

WINNER OF THE 2014 PNWA AND SWA AWARDS FOR FANTASY

STEPHEN C. MERLINO

"Of all the books I've read
in the past few years,
this was by far my favorite.
Merlino's remarkable imagination
and storytelling had me on the edge
of my seat the whole way through."
- Karen Duvall, author of
Darkest Knight.

THE JACK OF
SOULS

THE JACK OF SOULS

BOOK ONE OF THE UNSEEN MOON SERIES

SAMPLE ONLY

BY STEPHEN MERLINO



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PDF Edition

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All characters in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is coincidental, with the exception of the ghouls, which, of course, exactly resemble dead persons.

For Jane, my mother, who's nothing like Harric's mom, and who took me
to my first workshop.

For Ed, my father, who taught me long patience.

For my sister Sue and brother Scott for the inspiration they bring by being
so different than me.

For Kathryn, the one who didn't flee.

For Maia and Roman, my biggest fans and partners in adventure.

For my close friends, who endured all the earliest drafts.

There is as much of you in this as there is me.

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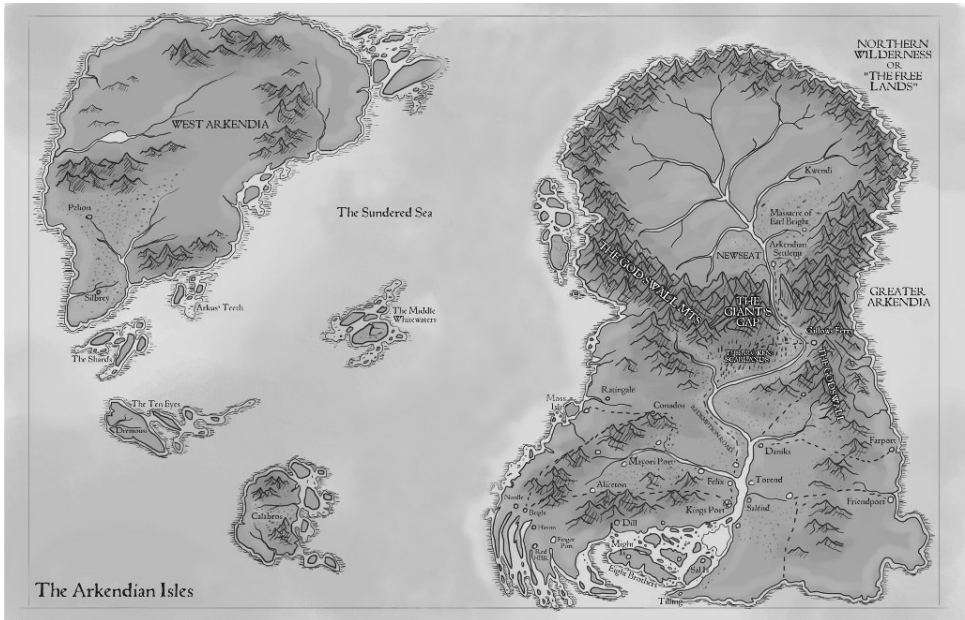
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The Arkendian Isles

*As I found the world, so do I leave it
With naught but what I've done
With but the craft I've mastered
With what regard I've won.*

—Arkendian Funeral Rite

1

Cursed

“**Y**OU WRITTEN YOUR will yet, lad?”

Someone shouted the words in Harric’s ear over the din of the crowded barroom. He turned from the group of knights and house-girls he stood with, and found the brewer, Mags, leaning across the bar behind him. The old man fixed him with a look, drunk and earnest, and indicated the winch-clock on the bar. Five minutes to midnight. Five minutes left of Harric’s nineteenth year, and his last full day of life. “You’d best write it quick,” Mags said, “or Rudy’ll snatch up your things before your corpse is cold.”

Harric’s throat tightened. He clenched his jaw against a rising rage—rage at the unfairness of his fate, at the madness that spawned it, and—

He shook it off. He would *not* end like the others, howling or blubbering for mercy.

He tipped his cup back and took a deep drink from his wine. “The night is still young.” “Don’t make light of it, son. This is the day.”

“You think I don’t remember?”

“Just trying to help.”

“You’re trying to clear me out before my death spoils the party.”

The old man scratched his stubbled chin. “Well, it would cramp the mood considerable...”

Harric managed a wry smile. He pointed to the winch-clock that towered above him, a column of woodwork on the bar, like a coffin on end. “When the twelfth chime sounds at midnight, my precious doom has till sunset tomorrow to find me. Plenty of time to write a will.”

The brewer nodded, and grimaced as if struggling with emotion. He drew Harric close, old eyes glistening with unshed tears. "You know there isn't a one of us here wouldn't have stopped your mother if we'd known. I'd have killed her if I had to. I swear it."

Unable to speak, Harric downed the last of his wine. "You're right about one thing," he said, pulling away. "It's time to leave the celebration to my guests." Before Mags could object, Harric stepped on a chair and onto the bar beside the winch-clock. From the back of the clock case he drew out the crowbar he'd hidden inside, and in two quick moves he wrenched out the mainspring to the accompaniment of cracking wood and outraged chimes.

"Wha—?" Mags choked. "Who's gonna pay for that?"

"Keep your hair on." Harric dropped his purse of coins on the bar, and steadied himself against the clock, forever stopped at one minute to midnight.

The clamor drew all eyes to the bar. A few present could read clocks and understood his joke; most simply saw him on the bar and fell silent, expecting a speech from their host.

Harric looked out into the smoky hall at the sea of upturned faces. In the gloom at the back of the hall, orange embers of ragleaf pipes pulsed like fireflies, and the place had fallen so silent he imagined he could hear the embers crackle with each pulse. Among the expectant faces he saw mostly locals of Gallows Ferry, familiars with whom he'd grown to manhood. Others were strangers passing through the outpost on the way to the Free Lands. He'd invited them all, and not a single enemy stood among them, for he'd drugged Rudy and his crew and left them sleeping with the hogs. A double pleasure, that.

"Almost time," he called, with a room-filling bravado he did not feel. "And it's going to stay that way for the rest of the night!" He raised the mainspring in mock triumph, to a roar of applause.

"I have no gloomy speech for you," he assured them. "We've said our farewells, and this night is for celebration. I leave you now to finish the

wine and continue as if this night would never end. For you I bought up all the wine in Gallows Ferry, so it will be a great affront to my memory if a drop remains at daybreak.”

Applause shook the timbered walls. Gentlemen and free men saluted with swords or raised cups. House-girls and maids threw flowers and other favors on the bar. In their faces he saw affection and curiosity and pity.

For that moment, Harric was a hero. He bowed, savoring the feeling for a single, aching heartbeat, then flung the mainspring to the crowd and departed for his chambers through the service door behind the bar.

Caris waited for him in the passage, illumined by a single candle near the door. Like all horse-touched, she was even bigger than the average man, so she filled the narrow servant’s corridor, hair touching the ceiling and elbows brushing walls. If Harric hadn’t expected her, he might have stepped back to give way, mistaking her in the dim light for one of the knights rooming at the inn, who sometimes got lost in its passages.

As the roar of the bar washed through the open door and past Harric, Caris flinched and clapped her hands to her ears.

He shut the door quickly and flashed a reassuring smile. “Ready? I expect they’ll be on my heels.”

She lowered her hands, but kept her stare on the floor between them, rocking from foot to foot. Even with the door closed, the bar’s clamor distressed her horse-touched senses, so it wouldn’t have surprised him if she turned and fled or—worse—curled in a ball with her hands to her ears. He’d seen it before, but he could never predict when she’d collapse and when she’d stand firm.

“Nothing I can’t handle,” she murmured.

“Good.”

Shrill voices rose in the bar, and her eyes jumped to the door behind him.

“This here’s private, folks,” said Mags, on the other side. “Harric’s done said his farewells.”

“Aw, we can’t leave him alone tonight,” said a voice Harric recognized as Ana. “You *know* he’s writing his will.”

“Yes, and you aim to kiss your way into it,” said Mags, “but I ain’t letting you. So get!”

“He ain’t slept alone all summer,” Ana said. “Who’s he got up there? Ain’t that simple Lady Horse-touched, is it?”

“I said get! I got drink to pour!”

Caris’s jaw clenched. She turned sideways and gestured for Harric to pass, pressing her back to the side of the passage. It made little space for him to slip by, and since she was almost two heads taller, her breasts stood level with his nose. She blushed, for though she tried to hide her feminine parts in loose-fitting men’s gear, there was no denying their presence.

His skin tingled at the thought of brushing front to front, and the notion summoned the void back to his chest and a sting to his eyes. He bit the inside of his lip and turned sideways to sidle past. Before he took a step, she grasped his arms below the shoulders and lifted until his feet left the ground and his head bumped the ceiling.

“Or you could just lift me,” he said.

Face dark with embarrassment, she rotated him past, set him at the foot of the stairs, and turned back to the door.

“Let me through, Magsy,” said a male voice beyond it. “I’ll be sure you get a share.”

“*Magsy?*” The brewer snorted. “I said get!”

Caris glanced over her shoulder and frowned when she saw Harric still standing at the bottom of the stairs. “If they get by Mags, they won’t get by me. You can thank me in the morning.”

“You’re the only one I haven’t bid farewell.”

“I won’t let you. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Harric gave a weak smile. “You still think I’m crazy. You think all this fuss about my curse is for nothing?”

