

FIVE OF CUPS COVERS TEN OF SWORDS

Three so-and-sos from the cursed races—a canian, a felian, and a rodentian—sat around an upturned washbucket in the front yard of a dilapidated farmhouse, playing cards with the minor arcana.

“Any twos, Hardigar?” Roan asked.

“Go fish, Roan.”

“Meh.” Roan drew.

“Got any knights, Hardigar?” Syl asked through a barely contained grin.

Hardigar hissed down at his cards, and handed three knights over to the rodentian girl.

She added a complete set of knights to her collection of completed sets sitting on the washbucket table. After setting the set down she tapped the cards together neatly, and then looked back to her hand. “Got any aces, Hardigar?” she went on.

Hardigar opened his mouth fully and hissed even meaner, and handed over three aces.

“Got anyyy fours, Hardigar?”

Roan snickered.

Hardigar reached over with his claws extended and swatted Roan’s cards out of his hand: they went flying onto the grass.

“Ah! Hey! Ass,” Roan said, and quickly collected them up. He also looked to Syl, and mentioned, “That’s a bad word, don’t say that in front of Meesn.”

Hardigar took a deep breath in, and out. He reminded himself that he played these hideously monotonous social

brainiac games with these two because he loved them, and *they* enjoyed it. He handed Syl three fours.

She set down her complete set of fours, and asked, "Got any nines, Hardigar?"

Hardigar handed Syl card after card, until his hand was down to just two cards, the five of cups and the ten of swords. Good ones, them. He stared at the pictures as Syl extracted Roan's hand from him too.

"I think you won, Syl," Roan said, looking at Syl's extensive field of completed sets laid out neatly on the table.

Her nose twitched and her tail flicked agreeably.

"Good game, Syl," Hardigar congratulated. He set down his hand. He had completed zero sets, Roan had gotten one.

"One more?" Syl asked.

"C'mon now, that *was* one more," Roan said, as he began to collect up all of the cards. "*Clearly* you can remember that." He handed her the deck. "Want to go see if Meesn needs help with anything in the house?"

She took the deck, but did not go scampering off towards the house. She looked at Hardigar. "Make me fly?"

"Wellll," he said, and with faux-reluctance, stood up. "Hand me a card?"

Syl scanned through the deck, and then picked out a card to hand to him. Four of pentacles. Her favorite. "Mm, lovely," he commented.

He walked across the yard, spinning the single card atop his fingertip, being followed closely by Syl. He stopped at a patch of dirt. There, over the patch of dirt, he envisioned a sturdy table, considered the texture of the wood as he ran a hand over it, what its weight would be if one tried to lift it. He tossed the card onto the envisioned table: the card landed on the air as though striking the table's surface. The card slid briefly and then settled.

Though he was part of a cursed race, this contained weal as well as woe. One gift to Hardigar was the cliché one: in the black fur on his left forearm, in two rows, were the numerals one through nine depicted in white fur. The numerals nine, eight, and seven were crossed through with a line of crimson fur,

which looked as though it was white fur matted with dried blood.

His other gift was an adeptness in the particularly rare magic of pantomime. He made the imagined real, though the physicality of the imagined had to be truly believed by the one who would be most effected by it in the immediate future. As he tossed the card onto the imagined table, his immense ego was on the line, and so his belief made it physical.

Hardigar crouched, wriggled, and then leapt up onto the floating card, making a show of standing on it upon one tiptoe, hands out to the sides for balance. After staying that way for a few seconds, he hopped off.

He came around the table to Syl, lifted her up, and held her atop the table, over the card. "Don't look down," he instructed. "Look forward, out into the woods. The card is still there. You'll be able to stand on it."

She looked up and faced forward, into the woods as he had said.

Very slowly, he lowered her towards the table, saying, "Easy, almost there, almooost..."

Her foot settled on the imagined table, several inches away from being atop the card at all. He set her fully on the table, made sure she had her balance, and then let go of her, leaving her to stand on one foot, believing she stood on the floating card, and, incidentally, therefore believing in Hardigar's pantomime, making it real. She squeaked with delight as she kept her balance, facing the woods diligently.

Silently, Hardigar grabbed the card, held it behind his back, and walked around to the front of Syl. He smiled at her joy in this, and then held up the four of pentacles for her to see. He watched as she processed what he was showing her. She held on to the belief for a couple more seconds, and then dropped to the ground.

He picked her up and began carrying her to the farmhouse. "You were off the card the entire time," he told her, "and you still floated."

Hardigar took a few steps up an imagined staircase and onto an imagined platform, about three feet off the ground. From the

felian's arms, the rodentian girl peered down at the ground, and at the seeming nothingness which the man stood on.

"If I set you down, will you float?"

Syl looked down, pondered it, and then nodded.

Carefully, Hardigar began setting Syl down. "Almost... almooost..."

Syl's feet found the platform, and she stood level with Hardigar. She squeaked up at him, and he flicked his tail and purred down at her. He offered his hand, and she took it.

"Follow me down," he said, and led the way down the stairs. She followed him down after each one, and the two arrived safely back on the grass.

"Thanks Hardigar," she squeaked, and then skipped off into the house to go see if her grandmother needed help with anything.

Hardigar purred and flicked his tail as he watched her go. Smiling, he turned towards Roan. The canian still sat at the washbucket table, head bowed and posture stooped over. Hardigar's good mood turned to concern, and he walked over to his clanmate.

"Something wrong?"

Roan looked up to Hardigar. The canian's eyes were reddened and wide.

Hardigar's demeanor doured further at seeing the canian distressed. "Roan, if you need to eat—"

Roan growled. "No," he said.

"It's not our fault that we're like this."

Roan growled again.

