

The Morgen and the Monk

The world is like a house; it can be as comforting or as cold as you make it and everyone who passes through leaves their mark. It has its histories—and its secrets—especially in the dark and forgotten places. But in a house there are two areas above all others that teem with the unknown: the basement and the attic. It is there where the imagination is captured. So if you wish to seek out the wondrous, the horrid, the never-before-seen, don't explore the well-trodden middle ground of the world; look to its depths. Or its heights.

- Orman the Bard, Between a Roc and a Hard Place

Still as stone, I let the cold waters rush over me, soaking through my fur and down to the bone. I sit in the pose taught to me by my master and passed down through the generations at the monastery: legs crossed, hands resting palms-up on my thighs with my tail curled around my waist. There was a time where my tail would have had difficulty curving around my stomach but my trip through the Akama Desert fixed that. The hunger is like a tiny beast gnawing at the shriveled pit that was once my stomach. Hopefully the clear waters will drive the beast away long enough for me to focus on my meditations. Only mountain waters have that special mind-freezing quality that's perfect for inner reflection.

Alright now. Slow the breathing. Focus as each crisp breath enters the lungs and on each exhale let all of the distractions and anxieties (and sand) from my journey float away. My thoughts are but clouds (made of sand) floating past a mountain (Mount Sandy Sand). Let these cool mountain waters wash away all (sandy) thoughts, leaving nothing but calmness and sand...serenity. Sand sand sand sand-sand-sand-sand-

“Aaargh! Fuck fuckity fuck-shit fucking sand!” I duck immediately after my outburst. I’ve been trying to rid myself of that habit, but after getting struck by their master’s ironwood staff so often one develops an instinctual dodge reflex. No such blow comes (duh). Sighing with relief, I reflect back on the numerous times that staff met its mark. The knocks on the noggin, as well as the welts and lumps that followed, were always the result of my disruptive outbursts during meditations. However, in my defense, those outbursts were always for good reasons. There was that one time where I thought of a really funny joke, or the time when I decided to have third helpings of that lotus blossom and three bean salad, or that time where I was attacked by a deadly deadly Veloba wasp, only to have it magically turn into a falling cherry blossom when everyone turned their heads to look at me.

But now it’s all this *sand!* Never in my life have I felt so uncomfortable. Despite my greatest efforts to shield myself from the elements while on my journey, the desert found a way to breach all my defenses every step of the way. Even after leaving the vast white dead expanse of the Akama and entering the slow rolling foothills of the Giorrach Mountains, I still continue to find tiny granules of sand in every nook and cranny. Every. Nook. And. Cranny. Climbing over the moss-worn boulders just made the sand nestle deeper into my fur. And ears. And nose. And...well, everywhere.

The waterfall changes all that. Sitting under the chilly waters those thousands of tiny annoyances simply wash away. This place is a godsend; the journey through the mountains will be difficult enough without the mind-searing irritation of sand in my crotch. Clear, refreshing liquid fills my cupped paws then slowly trickles through them. The vista before me is absolutely breathtaking; the waterfall is situated in a tiny alcove halfway up the foothills overlooking the desert. Green-gray speckled hills gradually smooth out and become drained of their color as the searing desert takes over. It’s certainly a beautiful scene, but having come this far in the journey I’m quite used to such panoramas. If only there was a companion to enjoy it with me. Perhaps one of those cute desert cats I met at that outpost. Heh, I bet they know a thing or two

about...ugh, but the sand....

“It’s pretty isn’t it?” I jump at the soft, lilting voice and look around in vain for its owner. “Down here, silly.” The voice coos. My gaze drifts down to the pool collecting the falling waters below me. Peering up at me from the crystal waters below is the sleek head of a gray fox, her soft edges melting seamlessly into the rippling waters. Shimmering cobalt hair cascades around her ears and face. And she is completely naked. Speaking of companion...

As if reading my mind, the fox giggles and gives me a wink. Only her head is above water, but despite the fact that the pool is completely clear she makes no effort to try and cover any other part of her body. Not that I mind.

“I thought monks weren’t supposed to cast eyes upon an unclothed female?” She says playfully, twirling an ear.

“I’m not that kind of monk.” I reply. Thank gods. “Our guiding rule is to follow ‘The Path’ in moderation, and, well, no one really defined what ‘moderation’ actually was. Or what ‘The Path’ actually was for that matter. I mean, I’m sure they did, but I wasn’t paying attention. It was really hard to pay attention, especially when the weather was nice and sunny. I’m rambling now, aren’t I? I’m sorry that I’m rambling. And...wait...how did you know I’m a monk?” The fox grins and makes a motion of putting on an invisible necklace. I instinctively reach for my neck and run my fingers along the numerous wooden orbs around it. Duh. My prayer beads would be a dead giveaway to anybody.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen a firefox in person before.” She drifts closer to where I sit. I force a polite smile. Truthfully I’m pretty damned tired of the faux celebrity status of being a red panda – more commonly known as a firefox. Most everyone is accustomed to seeing our larger, black-and-white cousins and the questions thrown my way oftentimes lead to my patience wearing thin. However, I have all the patience in the world for this beautiful creature in front of me. “What’s your name?” She inquires.

“Bow.” I reply. She cocks her head to the side, curious. Then another smile breaks out. Such a pretty smile.

“Bow.” She rolls my name around in her mouth like a marble. “Bow.” This time she keeps the ‘ow’ sound going while forming

her mouth into a perfect 'O' shape before smiling again. "Is that the name given by your father?"

"No." I chuckle. "It's the name given by my master."

"Why?" She tilts her head again and stares up at me. Her inquisitive eyes are captivating, water-gray and sparkling like the still surface of a moonlit pond.

"Why?" I muse, "I guess because I never did." Wait. Something is missing. "I don't think I got your name."

"Leena." She says just before she ducks under the water. Her silhouette shimmers as she swims right up to the rock that I'm sitting on. In a sudden rush she springs forth from the water, her blue hair whipping trails of it in upward arcs. The droplets twinkle in the afternoon sunlight, diamonds that disappear as they hit the pond's surface. She stands before me, everything from the waist up exposed to the brisk mountain air. I'm surprised my jaw doesn't hit the ground.

"Well, um, I ... uh," C'mon Bow, stop stammering and get it together. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Leena."

"I can see that." She grins impishly. Instinctively my paws shoot downward to provide cover.

"It's, uh, it's just the cold water." I wince. Holy fuck that sounded stupid.

"Well then," Leena begins to twirl her ear again, "maybe you should come down here and we can find a way to warm you up." I open my mouth to try and say something, remember the stupid shit that came out right before, and immediately think better of it. Instead I stand with paws still covering my crotch and gingerly step towards the edge of the pool. All the while Leena eyes me as a hunter eyes its prey. Hunger flashes across her face. She bites her lower lip as I slowly dip one foot in.

As the first toe breaks the water's surface I pause and look down at my reflection. Staring back at me are searing purple eyes behind circles of auburn and stripes of white—a mask of mischief, as my master used to call it. I can't put my finger on it, but something is off. I quickly look back to the pile of rocks where I had set my things before starting my meditation. Phew, everything is still there. I look back at Leena, then my things, then back at

Leena, then at my things, then back at Leena once more. Her smile falters slightly as I lift my foot out of the water.

