



SHADOWS OF ESTEREN
HAUNTINGS

AGATE

Hauntings

Collection of short stories

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Agate Éditions

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I have always loved weird tales.

Through the years, I have gathered legends handed down by Varigals, side by side with bardic fiction, inspired by rumors or real events. I could not resist writing one myself to share how my occultist vocation was born.

This first collection gathers five stories. Their common point is that they provide a glimpse of what Tri-Kazelians imagine when they think about ghosts, possessions, and hauntings.

Within these stories, where truth and subjectivity intertwine, maybe we can find clues that will allow us to better understand our world...

Steren Slaine

Call to Action

By Iris

Always this same monotonous road I followed steadily, but with growing reluctance. My horse walked at a regular pace, not needing any guidance, leaving me free to let my thoughts drift off into the dusty pathways and the uneven horizon. In this dry mountainous region to the north of Candlewood, not far from the Gwidrite border, the vegetation appeared to grow laboriously near the brooks and rivers born from melting glaciers. Everything else was only a dry, desolate desert. The view might have been less bleak in summer, but in this cold, wind-beaten early fall, with the low, gray clouds looming, it felt as if I were reaching the end of the world.

Only five books remained from Aunt Haelara's library. Not realizing their true value, she had allowed me to take them. She had inherited them from her father, Glezran Mac Emmanon, who had gotten his hands on these treasures through the pillage of Gwidrite monasteries during the War of the Temple. Normally, only high-ranking initiates were allowed to read these books. I had all the time in the world to read them when I was in her service. I was just a distant cousin, a poor relative, and I had been accepted out of charity in order to act as a companion to her daughters. Since then, Luisa had been wed to a lord of the Emerald Crescent, while Abigail had left to marry one of the vassals of the Prince of Farl. The domain itself had been assigned

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to Osheen, the elder son. There only remained a small part, a simple legacy left to the younger son Cethern: the Domain of High-Winds. This was the fiefdom we were traveling to.

A bird of prey was gliding high in the sky. It must have felt a freedom and completeness that I was sure I would never experience. I stared at this dark, majestic shape of impressive wingspan for some time, filled with nostalgic longing. "The Corvus vulture. A nasty one!"

Cethern had just named the bird. So it was a scavenger? Legends sometimes portrayed them as harbingers of death, and even as attracting the evil eye. In my scientific books, I had read that they were actually necessary, since by feeding on corpses and rotting carcasses, they prevented illnesses from spreading and bodies from contaminating the rivers. These carrion birds had a fearsome reputation even though they provided well-being for all by standing on the forefront of macabre horrors.

An archer drew his bow to kill "this cursed bird." He took aim while I prayed that he would miss. Cethern cheered him, while I did not have the strength to intervene in the face of their unanimous agreement. The arrow whizzed away, but missed by far the bird of prey which flew off, apparently aiming for a carcass on a distant slope. It was now just a dot on the horizon. I felt relieved while the others were making jokes.

I was suddenly taken away from my thoughts by a gentle embrace and a kiss:

"Wake up, Steren! We are almost there!"

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I smiled faintly at Cethern, my husband. He tried to reassure me about the horrible bird, whose shadows of misfortune could not befoul our marriage and our life at High-Winds. As it often happened, he misread me. He thought that I feared irrational superstitions. Because I often read, he had gotten it into his head that I was a fragile and impressionable dreamer. Even our union was the result of a misunderstanding.

Less than three weeks ago, Aunt Haelara was discussing the division of property among her children. She wanted to be fair and leave no one out. She had also decided to leave a sizable nest egg to long-time servants. She had been laying everything out so that she may spend her last days peacefully thereafter. To everyone's astonishment, when she mentioned me, Cethern said that he would marry me, as if it were obvious. I had grown up in the shadow of my noble cousins, and I was only a commoner; a well-treated servant. I had not learned to say no, nor even to express my thoughts aloud. They decided what was best for me, and I must admit that I had never suffered from the sweet, comfortable life I had been offered. I had gotten used to following recommendations. Marry Cethern? I had nothing against him; why would I? He was a merry, brave young man, always full of enthusiasm. He was very persuasive and talkative, the very opposite of me, who had always been able to truly express herself only through writing. With his happy disposition, he shrugged off any worries his status as the youngest might have brought him. He always repeated that this difficulty would be the opportunity for him to earn fame heroically and to obtain through his glory what his elder brother had due to mere birth order. I was encouraged to consent to the proposal, and as I had no serious objection, I accepted.

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A gust of wind seeped through the flaps of my garments, which I gathered close to my body with a shiver.

The High-Winds. I could only face this place with graveness. The structure was twisted, bare, and built on a headland overhanging a yawning chasm. It irresistibly evoked a broken tower; an image of destroyed ambition and wishes. This former fort had been built to protect Reizh against Gwidrite incursions, and its primary function still showed through. Rock, ice, and dust appeared to be all one could hope for here—a life of bitterness. I realized that I had made a terrible mistake when I accepted such a convenient marriage.

Despite all my fears, I was not able to change Cethern's mind. All that I could only clumsily express were just the worries of a little girl who had always lived in a lofty castle. I could not “appreciate the potential” of the cold walls, rotting wooden frame, and leaky roof. The dreary, dismal loneliness I portrayed when describing the dull village half an hour's walking distance away was “much exaggerated;” the people there just needed some time to get used to new faces, that was all.

Dismounting my horse in the unpaved courtyard, I tried to see the place as he did. A gate, and on the left, a shaky tower that looked dangerously unsteady to me. A short path leading to the main castle building. On the right, another tower, smaller and distorted. The well stood near the stables, close to the half-buried kitchen door. The ground floor was still partly habitable, but the large reception halls, the lord's rooms, all the prestigious places that offered a breathtaking view of the surroundings, were now crumbling ruins. Whole portions of the roof were missing. The second and third floors of this part of the building were still

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accessible through a circular side staircase. A taciturn villager who had welcomed us and acted as our guide warned us against the badly damaged wooden floor. If we were to go to the upper parts, the sensible thing to do was to follow the main beams, which still supported the floor. Otherwise, we might fall to our deaths. Even the stout-hearted, optimistic Cethern went pale as he heard the floor cracking under his feet when he ventured too far.

That night, Cethern slept very little, pondering with a thoughtful look I had never seen him with before. He refused to hear my opinion, saying that it was up to him to solve this problem: I had nothing to worry about and everything would be all right very soon. Exhausted from our journey as I was, I did not insist, in spite of my skepticism, and I quickly fell asleep, overwhelmed with fatigue.

He woke me up before dawn. While I was still struggling to collect my thoughts, he began to talk wildly. He was frantic. He had a great idea; he knew what to do. He had to leave now. Until he came back, I had to take care of the most urgent roof repairs. I would hear from him soon. He would find money.

I saw him trot away in the early dawn. I was wrapped in a wool blanket and felt as in a dream. All of this seemed so strange, absurd, and futile... but what could I expect from someone who was convinced he could rise through strength of arms? Adventures, epic journeyings, unexpected encounters, discoveries, and the exploration of mysterious ruins in a quest for treasures were now his. As for me, I had a ruin of my own to take care of, exposed to omnipresent cold winds, and was doomed to endless monotonous days amidst a landscape of rocks, dust, and ice. I was almost unbearably alone. The villagers ignored me and spoke with

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an accent I could barely understand—when they deigned to talk to me at all. They came and worked on the roof to stabilize its deterioration. They put up ladders almost everywhere and removed the most dangerous parts of the floor, leaving large empty spaces. The echoes sounded even more ghastly to me.

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Weeks went by in silence and in boredom. Winter came, and with it snow fell like a white net, a bleak, hopeless vision of death. I felt trapped, almost immured... buried alive. In this prison, where only my docility had confined me, I spent many hours reading my few books. I had no other distraction but the flight of my vulture friend that often hovered over the Domain of High-Winds. I had time to seek to solve the mysteries of the occult language, which I discovered and learned with great difficulty. The mysteries of this world freed my mind. Trying to wrap my head around this alien knowledge kept me busy and distracted me from my sulking.

After the solstice, the days grew longer, and a Varigal brought me Cethern's third letter. He remained vague about his activities, but he seemed confident; it would not take too long now.

With the end of winter, the snow melted without the onset of spring bringing the slightest hope of renewal and happiness. Instead, it felt as if fall had come again.

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* *

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The horizon was heavy with dark clouds, and the cold wind blew strong, this gloomy whistling messenger worming everywhere. In the kitchen, which had nearly become my whole world, I had put an old rolled carpet against the door bottom, and I had nailed a piece of oilcloth to replace the broken window pane. It was not the first storm I had to face in these mountains. The Domain of High-Winds was aptly named.

That night, I wondered once more about what I should do. For too long, I had become used to obediently doing what I was told, asking no questions and relying on others to choose what was best for me. However, it was clear that such a life now led to a dead-end. Staying here, forlorn, dejected, and bored out of my mind was out of the question. Even though I had nothing, I could still walk to the capital city and find a profession as a scholar, scribe, copyist, or teacher. Anything but losing myself here.

Thunder roared deafeningly. I was sitting near the fire, waiting and dreaming before the dancing, crackling flames. This joyful glowing heat always brought me some measure of solace during the long nights. In the worst of winter, I had gotten used to sleeping here on the floor, wrapped in my blankets, feeling like a beggar. Tomorrow... I would pack my bags tomorrow. I was feeling uneasy about the idea of crossing the country by myself, but I was trapped. The longer I waited, the harder it would be for me to act.

It was then that there came a knock at the door. This had never happened before, and left me astounded. Another knock. Thunder roared deafeningly. Who? A villager? Why so late? A Varigal caught by surprise by the downpour? When I finally decided to check this out, my visitor began to shake the handle of the door which, like everything else

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here, did not close properly, and threw it open. A dark, massive shape, illuminated by the brief flashes of lightning, lumbered in. He was wearing ancient armor—I wondered how he could bear its weight—the helmet of which he took off.

Cethern? It was his face, his features, but his expression was hard and absent. As tired and pensive as he looked, I truly thought for a moment that I was mistaken and that it was a stranger. What warrior could wear such equipment here, in such a remote place that even brigands left it alone? Now that he came nearer the firelight, I could make out patterns on his armor that looked like carvings I had formerly seen in a book. I did not remember what they were exactly, but they disturbed me deeply. Something in me told me to flee from the darkness I suspected, but in spite of it all, it was still Cethern, even though I had thought about leaving him and abandoning this ruined house shortly before... I was lost, and as usual, I had difficulties both gathering my thoughts and finding the right words. His sudden question gave me a start:

"Well, wife, is this how you welcome your husband?"

"Sorry. Would you like to have dinner?"

"Why not?"

"I will fetch you something. Do you want me to help you remove your armor?"

"No."

"How was your journey? Did you find money to restore the Domain of High-Winds?"

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“I have acquired enough.”

“Really?”

“You don’t believe me? Wait.”

I could not keep my voice steady and I was concerned with every detail. Who would refuse to remove such monstrous armor when he was soaked? He went out and came back with a metal chest whose style and coating were apparently the same as his armor. It all seemed considerably heavy to me. He dropped the chest near the fireplace, which was then lit by a flickering reddish brightness, as if pulsing with life.

“Open it.”

I did. The hinges were time-worn and rusty; I had to force it a little... and suddenly came face to face with the sparkle of riches proportionate to Cethern’s wildest expectations: gold, coins, gemstones, and jewels of amber and emerald! With such a treasure, the Domain of High-Winds could not only be restored, but also become a wealthy and pleasant home. I was torn between bedazzlement and a nagging concern that I could not disregard. I could not look Cethern straight in the eyes. There was something in his features that made me feel very ill at ease, as if he were judging and scorning me. Keeping my head down, I examined the coins and jewels while he was eating and drinking beside me. He seemed huge: his armor made him look like a giant even though he walked almost casually with it.

“You found this treasure and your armor in the same place?”

“Indeed.”

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“Where was it?”

“In the Mòr Roimh in Gwidre, near the Ordachaï Peak in the ancient city of Gwaird.”

“Gwaird? The troglodytic town that is said to have cut itself off from the rest of the world during the Aergewin by closing its doors, and where everyone starved to death?”

“Many of them were killed by Feondas springing from the depths of the mines. Hunger only finished those who had shut themselves up inside the last bastion.”

“Did you go there alone?”

“No.”

“So your companions also have a treasure like this one?”

“No.”

“Did they not want a share?”

“They are dead.”

This is what happens when you ask too many questions: you learn truths that you would sometimes rather ignore. At that moment, I did not want to know whether Cethern had killed them to keep the whole treasure for himself. I dreaded to learn how he could know the details of Gwaird’s fall. The Cethern I knew would never have found an ancient city by himself. He had to have relied on the assistance of experts. Things like that did not happen in a day. They had to have explored the region and its underground for a long time. Now, they were dead.

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I was torn between fear and a cold line of thought that kept analyzing and juxtaposing the elements of the story. I was sitting by the fire at the feet of my husband, who was wearing that ancient armor and casually eating while it was still raining outside. Silently and calmly, I was trying to weigh what was in my favor and against me. Things did not look good.

“How long have we been married?”

“Since the end of last summer. We are now in early spring, even though it is long to come in these regions...”

“Almost one year. And I left my pretty wife alone here...”

“You wanted to restore this castle so that we may live here decently.”

“The nights you spent sleeping alone must have been long. Fortunately, I am back now.”

I glanced at him and saw that he was done eating. He took another draught of wine and faced me. I understood that he more or less wanted to rape me for dessert. Why did I see it as a rape? As I saw it, we had a marriage of convenience... But when I watched him in that armor that must have been worn during the end of Gwaird by one of its heroes who died in such abominable circumstances, and heard that almost metallic sound from that automaton-like man, my whole being was filled with loathing. The mere possibility of intimate contact with that harsh, stiff animate being gave me a kind of cold nausea.

The only thing that prevented me from panicking was a silly thought: how did he intend to do it without removing

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his armor? It almost seemed stuck to his skin, just like an insect's shell. I tried to analyze that protection without looking at him too intently, not wanting to trigger something that would mean my end. I could not see any defects. Even the joints were complemented with a sort of leather or oilcloth that folded and unfolded with each movement; it all looked absolutely impenetrable. Only a skilled swordsman would be able to find where to strike. With just my fists or a dagger, I would just be wasting my time.

“Where is your bedroom?”

The threat was getting clearer. The shock made me gulp. What could I do? Flee into the castle and hide? Run into my room and lock myself up? In both cases, he could catch up, and I imagined that he would prove all the more violent. Should I submit? Thousands of women did so out of political interest or lack of money...

“Show me.”

He should have known. His questions showed that he was not Cethern; not even a perverted Cethern, but someone whose face looked like his and who only knew a few scraps of his life. That meant that he did not know the castle. Could that be my chance? I could probably outrun him, then flee on his horse. It was worth trying! I stood up and walked to the corridor, then started running like never before to reach the circular staircase leading to the upper floor. There, the rooms in various conditions, connected with ladders leading to the attic, offered me a real opportunity. As fast as he could be in that monstrous armor, he had to be at least three times my weight. The floor could give way... I just had an idea, and it gave me some hope. I knew where to go and where to find salvation.