“I never said crazy. Just mistaken. We make our own fate.”

“Ah. And all the people I grew up with here—all the people who knew my mother and her curses—they’re mistaken too?”

She shrugged. “I’ve only been here two months. I can’t say I know you or your mother like they do. But maybe that makes me see more clearly.”

Harric rubbed his eyes. He knew he should go. He’d kept the boil of grief and rage well bottled all night, and he mustn’t let them leak now. Of all people, Caris would know least how to receive a torrent of emotion. But she surprised him, turning toward him and lifting her gaze from the floor to meet his, a task surely harder for her horse-touched sensibilities than lifting a donkey.

“No mother would kill her child,” she said, voice low, eyes bright with tears. “Not even my mother, the mother of a—” Her gaze faltered, then rose, defiant. “I’m proof. No mother could hate her child like that.”

Harric smiled. “In the two months I’ve known you, I’ve only heard you mention your cob-head father, never your mother.”

“Don’t change the subject. Your mother didn’t hate you.”

Harric sighed. “Who said anything about hate?”

“You’re saying she loved you?”

The ache in his chest deepened. Memories of his earliest years with his mother returned unbidden. Golden scenes of her lucid days, sitting in the sunny window above the river as she read to him, or sang. He swallowed the tightness in his throat. “She’s mad. Her visions showed her that the Queen will fall because of something I do, and only my death can prevent it.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

He nodded. “But her curses are real. I have less than a day.”

The bar door flew open and banged against the wall. With a triumphant squeal, a wave of petitioners swept in, and Caris whirled to face it. Harric retreated up the lowest steps and watched as she grabbed the leader by the arms—it was Gina, the eldest barmaid—and spun her about to face the flood that followed. Pinioning Gina’s arms, Caris used her as a breakwater against the rush.

Second in line was Donnal Bigs, who caught Harric's eye and waved a debt slip from the card tables. "There you are, Harric! Since you got no use for your coin anymore, be a good lad and float me—"

Donal's eagerness turned to confusion as Caris put her shoulder to Gina's back and drove her forward, mashing her into his chest as Ana collided behind. "Hey!" he cried.

"Horse-brained bitch!" Gina spat. "Brute!"

Deaf to their outrage—or perhaps fueled by it—Caris propelled them backwards, picking up speed until she ejected them into the bar, where they fell in a welter of boots and petticoats.

Their expressions as she slammed the door made Harric laugh.

Caris set her back to the door as curses rained against it. She glanced Harric's direction to be sure he'd seen the action. A rare smile parted her lips, making her quite pretty in spite of her size.

Another throb of loss in his gut. He hadn't had enough time with her. "Thanks, Caris. You've been a good friend—"

"See you in the morning." She slid down the door till she sat, knees to chest. Refusing to meet his gaze, she clapped her hands to her ears.

"Gods leave me, you can be stubborn," he said. She gave no sign of hearing, and he wondered for the hundredth time how she came to be horse-touched. Whether a careless maid had used mare's milk for her mother's tea, whether she'd been conceived in a saddle, or a dozen other explanations he'd heard, of which none might be right. The only thing anyone knew for certain about it was what could be seen: the massive body, the uncanny sympathy with horses, and the crippling incomprehension of people.

"Farewell, Caris."

No acknowledgement.

He turned up the stairs before his grief boiled over.



IN THE SILENCE of his chambers, four floors above the bar, Harric inked a quill and laid it to paper.

To the lady Caris, I leave all the silver in my strongbox. May it help her find a knight brave enough to make her his squire.

To Mother Ganner, I leave my collection of painted playing cards, with all but the Jack of Souls, which I want buried with me, and the Maid of Blades, which I leave to Caris, for luck.

He leaned back in the chair to read what he'd written, and frowned. The style was too informal. He'd learned to forge wills as part of his mother's teaching, and they had always been ceremonial in their language, but somehow he hadn't thought his own will would need it, or that he'd ever value such ceremony. He set the sheet aside, bemused.

On his last sheet of paper he began anew.

I, Harric Dimoore, being of sound mind and body, do hereby bequeath unto the following people, the worldly possessions here named.

That was better. He formalized the rest. Then he added, *Item: One longsword, barely used, for Mother Ganner's mantel*, and chewed the end of the quill while he studied the words. Should he add, *with my love*, or *for being my mother when my real one was mad*? Of course. He wrote it all and swallowed an unexpected knot in his throat.

"Damn you, Mags," he hissed, rubbing a sting from his eyes. He'd already said his farewells and had his tears, and now writing the will dragged him through it again.

To Rudy, the stable master, he wrote, my chamber pot, with contents.

Harric chuckled, then wept.

And damn Mags for watering the wine. He'd drunk enough to lay him out, but it merely filled his bladder.

He hastily wrote off the rest, adding, *To Caris: My unrequited heart—if only it had longer to convince you to open yours.* That made him laugh again. A flirtation from beyond the grave. She'd find that perfectly in character.

Signing it for Mother Ganner as witness—as he signed for all her dealings—he set it aside.

As the sealing wax cooled on the will, he noticed the air had grown hot in his chambers. Outside, the usually ceaseless river winds had died. He tore off his shirt and dropped it to the floor, then crossed the room and threw open the wind shutters.

Silver moonlight of the Bright Mother bathed him, and he stood at the sill to let the summer air caress his skin. She watched him from across the scablands, her face full and serene as if all were well in the world. Below his window, the dark void of the river canyon sighed. He nudged a candle stub off the sill and watched it fall past five stories of inn and fifteen fathoms of cliff face toward the swirling waters. Since they'd built the inn upon the very edge of the cliff, and since the top floors jettied even farther over the river, the candle hit the surface well away from the foot of the cliff to vanish without a sound in the black waters.

The view of the broken hills across the river, which normally cheered him, only made him wistful. This was his last look. After tonight, would he ever know beauty again? Would he know anything? As the Bright Mother moon set into the scablands of the opposite shore, her low-angled light etched the rocks in stark relief, a jagged labyrinth of stone. He had always meant to explore those lands, but never had. In patches of darkness between its crags he spotted the campfires of emigrants bound for the Free Lands, another place he'd never see.

As the Bright Mother sank below the horizon, he imagined he felt her protective powers withdraw, even as the Mad Moon, which he knew rose somewhere in the east, marshaled threat and destruction.

He snorted. “Such symbolic timing, Mother.”

Laughter gusted from the windows of the bar far below. His guests were probably betting on the manner of his doom again. He’d started the wagers himself, to keep things light at supper. “Hanging” had been a popular one, along with “taken by a god,” though his personal favorite was “loved to death by hoors.” They all knew it was a pointless pastime, since all victims of his mother’s curses died under cover of fog. The last two victims had been Harric’s friends, Chacks and Remo. The day before their appointed dooms, they’d fled for the Free Lands, and the fog overtook them. Emigrants had found their bodies on the north road, without a mark on them to show how they’d died.

Harric slammed the shutters on the view, biting back a string of curses against his mother.

The room spun. His head felt heavy. Maybe the apple wine was finally doing its work. He tore off the remainder of his clothes and flopped on his bed to lie sweating in the stagnant air. If sleep would come, he’d have it; no sense watching all night for his doom. Without sleep he’d be dull and vulnerable the rest of the day, unfit for resistance.

He pulled his sword from under his bed and lay with it clasped to his breast in its scabbard. Small help, perhaps, when fighting a mystery, but its weight and edge gave comfort.

He closed his eyes, resolved at least to rest, and fell into a wine-soaked sleep, his last in Gallows Ferry.



THE FOG ROSE quickly around the cemetery island, drawing spirits from the grave cairns that crowded its stony shores. The strongest of the spirits drifted to the edge of the water. Like the rest, he was a transient citizen of the Unseen; once living, he was still bound to his bones so he might serve his kin until the next should die and take his place. Also like the rest, he hadn’t seen his kin for a single night since he died, for his people feared

the attentions of the dead, and placed their graves on river islands where moving water confined them.

It is here, he said of the fog. As she promised. Soon we can cross.

The others stood well back and watched. They were fainter souls, weak but hungry.

They gazed in hope at the fog, which had already begun to calm the violent essence of the river as a blanket stills a fire. They gazed in fear at the sky, which, like the river, had been terribly transformed from the one they knew in life. In the world of the living, the Bright Mother and the Mad Moon had dominated the heavens, while the Unseen Moon—black as the space between stars—lurked in corners, unregarded. In the unseen world of spirits, this inverted. Here the black moon dominated the sky like the hole at the center of a whirlpool, and the sky itself—which in life displayed a mantle of stars—now bore the black moon’s web of souls.

Shuddering, they tore their gaze from the moon whose tides would one day draw them skyward. What happened after that, they knew not. Perhaps the creatures of that moon, which crawled the web like spiders, consumed the rising grave spirits. Or perhaps they wove the grave spirits’ strands into the very web they crawled—a living network of imprisoned souls.

Neither prospect brought comfort.

The spirit at the river’s edge knew better than to stare at the Web of Fate. His eyes lay on the water as he wrapped himself in fog and tested the air above the river with an outstretched hand.

Yes, he said. The fog grows thick. It is safe to cross.

To Gallows Ferry! a withered spirit cried. To feed!

To see my kin, said another.

No, said the strong one, now their leader. He glided above the sleeping waters toward the shore. We must find Him first. That is the bargain we made with the Lady who brought the freedom of the fog.