“Maybe I should just go and bring my stuff over here real quick.” I say, pointing at the rocks.

“Don’t worry about that,” She replies, “Just worry about getting in here.” She takes a playful swipe at my foot but only catches air. I take another step to the rocks and look back. Leena’s face is a portrait of frustration. Turning away quickly I act like I don’t notice but my heart begins racing a mile a minute.

Her fur had rippled. Right as I dipped my foot in the water, her fur had rippled.

No, that wasn’t right. *She* had rippled. Her entire body had coiled and waved, as if...

“I don’t think anyone is going to come and take your things.” Leena calls out to me, a tinge of irritation in her voice. “Nobody comes up this way, so you should just come back here.” Maybe she notices her shift in tone because the next thing she says comes out much more gentle and alluring. “I’ll definitely make it worth your while.”

“You really want me in that pool, don’t you?” I chuckle as I bend down to gather my belongings. My paw stops just before it clasps around the straps of my pack. She *really* wants me in that pool. I twist my entire body to the right to block Leena’s view and begin to sift through my pack. “If nobody comes this way,” I call over my shoulder as my paws feel around the small linen sack, “then how did you get up here?” Where is it, where is it, where...aha! My fingers wrap around a small metal disc—a coin with a mandala etched into it—and slip it under my tongue before picking everything else up and turning back to the pool. At the water’s edge I drop everything within arm’s reach: my pack, the drab brown tunic of a monk, and a staff made of ironwood.

“Oh, well, you know,” Leena fumbles as I stare down at her. “I come up here often when I want to relax. It’s my favorite place.”

Double-checking that everything is within reach I dip my foot again into the pool, only to remove it once again with a shock. The water is warm, much warmer than a pool up in the mountains at the foot of a frigid waterfall should be. Leena stares back up at me. Her

smile is innocent enough but her eyes flare with desire—a deep unquenchable appetite. For what, I don't know.

But I have an idea.

Oh well. Fuck it. I try to lower myself into the water but my foot slips on the slick stones and sends me flying tail over teakettle into the pool. Leena giggles as I shake the water from my ears. Wrapping her arms around my neck she gives me a knowing smile.

“Told you we'd get you warmed up.” She whispers as she gently pushes me toward the edge. I find a flat, submerged stone to sit upon, leaving my midriff exposed to the chill mountain air. Slowly she brings one leg up and over mine, then the other one. My heart races; I had always dreamed of this kind of scenario before I entered the monastery...well, even after I entered the monastery.

I keep my paws at my side for a moment before slowly bringing them up to Leena's waist, hoping she doesn't notice my trepidation. She simply feels...different. It's as if she has no form whatsoever to her. I'm almost positive that if I try to put my paws together they would pass right through her midriff. Her misty gray fur quivers in front of me like the ocean before a large storm. There must've been something in my stare that caught her attention; her murky eyes narrow as she locks her gaze in mine.

“What's wrong Bow? I thought you would enjoy this.”

“Oh, I am! I am!” I nod my head vigorously. How could I not? But there's still that nagging suspicion eating at the back of my skull. Gotta think fast. Say something. Say something. “It's just I've never felt someone like you before and, well, I just don't know what to do exactly.”

“Aww,” She caresses my lips with her fingers. “Am I your first?” Blood rushes up to my face.

“...Yes?” Not technically a lie.

“Really? Heehee!” Her eyes twinkle with amusement. “I somehow doubt that. Either way I'm sure you'll be absolutely...*delicious*.” She breathes in my ear as she rubs against me. I try to say something but a slick paw keeps my lips shut. Leena grins playfully and reaches down between her legs. Oh! Oh yes! More of that, please!

There is a little-talked-about branch of monks that believe that Enlightenment can be achieved not only through lifetimes of meditation, but also within the brief-yet-infinite moment of orgasm. These monks have been ignored and ridiculed by most of their peers at the monastery, myself included.

And at this very moment I regret everything I ever said about them.

And I'm converting.

Leena's moans grow louder. "Mmm." She says with gasping breath. "It *is* your first time." All I can do is close my eyes and hold her waist tightly. The fox slowly melts away in my paws and envelopes me as I clutch tighter. Soon we bring each other to the edge, and with one final push go tumbling over. Leena opens her mouth and lets out a scream of ecstasy.

It's now or never.

I grab her face with both paws and pull her close into a passionate kiss. Her eyes widen with surprise as she pushes away from me. Her mouth hangs open in a state of shock, the small metal coin resting on her tongue. A choking sound rises from her throat as she tries to speak. The noise quickly turns into a thick gurgle as her entire body begins to flutter and pulsate. Her fur moves like ripples on a pond, losing its foggy gray color with each wave. Her body takes on the crystal translucency of the water around us. Her eyes are the last to change, maintaining their surprised look even as they become two colorless, watery orbs.

Time is short; she won't stay in this form for very long. As I try to reign in my whirling mind from the last few minutes I reach behind me into my pack. There's a small vial – a gift from a traveling merchant—that had contained a rare rosewater liquor. I pull out the tiny, diamond-shaped glass and place it under Leena's watery chin. My other hand presses against her chest. Gods, I hope I paid enough attention during my studies at the monastery.

With a low hum I chant the words taught to me by my Master: "*Kono kami wo...hameru?*" Nothing. Shit. Try again. "*Kono kami wo toraeru!*" A pale blue light blossoms from Leena's chest. Yes! She gurgles again and looks down as the light sends bright blue tendrils to every part of her body. The glow seeps up through her

chin and begins to pour into the vial until the entire glass glows brightly. With the vial full the light dims and Leena's liquid form stands motionless for one more second before collapsing back into the pool with a splash. A lone spark descends within the cascade. I strike out a paw to catch the falling mandala before it plunks into the pool. A tiny glass stopper in the shape of a crystal rose seals the vial tightly. Slowly I drag myself out of the now frigid waters and lay flat on my back at the pool's mossy edge.

Holy. Shit.

A water spirit.

I. Captured. A water spirit.

My laughter echoes off the mountains. Master always told tales of the various spirits that inhabit our world. Some of them included water spirits who lured hapless travelers to their demise, drowning their victims and consuming their life essence. The younger monks ate that shit up, sitting cross-legged and wide-eyed as our master told the tale of Kuro and Shiro.

Kuro and Shiro were two brothers who happened to set up camp by a pond during their travels. One night while sleeping near the water's edge, Shiro was woken by a water spirit who lured him to his doom. Kuro woke the next morning to find that his brother had drowned. Overcome with sorrow, he sat at the shore when the same water spirit, disguised as a lovely maiden, swam up to try and console him,. However, Kuro saw the spirit for what it truly was and managed to trick it into a bottle. He then buried the bottle with his slain brother as retribution.

My laughter dies down. "If I ever return to the monastery, I think I owe my master a bottle of his favorite plum wine." I say to no one in particular.