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I was still ahead, but not by much; he was quick. I dashed up the stairs as fast as possible, lifting my dress so as to not trip on it. He did not waste his time insulting me; he was catching up, I could feel it. Terror overcame me; it seemed to me that this staircase would never end... then, at last, the first floor! I almost thought I was safe, but he lunged at me and caught my ankle, pulling sharply. Momentum drove me forward, and I fell down painfully on the corridor's rough floor. It took my breath away, and I knew I had to find a solution very quickly... The best option seemed to try to kick at him with my free leg. I turned around for more leverage, but gave a sudden scream at what I saw. I thought I saw his face contort, taking the form of a blackish grinning mask. My blow lost what little strength it had. Fear froze me. A part of myself urged me to recover lest I die, but I could not help it: I could not move. As he was pulling me toward him, I felt like a fly caught by a spider about to eat it alive.

“This is my room.”

I heard myself say these words, I did not even know why. It was a pathetic attempt to calm him down just when he seemed about to unleash all his violence against me, even though it was obvious I wanted to escape.

“Very well. Let us proceed.”

Once again, that feeling of absurdity came over me and I no longer knew if I had to be scared of getting beaten or going mad. It was very dark. I opened the door while he kept a tight grip on my arm.

“Let me take a light.”

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He nodded without letting go. I went straight ahead, past my wardrobe and my bed on the right, toward a dressing table where a candelabra stood. The glimmer of the candles let me see Cethern's face in the mirror in front of me. I could not help but strongly hope I was mistaken, that it was some cruel joke and that he would be himself again. I hoped so as much as I did not believe it, and I was giving in to despair. This enemy who had suddenly appeared at my door this stormy night could abuse me to his heart's content. This almost organic armor made him insanely strong, and I was on my own. Tears welled-up in my eyes. I was still reluctant to accept my fate.

Cethern's face in the mirror... He embraced me with his metal hands while pushing me against the dresser, scratching me much more than caressing me and tearing off pieces of my dress. Watching his reflection squeezing me and clawing me, sometimes till blood came, made him chuckle with evil glee. How could I tolerate such a thing, even from a false Cethern? Our marriage was indeed based on a misunderstanding, but he was still like a brother to me. Would I let a monster use his face as a mask, defile him, and inflict all this on me?

Certainly not! Not as long as I lived. Clenching my teeth, I did not shout. The monster was panting so heavily that the mirror had started fogging up.

"Don't resist."

Apparently, I must have tensed or disturbed him, I did not really know. He started biting my neck and shoulder with rising excitement, but as I had suspected, his armor hampered his goal. Such a foolish blunder infuriated him: he had to at least remove the cup shielding the sensitive parts

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of his body. The problem was doing it with only one hand embedded in a metal glove. He was all brute strength and animal urge, and did not think much. I suddenly became aware of what I considered obtuseness. It was like a revelation. This being who had terrified me was primitive, deprived of subtlety, and I had been witless not to notice it earlier and take advantage of it one way or another.

He took me by my braids to lay me down on the dressing table with one hand and raised my skirt. I was off the floor now, and my nose was almost pressed against the mirror half-covered with mist. I felt that pressing himself against me had driven him to the edge; he was scratching my thighs, and crushing me painfully between him and the wood. But he was still struggling with his cup, and the claws of his metal gloves were now proving a disadvantage.

The stranger brutally pulled my head back, using my braids as reins. Baffled, I stared wide-eyed at the mirror, where an invisible hand was writing in reverse. Was it real, or a figment of my imagination that was desperately seeking to escape the sordid end awaiting me?

“Fight. Kill him.”

A ghost? I had spent the winter here, there was nothing haunting the Domain of High-Winds! How? Who?

“Call my name!”

Call whose name?

Suddenly, I understood: this body was no longer Cethern’s—he had lost it to an evil spirit—but there remained something of him that had become a ghost, anchored to his own bones,

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prisoner of a flesh he could no longer live in. How could it be? The armor? This all-too-living thing, thirsting for the extreme intensity of existence, obsessed with experiencing pleasure? An Object of Power? I had read books on the subject, but I did not think I would one day have the opportunity to be so close to one!

“Cethern! Cethern! Cethern Mac Emmanon!”

I shouted as loudly as I could, my voice shrill, high enough to bring me pain. I caught a glimpse of something moving confusedly in the mirror, and I could make out a vaguely bright figure in the reflection. However, I did not dwell on this vision: already my hand was on the candelabra, and I struck at the abomination. The candles were blown out. I heard fighting, falling objects, but I did not wait to understand what was going on and ran outside the room.

Still in shock, I felt neither the blood seeping from my wounds nor the nightly chill. I could hardly stand up. I was so distraught that I felt as if I were on a boat rocking up and down in the middle of a storm. I had walked through the corridor countless times, but the single straight line, about fifteen yards long, sporadically illuminated by the flashes of lightning, seemed an endless tunnel. Behind me, I heard the screams of damned souls fighting—wild beasts tearing one another apart. No sooner had I reached the end of the corridor than I heard the heavy steps of my enemy.

“Your plan was a good idea.”

It seemed to me that I heard Cethern but I was too confused to be sure. No time to dither; I had to remember the layout of the mansion. It was dark, almost pitch-black. Tarps on the roof kept rain from falling inside despite the large

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sections of flooring that had been removed. I had to run to the upper floor, and from there, reach the attic through the ladders. At each step in the dark, I felt driven forward, but I was too focused to pay any attention. I knew that the other was coming: he was following me, cursing... He had understood that the floor was full of empty spaces, and had decided to climb the circular staircase to catch me upstairs. I hurried up, climbed the ladders... Second floor... Third floor, quick! He was already there! I missed a rung, caught hold of the ladder, felt it slipping... Finally, I reached the beams I was going for, the ones used to work on the roof. I sat on the wood, keeping a precarious balance. I could hardly see, I had to fully concentrate to not fall... He was coming; he was already there, just below me. He was furious and yelled that he would break me, gut me, and rape me through my wounds until I died.

Why didn't the floor give way? I had put so much hope in this supposedly rotten wood, and it was now bearing a man in heavy armor. I felt both desperate and angry at the cruel fate that favored that monster. I heard him reach the ladder I had just climbed. Since it had fallen down, he picked it up and put it back. He began to climb up, and in spite of all his weight, the wood creaked, but held.

I shook my head. What could I do? I had never stopped retreating! What would Cethern have done? He had always been a fighter to me, someone who never gave up in the face of danger, even if it meant acting rashly. I felt vaguely that if he managed to inspire this quality in me, just for this night, it would be a lesson for my whole existence. If I could learn this from him, our short marriage would finally have some meaning. I had had nine months, the length of a pregnancy. The time to become myself, to find myself.

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I stood up on trembling legs and moved forward with small steps while he was climbing. He was almost here. I came near to the top of the ladder and sat on the beam, trying to position myself to push the ladder with both hands, my legs leaning on the wood. Chances were that I would topple down as well if I managed to make the ladder fall, but I had no time to consider it. For me, this was a great feat.

Suddenly, the ladder moved away from the beam. I could make out the movement of the monster trying to cling to me to take me with him, but I was quicker this time and pushed harder. At first, it happened very slowly, with a succession of creaks... Then it went on faster: a crash, and a scream. The floor finally gave way under the impact and he fell down. The fall of about fifty feet ended with a sickening crashing sound down below.

I caught the beam just in time. I was sliding, and was now holding on with just my fingers. Would I know the same fate as my enemy right after defeating him? I gripped tight and took a deep breath. What could I do? Let myself go as flexibly as possible onto the intact floor ten feet below, and hope? In a final effort, I decided to swing toward the wall before releasing my grip, considering that the floor would probably be sturdier on the edge. I relaxed my aching, splintered hands, and fell hard onto the floor. The impact was brutal but less painful than expected. I stood up and slumped against the wall. I was shaken, covered with bruises and scratches, but I was safe.

I sat on the stone steps of the circular staircase, getting my breath back and wiping away the tears that filled my eyes. I knew I was in shock; it was but nerves. I was relieved.

“You have always been smarter than me.”

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Cethern? His ghost?

“I don’t want to stay, I don’t want to become what he became.”

Horror struck me. I understood that I had killed my husband, and the fact his soul had not been in his body seemed like a flimsy excuse to me...

“The armor. You could have never helped me without destroying it, and it is indestructible. Entirely made of Tugarch’. No one must ever find it.”

If he told the truth, the armor alone could be worth as much as his treasure. Yet, I agreed with him: this thing had to be stopped. I needed to understand to feel better, to ensure this nightmare never would never occur again, and to put an end to the horrors of this night.

Somehow, I had found my call to action.

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The next day, at dawn, I went to check on the intruder’s cadaver. Cethern’s body was broken and the armor seemed less alive. It was an ordeal to free his corpse from this protection that had become a prison. My intention was to leave, gathering the metal into bags and dumping it all into the most desolate chasm on my way. Resolute, I struggled to pull Cethern’s body out into the castle’s courtyard.

The vultures were there.

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About a dozen of them. I had never seen that before. I had the strange feeling that it was a gesture of sympathy. I stepped back inside. They came upon the corpse like a tawny swarm of feathers. Staring at them with a kind of morbid fascination, it seemed right to me. It was necessary to accept a passing and the purification of the dead...

A few hours later, only bones were left. I respectfully gathered my husband's remains to bring them back to his family, along with my cut braids.

Gray dawn

By Pénombre

“Father Merven,” the Sigire whispered, gently shaking Arteus. The young priest was startled awake, realizing that he had fallen asleep in the middle of his intense pondering. It was still dark around him, but he could make out the shape of Siobhan Arweal, bending over him in the dim grayness that was starting to break through the cloudy sky in the east.

He took a deep breath to speak, but she quickly put her hand on his mouth.

“Quiet. Sounds echo a great deal at this time of the day.”

He obediently kept silent, and sat up carefully.

Arteus had never had any problem getting up before dawn, and he could count on the fingers of a single hand the times when he had had to stifle a yawn during Albines. However, the thoughts he could not help but mull over had prevented him from sleeping, until he had inadvertently succumbed amidst his contemplations. The short spell of unconsciousness had done little to quell his fears.

He sighed, and immediately cursed himself for being so noisy, but the Sigire did not stir. He felt that it was best to just wait. She had woken him up, and if she had something

Gray dawn

to tell him, he would soon know about it.

However, as Siobhan remained silent, his still confused thoughts wandered back to the concerns that had been haunting him for the past few hours.

Things had taken a most unexpected turn, to say the least. Still, Arteus believed that his future would be more peaceful, and he actually had a fairly good idea of what awaited him.

Three years ago, the young man had been assigned to a small parish. It had been made clear to him that, should he perform satisfactorily, he would be appointed to a more prestigious position within a few years. It had been acknowledged that his faith was undoubtedly pure since the One, in His divine omniscience, had granted him the gift of Miracles, not once but twice before his Acceptation. Such a case was rare enough for the clergy of the One to become closely involved in his future. Arteus knew that he disappointed many people when he made public his intention to become a priest instead of embracing the career of Vector, or the rigorous and hard path of a Sigire. The One granted the gift of Miracles sparingly, and even though each of the clergy's six branches included Elect, those who clearly seemed to be marked by a divine influence were icons the hierarchy directed to best serve its interests.

However, since the first day of his novitiate, long before he was touched by the One, Arteus knew that he was destined to become the gardener of the Creator's domains, and to look after the flock of the faithful. The order dressed in green had supported him in his choice all the way to his Acceptation.

In truth, Arteus gave little care to the promises of promotion. He strove to be worthy of the One's gifts by serving

Gray dawn

Him humbly, and he had grown attached to his little parish in the modest fishing village. Every day he prayed with conviction, devoutly maintained the small church, and proved both patient and open with his congregation's troubles in their frugal and thankless life.

Never would he have imagined that he would be called to hunt down a sorcerer.

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A noise to his left snapped him back to reality. A sinister shape rose, as if the darkness had taken shape and suddenly emerged from its original nothingness to come forth. He started, but then heard a familiar whisper.

“No light. They must be asleep.”

Far from reassuring him, the murmur only increased the growing uneasiness in the young priest's heart. He did not like Blade Knight Deckhir. Truly not. The man behaved like a killer, and he had not uttered more than twenty words since he and his companion in black had dragged Arteus away from his church. The gaunt, pallid, unshaven bean-pole of a man spoke little—when he spoke at all. The rest of the time, he just looked around, his lips a thin gray line, his black, clouded eyes concealing his thoughts.

“Well then,” Siobhan answered with a stronger voice than before. “It's time to go.” Deckhir's shadow gave no answer.

Compared to the holy warrior, the Sigire seemed almost friendly, even though she looked like a worried, slovenly vagrant. The two defenders of the faith seemed to know

Gray dawn

each other well, but since Deckhir never answered Arteus and his companion practiced the art of evasive answers, he did not know much more than the day before—the day of their meeting. Both had simply come to his door, and Siobhan had ordered him to take a few belongings and come with them. He had protested, but the Sigire had shown him the warrant bearing the seal of one of the main leaders of his order in Gwidre... When he had been ready to follow them, she had stopped him and told him to take a sword, or at least a dagger.

Arteus had never killed anyone, and his military service had conclusively demonstrated that he had neither the skill nor the inclination for fighting. However, when he arrived at the parish, he had found an old, well-maintained blade in a chest, probably forgotten there by his unknown predecessor. A plain, ordinary sword that he had quickly forgotten about... until Siobhan told him to arm himself.

He got up and shook his traveling coat. The fresh morning dew had not even woken him up, but when he moved, he realized that moisture had seeped through his cloak and dampened his clothes.

Out of habit, he knelt down to begin Albines, but stopped when he noticed that his two companions did not. In the uncertain light of dawn, he could make out their hands quickly making the sign of the Hexcelsis.

Arteus sighed ever so softly, even though he felt incredibly noisy in the surrounding silence. He should have guessed that the Sigire and the Blade Knight would not be more inclined to pray at dawn than for Vesperines and Estellines. The day before, too, they had observed the sacred moment of prayer in a merely symbolical way, and he blushed in

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the darkness as he remembered the Sigire's words.

"We are often on the road, and the One expects us to worship Him through our deeds much more than through prayers."

He had learned during his novitiate that among the Vectors, Sigires and Blade Knights, many substituted the ritual prayers with shorter and even minimalistic observances. They argued that their demanding missions and their frequent travels in the service of the One prevailed over the long minutes required for each of the six daily prayers. At the time, and still now, he found it incongruous, almost blasphemous.

But who would blame Sigires for their lack of devotion?

Doggedly, he remained silent on his knees for a long minute, and only stood up when he felt that one of his companions was about to call him.

"We can go now."

