THIS ABOVE ALL;

TO THINE OWN SELF BE ZOO.

Vol. I No. 4

April 2023

In this issue,

the spirits of a man and a horse share the same body,
and a dog lover comes out to his estranged friend.

To the fullest extent permissible, all stories and poems herein are released into the public domain.

To Thine Own Self Be Zoo
Vol. I No. 4
April 2023

1. *The Dethroning of Vermilion Von Scaldis*
2. *The Immortal of Loch Anneth*
3. *Melvin, Lilly, Raspberry Whiskey*
4. *Specifications for the Zoocosmologica Deck*
5. *Poems*

THE DETHRONING OF VERMILION VON SCALDIS

Cahsn held their hand over the block of pitch crystal, feeling for any lingering heat. Finally, to all perception, it was an appreciable deal cooler than the rest of the stifling workshop. With something of a curtsy, Cahsn bent down and whispered the release word: All at once, the black crystalline prism fell to ashes, leaving in a nest of themselves a silvery implement with two prongs and a handle.

Delicately, Cahsn picked up the channeler from the heap of ashes. Walking over to the window, they brushed away the soot on a portion of the pane with a work cloth, and in the afternoon daylight inspected the device closely. No visible faults anywhere on the surface. A good sign so far.

They walked to a workbench, took a deep breath, and centered themselves. With hopeful intention, they struck the channeler against the edge of the bench: As the channeler hummed, they held their other hand beside it, making the old elven hand sign for listening. Across the fingernails of their little, ring, middle, and index fingers, written in obsidian mite wax, were the symbols for knowledge, love, wellness, and material, with the symbol for divinity added somewhat tokenistically on the thumb: None here had felt divinity resonate in over a century. The fact that it did not resonate now was no cause for surprise, and did not give a sinking feeling to Cahsn's stomach. What did was the complete lack of resonance in material. Still hopeful but no longer optimistic, Cahsn struck the channeler against the workbench again, and again made the

listening sign beside it with their other hand. Again, the fingernails of knowledge, love, and wellness hummed loudly, while again the fingernails of divinity and material stayed mute.

"Oh dear," Cahsn said to themselves.

"I don't like the sound of that!" Filra called.

Considering that the spectresmith was pumping a noisy bellows to feed a noisier furnace and that he was entirely across the room from his dispirited apprentice, Cahsn was impressed that the man had managed to hear the disappointing utterance at all.

After giving the bellows a few more pumps, Filra came over to see the problem. He took the offered channeler, struck it against the workbench, and held it beside his other hand.

"Oh dear indeed," he said, after a moment. He glanced up at the portion of the window that had been cleaned of soot, and judged the time. "You'll have to hurry and fetch whatever they've dug up so far. Take S'lel to—"

He caught his tongue: the stallion had been needed at the fields that day, and had been lent out.

The spectresmith muttered to himself, and then to Cahsn only repeated, "You'll have to hurry."

Cahsn nodded, replaced their apron for a satchel, and swiftly made their exit of the workshop—the air outside was rejuvenatingly crisp.

Fortunately, a strong wind that day was towards the mines. Cahsn held their arms out to either side, fell forward, and let a gust of wind catch them, with which they began sprinting along the wind's currents, their feet as one with the air. To any who saw them pass by, they would likely only perceive a troupe of leaves blowing past, the same deep and pure hue of green as the spectresmith apprentice's hair.

Ten obelisks surrounded the town. Each day, at the fields, an immense pit was filled with wheat harvest, or if there wasn't enough harvest to fill the pit, then the equivalent value in blood was thrown in. With this sacrifice, the druid who lived on the castle on the hill outside of town would activate the protective obelisks that surrounded the town for another night. If activated, the obelisks kept out the malevolent forest spirits who lurked in these bleak woods. If not activated... Cahsn had seen

what happened when they were not activated only once. They would not see it again if anything in the world could be done to help it.

Cahsn stopped their run at the mouth of the mine, and pleasantly accosted T'nahk who happened to be standing just there.

The forewoman sputtered out an old curse that was unfamiliar to Cahsn, and then crossed her arms and squared her stance against the visiting eighth elf.

"Good tidings, I hope," she joked.

"Someday," they lied. "But on this day, I find myself in haste and must be curt: How fares the spectracite yield this morning?"

"Cahsn, no," T'nahk moaned.

"T'nahk, please: I don't ask it for the pleasure of asking."

T'nahk sighed. "Four ounces that've been processed."

"I'll need that entire yield."

T'nahk's fists balled up for a moment, but then the forewoman let them go limp again. "If you take it, we'll be here late into the night to make up our quota for tomorrow. Do you truly need all four ounces now?"

"Yes. Though none could have known until after the enchantment was attempted, the yield you delivered this morning was, unfortunately, a dud."

"Okay," T'nahk said, and nodded. "For the record, if I find out this is all because you messed up with perfectly good spectracite, I'll have your hands."

"I think we'd all be in a bad way if we found ourselves short anyone's hands these days."

"True. I mark you're right about that."

T'nahk turned and went down into the mines.

Cahsn stood outside, arms crossed, the breeze rustling their hair. On the wind, Cahsn could smell the scent of the fields nearby, hay and manure.

T'nahk emerged from the mines with a small wooden box in one hand, and a horse's lead in the other hand—the horse walking beside on the other end of that lead was a mare named Red.

"Take her, and speed ye merry."

Cahsn curtsied and kissed T'nahk's hand in the old way of thanks, and then fluttered onto Red, took the wooden box of spectracite from T'nahk, and began back towards the workshop as quickly as the mare would take them.

When they arrived, Cahsn lighted off the mare, wished her well in whatever further ventures the remainder of the day had in wait for her, gave an appreciative kiss to the side of her mouth, and then went into the workshop and opened up the box.

It was late into the evening by the time another channeler was completed. But when Cahsn struck it against the edge of the workbench, this one hummed on the fingernails of knowledge, love, wellness, and material in equal and resonant measure. It would work.

Filra stood looking out of the soot-free portion of the window. He muttered, "Gods there isn't much time left."

"Then I shant stay us further by talking about it," Cahsn said. On the workbench before them was the channeler that they had made, and six talismans that Filra had made over the same period of time. Cahsn packed the seven objects into their satchel, which, somewhat specialized for carrying these very things day after day after day, had seven pockets of appropriate size stitched in—the pockets had been stitched in by Meuric, their clandestine sweetheart who was better at the delicate crafts than most would have guessed by looking at him.

With their satchel, Cahsn departed the workshop once more, and was pleasantly surprised to see Red waiting outside: Red in turn was happy to see Cahsn, and approached gaily.

"It's like you like me or something," Cahsn said, giving the mare a few strokes in greeting before hopping onto her back. "You know the way?"

Red clicked her hooves on the ground a few times, and stood in place.

"It's alright. I'll show you," Cahsn said, and spurred the mare forward down the packed-dirt street.

One by one, Cahsn and Red made their way to the six obelisks around the perimeter of the town, each one marking the border between the town and the hazy woods beyond. In a recess in each stone's face, Cahsn placed one of the newly made

talismans, until each talisman had found his home in one of the obelisks.

The hour was drawing late as Cahsn and Red sped towards the fields to deliver the channeler. As they drew near to the farm, they saw that a collection of a dozen stood around the sacrificial pit with torches: The pit, a thirty foot by thirty foot by thirty foot cube in the ground, was already filled with wheat, and most of the farm hands who had filled it had already gone home. Among those who still stayed were Kohnahsk who was the head of the farm, and Meuric who was a farm hand and Cahsn's honey.

Cahsn wasted no time with pleasantries: they flew from Red's back before waiting for her to stop, dashed with the wind across the surface of the pit, stirring up blades of wheat on the way, and struck and dropped the channeler onto the center of the pit. When they came to the other side, they stood beside Meuric, and caught their breath.

The crackle of torches and the hum of the channeler filled the air. Then, a flash of lightning came so silent that it sucked the noise from all else: in a massive arc overhead, lightning connected a tower of the druid's distant castle to the spectracite of the channeler at hand. Before the eyes of Cahsn and the farmers, every blade of wheat in the pit vanished, and the lightning ceased. The charred sides of the pit smoldered and smoked. A moment later, the sound of the crackling of torches returned.

All eyes watched the druid's tower. For a while, nothing occurred, and Cahsn wondered if they could have done more, worked with unworkable metal, gone a hair faster than fastest, coerced T'nahk any more expeditiously than curtly.

But at last, six arcs of lightning blasted silently forth from the druid's tower, aimed at the six obelisks around the town. They were safe another night. Around the sacrificial pit, a collective exhalation was made.

Most of those who had still lingered began trudging away. Cahsn, Meuric, and Kohnahsk remained, as well as Red, who came trotting back up to Cahsn and stopped at the eighth elf's side. The eighth elf put a hand on the mare, to say that they were aware of her, and appreciative.

Kohnahsk approached the spectresmith apprentice and their company. “Cutting it rather close today, miss,” she said.

Cahsn did not bite, flagrant as the bait was. “Do you need anything else of me, miss?”

The widow flinched.

Cahsn *did* bite *somewhat*.

“The next time we need to throw a living person into the pit,” Kohnahsk began, and then gave a grim look to Cahsn, and turned and trudged away.

With all eyes off of them, Meuric entangled his fingers around Cahsn’s, and gave their hand a squeeze. The farm hand had a comeliness to him that not everyone seemed to see, but very often the man’s understated demeanor had the eighth elf feeling quite flustered. The man leaned his head against theirs and let out a whinny of dejecting Kohnahsk and appreciating Cahsn.

Cahsn felt tingles down their back, and gave a kiss to Meuric’s cheek. They then mounted onto Red, and offered their partner a hand up. Meuric took it, and sat behind Cahsn. The two of them rode at a slow walk back towards the workshop. Cahsn told Meuric of the day they had had; later into the ride, Meuric found his human spirit presenting, and stopped with the horse noises to talk about his day in turn. It had been an exhausting day for the both of them, and the partners were glad to have it behind them, and have the rest of the night to themselves.

—

Quite some years earlier, in a city well beyond the hazy woods, a man named Amadric, a cobbler’s assistant by trade, stood at a canvas, in a study that he did not belong at in the dead of night, on the seventeenth floor of a twenty floor tower. His means of entry had been that he looked rather like the nephew of the noble who owned the tower, and if he held himself right and proceeded as though he were at home, the guards would not stop him. He had come to this tower on winter nights when his own loft above the tiny stables behind the cobblery proved too cold, or on nights when his meager payment was put towards

the care of his horse Mu, and he had to find dinner for himself by less honest means.

But as often as he could find the time for, he came here to paint. By lamplight on this night, he was putting the finishing touches on a painting of the hindquarters of a mare, her tail whipping off to the side in a splash of long black hairs, her sex revealing a crescent of the enrapturing pink flesh that dwelt inside. The painting was large, twice the dimensions of the real thing. Amadric stepped back and let the final brush strokes dry. It was done. It seemed as though he could reach out and touch it, and feel a good deal more than a canvas and some damp paint.

Behind him he heard the creak of the study door opening. The light of a much brighter lantern than his own cast its radiance into the room.

"Estahsh?" inquired the bearer of the brighter lantern.

Amadric turned, and stood tall with an air of arrogance, even as his heart beat rapidly in his chest. "Yes. One would call the nightingale a lark," he said, a haughty expression there to dismiss questions of why one was up so late at night.

"Have you had much to drink, dear nephew?" the woman with the brighter lantern asked—if she believed him her nephew, this made her one of the lord's wives. She added, "There is something odd to your voice."

Amadric coughed, and then nodded. "I have had a fair bit tonight." He had had nothing, but it was a decent excuse she had given him.

"What have you painted?" she asked, and withdrew a pair of spectacles from a pouch on her dress. The moment she put them on, she got a better look at the imposter's face, and gasped and drew back, out into the hall.

"Guards!" she called, running away. "Guaaaards!"

Amadric fled out of the room as well and began to make a hasty departure, but was soon tackled to the ground, beaten, and outfitted with manacles on his wrists and ankles. On the way out, he saw the real Estahsh briefly—the young man was bleary eyed from his interrupted sleep, but seemed curious about his lookalike who was visiting at such a late hour.

In the city where Amadric lived, the punishment for most crimes was the same, if enough attention was aroused that official punishment was to occur. Amadric was marched through the frost-covered streets to a jail, where he would remain locked in a cell until he starved or froze.

The next afternoon, he found himself visited by a well dressed lookalike of himself. The two stood across the bars from each other, face to face.

"You are quite the painter," Estahsh said with a charming smile.

"And you were quite the patron, unwitting as it was," Amadric said back. "I should thank you, for that."

"My uncle wants the paintings destroyed by a priest. I stole them away, and have them hidden somewhere where they will remain safe."

"You care for the subject matter that much?" Amadric asked, leaning casually forward onto the bars, head tilted a bit in curiosity. The subject matter of all of the paintings was horses, and the majority of them focused on the genitalia. There was a crate in the corner of the study where he left them when they were finished, throwing a paint-stained cloth over the top of the crate to keep them inconspicuously hidden.

"I will deny it if you tell anyone, but I think that you and I share an appreciation for beauty in the equine world, strongly enough so that I should treat you as a friend rather than a criminal. I have paid for your release." With that, Estahsh produced a key from his garb, and unlocked Amadric's cell.

"I—my surprised and eternal gratitude, truly, Lord Estahsh," Amadric said.

Estahsh then produced a sack of coins, and placed it in Amadric's hand. "For the purchase of your paintings. I think it should adequately cover the means of leaving here, which would be wise."

Amadric looked his lookalike in the eyes, and nodded.

The two left the jail.

"Fare you well," Estahsh said.

"And you in twice the measure," Amadric said in turn, as was the haughty response to such a remark, though in this instance Amadric truly did mean it.

Amadric returned to the cobblery and snuck straight around to the back, not caring to get an earful from the cobbler, who would want to know where his assistant had gone off to for the better part of the day. Instead, he went straight to the tiny stables in the back, and greeted his horse, Mu.

In short order, Amadric and Mu left quietly out of the stable, purchased some journeying supplies, and then were gone from the city.

When many days and scores of miles were put behind them, the painter and the horse found themselves crossing a shadowy swampland; a road crept through it, lit by the occasional luminescent stone in the cobbled path, though the road was in bad repair. At one stage, Amadric and Mu were crossing a bridge over an algae-covered pond, when all at once the bridge fell apart underneath them, and they were dropped in a startled flailing of limbs into the waters. As the two fought to keep at the surface, a flash of lightning struck across the swamp—some old magic, to deter those who would cause the road harm, but here quite unfortunately triggered.

Leaping around the magic of the lightning with swiftness and power, the spirit of Mu left the body that it had until then inhabited, and found footing on a new body.

Amadric came coughing to the shore of the pond, and there stayed a while on his hands and knees, catching his breath. Mu was with him, so something at least was well.

When he did have his breath, he stood, and turned around with a squelching of his soaked boots in the shore of the pond, and looked at the collapsed bridge.

The body of Mu laid stricken and unmoving atop the debris of the bridge that had fallen into the water.