"Yeah?" A voice calls back, a bubbling stream in my ear. I look down to see the water in the vial swirl and cloud until the figure of a naked gray fox appears floating in the center. It glares at me, arms crossed and foot tapping on nothing. "So, *now* what are you going to do?" Leena huffs impatiently.

"Dunno." I shrug. "To be honest, I didn't think that far ahead. I guess I'll just hold on to you until I figure out what to do."

"*What?!*" Her tiny paws slam silently onto the side of the

glass. “You can’t do that! I demand that you put me back in my pool right now!” She’s pretty demanding for someone trapped in a wine flask.

“Why? So you can try to seduce me again and drown me? I know what you are now. I’ve heard the stories. Admit it, given the chance you would’ve drowned me.”

“I wasn’t going to drown you. I was just going to...” Her voice trails off.

“Going to what?”

“Have you not breathe anymore...forever.”

“Yeah, no, that’s drowning. I’m just going to keep you in that bottle for a while.” I tap the vial twice. Leena crosses her arms again and pouts her lower lip. “I don’t wanna hear it. Maybe if you reform your murderous ways I’ll let you out. Okay? No more drowning...but the seducing part is fine.” I smile.

“Idiot.” She sighs.

Paying the Toll

To you who claim to know what civilization is, who look upon the skins on my wall and dare call it barbarism: I look at them and see the history of my clan back to when the mountains were young and gods walked the earth. I see a tradition that had no beginning and will have no end. How many of you can claim such?

- Chief Dagda, addressing the High Council

“Stupid mortal. Stupid stick-carrying, bead-wearing, stripy-tailed, coin-kissing, vial-holding, *stupid* mortal. Stupid stupid... somewhat attractive, but stupid mor—”

“What are you grumbling about *now*?” I ask impatiently. The first couple hours of her grumbling were somewhat humorous, but now it’s really starting to grate.

“I was just wondering if perhaps maybe you can let me out of here now?” Leena tries to sound as sweet and innocent as possible. The glass distorts her features, or perhaps that’s how she looks when she’s upset.

“No.” I reply through gritted teeth.

“How about that puddle over there?”

“No.”

“Ooh! How about that puddle over *there*?”

“*No.*”

“Well, when *are* you going to release me?”

“I already told you, when you stop trying to murder people.”

“But, but I won’t murder anyone anymore! I’ve reformed. Honestly!” She pleads.

“Uh huh. So you didn’t mean any of those nasty things you’ve said about me over the past day or so?”

“Oh...you heard that?” She says after an awkward pause.

“Yup.”

“Of-of course I didn't mean it! I was just playing!”

“Yeah? And what about last night when you were muttering to yourself about all the ways you'd kill me?”

“... You heard that too?”

“Yup.”

“...I thought you were asleep.”

“Nope.”

“Oh...” We travel in silence for a long time. The wind bites through my robes and I pull them tighter. I didn't really want to travel this way, but there aren't any alternative routes back home besides this mountain path. Well, any *better* alternatives; the next best way would've cost me an extra two months. Still, I wish I hadn't come this way; it feels like the cliff walls towering above me are going to come collapsing in at any moment. I quicken the pace, keeping an eye on the rocks above.

“So,” Leena finally breaks the silence, “is that why you're on this journey? Trying to turn spirits towards good?” Sarcasm drips from every word.

“You could say that.” I reply flatly.

“And how many others have you kidnapped?”

“None. You're the first spirit I've met.” Not entirely true, but she doesn't need to know that.

“Well then why—”

“Shut it.” I cut her off suddenly.

“Don't tell me to shut it! I can do whatever I – oh!” She finally follows my gaze and does in fact shut it.

Two hulking figures approach us in the distance.

“*Cait na bienne.*” I say out the side of my mouth. Cats of the Mountain. My voice is low and calm but my heartbeat starts to thrum out of control. The two monstrosities banter to each other as they approach. One of them points to me and my heart skips a beat as the two snow leopards draw closer, broadswords clutched in their paws. The weapons seem more like pillars of iron than blades of war. A heavy black scabbard hangs from each of their backs and despite the bitter chill and fierce winds they wear only a black and blue plaid skirt; the cats are apparently unfazed by the cold around

them. Their dappled fur blends perfectly into the cliff walls to either side.

“Damn. They’re actually pretty cute. And I bet they taste absolutely delicious.” Leena whispers.

“Do you know them?” I whisper back.

“Sorry.” She replies. “Not too many travelers came to my pool, and when they did they didn’t really discuss anything about the surrounding area. They were too busy with...other things.”

“Can’t say I blame them.”

“We could always turn back.” Leena’s voice betrays her misplaced hope.

“No bloody way.” I say as I peer up at the rock walls.

“Besides, I don’t think those two would let us.” Almost as if on cue, the two sword-wielding warriors wave at me with their free paws.

“Oi, Callum!” The one on the left grins viciously and elbows his partner. “Lookit this here wee wanderer.” Uh-oh. They stop within arm’s reach, their grins revealing massive ivory daggers. My throat tightens. I truly am a ‘wee wanderer’ when compared to these brutes. Each of them stands a good head and a half taller than me. Their arms are roughly the size of my legs. Their swords, crude hunks of metal etched with runic writing, look like no mortal being has any right wielding them. Yet these two carry them around like cubs playing with twigs.

“Hah!” Callum snorts as he returns the elbow. “He’s ah fancy one, ain’t he? Wee little, slipper-walking, stick-carrying, wide-eyed, pajama-wearing *panda*!” Callum bends down and stares with pale yellow eyes. “Who do ye think ye are?” He snarls. I stare back, speechless. “Well?!”

“I-I am but a humble monk, trying to pass through these mountains.” I bow low, making sure to keep my eyes on the ground. They both huff.

“Gareth!” Callum calls to his partner who had been mindlessly tracing the cracks in the cliff wall and scratching his ear.

“Oi.” Gareth calls back.

“He says he’s a wandering monk.” Callum snorts. He pauses for a second, then in a flash his sword is pointed at my neck. Now

I'm stone-still, paws outstretched towards the cloudy sky. Callum uses the tip of his sword to skillfully pick up the chain holding the vial around my neck. "Fancy jewelry for a monk, eh?"

"Oh, it's not jewelry!" I pipe up before the sword draws closer to my throat. Keep the paws up. Speak slowly and carefully. "It's not jewelry. It's a vial of holy water. From a sacred mountain. In a far off land. That has no special properties or any monetary value. Ever."

"Ah c'mon now Callum." Gareth says gruffly. "Let the wee monk keep his precious water."

"Fine! Fine." Callum's sword hums as he twirls it back to his shoulder. The vial thunks onto my chest. Callum gives his partner a sly wink and holds out his paw palm-up. "You can keep yer water, but you still need to pay tribute to Chieftain Aodh if ye want tae pass through his mountains."

"Chieftain ... 'Aye'?" I try to decipher Callum's thick accent.

"Aye. Aodh." Gareth says. "He lords over these mountains. Those who dinnae pay tribute forfeit their right to pass through."

"And their freedom." Callum adds. The two stand together, shoulder to shoulder, making it impossible for me to maneuver around them. I laugh nervously.