Across the surface of the water they sped blindly for the shore, drawn by warm blood and the breath of the living.

Tell the Lady I care not for her bargains, said another, pushing forward among them. He was nearly as strong as the leader, a butcher in life used to eating his fill. *Now that I'm free, I shall feed as I please.*

You may tell her yourself, said the leader, *for she is here.*

The Lady, as they called her, stood above the beach like a sad queen upon a platform, surveying her troops before a battle. In contrast to the starved shapes of the grave spirits, she radiated power and light. And while their soul-strands trailed miserably behind them to their graves, hers rose into the web like the flames of a signal fire. And where the spirits covered their nakedness with loops of their ragged strands, she wore hers as a gown of light. Her gaze burned. She peered from the flames of her being like a witch at the stake, mocking the fire.

What is she? one whispered in awe. *Is she not one of us? A mortal soul upon this land?*

She is, said the leader. *But she is more. She has the Sight. She knows the web. She knows its ways.*

They huddled before her on the beach, avoiding her gaze. Even the butcher faltered, but then he swelled and pushed forward beside the leader.

The leader bowed. *Lady, we have come.*

Her voice rose, pure and sad. *You know what you must do.*

We do.

Then go. She gestured in the direction of Gallows Ferry, though her sorrowful eyes rested on the butcher, as if she knew he would speak.

We must feed first. He lashed his strands angrily. *Look at us. We are weak and shriveled like corpses. There are settlers on the road; let their strands fill us first, then on to your business.*

I did not free you to feed on peasants.

I say you did not free us at all, he replied. *It was the fog that freed us, and maybe it would have come on this night without you, only you somehow saw it would come, and pretend you caused it.*

The other spirits shuffled nervously. Some moved away from him, but he stood his ground.

Perhaps it is as you say. She stepped aside and gestured to the road on the bank above. *Let us see whether you need me or no.*

He hesitated, but then puffed himself and proceeded up the bank beyond her. When she did nothing to oppose him, he raced up the road, free as air.

Several others moved to follow, but the leader pointed to the lowest strands of the web above the trees. *Look.* Something moved there. Dark shapes like crows at a gallows.

Servants of the Unseen Moon! a grave spirit hissed.

As the figures descended the web, their forms seemed to coalesce, then bleed like ink in water before coalescing again into forms varied but difficult to discern. Half shadow, half soul, they seemed to both generate and swallow the spirit light around them.

They dropped from the web onto the butcher like crows on spilled corn. The butcher cried out, brief and shrill, but his struggle quickly ceased. The moon sprites huddled around him, heads low. When they rose to perch in the web, the butcher's empty husk drifted back to his grave on its strands, formless, and fainter now than the shadow of smoke in moonlight.

Are there others who doubt I freed you? The Lady's sad gaze had never left the beach. None of the grave spirits moved. *Very well. Go before me and fulfill your half of the bargain. When it is done, you may do as you like.*

The leader followed the path the butcher had taken, and this time the moon sprites above them only watched.

Another grave spirit ventured after the leader and clung to his side. *She is truly mighty. The moon spirits do not move! They fear her too.*

She has made bargains of her own, said the leader. One can only wonder what sacrifice she made to gain such power.

It matters not to me what she gave, as long as I feed.

The rest of the grave spirits made themselves small and scurried beneath the watchers like rats beneath an eagle's nest. Then the Lady was behind them, bright and terrible. *Fly now, or there will be no time!* Strands

of spirit lashed from her hands like whips, scoring the air above the stragglers. The spirits sped before her, and she pursued on wings like fire.

The leader of the grave spirits saw that she wept.



HARRIC WOKE IN pain, bony hands around his throat. He twisted against their hold until he tore away and shot upright as his enemy dissolved into fog.

Staring about in confusion, he gulped the air. His candle had dwindled to a guttering stub, but it was enough to illumine the stream of fog sieving through the shutters and burying the floor. Already it stood as high as the top of his mattress.

He bolted from bed, sending his forgotten sword skittering to the floor, where it disappeared beneath the fog. Something cold entwined his knees. Something hard seized an ankle. He cried out and wrenched free, tripping to the door and throwing it wide to plunge down the stairs, only to find the stairwell overflowing with fog. White hands like the hands of drowned men reached from its surface to grasp at his arms.

He cried out, stumbling backward and thrashing to the window. Throwing the shutters wide, he saw the Mad Moon full on the horizon, its red skin blazing like fire. A sea of blood buried the valley to the height of his window—the fog, stained red in the crimson light of the moon.

The fog filled the valley in all directions. Only the peak of the inn and a few distant hilltops stood above the tide, tiny islands of safety.

Harric clambered through the window to stand on its sill, and grab a rung of the roof ladder beside it. Fire-red tendrils of fog slid up his knees as he stepped onto the lowest rung. He swung his other foot to the next rung, but something seized it and nearly jerked him into the void. Kicking wildly, he tore his foot free and pulled himself up with his arms.

Fear pulsed in his temples. His feet flew up the rungs. Only six more rungs to the edge of the gable above his chambers, and then he could grab

the rope knot that dangled over the lip of the roof, swing a leg over, and crawl up the shingles to the roof peak above the fog.

As he clambered the last rungs and grabbed the knot securely in his fists, bony hands seized his left leg. He kicked free long enough to fling the leg over the lip of the roof, but they descended upon his right foot on the rung and wrenched it free.

Without solid purchase on the edge of the roof, his free leg slipped back, and he swung out above the void.

Harric roared. Dangling above the fog, something in him broke. The rage he'd bottled burst free and filled his limbs with fury. Stomping downward with his free foot, he broke his captor's grip. He pulled himself up, swung a leg over the lip of the roof, and hauled his body onto the shingles.

On all fours, he scabbled up the slope. When he reached the peak above the fog, he collapsed across it and lay panting and trembling. Only then did he realize he'd screamed his voice raw, and his feet and fingers bled from the sharp slate shingles.

When he caught his breath, he stood on the pinnacle of the roof, a tiny island in a flaming sea. His naked body shivered. There was no higher point in Gallows Ferry: to the west, the crimson moon set fire to an endless sea of fog; to the east, immediately behind the inn, the fog lapped against the cliff of the Godswall, and even with a running leap it stood too far from the inn to reach, and too sheer to climb if he could. The cliff loomed above the tiny island, a granite wall a full mile high.

He was trapped. And naked. And as the fog rose, his island dwindled.

Harric shivered again and rubbed his bruised throat. So it was the fog itself that executed her curses. Or something in the fog. *And this is how Chacks and Remo must have died.* He remembered their faces as they begged for mercy at his mother's grave, the night before they fled Gallows Ferry.

"Is that what you want of me, Mother? Want me to weep and beg?"

The fog swallowed his words. Already it submerged the top of his window below, and licked at the edge of the roof. Searching tendrils twined up the slates, questing and retreating like the tongues of serpents.

The Mad Moon glared across the sea, the blistered eye of its angry god. And now beside it, like the crow-plucked socket of its twin, stared the black void of the Unseen Moon. A pulse of fear shot through him. It was rare to notice the black moon's place in the sky, and bad luck to stare when you did. Yet he found himself transfixed. It seemed not a moon but a burn-hole in the canopy of stars, blacker somehow than the night itself. It seemed to swallow the light of the nearest stars and humble even the fire of the Mad Moon beside it.

Something moved across the face of the Unseen Moon. A shimmer barely glimpsed, like a reflection from the depths of a well.

Whispers teased at the edge of Harric's mind: *We see you.*

A shiver crawled up his spine.

Fly to us. Be free.

The black moon kissed the horizon. It was setting, which meant dawn was near, for it always set before dawn. As it touched the fog, an oily stain seeped onto the surface of the sea, spilled ink on red linen. The stain meandered across its surface until it touched the shores of Harric's island. A path. In the distance he imagined huddled figures on the path, shapes as dark as the moon itself, beckoning.

Fly to us. Fly and be free.

Harric shuddered. He imagined himself stepping from the roof onto the path and plunging thirty fathoms to the river. Even if he survived the icy shock, he'd never rise from the whirlpools. No one ever did. The figures called him to his death.

Death...and then what? The black moon's belly? Oblivion? A new mother's womb and another run at happiness? *Depends on whom I ask.* Surely one must be right.

A tingle of horrible hope ran through him. Might this path to the Unseen be an offer of freedom in the afterlife—of protection from his

mother's ghost, which surely waited on the other side as she waited in his nightmares? Or should he wait for the fog to reach him and then fight—weaponless and naked—against a sea of clawing hands?

The fog boiled above the eaves, near enough to touch. In it Harric glimpsed faces desperate and hollow. Its hands and tendrils grew bolder, scrabbling toward his toes. A bold arm flung from the fog and scraped his heel.

Jump. Fly.

Harric crouched, heart pounding, legs tensing to spring.

“Harric?” said a familiar voice. “What are you doing? Where are your clothes?” The voice seemed near, yet whole worlds away. *Gods take it for interrupting!*

He reset a slipping foot and tensed to spring, only to watch in dismay as the Unseen's path and figures faded from the fog. Stars winked where the Black Moon had been.

“No!” he gasped.

The Mad Moon followed its brother beneath the horizon. The sky paled. Golden sunlight glimmered on the few hilltop islands in the west, and the stagnant air finally stirred, shifting hair from Harric's eyes.