But Amadric could still hear the horse's intonations, vividly. When another happy snort came, Amadric realized that his spirit now shared the same vessel as the spirit of his horse.

"I am Amadric," he said. "But I am forever now with Mu. We are Meuric, and this is good."

Meuric swam out to the equine corpse to salvage what could be salvaged from the saddle bags. The spirit of the horse spoke of no remorse at the dead body before him, and in fact was quite eager to get a move on again.

With what he could retrieve, Meuric did then continue onward, and soon thereafter left the swamp and entered the hazy woods, and found work in a town beset by an evil druid who lived in a menacing castle—there he enjoyed the frequent social company of mares and stallions, which to both spirits in the body, was good.

—

Back at the workshop, Filra was just finishing cleaning up. He looked up from his broomwork to acknowledge Cahsn and Meuric as they entered, and to wave to them. “Looked like we made it, eh?” Filra said.

“Only just,” Cahsn said. “But yes. The sacrifice was sent, and the obelisks are activated.”

“Only just does seem to do the trick around here,” Filra said with a smile, and returned to his sweeping.

Cahsn led the way lightfootedly up the stairs, while Meuric skulked after. The two went up past the second floor which was wholly Filra’s, and proceeded up to the smaller third floor which was, in essence, Cahsn’s. At the top of the stairs was a miniature foyer of sorts, with one door and a potted fern plant on either side. Cahsn opened the door and allowed Meuric in. Meuric began to disrobe as Cahsn left the door open. With a pitcher and with water from a small fountain fed by rather cunning pipework, Cahsn went and watered the ferns outside their door, then closed the door and locked themselves and their partner inside.

With this done, Cahsn promptly found repose on their living room’s rug. “Mah,” they said up to Meuric.

Meuric gave an equine huff of an exhale back, and then came and laid down with them.

The two both laid on their backs, with the tops of their heads touching, staring up at the slanted wooden ceiling, which was littered with oddly angled nails from the shingles on the ceiling’s opposite side.

“We stink,” Cahsn observed.

Meuric turned and play-nibbled on one of Cahsn’s ears with his lips.

“Bad,” Cahsn corrected. “Bath.”

Meuric gave a bemoaning exhale, and stood up and went over to the bathchambers, and turned a pipe to start the hot water flowing.

Remaining on the floor, Cahsn began disrobing, flinging all items of their apparel in whatever directions behooved them at that second. When it was done, they laid on the floor staring blankly at the ceiling again, but additionally they were now unclothed.

With some time left before the bath would be filled, Meuric trudged back in and laid down on the floor once again too, this time on his chest, between Cahsn’s legs, staring at the space between their inner thighs.

Their crotch was a vague aura of softly billowing blue light, with distinct tiny blue moths fluttering around. Whatever had been there originally was a secret that only Cahsn truly knew the answer to—they had not told even Meuric, not that the young gentleman had ever pressed the question beyond a rare curiosity. As time had gone on in their relationship, Meuric was gladder and gladder to not know, and to let Cahsn exist as Cahsn.

When he sensed that the tub was near to filling, Meuric pried his gaze away from his partner’s aura and stood. Cahsn stuck up their hands, and Meuric grabbed them, and helped them to their feet. Leading as though it was a dance, Meuric guided Cahsn hand in hand to the bath tub, turned off the faucet, and the two of them slid into the water. As they settled, Meuric found himself sitting on Cahsn’s lap, getting his hair washed by his partner.

When many minutes and kisses had gone by, the two were both clean and dried and lying naked together on the couch, Meuric lying on his back, arms wrapped around Cahsn who laid face down on top of him, pecking kisses around his pecs and neck and jaw. Eventually Cahsn slinked higher up Meuric, and reached over him to the small table beside the couch, and retrieved a pair of necklaces. Cahsn smiled as Meuric reached around his neck, and fastened his necklace onto himself. With that done they fastened the clasp on theirs as well, and collapsed down onto his chest as the melding began.

With the necklaces on, each of them could feel everything that the other felt. Ordinarily these necklaces were used by physicians to diagnose, and by the likes of Meuric and Cahsn for hedonism. Today when they melded with Meuric, Cahsn felt like they had been struck by a swinging hammer: the man's muscles had been worked long past what Cahsn would have personally thought was the breaking point.

With care, Cahsn pulled Meuric up off of the couch, and lugged him over to the bed where he flopped down, playfully allowing himself to be manhandled. From a closet Cahsn retrieved a flask of calming oils. They poured a portion out onto Meuric's back and got to work, massaging the man's back and arms and legs, feeling their own fingers doing the work of rubbing and feeling Meuric's muscles receiving the relaxation and care. With the use of the necklaces, Cahsn could not help but be mindful of any tenderness, as well as anything that was enjoyable. They found themselves rubbing Meuric's right bicep quite a long time, to the point of flopping over onto their side beside him, and rubbing it from a comfortable sidelong repose.

Eventually, from this vantage, Cahsn reached down and gave Meuric's butt a squeeze, felt the jolt of it themselves, and slinked out of bed and skipped over to the liquor cabinet.

They returned with two bottles of musk wine, when they noticed that at the fountain in the corner, a message capsule was just floating up from the faucet. Meuric sat up on the edge of the bed and held the two bottles as Cahsn went to go see the message.

They picked the capsule up out of the basin, dried the outside against the bedsheets for convenience, and sat down beside Meuric and opened the capsule up, unrolled the little scroll inside, and read.

"It's from Darmf," Cahsn read.

Meuric tossed his head and stomped a foot, hoping to assert his disinterest strongly enough that it would bend the will of the universe and reshape the course of recent developments in reality into something more agreeable and less likely to include anyone other than himselves and Cahsn sharing the night together.

"He wants to know if we want to hang out," Cahsn went on.

Meuric again gave a stomp, and tossed his head for a pointedly longer duration of time.

"Why not?" Cahsn asked, and laid back across Meuric's lap.

Meuric extended a finger on his hand, and hovered the fingertip over Cahsn, hovering it back and forth from head to toe over and over, until eventually picking up one of their legs and poking the eighth elf on the buttcheek.

Cahsn glanced again at the message. "He says he didn't like your book recommendation."

Meuric gasped. "That *bitch!*" he said, his human spirit rushing to the fore. "Okay. Darmf can come over and then we're going to the library. Let's try to sneak one in before he gets here though. Mu has been randy all day, you have no idea."

Cahsn wrote a return message, and sent it in a capsule down a pipe adjacent to the pipe by which Darmf's message had been delivered.

By the time Darmf arrived up the stairs, Cahsn and Meuric were clothed, if slightly catching up on their breath. Darmf opened the door. Cahsn and Meuric were sat together on one side of the couch, though Meuric quickly shot up and stomped forward to Darmf, and gave an assertive huff to the scrawny man.

"Hi, you," Darmf said, cowering slightly.

Cahsn came forward as well, giving assuring shushes to Meuric on the way. When they arrived, they took Meuric's hand, and gave it a few gentle strokes with their thumb.

"What was wrong with A Feast Of Leaves And Sugar?" Meuric demanded.

"It was barely *readable*," Darmf asserted.

Meuric gasped and tossed his head. "I couldn't set it down!"

"Nothing *happened!*"

"So!"

Cahsn interjected to ask, "What was this book about?"

Darmf answered, "Some nameless, faceless, characterless narrator eats dinner for five hundred pages."

Cahsn noticed Meuric squaring up to punch Darmf; the eighth elf gave their partner a shove, and an assertive, "*Hey*. *Not* how we settle disagreements about books we don't like, Amadric."

Meuric knew that when he heard his human name from Cahsn, he was in trouble, regardless of whether it was his human spirit or his equine spirit that had gotten him there. He crossed his arms, and remained standing where he had been shoved to, further from Darmf, which was for the better anyways.

"Well *I* think it's the best thing I've ever read," Meuric said.

"That's fine, but I thought it was sooo boring. There's an entire chapter, twenty nine pages, where the narrator eats a carrot and that's the *only* thing that's described!"

"That was the *best* chapter. Life changing."

"Okay, you two," Cahsn said. "Meuric, can you agree that you might be biased towards liking a chapter about eating a carrot?"

"...Yes."

"Can we agree to disagree and move on?"

Both men grumbled that yes, they could move on.

"Good. Meuric, you were saying you wanted to go to the library?"

Meuric nodded.

"Anything you were looking for?"

"I would like to see if that author has written anything else."

"Okay. Darmf, would you care to come with us to the library?"

"Sure. I actually wanted to show you guys something I found down there, too. A little room that I don't think any of us knew about."

Cahsn, Meuric, and Darmf exited down the stairs, out of the workshop, and into the cool night. A dreadful silence hung around the air. The activated obelisks kept out noise from the hazy forest, and the townsfolk by and large went to sleep as soon as they were able, to be ready for the next day's exhausting work.

The three friends made their way to the mines. As they were walking, they crossed paths with Red, who was milling about town. The mare was greeted warmly by Meuric. She continued along with the three, she and Meuric trailing back and flirting with each other as Cahsn and Darmf led the way—whether or not Darmf knew that the two were flirting, Cahsn wasn't sure. Most of the fully human folk were shockingly bad at picking up

on communication from any creature outside of their own species.

At the mouth of the mines, Meuric paused with Red, and said, "You two go on ahead, I'll catch up."

"Something wrong?" Darmf asked.

That was a no, then, on Darmf picking up on anything.

"Going to see if she needs anything before we head down," Meuric offered.

Cahsn quickly assisted by shuffling Darmf onward, into the cool mouth of the mine. Being that it was impossible to see in that kind of darkness, Cahsn made the old elven hand sign for light: a faint luminescent aura began to trail about their feet in the appearance of a low mist, dim in the scheme of things though brighter than the moonlight from which they had come, and as such it left the eighth elf and the oblivious human squinting for a moment.

The two of them made their way down gradual slopes, sticking to the main tunnel until arriving at a large metallic door embedded in the side of one wall. There they stopped, and the two of them took a seat on the ground, waiting for Meuric.

"Do you think he'll be long?" Darmf asked.

"Not too long," Cahsn assured—the melding necklaces were still on, and Cahsn was very aware that Meuric was close. Though Cahsn was aware that Meuric was no stranger to indulging frisky equines, this actually was their first time being party to it themselves, by way of the necklace. The palms of the hands on the smooth hair that covered enormous musculature, the soft wet flesh of the sex itself—they'd had no idea that Red was such an appealing creature in that capacity. They may not quite look at Red the same way ever again, though all for the better.

After not too much longer, Meuric's climax was reached, and he soon withdrew himself from the mare, no longer touching her hindquarters. Cahsn felt the soles of Meuric's feet as he walked around the horse, and then shivered as they felt Meuric's lips touch Red's.

Then after a couple of hearty pats, Meuric began walking down the slopes.

"He's done," Cahsn idly reported.

“He… who, Meuric?”

Immediately, Cahsn realized they had said too much. With a sigh, they lifted up the necklace that they wore.

“Oh. It’s uh, it’s a little weird when you two wear those.”

Cahsn and Darmf sat in the silence of the mine, in the shifting luminescent fog at the floor.

“What was he doing?” Darmf asked, probably just to fill the quiet.

“He can tell you if he wants,” they said. They wished that they could forewarn Meuric, but the necklaces only transferred physical sensations, not thoughts or speech.

“Wh… how bad could it have been that you won’t tell me?”

“Nothing bad, just, not trying to talk behind anyone’s back.”

“Ookay then,” Darmf said. Then quite quickly sensing that the silence would encroach again, he said, “Seriously though, that book was so boring. I kept reading expecting some kind of revelation about why any of it should have been interesting, and it just *never* came. It was an *entire* book about eating dinner.”

“That does sound pretty boring,” Cahsn admitted honestly. “I do think that that was his horse side that liked it so much. Maybe like, his human side getting to read his horse side a story.”

“I kinda figured, but it was *such* a bad recommendation that I did still have to give him shit over it.”

Cahsn smiled a little. “Yeah, fair.”

With that, they heard the sound of footsteps coming down the mine, matching in cadence with the sensation of Meuric’s soles touching the ground.

Cahsn and Darmf stood. Light from a lantern came around the corner, joining the light of Cahsn’s fog. Meuric, the lantern bearer, exchanged sneaky satisfied smiles with Cahsn.

“What did Red need?” Darmf asked.

“Nothin.”

“Then what took you so long?”

“Mating.”

“*Oh*. I see.”

“Jealous?”

“No but like, that makes sense for you, actually.”

Meuric went at a canter to the door, and began turning the wheel that opened it.

"So does the human side of you close his eyes, or?"

"Nah, we're both into it."

"I'll pretend to be surprised."

With a final turn, the bolt of the metal door was fully released. Meuric pulled the door open, and invited Cahsn and Darmf to lead the way.

The three began into the ruins of the old city, creeping through brick passageways that by all rights should have fully collapsed long ago—a good amount of the place certainly already had.

It was not somewhere that one would want to get comfortable in. At some point most days, one would hear all of the old pipes begin to creak—as soon as the noise began, one would want to be leaving. Ten minutes from the creaking beginning, one's eyes would begin to tear up, and their nose would begin to run, and their lips and throat would feel dry and irritated. Another ten minutes from the irritation beginning, and the yellow gas seeping through the old pipes would be accumulated enough to be visible across the old cobbled floors, and even the toughest would be reduced to a blinded coughing and rasping on the floor, and ultimately a death of suffocation.

The entrance to the library—a collapsed wall in a section on agriculture—was a thirteen minute walk into the city from the fortified entrance in the mines. This made an escape under ten minutes doable, if one could hoof it.

By lanternlight and luminescent fog, the three made it to the library.

"You wanted to show us something?" Cahsn prompted.

"Yes!" Darmf said. "Second basement. It's in a section of the stacks that seems to be for books that are damaged or incompleted, I guess enough so that they couldn't be categorized any other way."

"Esoteric," Cahsn noted.

"I think mostly a librarian would put something there and forget about it forever. Most of what I've poked through there is *really* dull."

"Exciting," Cahsn remarked.

“Lead the way,” Meuric said, and offered the lantern out.

Darmf took it, and did lead the way over to the stairs, down two floors, and into a cold, echoey recess of the library. Eventually, the three came upon a pile of books blocking their passage down the aisle—it was a common enough thing to see, unfortunate as it felt.

“This is it,” Darmf said, and took a step up onto the slope of books. Continuing to walk forward onto them, he said, “I was grabbing something out of here when the whole area came down. I was *terrified* at first, thinking, this is it, this gas is going to start right while I’m buried under here, and I’m not going to make it in time. But, I did get myself unburied, and I found this.”

Arriving at the crest of the pile, Darmf held the lantern down to light up the top of a rectangular opening in the wall.

“A door!” Meuric remarked. “We have those in town too, actually.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Darmf remarked. “Come on, *I* think it’s pretty interesting. This is the only door into here, hidden behind a wall of books.”

With that, Darmf slid down into the doorway, into the room beyond.

With a moment to themselves, Cahsn cupped a hand to Meuric’s ear, and whispered extremely quietly, “That felt like a good time, with Red.”

Meuric shivered, and nuzzled Cahsn’s forehead.

Cahsn added, “We should follow after Darmf.”