He strapped on his sword and made sure that the few things he had hurriedly packed before leaving the church the previous day were still in order.

Without a word from either of them, Deckhir started leading the way through the barely visible tree trunks while, at their back, the daylight was getting paler and clearer.

They were about five hundred steps away from the old, crumbling Inguard where the sorcerer Oric Mertoèn and his henchmen had taken refuge. According to Siobhan, there remained but three of them after the fight during which the

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sorcerer had narrowly escaped capture, three days before. Of the small group in charge of hunting down the curse-maker, only Erald Deckhir and his Sigire companion had survived.

When Siobhan had told him about it, Arteus knew that she was not telling him everything. He suspected that the deaths of her brothers and sisters in arms had affected her deeply, even though she showed nothing of it. As for Deckhir, he seemed insensitive and was even colder than he was silent.

They moved carefully, but the pale sky brightened with every passing minute, and they began to clearly see the jutting roots awaiting the unwary hiker's foot. If everything went well, they would find the renegades just after dawn and would then have the advantage over them.

The Inguard had a vantage point on the road, and according to Siobhan, Mertoèn and his fellows must be making use of it to watch for prospective pursuers. Hence the detour through the groves of conifers to strike at their enemies from where they did not expect it.

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They stopped when Deckhir held up a warning hand. After a few seconds of remaining motionless, the Sigire and the young priest came closer to the Blade Knight.

The three of them were hiding behind a majestic fir tree, about twenty steps away from the Inguard they could see just below. Although one of the two buildings still looked defensible, the other was just a roofless ruin, and the few crumbling sections that remained of the low wall would not prove much of an obstacle.

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Something violently struck the trunk, very close to Arteus's head. He then understood that, in the end, their enemy was much warier than expected.

They turned their heads and saw a bowman fifteen steps away from them hurriedly nocking another arrow. Erald Deckhir rushed him with a savage grunt, hurrying to kill him before he could draw his bow again. The sorcerer's accomplice gave a cry, and the sound of a door flying open could be heard from the Inguard. With a curse, Siobhan dashed to the small, derelict fort, leaving Arteus alone, unsure of what he was supposed to do.

He turned his head toward Deckhir and saw the renegade fire an arrow at close quarters. The sound of the projectile piercing through the Blade Knight's leather jerkin and biting his flesh was horrible, but Deckhir barely flinched and did not even stumble as he raised his weapon against his attacker. There was enough light for Arteus to see the horror and panic-stricken look of the man facing his imminent death. The young priest looked away and wished he had covered his ears when he heard Deckhir's ax crush the bones and tear the flesh of his unfortunate opponent. Right in front of him, he saw the Sigire drawing two blades and charging at the two men stepping out of the Inguard.

To his great surprise, part of his mind remained cold and lucid, commenting on the frantic events occurring before his eyes. This did not make any sense, an inner voice told him. Those men should have stayed safe in the building, from where the bowman could have shot at them from the ample cover of the arrow slits. Why had they posted a sentinel outside, and why were they leaving, giving up their main strategic advantage?

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The Sigire's two opponents looked similar to the bowman whom Erald Deckhir had just butchered. They were wearing sturdy traveling clothes and carried weapons, but apparently wore no armor. One of them moved toward Siobhan while the other stood back, frantically rummaging through a sack hung from his belt.

Fear seized the priest when he saw the man waving some kind of pebble. From his position, he couldn't make out the symbols, but he was certain the man was one of those pagans who used the profane Oghamic stones to enslave the natural spirits and divert them from their role assigned by the Creator. Knowing that he was hunting down a sorcerer was one thing; facing him was another...

Sliding nimbly on the mud, Siobhan dodged an awkward stroke from the sorcerer's minion, then brought one of her blades forward in a rising motion, stabbing the man's stomach and driving the steel into his lungs. She dropped her weapon, recovered her balance, and went for Mertoèn.

Arteus felt his throat tighten when he saw the sorcerer's skin transform, turning brown and rough like bark. The blow from the Sigire only scratched the strange natural armor, and she was not able to avoid her opponent's ensuing attack. Mertoèn bludgeoned her with a heavy mace, and only the man's haste and lack of training saved his enemy. Siobhan was thrown to the side with the resounding sound of cracking bones. Standing above her groaning body, the sorcerer hesitated for a while, then suddenly lifted his eyes, as if he had felt Arteus's stare on him. They eyed each other.

Oric Mertoèn was about thirty years old, powerfully built like a laborer or a soldier. He sported a short, red beard that must have looked good on him before weeks of neglect. His gray eyes had a worried look—frightened, even. Once

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again, Arteus surprised himself, being able to methodically register so many insignificant details while he remained gaping, his legs refusing to move. The sorcerer started walking toward him, carefully avoiding the Sigire who was still twitching at his feet. A startling conviction was growing in Arteus with each step the man took toward him. He knew that he would never, ever be able to look away from the one who was about to kill him.

Then, Mertoèn froze, as if he had suddenly felt something deep inside him—a silent shock that made him turn his head. Arteus also turned and saw Erald Deckhir striding heavily toward Mertoèn despite the arrow burrowed in his chest. The sorcerer gave a strangled sigh.

“So that’s what it was! But it’s impossible...”

Paying him no heed, Deckhir kept moving forward, laboriously but inexorably. Mertoèn staggered back hesitantly, then frantically searched his sack for another Ogham with which he could unleash his evil powers.

Arteus never knew what drove him to act right then. The moment before, he was stunned by fear, but then, he suddenly leaped forward like a deer lunging at his rival. He knocked Mertoèn down, and they both fell onto the pine needle-covered stones.

“No!” The sorcerer shouted, struggling, scratching Arteus’s face and kicking wildly at the young priest who was shielding himself as best he could.

Mertoèn pushed him away and raised his eyes just in time to see Deckhir’s ax smash his face. He did not even have time to scream as the powerful stroke split his head in two,

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splashing Arteus with gore and bone splinters.

The young priest remained there, half-curled up, with Mertoèn's body spasming beside him. His heart was racing madly, painfully ringing through his entire body.

Impossible, impossible, impossible... his inner voice repeated. Frozen in horror, he gazed at Erald Deckhir looming over him and the dead sorcerer. Arteus's stare could not leave the arrow stuck in the Blade Knight's leather coat, deep into his flesh. Deckhir should not even have been able to stand after such efforts, but there he was, motionless on his two feet. With that strange attention to detail that seemed to have taken hold of him, Arteus noticed that he could not see the man breathe, whereas he should have been huffing painfully. Above all, in spite of the terrible wound close to his heart... Deckhir was not bleeding. *Deckhir was not bleeding.*

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The Blade Knight's black, blank eyes stared at him, enigmatic and impersonal. Then, Deckhir raised his eyes, which broke the spell that had held Arteus motionless. His body and mind became one again, and the fear suddenly worsened, taking more consistence and depth, but also losing the petrifying power it had held over him.

Drawing from an energy he did not know he possessed, the priest slowly turned his head, following the dead Blade Knight's gaze. Siobhan was limping with difficulty toward them, her face drawn with pain, bent by the blow that must have broken her arm and maybe even one or two ribs.

Gray dawn

“I’ll... need you... Father Merven,” the Sigire stuttered, a thin trickle of blood running down her lips.

Something deep inside the priest began to move, and he slowly stood up. Time resumed its normal course, and he ran to Siobhan, his mind fiercely repressing the impulse to stop and look at the kni... the abomination behind him.

In the grayness of dawn, surrounded by their enemies’ bodies, he helped the woman to a nearby rock where he sat her down. Then, closing his eyes to focus as much as to avoid laying them on Deckhir, he fervently prayed the One to grant him the wholesome, regenerative power of the healing miracle He had bestowed on him. The divine manifestation slowly spread in the air around them, like a fresh, pure sensation devoid of coldness. Both reinvigorating and appeasing, it gathered in his hands which he laid on the Sigire’s side. She winced when her bones and flesh returned to their healthy state within moments, and he released his will, letting the divine power dissipate and go back to the great All.

He opened his eyes and saw her smile sadly at him. Her face was marked with a weariness that could not be attributed to her now erased wound. She nodded and told him softly: “Erald needs you too.”

He opened his mouth, shocked. How could she? How dare she?

The sound of the Blade Knight’s heavy steps caught his attention, and he felt terror slowly settle in him, along with deep disgust.

Deckhir stopped a few steps in front of him and knelt down,

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letting go of his ax. The dead warrior with the arrow grotesquely protruding from his flesh slowly took hold of the Hexcelsis tied around his neck, and he kissed it slowly before looking at them.

“I am ready. Hurry, please”

Arteus frowned and turned to Siobhan as she stood up and laid a hand on his shoulder.

“Come, Father. One thing remains to be done here, then I will take you back to your beloved parish. In truth, this is another reason we brought you here.”

“Excuse me?”

She gave him an almost mocking smirk.

“Of course. I am a Sigire, I know all that I need to know about you. The gifts the Creator granted you when you were just an adept clad in gray... The news spread through all of the Temple. Did you not realize that you were put aside for your own protection? That your superiors wanted to ensure that the factions within our great church did not compete for the standard of faith you are willing to become?”

He gave no answer. There was none to give.

“When I understood that this unbeliever would pass near the village you live in, I knew that the Creator had not turned away from us. I knew that he was offering us the chance to do His will and, above all, allow Erald to die righteously.”

He shivered, and could not help glancing at the Blade Knight’s motionless kneeling figure.

Gray dawn

“But...he is already dead...”

“He is. For eleven days exactly. But he began to move again as I was about to set fire to our companions’ funeral pyre. His pyre. For a moment, I hoped... but his heart is no longer beating. He does not breathe. He can move and speak, but he is not really alive anymore.”

Arteus gulped.

“You did not...you accepted that...you deceived me?”

“Quick...” Deckhir’s whisper startled them. Siobhan grabbed the young priest’s arm and spoke to him firmly.

“Father Merven. I do not know what force brought my old friend back from the dead and keeps him in this world without truly existing like you and me. I do not know what this force is; I do not know what it is expecting from him, but I do know that he is filled with murderous impulses and that, with time...”

“Why didn’t you burn him?”

She gave him a shocked look.

“And what about his soul, Father?”

He did not answer. She was right. If Erald, devoted fighter of the Faith and devout arm of the One, died under the influence of that unholy force, what would become of him? What if his soul, despite years of steadfast service, were to eternally roam Limbo? What if, instead of dying, he returned as a demon, or took possession of a body as the Feondas sometimes did?

Gray dawn

Could he accept that a man who had given up on many things and lost his life in the service of the One would suffer such torment?

“But... What do you want m...”

He suddenly understood what she expected of him—what they both expected of him.

Arteus Merven, young prodigy of the Temple, Elect of the One, felt his determination harden. His duty had just been revealed to him. It was obvious, and he knew he was perfectly capable of performing it. One more time, despite the circumstances, he was amazed at the perfect omniscience, the meticulous foresight of the One who had put him on His servants’ path when they needed the purifying miracle with which He had gifted Arteus.

Without fear now, he turned to the still kneeling Erald Deckhir. He looked deep into his dead eyes and saw the torments of the faithful and pious mind, prisoner of the cold flesh. He saw fear and despair as this devoted servant of the One tried to remain sincere and continue serving Him despite the grim, unnatural fate he was suffering. He found himself smiling briefly at Siobhan, who was standing by his side, and he was even more surprised when she smiled back. All the Sigire’s humanity, friendship, and loyalty showed through that smile. For the first time in his life, Arteus knew that the austere inquisitors of the Temple were much more than stone-hard hunters in a black coat.

Just like him, they were humble, devout human beings who, despite their imperfections, strove to serve and apprehend the divine Will, faithfully marching on despite the hardships and bringing the Truth to those who suffered from uncertainty.

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Arteus Merven was a priest, but at that moment, the Creator wanted him to bring the comfort of divine Truth as an Elect. He wanted him to purify the body of the brave Deckhir and wash his soul so that it might join the kingdom of fresh, pure, and eternal peacefulness.

He bent his head among the silent fir trees, under the clouds of this long, gray day that was dawning, with a warm smile at the kneeling knight. The dead flesh that had sickened and disgusted him no longer did. He put his hand on the dead warrior's cropped hair and closed his eyes to focus all his piety, all his will, all his faith in the most perfect miracle he would ever request from his Creator.

Soul-Searching

Bylkaar

“Now and then, alas, the conscience of man takes up a burden so heavy in horror that it can be thrown down only into the grave.” Edgar Allan Poe, *The Man of the Crowd*.

I have been here for such a long time, waiting, pursuing answers. My thoughts are so confused... Writing this journal is my only solace, it helps to set down my ideas, my thoughts. It clears my mind. It brings me a sense of peace I seem to have lost so long ago. Sometimes, I feel like my memory is slipping progressively away from me, becoming a bit more inaccessible each time. That's when I take out my small almanac, the one I wrote in when I was still a Varigal. When I dip the quill into my little inkwell, serenity returns and I can finally be sure of who I am, of what I am doing here. I remember my endeavor, so foolish, so desperate, and yet seemingly the only thing I can still cling to.

Writing my story chronologically, systematically, is the only means I have found to overcome the anguish I feel whenever my memory fails.

I am Neviell Mac Bretor. I am from a noble clan, the founders of a long, formerly famed line of warriors. My father intended for me to marry Alydra Mac Leg. I loved her, and she loved me.

Soul-Searching

However, the call of the peninsula's hidden paths was strong inside me, so strong that I could not resist it. I was to become a warrior just like my brothers, but I became a Varigal. I was approached by an Observer who became my master. He taught me how to leave my own footsteps on the rough land of our ancestors. I have walked on age-old paths for so many years that I did not feel myself getting old. I discovered new side roads that are now handed down from Varigal to Varigal through the Stermerks I have carved. Yes, I have left my mark on the peninsula...

However, another mark kept on living inside me as my black beard grew thicker, longer, and with every step it seemed to get more and more speckled with the snows of our lands. The mark of remembrance and regret, that of Alydra.

When my travels brought me back to the lands of my clan, which I had carefully stayed away from for all those years, it was a man with salt and pepper hair and beard who returned, a man whose face was burned by the winds, frost, and years of roving.

There I was told dark truths. I had hoped to see my betrothed of old again, whom I had left for another—our peninsula and all its hidden mysteries. It was an irresistible passion that I could not turn away from despite the guilt I felt and that continues to torment me.

Alydra was dead. For a long time, it appeared. She was forced to marry my younger brother, a clever, ambitious young man... who had, however, not considered it uncalled for to be jealous of my memory and to blame his wife for having nurtured overly strong and vivid feelings for me. We were promised to each other. How could she have imagined that I would abandon her? It was my fault. I had sealed her fate.

Soul-Searching

The bonds formed through Lyrann and her had become so important for both families that the couple presided over the destiny of the clans. Their success was spotless, but behind the doors of the castle they inherited, jealousy wormed its way into my younger brother's heart. He was wreathed in glory, but his delusions got the better of him. They ate away his soul. He could not be satisfied with his success because he thought he saw something in Alydra's sometimes too distant gaze, absences during which her mind wandered over the Tri-Kazelian mountains and valleys to find some faraway image... a slight he found it increasingly impossible to forgive her.