“Harric! Answer me.”

Harric stared in confusion as crimson drained from the fog and Caris's head and shoulders rose through it directly before him. Big as she was, she could stand on the sill of his window with her head above the fog. Her face floated before him, a dream interrupting a nightmare.

“Harric, what in the black moon are you doing?” She clamped a strong hand around his ankle. “If you jump, you make her stupid doom come true!”

Claws erupted from the fog and seized her hair from behind, hauling her head back and peeling her away from the gable.

She yelled, twisting aside while clinging to the roof with one hand and to Harric's ankle with the other. Then she dropped as if something

knocked her feet from beneath her, and her grip jerked Harric's foot from the slates.

He fell, slamming his side on the roof before she released him and he plunged over the edge into the fog. Somehow, he caught the lip of the roof with one hand and slowed his descent enough for Caris to snatch his wrist. His fingers lost hold, and this time he swung downward in her grasp and crashed against the ladder beside the window, jarring his arm in its socket.

He cried out in pain. Caris cursed steadily.

Harric groped until he found the bottom rung of the ladder, and hooked a knee over it. Before he could propel himself up, icy hands collared him and squeezed. He pried at them with his free hand, but they were bone hard and slippery. More hands grabbed his ankles and dragged him from the rung to swing free again in Caris's grasp. She groaned and tried to lift him, but the fog countered with such terrible strength that her grip slipped from his wrist to his hand.

"Grab something!" she cried.

Harric dared not release his grip on the hands at his throat, and he struggled in vain to free his legs.

Wind gusted his hair sideways and banged a shutter above. One of the claws on his ankle released him and he flung his knee back onto the rung. Another gust cut across the face of the inn, and its force seemed to literally blow the strength from the hands at his neck. He pried the fingers free and grabbed the ladder. He sucked cool air into his lungs.

As sunlight streaked the morning sky, the grasping hands withered like paper in fire. Faint screams of pain echoed around him, weirdly present yet distant. *To ground! It is done!*

In the thinning fog Harric saw Caris throw a leg over his windowsill, eyes wild and desperate. Straddling the sill, she hauled him to his feet. "Get in!" She practically shoved him through the open window, and he tumbled through.

Harric embraced the floor in relief.

Caris piled after him. She staggered to her feet and whirled to face the window, fists balled to face pursuit.

“It’s all right, Caris—it’s over.”

She turned. Eyes wild, she grabbed him by the shoulders and hauled him to his feet. Her hair had broken free of its binding to stick out at wild angles or cling to the sweat of her face. “What in the black moon was that?” she gasped. Her eyes pleaded for explanation as if sanity depended on it.

Harric blinked. He took her hands in his to steady himself, and managed a wry smile.

“That,” he said, between panted breaths, “was my mother.”

...The blood of the Phyros made great knights immortal, but it also drove them mad. Countless are the tales of those who woke from black rages to find the blood of loved ones on their hands. Yet few could bear abstinence, and only one succeeded long.

—From *Lore of Ancient Arkendia*, by Sir Benfist of Sudlin

2

Blood on the Stones

SIR WILLARD WOKE from an unintended sleep in the saddle. The sound of Molly's snort had wakened him—a snort of warning, of enemies nearby—and not the first alarm she'd raised, he realized, only the first to wake him.

He cursed and peered about through the slots of his helm. At a glance he saw they were still on the road to Gallows Ferry. The two mortal ponies still plodded before them. To his relief, the ambassador remained fastened to the saddle of the smaller pony, his blanket still cloaking him, hiding his inhuman shape.

Nothing amiss there.

But it was past dawn, and their cover of fog had disintegrated in a brisk north wind, exposing their position to their pursuers. Worse, their road no longer crept along the bottom of a scabland canyon; it had climbed onto an open ridge above the river to his right, and a dry gulch on the left, where they stood skylined against the glowing mist. The river rushed below, wide and swift and cold. On its far bank, the cliffs of the Godswall erupted from the waters and soared into frosted pinnacles in blue sky.

“Something is wrong ahead?” Ambassador Brolli stirred, his weirdly fingered foot poking briefly from under the blanket.

Willard grunted, finally awakening fully to the backward cant of Molly’s ears and glances. “Something behind us.”

“Perhaps our pursuers did not give up as we thought.”

Willard turned around in time to see the first crossbowman loose his bolt from two hundred paces on the opposite side of the dry gulch. The bolt whipped past Molly’s nose and over the ambassador’s head to crack against a stone.

“Willard?”

“Keep your head down!”

Willard spurred Molly hard into Brolli’s pony, herding it toward the cover of a massive boulder and shielding the ambassador with Molly’s bulk and his own armored back. A bolt stuck deep in Molly’s neck, below her ear. She tossed her head in rage, and Willard tore the shaft away, painting the stones with immortal violet blood. Another bolt snapped upon the boulder as the ambassador reached safety, followed by a wet *thack!* and a flash of pain in Willard’s thigh. A glance down confirmed a feathered bolt jutting behind the steel of the cuisse.

He cursed, and freed the shaft with an unconscious yank. White-hot pain lanced up and down his leg, and he nearly fainted. Perhaps he did faint, for he’d apparently dropped the bolt, and now he couldn’t see it among the stones. Long ago he’d forgotten the crippling pain a mortal felt. How it ruled him now!

Bile welled in his throat. His vision spun.

The ambassador threw off the blanket and looked about, his gold, owlsh eyes full of fear.

“You are injured!” The ambassador’s long fingers flew to unfasten the straps that kept his ill-fitting body in the saddle.

“I said stay on your horse!” Willard drove Molly against Brolli’s pony again, startling both pony and ambassador. “You cannot help me! Keep your head down until I return.”

“You are bleed! Look!” Brolli’s accent thickened in agitation. “You are fall down before you reach them!”

As if in confirmation, a line of blood tickled Willard’s ankle and streamed into the dust. A qualm of nausea swept him. His bowels grew watery.

“Sir Willard, you must drink her blood.”

“I cannot. My oath to Lady Anna—”

“Foolish oath! What of your oath to your queen? Your oath to return me safe home?”

Willard’s head swam. He turned his eyes to the wound, and jammed a fistful of his cloak behind the cuisse to keep pressure on the wound and stanch the flow. With each fold of cloak he jammed in, the dripping slowed, but hot wires of pain shot up his legs. “You don’t understand,” he panted. “If I start again, I won’t stop. And the madness, Brolli. The addiction. The Blood offers no simple healing, Brolli. It changes everything. Forever. You don’t know what I suffered to be rid of it.”

“You wish to be rid of life, too?” The ambassador’s flat face scowled, huge gold eyes burning scorn into Willard’s. “You free of being Queen’s Champion? You wish be free of worry her safety so long, all lost in the end? *Here* is the madness, if you not drink the Blood!”

Willard clenched his teeth against the pain. “I’ll put the suggestion of cowardice down to a mistake of language, Ambassador,” he growled. “But only once.”

Brolli held his gaze, unflinching.

Willard sighed. “We have no time for this, Brolli.” From the height of Molly’s back, he laid a reassuring hand on Brolli’s thick shoulder. “Trust me in this. This is my land. My people. I know how to fight them. And you must stay in that saddle, or we will not make Gallows Ferry before our enemies.”

“That is not my tactics—”

“You *have* no tactics, Ambassador! Not here! You know only forest fighting. And you do not know my people. You must trust me in this, and stay as you are.”

Brolli gave a curt nod of agreement, just as a bolt whizzed past his ear. He flinched and ducked as another hissed through the air where his head had been, and a third skipped off the sheltering boulder.

“Keep that head down!” Willard bellowed. Whirling, Molly launched back down the road.

The crossbowmen had made no attempt to hide themselves. Four men, four horses. They had drawn up on the opposite side of the treacherous-looking ravine around which Molly had taken him when the road bent around the head of the ravine in the shape of an elongated U. The bowmen worked the cranks of their crossbows to load another volley, watching Willard intently as he halted Molly at the edge of the ravine and assessed their position. The shortest way to the bowmen would be straight across the gully, but once Molly plunged in, the way might prove uncrossable, wasting precious time and allowing more shots at Brolli. The surest way would be the long way around the head of the ravine, on the road.

Shifting his weight, Willard turned Molly, and she exploded into the road-devouring gallop only possible for a Phynos.

As the bowmen cranked furiously at their crossbows, their horses shifted uneasily beside them, eyes on Molly. Hot-blooded stallions, Willard noted, unburdened with gear or armor. The four were scouts, sent from the main body of knights who pursued him, expressly to take potshots at the ambassador if they could catch Willard unaware.

Or sleeping. Willard ground his teeth. *Sleeping!* When immortal, he'd gone days without sleep—weeks at a time during the campaigns of the Cleansing. Now he couldn't stay awake an hour without nodding off when his mortal carcass took the notion. It made no difference that the fate of the kingdom rested upon this mad quest for the Queen or that a single bolt to the ambassador could start a war that would end it.

He roared a string of curses that left his great-helm ringing. Let them think that was his battle cry and not an anthem of frustration.

“Lady Anna, your paramour is not adapting well to mortality,” he muttered to his absent love. “But I shall stay true to my oath. I will not take the Blood. I will grow old with you, I swear.”

As Molly reached the head of the ravine, she cornered and accelerated, hoofbeats shattering the morning stillness. The bowmen abandoned their bow-cranks and scrambled for their horses.