Meuric nodded, and led the way, stepping onto the pile of books and then crawling on his chest down the slope that had fallen into the room beyond; Cahsn followed closely after.

The room beyond was a study. Besides being notably free of cobwebs, the study had a desk, a private bookshelf, and plenty of space to pace around.

Cahsn commented, “If it weren’t for being in a place that I’m terrified of relaxing in, this would be a very nice place to sit down and read. Do you suppose they remodeled and just left the room inaccessible instead of bothering to destroy it?”

“I’m not sure,” Darmf said. Meandering over to the bookshelf, he said, “I haven’t had time to read any of them fully, obviously,

but a lot of these books are on the lower planes, and magic associated with that."

Cahsn felt shivers down their spine. With some reluctance, they made the old elven hand sign for listening. The sensations that came about across their fingernails were all a mess speaking over each other: the symbol for knowledge hummed; the symbol for love seemed almost to recoil, as though the nail was grating against a chalk board; the symbol for divinity, written on Cahsn's thumb, felt as though a red hot brand was being held to it, and Cahsn shouted profanity as they quickly dismissed the hand sign.

With the hand sign gone, all of the sensations subsided—examining their thumb, there was no actual damage done, it seemed. But they suddenly liked this place quite a good deal less.

"You okay?" Darmf asked.

"Fine," Cahsn answered. "Do you know if this study belonged to anyone in particular?"

"No, I'm not sure. There's a drawer in this desk that I was interested in, but there's a lock on it."

Meuric went over to the desk, squared up with it, and kicked the face off of the drawer. Reaching into the open mouth of the drawer, he retrieved a book and handed it to Darmf.

Cahsn quickly stole the book out of Darmf's hands, before he could open it. "If I may, quickly," Cahsn said, feeling a magical force from the book as soon as they had caught even a passing glance of it.

"Y-yeah. Please."

Cahsn set the book on the desk, and placed a flat hand over the front cover of it. With their other hand, they made the sign for vision.

All sight of the room was put off to some vague periphery, and, without drawing open the covers, Cahsn saw the writing on the first page of the book.

Any child of man who bears witness to the words in this tome, in my name be struck blinded and mute. - Vermilion Von Scaldis.

Cahsn gasped, and raised their hands away from the book; sight of the room flooded back in. Two things had very urgently

struck them. Most alarming was the name: the druid who beset the town, demanding sacrifices of them from his solitary castle on the hill, bore the same name as the signer of the page. The second thing which struck them was that this inscription they had read was indeed highly charged with magic, and by all rights should have gone off when they read the inscription alone, even if it had been read by a proxy of magic rather than by direct sight.

"It belongs to the druid," Cahsn reported.

"Cahsn," Meuric said in a grave tone. "Step back. Let's leave it alone."

"He's right," Darmf added. "I don't want to be here anymore either, anyways. We should go."

The two were not wrong. To stick one's nose any further into this was insanity. And yet. They could not help but recall quite a lot, even in the last day alone. The hardship of the miners, working all their waking hours today to extract the spectracite for the daily ritual required by Scaldis. Their own fear at what would become of them if the second channeler they made was also unsuitable, and the sacrifice could not be made that day, to Scaldis. The sensation of putting on the melding necklace, and feeling how deathly sore the day's work at the farm had left Meuric, who was hardier than most who worked those fields.

"Let me look at one more thing," Cahsn said, and placed their hand on the cover of the book once more.

"Cahsn," Meuric tried again. "Whatever it is, isn't worth it."

Maybe not. But the way the town was being worked could not go on forever. If they were going to die, they would rather it was while risking liberation rather than being thrown into a pit in the ground and struck by silent lightning.

Cahsn made the hand sign for vision, and once more examined the first page. Being that the inscription was magically charged, and to quite an extreme degree for that matter, anyone who was not utterly blind to magic could sense that each word bore a meaning, each of which fed into the other words, to create the terms of the spell itself, chiefly the spell's trigger and the spell's effect. The effect, it seemed, was more than clear: whosoever effected by the spell would be struck

blinded and mute. Clearly, though, that had not happened to them, which made them very, very curious about the trigger.

Any child of man who bears witness to the words in this tome, in my name be struck blinded and mute. - Vermilion Von Scaldis.

They crept their way around each word, examining the corners and edges of each word's meaning.

Though it took some passes to spot it, the answer was found near to the start of the passage: when using the term "child of man," it seemed that Scaldis had only envisioned a human. It was beyond Cahsn how such a mistake could be made by a druid of all people, who were supposed to see the wisdom in the non-human world.

Cahsn was uncertain as to whether Meuric would be safe in reading the book. And, unfortunately, "bear witness" did include hearing of the words in the book, it seemed, and so they would not be safe to relay the book's contents to Meuric and Darmf. But after some long minutes of intensive focus, they were positive that they understood the scope of at least this inscription at the front, which was the only part of the book charged with magical energy. They were confident that they would be safe to proceed into the book for themselves.

They withdrew their hands from the book, and stood and hugged Meuric.

Meuric hugged them back.

Cahsn noticed, then, that he had taken off his necklace. A wise choice, and Cahsn themselves felt foolish for not having thought to mention it. They took their necklace off too, and stowed it in a pocket.

"Can we go now, please?" Darmf asked.

"I'd like to stay and read the book a while longer," Cahsn said. "There is a magical inscription at the front which would make the volume unsafe for human eyes, though it seems…"

They trailed off, as around them, the sounds of the pipes creaking began.

"Well, it seems we have no choice anyways." Cahsn stowed the book in their satchel.

"Is that wise to take?" Meuric asked.

“Perhaps so or perhaps not, but for a certainty it would now be unwise to stand around any longer deliberating on it.”

“Agreed,” Meuric conceded.

Without further discussion, the three of them began at once out of the secluded study, making a jog to the stairwell, up the stairs, out through the library’s collapsed wall; the eyes of all three of them were beginning to water as they progressed through the final passages; by the time they made it out into the mines and sealed the door shut behind themselves, there was a tickle in Cahsn’s throat, and they noticed Meuric and Darmf each had a bit of a cough.

“Too close,” Cahsn said with something of a relieved smile.

Meuric hugged Cahsn, and clung there for a while.

Eventually the three made their way up out of the mine. “See you two around,” Darmf said, and then gave a little wave, and headed off alone down a trail that more directly led to his family’s dwelling.

Cahsn snuggled up against Meuric, standing there with their temple buried in the soft fabric of his shirt which covered his muscular chest. “Spend the night with me?” they asked.

Meuric locked his arms around them, and held them securely. “Of course.”

When they were ready to go, Meuric picked Cahsn up and gave them a piggy back ride back into town. Had they still had the melding necklaces on, Cahsn would have realized the man was still as sore as he was earlier and wouldn’t have allowed themselves to be carried by him, but as it was, he bore it nonchalantly enough to get away with it, and he was, in fact, happy to bear it.

Meuric set Cahsn down outside of Filra’s workshop, and the two climbed up the stairs to Cahsn’s quarters on the third floor.

“I gotta get to bed,” Meuric said.

Cahsn nodded. “I’ll be after you in a while.”

Meuric kissed Cahsn, and stole the druid’s book out of their hands while they were distracted. “Be careful,” he emphasized, and offered the book back to them.

They nodded. “I have no intention of doing otherwise.”

The two of them shared another kiss, and then Meuric did proceed to bed, and within the minute was snoring.

Cahsn sat down on the couch, took a deep, mindful breath, and then opened the druid's journal.

The eighth elf learned many things in their reading, but chief among them was that it was, in essence, all a charade. Many times they had to put the book down in tears as they learned that Vermilion Von Scaldis was nothing of a druid, and was, in fact, merely a lord among men who had made a pact with a lord among demons: Scaldis would supply the demon with regular sacrifice—the crop yields, the blood yields when crop was not enough—and in turn, the demon would allow a vein of the powers of the many hells to flow through Scaldis's gnarled fingers. The spirits which beset the town were conjured when a sacrifice wasn't made, not warded when a sacrifice did occur. The eighth elf's entire life's work was, more or less, a trick.

—

Every night, Meuric dreamt. They never knew until waking up that they had been dreaming, although there were a great many things that should have made it seem obvious, were one lucid to such things at the time. For Meuric, the most stark difference between dream and reality was that in reality his two spirits occupied one body, whereas in his dreams, almost without fail the two spirits were divided again. Curiously, Amadric was not always a human, and Mu was not always a horse: sometimes they were inverted, or both horses, or both men.

In their present dream, Amadric was his old human self, younger in years than he was now, and Mu was his old horse self. It was a pleasant day; Amadric had the day off from working in the cobblery, it was a holiday in the old city, and so he had all the hours he could want to tend to his horse. The man and the horse stood in the small stable behind the cobblery, though at present the stable was located in a wide open field, with mountains far off in the distance, and mountainous clouds overhead, and a strong wind blowing in the scents of diced apples and freshly baked bread.

"I am dreaming," Amadric and Mu both realized, and then Amadric stopped the work he was doing on Mu's saddle, Mu stopped sniffing curiously at the smell of apples in the air, and

the man and the horse both looked at one another. “We know that we are dreaming,” they said, and then said as well, “How do we know this? We never know this.”

From the mountains came a distant, echoing scream. Amadric and Mu both turned their heads to face it. The voice had called out but one word, which was the man and the horse’s shared name: “*Meuric!*”

That voice. That voice was not from here. It was from later. Somehow, it was from later, a time that had not yet come, there in the stables, Amadric and Mu living as two separate bodies.

The voice called again, “*Meuric! Help!*”

Mu realized first who the voice belonged to: “Cahsn.”

At the name, Amadric felt icy fingers creeping upon him, at knowing that they were calling for help, but that he was so very far away.

Mu continued, “We are dreaming. We must awaken and help them.”

With a hideous gasp, Meuric shot open his eyes and sat bolt upright on the bed.

What he awakened to seemed more like a dream than what he had awakened from. He sat upright in a cold sweat on Cahsn’s bed, in the dead of night. No sound was present anywhere at all: even when he had gasped when waking up, the sound of it was stolen, muted immediately by the very air around him. The bedsheets fluttered, and some papers blew about the room. In the living room, in place of the floor, there was a swirling red vortex: Cahsn clung to the doorway to the bedroom, staring pleadingly—no, apologetically—at Meuric.

“*I love you*,” they mouthed, and then the door frame broke apart, and Cahsn was sucked backwards into the vortex, and was swallowed by it.

Before it could have any chance to close, Meuric dove forward in after them, and was swallowed by the vortex as well.

Meuric tumbled out of the vortex into a long, dark, grand room. He found his balance and leapt to his feet. To his left and right, the walls were covered in bookshelves from floor to ceiling, and underfoot was a thick red carpet set over a stone floor. The hall was dark, and Meuric could not see through the darkness to the wall behind him or ahead of him. All light came

from five flames, each the size of a candle flame, though redder, and with no visible source; the five flames circled slowly around a snarling man in a crimson robe, whose gnarled hands were clutched around a staff, the top of the staff adorned with a human skull.

Cahsn found their footing as well, and stood up beside Meuric, the two partners facing the robed man. Meuric and Cahsn stood unclothed—the vortex, it seemed, had only transported their bodies.

The robed man spoke: "You fools shall regret stealing from your master."

Cahsn retorted, "On my life, you'll regret that you brought us here." They seemed very aware of the accuracy of 'on my life,' and gave a small, helpless laugh.

"What magic is this about you?" Scaldis asked, looking down to the blue aura which hung in the place of Cahsn's genitals. "A strange choice of perversion; I sense that you have elven blood within you, but I cannot sense whether you are man or woman. Do you think this gives you some form of protection from my hexes?"

"I might now that you've told me as much."

"Fah. It protects you from nothing. But I will find you out all the same."

Scaldis waved his staff through the circling flames, catching one flame on the staff's skull; the skull became engulfed in the red fire. Scaldis muttered hexes, causing the fire to become a chromatic swirling of pink and blue. When the magic was prepared, Scaldis swung his staff, sending the ball of pink and blue lights racing towards the eighth elf. Meuric pushed the eighth elf out of the way, and took the blow himself.

The magic of the lights took an immediate hold of Meuric, and he found himself growing taller, and his stance growing more sure. The magic cast upon him by Scaldis was magic that would reveal the true form of any who was struck by the pink and blue lights; in short seconds, Meuric found himself with the head, arms, and chest of a man, and the four legged body of a stallion.

Wasting no time in the opportunity of this surprise, Meuric stampeded forward towards the wide-eyed Scaldis, toppled the

gnarled man over with fierce hooves, and wrestled from the warlock his staff; this he threw to Cahsn, who caught it and ran forward into the struggle. From the ground Scaldis snatched at another of his circling flames, made a gesture, and in his hands the flame grew into a flickering scimitar. Meuric reared at the sight of it, and Scaldis got to his feet. The warlock took a swing towards Meuric, but found the back of his head struck in by his very own staff.

Scaldis collapsed, and his ring of flames went out, leaving total darkness to reign over the quiet hall.

Cahsn made the old elven hand sign for light. Around their feet, a radiant fog began to sweep over the red carpeted floor.

For good measure, they made the old elven hand sign for axes, and with the conjured tool, beheaded Vermilion Von Scaldis where he lay, putting a definitive end to his reign over the town.

With this done, they picked up the warlock's staff once more, and with it in hand, turned to face their partner, whose body now reflected his spirits.

"You look amazing," Cahsn commented.

Meuric smiled, flicked his tail, and offered out a hand. Cahsn took it, and accepted the help up onto Meuric's back. Meuric walked them slowly forward, seeking an exit from this dark chamber.

"It would have done nothing to me, his magic," Cahsn mentioned. "The same magic he invoked to try to reveal my true form is the exact magic I used long ago to attain this very way that I appear now. All the same, I'm happy that you got in the way." They gave Meuric's equine body a hearty pat on the flank.

The eighth elf and the first centaur found their way back into town, and informed the people that they were free.

THE IMMORTAL OF LOCH ANNETH

I fling dirt over my shoulder. All of my muscles are sore. My palms are sore. The joints of my fingers are sore. I awoke last night from a dead sleep with a pang of a memory so intense and precise it felt as though I had been stabbed. It was fleeting as a dream: I knew that if I did not get up that instant and act, I may lose the thought forever.

It was a memory of burying something extremely precious. Upon waking and standing, I rummaged around for a shovel of mine, and then walked around the sandy beach of Loch Anneth by the silver light of the moon. As my footsteps crunched over the sand, I held tight to the memory of the burying, of the place where something was buried. Even the place has been changed by time, but I remember where it was if I don't overthink it. It was a clearing. Now it is overgrown, indistinct from the forest surrounding. By the silver moonlight, I uprooted a tree that was grown on the place of the burial, and pushed it aside. By the light of the morning, I dug where the roots have grown, cutting through them, reaching where they were reaching. Now by light of day, as I am drenched in sweat, I dig clay, until finally, my shovel strikes something else. I dig the hole wider, until I have uncovered the entire surface of a finished and stained wooden box, six feet tall and three feet wide, and I know that this is the thing I have come for. I dig the hole wider yet, so that I can have room enough to pry open the lid with my shovel. The lid does not give easily, but with a bellowing groan, the wood and the nails bend apart, and I lift the lid and heave it aside, and I look

into the box. There in the box, there are the remains of a deer, the legs crouched slightly to fit inside, as though the deer is laying down to nest. The flesh and all except the bones is decomposed. Only the skeleton remains. I sit against the side of the freshly dug hole, the dirt clinging to my drenched body, and I stare at them—it—them—her.