The tragedy that was unfolding in their home climaxed in the horror of a much too long night: Lyrann gave in and strangled Alydra. Some people say he wanted to see something different in her eyes. Appalling rumors depict morbid details. After he had committed his irreparable act, he set fire to the castle and jumped off one of the highest balconies, putting an end to the Mac Bretors' lineage in the region... until I came back many years later.

This could have been the end of the story: the prodigal son returning from his incessant journeys to find those he loved—but who couldn't keep him from going away—surrounded by desolation in the lands neglected by his long absence. Yet, it is actually where everything started for me. Indeed, in the lands surrounding the castle, a dark legend took root. It was said that Alydra's soul had not returned to the earth as it should have—that sometimes, one could hear her persistent lament on the plain surrounding the ruins. Others swore they had caught glimpses of an ethereal figure lurking behind the broken windows of the castle—Alydra's ghost bemoaning her evil fate and mourning her lost loves.

Soul-Searching

That was the moment I stopped being a Varigal. Throughout my travels, my eyes had seen so many inexplicable things and my ears had heard so many mysterious rumors that those superstitions were not that fanciful for me. And the ideas of a certain Doctor Aodren Floyd came back to me... I had been given the opportunity to be his guide, and he had told me many things on that journey. If Alydra was truly restless, I was partly responsible for that fate, and in no small measure. Should there be some way to bring her the peace my wandering had denied her during her living days, I had to do everything to find it. And maybe this would give me one last chance to see her again, to ask forgiveness for the long and selfish absence that had sealed her fate.

I did not pay attention to the villagers' warnings. I needed to resolve this, to trust my own convictions. That is why I went off to the burned castle, which had remained abandoned for so many years. And since that time, I have been searching for any trace of Alydra. This, above all else, is why I commit myself to putting my thoughts on paper: so that I will not forget why and most importantly who I am here for. Today, I will start from scratch—my investigation as well as my journal.

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My memory is playing many tricks on me. I realize I keep losing track of time. I do not know what day it is. I have not been outside for a long time. I spend my whole days and nights within these cold walls to increase my chances of finding Alydra, talking to her one last time, and ensuring that she is at peace.

However, hunger is not an issue. I still walk down to the

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village periodically to restock on food. The villagers have become used to my presence. In the beginning, I was a matter of curiosity providing fuel for the conversations of the shrewdest gossips, but now they do not pay me much heed. They barely notice me when I buy food from my childhood village's badly supplied stalls. I have learned to make myself unremarkable, and the novelty has worn off. I prefer this to the suspicious glances they used to give me.

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This place is exceptionally bleak. The surrounding gray fog seems to seep into the whole building, continually bathing it in a light, yet persistent mist. The castle itself is not that big, but it is no less dangerous. Many beams are shaky, and some floors have given way. Recently, the main stairway collapsed into the basement. It was still standing during my first visit to the building. Some fragmented images of the collapse come to my mind... The details are vague in my memory, obscured by the intense, chaotic crashing of the events, but I remember how I needed to maintain my composure that day to avoid a terrible fall. The pit is now so deep that I cannot see anything below.

Fortunately, the stones are still sturdy, and with my equipment I should be able to climb to the upper floor. That is where villagers claim to have seen Alydra's face. That is where I must go. I am confident in my old abilities as a Varigal to ensure a safe ascent and avoid risks. I sometimes feel a presence beside me, very close and yet inaccessible. I do not feel any hostility from it, but I cannot help but get goosebumps when it suddenly gets colder—abnormally colder. Maybe I am being silly, and these are just draughts from the leaky roof...

Soul-Searching

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I heard her moaning. Alydra... A stifled complaint, yet so familiar. As if this was not the first time I had heard it, as if, despite its ethereal nature, it was impossible for me not to recognize the one I loved so much.

There was no doubt: it was her. My heart filled with certainty, I rushed toward the cry. I ran as fast as I could, more agile than a cat, darting through the ground floor, zigzagging past the natural traps of the burned mansion. Boards sank under my feet, dust or some brittle stone fell down each time my hands touched the wall... But all these efforts proved useless, and my headlong dash was in vain.

The echo of the howling rang in each of the castle's rooms, as if to better lose and confuse me. And yet... my old Varigal instinct yelled in my ears that the cry was coming from the stairs...or from its surroundings.

When I reached them, I was exhausted. Out of breath. There was nothing. Only emptiness, silence, and loneliness. I could only look up to the floor above, hoping that I would see something. Nothing. But it steeled my resolve to climb up there. My objective could not be clearer: this is where the villagers' reports and Alydra's chilling wail are leading me. Tomorrow, I will be up there.

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I made it. It seemed a risky venture and I expected it to be much more difficult, but I reached the floor with confounding ease. As if wanting it was enough for me to find my

Soul-Searching

way there. The floor did creak a bit when I got there, but not much more than it usually did. The mansion is old and in poor condition: what is left of the beams keeps groaning under the unceasing draughts, always reminding me of their frailty as if to better warn me. Their frequent creaking is only the terrifying omen of their eventual breaking. The question remains, “When?” But I am taking every precaution possible for the answer to always be “Not today.”

When I stood up there, I could not help but turn around as though by instinct and look down into the pit. Pitch black it was, absolutely impenetrable, a depth that seemed to me all the more frightening that I could not see the bottom. I remained there for several minutes, staring into the depths. Some say that one should not look too long into the abyss, for the abyss itself might end up looking back. This is just a metaphor, of course, but it is what the emptiness at my feet reminded me of... I looked away, haunted by the odd association of ideas. The human mind is strange. Aodren Floyd was right on that point, he who sought to solve its mysteries. His abstruse talks amused me, and I listened absentmindedly on our way through the Tri-Kazelian paths...

But his words ring in my mind with much more strength now that I am a voluntary prisoner in a building as gloomy as it as derelict, looking incredulously for the tormented soul of the only woman I have ever loved. I think I have never been as introspective as I currently am, and the keeping of this journal surely has something to do with it. I share the progression of my investigation, along with my state of mind. My little notebook replaces my ever-waning memories. Is it due to Alydra’s closeness? I do not know, but these few bound sheets of paper are now the strongest support for my shaky psyche. My psyche? Here I go talking like Aodren himself. Good gracious.

Soul-Searching

About that... I leafed through my journal again, looking for my lost memories. Since it is a substitute for my recollection, I thought that it could tell me more about myself... About things I might have forgotten, important clues I may have put aside.

I was somewhat disappointed when I read it again: no mind-boggling revelations. Still, I was a bit surprised at everything I had forgotten. Apparently, I have already explored the castle numerous times. How could I forget that? I remember nothing of it. I appear to have gone over my journal several times... My amnesia has gotten dangerously worse. This notebook has been a crutch for me for longer than I believed. It helps me to carry on despite my memory failures, but I feel like I am becoming mad and losing myself more and more as I write. It is as though my journal is progressively substituting itself for me, as though it absorbs my memories and thoughts as I put them into words.

And worst of all: on several pages, I mention the successive appearances of Alydra's ghostly figure, her attempts to communicate through incomprehensible rattles, and finally my failed efforts to keep her long enough to listen to what she was trying to make me understand.

I am sure that she remains attached to our reality because of something I must find, or destroy, or repair. But how can I find it if I cannot manage to make contact with her? At first, I thought it could be something linked to my younger brother's crime, but he has been dead and buried for many years now, and Alydra probably burned in the fire. I did not find her body. Yet, it must be somewhere. Even burned, there must be remains, some decayed pieces of her skeleton. I must find this blackened, charred body. Giving her a decent burial would certainly be the means to bring peace

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to this woman abandoned. I must go on. I have to talk to her at least one last time before freeing her from this world... if she so wishes.

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Same day. On the basis of what I have re-read, I resumed the exploration of the upper floor. I feel so close to a major discovery, some secret—that of Alydra, I hope. The unwavering conviction that I am about to reach my goal never falters, in spite of the holes in my memory, despite the castle itself. It is a strange feeling: I now feel prepared for any revelation.

Aodren often told me that we had to open our mind to ourselves to grasp what we had previously failed to find outside of ourselves. This makes me smile. My friend, I believe I have never been as open-minded as I am today.

Perhaps the upper rooms are even more derelict than the lower ones. It is not surprising: the fire is said to have started upstairs before spreading through the whole building. Here, more than anywhere else, everything seems to have been consumed by the flames: the heavy, blackened floor has collapsed here and there, the walls are covered with soot, and the ceiling beams are sagging in many places as well. Part of the roof has given way, resulting in a mess of wood and stone.

Still, it could be worse: the villagers reacted quickly, and most of the building has been preserved.

A few pieces of furniture have been spared here and there, but not to the point of remaining usable: they have burned almost entirely, or were gutted by the surrounding heat, and now only hold by some miraculous mystery. Their frail

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contents were also reduced to ashes on that fateful day. Some metal items are only in slightly better condition, lying on the floor in an eerie chaos. Here, a candlestick with some ornate cutlery; there, some weapons whose decorative function was lost in the flames.

This fire-eaten place is disturbingly unsafe. Compared to these high ruins, the ground floor seems oddly like a haven... However, this is where Alydra's tracks have led me. There must be something here—a mark, a clue, anything. I must explore, inch by inch, for if there were nothing, that would be simply intolerable. Actually, it seems downright impossible! It cannot be. There must be some hope.

*

* *

I found nothing, but she found me.

There was nothing special up there... Or else, what is holding Alydra here is among the half-burned objects I gathered by dint of my methodical, meticulous searching. And should it even be among these trinkets, I do not know how I could possibly identify it. Remains of jewels, a brooch, a book of which only the adorned metal cover remains, some crockery...

Overwhelmed by doubt—or maybe angered by the fruitlessness of my investigations—I have chosen to destroy it all. I intend to pick the items one by one and make them all disappear entirely from our world. I wish I could be sure that I will not destroy Alydra, but truly free her, and to make sure of this, I must meet her again and ask her directly. At any rate, there is a chance, however small, that one of these objects is her link with our world; what holds her back here

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in her body's absence. If by destroying it, even by accident, I can bring her peace, then I will feel that I have righted a wrong, and found clemency for having partly been responsible for the tragedy that resulted in her death. However, these trinkets are nothing compared to what happened today: Alydra found me up here. She appeared to me.

It happened after long hours spent looking for clues in the rooms I was able to reach with reasonable safety. I was bringing back another one of these objects. I was down on my knees, staring at this jumble of treasures, this half-ashen mess, when I distinctly felt freezing cold spreading through my right shoulder. I first thought it was just a colder draught than those coming from the torn roof, but when I stood up and turned around, I came face to face with Alydra's tall, vaporous figure. I could not help but jump back and was lucky I did not lose my balance. A couple of steps farther, and I would have been in for a quick, one-way trip below ending with my smashed body deep inside the pit.

Alydra must have appeared right behind me and put her hand on my shoulder without my senses registering it, and I could not help but react instinctively. Once I recovered a modicum of control over my stunned body, I could finally let my eyes stare at her at leisure. The apparition had not vanished despite my foolish reaction: Alydra was still standing before me, so pale that she seemed like a giant porcelain doll in ceremonial or wedding garb.

She was still exceptionally beautiful, dressed with regal magnificence. It was as if my eyes had never really been able to see; I felt like a blind man suddenly recovering his sight. Alydra stood in stark contrast to the surrounding shadows, a flickering candle in too deep and dark a night.

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I tried to keep my gaze steady, but I often blinked. She was magnificent, even in death! Very few artists in the peninsula could even begin to properly depict her beauty in their most splendid masterpiece. She was floating slightly ahead. Her hair, which was once a shiny blond, looked much paler now, as if covered with a veil of ashes. In her face, two large luminous eyes were looking out, shining a mysterious blue-green.

They glowed so fiercely that their light seemed to go beyond life: it was not death standing before me, but a different form of life that found an echo in my reality and whose beauty still clutched at my heart. From time to time, she shook her head, like a soft wave wrinkling the water of a calm sea after a storm. Each of her movements sent deep shivers inside me, which seemed to wake up all my senses, bring me back to myself, stirring up my memories.

None of these details escaped me during this moment frozen in time. The lightest shade, the slightest change in her attitude—everything remained in my mind with amazing clarity despite the strangeness and suddenness of the apparition.

The more I gazed upon her, the more I felt that unknown opportunities arose before me, doors that had remained barred deep inside me until then, without my understanding what they opened into.

When I was done examining her, I realized she seemed to be doing the same to me. Her eyes sometimes had the questioning look of someone who does not understand what she has discovered. She scrutinized me for a long time. Could it be she recognized me? She nodded to her side with inhuman slowness and held out her hand again, without aggressiveness, as if inviting me to take it. It seemed obvious to

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her that I would accept her invitation.

I did not move, as if I were paralyzed or too absorbed by what I had at last been given to see. Then, she seemed to want to talk to me: she slowly opened her mouth, with a slight, saddened smile... but no sound was produced.

Despite the movements of her lips that seemed to be uttering something, I heard nothing. My eyes fell upon her neck that bore the marks of my brother's numb fingers, having squeezed her throat so tightly he literally crushed it in the fit of rage his mad jealousy had led him to. Perhaps that was the reason I heard no intelligible sounds from her mouth? My sweet apparition was mute, unable to convey what she wanted to say; something obvious, her eyes seemed to indicate.

Alydra looked surprised I did not answer. Maybe she did not realize she could not speak?

Then, she slowly lowered her head, shook it negatively in some kind of inner resignation, and turned around, fading slowly into the dark. I rushed toward her, trying to hold her back somehow, but my arms only embraced the air. She had turned away from me... I was well aware, from the depths of my soul, that I had proven unable to help her in any way. Our communication had been reduced to exchanging long and intense but ultimately fruitless glances.

This meeting left me puzzled; it is only as I am writing it now that I am becoming fully aware of its reality. I was disturbed by our inability to communicate; I did not expect it. And her gaze, that strange spark in her crystalline doll eyes, as though she were disappointed, as though she did not understand me or expected me to react differently. I was

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unsettled by this look; it was a new mystery to add to all the others... and the feeling that it had directly to do with me was as odd as it was unpleasant!

I need to think. This impromptu meeting did not happen at all as I had pictured so many times. What I am here for—to speak with her again and right the wrongs I have committed in the past—is turning out to be a much more arduous matter than I first believed.

*
* *

Same day.

She came back. Barely an hour after I had finished writing my page. As if to insist, to make me understand what my poor self could not. This time, she literally rushed me!

I thought that wandering souls were intangible, yet Alydra undoubtedly knocked me backwards. I had expected her to pass right through me, but to my utter confusion, she plainly hit me, and the force of the blow sent me reeling.

Maybe spirits are sometimes capable of interacting directly with the physical world, and her will was enough to strike me. How strange...

