha Sammons argues that the sort of legends and fantastic events writers create are more appropriate when set in an approximation of a time in which such stories would have been believed, when "reality was still seen in terms of myth, and man was united with nature" (140). If choosing to emulate an era when magic and myth were commonly believed is a requirement for writing a good fantasy, then it does make sense to choose the mid-to-late medieval era, when belief in all things magical and mythical was high. At this time, the Church had internalised pagan beliefs to the extent that it actually "deemed it heretical to hold that witchcraft did not work" (Olson 161). But in a fantasy, where the existence of magic is undeniable fact, there is nothing particularly notable about the characters' belief in it. If performing magic is as much an everyday part of life as carpentry or tailoring, then *not* believing in

magic would be the more inexplicable standpoint for characters to take. Therefore it does not follow that a fantasy author should derive their setting from a more superstitious historical period, since their characters have no need to be particularly superstitious, and thus there is no particular intrinsic appropriateness in adhering to a quasi-medieval setting under this rationale.

Brian Attebery makes the point that when a reader 'enters' a secondary world, they can no longer know what will be the same as their primary reality, and what will be different. Attebery argues that the authors of high fantasy therefore "refer the reader to the European fairy tale and Romance tradition" by replicating the medieval aesthetic appropriate to that tradition, and thereby providing the reader with a set of working assumptions (*Strategies* 132). Brian Stableford concurs: "how are readers supposed to accommodate themselves within imaginary worlds without some set of default assumptions on which to draw so as to 'fill in the gaps'?" (lvi). Attebery says of the moment in which a narrative is 're-identified' as fantasy – when the reader encounters something which could not happen or exist in our own world – that "we know nothing for certain until the narrator tells us it is so. Is the sky blue? Is the world round? Perhaps, but don't bet on it" (*Strategies* 132). Of course it is true that you don't know anything 'for certain' in fantasy until the author tells you that it is so – but that doesn't mean you stop assuming the sky is blue, the grass is green, and people have one head and all the standard anatomy, at least until you reach a point where you're told otherwise. Part of the

work of a fantasy author is making sure the reader takes note of the relevant differences between their invented world and the real one without interrupting the suspension of disbelief; as soon as a reader's attention is brought to something for the first time, if it's going to be 'other' it must be made clear at that time. It would be extremely difficult and jarring for a reader to progress through a work if they actually operated under a belief that all the rules of our own reality are invalidated by any supernatural or magical elements encountered.

Attebery also suggests that a setting with more than a primitive level of technology is not appropriate for fantasy, "partly because the magical folktale comes from a time before great machinery and partly because technology overlaps magic in many of its operations" (*Fantasy* 172). However, there are fantasy works which successfully combine magic and modern technology to add atmosphere and further the narrative. In Elizabeth Bear's *Edda of Burdens* trilogy for example, fantastic elements inspired by Norse mythology are blended seamlessly with science-fiction type technology. This work clearly demonstrates that the tension between magic and modern technology can actually add to the narrative, rather than confuse it. Therefore there is no need to restrict potential inspiration for fantasy settings to eras before 'great machinery', and certainly not to the Middle Ages specifically – depending on what aesthetic an author wishes to create, they could draw inspiration from any or many different time periods and places.

But there is perhaps yet another attractive quality of a medieval setting. Although the traditional belief that the Middle Ages was a period of stagnancy or even regression in terms of cultural, political or scientific development is now outdated, many still associate the medieval era with a 'Dark Age' of human progress (Olson 3). In fantasy, sometimes this idea of 'medieval stasis' is taken to an extreme: high fantasy worlds may have an extended written history that foreshadows the events of the narrative, but often there is no real perceptible change in society throughout this history. As Manlove states: "[most fantasies'] frequent looking to the past is conservative within itself; and the order to which they look and seek to re-create is usually a medieval and hierarchic one, founded on the continuance of the status *quo*" (*Impulse* 31). This may help explain the continuing attraction to appropriating a setting based on the Middle Ages, an era long viewed as the most unchanging stretch of history (Olson 3). However, there are examples of successful fantasies which have managed to incorporate societal advancement. In Sarah Ash's *Tears of Artamon*, the political situation and technology are shown to have been continually changing, and are still in a state of development even in the short time frame of the narrative. L. E. Modesitt's *Recluce* series uses the stereotype of medieval stasis to further its own plot while also subverting it: the government of Recluce suppresses new inventions and information believing that this is divine will, while other societies continue to develop new technologies. This clearly shows that it is possible to create a convincing, absorbing society