I loved her. As I sit against the side of the hole and stare, I begin to weep. I loved her. I have lost her. And I know nothing else, other than that it was a long time ago. I cannot remember what she was like. I cannot remember anything that we did, other than the almost forgotten fact that at the end, I buried her. I try to remember what she looked like in life, but every detail is imagined, not recalled. I loved her, and I lost her, and now there is nothing there but the dim memory of both, and the wrenching feeling that I ought not be able to do this, be able to mourn for something that I no longer know.

Some of my old loves are like ashes. There was once something alight here. Something dancing, nourishing, absorbing, burning. Now it is inert. I try to move it around again and feel heat, comfort, warmth, pain, scalding pain, anything, but it is not there anymore. Some of my old loves are like nettles in the pads of my fingers. I am doing something that has nothing to do with them, and then they sting me. I try to find them, and they hide. I cannot remove them. I know that someday they will sting me again, and then someday they will not, and I might not ever know. Some of my old loves are like a note: *I love you and I'm looking forward to spending more time with you tomorrow*. There is nothing alive, but when I happen upon them again, it is like they are still here to speak.

I stare at the doe. The sense of loss here is a monstrous shadow of the actual thing that is now so far behind me I will never see it again so long as I live.

Would that I could turn around and look back into the past, earlier, and earlier again, and know who this was, and how I loved her. Would that I were not cast into the ocean of time with an anchor upon my ankles and forced to forever wonder if there is a bottom, and suspect that there is not. There is no sun. There is no floor.

I secure the lid back atop the box, and I bury the doe for a second time. It helps. It takes away the momentous sting to know that this has happened a second time now, that this is not a monolith, but merely a thing which I did once, and I can do again. The pain is still pain, but it is dulled. I return the soil to where it was, and leave the tree fallen. I trudge to the lakeside, and sit on the sand, filthy and tear-streaked, staring out at the water that shines in the daytime. My wife Heleyne comes and finds me. She sits beside me a while. Then she takes me by the hand, pulls me upright, and leads me into the piercing cold water. When the sweat and dirt are cleansed from me, we return again to the beach, and begin walking back to our cabin, so that we can get a fire on and warm up.

We arrive at the cabin. We change into dry clothes. We start a fire in the hearth, and sit on the floor before it, wrapped together in one blanket, staring as the flames lick upwards from the logs.

"Thank you," I tell Heleyne. In my head, I repeat the name. *Heleyne. Heleyne. Heleyne.* "I love you."

"Tell me about her," Heleyne says.

I tell her about the doe, though there is little to say. It really is as though I am telling her about the dream I had last night that I have already forgotten most of the details of.

Earlier

There is a stone tower standing on an island at the center of Loch Anneth. Many days, in periods when I am alone, I find myself atop the tower, wearing a wide brimmed hat to shade myself from the sun. I circle around and around, looking out at the lake, at the forests beyond. The lake is the pupil to the green forest's iris. Loch Anneth, and the green forest surrounding, sit at the border of two landscapes which are far more immense.

To the south, stretching beyond sight, is the orange forest. It is a strange place. The trees there bear fruit, but the fruit cannot be picked no matter how hard one pulls, and if one pulls for more than a moment, it will sting the hand even through a steel gauntlet. Bushes are razor thorned, the vines drip with poison that will cause one a blistering rash. The soil appears good for

planting, but if one takes a trowel to it, fire will shoot forth from the earth. No flora in the orange forest has grown or been removed so long as I can remember. No fruit from any tree has fallen or replenished, but merely hangs perpetually. It is a place frozen in time, harshly resistant to being interfered with. Through it, there is a dirt road, leading from the greater world to Loch Anneth.

To the north, stretching beyond sight, is the tangled labyrinth. On the surface it appears as a landscape of mountains, some minor, some snow-capped, all formed into a heap of lines that resemble a floor covered wall to wall in discarded thread. There is one mountain here adjacent to the green forest. In it, if one traverses up a small valley, they will arrive at a door, the entrance to the labyrinth which spans beneath every mountain beyond, and reaches down to depths unknown. It is said that the world which we know was once the home of the gods, but that they have all moved on to a new world that is currently being weaved, and that our current world is discarded, fallen, rotting, finite, perilous, soon to be uninhabitable. It is said that if one traverses the tangled labyrinth, that on the other side will be the new home of the gods, a blossoming paradise in progress. Who is to say if anyone has made it?

I believe that a very long time ago, I began life in the world beyond the orange forest, and one day traveled up the road, to the lake and the green forest. I believe that I built the tower on which I now stand. It is never easy to say what is memory and what is fancy, but I recall great difficulty getting the large slabs of stone out here by boat. I remember—I think I remember—capsizing a number of times, losing weeks of work on the cut slabs. When I am up on the tower, I am looking for someone. I stand, and I pace, and I search the green forest. My gaze hangs on the road through the orange forest. My gaze hangs on the valley to the door of the labyrinth. I have an unreasonable hope that whoever it is I am looking for will stand out so strongly that it will not matter how many millennia it has been since I even knew who I am waiting for. A father? A mother? A sibling? A child? I haven't the faintest. So whenever I see someone from up here, I go to meet them, and I hope that something will stir.

Down the road through the orange forest, a lone figure approaches. I descend the tower, push my rowboat into the lake, and venture forth to meet this person. I bring a vase of water good for drinking or washing.

When I arrive, the figure is still on their way up the road through the orange forest. They move at a shamble. I stand at the border. As they come nearer, I can discern their trouble. She is burned, blistered, cut, and in her arms she cradles two children, one over top of the other. I set the vase down in the road, and go to get cloth, and a shovel.

When I return, she has arrived at the green forest, and has laid the two children beside each other on a patch of grass. She has used the water to wash them. Their faces, necks, and hands are free of dirt. They are dead. Girls. Twins. The mother kneels before them. She is in a bad way and needs to be attended to, but it is not a great stretch of empathy for me to understand that she first must attend to her mourning, however long or labored.

I set down the cloth and the shovel beside the empty vase, and I go to sit on a fallen tree away from her.

Later in the day, I hear digging. I return to find the mother digging the graves. She has wrapped each body in cloth.

"I would dig them, if you would let me. Rest would do you well."

"Allow me this," she answers.

"Of course." I linger. "If you would tell me their names, I would make them headstones."

"I wouldn't ask that of you. But I would tell you the names. Maigis. Bayach."

"And your name?"

"Heleyne. And your name?"

"Duncan."

"Thank you for the water, Duncan. And the veils, and the use of your spade."

I leave her to her work, and go to retrieve a meal for her, for when she is finished, and another vase of water to wash her own wounds with, and to drink. When night falls, she agrees to stay in a cabin I have nearby, all to herself, and I will return to the tower on the island.

Weeks pass as her health returns to her, and her wounds begin to heal.

One day, I am walking carefully through the forest, in the form of a deer. I have remembered something. With Heleyne beginning to be well again, there is an aspect of her character, a certain joy she takes in resolute stubbornness, which has reminded me of something long, long past, so vague that I don't know why it has reminded me of what it has. But nonetheless, I am going to retrieve something that I had until now forgotten about.

In the green forest surrounding Loch Anneth, there is far more than meets the eyes of men. To the man, each tree has a number of branches too numerous to easily count, but nonetheless very finite. To the squirrel, one can ascend the trunk and arrive at a tree with thousands of branches, nooks in which to sleep and run and play and hide things away, each birch its own manor, each yew its own castle. To the man, the ground underfoot is uniform and solid. To the shrew, the ground underfoot is as varied as the forest on the surface, spaces of loose dirt and hard, veins of rock, roots thin and thick stretching as wide below ground as the tree above reaches into the air. To the man, we see the odd deer trail. To the deer, the forest is a sprawling park, rich with trails and fields in which to dip into, away from men's sights.

As a deer, I am making my way, carefully, to one such hidden clearing. The walk has taken most of the day. I can be in no rush.

I come to the clearing of short grass, at the center of which is a grand yew tree. In my memory it was a sapling. Nonetheless, against the base of it leans a tall red bottle. I go to it, take it into my mouth, and leave, carrying it away. As I arrive back at the lake, I find myself a man again, bottle of wine in my hand, staring at the waters of Loch Anneth which shine in the evening sun. I go to Heleyne's cabin, and we share the wine together.

As the months go by, we are living in the cabin together. She would no longer like to venture into the tangled labyrinth. She would like to live here with me, for a time.

How many times has it started this way? Someone comes to me hurt, and when they are healed, we find that the process of healing has grafted me onto them.

I walk slowly through a graveyard at the most secluded edge of the green forest, bordering on the orange forest. I walk at a snail's pace, going a few feet to the hour, staring at the names on the headstones. *Gennat. Rowland. Joan.* Some of the names, I can vividly remember the person who is now buried in earth, unbreathing. *Marriory. Mede. Waltir.* Some of the names ring as faintly as the names of people I have never actually met, but only heard about secondhand. *Maybe Alesoun. Maybe Wilmot. Maybe Avis. Maybe Theresa. Maybe Myrina.* Most of the names are weatherworn from the stone beyond legibility. The headstones that I placed on the graves of Maigis and Bayach will last Heleyne's lifetime. I will watch them return to being just stones.

Earlier

My hooves crunch over the snow as I carefully walk. My bare nose is colder than ice, and my breath is a hearth's plume before me. It is the middle of the night, but with a full moon and snow to reflect it, it may as well be daytime aside from the temperature.

I carefully come around a tree, and then, seeing something move in a snowbank ahead, I freeze in place. I am ready to bolt away, into the hidden places.

The figure moves again. It is a man. He huddles hunched over, shivering, arms wrapped around his torso, face exposed. His face is bright red from the cold. He will die like this.

I dash away. I bound over bushes and fallen trees to a cache I only vaguely remember. In a hidden clearing of short grass, a pocket world untouched by the snow and cold, I see the sapling of a yew tree. On the ground beside it is a heavy winter coat, and beside that, a tall red bottle of wine. I take the coat in my mouth, and bound back towards the man.

I am making a great deal of noise this time, and this time when I approach, he is looking at me. I walk up to him and push the coat against him. He appears confused but grateful, and puts

the coat on. When it is on, I push myself against him as well, laying down on top of him, insisting upon him whatever warmth I can provide, even though in truth, I would be shocked if it is enough. Gently, he rests a hand on me. As the cold hours of the night stretch on, he has laid down beside me, huddling his hands and face between his chest and my back, creating a pocket of warmth.

When the sun rises, I am surprised he is still alive. The world becomes as bright as the lake, as the sun takes the place of the moon and the surface of the snow melts enough to glisten like diamonds.

The man remains huddled against me for some hours into the morning. Eventually, when I sense he is warmed enough to survive without me, I scramble slowly away from him, stand, and find myself as a human, which I have not been in a long, long time. The body feels awkward, squat, brutish. The man looks up at me agape.

"Duncan," I offer in an agreeable tone, and extend my hand.

"Waltir," the man returns through stiff lips and chattering teeth. He takes my hand, and I pull him up.

I help him to the beach, where he sits in the sun as I assemble a fire for us.

We make a camp. He is frostbitten, badly. I gather food and firewood for us and he tends the fire while I am away. Eventually when he is well enough and springtime has come, we go on walks around the lake, and through the green forest. He happens upon things that I can tell him about. A fallen and overgrown kiln, where I used to fire clay pots. A sundial carved from stone, the face now cracked in half, the needle broken away and missing completely—until he led me here and reminded me, I had forgotten that I ever once cared about the time of day, though now I remember, there was a phase when I used to rather obsess over it, a long while back. A rowboat tucked away in a natural high shelf within a cave, which has held up better than I could have expected of it. We take it out to the lake and give it a try. It fills with water very quickly, and Waltir tries to salvage it, but I pull him up from the water, insisting that he leave it sink.

As we sit on the beach afterwards, staring at where the rowboat sank, Waltir asks me something. “The name of this lake. Loch Anneth. Do you know who Anneth was?”

“I suspect she was my first wife.”

“You suspect?”

“Do you remember the start of your life?”

“…No.”

“Nor I.”

He accepts this.

That night as we are sitting beside each other at the fire in our camp, he grabs me by the bicep and pulls me in to a kiss. This is new to me—I have never shared romance with a man before. But it does not feel wrong. In fact, it feels delightful: a thing that I am somehow confident I have *never* done before, and now I am. I kiss him in return, and then we are lying down before each other beside the campfire.

As the months go by, we begin work on building a cabin at our campsite.

Earlier

In defiance and in tears, I have built a tower. It is a far cry from my most aesthetically pleasing work—I truly do have a talent for working with stone—but what it lacks in looks, it makes up for in stubbornness. It will stand for my lifetime. I stand atop the tower, arms crossed, staring unblinking at the door at the end of the valley in the mountainside, waiting for her to emerge.

Five thousand years pass. Someone shoots an arrow at my head. I uncross my arms and catch it, and throw the damnable thing over the parapet to the ground. It falls. I hear it land on the grass below. I hear the waves of the lake lapping against the shore of the island. I blink. I blink repeatedly. I close my eyes hard. I bow my head, facing the floor, eyes shut tight, as the gravity of how much time I have spent unmoving catches up with me.

I open my eyes, and look to where the arrow was shot from. The scoundrel sees that I see him. He stops aiming his next shot and disappears into the green forest. I look back to the door at the end of the valley in the mountainside, as though seeing it

again for the first time. I am waiting for someone to come out of the door. Someone who I love. She is tall with handsome features, black hair straight and long, deadly with a short sword, stubborn as a stone, overflowingly generous to those she has found pity on, sharp tongued, quick witted, irreverent and righteous. My wife. I am waiting for my wife. Gods how I love her. Gods how long I will wait.

But as I fix my stance to resume staring at the valley again, I wonder whether I must wait and do nothing else. Perhaps I may take this time for my own edification, so that when she returns, she will find a man more worthy to be called her husband.

The man who shot an arrow at me is walking up the valley in the mountainside, towards the door. Good riddance to him. I watch him go in. Then I turn, and descend the stairs.

In the green forest, there is a hill. I build a house on top of it, such that it can't be missed as one passes through from the mountainside valley to the orange forest road. When she emerges, she will see this manor, an exact replica of the home she grew up in, and she will come to me.

When I drive the last nail into this house—this beacon—I feel, for the first time in many, many years, that a burden is lifted from me. My vigilance is no longer needed without rest. For the first time in thousands of years, I sleep.

As time goes on, I do still go out to the island, stand atop the tower, and stare at the valley. But I do other things too now. I start a garden. I start to farm. Eating for me is more of a pastime than a necessity. Most of the food goes to the wildlife. If they ravage my garden, I wish them well. If anything makes it to harvest, I leave it out for the birds and the rodents anyways.