Willard made no special flourish as he drew the greatsword from its sheath at his waist. It was Molly he needed them to watch: a horse so big she made their stallions seem ponies; the Mad God’s own mare; a thundering, violet-black divinity with more scars than the keel of a longboat. One look at her and they’d assume that he, too, was still immortal. How could they not? In twenty generations no Phyros-rider had ever successfully abandoned the Blood and immortality.

And he still wore the impressive oversized armor. Filled as it was with pads and air around his shrunken mortal muscles, it maintained the appearance of immortal stature. The only thing that hinted at his secret was the paunch he’d hammered into his breastplate to accommodate his new belly.

And his red blood.

Gods leave me, the damned red blood on the stones. If they find the bloody bolt, the game’s up. A wash of shame poured over him. To be exposed a fraud and japed at in a ballad! He could see it now: *Sir Willard Feeble Paunch. Sir Willard the Shriveled.*

Molly’s blood called to him. Within easy reach, hot streams of immortality pulsed through rippling veins beneath the wine-black hide. He shut his eyes tight against temptation. How he longed to cut and drink from her! Molly cast a glance back, longing to be cut, pinning him with a violet eye and urging him with a low groan.

Willard’s stomach rolled. *No.* He forced his eyes away, and she bucked in anger, but he would not look back to her. *Never more, girl. Never again.*

Roaring in frustration, Molly channeled her rage into the pursuit, iron-shod hooves hammering sparks from the stones.

The bowmen had whipped their horses to an all-out run. Ahead of them, the road plunged over the edge of the ridge and into another scabland canyon, and they plunged down it, leaving a cloud of dust on the rim.

Only fifty strides behind, Molly sailed over the rim, and the thunder of her massive hooves compounded between the walls.

The bowmen had just reached the flat of the canyon floor when Molly flew among them. With a four-hand height advantage, and nearly two times their weight, it only took a sideways check of Molly's shoulder to shove the rearmost stallion into a stony outcrop, where he crashed from full gallop to full stop against the stone. Without breaking stride, she drove between the second and third horses, seized a rider's ankle in her jaws, and hoisted him from the saddle. She dropped him under her pounding hooves, and with the upswing of her tusk-like blood tooth opened a fountain in the neck of his horse.

The third rider tried to rein in, hoping perhaps to duck the charge and circle back for the ambassador, but Willard's blade slashed through his ribcage as they passed.

Willard sighed. It felt right, the unconscious perfection of their partnership. More right than anything he knew. Ten lifetimes in her saddle—ten lifetimes infusing Molly's blood in his veins—and how could it be otherwise?

They were one, and made for battle.

He knew she could not understand his abstinence—his repudiation of their old fellowship, his refusal of the daily ritual of drinking from her veins—and he knew she hated him for it. But unlike him, she could not release her bond. She served him rebelliously, an old lover rejected but still hopeful. Glancing back at him in challenge, she surged forward, redoubling her stride in pursuit of the remaining stallion, a sleek, crop-

eared black with a fearless stride. Drawing alongside it, she seized it between her teeth at the top of its neck, behind the ears.

Willard read her signals and let her run free, adjusting his balance to her motions as Molly forced the stallion's head down and dug her hooves in for a precipitous stop. The stallion squealed in pain, twisting and juddering to a stop that launched its rider swimming through the air. Molly forced the stallion to the ground, twisting until he rolled belly up like a yielding dog. With a hoof the size of a stumper's wedge, she pressed its skull to the stones, and *leaned*.

A violet eye glared back at Willard, as if daring him to challenge her divine cruelty.

Willard grunted. "You make immortality so attractive, Molly."

The fourth bowman staggered to his feet and limped away up the road, but Molly had her toy, and Willard did not dare deprive her of it in her present mood.

They stood now in the belly of a canyon, which rose before them over a low saddle of crumbling granite, over which the road climbed and disappeared again into another nameless channel through the scablands. A glance behind confirmed all three bowmen lay motionless in the dust.

The sound of hoofbeats drew his attention back to the road ahead, where the limping bowman climbed the road toward the rise. As the man reached the crest, a thicket of pennoned lances bobbed into view beyond it, flashing spear tips angled against the winds. The bowman hailed them, waving his arms as if he would fly.

Willard sat as straight as he could manage, visor down, and drew his cloak around his waist to conceal the paunch of his breastplate, and the red blood of his wound.

Eight knights in full armor drew up on the crest. Eight squires drew up behind them, and more men behind that. Willard frowned. They'd been only half that number the day before. To grow by so much they'd have to have the support of a ship or two on the river, which was very bad news. It meant they could replace their horses with fresh ones, while he could not.

Molly, of course, was tireless, but the ambassador's ponies sagged near collapse.

A knight in emerald-green armor advanced from amongst the others and signaled the ranks, from which six fresh bowmen emerged. They walked their mounts off the road among the boulders, maneuvering through the rocks until they drew even with their leader. Once there, they winched up their bowstrings. But the green knight made no further preparations for attack.

Willard grunted his approval. In the three days since Sir Green had picked up Willard's trail, he had never engaged Willard directly, only followed and sent the occasional band of snipers. Sir Green clearly knew the old rule of fifty to one for mortal-on-immortal combat, and wisely awaited reinforcements before trying anything. His short-term tactics were also sound, since his present elevated position on the crest gave him as defensible a position as he could hope for, and he knew if Willard attacked, some of the bowmen could race past and threaten the ambassador.

A stalemate, then. Well enough.

But something was wrong with their horses. This close to a Phyros, a mortal horse should be terrified—even the best war-trained specimens should prove difficult to manage, and the untrained mounts ought to be blind with fear. Sir Green's destriers stood on that crest as still as jades in a pasture, and even the untrained bowmen's mounts seemed nothing more than nervous.

Molly also noticed. Though she kept her hoof against the stallion's skull, she released the stallion's jaw to better view their unresponsive audience.

There was only one explanation: their horses had been conditioned to be near a Phyros, just as his ponies had. And the only way to do that was to stable them with a Phyros.

A chill slid down Willard's spine. "One of your immortal brothers has returned to Arkendia, Molly. They've got an immortal on their side."

The implications hit him like a boot in the stomach. Did the Queen know? Had she alerted the Blue Order? He would never have sworn his oath to Anna if he'd known an Old One had returned, nor would Anna have let him. *I will never drink the Blood again. I will grow old with you and die.* The oath mocked him. He bit off a curse.

Willard studied the green knight, as if he could divine from the man's appearance some clue of *which* Old One had returned without his knowing. Sir Bannus? His stomach turned at the thought. Could Sir Bannus be a day's ride behind? Might he catch them before they crossed at Gallows Ferry?

Molly snorted. She released the quivering stallion, and Willard turned her back the way they'd come.

Sitting straight and calm as any immortal, he walked her away, shifting the cloak to conceal his bloody leg. With luck, the drips on the stones would be indistinguishable from the blood of his enemies, but there was nothing he could do about the bloodied crossbow bolts. His enemies would find them both, one inked with violet divinity, the other with mortal red. And when that happened they'd know the unimagined truth: that for the first time in three hundred years, Sir Willard—their most hated enemy, chief architect of their exile—was mortal again. And they could take him at will.

At a natural bend in the road he risked a glance back, to see his enemies still watching from the rise. *Good. Stick to your strategy, Sir Green. Hold off until your immortal master arrives.*

A wave of dizziness swept him. He caught himself leaning, close to tipping from the saddle, and righted himself with a start. The wadding had shifted free and the trickle of drips returned to his ankle.

Brolli was right. I'll fall before I return to him.

Black spots crowded his vision. A humming began between his ears.

"I will not!" he snarled at the absent ambassador. "Gods leave me, I swore it, I will not!"

Yet his hands trembled as he removed a gauntlet and reached for Molly's neck to claw away the scab from the crossbow wound that had already hardened to a scar. Shuddering, he thrust the clot beneath the quilting on his leg and into the mouth of the wound.

I swore off drinking the Blood. I never swore off plasters.

Yet he understood too well the risk he took in touching it at all. Already the familiar fire raged in the wound, numbing as it burned. The old strength whispered briefly in his veins. But the old hunger *roared*. And the addiction that once ruled him embraced him like a possessing spirit.

More.

"No!" he gasped. "My lady!" In his delirium he could see her before him as she had been when last he saw her in court—aging away from him—now watching with pitying eyes. "I will not betray you again, Lady Anna! We will grow old and die together!"

He repeated the words like a mantra, beating his fist on his new-healed wound until he gained the bluff and cantered back up the U around the head of the ravine to the ambassador's sheltering place.

True to his word, Brolli remained fastened to the saddle on his pony. He grinned with relief and admiration. "Well done, old man!"

"Ride!" Willard gasped.

The ambassador's face fell, gold eyes searching for answers in the anguish of Willard's face.

"Ride, I say! To Gallows Ferry. And get under that blanket, or we'll be stoned by the first mob that sees you."

*Red for the Peasant with dirt in his nails,
Red for the Freeman at work in the vales,
The blood of the Yeoman is red as his flock's,
And red is the Merchant's, a-counting his stocks.
Orange is for Gentlemen new to their farms,
Yellow their betters, in glittering arms,
Green for the highest a Gentle can wend,
Blues for the Nobles whose cattle we tend,
Purple the stain of the God in our Kings,
Cut deep in the veins where the Phyros blood sings.*

—Didactic rhyme of the Arkendian “blood ranks,” social castes based in the ancient Blood Religion, translated into Iberg by Sandro Botini.