Two hundred years ago, a wizard of great power and true evil cast a curse upon the followers of Essera, the goddess of animal empathy. The curse gave each follower the likeness of an animal, and ordained that the only food which would bear sustenance for the cursed races was the blood of a freshly killed animal to whom one had formed an emotional bond.

Most from the cursed races starved, or were killed before they had the opportunity to starve. Essera herself, in the last fortress where she and her followers made a stand, was killed in a raid which lasted forty grueling days. In the days before her impending death, the goddess broke off pieces of her own

divinity, and gave them as blessings to her people who would soon be the orphaned followers of a dead religion. Cats with nine lives. Dogs with sight of ghosts. Rats with the ability to bestow bad luck.

Hardigar, Roan, Meesn, and Syl were the descendants of an almost totally successful genocide. They were among the last from the cursed races in the world.

Roan stood up, and began walking around to the back of the house, towards the barn and the pasture. Hardigar followed beside him. The canian and the felian entered the barn, where Page and Temperance, two mares, stood in their stalls.

Roan went to Temperance, and held the mare's head in his arms. He stroked down the mare's neck and buried his canian nose against her coat, taking in deep, long sniffs.

Hardigar went to Page, set down an invisible step-stool behind her, stepped up onto it, and mated with her to pass the time. He tried to focus on the physical pleasure of it, to block out the invasive thoughts about death, about eating other living beings, about the profound selfishness of his very existence in this world. It was not an easy thing for him to forget about. It was even worse for Roan. As a canian, Roan still saw the ghosts: not exactly living creatures anymore, but the echoes of a living creature's soul, cracked motors still blindly lurching on to turn machines that are no longer there. He saw the ghosts of sheep walking alongside the rest of the flock, never again to taste the grass or smell the breeze, always bleating at him and running if he neared, for he was their murderer. He saw the ghost of the mare who had been named Queen, standing in the stall right beside Temperance, staring daggers at the canian who had killed her to feed himself and a rat.

Roan managed not to eat for the remainder of the day. When his stomach growled, he growled back.

—

The next day, Hardigar and Roan sat near the edge of a cliff, with Page and Temperance standing around behind them. Hardigar played solitaire while Roan looked down at the fields of the valley before them. A road cut through the valley. Roan's

wet nose pulsed as he monitored the scents in the air. The stomach of the felian and the stomach of the canian had a conversation in growls.

On the day of her death, the goddess Essera gave one final gift to her people: they would be able to smell a rank odor upon any human who killed for pleasure. Being that a human was an animal, this proved to be quite useful to the cursed races in expanding their diet.

A gentle breeze came by. Roan's nose twitched, and then he shot up to his feet and barked at a grove of birch trees a ways down the valley. "Hunters," Roan said, jowls raised.

Hardigar did not yet get up. He continued to ponder his game, tail flicking back and forth. "Survivalists or sportsmen?" he asked.

"I can smell them, can I not?"

Hardigar smirked. "Teasing, Roan. To imagine I would doubt you."

Hardigar collected up his cards, and stood up as well. The two of them mounted the mares and set off, galloping over a path that lead down into the valley. The nose of the felian and the nose of the canian twitched the entire way, a foul scent guiding them to their targets. As the scent grew stronger, Hardigar and Roan slowed their mares to a trot, and then dismounted, and tied the mares' leads to a couple of birch trees. The two men proceeded on foot, stalking silently through the forest. Hardigar's left hand rested on his cutlass, and he felt the weight of the sets of manacles stashed around the rest of his hip. Roan had his bow drawn and an arrow knocked.

As the two neared the road, they could hear the sound of the hunters' wagon coming through, drawn by a horse. Hardigar and Roan both bared their teeth reflexively at the overwhelming scent: these hunters had killed many for no reason other than sport, perhaps even no other reason than habit.

The felian and the canian peeked out to the road from behind the trees. The covered wagon had one driver, a bearded man boredly holding the horse's reigns.

Roan pulled back his arrow and trained a shot on the driver. Once the wagon was near to passing, Roan released the arrow and sent it on its way: the arrow flew, and landed in the throat

of the driver, signing the end of this life that had taken the lives of so many others. The driver lived long enough to know that this was his death. He put his hands to his throat, mouth open and grimacing in pain and discomfort, and then he slumped over in his seat. The horse continued on walking, pulling the wagon.

Roan gave Hardigar a pat on the shoulder, implicitly saying, "Your turn."

Silently, Hardigar dashed up to the road, leapt into the driver's seat of the wagon, and tossed out the bearded body, which fell to the road with a hefty thump. He then crouched in the driver's seat with his cutlass drawn, and waited for the riders in the back of the wagon to see their compatriot on the road behind them with an arrow in his throat.

Shortly, he heard an uproar from inside the wagon: "What in the twenty nine hells!"

Hardigar snickered. As soon as he heard boots hit the road, he leapt out to the side of the wagon to confront the alerted men.

Two men were running at him, one with a crossbow and one with a shortsword. The man with the crossbow came to a skidding halt and fired his shot: Hardigar raised a pantomimed shield, and the bolt embedded in the air before it could strike him. He forgot about the shield, and the bolt fell to the ground.

The man with the shortsword still charged. Hardigar crouched, leapt up into the air, and then landed on an imagined trampoline. He sailed comfortably over both men's heads, doing a flip on the way, and landed behind the crossbowman. With deft hands, Hardigar clamped manacles onto the man's hands and ankles, and then kicked out the man's footing from under him, sending him sailing down to the road which he hit with a thump much like his compatriot had made earlier.

The swordsman wheeled around to face the felian assailant. This time he did not charge, but stood—cowered—in a cautious, frightened stance.

Hardigar drew his foot back and kicked the crossbowman in the ribs for effect, and then stood tall and gave the swordsman a smile. "Stand down, and you will live the rest of your limited days in comfort!"

The man sneered. "I've killed larger vermon than you, degenerate."