A thousand years pass. One morning I row out to the island, my mind on the tomato vines that are sprouting, where I might want to put in a flower bed, what I might do for mulch. I enter the tower, place my foot on the first step, and pause there. I try to remember why I am here.

I do remember, eventually. I am expecting someone. Of course, yes, I am keeping a look out. I climb the stairs, and on the roof of the tower, I pace from one side to the other, looking at the valley for a time, and then looking at the road. I am expecting someone I care deeply about. Her. Her? It has been so

long. I am not even certain of how long it has been, by now. Lifetime after lifetime, a memory of a memory of a memory in perpetuity. I hope that when they come, they will be striking enough that I recognize them.

Seasons go by. I continue to tend to my crops. One spring day, when I am standing on the roof of the tower, facing the orange forest, I see a figure coming up the road. This happens sometimes. It is rare, though. An occasion to be appreciated.

This figure is quite different than most, I realize jovially. Not a human. For some unknowable reason, there is a doe coming to the green forest. She walks tall, her footsteps headstrong and precise.

It is actually some weeks before I see her next. I have been leaving grain out for the birds. I sit on a swinging bench on the porch in the shade, and I watch them peck and eat. And there, coming up out of the woods, is the doe. I hold my breath, not wanting to startle her. She is cautious as she approaches to join the rambunctious birds in eating the grain.

She lowers her head, eats a bit, and then bounds away. I breathe again.

She comes again the next day, and the next. Even into the winter, I leave grain out for her on the snow, and she comes, and she eats. I am not hidden to her. She often looks at me as I sit on the swinging bench, watching. One day, instead of waiting on the bench, I wait standing in front of the porch. She is cautious of this. I see her stand at the edge of the woods for some time before she decides I am still trustworthy, and comes to eat. The winter melts and gives way back to spring. I suppose that she trusts me quite a lot when she comes out to meet me as I toss out the grain for her and the birds, even if she does keep a distance between us still. One day, I am delighted when I am throwing out the grain and she walks straight up to me, and places her soft nose against me. I rest a hand on her side, look into her eyes, and without words, try to convey all of my gratitudes to her for her gift of this moment.

The moment passes, and she lowers her head to eat some of the grain I have tossed out. I have a handful for myself as well.

One day, as I am walking through the woods, I happen upon her in the wild. We both freeze, surprised at each other. She

begins walking to me, and I to her, lightly, cautiously. I press my soft nose lightly against her side. I look down at myself, and realize jovially that I am quite different than before: a buck, antlers and all. She bounds away, and I bound after her, and we frolic through the green forest, and I see how much more to it there is than even I had known, lo these many years. That night we nest down together. I find myself spending most of my time with her, only occasionally seeing to my garden, and even in this, she stands beside me, watching with interest. We weather the winter together. More than once I lead us into the manor, and we nest down in a living room kept warm by the hearth fire. When springtime comes again, the world is living and we frolic through it. One day in a hidden clearing, she flags me, and I feel a tiny and precise pang of hurt, as though grabbing something and discovering that there is a nettle in my fingertip. I am unsettled, and I ignore her advances. The next day she flags me again, and although there is once again this pang, it feels distant, and there is much more presently her enrapturing scent, presence, heat, longing to care and be cared for. I go in unto her. The months go by, and she gives birth to the first of our fawns, a doe and a buck.

Earlier, at the start

Anneth and I walk along the road through the orange forest, hand in wicked hand. It is bitingly cold, though no snow falls on this place. When we arrive at the green forest, we have to climb over a snowbank.

We walk across the frozen lake, and sit together on the center of the island at the center of the lake in the center of the forest, two glints in a pupil in an iris.

“If we become separated in the labyrinth,” I say, “and it is hopeless for us to find each other, then let us return back, far as we may have come, and we will meet again at this lake.”

“Of course,” she tells me.

The winter wind howls across us.

“How long shall I wait for you?” she asks.

I consider this as the wind screeches. Eventually I answer, “As long as you feel I am worth. I will wait for you forever.”

Much later, nearing the end

After a fashion, I have decided I will never again be alone when another partner dies. We lounge around bonfires in the parched dirt, I and my concubines, women, men, doe, stag, squirrel, songbird, snake, wasp, anything that moves that I think might move me. I am fluid, sometimes in the form of one specie, but often caught somewhere between two or several. I know my partners' names occasionally, but much more viscerally I know their scents, their noises, their behavior. When I am anything mammalian or adjacent, I drink. No matter what I am, I am seldom without some manner of contact, nurture, stimulation. I am never alone.

But it never lasts forever. Loving as many as I do only multiplies how often I fall for someone deeply, and then they depart unto eternity. I try to fill the void left by them with a hundred others, but it is a fool's errand. The blot left by them hangs suspended over me as I fall through time, ever more out of reach, ever more unfillable, ever more doomed to acceptance or denial, then to vagueness, then to nothing.

After a fashion, I can endure no more, and I flee into Loch Anneth as a minnow, and spend a long, long, long, long, long time alone.

Later, at the end

I emerge from Loch Anneth immense, profoundly muscular, profoundly greedy, profoundly wise, scaled and clawed and frightening. My claws rake through the frost and sand as I circumnavigate the beach, taking deep breaths of the cold winter air. When I have done a full lap and have reacclimated to a life in air, I leap up, flap my immense wings, and take flight.

I am leaving Loch Anneth. As a dragon, I rocket past the valley and vault above the mountain range over the tangled labyrinth. I do not expect that there is an afterlife. I do not expect that there is an afterlife where everyone I've ever loved, from the first to the last, is waiting for me. But whether there is or there isn't, I will join them.

MELVIN, LILLY, RASPBERRY WHISKEY

1) Mel is 21 and on winter break from college

Last night I discovered that when I get severely drunk, I do not keep secrets. Previously this had never been a matter of consequence, as I had only ever been severely drunk alone.

Around noon yesterday, after a terrifyingly blizzardy two hour drive from Meriville to New Denton, I arrive at Ben's house with a backpack in one freezing hand and a 24 pack of tall cans in the other freezing hand, and I am literally shivering from just the walk from the car to Ben's front door. I am invited in by Ben and his Saint Bernard Toros, and after dropping everything to kneel down and rub Toros and absorb his warmth as he leans into me and wags, Ben and I head to the fridge to unpack the cans, finding space in the fridge among the deli meats and cheeses and condiments—my friend Ben is assertively not vegan. I am vegan, but I don't say a word about it to him. At this point in my life no world events have radicalized me enough to realize that immoral behaviors, even the most normalized ones, by definition, are more than personal choices. That doe eyed innocence won't last forever in me. Watch this space, I guess. But, in the meantime, back to pretending that I don't know what happens at the end, and that I am still writing as a linguistics undergrad—we overanalyze our own speech and talk unlike any native speaker, it's not charming, but it was realistically how I talked for a few years.

As Ben and I find space for the tall cans, he asks me a few questions about college life. “Learning much about languages? How many languages do you speak now? Lots of parties?” Yes, three fluently, no not really. By the time we’re done, half of the cans have fit into the fridge, and the other half are left to wait their turn in their box that is left on the kitchen counter.

“Still see many people from high school?” I ask Ben.

He shrugs. “I see them around, but I only really talk to the people at work.”

“Jason, Millie, Kylie?”

“Kylie moved away like a year back. But yeah, Jason and Millie.”

“Ah.”

“You still talk to anyone from around here?” Ben asks me.

I shake my head. As we’re standing there in the kitchen and I’m trying to think of how to explain how I’m bad at keeping in touch—as though Ben would be unaware—the power goes out. It’s oddly startling, every light going out at once. We stand around for a few seconds, wondering if it will just come back on.

After a bit, Ben takes out his phone and turns on the flashlight. He mutters something to the effect of, “Check out the breaker I guess.”

I come with him, and stand and watch as he flips some of the breaker switches back and forth to no effect. We step outside, and it appears that power is out for the entire neighborhood. No other lights on on the entire street.

In case of the event that the power will be out for a long time, Ben gets out a couple of coolers, and we bring them outside and pack icy snow into them. We bring them into the kitchen and put the remaining cans of beer into them, as well as some of the items from Ben’s fridge that he most wants to avoid going bad—those being the deli meats and cheeses and condiments, so, more or less every item that had been in the fridge, to the best of our cooler packing ability. Ben has also brought out an electric lantern, which sits on the kitchen counter, providing surprisingly good lighting to the entire kitchen, with dim light into the living room.

As Ben is assessing what he wants to do about the frozen meats in the freezer that he’s just remembered, the front door

flies open. Although he is a blur who never stops to say hello, I immediately recognize my best friend from growing up who I haven't seen in person since I was fourteen: Harry. Toros does not recognize him, and begins barking at this intruder into his house. Harry drops some paper grocery bags by the door—literally drops them—and flies to the kitchen sink and turns it on, and only when he stops there do I notice all the blood on him.

"Mel!" Harry yells, turning to me with a big smile on his face. It looks eerie, his smile lit only from the side by the light of the lantern, much of his face left in shadows. He winces as he puts his hand under the stream of water.

I take a second to kneel down by Toros, who is at Harry's leg, barking viciously. I tell the big hound that it's okay, and although he doesn't believe me right away, he eventually stops barking and walks off, keeping an eye on Harry from afar, beside Ben who is dumbfounded.

I stand up and look at Harry. He's wearing a black and grey long-sleeve shirt. The left sleeve has a line of blood all the way up to the shoulder, and the front of the shirt and his frayed jeans are wet with blood too. His left hand, which he is washing, has cuts on it. One cut goes across the side of his thumb, the back of his pointer finger, and the back of his middle finger. The other cut goes across the back of his wrist.

"You need stitches," I tell him.

Harry cranes his neck to look over me at Ben. "First aid kit?"

Ben stutters the beginning of a response, and then gives up on it and gets on his hands and knees between us, reaching around in the cupboard under the sink. He comes up with a dusty tin box, with a white circle and a red plus sign on the face.

Harry applies an ointment to his cuts and wraps a bandage around his injured hand, only allowing us to help by holding things for him.

As Harry is finishing up the bandage, Ben asks what happened.

"Slipped on some ice, somehow caught the edge of a fucking storm drain on the curb."

Ben winces, believing Harry.

Harry goes to his grocery bags that he dropped by the door, and out of one of them, he pulls out a flask-shaped bottle of liquor. He yanks off the stopper which comes out with a *pop!*, holds the bottle up to us in a salute, and downs several gulps. When he's done, he smiles at me. "How have *you* been?"

After I ask again if he wants to go to the hospital and he insists that he does not, I tell him that I've been good, which is a lie and not a lie. In truth, I enjoy my studies, but I don't have any friends in Meriville who I see outside of class. I enjoy going on long walks through Meriville. I enjoy swimming in the lake near campus. I enjoy reading in the campus library and in the city library. I have not dated anyone in my three years there and I hate my nights and weekends job as a dish washer. My life is fine. I am depressed and think of suicide every day. Nothing is physically wrong with me and there is no threat to my safety. There is a hole in my life that was ripped out when I was seventeen and I have never been able to talk about it with anyone and the emptiness is killing me. I want nothing more in life than a dog but I'm too busy. I want nothing more in life than to drop out and live far away from everything but if I do I am a failure who does not deserve nice things.

I ask Harry what he's drinking.

Harry shows me the flask-shaped bottle. "Raspberry whiskey." On the label is a painted scene of a dog—a Jack Russell but mixed with a taller breed—standing in a raspberry patch, facing the left side of the label and pointing to something unseen.

I go to the coolers and get beers for myself and Ben. Ben goes with Harry to find him a change of clothes and show him to the shower. When they return, Ben grabs the lantern and brings it to the living room, and the three of us sit down to play cards. The night goes on. We talk about movies, mostly. Ben yawns about a hundred times before eventually deciding he will go to bed. Before he does, he shows Harry and I his brothers' bedrooms—his brothers are out of town visiting their parents' house downstate, and Harry and I are bumming the rooms for as long as we're staying here. After showing us the rooms Ben goes downstairs to his own bedroom, and Harry and I find ourselves standing out on the porch that leads out from one of

the second floor bedrooms, in spite of the horrific stinging cold that has me shivering immediately and wondering how Harry seems literally unfazed by it. Harry lights up a cigarette. He can still hold it with his bandaged hand. I sip on my I-don't-knowth beer, and discover it is empty. I toss it back at the porch floor behind us, where it lands on a snow drift with the tiniest empty clang.

"Want a sip?" Harry offers, and shows me the raspberry whiskey.

I take the bottle, have a sip, and feel a warmth in my chest that explains much. I take another, bigger drink, and although I'm sure the world is still icy and terrible, I feel immune and it is wonderful. My shivering stops as I lean forward against the railing, holding the raspberry whiskey bottle for a while. I find myself looking down at the label with the Jack Russell mix.

"The dog on that label is hot," I tell Harry, revealing apropos of nothing my biggest secret in life that I thought I would take to the grave.

Harry is quiet. I realize I've said a thing that I wish I hadn't said. Ice creeps back through my chest, and my hands begin to shake, but it is not cold, I still feel warm physically. It's one hundred percent nerves.

Harry eventually asks, in a tone of his that I know is cautious: "You into that? Bestiality?"

I've made a mistake. I want to lie to him and back out of this but I don't. "Me and Chester were soulmates and I've never gotten over him," is what I begin to say, but I don't make it through the end before my face is a mess of tears and snot and I can't take a breath without shaking. A wave of drunkenness pulses over me and I feel off balance, and I lean heavily on the railing as I cry, wishing I was a lot, lot more together than I am.

Harry takes the bottle of raspberry whiskey from me, drops his cigarette onto the snow and stomps it out. He wraps an arm around my shoulders and leans onto me. He rubs my bicep through my sweatshirt. I don't know if I want this—being this close with someone—but I know that I'm glad Harry hasn't called me a rapist and left to call the police to have me arrested.

"I didn't know," he tells me. "Sorry if I ever... I don't know, said anything wrong."

I shake my head.

He squeezes me with the arm he already has around me.

I compose myself a bit, and snort in the snot that's coming out of my nose.

"Let's go in," Harry suggests, and I follow him inside. We sit at the foot of one of Ben's brothers' beds, both facing the floor in the dark, side by side, passing the raspberry whiskey back and forth. I take very light sips whenever it comes back to me.

"I know Chester meant the world to you, and you meant the world to Chester." He has taken his arm off of me by this point. He has a sip of his whiskey.

"Thank you," I tell him, and I don't know if he understands how much him saying that means to me, that he could recognize the bond Chester and I had had growing up, that he could remember it now instead of assuming something different.

"So just dogs, or?"

"I don't know." My hands are still shaking. I am residually extremely nervous and cold, but now it is a nervousness of freedom, of being opened and allowed to spill myself forth, tangled up, unplanned, rolling with the punches as they come. I am afraid but hopeful. I try to focus on the matter at hand, and ignore the fact that I am actually still freezing from how fucking cold it was outside. "Dogs definitely," I tell Harry. "Horses and farm animals like that, I mean, I'm curious about them, but I don't really know much first-hand."

"Is there porn?"

I give a very upset sigh. "Some. I don't really... most of it seems nonconsensual."

"Oh."

I am quiet, and hope he will ask me more. There is a wellspring of knowledge in me that is being tapped for the first time.