Once more, I came a few steps away from the pit. Could she mean to harm me? I must take this possibility into account, regardless of all the love I still have for her... I turned over onto my stomach, and remained prone to look up at her without risk, ready to react to any other aggression. However, she did not attack me again, though she did not disappear either, as I would have expected. She remai-

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ned floating in the air above the pit, staring at me with the same questioning eyes. And then, she suddenly dived into the gaping maw, just like an eagle, plunging to the ground floor and below: her fall took her where the stairway had collapsed into the depths. A second later, a great bluish glow came from the depths, rose up to me, and was gone. It was like a will-o'-the-wisp that, upon burning out, gives a sharper, more intense burst of light before disappearing in the dark.

I remained aghast, staying still in the silence and darkness for some time. I tried to make sense of what had happened, endlessly thinking about what had just occurred, my eyes closed, my motionless body suspended in time. I reflected long and hard about what Alydra had just provided me in her own way: it was not an attack, it was a message; more than a clue, the way to go. I then sat up cross-legged, took out my faithful almanac, and started to blacken this page. I know where to go now. Alydra showed me the way. Soon, I will find a means to be forgiven and to free you from your wandering, I promise you, my sweet love. I am coming, Alydra.

*

* *

All is over. My investigation stops here, and has forever changed me. What I found out has changed everything. What a mistake! What a disappointment! How could I be so stupid? All the clues were before my eyes, and I saw nothing—I could not see it, or rather did not want to see it. It is the end of all that I had imagined, all that I had prepared for. No hope, no answer. My world has known its last revolution. What I found out has altered everything. Forever.

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But I must put my thoughts in order and not give in to chaos and panic. No. I should not be in such low spirits—the phrase has never been so ironic. I am writing on my journal for the very last time, probably to no avail and in vain, but in order to properly entrust my dismaying story as well as that of Alydra to these pages. Just so that they have a chance—however small—to give meaning to the meaningless, to help me understand what then seemed inconceivable in that spell of great confusion.

Let us resume, then.

After I had decided to follow the glow Alydra had left, I discarded my treasures and went down to the ground floor as easily as I had climbed up. I certainly did not have Alydra's floating grace, but my dexterity made me, all things made equal, just as aerial.

Once I had made it down, I looked once more into the dark abyss the stairway left after its collapse; the pit Alydra had briefly illuminated from its depths. Going down into that hell of broken wood was a much more daunting prospect than I had thought. If Alydra had not showed me the way so clearly, I think I would not have dared. My instincts screamed for me to forget it. Maybe I already knew—while still hiding the truth from myself—what I would find down there. It occurred to me that I might have already climbed down into that shadowy maw and forgotten about it. Or erased it from my memory. Aodren Floyd had told me that memory loss could sometimes be the result of shocks too powerful to be fully accepted by our mind. All of a sudden, I was afraid of what I would find below. What was so important for Alydra to urge me to go down there so insistently? A thought crossed my mind like an arrow: maybe it was her corpse I had found down there, and my mind had

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balked at the sight of the dead body of the woman I had loved so much in the past.

This thought terrified me, but it also revived my will. Whatever I would find down there, I would be strong this time. I promised myself to have enough courage to face what I had probably not been able to accept so far.

I tethered my rope to the boards that seemed the sturdiest, the least burned, and the least broken, which proved a delicate matter. It felt as if the rope were hanging from one of the teeth of a giant monster able to swallow me in a single bite. But I mustered all the courage I had left and started to climb down.

Once again, I did not face any difficulties, descending the rope smoothly, with a confounding sharpness of movement that continued to amaze me. Going down into such darkness would put anyone ill at ease, but my heart was pounding uncontrollably: an inner terror gradually took hold of me, one I was half-powerless to control. I was more than eager for my feet to finally touch the ground. It should not have taken long, but the descent felt like it lasted longer than eternity itself.

At last, I reached the bottom of the pit. I instinctively raised my head and saw the hole I had climbed down from. It was indeed not that deep. A new fear washed over me: there was no rope hanging from above me. Nothing. I looked down at the ground, thinking it may have fallen, but there was nothing there either. My eyes widened, and I quickly grabbed something to illuminate myself with. Light shone from my outstretched arm. I looked up again toward the top, squinting obstinately, and to my relief, I saw the rope again. Worrying thoughts occurred to me: could it be due

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to fatigue, or to the darkness? The rope was less than a yard away from me, how could I have missed it? I grabbed the rope to be fully reassured. I felt like I was losing my mind.

Feeling somewhat better, I turned left and right to get a picture of the place by the light my right hand was holding. I was in the middle of a wreck of wood and collapsed stones. The remains of the stairway were tangled together in a particularly sinister work of improvised architecture. I was indeed in the monster's mouth, that burned castle that had taken everything from me.

The basement itself was not particularly big. I had enough light to see each of the four walls that surrounded me. An old cellar, most probably. Some small manors had such a room built under the main stairway. Remains of massive barrels confirmed this theory. If I were to find something down here, it could only be on the ground: the walls were bare, and the collapse of the stairway had removed what might have been a ceiling.

I thus started to walk around the place, stepping carefully over the harrows of broken wood that were strewn over most of the floor.

It did not take much exploration before I found what Alydra had urged me into that hell of rubble for. A few yards from me, half hidden by a broken beam, I could make out a motionless human shape. "Alydra... at last!" I thought. My heart sank into my chest, as I was guided by some distressed impatience that made me hastily cross the debris still separating me from the body of the woman I had loved.

I abruptly stopped, astride the last beam that separated me from the body: it wore clothes. The flames of the fire

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should have destroyed any piece of cloth on Alydra's body and burned her almost thoroughly. I should have found a blackened skeleton, not this.

From my perch, I could make out strong, practical clothing and embroidered leather boots. Such a garb was all too familiar to me, and was worn by too recent a corpse for it to be that of my late lady. My heart sank a second time as I started to understand in an improbable stupor.

I got down from my perch, and in a fit of fear and anger, I pushed back the beam that was still hiding part of the body. It was a man, his broken body a parody of a disjointed puppet, lying on his stomach, face down...

A stronger light seemed to shine on me when I turned the body over to see his face at last. Despite my recent foreboding, a stupor seized me in front of the impossible sight I was witnessing with my own eyes. I then felt as though I were sliding into another world, at the edge of madness and life itself. That bruised face, already partly rotten... that face... it was mine. That body, those clothes, that morbid immobility, they were all mine. All at once, the collapse of the stairway fully returned to my mind and I realized that I had not avoided anything then. I had been carried away like an insect in a tornado of wood that had dragged me down into the depths of the abyss. I felt a hand squeezing my shoulder again, and I did not need to turn around to understand that it was Alydra's. She only wanted to comfort me before the horrific truth that was taking shape in my dead mind and that continues to leave me numb at this very moment, even as I write it down for the very last time in the ink of my ethereal almanac: I am a ghost...

Dusk and Dawn

By Elenyl Forgelune

It was one of those foggy, twilit fall evenings so typical of the mountainous regions of the center of the Peninsula. Six small shapes were moving stealthily, scuttling through the trees of the old forest, following the towering stone blocks, and running whenever there was no natural feature behind which they could hide. The long, sinister howling of a wolf broke the silence. The little figures huddled together, laying low. Amidst the tendrils of fog slithering on the ground, nothing and no one could have made out this insignificant heap of beings, motionless as a rock.

“We must hurry,” a tiny voice whispered. “The wolves are coming...”

“The house isn’t far,” another voice replied. “Quick, quick!”

The small line moved on, ran along an old wooden palisade, ducked under the entrance of a misshapen portico, and moved from one shadow to another through the stone circle of a deserted village square until they finally reached a fortified building. There, as the last sunset twilight rays shone weakly, with a faint creaking that could have been caused by the wind, the little ones opened the door and entered the house, as swift and quiet as ghosts.

The house was dark and looked abandoned: some of the

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roof tiles were broken, and the ground was damp in places. The children easily found their way in the darkness they were accustomed to, opened a hidden hatch, and went down to the basement while the howling of a pair of wolves rang at the edge of the village, and the nighttime darkness was quickly spreading over the mountain.

“Una, we’ve found the roots you wanted.”

“And clay, too!”

“And the wolves almost got us...”

“Thank you children, it was very brave of you to go out without me. Diordain will be better now; I am sure she’ll be able to get up soon. But if you were so late, why didn’t you come back through the tunnel? It’s less dangerous that way, isn’t it?”

“We were too scared of getting lost, you know...”

The woman left the bedside of a little girl of seven or eight and came nearer to the little group that had just come back. By the light of a lantern, carefully and silently, she examined each of the children: their eyes, their face, and the skin on both sides of their arms. Used to this ritual as they were, they complied.

“It’s alright, there’s nothing, blessed be the One,” she said at last. “Did you notice anything in the village?”

“Nothing,” the oldest of the children answered. He was named Aethel and looked nearly ten years old. “But we crossed it very quickly. The night was coming, and the wolves had already left the forest.”

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“‘Cause it took us so long to find the plant,” a younger boy added.

“Don’t worry, Gardween, you are all back safe and sound, that’s what matters. Going out at dusk is not as dangerous as at dawn: the wolves always howl before they come, whereas the first rays of the sun can catch us unaware, just like poor Diordain...”

They all turned their worried faces to the straw bed where the girl was asleep.

“You really think she saw something?” the youngest of the girls asked.

“I don’t know, Goldreïn, but she took huge risks going out during the day as she did. She has only been sleeping and raving since we found her. Her face, her eyes, and her arms have suffered a lot. I hope she will recover. Come, let’s pray for her.”

Ùna moved toward one corner of the room, followed by the children, who were looking at one another, half-interrogative, half-embarrassed. There, on a wall made of blackened wooden battens, there was a round symbol that seemed to have been crudely carved with a blade, directly on the burned wood. There were six evenly separated branches, on each of which six symmetrical lines had been drawn. The children could recognize the symbol of the Temple, the official religion of the neighboring kingdom. They did not know much about it, apart from the expansionist crusade of the past that had brought about the War of the Temple a few decades earlier.

The young woman remained standing in front of the black

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snowflake, her arms dangling at her sides, her head down. She was whispering words the children could not hear; she was praying to the One to heal them, to save the village from the evil that had suddenly devastated the population to the point that they seemed to be the last inhabitants. She was hoping that others had survived, had left to seek help, and would come back very soon with assistance. Above all, with intense fervor, she was asking for forgiveness for all her faults and doubts, and for a blessing upon her little protégés.

After what seemed like a very long time to all the children, she finally turned around with tear-filled eyes. She looked at them, one by one, and her sad face grew sterner when she noticed their uncomprehending faces.

“You did not pray?” she asked much more dryly than she meant to.

“Ùna,” Aethël said while coming nearer to two little ones who had not understood anything and had recoiled when their Dàmàthair had snapped at them. He laid a comforting hand on their shoulders to calm them. “We’re still not used to praying. It’s a little new for us here. I think you’ll have to explain it to us again...”

It was night, and when she woke up with a start, nothing was moving in the converted cellar they were all living in. The small lanterns they used for lighting were all out. She could not hear a noise, yet it seemed to her she should have heard and recognized the breathing of each of the children. Outside, in the misty night, she wondered if the village’s streets were lit by the silvery radiance of the moon. She pictured them full of hordes of ravenous, ferocious wolves, feeling their presence but failing to find them.

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Soon, dawn would drive the wolves away: they would all go back into their dark dens in the depths of the forest, where they would patiently wait for night to return. Dawn and dusk were the only times when they could go out, when the sun was below the horizon, but its light shone on the land. As soon as the first rays of light struck the mountain, the strange evil that had devastated the village spread, and it was impossible to survive outside for more than a few minutes.

When that had happened, many days ago—she regretted not having kept track now—most of the villagers were rebuilding the dam that diverted the course of a mountain stream. It had been raining continuously for two weeks; water-gorged clouds had poured on the side of the mountain and had transformed the nearby river into a frenzied cascade that had threatened to flood the village and all the surrounding crops. The Demorthèn had then used all his skill to stop the downpour, and the sun had suddenly shown again in the blue sky, as though the clouds had been swallowed by a huge maw. But the joy was short-lived: the foghorn had sounded the alarm, and a pestilent wind had swept across the square where she was with the children. She barely had the time to gather them all and bring them to her fortified house. Everyone else had started coughing, their eyes becoming bloodshot as red, suppurating, irritant spots appeared on their skin.

The deep silence roused her from her worries, and she groped her way to Diordain's bedside in the dark. She hoped that, through her care and her constant prayers, the ailment the girl was suffering from would subside. The little girl was lying so silent and quiet that she wondered if she was dead. She delicately ran her fingers over the child's arms and cheeks; she could feel the ravages of the illness that

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had left its mark on her skin—lesions, scabs, fissures... Diordain shivered, and Ùna quickly removed her hand, as if she were ashamed of her simple, innocent gesture.

“Diordain, it’s me, Ùna. Can you hear me?”

“Ùna? What’re you doing here?” Her voice was hoarse and feverish.

“I... I’ve looked after you, don’t you remember? You stayed outside when the sun came out. You almost died.”

The silence went on for what felt like an eternity for the Dàmàthair.

“I saw Ymir and Balor,” the little girl said in a breath.

“What!?”

Ùna’s two dogs had been hunting when the disaster occurred. Between the coming of the wolves and the threat of the illness during the day, the woman had quickly abandoned all hope of seeing them again.

“I saw them when I went to wee behind the house. I called them and I followed them, but they didn’t want to stay.”

“It... it’s not possible, Diordain! If they were still here, they would have come to us.”

Diordain’s voice lowered to a whisper.

“And I saw people, too...”

Ùna froze. She tried to speak but could not utter a word.

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Once the Dàmàthair recovered, the little girl had turned around on her straw bed and seemed to have fallen back asleep. The Dàmàthair reached out, but stopped right before touching her. She could feel the heat coming from the child's feverish body and immediately decided to spare her all the questions she wished to ask her. She returned to bed and waited for the darkness of the night to fade at last, unable to go back to sleep.

Some time later, Diordain finally recovered, but kept some scars she hid under her baggy clothes. All of them were outside, enjoying the fresh air of dusk. In the streets around and on the deserted square, a light mist was rising from the cold, damp ground. Ùna called them, and all eight of them quickly went back into the basement of the fortified house. As the Dàmàthair locked the hatch, a first muffled howling was heard. The wolves were coming once again to prowl the village, as they did every night.

When she reached the bottom of the wooden staircase, she saw that the children were already sitting. She joined them in front of the black wall on which the Hexcelsis, the snowflake symbolizing the religion of the Temple, had been carved on the burned wood. She sat down among the children and started to pray, softly whispering requests for help and protection to the One. The children had gotten used to this new habit. They humored their Dàmàthair by strictly attending prayer and imitating her behavior, but they did not really understand the meaning and impact of what they did. When one of them lost focus, Ùna got angry and spouted threats of hell and damnation that terrified them.