3

Curse & Counterspell

HARRIC STAGGERED BACK from Caris until he collided with the wall beside his desk. Morning light flooded the room. Wind banged the shutters, as if to frighten the fog it drove before it. A rush of relief escaped his lungs.

Caris reeled and stared, face pale with panic. “Your mother...” she murmured. Now that the crisis was past, shock seemed to squeeze in on her. The hands she’d balled for a fight now flew to her ears as if to shut out echoes of what she’d witnessed.

“Hey, it’s all right, Caris,” he said, her distress summoning a strength he didn’t otherwise feel. He took her wrists and coaxed her hands from her ears. “She’s gone. You saved me, Caris. She had me bewitched, and I was thinking I should just jump and end it when you woke me—or broke the spell, I guess.”

Saying it aloud made it real for him as well, dispelling the last shreds of nightmare from his head, but Caris pulled away. Her hands snapped to her ears and she squeezed her eyes shut as if the horrors still swirled around her. “The fog—there were voices!” She crouched like she would curl up in one of her fits, but as Harric reached to put a hand on her shoulder, she sprang up and punched a hole through the plaster. With a strangled growl, she wrenched the door open and thundered down the treads, taking them three or four at a time until the sounds of her passage faded in the lower flights.

To the stables, Harric guessed, and the solace she found among horses.

He exhaled in relief. It was difficult to help her once she collapsed, and half the time when she did, his efforts at soothing were rewarded with kicks in the shins. Nevertheless, he debated whether to follow. Alone, the room seemed hollow and exposed.

His guts chilled. He imagined his mother’s ghost in the shadow beside the window.

Shake it off. It’s just your nerves.

A stealthy rustle drifted behind him, and he spun about, heart in his throat.



FLAT AGAINST THE wall beside the door stood a girl, one hand clapped to her mouth as if holding in a scream. She might have been thirteen, all willow wands and ribs in a chambermaid’s dress and apron. He didn’t recognize her, however, which was odd because he knew all the maids by name.

“Gods leave me,” she said, in a tiny, breathless voice. “That was the curse everyone’s talking about!” She sidled toward the open door, eyes wide and white.

“Don’t worry. It isn’t contagious.”

“Almost killed that Caris lady—stay away!” she cried, as he started toward her.

He stopped.

She fixed him with eyes determined but full of fear. After several heartbeats, she said, “You don’t recognize me.”

He looked closer. Nothing about her mousy hair or somber mouth triggered his memory, though there was something familiar about her.

“Lyla,” she said.

He exhaled slowly, his eyes searching hers.

“You won me from my master in the card game today. You freed me.”

“Of course! Your face was all covered in slave paint! I see Mother Ganner took you in and got you some new clothes.”

Her eyes dipped to his nakedness and bobbed back up. “You want I should fetch you some, too? The cold don’t do you no favors.”

Harric let out a laugh of surprise. He was bare as an egg to his toes. “I’m—ah—it’s been quite a night.” He grabbed his trousers from the floor and threw them on.

As he cinched up the bastard belt, she edged the rest of the way to the door, stopping only when she stood with a foot on the top step, ready to bolt. But she did not leave. She swallowed hard, as if steeling herself to speak. “I ain’t here to thank you. I’m here to pay my debt.”

“You don’t owe me anything.”

“My freedom ain’t worth nothing?”

“That’s not what I mean. I gave that to you freely. My payment was watching the expression on the face of that West Isle slaver while you burned the deed to your bondage. Anyway, I’m a dead man, and death cancels all debts.”

“You don’t have to die today. I can tell you how to beat that curse. That’s how I aim to pay my debt.” She took a step forward, determination giving her courage.

Harric suppressed a roll of his eyes. “Another surefire cure for curses? Look, I’ve seen her victims try a few dozen of those, and they don’t even delay their deaths. So, thank you, but if you don’t mind...” He gestured to the door to usher her out, but she stamped her foot, making a surprisingly loud bang. Her eyes blazed, wilting any remaining fear in them.

“Look, Lyla—”

“You better listen or you’re gonna be dead by sunset. You survived that fog, didn’t you? Her doom didn’t claim you. Why do you think that is?”

“The doom has till sunset.”

She put her hands on her hips as if addressing a dense or stubborn child. “And this crawly talky fog was just normal weather around *came* here? That doom came for you this morning, but you survived, and I know why.”

Harric blinked. “So do I: because Caris intervened.”

“Hah! You Northies wouldn’t know magic if it fell from the sky and hit you. Answer me this: all them other cursed boys had friends to help them. Mother Ganner told me all about it. But did any of them survive the fog?”

Harric frowned. She had a point. The fog had come for Davos on the foretold day that spring, and Davos had a hired company of bodyguards to protect him; the fog slipped right past and did its work all the same. Gravin’s day came shortly after, and he encircled his cabin with a posse of witch hunters, who by morning lay strangled or decapitated with Gravin. Why had Harric alone survived?

Lyla stepped toward him, eyes bright and earnest. “It was the power of your nineteenth Naming Day, Master Harric. That’s what I’m here to show you. You know about the Naming Day? You know about the Proof?”

Harric grimaced. “The apprentice proof? Some kind of West Isle superstition?”

She glared. “That *superstition* just saved your life, and it’ll keep you alive past sunset if you make your Proof today.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’m here to explain it, ain’t I? The nineteenth Naming Day is called the *Day of Proof* because it’s the day a prentice proves he’s a master by doing something only a master can do. Once he proves that, he’s free, and his master has no power over him. See?”

“Yes, it works that way here, too. But how does that apply to me? I’m not an apprentice anymore. I quit two years before my training was complete, when Mother’s madness got so—” His voice hitched. He swallowed and shrugged. “She chose this day for my doom because it’s the day I would have completed her training. Her way of saying I brought it on myself.”

“You can’t quit what you already learned. You still *know* what she taught you, so you can still Prove it.” She studied Harric from the corners of her eyes. “I asked Mother Ganner if your mama prenticed you as a witch, but she said your mama was never a witch. Said she was a lady of the court who went mad from visions of the future, but that your mama taught you how to be a courtier. Did I learn that right?”

Harric smiled. “As far as it goes.”

She nodded. “All right then, for your Proof you have to pick a courtly art of hers—something only a master could do—and show you can perform it like a master. When you do that, you break her power over you. See?”

“And this ‘Proof,’ if I perform it, will somehow break my mother’s curse, too?”

“Stop smiling at me like I’m some tickle-brained peasant. The curse is part of her power, ain’t it? So, promise.”

An ember of hope sparked in Harric. Break her curse and live? Live to see the sunrise again? Embrace Caris? Dream—

No. He snuffed it savagely. *Her dooms always come true.* Hope would only make him pathetic, scrambling after every witch charm and counter potion.

But the ember wouldn't snuff. It grew. He couldn't help it. He couldn't ignore the fact that for the first time one of his mother's dooms had stumbled, which meant there was hope. He couldn't deny it, and the hope seemed to know it, expanding from an ember to an unquenchable conflagration that reduced all his defensive walls to ashes.

"All right," he said, through grinding teeth. "You'd better be right about this."

She studied him, then nodded, evidently satisfied this qualified as acceptance, if not gratitude. "I am right." She took a tentative step forward, a flash of mischief in her eye. "So, what art will you perform your Proof in, Master Courtier: fencing, feasting, or foining?"

"You forgot *feigning*." Harric gave a barren smile. "Yes, I learned those things. But my real training was for more...*secret*...skills to serve our queen."

"It can't be a secret if it's your Proof, so you have to tell me."

He took a deep breath, trying in vain to calm the turmoil in his chest. Could he truly defeat his doom? What if he failed?

She arched an eyebrow. "Well?"

"I'll make my Proof in the art of the con. That's my strongest suit."

"I knew it! She trained you as a trickster. That's how you beat my master in poker. It's probably how she kept her magic secret all those years."

He gave a non-committal shrug. "Sadly, all of Gallows Ferry saw me trick your master. The whole outpost will be alert to anything I try now. If I want to con anyone today, I'll have to focus on new emigrants passing through the market."

"How many cons could your mother do in a day?"

"Nineteen."

"Then for your Proof you'll need twenty."

He felt the bottom drop out of his stomach. Nineteen had been a lucky day for his mother. Her best before that had been twelve.

“You can *do* it, Master Harric. You can. I saw you beat my master.”

Harric nodded. He’d done well against her master, but he’d also been reckless because he didn’t think he’d be alive the next day and therefore hadn’t cared if he made enemies. Now, if they learned he lived, they’d try to kill him themselves if they got a chance.

“So promise you’ll make your Proof.”

He nodded. “All right. But if this goes wrong you should probably know I’m going to haunt you from the grave.”

“I’ll bury you on an island so your ghost can’t cross the water.”

He laughed and reached out to take her hand, but she jumped back as if he’d held out a rat, and her initial fear returned in a blink. Whirling, she flew down the stairs, but stopped at the landing and looked back. “You can do it, Master Harric. Don’t forget you promised.”

“I won’t,” he said, more to himself than her, for she had turned and continued her flight down the stairs.

He closed the door and laid his forehead against its painted wood.

His heart, which had calmed after the nightmare in the fog, had begun to flutter again like a frightened bird in his ribcage. Twenty cons in an outpost full of enemies and people who knew to watch him. He chuckled grimly. “I’m dead already.”