Hardigar hissed, and held his forearm out to the side for the man to see the numbering in the fur. "I warn you, you'll have to kill me six times for it to stick. Which is more than fair, I would say, given your genocide of my people."

"There was no genocide. There was a war, and you lost it."

Hardigar kicked the crossbowman in the ribs once again. The felian noticed, then, that neither of these humans was dressed as a hunter. They each wore black leather with metal studs, and their boots bore pointed metal tips which glinted in the sun. Hardigar squinted at the swordsman's hand: a tattoo of a cross overlayed by a three-headed lion confirmed it; these were agents of the crown. It was entirely possible that the killing which had caused their rank odor was not restricted to the traditional animal kingdom alone.

"Tell me, how fares the king? I pray he is sick."

The man drew a dagger from a sheath Hardigar hadn't noticed. The man hurled it at the felian, quicker than the cat could conjure up an image of something with which to block it. Hardigar let out a surprised breath as the dagger pierced his stomach. He removed it and let it fall to the ground as an arrow came and pierced the swordsman's throat, in much the same way as an arrow had pierced his compatriot's.

Hardigar felt a tingling sensation spreading from his stomach outward. He screwed his eyes shut, and bowed his head in disappointed resignation. Poison. The dagger had been poisoned.

Roan came running up. He peeked into the back of the wagon for any more adversaries, and then went to Hardigar.

Hardigar forced a smile, and said, "Not our best work."

"Hardigar, you—"

Hardigar put a firm hand on Roan's shoulder, and nodded. "This will kill me, I think, but what else is new? Kick him in the ribs for me, would you?"

Roan did as asked. Hardigar beamed at the odorous man's yelp.

Hardigar staggered over to the back of the wagon, and had a look inside.

“Howdy,” I said to him.

So, this is where I come into the story. At the time I didn’t know what my real name was, though Hardigar would soon give me the nickname Hermit. I stood in a cage in the back of the covered wagon, clothed in a ratty grey cloak, having heard my captors dispatched one by one. Then up comes a man who looks like a cat, his stomach and hands soaked with his own blood, and he tilts his head curiously at me like I’m the weird one. I guess we both are.

“Be it animal or mineral, insect gas or vegetable; who are you?” he asked. His tongue was sluggish as he recited the singsongy children’s rhyme—because of the poison, as I would later learn.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I remember nothing from before this morning, when I awoke in this cage.”

“Fascinating,” the cat man said, and then turned and puked blood onto the road.

Once he was finished doing that, he grabbed one of the chests in the back of the wagon and slid it over to himself. He pressed in on the latching mechanism, lifted up the lid, and set off what turned out to be a booby trap: an explosion flashed and filled all of my senses, leaving me blinded and deafened and smelling gunpowder and aching from the shockwave that had picked me up off of my feet and slammed me against the back of my cage. I sat on the floor, rattled, looking out at the back half of the wagon that had been exploded off. The cat man laid on the road, dead.

A dog man approached, crouched down at the body of the cat man, and examined the forearm. He whined, and then stood and approached me. His nose moved around as he examined me from a distance. Apparently I did not bear the same foul odor as my captors, but at the same time, the dog man was not ready to let me out of my cage just yet.

The cat man, dead just a moment ago, sat up. He looked around, particularly up at the exploded wagon, and then looked down to his forearm. “Ah shit.”

The dog man came over and gave him a hand up. I saw the dog man show the cat man a large key, and then both of them looked in my direction. With a smile and a flick of the tail, the

cat man snatched the key and leapt up into the wagon, standing face to face with me. I stood back from the bars with my hands at my sides; he came and leaned forward against the bars, pressing as much of his face through as he could while his tail flicked back and forth behind him.

“My name is Hardigar,” he said. “I have five lives left, and if you promise to keep it that way, I’ll unlock you.”

“Easy enough,” I said, and then extended a hand.

He reached through the bars, and we shook. Next, he unlocked the cage and held open the door for me, and I was free.

Free to do what or go where, I wasn’t sure of. I followed the cat man out of the wagon, and then stood and observed as the two of them made the remaining agent stand up; this agent’s hands were bound behind his back and his ankles were chained together; the canian stood behind him, keeping a hold on him.

Hardigar looked over to me, and mentioned, “You can go. Perhaps the horse would give you a ride.”

“To where?” I wondered aloud.

Hardigar gave a big shrug.

“I may wish to come with you, if you would have me.”

The felian and the canian turned and whispered to one another. Hardigar then said to me, “We don’t have much.”

I shrugged. “I don’t have anything.”

“Yeah, alright. Come along then.”

Hardigar removed the horse from the cart. He then produced a deck of cards and looked through them, glancing up at the horse once in a while. Eventually he held one card up to look at it and the horse side by side, and then nodded. “Magician,” he said to the canian, who gave an approving thumbs up. He then came over to me, held a card up to look at me and it side by side, and then nodded again. “Hermit.” He flipped the card around for me to see. I could see where he was coming from with the grey cloak, at least.

The five of us—myself, the agent, the canian and the felian, and the horse—proceeded through the woods. Hardigar rode atop the horse in the back of the procession, likely keeping a suspicious eye on me. We stopped at a clearing and gathered two more horses, then proceeded on, up the side of the valley, and through the woods a ways, eventually arriving at what I first

thought to be an abandoned mansion, before realizing that it was not abandoned, and was not a mansion per-se, though it was a sizeable house to find in the middle of nowhere.

Later on in the day, I found myself sitting at a table in the cellar, playing cards with Hardigar, Roan, Syl, Meesn, and Meses—the agent—who played from inside of a cage.

“Got any twos, Syl?” I asked.

“Go fish, Hermit,” she answered.

“Got any twos, Hermit?” Hardigar asked.