Diordain was the only one to prove indifferent. She did not even pretend to pray: she stared at the Dàmàthair without a word or noise, as if they both shared a mutual secret

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agreement. Yet, there was nothing of the sort between them. Ûna had questioned the girl on several occasions since that other night, but Diordain seemed to have no memories of what she had said then.

Yet, one morning at dawn, while the group was milling around the house, two shapes appeared on the other side of the circle of stones, emerging from the mist in the uncertain daylight. Ûna saw them right away. She put her hand on the hilt of her sword, and silently drew out the long blade.

“Go inside, children,” she said, simply, without raising her voice.

At once, as if they had been watching out for any signal from their Dàmàthair, and not frolicking in the fresh pre-dawn air, they quietly gathered and moved back into the fortified house’s protective walls. A few seconds later, the hatch clanked shut.

Then, the point of the sword struck the ground almost immediately. It suddenly felt much too heavy for the Dàmàthair’s arms, as if all her strength had abruptly failed her. She seemed to be waiting for a deadly enemy with no intention to resist its attacks, ready to cast away her desperate existence right here and then.

The clouds of mist drifted apart: two beasts were trotting toward her, their claws scraping the ground with each step, their heads down, their ears pricked-up. Their yellow eyes seemed to spark in the shaded, gray landscape. They might have been wolves, though this hour was no longer theirs. Ûna spoke, but her words only came as a stifled whisper when she called the names of those she had just recognized.

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“Ymir? Balor?”

The two dogs slowed to a halt an arm's length from the woman. They sniffed, one of them raising his nose, the other keeping it close to the ground. Then, they brushed against their mistress's legs and sat facing the house. The sword fell from Ûna's hands. She knelt down to take their powerful, purebred heads into her arms, laughing and crying at the same time, overwhelmed by emotion.

Yet, the dogs showed no joy: they sat still, accepting the caresses, staring at the doorway. Among the house's dancing shadows, she was certain she caught a glimpse of Diordain staring at her somberly, with eyes blacker than the surrounding darkness. Not turning away from the door, she picked up her sword, called her dogs almost reflexively, and walked to the house. No one. The children were below, and when she opened the hatch and walked down the stairs, followed by Ymir and Balor, she found them quietly lined up in front of the black wall, waiting for her and prayer time, as usual. Little Diordain was there as well, looking the other way.

Ûna swallowed back her uneasiness, not wanting to let it show. The children were silent, and although some of them were looking at the dogs with joy and interest, none of them dared to attract attention by breaking the daily ritual of the morning prayer. She came closer to the symbol, while the dogs sat down in the middle of the room, and as she always did, she fervently prayed to the One, thanking Him for all His blessings, particularly on that day when she was allowed to reunite with her faithful companions.

When she turned to the children, who had all remained silent, she did not find in them the fervor she expected.

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They were looking at the dogs, no longer hiding their impatience to see them more closely and pet them. She dismissed them with a gesture, pondering that it would take time to make them fully accept the existence of the One God...

She came nearer to the group to share their happiness, failing to notice the dogs' stoicism and Diordain looking at them some distance away, her eyes cold.

The day went by with the pleasure of the new company. In the evening, they went out for a short time, and the ensuing night was the first when no wolves howled. Una slept well for the first time since the illness had spread. She woke up as usual some time before dawn. A lantern was still faintly glowing, the wick of which she raised to get some more light before looking around. She blinked to dispel her drowsiness and see more clearly, then squinted to make sure of what she was seeing in the flame's low light.

One child was standing, facing the corner of the basement's back wall—the burned wall on which the symbol was carved, with the small hidden door nearby leading to the underground passageways that would allow them to flee toward the forest in case of great danger. Una rose slowly and got closer with careful steps. The child had her back turned, but she easily recognized Diordain who remained motionless, her hands behind her back as if she had been punished and put in the corner. She was whispering, pausing from time to time, but Una could not make out what she was saying. Coming closer, she shivered when she saw that the passageway door had been unlocked and was partly open. The girl seemed to exchange words through the dark, half-open doorway. The woman took one more step; the conversation stopped abruptly. Diordain turned around and

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looked at the Dàmàthair with anger-filled eyes. She spoke in a low, forceful voice.

“Didn’t I tell you, Dàmàthair, that they did not want to stay?”

At the same time, the door slammed shut, lifting and replacing the latch. Una only took a quick glance, but when she looked back at the girl, there was no trace of aggressiveness in her eyes anymore. Shaken, she almost shouted:

“What are you doing? Why did you open the door? What are you talking about?”

Her voice when she answered was Diordain’s, but it was laden with spite:

“Your dogs! They left...”

“Ymir? Balor? You... You... What did you do that for!? Why did you open the door?”

“I didn’t, the two men did. They were here, and they asked me things...”

“Liar!”

Una shouted this time. She grabbed the girl’s arms, shaking her and raining questions upon her. The little girl looked fragile and scared, paralyzed by the Dàmàthair’s violence.

“Ow! You’re hurting me!”

She let go. Behind her now stood all the children, woken by her shouting. Aëthel was holding Goldreïn’s hand, Gard-

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ween was clenching his fists on his thighs and breathing very quickly; the others were staring at her, surprised by her outburst. She felt ashamed, guilty, and devastated. She frantically looked through the cellar, seeking something to draw comfort from, and realized that the dogs were indeed missing. She fell down on her knees and burst into long and uncontrollable sobs.

Diordain rolled up her sleeves. The scarred skin of her arms showed red marks where the Dàmàthair had squeezed her. “You can pray to your God now, and ask him to forgive you for what you did. It’s too late! You’re bad, bad!”

Ùna remained prostrate for a while, then raised her eyes to the Hexcelsis. She almost called the children to join her in prayer, but in the end, she did not dare.

She prayed for a long time, by herself, with a heavy heart. The day was well on its way when she got up and scanned the room with her reddened eyes. Out of habit, she counted the children. Seven. She looked around once more. Still seven.

Diordain was missing...

“Everyone,” she said in a voice still somewhat hoarse from the tears she had been shedding all morning, “does anyone know where Diordain is?”

Diordain really was missing...

Luka, a six-year-old boy, was the first to answer, timidly.

“Maybe she’s hiding because she’s scared of you?”

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Úna felt a painful pang of guilt as she became aware that she had made a great mistake. She would have to explain herself, show the children that she was still their Dàmàthair and that they could rely on her. For them, she was ready to do anything: for them, for any one of them, she would not hesitate to give her life... Now was not the time for explanations, however. They had to find the girl quickly.

The children had gathered around her.

“Does anyone know where she is? Please, tell me if you do! It’s important—she may be in danger!”

“I think she left to get them,” Goldreïn said.

“Get who? Ymir and Balor?”

“No, the two men...”

“Men? You... you saw them too, Goldreïn?”

The little girl nodded gravely.

“Yes, once...”

“What did they look like?”

“They weren’t dressed like our dads. They looked strange...”

The village’s men were mountain people, and they all wore traditional attire, which was both practical and well-suited to their daily lives. Should these other men truly exist, they were obviously foreigners.

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“Children, we must find Diordain. Help me, and look everywhere she might be hiding. Diordain! If you’re here, show yourself right away, please. I’m sorry I got angry, but you have to come back now!”

They searched the basement from top to bottom, moved the furniture, and looked under the straw beds. No Diordain. The hatch had been left locked, like it always was, but Luka called from the back of the room:

“Ùna, the tunnel door has been unlocked...”

She was certain that the lock had slid back into position when the door had slammed. Either way, she would never have left the room vulnerable to an outside intrusion; that would have gone against all the safety principles she had been taught as a Dàmàthair.

The caves had been dug for gypsum mining, which had ceased many years ago. The passageways formed a small network of tunnels that provided a way out of the village in case of emergency or great danger. They led into the deep forest, or out of a grotto overlooking a steep slope from which a narrow and treacherous Calyre path ended not far from a road below. It was a difficult trip, as you had to be on your toes against dangers at every turn: a wild beast exploring the caverns, a hole letting the sunlight through, a wrong turn leading to a natural labyrinth where the ground was unstable and could collapse into a lower gallery... Yet, Diordain could not be anywhere but there...

An hour passed, then another one, as Ùna kept walking alone, shambling through the underground network, refraining from turning back. Then, with a jolt of terror, she sud-

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denly saw the sunlight. She forced herself to look outside, certain that she would see the little girl's lifeless body, devoured by the sun-borne illness. It was a cold and dark day. Black clouds blotted out the sky, so she hoped the illness would be less active than usual and that she would not suffer too much from the marks she already saw appear on her hands along with the stinging that spread over her face. Nothing this way, either. She was moving through a dreadful nightmare where guilt was vying with fear for the right to torture her.

She had just turned back into the tunnel when, in her lantern's light, she caught a glimpse of a fleeting shadow sliding past the end of the passageway she was currently progressing through. Knowing that her sword would not be of much use in such a narrow place, she grabbed hold of her dagger. She treaded carefully, veiling her lantern's light, and then leaped deftly in the middle of the path, ready to jump again in case of danger. A few steps away from her, in the beam of light, Ymir stood side-on, his eyes flashing green as he walked toward the path on her right.

"Ymir!" she called out.

She quickened her pace to keep up with him. However, he was always one turn ahead of her, even as she ran to catch up.

Then she stopped. Her lantern's flame was flickering, and she realized she would soon be in the dark. She had not thought of keeping track of her way, and she was not even certain of where she was. She was about to call herself an idiot when she saw Ymir waiting for her, one second before the flame died out. But was it really him? Hadn't she caught a glimpse of amber in the dying light? Ymir was

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pure white, with just a dark stripe on his higher back, while Balor was a multi-shaded tawny, from the light yellow of beech wood to the dark brown of toffee. Now completely blind, she groped forward, uncertain of what she was moving toward.

“Balor? Ymir? Is that you, my dog?”

The only answer she got was a quiet pant, and when she stretched her hand, she heard the beast trot away once more.

“Wait! Come here, I tell you!”

Una heard the creature stop. She took a step, and the animal moved away again.

“You want me to follow you, right?”

In the darkness, she moved slowly, following the path the dog seemed to guide her down. Then, suddenly, after long minutes of walking, her guide left her alone. She laid her hands on the wall, trying to find her bearings, and felt the studded wood of a door. It could only be the basement’s door, she realized with relief, and she pushed it open without even noting that the children should have locked it right after she left...

The room was dark. The children were gathered around the only bright spot, and she could not see what they were encircling.

“Children, I...”

One head turned toward her. At Gardween’s dark look, she felt her throat tighten and kept silent. Something serious was happening. She would have liked to know more, but the boy was already staring at the center of the circle again. She was walking slowly, almost against her will, as if in

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the middle of a dream in which she knew that her steps were leading her to a precipice, yet feeling inexorably drawn forward. She was aware that the children were whispering, apparently in answer to a louder voice, the source and words of which she could not make out. She could see the children's faces, lit by a light coming from the ground. She could only recognize a few of them, but she counted eight shapes. Diordain should have been among them, but she could not identify her.

"After that, she turned mad," someone whispered, "she drew her god's symbol on the wall, and told us to pray with her for our salvation."

"What did she do, then?" Said a man's voice, very composed.

"Then, when she saw that we did not, she started shouting," the child—Diordain—replied. "That's when she knocked the lantern down and started the fire..."

Another man answered, speaking clearly despite the fear in his voice.

"It matches the testimony according to which they all died of suffocation... or were burned alive, for the least fortunate of them..."

"Died!?" Una burst out.

She stepped forward, which made her able to see the two men sitting in the middle of the circle of children, whom they could not see. Their faces were sweating with fear and concentration. She made another step forward to go into the circle, and tumbled down...

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Later that afternoon, two men were talking in the village square, sitting in front of a stone. It had been erected by the Demorthèn as a tribute to the dead children, soon before the villagers left for good that place full of horror, bitter memories, and mysterious, horrifying apparitions that came back to haunt the surroundings at dusk and dawn.

“So, Aodren, what are your feelings about our little adventure?”

“I must confess, Athelsan, I have seldom been so scared in all my life!”

“Now, my dear friend, let us leave such base human reactions aside, and instead focus on the facts—and only the facts, please.”

“Well, the testimonies of the former village’s survivors matched what we were able to observe: if the alarm was indeed raised by the village idiot, who believed wolves were attacking while all the able-bodied men were busy reinforcing the dam, it stands to reason that the Dàmàthair would take shelter with the children.

The villagers had not noticed anything unusual about the Dàmàthair. She sat on the village council and was thus a keeper of the traditions. However, the Hexcelsis shows us that she had converted to the cult of the One God, probably in secret, which is a sign of inner trouble. One does not turn toward religion when all is well, but rather when one seeks an answer to unanswerable questions. It may be that in the

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face of what she thought was a real danger, she wanted to provide the children with what she considered as protection: redemption through prayer...”

“Very accurate observations. You are a brilliant mind, as I had been told. I am honored to offer you some help and share my knowledge about spirits and ghosts.”

“The method you used to bring us into contact with the children was hypnosis, wasn’t it?”

“Close. I used a hypnotic beam to allow us to reach another level of consciousness. By slowing our breathing and heart rate, and by honing our perceptions, I allowed the children to find a means to communicate with us. We got within their reach, so to say.”

“I use hypnosis as well, but I had never thought about making use of it for such phenomena. It must be dangerous, mustn’t it?”

“Not that much, truly. The beam which kept us in a hypnotic trance was deliberately made unstable. As soon as a powerful manifestation appeared, it interfered with the beam, which broke and sent us back into a normal state in which we can only perceive the manifestation’s presence very lightly. That is precisely what happened: the woman came back while we were talking to the children, and all the ties were suddenly severed. “

“What will become of them now?”

“Aodren, do not be mistaken. They are all dead! Though they were still present, in a form we can describe as ghostly, their existence was no more than a parody of the life they

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lived. Will they come back? Did they finally cross over to another shore inaccessible to mortals—Heaven or Limbo—or did they merge with the Great All of Corahn-Rin, the Life-Tree? Who knows? As opposed to many others, we occultists do not claim to hold the one truth. Our observations and studies are led by reason, we must not assert anything that we cannot prove. This is what sets us apart from all the obscurantists, Demorthèn, adepts of the One, sorcerers, and assorted priests of some almighty spirit... Never forget this: it is the most important lesson of occultism I can teach you.”

“I am grateful, Master Oxcendre,” Floyd replied with a smile.

“My dear friend, let me now go back to that letter I received before I came to meet you. If our respective discoveries are not shared, or only in a limited way, what purpose will they serve? Should there exist, as it seems to be the case, a secret society of occultists whose aim is to share the advances of every one of its members in order to allow us to progress more rapidly in the fields where each member excels, would you not be tempted to take part in this adventure? In these three days with me, I hope that you have discovered many things about spiritualism. It would have taken you months, even years, to understand and grasp all of this by yourself. I have also made progress thanks to you, and I greatly appreciated the discussions we have shared. Imagine the benefits of being able to read the notes of the greatest specialists in any given discipline, or even meeting them and being imparted the secrets of their art!”