"The thing is, I have no money to give." Not good. "But as a monk I can offer a prayer to Aodh's long and prosperous rule. Now, I'm sure we can work something out so that I may pass, yes?"

"You sure this is the place?" I dangle the coin just out of reach of greedy little paws. The creature jumps, nodding furiously. His big black eyes gleam beneath silky brown fur. His fingers close in and open, in and open in that all-too-familiar *gimme!gimme!gimme!* motion of cubs. I lower the coin a few inches, then hoist it back up out of reach. The furry thing licks his needle-sharp teeth as if waiting for ripe fruit to drop from a branch. "You suuuurrrreeee?" I ask again. I already know that this is the right spot. I just can't pass up an opportunity to fuck with goblins.

"Yes! Yes! Banjo is sure!" The narrow brown head nods vigorously. Heh. Banjo. Goblins always have the cutest names, like Droop and Scoodle and Jingles. The coin plops into his waiting

paws and he's off like a shot, weaving his slender body between shrubs and trees, holding high the purchase of his betrayal. Most likely he'll brag to the others in his tribe about his new shiny, causing some of them to get jealous. Then a tiny civil war within start within his band. It sounds crazy and stupid, but not too improbable; when it comes to goblins, far bigger conflicts have started over far less.

My attention turns back to the location my goblin guide has led me to. I crouch down behind a copse of trees and try to get a better view of the cave in front of me. The pitch black maw gapes out from a sheer cliff face fifty meters high. Despite the tall firs growing up all around the rocky edifice, the front of the cave has a makeshift clearing of about thirty meters. Whole trees have been uprooted and shoved aside; grass has been trampled and stained crimson with blood; various bones are sprinkled around the mouth of the cave and even from this distance the fetid stench of death and rotted meat hits me right in the face, sending my stomach into my throat.

In short, a fairly typical ogre cave.

Slowly and quietly I step out off the trees and right to the edge of the clearing. I heft the iron maul strapped to my back and place it on the ground beside me, careful to place it head-down so that the handle stands erect right next to me. My hands gently tap the six metal cylinders holstered to my stomach and legs. Check, check, check-check-check...check!

I breath in deep only to immediately fight a vicious gag reflex. Catching my breath, I try again. "*Hei! Kom ut her du stygg sønn av en jævla hore så jeg kan drepe deg!*" Not the most clever thing I've said, but when it comes to ogres, direct usually trumps clever. I lick my parched lips and draw the first pair of pistols.

"*Hva?*" I deep rumbling blows forth from the cave along with an even fiercer stench. All grows quiet as the monster processes what I just said. "...*HVA?!?*" A guttural roar erupts from the opening along with a massive ogre. Pallid yellow skin holds together an enormous blob of fat and muscle that's as wide as it is tall. Tree trunk limbs poke out and end in stubby fingers. A head with no neck sits atop, mouth unhinged like a snake's, showing four

massive fangs the size of my hands. Rust-colored blood cakes its lips, and a long bluish-black tongue lolls out the side. As for clothing, the common perception of ogres is that they all wear at least a loincloth. Unfortunately, common perception is wrong. Ogres wear nothing (oh gods why?!).

Just as the ogre's pale, hairless head emerges from the cave, I pull the trigger on both guns. Two loud clicks signal the release of the flint locks and my field of vision is obscured with sparks and a roar of fury. The guns kick like basilisks and I let their momentum carry them up and behind me; I learned the hard way long ago that trying to reload them is a waste of time.

One shot grazes the monster's arm, drawing a tiny gout of blood. The other ricochets off the cliff wall with an echoing *ptang!* Before the echo fades away into the trees I draw the next two pistols.

The monster is in full view now and despite its size and girth he's a quick bastard. Still charging, he wields a makeshift club in one hand and a crude javelin in the other. With surprising dexterity he hurls the spear at me. A dull hum fills the air as it flies at me. A quick step to the right allows it to sail right past and embed itself into a tree with a resounding crack.

I fire the second salvo and my right side flares with pain as the pistol explodes in my hand. Shivers of metal and wood embed themselves into my arm and face. I scream and drop the guns. The other seemed to fire alright, since the bleeding hole in the ogre's leg wasn't there a second ago. The beast staggers a bit, its jaundiced eyes wide with surprise. They instantly narrow with rage as it lifts the club above its head with both hands. The head of the club is coated in shards of bone and metal, with the sheen of tree sap showing in the gaps.

I stand my ground and aim the final two guns right into the ogre's face. It brings the club in a sweeping arc down and around to the left. I jump back and fire at the same time. The chaos that ensues is drowned out by the shockwave that courses through my body as the club grazes my shoulder and sends me spinning to the ground.

Scrambling to my feet, I grab the handle of the maul and swing

with all my might at the ogre's legs. The chunk of dented iron that goes for a hammer connects to the back of the creature's leg, buckling its knee and tipping it off balance. It swings its arm and club in wide arcs in a desperate attempt to try and stay upright. Ducking as the greatclub whistles over my head, I brace myself and swing again, this time straight into the ogres flabby, bulbous chest.

The sound of lightning striking wood echoes through the forest, followed by a roar of pain. The creature lays on its back, wheezing through broken ribs. Its lips tremble as a trickle of blood drips out the corner of its mouth. "*Hvorfor?*" It asks me with rasping breath. Some might be moved to pity at the sight of such a battered and helpless creature, even one as large and grotesque as this. That is, until they remember the primary diet of ogres: children.

I slowly and pitilessly raise the maul over my head, ready to deal the deathblow. The ogre begins to close its eyes in grim resignation, but just before I swing they fly open. Wicked, murderous intent shines within them.

Oh shit.

The greatclub glides over the ogres enormous stomach as the creature swings it across its body. The club connects with my exposed side and rakes across my stomach. Three explosions of agony wrack my midsection and warm streams begin to soak the front of my tunic. I stagger backward, clutching my gut and tasting copper with every ragged breath.

The ogre wheezes a few laughs, having gotten his rib for a rib. In a blind rage I golfswing the hammer right into the crown of the bastard's skull. The laughing stops. I clutch up on the handle and try to raise the hammer as high as I can. I bring it down, painfully, again and again and again until my world fades to black.

The soft orange glow of sunset seeps through the trees, warming my face as I slowly wake up. I gag up some blood as I push myself off the ogre's stomach, leaving an imprint of my body. Swaying on my feet for a few seconds, I finally gather the courage to take a step. "Holy shitfuck!" I growl through gritted teeth as arcs of pain shoot up my left side. My breathing is calm and I don't taste copper anymore, but those ribs will need to be set. Shit.

Slowly, carefully, gingerly, I stoop down and pick up the broken handle of the maul. I leave the dented iron hammer next to what is left of the ogre's head. Using the handle as a walking stick, I make my way to the mouth of the cave.

The splintered end of my new cane sifts through the myriad piles of bone and debris that scattered around the entrance. After some searching, I find it: a small, dirty ribbon. Tiny bits of sky blue peek out through the caked dirt and mud. I pick the ribbon up with the stick and brush off the encrusted gunk as best I can. Fine gold thread is embroidered on one side: "Emma." Pocketing the ribbon, I turn to finish the rest of my work.