with political and social advancement, and that when achieved it can significantly further the plot of the story and add great layers of complexity.

Although, for all the many reasons discussed above, high fantasy has come to be associated with a quasi-medieval setting, we can see that fantasy works need not necessarily draw on any particular historical or literary tradition. An author could borrow and fictionalise elements from several cultures and eras, or none of them, if so inclined. Perhaps supernatural events seem more 'at home' in a quasi-medieval setting less because it is the familiar setting for folk tales and old myths, than because readers, authors and publishers alike are so used to seeing them there. It is possible for a writer to familiarise their readership with any setting, no matter how outlandish – in fact, it is a common theme in science fiction, for example, to be as creative as possible with setting. In high fantasy such experimentation is not as common as it perhaps could be. Interestingly, some of the authors who write non-medieval high fantasy, such as Pullman and Stephen King, have made clear that part of their motivation for their choice of setting was that they specifically did not want to write anything reminiscent of Tolkien. Pullman has "assertively, even aggressively, positioned himself in opposition to Tolkien and Lewis" (Hatlen 76), while King "made a conscious effort not to duplicate what Tolkien had done" (Strengell 118). The fact that some writers react in this way suggests that the commercial definition of fantasy has become

narrow enough that some authors find it oppressive, and actively choose to rebel against it with the production of something markedly different.

'Worthy', in its final incarnation, falls neither completely in the sphere of the quasi-medieval, nor does it go to extremes to avoid any and all elements associated with that form of setting. When I began to write fantasy myself there were, of course, many options for setting which I could have considered for their potential influence on the story, but initially this did not occur to me at all. I had read so much quasi-medieval high fantasy that it was what I unconsciously emulated when I started writing myself. I had knights in armour, robed wizards and wattle-and-daub houses. The landscape was very reminiscent of northern Europe, filled with mountains, heaths, snow drifts and forests of trees I wouldn't recognise in real life – oak and birch and ash. It was a setting familiar to most readers of high fantasy: a romanticised, mythologised interpretation of Medieval Europe.

Some time afterwards, I came across what was at the time a revelation – that one could potentially write a high fantasy story which did not employ a quasi-medieval setting. It soon became baffling to me, where it had once seemed so unremarkable, that much of the fantasy material I had read and loved seemed 'cut from the same cloth' insofar as setting was concerned. On reflection, a quasi-medieval foundation really did not appear most appropriate for 'Worthy', which

had quite a different thematic focus and approach to inter-personal relations to the 'quest based' quasi-medieval high fantasy epitomised by Tolkien, Jordan, Martin, Eddings and Brooks .

Although a traditional aristocratic hierarchy exists in 'Worthy', it is more flexible than would be expected under feudalism and can be subverted by the possession of other forms of power. Some characters already view the system of rank as outdated and the aristocracy as frivolous, as the physician Crelt makes clear in his musings early in the narrative. Luca is a duke, but he takes advantage of his rank only insofar as his authority allows him to ignore what might be inconvenient to him. Luca has an unusually democratic, egalitarian relationship with his protégé Cai, despite the massive difference in status between a Duke and an ex-slave. Luca has a greater concern for Cai's ability and potential than for his situation in life, to which he is mostly ambivalent (until, of course, it interferes in their work). If Luca is distant with Cai, it is not because he is preserving the dignity of his rank. Rather, Luca's distance arises from two factors that have other causes. The first is that Luca himself is an emotionally damaged man, and has difficulty forming relationships. The second is that Luca is a magician first, and a Duke second. His degree of interest in Cai depends entirely on how much magical talent he perceives the boy to have. His interest wanes when it appears that Cai's talent may not be as profound as initially believed, and rekindles when Cai proves that he has intrinsic value as a sorcerer of great potential power. This egalitarianism