“Hmm, this red circle business does seem interesting... But again, before I agree to be part of anything, I prefer to proceed with circumspection and caution. I will let you explore

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this possibility, and in a few months, once you can tell me more, I will make my decision. But I beg you, be careful, and try to understand what there is behind this whole thing. Try to find out who contacted you, why, and how. Who will finance the archiving of the notes, where, and for what purpose? There are still too many unanswered questions.”

The two men had been walking through the mist, following the dirt track leaving the village. They returned to their horses, which had been kept by the son of an innkeeper that lived in the village in the valley below. Aodren Floyd had to leave for Osta-Baille immediately, and the journey was a long and dangerous one. As for Oxcendre, he would go back to the inn where he would wait a day or two for the coming of a merchant caravan that would return him home, to Reizh.

“Goodbye then, Dr. Twain. Will I have the pleasure of seeing you again?” Athelsan asked as they were about to leave.

“Who knows?”

“Well, might I at least expect to hear from you again? If only to inform you of the beginnings of the occultist society.”

“I must indeed admit that it piques my interest. I will write to you within a few months, a year, at most. Goodbye, and thank you again for this new experience.”

Twain spurred his horse, which quickly trotted down the small, winding road. The man and the boy watched him for a while before going toward the village. Oxcendre glanced back to the cloud of obscuring mist and thought he noticed a figure running down a very narrow Calyre path beginning

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at a hollow in the nearby cliff, and which appeared to wind toward the road he was following. He focused, squinting.

“Huh, I must have been mistaken...” he muttered.

Look in the Mirror!

By Nico du dème de Naxos

Grimace dropped against the dingy wall of the rickety house. He wiped the sweat from his forehead with the tattered lapel of his jacket and breathed the icy air, taking long, burning gulps. This time, it had been a close shave. The harmless-looking guy whose string of Daols he had tried to snatch had started to yell, struggling fiercely. By some extraordinary misfortune, two guards had still been hanging around this late and had given him chase through the streets of the lower town. He had never run so fast in his life, slipping on the uneven cobblestones, changing direction at the very last moment, almost rushing into two sinister-looking men before slipping through the narrow underground passage that led to a small plaza not far away. From there, he stalked the shadowy alleys, carefully making his way back to his own territory: the only part of the lower town he knew like the back of his hand and where he felt perfectly safe.

Grimace kept gasping for air until he had regained his breath. With a burning throat and trembling legs, he glanced around to make sure that the guards had not managed to follow him this far. The dark street was bathed in the silence common to deserted places. The windows, the doors, and all the other openings of the houses piled helter-skelter along the street were barred with hastily-nailed wooden boards. The street had burned—arson, presuma-

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bly—a year ago, but the authorities of the capital city of Taol-Kaer, represented by Administrator Malcain, had not yet made any decision concerning the rehabilitation of the district.

This is where Grimace and the other members of the “Laughing Rats” gang had found shelter after they had been driven off by a fiercer and more organized group. Life in the “Burned Street”—as he called it, not without some fondness—was particularly dangerous. The smallest out-of-control fire could quickly set it ablaze again. Their boss’s instructions were clear, and if one of the Rats was caught playing with a tinderbox or even a flint, he could kiss his membership goodbye. Grimace still remembered a firebug the boss had thrown straight into a well that dropped into the sewers. He had chanced upon him again a few months later. Both his legs were broken, and he made a living begging on a wooden wheeled board an old, compassionate Magientist had given him to move around on.

His life sucked big time, to be sure. He hadn’t managed to earn a single Daol today, and his last attempt had nearly ended with a visit to the pit, undoubtedly with a good beating thrown in. The boss would probably chew him out, and even take it out on him if he were in a bad mood, as was often the case lately. And Grimace had better not come back empty-handed the next day, or his back would remember it. The last yowls of the cat-o’-nine-tails had stung for nearly three weeks, and the pain brought tears to his eyes during the first days. “Grimace,” he reflected, using the name the other gang members enjoyed using to annoy him. “That’s what you’ll reap if you don’t pull up your socks!” Well, he could already forget about this evening’s meal. At best, the others would only leave him a dog, cat, or rat’s bone to chew, if they left him that small pleasure at all. But

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he didn't kid himself: he would go crawling to his mattress with an empty belly and would wake up at dawn tomorrow with belly cramps.

Grimace had been abandoned by his parents and taken in by one of the lower town's orphanages. After a few years suffering the ill-treatment of an angel-faced but cruel supervisor, he had taken his leave through a window that looked onto the building's meager orchard. He twisted his ankle when he landed, but the boy had gritted his teeth as always before climbing over the gate to reach the cobblestones of freedom.

He had quickly understood that to keep this freedom, he had to prove his worth to one of the criminal gangs that ruled the lower town. His first choice turned out to be disastrous since his fellow pickpockets and robbers had been taken down by stronger rivals. Grimace had fled with another member, Verse, who had learned to read and who knew Soustraine's Writings by heart. He was rather cowardly and not very resourceful, but he was still useful as he was the only thief around who could translate the long series of incomprehensible signs on the parchments into intelligible words. His role was mainly to enliven the evenings by reading the few books the boys could bring to the hideout.

Even now, Verse was his only friend, the only companion in misfortune he could truly rely on. Sometimes he had it up to here with the weird Ordinances of the One, but the sacred sentences often kept them occupied during the slack periods of the day, between dishonest attempts to get their hands on a few more Daols. He had come to know some of them by heart as well, and that was how, more than once, he had managed to quell the suspicions of passing pilgrims

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by having them believe he was a devoted follower of the One, open-handed but down on his luck.

Brooding on his bad luck, Grimace stood up wincing, rubbing his painful lower back. It was time to return to the Laughing Rats, a wholly unpleasant prospect. It was then he saw a richly dressed burgher walking in the narrow street. The perpetual sneer on Grimace's face turned into a wicked smile, the only way his features scarred by human hand could still express joy. When the orphanage people picked up Grimace in the street, he was bathed in his own blood, his face hideously wounded by a deep gash going from the right corner of his mouth up to under his ear. That mutilation was the work of a sadistic mind that had been plaguing Osta-Baille for months, looking for easy prey to commit his insane crimes. He had scarred more than a dozen people in the lower town, but also in the wealthier districts of Dïol and Trádáil. The soldiers were on full alert, but the man seemed to slip through their fingers, as if he were as intangible as smoke. The madman had stopped a few months later, but he had remained uncaught...

Grimace's expression turned into a dismayed scowl when he saw two armed brutes, one with an ax and the other with a long sword. They were walking with a nonchalance too calculated to be natural, and the teen understood at once that they had been hired to be the burgher's bodyguards.

The wealthy man suddenly noticed Grimace when he stood up, and his eyes widened. With a brisk gesture, he pointed at the thief, which set the two thugs on him like clockwork. Grimace bolted away, knowing that he didn't stand a chance against the two armed bruisers after him. At first, he thought he would manage to shake them off, but still out of breath from his recent escape, he quickly started to lose

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ground. With no other way out in sight, he climbed on a barrel, leaped, caught a cornice, and tried to reach the slate roof rising above him. But just when he was about to get a foot on the roof's edge, a hand caught his leg and wrenched him back to the ground. He would have smashed his head had the other brute not taken care to soften his fall.

"Don't move!" the big man with the ax ordered. "Our master wants to talk with you about an urgent matter."

"I'm sure you're mistaken," Grimace whimpered, trying in vain to struggle away from the brute's hairy, filthy hand.

"Shut up, you damn brat, or I'll give your face a second ugly smile!" He then laughed coarsely, which gave Grimace a burning desire to stab him in his pride-swollen throat with the shiv hidden in his shoe. However, he stopped squirming.

The wealthy man arrived soon after, pulling on his long handlebar mustache.

"Well, well, well, look what we have here! Yes, I am not mistaken, you are the boy I am looking for. You are as ugly as I was told."

Grimace tried to spit in his arrogant face, but the man quickly stepped aside to avoid the spittle.

"My, my, how childish young people can be! Attempted aggression against a representative of the law. Well, I will deduct that from your assets, boy. Come, stop being a fool and follow me. You don't know it yet, but you are very lucky. I can even say that you're damn lucky, oh yes!"

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Grimace did not understand anything this man said, his words making as much sense as those of a beer-filled drunkard. Still, there was nothing for him to do but accept the “invitation.”

“Good, good, I see you catch on quickly. That’s for the best! Let us get on with this matter, and then go to bed! Tomorrow will be all the brighter!”

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“And now, all you have to do is sign here, and the mansion is yours. It’s that simple! What? Oh, you can’t write. Well, just draw a triangle, you know, like the symbol representing our three kingdoms’ unity.”

“That’s it?”

“Absolutely, boy! You have nothing else to do. Your uncle had prepared everything. In his will, he clearly stated that if there is no direct heir, all his property goes to his nephew, provided he is still alive. Your uncle came to visit you in the orphanage, but I guess you don’t remember. He was an excellent portraitist, and he made a sketch of you in Ear Caladh ink. Unfortunately, after you escaped from the orphanage, he lost track of you...”

“Here you go.” Grimace held out the paper to the burgher, who took it with a predatory smile.

“That’s perfect. So, here are the property titles with your actual name, a letter from your uncle in which he explains to you several things you must know, along with a wax-sealed envelope containing the manor’s keys. Um... that’s

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it, I think. My fee has already been taken, so I believe it's time to part ways!"

He patted the boy on the shoulder with what seemed like affection, pressed a bundle of various documents into his hands, and walked him to his office door.

"It's time to enjoy life, boy! This is the beginning of another existence for you."

"But... where is the manor?"

"How absent-minded of me!" the burgher sighed, slapping his forehead with the tips of his long fingers. "The manor is in the district of Dïol, away from the constant bustle of this part of the town. Problem is, you don't know Dïol, and the guards will not let you in with your appearance and obvious lack of good manners. Well, I'll ask someone to take you there. "

"Tristan!" the burgher shouted, looking up to the ceiling. "Get over here! I need you to take the boy to his new home. Chop chop!"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm coming. You know, that wasn't part of the contract!" the brute with the ax grumbled as he trudged down the stairs to the single room of the office's ground floor. "If you want me to go to Dïol, that's gonna cost ya. It's not 'round the corner."

"Ha ha, of course! It so happens the boy's uncle left additional money to cover this kind of unexpected expenses. You'll have the Daols you deserve, Tristan."

"It's a deal, Briskarn. Come on, scarface, we're leaving."

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Finding the manor turned out to be much more difficult than expected. The Magientist elevators were not open after dark, so they had to take the endless rock-carved stairs leading to the top of one of the rocky peaks where Diöl was spread out. Walking up the stairs had left them breathless and sweating like Boernacs, despite the absence of sunlight and the fresh air of early Damhar.

Under the vaporous light of the Nebulars and the flickering one of Tristran's lantern, they had crossed a bridge with worn guardrails leading to the district of Diöl itself. The brute must have lost his way at least ten times, and his already unpleasant mood had been getting worse. More by chance than by dint of deduction, they had finally arrived at a high, dark building built on the edge of the peak. The Nebulars did not illuminate that part of Diöl; either they did not work, or no one saw the need to provide light in that place. Grimace fumbled for the heavy envelope Briskarn had given him and took out a big ring of keys. Followed by Tristran, he pushed an old, rusty iron gate that creaked loudly on its corroded hinges and moved along a short, paved lane leading to an impressive porch. In the wavering light of the lantern, the boy could only make out its massive, threatening shape as he walked to the large entrance door.

Sparkling in the flickering light, a silver doorknocker in the shape of a big, cabled ring caught in an undefinable creature's twisted mouth invited people to make their presence known. However, no one inhabited the manor yet, and Grimace tried to open the door, inserting one by one the

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many keys in the lock shaped like a gaping mouth. Each time he put a key in the lock and tried it, he thought he could hear low moans. Still, exhausted as he was after such a long day and wanting to get some rest quickly, Grimace did not pay it much attention. Under Tristran's growing grumblings, he persisted and finally managed to get the door open with a key he thought he had already used... but they all looked alike, so he could not be sure.

The brute bid the boy goodbye with a grunt and turned back at once, leaving the thief under the porch's deep darkness. The door weighed a ton, and Grimace had a hard time getting it open enough to get into the manor. Inside, the pitch-black darkness concealed everything. He had nothing to light his way with, but as he certainly did not want to spend the night outside, he closed the door behind him with difficulty and groped his way through the darkness.

Accustomed to stressful situations, the boy did not yield to fear. However, he felt oppressed, as if someone—or something—was spying on him in the darkness. He kept moving forward blindly, and felt that he was walking through the frame of a door left open. He could then vaguely discern some large, bright spots. One of the windows of the big room he was now in let through cold rays of light gliding over the pale shapes he could make out around him. Once his eyes had gotten used to the dim light, he realized he was standing at the entrance of a high-ceilinged room, crowded with furniture covered with white cloth protecting them from dust and humidity. Going for what seemed to be a sofa, he removed the cloth and laid down on the comfortable couch. Moments later, he was snoring loudly.

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A great cracking sound jolted him awake. The golden light of dawn came in through the half-closed shutter that had let in silvery moonlight the night before. He looked up and saw a crowd of grimacing characters joining hands. They formed a frieze surrounding a trompe l'oeil ceiling representing a strange scene. A man with a handsome smiling face and a short pointed beard, dressed in beautiful clothes of embroidered brocade, stood on a sunlight-bathed cloud. Under the woolly mass, naked men and women whose bodies bore bleeding injuries were desperately trying to grab hold. Their faces expressed the abject terror of falling into the yawning abyss beneath their feet. Its rocky walls were licked by huge, blackish flames with glowing red outlines in which screaming bodies were burning, frightfully contorted in a vain attempt to escape their torment.

Grimace rubbed his eyes to make sure he was not dreaming, but the cruel scene remained as he had just seen it. He got up from the sofa and almost tripped on the papers he had dropped on the floor during his sleep. He took his uncle's letter in his hands, stared at it for a while, but could only admit his inability to make sense of its contents. At the same time, his stomach roared dreadfully. He was starving, and badly needed something to eat; anything edible. He explored the ground floor of the manor, but there was not a single scrap of food to be found in the big kitchen or in the large room serving as a dining room.

The situation was so comical that Grimace had to let out a bark of laughter. He was now filthy rich, but did not have a bean to eat! Going for another approach, he walked up the main stairway going from the sitting room to the first floor, in search of his uncle's bedroom. A dark corridor gave way on both sides to many rooms of faded colors. It smelled dusty and musty, and he suddenly started to choke.

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He opened the windows and shutters one after another to let in the cold air and golden light of autumn. He breathed a sigh of relief and went on with his investigation.

He finally found a door barred by an ornate lock, on the bronze panel of which the graceful shape of a naked woman had been hammered. A slender being had been wrought under her legs, looking up with an impish smile. The boy grinned dumbly at the saucy meaning depicted before his eyes, and looked carefully at his keys before choosing one. Luckily, the first he tried—a long, thin, black key in the shape of a snake—was the good one.