“Doomed,” said his mother, behind him. “There’s a difference.”

He whirled, anticipating murder, only to find her across the room, regarding him with cool amusement.

“Miss me so?” she said. She looked precisely as she did the day she died, a vision of insanity from his childhood. She wore the same threadbare ball gown she’d fled court in twenty years before, and which she’d worn almost exclusively the last ten years of her life. Scarcely more than a colorless bag now, it hung limp and stinking from bony shoulders. She smiled, cracking her mask of thick white makeup, in fans around her eyes and mouth. Blue lipstick hanging crooked on her lips. Once a subtle

and delicate style of makeup in court, years of madness had made it lumpen and clownish.

He backed against the door with a thump, heart racing. Hurt and anger battled in his chest, paralyzing his tongue.

She followed his gaze to the gown, and frowned. "This is how you remember me, therefore this is how I appear to you." She swirled the skirts about her ankles, wafting the stink of urine. Her nose wrinkled. "Pah! This was but a shell I cast off at the grave. The Sight, which made me mad in life, now gives me power in the afterworld. If only you could see me as I am now. Try! Look past this memory of madness and see. Do I rave, as I once did? Do I foam at the mouth? I do not. Indeed, I come to offer you life, my son. You needn't die tonight, if only you will follow me. In the afterworld I am clear-eyed and strong. I can train you as you were meant to be trained. Follow me, and I will steer you from your doom."

Rage welled in Harric. He clamped his jaws against screaming fury and turned from her, forcing himself to breathe evenly. *She isn't real*, he told himself. *Just a vision. Part of the madness in the family blood. I mustn't engage, lest it worsen and Mother Ganner find me alone and shouting in my room again.*

Stalking past her to the wall beside his bed, he did his best to ignore her. He ran his fingers along the wainscot, searching for the latch points of the hidden closet where he kept the "bag of tricks" he'd need for his Proof.

His mother let out a careworn sigh.

"Spare me the theatrics," he growled. "I won't live as your pawn anymore."

"Then you know I must kill you. I do not wish to, but I must."

"So you say."

"I speak truth, Harric! Without my guidance, you will destroy Queen Chasia and all she has brought to our land! It is woven in the sky! You are fated to destroy the queen you love. I see it! And I cannot let it happen. That is why I cursed you. Either you must follow me that I may guide your

path from harming the Queen, or to preserve her I must kill you. Oh, Harric, you break your mother's heart!"

She gazed at him, eyes soft and pleading. Tears streaked her makeup, making her even more clownish, and suddenly the whole thing seemed ridiculous, including the longing she stirred in his heart. He laughed. "You love playing the martyr, don't you, Mother? But I know it's all the same lie, your mad attempt to keep me as your puppet. And you're still jerking at my strings."

"If only that were so!"

His hands found the hidden latch points of the closet. He depressed the points, and the locks clicked. The door swiveled out on hidden hinges, revealing shelves and hangers arrayed with all the tools of a courtesan spy (or for training one). He knew the books on the shelf by heart: manuals of courtly etiquette, treatises on poison, lock crafting, subterfuge, deception. As bookend to them all stood the coded journal of his mother's secret service to the Queen.

She looked past him into the closet. A bitter scowl cracked more plaster from her nose. "Behold the glories of my arts. How can you bear to look at them, Harric? Every kit, every lock-hook, every tincture in that holy sanctum abides as a burning symbol of the greatness you rejected when you rejected your apprenticeship before it was complete. If you had finished your training, your fate would be different. Of that I am certain."

Harric clenched his jaw. He hated himself for listening, hated himself for feeling pain at her words. Why was it that nothing he said affected her as she affected him? And nothing he could do would make her leave.

He picked up his own journal of apprentice "missions" around Gallows Ferry. As he flipped through the pages, a wave of nausea rolled up his stomach. Cons, seductions, betrayals—all designed to harden his heart and wear away sentiment and petty loyalties. Each entry burned in his memory, an icon of sacrificed childhood.

He slammed the book back on its shelf and turned on her. "My only regret, Mother, is that I did not abandon you sooner."

She retreated in alarm as he advanced with steady steps. He felt the corners of his mouth draw back in a lipless smile. “I beat your doom today, Mother. You failed. I won. Why is that, do you suppose? If all the others died in your precious fog, why did I survive?”

“If I’d wanted you dead, you’d be dead,” she snapped. “This morning was a warning, that I might offer you one last chance before sunset.”

He laughed. He’d glimpsed something in her face. It took him a moment to recognize it behind the cracking mask of makeup, but when he realized it was *fear*, an ember of hope leapt to life inside him.

“Do you know why I opened the secret closet?” he said, gesturing to the open door. “So I could grab my bag of tricks and perform my Proof in the market. Do you know what that means?”

Her jaw dropped. “You fool, Harric! Queen Chasia forbids magic! In your desperation would you sneer at her? Would you disgrace and dishonor the land and your queen above all?”

“Don’t try to shame me, Mother. I dedicate my life to the Queen; it’s *you* I sneer at. And you question *me* about magic! That *was* your fog this morning, wasn’t it? The one full of clawed hands and twining snakes?”

“In the afterworld my visions are power. I see into the Web of Fate and know its patterns—even weave them! Spirits obey me. That is not moon magic; it is power as natural there as the air is in this world. That little slut’s ‘Proof’ is nothing but West Isle sorcery!”

His eyebrows rose at the fury in her bloodshot eyes, and he began to chuckle. “How could I have been so blind not to see it before? I’ve finally found something you can’t control. Magic! I must fight magic with magic!”

“You leave me no choice.” Her eyes rolled back in her head as the vision took hold.

“Stop it, Mother.”

Her jaw went slack. She collapsed to her knees and fell on her back as if a giant invisible hand pinned her like a bug.

“Your doom approaches!” she gasped. “It comes apace! I see it before me! Oh! Flesh and blood from the very court you will one day destroy! It is woven in the sky!”

“Shut up!” he shouted. “You lie. You always lie. And I don’t care what’s woven anywhere. I don’t care about your dooms! I’ll make my own damned future!”

Grabbing the heavy carpetbag of tricks from the bottom of the closet, he heaved it almost savagely at her feet. “My Proof will destroy your doom!”

But the bag merely thumped on the floor where she’d been.

He was alone and shouting at the air again.



HARRIC STOOD IN the market in the back of his grain cart, bag of tricks at his feet, as the first emigrant train poured through the south gate of Gallows Ferry. Its herd of peasants led the procession, staring and stunned from the terrifying journey across the wild river, and up the Hanging Road across the face of the Godswall. Plainly they found Gallows Ferry no more comforting than the road had been; it must have seemed to them a mere hanging village crowded onto a wide ledge on the road.

A family at the front of the procession halted when the road plunged into the morning gloom of the Crack behind the inn. It must have reminded them of the treacherous canyons they had traversed in the scablands, only this one was artificial, made by the back of the inn on one side and the cliff face on the other. By the expressions on this family’s faces, however, it was clear they’d prefer the dangers of sand cats and scorpions in the scablands to what they saw ahead in the Crack: an alley lined with frontier hucksters and peddlers in a kind of hawker’s gauntlet.

A bolder family shouldered past the bewildered family, faces set, to be swallowed by the gloom, and as they trudged between the first stalls, the gauntlet of hawkers erupted.

“Fresh butter! Queen’s prices!”

“Mend your shoes! Hard roads ahead!”

“Witches on the road! Protect your children! Get your witch glass here!”

To that Harric added his cry of, “Feed grain! Buy now! No grazing left on the road!”

His cart stood right in the middle of the market, with its nose tucked under the back porch of the inn. The rest of the merchants had been so delighted to see him alive that morning they’d given him the prime spot. Not only was it the narrowest point in the market, where the porch pinched the road and slowed the passing emigrants, it was also the most entertaining place in the Crack. By midday, the porch attracted revelers who watched the drama of emigrants and merchants like hecklers at a stage play. Best of all, he was safe from Lyla’s master there, as the lord couldn’t act against him in such a public place.

Harric studied the mass of peasants as it slid by, a brown river stinking of unwashed bodies and last night’s garlic. In their eyes he saw worry and mistrust. Dozens of families trudged past in this caravan, likely a whole village being transplanted to the Free Lands. But they were not free peasants of the East Isle. Each bore a blot of orange paint in their hair, marking them the property of a West Isle lord.

Harric’s jaw tightened. Among the families walked a giant and giantess who were clearly the product of some ancient Westie breeding project. He’d seen the sort before: pinched skulls with unnaturally huge mouths and tiny eyes too close together. The giant’s eyes stayed fixed on the mud, as if ashamed to meet a gaze; the giantess gripped his hand and glared at everyone she passed.

“Welcome to the Not-so-Free Lands,” Harric muttered. He understood the reasons why the Queen had welcomed Westies to settle the north, but he hated that political necessity. If he could achieve his Proof that day at the expense of every Westie lord that passed, it would bring an added sweetness to the day.

Soon a mounted lord emerged through the gate, attended by two retainers. Orange accents in their clothing and trappings declared the lord to be a gentleman of low rank and master of the orange-marked slaves. At the sight of him, Harric felt a spark of anxiety in his belly. His death might come with any such lord. "Flesh and blood from the court," she had pronounced in her latest doom. Though few actual courtiers came through, many visited the court for one reason or another, so that left a lot of possibilities. His death could come in the form of an unwanted duel from a drunken lord or from a simple fall on his neck when a courtier's carriage jostled his cart. How could he defend against that?