“Maybe,” I said, and then handed my twos over.

The felian smugly put down a completed set. “Got any sixes, Meses?”

“Go fish, Hardigar.”

Hardigar drew. As Roan went, I noticed Syl tug on Meesn’s arm. The older rodentian woman leaned down to her granddaughter, and listened to her whispering. The grandmother nodded, and then sat upright again.

On Meesn’s turn, she asked, “Are you cheating, Meses?”

Meses made a fart noise with his mouth, tossed a six onto the table, and then tossed the rest of the cards behind himself in his cage.

“Is there a game *you* would rather play?” Meesn asked.

“Didn’t your mother teach you not to play with your food?”

“Ohh, quite the opposite.” Meesn set down her cards and leaned forward on the table, cupping her chin in both of her palms. “Tell us about yourself. Are you a hunter?”

“Yes.”

“And an agent of the crown, by the looks of it. Ledonia’s finest.”

“Yes.”

“Any good stories?”

“I don’t imagine you would appreciate the protagonist in them.”

“Try us.”

Meses huffed, and crossed his arms. He stared up at the ceiling for a moment, and then began. “There was this one time I was stationed in Verodia, and I had some down time to go hunting. Miserable place most of the time, I hear, but when I was there it was all warm, dry, and partly cloudy. I go out to this

hunting stand, and I'm out there for hours, I mean hours, wondering if there are even animals living here, when suddenly I spot this buck, and I swear to you as I live and breathe, it had a black coat and a thirty two point rack. I draw back my bowstring, take my shot, and miss, but I don't miss: I end up hitting his mate who was behind him and I hadn't even seen her. Later when I dressed her, I found out she was pretty far along in her pregnancy, and it was the first time I knowingly ate fetal venison—pretty good if you ever get the chance. Bagged the buck the next day, had him mounted—the guy charged by the point so I threw the doe's meat into the deal to get it done with less out of my pocket, since I was planning to throw it out anyways, I'd already thrown out the other fetus—and then I caught my ride back home. Buck's still mounted on my den wall to this day."

The story left a vacuum of silence in the lanternlit cellar. Meses sat with his arms crossed, his body language screaming I told you so.

Hardigar broke the silence: "Do you have any stories that *aren't* terrible?"

Meses rolled his eyes. "Yes, one time I was out skipping through the woods and I saw a really pretty flower." He reached down to the floor of his cage, picked up a few of the cards he'd thrown, neatly stacked them together, and then ripped them all in half.

Hardigar and Roan shot up, hissing and barking at their prisoner.

Meses looked at them with dead eyes.

Hardigar pantomimed a club, knocking it against the table a few times to show that it made a wooden sound which rang out through the room, and then he reached into the cage and bonked Meses on the head with it. Meses yelped and cursed; all outside the cage had a giggle, admittedly including me.

"Would anyone else care for some wine while I'm up?" Hardigar asked.

All hands in the room shot up.

Hardigar looked bemusedly at Syl's raised hand. "Only a little for you. Tiny, tiny amount. You probably won't like it anyways."

The felian went off to a corner of the cellar, opened a cabinet, and looked inside for a moment. Roan also went off, and came back with glasses which he passed around, including a shot glass for Syl and a tin cup for Meses. Hardigar returned with two bottles of wine, and began pouring for everyone.

Meses watched closely as Hardigar poured wine into the tin cup. Seeing no form of poison dropped inside, he downed his cup in one draft and passed it back out of the cage for a refill, which Hardigar provided with a purr and a flick of the tail. Syl took droplet-sized sips out of her shot glass, managing to make the tiny quantity last.

After much conversation and many more cups of wine, Meses conjured up another story. He swirled around the contents of his cup contemplatively as he told it.

“There was... there was one time when I did let a deer go. I don’t know what came over me exactly, but I think I was just... happy that day. Yeah. It was a day when I was happy. I woke up well rested, so well rested that it felt uncanny, like I had taken something. Heh. My wife Hetra was making breakfast when I came downstairs—eggs—and I came over and helped her—more got in her way, really, but we had fun. Spent all morning just cleaning up the place with her, which sounds dull when I say it, but tidying up turned up all kinds of little flashes from the past, little mementos that had been forgotten about in piles of old clutter. The place was immaculate when we were done. That afternoon when I went out with my bow, the birds were singing. They always sing, I know, but, that time I was listening. Sitting up in my stand, only about a half hour went by before a doe came walking by. I don’t think she saw me. She stopped dead in the middle of my line of sight, and just stood there like she was waiting for it. And I couldn’t. I don’t know what it was, but I had to let her go and live the rest of her day. So I put down my bow and I waited. And she went.”

After he had finished telling his story, Meses leaned back and looked up at the ceiling.

Hardigar turned to his clanmates, and asked, “Good?”

“Good,” they all responded.

Hardigar drew a throwing dagger and hurled it into the cage, striking Meses in the throat. The four of the cursed races dashed

to the cage and waited impatiently as Roan unlocked it. When the cage door swung open, all four clambered in and I watched them feast.

I wish I could say that I was fraught with worry for my own life that night, tossing and turning and thinking up my escape, but in all honesty, it had been quite a long day and the straw mattress in the guest room felt like the height of luxury. I slept like a rock.

The next morning I made a lap around the house, looking around at the woods and the small pasture and the flock of sheep, and found myself wandering into the barn. I was some ways into the barn before my eyes adjusted to the dimmer light, and I realized that Hardigar was in here too, sharing the close company of one of the horses. I averted my eyes and began to apologize, but the felian spoke over me as he continued with the mare.

"There's a lovely apple tree that's just a short walk into the woods from here," he mentioned. "I can bring you to it if you'd like."

"I would look forward to that," I responded.