Darkness falls before I finish, but camping in these woods another night isn't an option. The smell of blood will have attracted goblins. Those little buggers can get pretty brave—and vicious—when they have numbers on their side. Even now a few pairs of tiny glowing eyes peer at me from far out in the bush. They'll leave me alone as long as I don't act too injured which, unfortunately for me, I am. So I need to get out of here fast and pray that those fuzzy little bastards are the only things that were curious enough to come.

With the six pistols holstered again and an ogre hand tied to my hip, I trudge off toward town to return Emma's ribbon to her father and the ogre's hand to the local magistrate. Naturally, I'll also be collecting my reward, drinking my weight in wine, and convalescing for Hel-knows-how-long. As I stumble over tree roots and brambles, always keeping one eye on the will-o-wisp eyes of the goblins, one singular thought sticks in my mind.

Fuck this job.

"Fuck what job?" Leena's voice breaks through the crashing waves of pain between my ears.

"Ugh...godsdammit my head...Huh? Ah, don't worry about it. And okay, I'll admit," I wince as I gingerly prod the lump on my head, "that could've gone a little better."

"Well *I* enjoyed it." Leena barely suppresses a giggle.

"Of course you did." I grumble. "Did you happen to see which way they took us. You know, since I was knocked out."

"Not really. They dragged you here face down, so all I saw

was a bunch of dirt and rock.”

“Great.” I press against the iron bars of my cage and peer through the darkness of this small cave. Another cage sits on the opposite wall, empty save for a pile of rags in a corner. Wind howls outside the entrance; flecks of snow and dirt whirl and dance in the dim moonlight. The two leopards lurk a few feet from the opening. They lean against a barrel that’s roughly their size and take turns dipping their paws in it, bringing forth a sickly sweet-smelling liquid to their lips and greedily lapping it up.

“Hey!” I shout, my hoarse voice echoing off the cave walls. “Hey! Is that any good? Could I have some?”

“**Hic** Wuzzat?” One of them sneers. “What would some wee pajama panda want with mead? Betcha couldn’t even handle the stuff.”

“Won’t know until we try. Plus I need it for a, um...holy ritual.”

“*Pssh!* There’sh just enough mead here for me and Callum anyways.” Gareth takes a break to lap up another pawful, swaying slightly as he does. “Sho just shut yer trap until we get you to Lord Aodh.”

Well, at least I tried. I sit back and watch while the two cats down way more mead than should be physically possible. Each turn brings them deeper and deeper into the barrel until they need to grab each other’s tail to prevent from falling in. But of course one eventually does; Callum or Gareth (who the Hel knows?) hiccups loudly and lets the other’s tail slip from their grasp, sending him tumbling into the wooden barrel with an echoing thud. The barrel wobbles a few times before crashing down on its side. Spotted legs and a tail—as well as some other bits—stick out from the opening with the kilt scrunched about the waist.

“Not to bad.” Leena muses.

“What was **hic** that?” The guard still standing eyes me suspiciously. I just shake my head furiously and pantomime zipping my lips. “Good. ‘Cause otherwise I’d have to go over there and **hic** shut you **hic** shut you **hic** up.” A giant, tongue-curling yawn overtakes him as he slides down the cave wall and curls up. Seconds later he is fast asleep. Faint echoing snores come out from

the barrel, the other's tail curling in and out to the rhythm.

"Well then." I place my fists on my hips. "What now?"

"Now," A voice to my right makes me jump, "we escape." I peer in the direction of the voice to the moving heap of rags in the other cage. No. Not rags. The heap stands up to reveal a maus. She wears a plain pink dress with elbow-length gloves and a tiny bow behind her left ear. Large eyes peer back at me. Studying me.

"Um, hi." I break the silence between us.

"Hi. I'm Susi." She brushes away black bangs from her face. There's absolutely no emotion in her voice.

"Bow."

"I bow to no one." Immediate ice flows through her words.

"What? No! That's my name. Bow."

"Oh. So what are you, some kind of monk or something?"

"Yeah something like that. So what are you—"

"She's pretty small." Leena blurts out as the vial begins to glow a faint blue.

"You're pendant talks." Susi says flatly.

"And glows, apparently." I'm pleasantly surprised by this new development.

"A pendant indeed!" Leena huffs. "I'll have you know that I am a water spirit!"

"Really?" Susi's ears twitch. "I've heard stories about water spirits. Don't you devour your victims' life essences after you um..."

"Yes."

"I see." She glances up at me, then down at the vial. Up at me, down at the vial. Up at me. "He's not bad, but you could've done better."

"What?!" I splutter.

"Hah! I like this one." Leena giggles.

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever." I stuff the crystal vial back down into my robes, despite Leena's shrinking protests, and turn back to my fellow inmate. "So you mentioned escape. May I ask how?" I try to keep the incredulity out of my voice but the little thing in the cage across from me looks like she'd be more comfortable waltzing in a ball than breaking out of a leopard warlord's prison.

She gives me a sly wink as her tail snakes through the iron bars. A little bow tied to the middle of her tail scrapes against the bars and takes a bit of rust off them as she jabs the tip of her tail into the cage's lock. Her face contorts into wincing and frowns as the remainder of her tail flails back and forth like a snake in its death throes. A few more frowns and whips produces a very distinct *click!* from the lock and Susi's face lights up. Her pace quickens. Soon four more clicks and a clunk echo off the rock walls as the lock drops to the floor.

"That," I give a low whistle, "is quite the useful trick."

"My father taught me that." She bears two large teeth in a wide grin. They quickly disappear behind a growing scowl. "That bastard."

"I...missed something."

"You were about to ask me why I'm in here, yeah?" She scampers over and begins to work on my lock. "Well, I belong—belonged—to a merchant family. We tried to pass through these mountains a couple of days ago when Doofus and Dickhead over there stopped us. They gave us a choice—"

"Pay up or prison." I finish her thought. She nods.

"My father decided to pay up. With me."

"Oh..." The only sound that follows is the metal clangs of the lock. Susi's already heading towards the exit as I push open the door. "Wait wait wait!" I whisper/yell to her.

"What?!" She whisper/yells back.

I tiptoe over to the two unconscious cats and crouch down by the barrel. First things first: cover up this passed-out leopard. Now that the kilt is back where it belongs, I drag a finger along the edge of the barrel and pop it into my mouth. My cheeks spasm as the taste of honey and wood and piss fills my mouth. Worst. Mead. Ever.

"Are you serious?!" Susi hisses, huddled against the wind and waving for me to follow. "This isn't the time for that!"

"False." I say while smacking my lips against the acrid taste. It makes me shiver from the top of my head to the tip of my tail. "Although I do regret that decision." I head towards the exit, stop, and go back to the barrel. "On second thought it wasn't that bad." I

scoop up a pawful and raise it to my lips. The taste hits me before the liquid touches my tongue. I let the contents dribble away between my cupped paws. “Blech! Yes it was. Okay, okay. Coming!”