"Any interest in humans?"

"Not much."

"Good, we suck. You just gay for animals, or?"

"Bisexual." It feels weird to say this out loud, as I don't ever really think of myself as bisexual. The zoophilia eclipses it. Not to mention, the LGBT community has been loudly not-welcoming of my kind.

Harry and I talk for a long time. I black out at some point so I'm not sure what all was said, but when I wake up I am in Ben's brother's bed with a hangover. Physically I have a pervading hunch that I am going to die of alcohol poisoning. Emotionally it has been a long time since I was happier. If Harry tells anyone my secret my life will be ruined. I swore to myself for the last four years I was permanently scarred and would never have sexual interest in another soul and yet here and now, somehow, against it all, I know that I want to find an excuse to be alone with Toros today.

2) Mel is 23 and living alone and there is a global pandemic

It feels like a decade ago that I graduated with a bachelor's degree, majoring in Linguistics and minoring in Art History. I work freelance as a transcriptionist. The pay is close to minimum and I work long hours to make up for it, because I am lucky to have a job where I can work from home, when so many others are jobless and are not going to be looked out for. Knowledge of linguistics makes this job less bearable, not more. I live alone in a single bedroom apartment. The weather is very hot this week, and my AC unit is not working, and maintenance is only handling emergency requests because of the global pandemic and this does not rise to their standard of an emergency.

Someone knocks at the door. I do not know who it would be, other than that I know it is not maintenance.

I grab a mask off of the kitchen table, and as I put it on, I look through the door's peep hole. Standing outside my door is a man with combed-back hair wearing a mask and carrying a paper grocery bag. I can hear panting through the door, and looking down farther through the peep hole, I can make out a white and tan Husky.

I open the door, and ask, "Harry?"

The dog is wagging their entire body and trying to come meet me, but Harry has them on a short leash. He is smiling behind his mask. I haven't seen him since that week at Ben's house in college a couple years ago. "Care if I come in?"

I do consider it for a second. For most people I wouldn't have even answered the door. I give him a nod in.

Harry unclips the leash, and the Husky rushes forward. I kneel down to rub them as they lick me and get their back pet and their sides rubbed.

"Not surprised she likes you," Harry says, walking around us. He sets the grocery bag on the kitchen table. He reaches inside it and pulls out a flask-shaped bottle of raspberry whiskey.

The door has closed, and I have sat down with the Husky, petting her and leaning away as she licks my face.

"So what's going on?" I ask Harry.

"Global pandemic. Police and feds committing war crimes against citizens on a nightly basis. President's a maniac." He takes the stopper off of the whiskey bottle and takes a drink. "Wanted to see if you were still alive."

I gather that he's not lying about wanting to check in. Last I knew of, neither of us are on social media and Harry does not have a phone.

"You got a dog?"

"Lilly," he says. Lilly looks up at him with her head tilted for a second. "Good girl," he tells her. She walks off to go sniff around the apartment.

"Good girl," I agree.

"Is it always a furnace in here?"

"Maintenance won't come in to fix the AC."

Harry takes another drink from the raspberry whiskey and then sets the bottle on the table. "Lemme at it."

The day goes on, and it has become clear that Harry is going to be spending the night on my couch, and I am glad to have him. As a friend, and as thanks for him fixing the AC, which probably didn't take him more than ten minutes, including all the times we stopped to chitchat.

It is the nighttime, and Harry and I are both drunk, sitting cross-legged on my living room floor, Lilly at my side. I don't know that Harry and I have ever talked about the news before, but in the world we're living in now, the noteworthy news seems endless. Broadly, Harry and I agree that masks are good, that black lives matter, and that the president should be impeached.

"You follow the protests much?" Harry asks me.

"Not closely. Lot of burning and looting."

Harry shakes his head. "A little burning and looting. Lot of people just standing there and then getting tear gassed and bull rushed."

I take his word for it.

"I appreciate the work that they're doing," he tells me. "I'm impressed by their restraint."

I wonder if I should broach a subject with him, since it verges on the level of conspiracy theory, but I decide we are already at this point, and drunk as I am, the hurdle to me saying what's on my mind is low. "Do you want a civil war?"

Harry sighs through his nose. "Do I *want* one? No. I think our government does a lot of evil—always has done. I think a lot of people are seeing it for the first time now en-masse." He sighs again through his nose. "But I don't think a civil war would be good. For a problem as big as the United States of America, I don't think there's a silver bullet. We've been metastasized for a pretty long time by now."

"Do you think there *will* be a civil war?"

Harry smiles to himself, looking down at his lap, and then after a moment he shrugs. "I think we're pretty well fucked some way or another. It's already too late to stop climate disaster. But honestly, no. We'll see how much the pandemic changes things, but I think as things stand, most people here are too comfortable to start a war any time soon."

I nod, and then yawn. Before too much longer, Harry is lying on the couch with a blanket, Lilly is lying on the ground beside him on another blanket, and I have gone to my bed.

In the morning, I wake up happy, remembering that Harry has come to visit. I get out of bed, and find Lilly lying on the floor at the foot of my bed. She looks up at me. She seems nervous about something, but seems to think I may be of help. I walk out to the living room, and Harry is gone. Not on the couch, not in the bathroom, not hiding around a corner somewhere. No note as to where he's gone. I am not concerned until I see three big bags of dog food leaning against the wall beside the front door. One is opened, and in front of the bags are two dog bowls. One is filled with food and the other is filled with water.

3) Mel is 23 and might have a dog now

Two days have passed. Harry is not coming back. I suspected that he was not coming back on the first day. Now I know it to be so. This morning I searched his name on the internet, and I discovered that my best friend Harry is wanted on suspicion of over a dozen murders. There are many articles breaking down his targets: almost entirely lawyers, one CEO, two philanthropic though relatively unknown multimillionaires. At least three and upwards of six of his targets have ties to oil. All of his targets have ties to the GOP. He does not steal, only kills. The leading theory is that he is an eco terrorist. There is a forum that has been active for three years whose aim is to thwart him, whether by providing actionable information against him to a three letter agency or by vigilantism. They have not had a credible location on him in eight months—Meriville, and the trail was a week old by the time they got to it, and he was gone. They know his full name and date of birth and every address he has stayed at on the record before he had been found out and had to continue on ephemerally. They know the full names and addresses of several people he has been seen in photographs with, though I am not one of them. To be fair, Harry and I have not been in a photograph together since we were children.

So I have a dog now. She likes me but I think she is hesitant to accept me as someone who will stick around with her. I don't know if Harry had her for years or hours before arriving at my door two days ago. I do think Lilly is her real name. I think she is fully grown but still young, possibly three or four years old. She is eating and she seems to be healthy, though I will be taking her to the vet.

4) Mel is 23 and Lilly is 3

We get up around 9 AM. We go for walks in the morning. We look out the window together, smelling the world through the screen mesh. We go for walks in the afternoon. We go to the store and she picks out a toy and I pick out meaty treats. We trade information for the treats: she knows the words sit, lay

down, shake, roll over, come, and stay, although she does not take them as commands, rather, she knows what they mean and may do what the word entails if she decides she would like to—she can often be bribed. We have her checked out: she is in excellent health, a good weight, her teeth and bloodwork look good, her nails should be trimmed shorter, she is likely three years old, we can get her spayed today (I decline). We go to the dog park, and she is friendly with the other dogs. We share a bed, and she sleeps at my feet. We get up around 9 AM, and if I am sleeping in, she will whine, and I will be up. We go for walks in the morning, the afternoon, the evening, and at night.

5) Mel is 23 and copes with chronic anxiety by supplementing it with chronic stress

I send off my last email of the day and shut off the computer. It is 8 PM, and I have been working since 9 AM. This is the shortest workday I have had in ten days.

When Harry left me Lilly, I probably didn't work more than 5 hours in the two weeks that followed. I am not rich, though. I have savings, but they are not inexhaustible and were not trivially earned. For the last month, my workdays have been getting longer and my weekends have been theoretical.

As I lean back in my chair and the computer finishes powering off, Lilly has gotten up and is standing looking at me, wagging her tail with metered excitement. I stand up, and she licks her lips and wags freely, and walks to the front door ahead of me. I meet her there, put on my shoes, grab some bags, put on her collar and leash, and we go out and walk, and I know how happy she is as she trots along the sidewalk, as she buries her nose into the grass and leaves and we take her time as she smells, and I realize, standing and watching her examine a leaf that has fallen onto a bush, that I too, here, am happy.

The following day at 9 AM, I snap awake with a start, as I often do. On the bed at my feet, Lilly wags her tail. I manage my way out of the covers and lay on the bed the opposite way so that I can lie and pet her for a while. When I get up and walk out of the bedroom, she stands up on the bed, shakes herself, and follows after me. She is happy. A thing I love about dogs: they

are intelligent, and emotionally intelligent, and if one is not astute with dogs then a dog can often be reserved about the fact that they are afraid or upset if they want to, but I have never known a dog to hide that they are happy. I put on my shoes, and Lilly is happy. I grab her collar and my car keys, and Lilly's happiness is overflowing, and she bays and trots in place. When we are out of the door she pulls me all the way to the car, and we get in. We are going somewhere we have not gone together before, and somewhere I have not been in a long time.

The drive is roughly twenty minutes. For the first while, Lilly stood and sat in the passenger seat, sticking her nose against the cracked window. After we are on the highway and I have rolled the window up, she has laid down. As we are arriving, she has gotten up again. We arrive at the parking lot of the state park in Meriville. I myself have only been a handful of times, as it was not in walking distance from campus, and my walks were typically more impromptu, but I have certainly been here enough that it is familiar, and pleasantly so. It is a cool day, and I realize all at once that it is no longer summer. In the air is a heavy scent of fallen leaves.

I clip on Lilly's leash, and she follows me out of the driver's side door, and we run together, around and around the lawn of the visitor's center, hurriedly sniffing along the edge between the lawn and the woods, constantly doubling back and back again, closely following trails of scents that I am overjoyed to know that she is overjoyed to follow.

When we get onto the trail we are still running at a jog, and we go on for a while like this, although eventually we settle down into a walk. All the way we go, we go at her pace. She is meticulous, stepping along with her beautiful paws at the edge of the path, nose to the ground.

Deep into the woods, we arrive at a clearing of long brown grass, rippling in the wind. I look around. We have not seen a soul out here, nor was there any other car in the parking lot when we arrived.

I kneel down beside her, and leaning my head against her head, I tell her, "Stay close to me," and unclip her leash. She turns and licks my forehead, and then trots away, walking through the long grass, letting it brush against her head as she

parts it. She explores, and I feel I am blessed to be here to watch.

When she has explored thoroughly and is getting farther out than I would like, I call her back. She stands still a while, looking outward in the direction she had been walking. I do not rush her. Eventually, she turns and comes back to me. She is panting, and I ask if she wants to lay down. She lays down on the trail, back legs out to her side, tongue lolled out as she breathes. I sit down on the trail beside her. We are in an autumn house with walls of rippling grass.

As we stay a while, she stops panting, and lays over on her side. I lay down in front of her on the trail, face to face, and am stricken by her beauty, and the light catching in the fur of her muzzle, white and tan, and her black whiskers, and her black and pink lips. I kiss her. I have kissed her before on the top of the head, or on the back as I am petting her, but until now I have not kissed her like this, lip to lip. It is quick, and warm and perfect, and my heart speeds up as we look into each other's eyes afterwards. She considers only briefly before leaning forward and licking at my lips, and then we are making out, man and dog in the autumn house, and something has changed and it is wonderful.

6) Mel is 23 and is readjusting to what love feels like

We get up at 9 AM. We go on walks. I work full time, but less, and with breaks to appreciate each other and life. We are like rabbits or teenagers. We share a bed, and sometimes she sleeps at my feet and sometimes we sleep side by side. We lay on the floor together. We lay with her on her side and me spooning against her back and petting her and then resting my hand on her. We lay with me on my back and her on her chest with my head or arm pinned down as she licks me. We kiss with unbridled expressions of joy for one another. We kiss as I pass by her from my desk to the kitchen, or the kitchen to the couch, or so on. We look out the window together, smelling the world through the screen mesh. I do not know what to label us as because I have previously sworn that I will never love again, but I do not fight what is here between me and Lilly. I take it as it

comes. We go on walks. We sleep well and wake up ensnared in one another, a snug satisfied pile of human limb and canine. Each morning she rolls onto her back and I rub her belly as her jowls flop back and I look at her teeth, and at her chest where I can see her pink and white skin through the areas where the fur is thinner. I am utterly in love with her.

7) Mel is 24 and is contacted

It is 1PM and I have just sat back down to work after Lilly and I have been on a walk. My phone's text tone goes off in my pocket, and I am surprised by it. I take the phone out of my pocket and look. It is a message from Ben and it contains no words. It is a picture of a bottle of raspberry whiskey on his kitchen counter.

I close what I'm doing and shut off the computer. A minute later, Lilly and I are driving to New Denton and I do not have the music on, I am riding in silence and allowing all of the words to exist in my head, rabid.

I park on the side of the street in front of Ben's house and leave Lilly in the car, and she barks after me as I walk up to Ben's door. I knock and wait. I hear the door being locked or unlocked, but nobody opens it. I open it myself and walk in, and there is Harry. He is smiling. "Ben's at work. Should be back around five."

I want to punch Harry and hug him. I want to accuse him of murdering Ben because I have not actually seen Ben yet, although I know it is unlikely that Harry has murdered Ben.

"You keep a secret better than I do," I tell the asshole in front of me.

"Great minds," he says to the asshole in front of him.

We hug, and I go out to get Lilly. When she comes in, she is friendly with Harry, though I am stricken by how she does not seem to really remember him. "Where did you get her?" I ask.

"Farm in Iowa," he says. "They had an ad out. Picked her up and brought her to yours." He grabs his bottle of raspberry whiskey and holds it up, showing off the dog on the label. "Looked kinda similar."

I breathe in, and sigh out.

"You still have her," he says, cautious.

I nod.

He looks at her and at me.

"Head over heels in love," I tell him, and can't help but smile at the admission, even though somehow, I am mad at him right now. "Thank you. Why the fuck did you get me a dog?"

"I try to balance my evil good things with good good things."

He goes to the living room where Lilly is sniffing around. She sniffs up at him, wagging, and he puts his hand out to her nose to let her smell. After she turns away from him to continue sniffing elsewhere, he sits down on the couch. Looking at me, he pats the spot next to him.

I steal a beer out of Ben's fridge and then go and sit beside Harry.

"Did you really do it all?"

He tells me every name. He adds, "I'd do it again."

"Reason?"

"Pretty on-the-face. They were tyrants and if it weren't for me they would still be getting away with it."

We sit in quiet for a moment, but it is not an uncomfortable quiet. I am nodding. Eventually, we are both leaning back.

Harry toys with the whiskey bottle, turning the stopper back and forth in the mouth. "I want to ask if I have your blessing on something."

My throat closes up, and I cannot utter a response.

He goes on. "Meat and dairy industry. I won't tell you the names but I've done my research. Say go and I'll go."

I have nothing to consider here and my answer arises effortlessly. "Kill every damn one of them."