"This is Page," Hardigar added after a moment. I looked up to see him gesturing to the horse he was copulating with. Pointing to the other horses, he added, "That's Temperance, and that's Magician. Since you and her came here together, I wouldn't stop you from leaving with Magician if she's agreeable to you. But if you're inclined towards it, I wouldn't stop you from staying either. It's been a long time since the clan had a new speaking member."

"I have to admit, I do feel it would be wise of me to leave before any of you get hungry again."

Hardigar closed his eyes, and sighed an unhappy sigh. Closing his eyes tighter, he began going at Page faster for a moment, and then returned to a regular pace and looked at me again. "You have about a month before that will be of concern again. We've gotten very good at fasting."

"Are you planning to eat me in a month then?"

"I'd eat you before I ate Page."

"What about the sheep? How do I stack up against them?"

The sound of Hardigar slapping against Page filled the air as he thought about it. As he continued with Page, he answered, “I don’t *like* to eat the sheep, just so you know. I wouldn’t *like* to eat you either.”

“I’m getting the impression I won’t be eating any mutton here.”

Hardigar made a hissing face at me, and then turned his full attention to Page. When he finished, he stepped down from his pantomimed stepstool, brushed aside her tail, and began licking at her. He wasn’t at it for too long before I heard footsteps from behind, running towards the barn. I turned to see who was coming in such a hurry. It was Roan. The canian stopped before me to catch his breath.

Hardigar poked his head up from behind the mare. “What’s the hurry?”

Roan gave his answer facing me: “I’ve learned who you are.”

“What?” I asked. “How?”

“Meses, your captor, informed me.”

“What, some document hidden on his person, or—”

“No. I grant he was secretive, but his ghost has been more forthcoming.”

“Oh. Oh I see.”

Roan clasped his hands onto my shoulders, looked me eye to eye, and said, “I speak your name to return knowledge to body: reform into one again, Prince Auren.”

The name reverberated through my ears, and in an instant knocked a lifetime of memories back into my beck and call. No sooner had I remembered myself than did a dread crawl through me. I asked Roan, “What day is it? How far are we from Kon Kell? I must get to Princess Koriene: my business with her is of the most extreme urgency.”

Hardigar cooed as he pranced over. Purring, he asked, “Am I hearing that you’re late for a date with a lady friend?”

Roan interjected to answer my earlier questions, saying, “By my reckoning it is the tenth morning since the Autumn equinox. If you left on horseback now you would reach Kon Kell by nightfall.”

"I am too late," I said blankly, aloud but to no one. "Even if I were already inside the city walls of Kon Kell, I would be too late." I turned and walked swiftly towards Magician.

"Is Princess Koriene pretty?" Hardigar called after me. "Would the two of you happen to want a third? Is she allergic to cats?"

I entered Magician's stall, hopped up onto her back, and rode her at a walk towards the open barn door. As I passed by Hardigar, I informed him, "She was to ritually sacrifice me this morning to prevent a horrible fate from befalling Ledonia. In short hours I think we will all regret that—"

I was cut off as the ground began to shake, the warm temperature dropped to freezing, and the sky outside darkened. Distantly I heard a roll of thunder, and then another volley far off elsewhere, and then in a dazzling flash and deafening bang, a third volley of lightning struck the farm, blasting apart the walls of the barn and the house, setting fire to the woods, and putting the fear of the gods into every living creature hereabouts. I was thrown off of Magician and she sprinted away. Hardigar and Roan huddled over one another. I sat dazed on the floor, smelling a strange, lively smell in the wake of the lightning.

The sky outside was grey, as though a uniform fog domed the world. From the fog, meteors began to fall here and there, as well as enormous grey centipede-like creatures called grabbers. Three of them fell onto the farmhouse, and by their masses together, were comparable to the house in size. Two of them tore the lightning-struck farmhouse into further pieces, while the third ambled with its hundred legs over to the barn. I watched in a stupor as it picked up Roan and then continued walking, tearing a hole through the back of the barn to exit, and then continued away into the woods holding the canian: Hardigar had scratched at the creature and tried to hold onto it to get back his friend, but a few of its many legs reached up and kicked him off, spraying up an irritating cloud of ash in the process. The other two grabbers left holding Meesn and Syl.

A meteor struck through the roof of the barn and landed in Magician's empty stall. Shakily, I got to my feet, went to Hardigar, and dragged him towards the house—he staggered along with me for a few steps, then yowled and gouged my arm

with his claws. I snarled and he hissed. He went to the stalls of Page and Temperance and took them both out on leads. With both of them in tow, he was now willing to follow me. I brought us all down into the cellar. Hardigar sat down at the table and wrapped a blanket around himself. He reached out to the cards laid out on the table, looked through them, and singled out the four of pentacles. He clutched it in his hand, bug-eyed, as he sat there and shook and stammered to himself. I found myself pacing back and forth across the cellar as I listened to the crashing thunder and sailing meteors outside.

Hardigar eventually shot up from his chair and marched straight towards me, claws extended. "What is this?" he asked.

Not having forgotten about the wound his claws had made on my arm but an hour ago, I balled my hands into fists as I answered him. "A localized apocalypse," I said with a sneer. "What we have just witnessed is the end of life in Ledonia."

"Go on."

"Where to begin!"

Hardigar bared his needle-like carnivorous teeth, and asked, "What hand have you had in this?"

"My hand was supposed to be in stopping it!" I shouted, and then marched to the table where the empty wine bottles still stood from the night before. I picked one up, hurled it at the far wall, and watched it smash. I picked up the other one and did the same, and felt better, if only very slightly. "It was my father's hand who started it," I said to the waiting felian. "Does news of the world reach you here? Do you know the tensions between Ledonia and Hondland?"

"I do. Go on."