I catch up to Susi outside of the cave and take a quick moment to gather in my surroundings. The narrow canyon where I got conked out is nowhere in sight; they must’ve dragged me to this cave nestled atop a steep cliff. The moonless night reveals nothing below us. Just a sea of darkness. As my eyes slowly adjust to the dark a path materializes to our right, leading down, down to the dark expanse far below.

“There.” I point and my new companion follows my finger. “That’s where we want to go.”

“How can you tell?” She asks. I answer by simply pointing upwards to the dazzling night sky above—a black blanket glittering with thousands of tiny jewels.

“Over there,” I point to a cluster of stars, “is ‘The Maiden’. Or as I call her, ‘The Exotic Dancer’. Over there is ‘The Twins’, or ‘The Other Exotic Dancers’. And over there is ‘The Goat’, otherwise known as ‘That Horned Bastard Who Beat Me In Checkers’.”

“You’re weird.”

“I get that from time to time. Now, there is the North-ish star.”

“‘Ish’?”

“It moves around a bit but always is in the northerly direction. Now if that star is there, then we want to go there. We should be able to get off this mountain by daybreak. And I suggest we get going before those two wake up.”

Susi shrugs. “Not like I really have a choice, but I have a feeling this isn’t going to end well.”

“I’ll vouch for that.” Leena chimes in, lighting up my chest as she speaks.

“Shush you.” I tap the vial not too gently. I turn to Susi and give her my most reassuring smile. “Don’t worry. Things can’t get worse than being locked up in some warlord’s cage.”

...Right?

"Shall I add their furs to the Hall of the Slain, sir?"

"No." Such an annoyance. A bloody knife balances on the tip of my claw. I had taken my time with those two. "Burn their furs. Feed the rest to the birds." Failure forfeits mercy. And honor. I flick the knife upwards. The blade twirls and sends tiny droplets of fresh blood into the air in crimson arcs. A few splatter on the page's face as the blade buries itself into the floor between his feet. Without giving the young whelp another glance I march into the Great Hall. I cross the threshold and immediately turn to where my father, grandfather, and great-grandfather hang. I gently stroke the spotted fur of my father that is strung beside the empty space where mine will be one day. The soft feel brings his words back to my mind.

Respect the Father. Then kill him.

Clan tradition states that whenever the first son of the Chieftain sees fit, he may challenge his father for reign of the clan in a fight to the death. The winner must skin the other and display the fur somewhere in the Great Hall as a sign of respect for the fallen...and a constant reminder for the current Chief that nothing lasts forever. As a young cub I had watched as my father defeated his grandfather for the right to rule. I learned much from watching that fight, including my father's weaknesses—knowledge I used a few years later to take his life and mantle as Chieftain. It is a mantle I intend to wear for quite some time. I am young and have not yet chosen a mate. No whelp will challenge the rule of Aodh until I see fit. Speaking of whelps...

"Graeme!" I bark and the page comes running. The young cat wears the black and blue great kilt of the Clan Shadowpaw. He

places an extended claw over his heart and takes a knee. "How many did those two say escaped from them?"

"O-only t-two my lord. A young maus and a firefox. A monk, I believe." My back is turned but I can still feel him shrink back from my presence. Good.

"Send out three of our best scouts." My eye twitches in rage, rage at the embarrassment brought upon me and my clan by those two drunken idiots. "I should've taken longer with them."

"M-my lord? T-the prisoners are headed towards the Ivywood...and Evershade."

"Then I guess our scouts better be careful." I whirl around and rake the insolent brat's face with my claws. He utters no word but his eyes speak louder than his tongue could. I'll need to watch this one as he gets older. In the meantime, the three clawmarks on his left cheek will serve as a reminder that my orders are final and not to be questioned. "Do you think I do not know where they are headed? They could be traipsing into Hel's waiting arms and I would send after them! Now leave me."

The wretch stands and leaves without another word. As the heavy doors close behind him I allow myself to release all the pent-up fury that has been building since learning of the escape. My mind clouds over and my vision goes red. When I finally come to, the entire hall is in shambles—save for the Wall of Chieftains. Tables are splintered to pieces, metalware is bent and broken and a great claymore is snapped in two.

I stand in the middle of the melee, chest heaving and body shaking uncontrollably. Many times my warriors have seen my fly into Bloodfury, but they have never seen it off its chain and out of my control. And I intend

to keep it that way. There's only one unbroken container of mead left in the hall, and the liquid is sweet and cool going down my throat. The ensuing warmth calms me.

That maus.

She is the linchpin to everything. Success or failure depends on having her safely in my paws.

And failure means death.

A Whisper in the Woods

Stay with me, and I will grow you worlds that you have only visited in dreams.

- from Song of the Warden

“Swish. Swish. Furry tail.

Swish. Swish. Stripy tail.

Swish. Swish. Swish.”

Ugh. She’s been singing that song since we got off the mountain. Plus, she’s been way too chipper, singing and humming and skipping and whatnot. Especially considering we just escaped captivity. Although she might’ve been stuck in that cage for a while before I got there, so I guess all that peppiness might be warranted. Still, though. Ugh. This is why I travel alone.

“So, was your mother a panda and your father a raccoon?” She asks as she skips along behind me on the beaten dirt road that’s overgrown with weeds.

“No.” I grunt. I’m trying *really* hard not to get annoyed with this one but the path down the mountainside had been exhausting; I can’t count the number of times one of us has almost slipped off a ledge or gotten stuck in a crevasse or something. But everything had turned out alright in the end...so far. Although now there’s the nonstop questions.

“I know! Your *father* was a panda and your mother was a raccoon.”

“No.” Seriously?

“So...both your parents were raccoons and your grandparents were pandas.”

“That doesn’t even make sense. And besides, it’s ‘firefox’. Not ‘panda’. Completely different.”

“...your tail is so striped and poofy. Can I touch it?”

“What? No!” Touch your own damn tail.” This is *definitely* why I travel alone.

Uh-oh. That must’ve hit a nerve. She skips ahead of me and twirls in an about-face. Folding her arms she begins to give me The Look. Every child who never got their way knows and has utilized The Look. I’m sure The Look always worked on her brothers and sisters, but that shit won’t work with me. She wrinkles her nose and squints her eyes real tight. The bottom lip curls in a sneer and those two large front teeth poke out slightly. Yup, that’s The Look...except it isn’t gonna work. I simply just stare back with a smirk, letting my apparently poofy tail drift back and forth behind me

Since The Look isn’t working she moves on to Plan B: The Tears. She snuffles and little dewdrops begin to well up in her eyes. Her black ponytail bounces as her whole body shakes, trying to hold back the coming deluge. “I thought monks were supposed to be nice.” The words dribble from trembling lips as a single tear leaves a shining trail on her latte-colored fur.

“And I thought mausen were supposed to be quiet.” I grunt as I walk around her. She stands there, stunned. Round two goes to Bow.

“She’s right,” Leena’s wavering voice reaches my ears as I continue down the road, “you’re not very nice.”

“You might be a little biased in that assessment.” I retort. “But still ...” Aw, fuck it. I thump back to Susi’s side. A clear of the throat and a pause. “Susi. I’m sorry. It’s just that ever since I left home that’s all anybody ever wants to talk about with me. I guess I can be pretty touchy about the subject.”