He closed his eyes and concentrated on slowing his breathing to calm his heart. *Block out the fear, or you'll make a mistake and fulfill her stupid doom for her. Just relax and enjoy the game of cons.*

Harric opened his eyes and studied his first mark. The lord was no older than Harric. He carried himself with none of the easy confidence of one well traveled or educated in court, but instead wore haughtiness as armor: his glance a sneer, his laugh too loud, as one ill at ease off his own estate. Around his neck he wore numerous witch charms, marking him as superstitious as the peasants he led.

An easy mark, yet the sight of the man opened a gulf of dread in Harric's gut, as if he were the one out of place.

A simple Bait and Switch will do, he decided. Nothing fancy. Play it safe.

He lifted a large but wilted paint-flower from his bag of tricks. The edges of the crimson petals overflowed both hands as he held the flower to his nose and tested its scent. Pungent. Not unpleasant. Still strong enough to drive off flies, and its familiar scent gave him a swell of confidence as he raised it above his head. He laid it carefully on his crown so the fringe of petals drooped below his brow like a bowl-cut jester's wig, and stood waiting for the lord.

"Well I'll be a horse's pizzle," said a voice behind him. "You live!"

Harric looked back to see one of the middle-aged yeomen who had been drinking and playing cards on the porch for the past two days. He and his mates had bought Harric drinks while they played a complex drinking game that took its cues from the market: when the tinker clanged his pots, someone drank; when a horse pissed, another drank; when Harric sold an ass-lily to a Westie, everyone drained their cups. A pulse of dread in Harric. The man and his comrades knew too much of Harric's games. In the last few days he'd openly shown off some of his cons, to the immense amusement of the revelers. Since he was going to die anyway, why not have a little fun? But now that he'd decided on his Proof, he wished he hadn't so freely discarded his cover. The yeomen backed him, but they were normally raging drunk by noon, and to them it was all a game; if they blabbed around the wrong person—Rudy, for instance, or some aggrieved Westie lord—Harric could be hung as a thief.

“Heard a hell of a racket last night upstairs. Figured they'd come for ye, but the fog so thick no one could see their hand in front of their face. Broke our hearts,” the yeoman said, laying a hand to his breast. “Weren't nothing we could do. But you live! No one expected that.”

Harric forced a smile. “It's a little awkward. But it isn't over yet. Not till sunset.”

The yeoman raised one of Mags's tall wine cups to his lips. “Me and the boys did our best to make certain there wouldn't be a drop of your wine left, like you said. The cup you see before you is the last.” He sipped it as if husbanding the last of a very fine vintage. “You gonna throw another party tonight?”

Harric nodded, anxiously aware that the orange lord floated nearer in the river of peasants. “If I live past sunset, you can expect one twice as big.” He said it with a note of finality, but the yeoman leaned over the porch rail and beckoned to Harric with a conspiratorial grin. “You gonna sell an ass-lily to this orange-blood Westie? Me and the boys love that! No Westie ever cared much for bastards or for bastard freedom in the north.”

“And we don’t care much for Westies bringing slaves to the Free Lands.”

“I’ll drink to that.”

The orange lord reined in before Harric’s cart and stared at Harric’s head ornament with unrestrained contempt.

“Would Your Lordship care to buy grain?” said Harric, returning his gaze as if it were perfectly normal to wear a drooping flower on one’s head in Gallows Ferry.

“Bastard, there is a plant on your head.”

“Yes, Your Lordship. As you can see, it keeps the flies off nicely.”

The lord’s mirth transformed to interest. “A paint-flower! I thought them rare in the north.”

“Your lordship is wise in the ways of plants.”

The lord’s eyes flashed to the green and black of Harric’s bastard belt. Scorn and envy glinted in his gaze. “I must have that flower, bastard. You will sell it for five silver queens.”

“Ten queens, Your Lordship. I set my own price for things that are mine. On this isle, a bastard is free.”

He never tired of saying those words to Westies.

The lord flushed, but hid his irritation behind a clipped laugh. “Ten queens, then. Worth twenty to be rid of the flies on this stinking road. Every slave in the Isles has shit on it.”

One of the grooms paid, and Harric produced a bud as big as his hand from the bottom of his bag of cons. It looked very much like a paint-flower might look when closed, and since ass-lilies grew only in the north, the man would see no difference.

The lord lifted it to his nose and recoiled. “It’s the very crack of a hog!”

The yeoman choked and coughed behind Harric. Wine had shot from his nose.

The lord studied him, eyes narrowed, as the yeoman sputtered apologies.

“The scent changes when it opens,” Harric explained. “That’s when it repels the flies. Just keep it in the sun on your hat till then, and soak it in water each night so it outlasts the week.”

The lord examined it skeptically. “The petals are brown. Paint-flowers are red.”

“They turn red once they open, my lord.”

“No. I’ll take the one on your head.”

Harric brightened. “Same price, of course.” He leaned forward so the petals fell away from his forehead. Gently slipping the edge of his hand beneath them, he lifted it free of his head. One of the petals fell off, but he scooped it up and placed it on top with a flourish. “There you are, Your Lordship. Not as fresh, but treat it kindly, and it should last a good couple days.”

The lord frowned. Without Harric’s hair to support the petals, they drooped like the head of a threadbare mop. “How dare you offer me such rubbish.” He waved off the tired flower, and tossed the fresh bud back to Harric. “I will take the bud. Give me a pin for it.”

Harric made a show of suppressing his disappointment. “But this flower is already open, Your Lordship—”

“Do you take me for a fool?”

“Yes,” the yeoman muttered.

“No, Your Lordship,” said Harric, as one of the lord’s retainers shot the yeoman a look. The lord’s eyes caught the retainer’s look and followed his glare to the yeoman, but Harric handed up the bud with a pin, diverting his attention. The next moment the lord rode off with it wagging on his hat.

Harric breathed a sigh of relief, and kicked himself for letting the yeoman see too much the day before.

The yeoman laughed until he wept. “Every fly in the country will find him when it opens. It’ll be a week before he knows he’s been had.”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean,” said Harric, and his look of blank innocence made the man laugh even harder. The laughter was good. It kept the anxiety at bay.

One down, he thought. Nineteen to go.

With luck, maybe the yeoman and his crew would pass out before they blew his cover.



BY NOON THE porch rails dripped with revelers, and the market boomed with merriment. The yeoman and his mates were still going strong, and when they told newcomers of Harric’s sunset doom, everyone bought Harric drinks of apple wine.

“To your doom!” they toasted. “May it be a gentle one!”

Harric drank.

When a squire discharged a long-barreled spitfire over the crowd, one cried, “Spitfire! All drink!” and Harric joined in another.

Not an hour went by in which he didn’t con at least one well-born Westie. Lyla appeared once on the porch to shake out a rug and empty a chamber pot. She managed to give Harric a conspiratorial nod before the head maid called her name and she hurried back inside. Caris never resurfaced, however, which worried Harric. After their adventure in the fog, she’d probably fled to the stables and curled up in a ball at the back of a stall. He longed to check on her, coax her back to her feet before Rudy spotted her and used it to prove her imbecility, but Harric dared not interrupt the Proof. It was just as likely she’d taken Rag for a ride up the Hanging Road. He hoped so.

Caris’s absence also came as a relief, however, since he couldn’t pull cons in her presence. Her ideas of nobility and honor were about as rigid as his were loose, which was why he hadn’t yet dared to explain to her the true nature of his childhood training. He’d only told her part of the truth: that his mother had him trained to be a squire. The fact that he only

learned enough squiring to make a convincing cover for his real arts was something he dreaded might end their friendship.

By late afternoon he scored his eighteenth and nineteenth cons, the last upon a balding Westie squire who rode off with a reduction of goat piss to rub in his scalp for new hair. With that he'd matched his mother's record, and with one more he'd have his Proof. But two hours passed after that without a suitable lord or lady passing through. Several lords passed, but they appeared to be from court; when he saw these, he held his breath and let them pass without engaging.

During those hours, too, the servants of Lyla's former master found him. The lord's men were easy to spot in their saffron-colored liveries. Four of them took stations on the porch, watching and waiting for Harric to try to leave. Harric's stomach flopped over inside him.

Worry about them later, he tutored himself. Concentrate on nineteen.

The inn's shadow crept steadily up the cliff wall, marking the downward path of the sun in the west, and still no suitable marks appeared. When the inn and its shadow finally reached an equal height, Harric knew the sun touched the horizon, and he had little time left. To get his twentieth con, he'd have to attempt a courtier.

"Carriage!" a reveler called, pointing to the gate. "Drink!"

A fine carriage trundled through the south gate, brass tokens flashing on the breasts of the lead horses. A knot of doubt twisted Harric's stomach, as he recognized the tokens as licenses admitting carriages into the court of the Queen.

Harric muttered a silent curse. "You think it's my doom you send in that carriage, don't you, Mother? Well, you're wrong. It's my Proof."

"Sir Bastard!" The yeoman leaned across the porch rail to offer a cup of frothing apple wine. "This your magic number? We must toast!"

Harric bowed to the yeoman, never taking his eyes from the carriage. He waved off the wine. "Keep it for after," he said. "For this I'll need my wits."