"My father, Xortahsh, King of Hondland, made a pact with the god of the lowest hell, may I never speak his name, that the god might open a hole between that plane and this one at Kon Kell and make a demon's feast of every soul in Ledonia. *I* was on my way to *stop* this wickedness. Retract your claws: I know of the cursed races, and therefore I know that you can surely smell for yourself that I am no murderer."

Hardigar's nose twitched, and then his claws retracted back into his fingers.

In a huff, I sat down at the table, and hung my head. “My father knew I had learned of his plans, and that I was conspiring to stop him. I was in communication with Koriene, Princess of Ledonia, who would be able to cast a spell to countermand the opening of the rift. The cost of the spell was one soul descended of the Orangetree Coronation—the coronation which made my great great great great grandfather the first king of Hondland. I was only too happy to give my own life to this noble cause. Princess Koreine arranged for Ledonia’s agents to kidnap me away and bring me to her. Alas. Here we are. If it means anything to you, I imagine they had already encountered quite a deal of trouble before your intervention if they were cutting it this close with my arrival.”

Hardigar sat down at the table beside me, picked up a wine glass, and hurled it at the wall where I had hurled the wine bottles. “Is there anything that can be done now?”

“I don’t imagine so.”

Hardigar groaned, and hung his head.

The two of us sat and listened to the meteors and the thunder.

Later in the day, my stomach began to growl. I ascended the cellar stairs and went out to the pasture, where the flock of sheep laid dead from all of the earlier tumult. As I went about dressing and smoking all of the mutton that I could manage to, I saw Hardigar glaring at me as he moved hay and oats from the barn to the cellar. When he was finished, he stayed in the cellar with Page and Temperance. I sat alone outside, eating a feast of mutton and looking up at a falling sky. That night I did worry he would kill me, and I sat up all night in the corner, dozing off and snapping awake. At some point my weariness got the better of me, and I fell asleep for real.

I awoke relieved to find that Hardigar had more pressing plans than killing me: he stood naked with a bottle of wine in hand, other arm wrapped around Page’s neck, kissing the side of her mouth. When he heard my shuffling footsteps approaching, he turned to face me, and I saw that his fur all over was ruffled from face to chest, and he was covered in brambles and ash. “You look like shit,” he told me. He took a long drink from the wine bottle, and then added, “Magician is dead. I went out to

find her this morning. She made it a good way from the farm, but.”

I sighed, and shrugged. Then I opened my stupid mouth to say, “At this point we didn’t have much of a use for three anyways.”

Hardigar snarled and muttered a sting of curses in a language I was not familiar with. “Idiot,” he ended with, and then finished his bottle and went to set it on the table beside two others. Then he fetched another wine bottle, opened it with some difficulty, and resumed his prior business of kissing a horse.

I went and sat at the top of the ramp that lead down into the cellar, wedged between the cellar ramp and the cellar door. I sat waiting to hear thunder or meteors. Neither sound came. Outside there was no sound of wind, no sound of birds, no sound of insects. The sound that eventually did come was the now familiar slapping of a cat man behind his horse.

Eventually, the horse that Hardigar was not occupied with came walking up with a tapping of hooves, and stood at the base of the cellar ramp, peering up at me.

From around the corner, Hardigar called, “Temperance is saying hello.”

“Tell her I said hi back,” I called to Hardigar, as she continued to stare at me.

“Tell her yourself,” came the felian’s response.

I looked at her eyes. Though I had been no stranger to riding, it occurred to me then, only then, in the cellar with a man piss drunk and coping with his mourning with a horse’s company, that there was more going on behind equine eyes than a direction and a speed. There was some social motivation, some reason why she had come over to me. It was beyond curiosity—she had already seen me, she knew I was there. There was something more to her. But the shape and dimensions of what more there was, I had no skill whatsoever to discern.

I called again to Hardigar. “Show me how to say hello.”

The sound of Hardigar slapping behind Page stopped. A moment later, he came walking into my sight with questionable balance and an erection. He set the bottle of wine down and walked up to Temperance. He laid his hands on her neck, and a moment later, he beckoned me over. As I began my way down

the ramp, Temperance began to turn away, but Hardigar gave her a shushing sound and kept his hands on her. She stood in place as I approached, and stood beside the cat.

"Just pet her," he said, demonstrating, running a hand down the side of her neck a few times.

I did as he did. "I *have* pet a horse before," I mentioned to him.

"The fact that that surprises me means we're still starting here."

"That is hurtful but fair."

Hardigar began petting her along the side as I continued. "Not so rigid, prince. Relax. Do it with feeling. This is how you tell her things."

"Okay." I slowed down my petting, and made a point of relaxing my hand some. "You don't have to call me prince, by the way. Auren is fine."

"Prince was not a form of address, it was an insult."

"Ah."

Temperance swung her head to me and started walking into me; Hardigar took me by the arm and pulled me aside. She walked past and began eating from the hay that Hardigar had piled against one of the walls.

"Can I say hi to Page?"

"I don't imagine she'd mind."

Hardigar lead the way over. He gave her a kiss and nuzzled his head against her neck, smiling as her mane tickled his face.

"I... that might be rather advanced for me."

"Suit yourself," he cooed. He then looked around himself.

I knelt down and picked up the wine bottle he had set on the floor a moment ago. I walked forward to him and Page, and extended the bottle to him. He put his hand on it, but didn't take it, and I didn't let it go: we both stood holding the bottle of wine, looking one another up and down. Then each of our eyes caught on the eyes of the other, and we looked nowhere else. There was a strange and exotic beauty in the eyes of a cat.

"Forgive me if this question betrays some foolishness on my part, but I must ask it: Is Page your wife?"

I believe I could see the mocking words assembling themselves on Hardigar's tongue, standing ready at a

milisecond's notice to be deployed, but if such words did in fact come to his mind, he did not say them. After a few seconds of looking into my eyes, he said, "It is not a foolish question, but it is a question which is trying to assert its existence in a framework that will not hold it. She is my love and my world and she is aggressively fond of me as well, but we do not live in a framework of contracts."