Ben comes home around 5:30. The three of us play cards and catch up, Lilly lying at my side.

8) Mel is 25 and has recently moved

Working remotely, my job actually does not require me to live anywhere all that urban. In truth, I can live in a place surrounded by farms, where some days I may see a horse passing more often than I see a car. I am embarrassed that it takes me so long to let go of things and seek betterness of my own accord, but I am here and she is here, and we have arrived.

Our things are still boxed up, aside from her food and water dishes. We are lying on the carpet of the new living room, sun shining in through the window, I on my back and her pinning my head down, licking me. Then she is kissing me, and I am kissing her back, and I am thankful for the brightness she is in my life.

SPECIFICATIONS FOR THE ZOOCOSMOLOGICA DECK

A missive reads:

Please find as follows the specifications for the Zoocosmologica Deck, with notes on the significant imagery and suggestions for stylistic direction.

1. Taxonomy

The Zoocosmologica Deck will consist of 74 cards in all. Of these total 74 cards, 56 will be of the Dasein, 16 will be of the Mythic, and 2 will be without category.

Of the 56 Dasein, 14 will be of the suit Flowers, 14 will be of the suit Stars, 14 will be of the suit Towers, and 14 will be of the suit Spheres. Each suit will consist of, in order, one Passion card, 9 Numeric cards whose count will begin at two and progress upwards by whole numbers until arriving at ten, and 4 Morendo cards of whom the first will be called Death, the second will be called Ripple, the third will be called Harmony, and the fourth will be called Finality.

The Mythic cards will be numbered from one to sixteen. In order, they are Hummingbird, Elephant, Black Widow, Beastman, Mantichore, Gryphon, Dragon, Great Bear, Pegasus, Unicorn, Sleipnir, Jörmungandr, Fenrir, Primordia, Cow, and Life.

Of the 2 uncategorized cards, 1 is The Egg, and 1 is The Seed.

2. Principle Designs

All 74 cards in the deck will be of a uniform width and height, approximately five lengths wide for every seven lengths tall. All 74 cards in the deck will feature a depicted scene, which must allow for directionality and should therefore not feature total symmetry when folded over the horizontal axis, save for the Stars Finality whose scene by happenstance is infinitely symmetrical. All scenes will be encompassed by a border, save for the two uncategorized cards whose scenes will extend fully to the edges of those cards; uniformly about the card, the border will leave some frame of white space between the scene and the edge of the card. Within this white space, in the top left corner and reversed in the bottom right corner, will be denoted the card's symbol and, in the case of the Dasein, the card's suit below it. The color of the border should be uniform across all cards, likely black, but certainly not green. In the case of the Flower cards and the Stars cards, the color used to depict the border should also be used to depict the card's symbol and suit: This color should also be used to denote the symbol in the case of the Mythic. In the case of the Towers cards and Spheres cards, the color green should be used to denote the card's symbol and suit. In the case of the two uncategorized cards, a reasonable choice of contrastive color may be used to depict each card's symbol against its scene.

The symbol of the Passion of Flowers and the Passion of Stars will be the planet symbol of Venus, while the symbol for the Passion of Towers and the Passion of Spheres will be the planet symbol of Mars. The symbol of the Numeric cards will be that card's number depicted in Arabic numerals. The symbol of the Death cards will be a sword whose design will remain uniform across each suit. The symbol of the Ripple cards will be a wave. The symbol of the Harmony cards will be four parallel lines uniformly spaced and of uniform width. The symbol of the Finality cards will be an unfilled square of approximately half the height as that seen of the numerals who serve as the symbols for the Numeric cards. The symbol of the Mythic cards will be that card's number depicted in Roman numerals. The symbol of

The Egg will be an ovum. The symbol of The Seed will be any plant seed whose shape reasonably distinguishes it as such.

The scenery found within the suit Flowers will tend to employ a pastel palette of light faded colors. The scenery found within the suit Stars will employ a palette of white design on black backgrounds and should employ no colors other than white and black. The scenery found within the suit Towers will tend to employ a palette centered around the color orange. Within the scenery of the Spheres suit and the Beastman card, each sphere will be depicted in a hue of blue which is uniform across Beastman and all Spheres cards, save the Spheres Ripple.

It is suggested that the design found on the card backs feature a horizontal line across the card's center, not near to touching either edge, with the Greek minuscule letter zeta depicted above and depicted in reverse below, such that the directionality of the card is not made known by the back. The colors employed and any additional design choices for the card backs may be chosen freely, though the color green is strongly encouraged to be prominently featured.

3. Significant Symbols in Scenery and Stylistic Suggestions

Passion of Flowers

The scene of the Passion of Flowers should primarily depict a female dog's genitalia: More of the scene than not should be composed of her vulva, which should be swollen with heat. She should be of a large breed suitable for vaginal penetration by a human penis. The vulva should appear that it has been smeared with body paint: Of the three sections seen of a canine vulva, the top and right sections should feature yellow paint, and the left section should feature green paint; The green paint should be of a lesser coverage than what is seen of the yellow paint on its equivalent section. The dog's anus and the base of her tail should be visible, but should not be the focus of the scene; the anus should appear clean, without presence of fecal matter. If possible, the perspective of the scene should be close enough

such that only the dog is depicted and nothing is seen beyond her.

Two of Flowers

The scene of the Two of Flowers should depict two dogs mating in the woods. Above them, hanging vines descend to produce an arched shape on the scene's upper half. Behind the dogs, trees should be spaced such that they alternate being planted distantly and closely in two rows, and nothing beyond the back row of trees can be seen. On the grass near to the dogs' heads, two plucked flowers should lie on the grass. The dogs may be of any breed and the flowers may be of any species.

Three of Flowers

The scene of the Three of Flowers should depict a dog, a fox, and a cat sleeping cuddled together in the forest beneath the shelter of a bush. The cat should be in the possession of three flowers, perhaps placed about her face.

Four of Flowers

The scene of the Four of Flowers should depict a sheep's leg below the knee, with four flowers of any species placed along the leg. The leg should be standing on the ground and the hoof should appear to be in good health. The ground should be light brown dirt, with no other background visible.

Five of Flowers

The scene of the Five of Flowers should depict five flowers arranged in a pentagon; the pentagon should be upright, such that a line drawn between the two bottom flowers would be parallel with the bottom border of the scene. Bees should be present here and there among the flowers, and should also be present in two distinct horizontal lines traveling left and right above the five flowers.

Six of Flowers

The scene of the Six of Flowers should depict two mermaids, one with the face of a fish, and the other with the face of a human. The mermaid with the face of a fish places six flowers in the hair of the mermaid with the face of a human.

Seven of Flowers

The scene of the Seven of Flowers should depict a dog lying within a cage in the woods. The perspective should look into the cage from the front; The bars of the cage should be overgrown, with the door of the cage missing. On the front side of the cage, around where the edges of the door would be, should be seven flowers, heavily skewed in quantity towards the top left corner, with only one flower near the bottom right.

Eight of Flowers

The scene of the Eight of Flowers should depict eight hatchling turtles walking across the sand, from the bottom of the scene towards the sea which is thinly visible at the top of the scene. Resting atop the shell of each turtle should be a flower.

Nine of Flowers

The scene of the Nine of Flowers should depict a soldier giving a bath to a dog. The soldier should have a green camouflaged uniform and an assault rifle on his person, and should be depicted without a face. On the bath tub and on the wall behind are seen nine flowers, none placed close together.

Ten of Flowers

The scene of the Ten of Flowers should depict a raccoon holding a flower, while standing in a clearing of grass where nine additional flowers grow nearby her.

Flowers Death

The scene of Flowers Death should depict a single rose, drooped, wilted, and visibly dead. The dead rose should be shown against a blue-purple background. No thorns should be visible on the rose's stem.

Flowers Ripple

The scene of Flowers Ripple should depict the same dead rose as the Flowers Death, though now the drooped rose is lifted by a dog's tongue. The dog's mouth should be around the end of the flower, teeth and tongue prominently visible, drool hanging from the corner of the dog's mouth. It should be clear that the dog is beginning to eat the flower. As little of the dog as possible should be shown beyond the muzzle, and the eyes in particular should be omitted.

Flowers Harmony

The scene of Flowers Harmony should depict the same dog as Flowers Ripple: The dog is now defecating in front of brown reeds near a lake. Through the reeds a farm can be seen across the lake, with fields of soil and a barn. The entirety of the dog should be visible in the scene, and should occupy as much of the scene as possible while allowing for the other elements described.

Flowers Finality

The scene of Flowers Finality should depict a flower pot viewed from an askewed angle above. The spout of a watering can should be pouring water into the soil. In the center of the flower pot, small green leaves are budding up from the soil.

Passion of Stars

The scene of the Passion of Stars should primarily depict a female horse's genitalia: The mare's vulva should be centered

within the scene, taking up as much of the scene as possible while allowing for the depiction of her anus and her tail. Her tail should generally be positioned in an arc going around the right side of the anus and the vulva; The tail should not be depicted in full, and should be cut off by the scene's right border, bottom border, and top border. On the line comprising the leftmost edge of the vulva, on the leftmost point of this line, there should be a shining star by which this constellation is known.

Two of Stars

The scene of the Two of Stars should depict a female horse and a male horse mating. A shining star should be depicted in the head of each horse.

Three of Stars

The scene of the Three of Stars should depict a great big tree, with three stars in a vertical line centered within the tree's trunk. The entirety of the tree may or may not be depicted, though as much of the trunk as possible should be contained within the scene.

Four of Stars

The scene of the Four of Stars should depict a snake diving towards a fleeing rabbit. Three stars should be contained within the snake, one at the head and two in the body, while one star is contained within the rabbit. The mouth of the snake should be open as though to eat the rabbit imminently.

Five of Stars

The scene of the Five of Stars should depict a thistle. Two stars should be in a flowering bud, one in the flower and one in the bud, while on a separate node a star is contained within a non-flowering bud, and a fourth star is contained at the fork between these two nodes, and a fifth star is contained at the base of the thistle.

Six of Stars

The scene of the Six of Stars should depict a camel. The stars of this constellation should be found one in the hind hooves, one in the hindquarters, one in each of the two humps, one in the head, and one in the forehooves.

Seven of Stars

The scene of the Seven of Stars will depict seven dolphins, with one star contained in each dolphin. Superimposed over the body of each dolphin should be a character from the Greek alphabet, namely, uppercase A, lowercase α, uppercase B, lowercase β, uppercase Ω, lowercase ω, and uppercase Z.

Eight of Stars

The scene of the Eight of Stars should depict the face of a reindeer looking directly at the viewer. Her antlers will contain eight total points, with a star contained within each of these.

Nine of Stars

The scene of the Nine of Stars should depict a human knight, riding atop a horse. The horse should stand on her hind legs, and the knight should have her sword drawn and raised tall.

Ten of Stars

The scene of the Ten of Stars should depict the same human and mare as seen on the Nine of Stars. In this scene, the human is visiting with the mare in a stable.

Stars Death

The scene of Stars Death should depict a gigantic human stabbing through a star with a sword, tearing the star apart with the piercing blow. The human should appear enraged; He

should have long hair and a long beard; He should appear very muscular; His closed hand should be approximately one fourth to one half the size of the star. In line with the Principle Designs outlined earlier, he should be depicted strictly in white and in black, with no other colors or greys present.

Stars Ripple

The scene of Stars Ripple should depict the partial orbital lines of planets circling around a no longer present sun; with the sun gone, these orbital lines will become straight lines exiting the scene in a variety of directions. Compared to the scenes of other cards, Stars Ripple should be among the most minimalist in design.

Stars Harmony

The scene of Stars Harmony should depict a galaxy. The Milky Way Galaxy may be an ideal choice to depict, though any galaxy should suit the purpose of this scene.

Stars Finality

The scene of Stars Finality should be uniformly black and should feature no further design, save that which should exist outside of the border of the scene.

Passion of Towers

The scene of the Passion of Towers should primarily depict a male horse's genitalia: The underside of a stallion should be seen in profile, with his penis fully dropped from his sheath. The entirety of the penis should be in the scene and should be the scene's focal point; The hind legs of the stallion should be partially within the scene on the left border, while the forelegs need not be depicted; The belly of the horse should be visible, while the horse's back should not be visible. The horse should stand at the edge of a cliff, below which can be seen a forest landscape, beyond which is a blue sky.

Two of Towers

The scene of the Two of Towers should depict a male donkey and a female donkey mating. The two donkeys stand in a field at sunset: the sun is not visible in the scene, though the shadows of the donkeys may suggest that the sun is to the left of the scene. The donkeys should be positioned near the bottom left of the scene. Near the top right, in the distance, two towers are visible.

Three of Towers

The scene of the Three of Towers should depict three horses sleeping while encompassed by three crude wooden watchtowers.

Four of Towers

The scene of the Four of Towers should depict four totem poles, the leftmost of which is not on fire, while the other three are engulfed in flames. At the foot of each totem pole should be a pile of kindling. Standing congregated near the three burning totem poles should be a collective of three werewolves bearing torches.

Five of Towers

The scene of the Five of Towers should depict three cats among five cat towers. The topmost cat should be walking, the middlemost cat should be in the midst of leaping, and the bottommost cat should be lying down.

Six of Towers

The scene of the Six of Towers should depict an interior view of an aquarium, with six prop towers of various heights and designs seen within. Swimming among the towers is a goldfish, who occupies a nontrivial amount of this scene.

Seven of Towers

The scene of the Seven of Towers should depict a cityscape with either seven smokestacks or seven skyscrapers distinctively in view. Somewhere in the scene, seven crows sit in a line.

Eight of Towers

The scene of the Eight of Towers should depict a lake, with eight towers in the background along the lake's perimeter. In the foreground, in the water of the lake, is an otter.

Nine of Towers

The scene of the Nine of Towers should depict an assortment of bugs smoking from nine hookahs. The bugs do not need to be to a realistic scale and may include a diversity of types of bugs, such as moths, grasshoppers, and ants. Not every hookah needs to have a bug presently at it, though at least a few hookahs should be in use.

Ten of Towers

The scene of the Ten of Towers should depict ten penises of various species shown within a display case. The penises should point towards the top of the scene, and while no cues need be given that the penises are explicitly still alive, no penis should be made to appear dead. Equine and canine penises may be avoided if possible, so as not to be conflated with other scenes.

Towers Death

The scene of Towers Death will depict a giant human woman pushing over a tower. Very close in the foreground, rubble from an already toppled tower can be seen. In the background can be seen a tower which is yet standing. The perspective should be such that a good amount of the ground surrounding the falling tower can be seen.

Towers Ripple

The scene of Towers Ripple should depict the same scene and perspective as Towers Death, though some time has passed. The tower in the background which was standing has now fallen as well, and now may be visible or not within the scene. In the rubble of the middle tower, using the rubble as part of the construction, a pleasant rustic house has been built. A human can be seen in front of the house using a scythe to cut a field of tall grassy plants. Smoke can be seen emerging from the house's chimney.