The door opened noiselessly, and Grimace walked into a small, dark, circular room. Oddly enough, there were no windows, and a canopy bed with drawn purple hangings on each of its four sides stood in the middle of the room. He left the round room, as he dubbed it on the spot, to look for some source of light. He found a candelabrum in another, bigger room and lit it with a Magientist Lighter. The boy had already seen burghers use this very expensive Artifact, and it did not prove difficult to activate the thin metallic rod, at the base of which a Flux cartridge had been inserted.

The candelabrum's three candles cast fantastic shadows on the round room's walls. Grimace put aside his light source and drew the curtains to have a look at what was hidden behind. The large bed was perfectly made; the part of the sheet sticking out of the quilt made of good Leacach wool was without any wrinkles. It came to his mind the bed was so large that three people could have slept without one touching the other. He crawled out of the bed, brooding over his fruitless search.

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It was then that he saw on one of the walls the portrait of a man looking just like the one on the cloud, painted on the sitting room's ceiling. His cheeks sported a few wrinkles, and his temples were slightly gray. Grimace took a closer look at the painting from either side, and it seemed to him the painted eyes were following him; most likely an illusion due to the dancing shadows born of the light of the three candles. When he let the frame fall back against the wall, he heard a heavy clang. Puzzled, he took the painting off the wall and saw an inlaid wooden panel depicting a horrible scene: a man dressed as a huntsman wielding a long hunting knife was jumping at a woman in torn clothes with a bleeding gash on the right side of her face. Grimace felt a cold shiver through his body and quivered violently. He remained motionless for a while, taking some time to recover from the shock.

He ran his fingers over the panel, looking for a means to open it. One of the corners gave way, and the panel slid, revealing a compartment containing a big casket. Seeing that it was not locked, the boy opened it and found a wealth of Daols and jewels. The riches glittered before the young thief's eyes. All his troubles were really over! There only remained one detail to take care of: dressed as he was, any merchant would be wary of him; even if he spent a frost Daol. Therefore, he needed to find better clothes.

He searched the wardrobes of all the rooms and got his hands on clothes of about his size, though they looked strangely old-fashioned. He would certainly look like a young eccentric with these clothes, but he was in the district of Diol, the place of entertainment and eccentrics, and he should go relatively unnoticed amidst the crowd.

When he left the manor with a string on which he had

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threaded several azure Daols and a frost one, he noticed a round tower that stood above the manor. Right below the roof, mullioned windows of stained glass with lead cross bars looked like eyes watching the surroundings. They probably opened on the tower's only room, as there was no access from the bottom. He promised himself he would have a look later.

Sauntering happily, the boy went as fast as he could to buy something to assuage his ravenous hunger and quench his thirst. Once he was full, he stood still for a few minutes on the edge of a busy alley, thinking about what he would do now. He remembered his uncle's letter and decided to get Verse's help. Grimace wondered if he should tell him the whole truth, and finally opted for prudence. He would go to his old friend wearing his former clothes and would devise a night's adventure explaining both why he had not come back to the hideout the night before, and how he had found the letter. Verse would undoubtedly believe him; he had no reason to distrust him.

Grimace went back to the manor, put on his rags, and took the letter, rolling it and tucking it into his hemp belt.

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The big, crumbling building still smelled burnt. For years, the Laughing Rats' hideout kept the same pungent, fiery odor. Within just one night, Grimace had already had time to forget it and wondered how he had been able to bear the suffocating stench of this house for so many years.

He stopped some ten yards away from the hideout, out of sight of the boy who continually watched the surroundings

Look in the Mirror!

to avoid any serious trouble with the other gangs. He gave a high-pitched trill, the signal he and Verse had agreed upon to meet a bit further in the lower town, in an old, derelict Magientist warehouse. He did not wait for an answer and hurried to the meeting place. Five minutes later, Verse came, a skinny kid floating in his shabby clothes.

“I was worried about you! Where the hell were you?”

Grimace gave him the pitch he had cooked in the morning, which Verse bought without any question.

“I need you to help me make sense of this letter to see if it can be useful to us. Can you read it?”

He handed the letter to Verse, who had no problem delivering its content aloud. Written with an elegant style, it did not dawdle over details, quickly getting to the point.

“My dearest heir,

Whoever you are, I greet you. If you are reading this letter, it means I have departed from this world. Death is the natural ransom of life, and we all have to pay it. I am content and only have one regret: that I did not manage to find the treasure my ancestors have hidden in the manor over a century ago. A colossal fortune is lying somewhere within its walls, waiting for someone cleverer than me to discover it. I studied the matter for a long time and kept the result of my research in the manor’s secret room. To reach it, I invite you to climb the circular stairway, only accessible from the part of the garden located at the back of the manor. If you climb the stairs, you will reach what will appear to be a dead end. The entrance is actually simply hidden by a subtle mechanism. Follow the instructions on the back of this

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letter, and it will be easy for you to trigger the opening of the hatch leading to the top of the tower. Once you get there, pore over my works and try to unravel the mystery of the hidden treasure.

May the coming years be fortunate to you!

Théodran Scathèn”

“What a strange letter!” Verse wondered.

“Meh. Unless you know where the manor that guy mentions is, I can’t see much use for it.”

“Scathèn... that’s not a very common name. I could ask around. Maybe I’ll find something that’ll set us on the right track.”

“Hmm, that’s an idea. Let me know when you’ve found something!”

“Wait, where are you running off to?!”

Grimace did not wait to see if Verse was running after him and raced toward Diol. It took him several hours to go back, forced to take many detours not to draw the attention of the guards of the wealthy districts.

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Grimace did not care about Théodran’s instructions. He was used to searching other people’s houses. After all, bur-gling was his thing. When he reached the top of the narrow, circular stairway with its icy, dusty stairs, he probed the

Look in the Mirror!

stone wall barring the way under the light of an oil lamp he had found in the sitting room. The work had been done masterfully, and it took the boy time to spot the thin crack in which he inserted the blade of his shiv. A stone square slid away, revealing a sort of strange wooden jigsaw puzzle. It was undoubtedly a Magientist contraption, a kind of sophisticated lock that would only open with the right combination. Grimace took the letter from his belt, taking care not to burn it. The day before, he had noticed that its back bore annotations, along with drawings. He turned it over and examined the complicated sketch. It seemed to show in which order and how to move the puzzle's wooden pieces to open the passage. The boy followed the instructions, and one minute later, he heard grating noises followed by irregular thumps, like a rolling carriage on a paved road, as the wall slid aside before him.

The secret door opened into a room illuminated by the multicolored light from the stained glass windows. One of the windows depicted a man with a gaping hole in his chest while the other showed a buxom, naked woman holding a bloody heart in her cupped hands. The owner sure had strange tastes in art!

His mind feverish at the idea of uncovering the hidden treasure, Grimace frantically rummaged through the tables, desks, chests of drawers, and boxes that filled the room almost entirely. He found countless scribbled sheets of paper covered with the same elegant writing as the letter, as well as sketches. One of the boxes was full of glass vials containing liquids of undefinable colors, and the chest of drawers contained complex, annotated diagrams he could not make head nor tail of. He searched for two good hours, but found nothing of interest.

Look in the Mirror!

He would not manage to solve that mystery by himself. It was time to let Verse in on the secret.

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Verse first got angry, but excitement quickly got the better of him, and he followed his friend—who, this time, had decided to wear his beautiful clothes—to his property. Grimace had to remind him to lay low several times, as the presence of the scrawny boy dressed in dirty rags next to the nouveau riche in his finery would surely have attracted unwanted attention. In the end, the two thieves successfully sneaked past the guards patrolling Diol and reached the remote part of the district where the manor was.

“So this is the secret room where we must find clues about the location of the treasure?”

Verse raised his eyes toward Grimace perched on the desk, his hands full of papers he scattered over his friend.

“Cut it out! That’s not funny!”

“Chill out, it’s just a joke.”

“Grimace,” Verse scolded him, “Look at all these papers! It’ll take me days to go through it all!”

“Then start now, instead of complaining. I’m going to town to buy us a royal feast!”

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Look in the Mirror!

When he came back, Verse was squirming with anticipation. He was holding a paper in one hand and a vial in the other.

“Well, it may seem fast, but I think I’ve found how to find that bloody treasure!”

“Have you? Soustraine’s balls, you sure are lucky!”

“Do not swear! Holy things are important!”

“Don’t get upset. Come on, tell me everything, I’m all ears.”

“Very well. I saw that your uncle studied catoptromancy... that’s the art of seeing faraway things in a mirror. Anyway, as I understand it, two conditions are required for it to work. First, prepare a mirror with the appropriate ritual. Second, go into a trance to send your mind through the mirror.”

“And... ?”

“And I am holding in my left hand a vial containing a drink that will allow your mind to leave your body. Speaking of which, your uncle has plenty of strange drinks in his boxes. According to the labels, there is one that makes you invisible, and another that... um, gives much pleasure.”

“I’m having a hard time following you, Verse. Do you really believe in crazy things like that? Like your mind leaving your body and seeing faraway things in a mirror?”

“Yes, I do. The miracles of the One are much more impressive than these... little tricks.”

“I guess you’re right. But what about the mirror?”

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“I was getting to that. In an unfinished note, your uncle mentions a mirror he was preparing for his catorpto... well, to locate his treasure. The problem is that he doesn't say where it is.”

“Why don't we take another mirror?”

“According to your uncle, it would have no chance of working.”

“How can we find it if we don't have any leads?”

“Ah ah! Actually, we'll at least know what it looks like.

” Verse quickly flipped through pages of the notebook he had been holding in his hands since the beginning of their conversation. Then, he opened it wide. A drawing of an ordinary hand mirror filled a whole page. Grimace took a closer look, but there was nothing else to see.

“Does that ring a bell?”

“No, but it could be anywhere in the manor and, and like you said, we can't even be sure that my uncle had prepared it.”

“Right now, this seems to be our only lead. Apparently, your uncle studied much more complicated ways to find the treasure, but I must admit I wasn't able to make much sense of them... Of course, with more time...”

“Forget about it, we'll look for the mirror.”

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Look in the Mirror!

It took them several days and a great stroke of luck to find it. A better diet gave Verse a healthy plumpness, and Grimace let time run its course, making the most of his new life. One day, as he was dozing on the sofa in the large sitting room, he heard the high clock ring four o'clock in the afternoon. He sat up, yawning, and shambled toward it. There had to be a way to stop that blasted pendulum, to stop that clock from waking him when he was so well in the land of dreams. He opened its central compartment and probed the inner mechanism. To his utmost surprise, he felt a cold surface, which turned out to be the perfectly circular hand mirror he was looking for.

The object was resting barely an inch under the pendulum, which brushed against it and reflected in it with each swing. Grimace stopped the pendulum with his hand and bent down to pick up the mirror. It was surprisingly heavy for its size, but unlike the reflecting surface, its handle was warm to the touch. The boy examined himself and thought he looked quite good, well dressed and well fed as he was. The life of a burgher had its charms, as the mirror plainly showed.

Suddenly, he heard Verse coming and without even realizing what he was doing, he hid the mirror under the sofa. He cut the conversation short with a few trivial sentences and waited until Verse left the room to take the mirror and gaze at himself again. It seemed to him that the gash that scarred his face had shrunk. He stared intensely at the mirrored surface, and the gash grew smaller and smaller until it was completely gone. There was no more Grimace, just a handsome teenager who could easily break the hearts of impressionable young ladies.

He spent the afternoon admiring himself in his new toy and barely touched his food during his dinner with Verse. His

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friend was worried, but he told him he had eaten enough during the last few days, and that his stomach should get a rest from such a princely diet. Verse tried to talk to him, but Grimace answered evasively; his mind was elsewhere. Grimace wandered through the manor until his friend went to bed, then immediately fetched the mirror back from where he had left it, away from prying eyes. He left the manor, walked round the building, and climbed the stairs leading to his uncle's secret working room. There, he looked for the vial meant to make the trance easier and found it exactly where Verse had left it.

He uncorked it, smelled its content with much suspicion, but found the odor surprisingly pleasant. He drank one sip. The drink was delicious, and he downed it all in one gulp. He absentmindedly dropped the vial and sat cross-legged in the middle of the room to gaze at himself in the mirror. The handsome teenager smiled at him, and Grimace suddenly felt his mood soar. Bathed in the multicolored moonlight pouring from the stained glass windows, he felt wonderfully relaxed. All of his former life's troubles—his disfigured mug, the evenings when he came back empty-handed and was beaten bloody by the boss, his daily meals of vegetable peels with rat or cat meat—all that misery had vanished on the surface of the mirror.

It was time to look for that treasure. The boy intensely stared at the mirror, trying to see through it, but all there was to look at was his new handsome face. Even so, he was patient and kept his objective in mind.

It seemed to him that his face was getting blurry, and he felt fluctuations in the light all around him. The stained glass windows' warm green, purple and gold suddenly faded away to be replaced by indigo veils. Ice-cold, they

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were waving on either side, forming a moving corridor at the end of which he could see a sparkling orb. Shivering, Grimace walked toward the sphere. However, the more he advanced, the more remote the light seemed to be.

The corridor appeared to sink now on one side, now on the other, while the boy kept staggering forward, feeling ill. It quickly became too much, and he vomited. As he wiped his mouth with the back of his nice frock coat's sleeve, he felt everything getting dark all around him, and his earlier confidence started melting like snow in the sun. A vague apprehension seized him, and he understood he had set foot on a dangerous path.

Like a sardonic echo of his worries, the light laughter of a man rang.

“Come here, my grimacing friend. Welcome to the true home of Théodran Scathèn!”

“Who are you?”

“Your uncle, of course, my dear heir!”

“Where are you? I can't see you.”

“Are you certain of this?”

“Stop playing with me and show yourself now!”

“Really? And what are you going to do, you empty-headed brat? Scare me away with your crooked smile? Ha ha ha...”

Grimace felt his anger rising, and the darkness flowed back. He was in the manor's sitting room, not far from the sofa

Look in the Mirror!

on which the mirror was resting. However, the room looked odd, as if it were not truly here. The furniture looked like unstable constructs of mist that would disappear if he took his eyes off them, even for a moment. He moved toward the sofa with aggravating slowness, determined to grab hold of the mirror.

The floor was freezing under his feet, and polar draughts sliced through his clothes. His breath turned into a ghostly steam that instantly mingled with the vague shapes furnishing the place.

“Yes, that’s it! Look in the mirror, my friend, and see your true face, the one that will be yours for eternity!”

Grimace tried to ignore the sarcastic voice, but fear was growing inside him, ready to overwhelm him.

At last, he reached the sofa, grabbed the handle of the mirror, and looked at himself in its silver surface. With a jolt of terror, instead of his own tortured face, he discovered that of a smiling, handsome man with a short pointed beard.

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