I nodded, and released the bottle of wine.

He brought it to his mouth and drank from it, and then smiled at me. "She and I do not have a monogamous arrangement, if that's what you were angling towards."

I smiled at him saying as much, and glanced away as I said, "I did wonder, yes."

"Do you have no monogamous arrangement, prince?"

"Someday, gods willing. But I have been no stranger to concubines."

He stepped forward, I stepped forward to meet him, and the two of us tilted our heads and kissed; his tickly furry lips made me giggle, and I had to step back.

He took my hand gently, and guided my hand until I was cupping his testicles. He closed his eyes and began to purr.

"Having fun?" I asked.

"Yes," he answered, vocalizing it within the purr.

"I'm glad. But maybe we should revisit this another time," I said, and took my hand away from the felian. "You are *very* drunk."

Hardigar's face scrunched up as though he had just been given a riddle. "What? So?"

"So I would be taking advantage of you."

Hardigar squinted harder and asked louder, "WHAT?"

Page took a step towards me, but Hardigar put an arm against her chest, and she stopped.

"Your judgment is impaired."

"My judgment is impaired on purpose!"

"Nonetheless, this is not a choice you're equipped to make right now."

"You have a *very* pessimistic perspective on mutual pleasure."

"You have a very big mouth for a cat."

Hardigar gave a brief hiss—a playful one, for a first—and then he asked me, “Do you feel I’m well equipped enough for Page?”

“I... don’t honestly know how to begin to consider that.”

The felian turned and gave the horse another kiss, and went back to nuzzling her.

I went back up the cellar ramp, and opened it just a crack to look outside. There was a pointed greyness outside, a kind of brighter nighttime or dimmer daytime: staring into it, I lost confidence in which of the two I should believe it was. Ashes fell like snow. I watched it for a while. I wept.

Later on in the day, I sat at the table eating smoked mutton. Hardigar laid passed out in the cage, snoring. When he awoke, he looked around, glanced at his forearm once to check he still had his five lives—he did—and then sat up. From the cage floor, he said to me, “Genevieve.”

I looked down at him. “What?”

“Maybe that’s Genevieve you’re eating.”

I sighed, and set the mutton down on the table. “Was she your favorite?”

“She was a *friend*, prince.”

“What would you have me do differently? I did no slaughter, only scavenging.”

Hardigar nodded. To my surprise he asked for forgiveness, and said, “My anger is misguided, pointed towards you, but I have had a very rough day. A lot of friends I had hoped would enjoy very long lives are now dead.”

At that very moment, the cellar door went bursting open, flying off its hinges and out into the grey pasture. A gust of wind blew a flute of ash into the cellar, knocked a full bottle of wine off the table, and shattered it on the floor. There on the floor the ash and the wine seeped together, and rivulets of it began creeping towards the wall, and then up the wall in bends and loops that were forming a mural. Hardigar and I shot to our feet and looked at the forming scene.

First, a wall, with ramparts and tall buildings visible behind, a castle with a distinct conical shape the tallest of them all.

“The city of Kon Kell,” I said, and Hardigar nodded.

As the mural expanded outwards left and right, we saw depictions of scenes within Kon Kell, identifiable from the

circle-obsessed architecture. In a round plaza, a banquet was held—all looked well as the painting filled in the tables and chairs and cups, until the further details crept forth: sitting at the table were demons, and on the table were dismembered human beings, heads and arms and legs and all sorts. In a gladiatorial arena, the figure of person after person was filled in, each detail of each beaten and dirtied face, all packed shoulder to shoulder together—the scene in the arena expanded outwards into the next scene, where humans were lead in a line out of the arena to be slaughtered and hung up on hooks.

In the final scene, we saw a dungeon depicted below the conical castle, and in the dungeon sat a woman at a table reading a scroll by candlelight. As the details of her long curly hair were realized, I became certain of who this was meant to be.

“Princess Koreine,” I said. “She still waits.”

I looked to Hardigar, and saw that his mind was elsewhere—tears hung in his eyes.

“Goodbye, Roan,” Hardigar said.

The gust of wind blew past Hardigar and I on its way back out, and on the wind, even with my unimpressive human nose, I could smell the scent of a dog.

Hardigar sniffled, wiped his eyes, and generally composed himself before saying, “We should set out at once.”

“It’s a pleasant surprise to hear you’re so keen on coming with.”

Hardigar turned to the mural and pointed to the scene of the people packed into the arena. I came over and squinted at where he pointed.

Two rodentians, one young and one old, stood huddled together.

“Oh. I see.”

Hardigar and I went up out of the cellar, and scavenged through the wreckage of the house until we had found his cutlass, as well as a dagger for me. We each filled a water skin at a pump in the pasture, and I packed a satchel full of mutton and apples.

Hardigar began marching off into the woods.

I called after him, “Surely you don’t mean for us to walk.”

He wheeled around to give me an earful, but paused when he spotted something behind me. I turned, and saw Page and Temperance bolting towards us. Both came to a halt at Hardigar, both in a tumultuous mood by the looks of it.

“Are you sure?” I heard Hardigar ask Page.

Apparently she said something that meant yes, because the next moment, he was riding atop Page and leading Temperance back to me.

The four of us rode off, made our way down the valley, and then rode along the road towards Kon Kell.

I could see my breath along portions of the ride, but only barely; grey on grey on grey.

As we rode I anticipated nightfall, but none came. We arrived outside the walls of Kon Kell under the same grey sky which we had departed from the farm under.

I brought Temperance to a halt. Hardigar slowed Page, and then circled her back around to stand beside me, the four of us facing the city.