extends to other characters, too. Prince Revem is comfortable with Cai despite the even wider gap in their social standing. Personal friendship trumps rank, as far as Revem is concerned; Cai's significance to Luca is the only factor of interest. In this context of fluid social boundaries, the 'feel' of a quasi-Enlightenment setting, in which the dividers of class were breaking down and attitudes to rank were beginning to evolve, seemed a much better fit for a work in which aristocratic position is of secondary importance to one's ability and thus intrinsic value.

One of the most markedly modern elements of 'Worthy', and an element reliant on the 'flattening' of social hierarchy referred to above, is the attitude towards and treatment of Cai's psychiatric condition. Cai suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of trauma and sexual abuse. His symptoms include amnesia, nightmares, and lack of emotional control. This makes it difficult for him to control his magic, which is dangerously powerful. The narrative charts Cai's experiences of recovering his memory and coming to terms with his past, developments which occur in parallel with his developing mastery over his own magical abilities. His constructive relationship with his mentor Luca is crucial to his learning to trust those around him, learning to take control of his emotions and his magic, adapting to the opportunity offered by his new existence, and eventually becoming strong enough to return the favour of 'rescuing' his mentor Luca. In 'Worthy,' mental illness – PTSD in this case – is understood as an

experience from which the subject can recover and, indeed, grow strong. It is a narrative about suffering, but also about hope.

This contrasts with the historical conditions from which many quasi-medieval fictions draw their conception of mental illness. In the Middle Ages, any condition that could not be easily explained by a physical cause would often be attributed to malevolent spirits or demonic possession (Hergenbahn 488). In such cases, "the preferred treatment was some form of exorcism" (Hergenbahn 493). If exorcism failed, someone in a state such as Cai's might have been confined, abandoned or even executed under suspicion of witchcraft (Kent, 29-31). Some quasi-medieval fantasies employ this medieval attitude to mental illness and indeed legitimise this theory of insanity, such that psychological disturbances are actually caused by demonic possession, the influence of evil or by being mentally overwhelmed by the presence of a god. For example, in David Eddings' *Castle of Wizardry* Polgara references the 'Mrin Prophet' who was "so hopelessly insane that he couldn't speak properly" and had to be kept "chained to a post like a dog" (408). In Tamora Pierce's *Squire* it is well known that would-be-knights have been driven insane by their experiences in the magically sentient Chamber of the Ordeal (21). Mental illness, in these instances, is portrayed as an absolute from which there can be no recovery.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo suffers from an inexplicable affliction after his return from Mordor and the scouring of the Shire (1002-1003). His recourse is to conceal his illness, to retreat from all the pleasures of his former existence, and finally to leave the Shire altogether. He is “wounded” in such a way that “will never really heal” (1002). This is reminiscent of the ‘shell shock’ encountered in epidemic proportions during World War I; a condition which would now be considered in terms of the current concept of PTSD. But at the time of its emergence, the field of psychiatry was still “unable to offer anything by way of effective treatment” for sufferers of ‘shell shock’ (Beveridge 7). Similarly, in *The Lord of the Rings*, it appears nothing can be done to help Frodo deal with his mental state. Though he does not receive the condemnation of other high fantasies’ raving lunatics or catatonics, his state is equally unapproachable and apparently permanent.