Towers Harmony

The scene of Towers Harmony should depict the same scene and perspective as Towers Ripple, though some additional time has passed. The house depicted before has been expanded upon, and is now one of multiple buildings which encompass a courtyard. Human figures can be seen in the courtyard, including one human pulling a cart, two humans talking, and one human juggling as two humans watch. Somewhere in the scene, a shepherd walks with a flock of sheep. On the rubble in the foreground, there now rests an empty glass bottle such as one may drink beer or soda from.

Towers Finality

The scene of Towers Finality should depict the same scene and perspective as Towers Harmony, though much time has passed. There is no longer any rubble or other structure standing in the scene. The landscape is now barren parched dirt. The sun hangs in the background, fully visible within the scene, not centered within the scene, not touching the horizon.

Passion of Spheres

The scene the Passion of Spheres should primarily depict a male dog's genitalia: A male dog should be seen from behind, with a human hand holding the base of the dog's penis behind the

bulbus glandis such that the penis is visible from this vantage. A blue circle should be superimposed around the bulbus glandis: This circle should be centered horizontally and vertically within the scene and should act to highlight the scene's focal point. A dimly lit stonework wall and floor should be visible beyond the dog, to the extent if any that the background is seen.

Two of Spheres

The scene of the Two of Spheres should depict an altar overgrown with creeping vegetation, where one orb can be seen resting on a pedestal while another orb can be seen hanging from a fine chain. The two orbs should be somewhat nearby one another, though not directly over or beneath each other. On the overgrown altar, not centered on the altar nor centered in the scene, two foxes can be seen mating.

Three of Spheres

The scene of the Three of Spheres should depict a human figure conducting a ritual with three spheres which stand on pedestals. The human reaches as though to touch a sphere, but a cat slinks in between the hands and the sphere, nuzzling the back of his head against the sphere. The human is partially costumed to resemble a dog of the breed husky, likely including a pair of faux ears and a faux tail.

Four of Spheres

The scene of the Four of Spheres should depict a flying squirrel leaping towards the ground, with a tree beside her. On the tree should be measuring marks as that seen on a ruler, though unlabeled. On the tree in a vertical row should be four spheres.

Five of Spheres

The scene of the Five of Spheres should depict a rat standing on her hind legs among wood shavings. Behind the rat should be walls composed of horizontal wooden slats, on which

mathematical formulas are written across many slats. Behind the rat, but visible to the viewer, in the corner formed by the two visible walls, should be stacked five spheres.

Six of Spheres

The scene of the Six of Spheres should depict a formal ball, where six couples dance hand in hand, facing one another; each of the six couples should be composed of one human and one dog, with each dog preferably being of a different breed. Above the head of each couple, a sphere should be depicted.

Seven of Spheres

The scene of the Seven of Spheres should depict the face of an underwater rock structure, with an octopus camouflaged over the top of the rock's surface, his skin colored to match that of the rocks. Among the octopus's tentacles are six spheres, which the tentacles should not obscure.

Eight of Spheres

The scene of the Eight of Spheres should depict coffee beans, with eight tiny spheres partially buried among the beans. The spheres should appear in a uniformly spaced grid of two across and four down. Crawling among the coffee beans should be two beetles, one appearing between the two uppermost orbs, and one appearing between the righthand side's lowest and second lowest orb.

Nine of Spheres

The scene of the Nine of Spheres should depict a discarded leg bone which appears to have been chewed on thoroughly by a canine. Embedded throughout the leg bone are nine spheres.

Ten of Spheres

The scene of the Ten of Spheres should depict two dogs sitting on a piano bench, playing a duet on the piano. On the sheet music which they read from, ten spheres are depicted with arcane geometric imagery connecting them; the sheet music does not need to look like any real-world musical notation.

Spheres Death

The scene of Spheres Death should depict a man of advanced age smashing a sphere by throwing it onto the ground in front of a stained glass window. The sphere should be depicted in the process of shattering, such that it is clear what the object is and what is happening to it. The entirety of the stained glass window behind the human need not be shown; the window should depict an abstract collection of colored panes with no distinct imagery. The man should be in the interior of the building to which the stained glass window belongs.

Spheres Ripple

The scene of Spheres Ripple should depict a book lying open upon a violet tablecloth. The visible pages of the book should feature text which is not rendered in such a way that it can be read in this scene; on the righthand page, with text above and below, should be an illustration of a sphere; the sphere and the text should be of the same color, likely black, though blue should be avoided.

Spheres Harmony

The scene of Spheres Harmony should depict the interior of a library: rows of book shelves can be seen on the left and right of the scene, and in the distance, a bookshelf forms the background of the scene as well. Superimposed upon the scene should be three concentric circles, uniformly spaced, centered both horizontally and vertically within the scene; these three

circles should all be rendered thinner than the circle superimposed upon the scene of the Passion of Spheres.

Spheres Finality

The scene of Spheres Finality should depict the ocean at night, with a mushroom cloud in the distance. The mushroom cloud should be the prominent feature of the scene, though it need not take up much of the scene: it should appear very far away. A thick horizontal blue line should be superimposed across the center of the scene, intersecting with the head of the mushroom cloud. Nothing in the scene should appear in front of the blue line, and the blue line should not be reflected in the water. Stars in this scene should be rendered sparingly, and if possible the ocean and the sky should bear a slight degree of color other than black, so as to avoid confusion with the suit Stars.

The Egg

The scene of The Egg should depict a brown chicken egg resting upright on a primate's open palm. The sky should be seen in the background: The weather and the time of day may be decided freely, though it should not be nighttime solely to avoid confusion with the Stars suit. On the egg will be positive holy symbols painted on with an artist's brush. The exact holy symbols may be decided freely, though one suggestion for a set would be a Cross, a Yin and Yang, an Om, and a Pentacle. The holy symbols may be painted with any color or with multiple colors, with black being an entirely acceptable option.

The Seed

The scene of The Seed should depict a collection of various plant seeds decoratively arranged in concentric circles: Each circle should be comprised of one type of seed. The outermost circle should be incomplete in a section at the bottom left, and a primate hand should be seen reaching into the scene and arranging the seeds to complete the circle. The surface on which the seeds rest may be decided freely, though some suggestions

would be on a wooden table, on a boulder with a moderately flat top, or on a plane of smooth sand. In a line across the circles traveling from near the bottom right of the scene and towards the top left should be a splatter of seminal fluid: Though the semen need not be of any specific species, it should be of a quantity such that it is enough to be visible but not so much that a human would be highly unlikely to have produced it in a single instance.

Hummingbird

The scene of Hummingbird should depict a stem along the left side of the scene, leading up to a flower from which a hummingbird drinks: The hummingbird should occupy a large share of the scene. Along the stem should be bunches of orange berries or buds, arranged into ten clusters, the farthest from the flower being a cluster of one, and increasing by whole numbers until arriving at a cluster of ten nearest the flower: the stem may need to go above the flower to near the top of the scene and then bend back downwards in order for this to be accomplished. Above the hummingbird's head, the image of a lemniscate should be superimposed.

Elephant

The scene of Elephant should depict a lone elephant walking towards the viewer. Each of the elephant's ears should be painted in the style of paintings created by elephants, and to the extent possible, neither painting should bear resemblance to symbology from any human culture.

Black Widow

The scene of Black Widow should depict a black widow spider on a background of layers of spider webs. Some or all of the spider's legs should be spread out to cover as much of the scene as possible while still keeping her within the scene in her entirety.

Beastman

The scene of Beastman should depict four humanoid figures who each possess the facial features and the fur, scales, or skin of a nonhuman animal. Each figure should bear the likeness of a different species of animal, though which four species are depicted may be chosen freely. Each figure should be of a particular gender and should be touching or by forced perspective have the appearance of touching a particular object: the figure with a male body and feminine clothing should be touching a flower; the figure with a female body and feminine clothing should be touching a star; the figure with a female body and masculine clothing should be touching a tower; the figure with a male body and masculine clothing should be touching a sphere. The placement of each figure and object in the scene may be chosen freely.

Mantichore

The scene of Mantichore should depict one mantichore on his back, swatting at a severed human hand which hangs from a string. The string should continue up until it is out of the scene, with its holder unknown. Part of the bone should be seen sticking out of the severed hand, and some blood should be visible around the wrist.

Gryphon

The scene of Gryphon should depict three gryphons standing in an abstract plane. One gryphon nuzzles the flank of another, while the third gryphon playfully drapes herself over the back of the gryphon whose flank is being nuzzled. All three gryphons appear agreeable to each other's actions. The entirety of each gryphon may or may not be depicted in the scene, so long as the preceding imagery is able to be conveyed.

Dragon

The scene of Dragon should depict a gargantuan dragon breathing fire in a barren landscape: the scene should be viewed from an angle overhead, and a mountainous landscape surrounding the dragon should indicate the dragon's immense size. In the moment in time depicted in the scene, the dragon should appear imposing and fearsome.

Great Bear

The scene of Great Bear should depict a gargantuan black bear standing over a city, with the moon haloed behind her head. While the great bear should appear entirely capable of crushing any portion of the city in a single step, the great bear should not be depicted as causing any destruction. The moon behind the great bear should feature additional coloration other than pure white, likely an orangeish yellow or a muted green.

Pegasus

The scene of Pegasus should depict a winged horse in flight, wings spread grandly. She appears to gallop on air towards the viewer. She should appear on a background of a bright blue sky. Wispy clouds may be seen about her legs and chest as she soars through them. The image of a lemniscate should appear superimposed over one wing, and superimposed over the other wing should appear a row of four images: from left to right, two instances of the planetary symbol of Mars and two instances of the planetary symbol of Venus; the four symbols should appear close to their neighbor or neighbors, but none touching.

Unicorn

The scene of Unicorn should depict a unicorn in a castle courtyard, standing on grass and flowers, with a stone wall behind which incorporates gold into the design, possibly as the mortar. In a horizontal row across the scene, partially superimposed over the body of the unicorn while still allowing

her to be clearly seen, are the symbols for the suits Flowers, Stars, Towers, and Spheres. Above the unicorn's head, not centered in the scene and not obscuring the unicorn's horn, is the image of a lemniscate.

Sleipnir

The scene of Sleipnir should depict a beautiful eight legged grey stallion mounting a male donkey and penetrating the donkey's anus: The donkey's penis should be fully dropped from his sheath, and he should be ejaculating. The two should be depicted inside of a cave, with instances of sourceless fire scattered about the cave floor lighting the scene. Superimposed over the side of Sleipnir's body, ideally centered in the scene, should be the image of a lemniscate. Superimposed in an arc over the darkness above Sleipnir and the donkey should be the four Morendo symbols, in order from left to right, Death, Ripple, Harmony, and Finality.

Jörmungandr

The scene of Jörmungandr should depict the world serpent biting his own tail: The head should come in from the left border of the scene, and the tail should come in from the right border of the scene. Below Jörmungandr is a roiling ocean, and above Jörmungandr is a yellow sky.

Fenrir

The scene of Fenrir should depict the gigantic black wolf Fenrir with the bloodied corpse of Odin in his mouth. The humanoid god should fit comfortably in the mouth of the legendary wolf.

Primordia

The scene of Primordia should depict the planet, the moon, the sun, and the void. This depiction may be literal or not, though personification into humanoid likenesses should be avoided. While this card should feature directionality, it is acceptable in

this specific card for it to be unclear on which orientation of the scene is the upright and which is the reverse.

Cow

The scene of Cow should depict a cow standing in a field of grass, facing the right border of the scene. The sky behind the cow should be blue, though this may not be made clear, as the sky should primarily feature dense radial patterns centered around the cow composed of overlapping lines of light green, light yellow, lavender, and pink. A human hermaphrodite should be depicted in the act of mating with the cow. Pine trees should be seen in the field some distance away.

Life

The scene of Life should depict a newborn wolf suckling on a human breast. Exact decisions on the framing may be made freely, though the scene should closely feature the wolf and should show little if any of the human beyond the breast.

4. A Note In Closing

Please do see that this matter is approached with sincerity and compassion, and while not avoiding gravitas, in twice as much measure or more do not avoid levity. Many will seek to use these cards for divination, and we hope that their path will be well guided: As with all things, whether it is real and helpful or surreal and helpful, it is helpful.

POEMS

Figurine Man

Jacob Bride sets his mug of coffee down on the side table, and sits himself down in the rocking chair on his back porch. He looks out at the open desert. Takes a big smell of the fine dirt in the air. From the side table, he picks up his sharpened knife and a block of basswood. He looks down at his hands as he works, though his mind's eye is jumping ahead. He whittles off the corners, molding the basswood block into a shape that is curved, organic, reminiscent of something living.

From out of the wood, Bride uncovers a mound. The figure is thick to begin with, and is coiled thicker. He carves out her muscular legs, muscular sides curved under her hunched muscular back, her short tail. Her face is turned down between all of her legs, licking herself. He carves out her short ears and the ridges of her wrinkled face. He carves her tongue, and leaves protruding the thin lines underneath. He carves her eyes closed in concentration.

With the rough shapes done, Bride retrieves his glasses from the side table. In doing so, he also remembers his coffee, and has a long drink of it now that it has gone from piping hot to warm.

Glasses on, Bride holds the wood closer to his eye level, and leans in and around the work as necessary. He touches up the detail of her nose buried in her vulva and her tongue pressing it further, pushing the soft sex. He carves out the toes on each of

the paws, some of the toes fanned out as she licks, splaying her little claws. He trims the claws each to a healthy length. Under her tail he carves her muscular rump and the pit of her anus, and carves out the details of the joints of the back legs, all just-so.

Bride sets the figurine on the side table. She sits licking without a wobble.

All The Happy Little Animals

Splashing around in a water park; running with high stomps through the shallow water until it's deep enough to swim and then splashing down and swimming; seeing your friend across the busy pool waving you over, and swimming around everybody to go meet them; putting your heads under together, each of you holding your breath, opening your eyes to look; your friend resurfaces and you follow, and they reach up to the poolside and show you they brought pool toys to dive for, and the two of you drop them and watch them all dart down to the bottom of the pool, and the two of you go down after them, seeing who can grab more; you go to the water slide, wait in line in the warm sun, which feels nice after the cold pool; you fly down the slide and make a huge splash when you hit the water at the bottom, and then swim out of the way to make way for the next person. The ducks get to have this as their life; they are nourished and livened by swimming around, shouting, diving and splashing, taking off and splashing, putting their heads under, play. When the seasons become too warm or too cold, they make a long trip over beautiful landscapes to a place that is more right for them; eat bread; lay an egg; stretch your wings; float and bob on a gentle wave for an hour, taking in all the goings on around your pond.

Awakening

Waking up,
sluggish surrealness,
I don't know
the time,
where I am,
who the president is,
what my name is,
or whether I am facing east.
I do know the warmth,
cozy heat,
of someone
in the blankets with me.
Eyes unopened,
I know nothing of
the world outside of
my sense of smell, and touch:
I am touching fur
which is ever slowly rising,
falling,
and rising,
and falling;
I am smelling dog,
his breath—
I breathe in when he breathes out
to take in the fullness of his breath,
and I breathe out when he breathes in
so that he can have mine.
We both stretch, and inch our nuzzling way
closer into one another's reacclimating bodies.
I breathe in the smell of his fur on his chest.
I know of the world I have woken into
that I am loved and love.