“It’s okay.” She replies. “All I wanted to do was get to know my new friend. The friend that I made while caged up because my parents sold me to some mountain warlord. But if you don’t want me around I guess I can make my way in the world...friendless...*parentless*...with nothing but—”

“Okay! Okay.” I sigh in defeat. “You can touch my damn tail.”

“Yay!” She turns around and jumps with excitement. My jaw drops; there isn’t a hint of sorrow on her face. I forgot about Plan

C: The Guilt. I can't help but laugh; this little maus is a clever one. But she sure as Hel isn't going to be able to pull *that* trick on me again. I make a show of turning around and waving my tail. Susi squees. "It's so fluffy! Aaaaahhhh!"

The dirt road goes on forever; I guess last night the distance from the mountains to the forest seemed much shorter than it actually is. The land finally levels off and I signal for us to take a rest. We sit down next to each other in the short grass on the side of the road and I try to get my calves to stop twitching and cramping. I turn back to the mountains. They look stained and broken and craggy, like an old wolf's teeth poking up from the ground.

"Do you think anyone is following us?" Susi asks, suddenly (and finally) serious. I look down the road one way and she follows my gaze. Empty. We look down the other way. Also empty.

"Dunno." I shrug. "But we should probably keep moving. If anyone was after us they would most likely be on their way, and I'd bet that they know this area a whole lot better than we do."

"Good point."

"Pretty empty, huh?" Leena says to Bow. "The road I mean, not your head." She giggles at her own joke. Her sense of humor earns her a flick of the vial that sends it swinging wildly from side to side, much to her dismay.

"Yeah, it's empty." I reply, "But given what we just escaped, I can't really blame anybody for not wanting to travel to those mountains. Or near those mountains. Or anywhere in sight of those mountains." Standing back up and stretching, I signal to my new traveling partner that it's time to go.

"So," Susi looks up at me (still carrying my tail) as we keep walking down this boring, boring stretch of road, "Why were *you* up there in that cage?"

"Wrong place at the wrong time." Story of my damn life.

"Okayyy, so why were you in the wrong place at the wrong time?"

"Heading back to Aquarian from the Akama desert."

She snorts. "That's a Hel of a way to get back."

"It was worth a shot." I mean, I did capture a water spirit. So far that seems like a net gain.

“And what exactly do you do?”

Ugh. *This* question.

“The short answer is I’m a bounty hunter. Mostly I specialize in monster slaying but if the coin is good I’m not picky.”

“I see...” It’s hard to tell if she’s impressed. Most people are at least a little impressed. “Are you any good?”

“If I wasn’t you wouldn’t be talking to me right now.”

“Hmm fair enough.” She ponders this for a moment. “Face any ogres?”

“A few.” Gods I hate ogres.

“What about Grimlocks? Goblins? Gnolls?”

“Yes, yes and yes. Small fry.” Though to be fair, goblins are just too damn cute. Any time I’m asked to eliminate them I just trick them into moving far away (and tricking goblins is easier than falling down).

“Well has there been any job that you failed?” Her hazel eyes bore into me.

“‘Fail’ is such a harsh word.” I scratch the back of my neck. “But...”

The sky is a perfect blue, the kind of blue everyone hopes for when they wake up on the first day of Spring. Puffy white clouds laze about but have the common decency to stay out of the sun’s way. Somewhere in the distance a bird chirps, the happy titter carried by a warm gentle breeze. The grass under paw is soft and springy and gives off an earthy scent as we traverse through it, running for our lives.

“This. Is. Your. Fault!” The words come out as panicked gasps. My lungs barely have the strength to push them out, let alone draw in breath. I glare at Jimmy who is running right next to me.

“It just kept growing!” The ram besides me is in a lot better shape and a lot less winded, but the signs of fatigue are starting to show.

“That’s. What. Bulettes. DO!” I shout back. A low rumble behind us helps the point stick. Bulettes—or the fucked-up cross between a snapping turtle and shark—burrow underground like few things can. They also have a nasty habit of springing up from

below, snapping up their prey whole. Which is what the one behind us will most likely do if we slow down. "Why. Did you. Have. One. Anyways?!"

"I'll have you know it was a gift from my Nana." He says that like it explains everything.

"You. Sure. Your Nana. Isn't. Trying. To kill. You?" I can't feel my legs and snot flies out of my nose with each attempted breath.

"Ha! Who *hasn't* my Nana tried to kill?" Jimmy laughs. That's why I like him, he always keeps his sense of humor, even in the face of gruesome, painful, bone-grinding death. "Do you know what you're doing by the way?"

"Of. Course."

I have no fucking clue.

"I'm only asking because we're heading for that cliff over there."

Shit. I didn't even see that. Hmm...that gives me an idea though.

"How. High?"

"Bout sixty feet or so, if I remember correctly."

"River?"

"Nope."

Perfect.

"Race. You. There." Not that it would be much of a race; Jimmy's worn out and yet he could still run circles around me.

"You're the monster hunter." He begins to pull ahead.

I brave a look behind only to see the idyllic expanse of the plains behind us. Butterflies and bees go about their routine amongst the wildflowers, unaware of the monster that lurks below the surface. A leyline of sunken grass runs from a few feet behind me to where Jimmy's farmhouse is. Or was; the bulette made quick work of its foundation. But that line keeps coming for me, the grass sinking down just a few inches.

If I can just reach the edge of that cliff I should be able to trick the beast into going just a few feet further, burrowing out into open air and a fifty foot drop. Even with its armor it won't be able to withstand that fall.

Jimmy now has a significant lead, reaching the cliff edge a good twenty seconds before me. He turns to me and does a sort of anxious dance. “Whatever you’re going to do I hope you do it soonohgodsBowlookout!”

The rumble turns into a roar as the bulette leaps out of earth behind me. I turn just enough to see the blue-gray sheen of its armored head and the black hole that is its enormous mouth. Bulettes don’t have teeth; you don’t really need teeth when one bite can turn brick into dust.

I don’t stop to think—not like I can. Locking eyes with Jimmy for a split second I lower my shoulder and say a quick prayer. The ram realizes what I’m about to do and tries to sidestep but it’s too late. I catch him in his midrif and we both sail over the edge, bulette in tow.

If I’m gonna die, it’s gonna be on my terms.

And if Jimmy’s gonna die, well, it’s also gonna be on my terms as well, apparently.

There’s a startled *yawp!* behind us. Ha! Take that you fucker. Twisting away from Jimmy I get a glimpse of a bulette that’s very much out of its element. It twists and pirouettes like a ballet dancer wearing full plate armor. It would be quite comical, actually, if we all weren’t plummeting to our doom. Poor Jimmy has even got the ‘free-fall scream’ going.

But something odd happens: the bulette stops moving. It lingers, suspended in the air, beady eyes looking almost thoughtful. Then, in one sprung motion, it rights itself like a cat and streamlines its body with its momentum. The momentum that’s carrying it straight to...the...other...side...