Frodo’s being allowed to ‘wither away’ while those who care about him look on, helpless, contrasts strongly with the attitude towards Cai’s condition in ‘Worthy’. Luca and Crelt, filling between them a role similar to a modern psychiatrist, identify a plausible cause for Cai’s condition and try as far as possible to facilitate some level of management and recovery. This approach to PTSD only began to develop in the late 1920s, when Sigmund Freud’s theories were adapted by William Rivers and others to the widespread problem of ‘shell-shock’ (Seligman and Reichenberg 41). So in ‘Worthy’, the other characters have a late-twentieth

century understanding of Cai's condition, believing that it is something that he can eventually adapt to and improve from. Unlike Frodo, Cai receives support and assistance that enables him to manage his condition.

In order for men such as Luca and Revem to provide this support to Cai, and thus for this therapeutic model to be successfully drawn on, 'Worthy' cannot sustain a traditional feudal model of class and rank. Under a strict aristocratic hierarchy, Cai – talented or no – would be too far beneath their notice for it to be appropriate, no matter how kind-hearted they may be, for them to interact with him directly. Their involvement in his life in itself requires a world where a rank system can be selectively ignored by those high-ranking enough to operate outside its confines, or by those with other forms of power enough to make titles irrelevant. As a result, the setting is now inspired more by the less staid and more revolutionary, politically-charged era of eighteenth century Europe. The overall aesthetic, such as the characters' clothing and diet, the social events at court, the political tensions and intrigues, the state of medicine, even down to the everyday life for the country working class, are an approximation of an era in which the important plot elements of 'Worthy' – the close association of a Duke with an ex-slave student or his own servant and the sudden transformation of a man from prince to prisoner, for example – work more effectively than they would in a quasi-medieval setting.

I have by no means, however, struck out on a radical new course away from the quasi-medieval. My idea of fantasy is shaped by my personal experience as a reader, and even as I altered my design somewhat I have brought much of the high fantasy tradition with me. Although the knights in armour have been banished from 'Worthy', there are still elements which are reminiscent of quasi-medieval fantasy – for example, the presence of a traditional (although unstable) monarchy, the use of the palace as a setting and the characters of a prince and a duke. As the narrative occurs primarily in a rural setting, there is less opportunity to demonstrate technological and social advancement beyond the quasi-medieval; and even if there were, of course the eighteenth century was still a 'low-tech' era by modern standards. As a result, though 'Worthy' has explored a different tack to an extent, it does not constitute a radical break from the stereotype. It brings with it, builds on, and branches off of my experience with quasi-medieval fantasy, while at the same time avoiding being entirely within the same mould.

Geographically, Terirth and its surrounds are now based on eastern Australia. The pine forests and snow drifts are replaced with eucalypts and mallee scrub. This subtly draws 'Worthy' away from the high fantasy stereotype of forests, snow and mountains. The Australian environment is not intrinsically tied to a western fairytale tradition the same way Europe is, and even stock quasi-medieval elements such as the travellers on horseback or the grand manor house seem to gain an air of novelty about them when juxtaposed with a different environment.



The relationship between fantasy and a quasi-medieval setting is a long and complicated one. This type of setting can work extremely well, and there are many interesting and varied stories set in quasi-medieval worlds that prove it. However, it is so pervasive now that for some readers and writers of fantasy – including me – it can be hard to imagine a secondary world that is *not* quasi-medieval in nature. The scope of what is possible – or, perhaps more accurately, profitable – in commercial fantasy appears to be quite narrow in this era “After Tolkien” (Attebery, *Fantasy* 10). ‘Worthy’ does not depart radically from the stock quasi-medieval setting, but it employs a distinctive approach to character psychology with a ‘democratisation’ of the relationships between characters. It also experiments with finding an appropriate geographical and temporal setting for those changes. ‘Worthy’ is designed to appeal to a reader approaching it with an understanding of fantasy conditioned by the publishing environment created by Lin Carter – a reader who has the idea that quasi-medieval fantasy is ‘just how fantasy is’. Accordingly, it doesn’t stray far from quasi-medieval fantasy, but it does offer small, incremental revisions that have the potential to refresh and broaden its intended reader’s understanding of the imaginative possibilities of high fantasy.



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