Jimmy’s scream is joined by a solid thud as the bulette dives safely into the cliff side like a hot knife into hotter butter. And before I have a very fast and very hard affair with the ground, I voice one more thought:

“Oh you mother fu—”

“*Gruss Gott!*” Susi exclaims. “How did you survive the fall?”

“I had a bit of cushion. Walked away with a few broken ribs and a bruised ego.”

“What cushion?”

“Jimmy.”

“What?!” Her face twists into shocked horror. “Did *he* survive?”

“Of course, of course. Although he didn’t really walk away. Still has that limp. I think. Doesn’t really talk to me anymore. Hey look! A change in the subject!”

The old rocky wolf’s teeth begin to sink beneath the horizon behind us. In front of us are countless brown giants with green hair. Susi drops my tail in awe. The trees go on forever on either side. I’ve traveled all over the world and been through every type of forest imaginable, but this one puts every other to shame. I’ve skirted around the edge of the Ivywood—a trip that’s a good month at least—but I’ve never actually been *in* the forest. Too many stories about this place. None of them good.

“I wonder if there are rivers and lakes in that forest.” Leena says, sounding cheery for the first time since the mountains. “Ooh! Maybe a nice spring in the middle of a sunlit glade. Yeah, that would be nice. A nice, cool spring under the shade of—“

“No.” I cut her off. The spirit lets out a liquid huff and falls silent. We continue towards the edge of the forest. As we draw closer the trees just keep growing larger. And larger. And larger. The weedy road becomes bumpy and jagged as massive roots snake their way just under the dirt surface. All of us crane our necks up from the road to the top of the colossal plants. “They’re pillars holding up the sky.” I say to myself.

“Huh?” Leena says with some agitation.

“Just another story from the monastery. There was a kingdom of clouds ruled over by a greedy and self-righteous king. I...actually don’t remember much of the rest of the story. Wasn’t really paying attention. Something about not seeking material wealth and knowing your place or something like that. But what I *do* remember is that this kingdom was held up by enormous stone pillars, too big for even giants to move.”

“So?”

“So,” I point up at the massive trees. The thick trunks rise up and disappear into plumes of green. “Giant pillars, holding up a

kingdom of clouds.” As I shift my gaze from the green above us to the green beside the road I notice a small shadow hidden by a bush. Susi sees it too and tugs on my tail to get my attention.

“Hey Bow! Over there!” She drags me over to where the small, triangular shadow hides. Shaking her off I pull some of the shrubbery aside. Jutting out from the underbrush is a tiny stone pyramid. Etched into it is one word: *Evershade*. An arrow directs us to continue into the woods. *Evershade*. Now why does that sound familiar?

“Guess we follow the sign.” I motions for the maus to follow. Not like we have much of a choice, although I’m not necessarily a fan of going further into this dark forest. Something keeps tugging at the back of my mind. Something not quite right. Though soon it’s pretty obvious where the name ‘Evershade’ comes from; the only light that makes it to the forest floor are tiny rays that find their way through the massive branches overhead. Fingers of sunlight warm my fur as I shuffle along. Susi makes a game of skipping between the circles of light that dot the road, partially to fend of boredom and partially because...because it’s so *cold* in this forest. Anywhere the light doesn’t touch feels frigid. I’m having a hard time controlling the shivers. Why in Hel is it so damn cold? I continue to walk in silence and Susi continues to skip behind me. Suddenly I stop and she, not paying attention, bumps into my backside.

“Odd.” I murmur, looking around.

“Hmm? What’s odd?” Leena yawns as if she just awoke from a nap. Do spirits nap?

“The forest is empty.”

“Empty? How so?” The fox spirit replies. Susi stands there, expecting an explanation as well. Birds chirp overhead. The little sunlight that shines through lands on dark green brush. Everything seems normal, but Susi begins to look around and starts to notice what I’m saying. These woods seem...empty. There’s just no other word for it. “Well?” Leena asks impatiently.

“I dunno.” I shrug. Susi continues to look around. That’s when we both feel it. A short, chill breeze blows through us and I swear there’s the faintest hint of a whisper. Suddenly, Susi jumps on my

back, clinging for dear life. I let out a yelp and flail wildly. “Yeeeargh! What in Hel’s name!” Carefully I peel her off and stand her in front of me. My tone softens immediately when I see her face. “Whoa. You okay? What happened?”

“They moved.” Is all she can whimper.

“What moved?” Now I’m scanning the surrounding underbrush frantically.

“The trees—” She stops, suddenly embarrassed, “I...thought the trees had moved.” She tries a half-hearted smirk but her eyes keep shifting from me to the woods. “I guess it was just the wind, huh?”

“Yeah.” I pat her on the head, but now I’m not fully sure myself if it was indeed the wind.

We continue onward, only this time with both our heads continually moving from one side of the road to the other. Fortunately there are no more moving trees or whispers in the woods. But it is growing dark, darker than any of us would like, and on top of that the once-straight road begins to twist and turn like a drunken snake. We slow our pace, wary of what might be lurking around each new bend.

After numerous twists and turns and re-twists, we round the next sharp corner and hit a wall. Literally. An impenetrable mesh of brambles towers twenty, maybe thirty, feet above us. Massive thorns bigger than my arm poke out in random directions. Another stone pyramid sits at the base of the wall, its message barely visible in the dying light: *Welcome to Evershade*. I scoff as I lay a palm on the dark brown vines blocking our way.

“Sure seems welcoming.” My paw closes into fists and gives the wall three hard knocks. *Thunk-thunk-thunk*. “Hello?” I shout over the wall. The fur on the back of my neck prickles. Someone is listening. I just can't tell on which side of the wall they're doing it from. “Hello? Hellooooo! My name is Bow. Me and my companion Susi are but travelers seeking refuge from the night. Will you let us in?” Silence, but not total silence. My hair prickles again as I hear that same whisper as before. I don't look to the trees. I don't want to see if Susi is right about them moving. The maus now has her face buried in my tail and she’s shaking like a leaf.

“It's back!” She cries. “Bow the whispering is back!” Shit. She hears it too. For once I wish it was just me going crazy. Both fists are now slamming frantically on the bramble wall.

“Please! Please! I implore you to let us in!” The whispering grows louder and more urgent until it is a quiet scream in my head. Susi screams as well and digs her nails into my tail. I join in, only my screaming are yowls of pain. I throw my entire body against the vines, dragging Susi with me. “For! Fuck's! Sake! Let us in this fucking—” My last word ends in a gasp of surprise as the vines slither apart to reveal a Bow-sized hole in the wall. I charge through and lose my balance, tumbling to the ground below. Susi keeps her grip on my tail as she's brought down to the ground besides me. I give one last glance behind me to see if we were followed. There is nothing but a black hole in the wall that slowly disappears as the vines come together again. The whispering is no more. “What. The fuck. Was that?”

“It was *something*.” Leena says. Even she sounds worried. “I couldn't see it but I could sense it.”

“Yeah, well, I'm glad it's still out there.” Standing up I brush myself off before offering Susi a paw.

“Umm...Bow?” She points a trembling finger behind me. Before I can turn around a huge paw—with equally huge claws—clamps down on my shoulder.