“I don’t suppose you know of a secret way in through the sewers,” Hardigar suggested.

“As a matter of fact, I was just about to bring up that very thing.”

“Lead the way, prince.”

I spurred Temperance onwards, and we rode off into the woods to the right of the path. We came, eventually, upon a rank lake, fed by runoff from a sizeable pipe that lead under the city wall. The pipe was covered by a grate that reeked of magic. I dismounted and approached the grate on foot, and placed my hands flat against the metal surface.

“By any light of Denirstis that still shines through in Ledonia, be gone.”

The grate disappeared and I stumbled forward in its sudden absence.

Temperance came and stood beside me. I walked onward, side by side with the horse, into the sewers. Hardigar and Page followed after. I don’t imagine any of us cared for the smell of the place all too much. More grates blocked our passage as we went deeper and deeper under the city, but each disappeared as we neared it.

After passing through one particular grate, the stonework became quite noticeably nicer, and as we went deeper from here, the offensive odor lessened. I paused at a particular door, opened it, and peered inside.

"This storage room may be a suitable place for the horses to stay while we attend to our business here."

"Are we near to our destination?" Hardigar asked.

"Yes, just a few more turns."

"Very well."

We brought the horses in. Before we departed, Hardigar gave Page a kiss and a hug. Then we shut the door behind us, and proceeded.

Shortly, we came upon a long passageway with an oakwood door at the end. "This is it," I said. "Princess Koreine awaits me behind that door."

With that, I felt Hardigar's cutlass pierce my back. I fumbled for my own dagger, but he reached forward and drew it from my sheath before I could, and I soon found the dagger planted into the side of my neck. I fell to the ground, and in a cold rush of wind, my spirit left my body.

As a ghost, I hovered behind Hardigar as he knelt over my murdered corpse, offering an explanation to its deaf ears.

"Rest assured, a sacrifice will still be made behind that door, prince. But as a matter of practicality for reasons you will soon see, I must ensure that I am the one who makes it. I, too, am descendant from the Orangetree Coronation, though I found myself a convert to Essera when I grew old enough to insist on having a mind of my own. I only narrowly escaped the battle in which she was killed. Since then, I have died of starvation once and old age twice. I spent some very formative years working in slaughterhouses, trying to find sustenance among those whose fates were already sealed anyways. But I could not last long there. The disrespect that I witnessed... what we saw in Roan's mural, what takes place above our very heads right now in Kon Kell, is a drop in the ocean of the cruelty that I have already seen committed in Hondland and Ledonia alike. I will save what of Ledonia I can, but I will not allow its people to return to inflicting the same heartless slaughter on my people that they

now find inflicted on themselves. I have lived a greedy life: this is the generous end I have lived it to, remaining gods willing.”

With that, he stood, and walked past my corpse to the oakwood door at the end of the hall. Ethereal and silent I followed after him, making sure that my final business was attended to, even if it was to take a different shape than I had imagined.

Hardigar opened the door into the hidden study below the castle. Princess Koreine, who had been sat reading a book, shot to her feet and poised a dagger ready to throw at the unexpected felian.

“Easy, princess,” Hardigar said, showing his empty hands. “I come belatedly to be sacrificed in Prince Auren’s stead.” He kicked the oakwood door shut behind himself.

Her brow furrowed. “Who are you?” she asked.

“Prince Gamund of Hondland, long and somewhat accurately thought to be dead. I stand here in hopes that my five remaining lives will be an adequate substitute for the one life that Prince Auren intended to sacrifice.”

“By Denirstis’s light, it really is you isn’t it?” Koreine lowered her dagger, and walked across the study to the felian. “May I?” she asked.

Hardigar held out his hand.

Koreine used her dagger to make a slight cut on his hand, and held a crystal under the drop of blood that first pooled together and fell. When the blood hit the crystal, the crystal let out a resonant hum, and then shattered and fell away into glistening shards and dust.

“You will indeed suffice,” Koreine said. “You may, in fact, be overpaying in your sacrifice by an amount that I’m not sure I can fathom.”

She took the felian by the wrist and lead him to the center of the study, where an immense pentagram was made on the floor in white flowers. Hardigar stopped outside of the circle, and would not budge.

“I must insist on seeing the spell,” he said.

Dismayed, the princess stopped pulling him but did not release his wrist. “Minutes wasted are lives lost.”

“So it goes.”

The princess scoffed, and released him to go retrieve a scroll. She handed it to him.

He unrolled it and read it over, line by line as a minute went by. When he reached the end, he shook his head and brought the scroll to the desk. He began preparing a pen to write with.

“Excuse me!” Koreine said, and marched after him. “By the gods, what *do* you think you’re doing?”

“By the rules of the good magic you invoke here, I must agree to the spell for which I sacrifice myself. Yes?”

“Yes.”

“I will not agree to this as written.”

“How in the world could you not! It states nothing other than the freeing of Ledonia’s people from the bondage of demons!”

“By Essera, may her name never be forgotten, I’m afraid the freeing of Ledonia’s people is not the unqualified good that you think it is. May I, princess?” he asked, holding the pen poised over the page.

The princess tapped her foot anxiously, and then nodded. “Very well.”

The felian spoke the words aloud as he wrote them down. “From hence forth among the human species, whenever one kills a member of the animal kingdom, whether by hand or by word, no matter how justified, that human shall witness one of their fingers turn to dust for each life that they take, until such a time as they have no fingers remaining, at which time they shall die.”

The princess kept her reply brief. “No.”

“Enjoy your slaughtered kingdom then.” Hardigar knocked the crystalline inkwell off of the desk, shattering it on the floor, and stood and began towards the oakwood door.

“It’s not that I object,” Koreine said.

This caught Hardigar’s attention, and he stopped before the door.

“It will not hold. A banishment I can do at great cost. You ask for the divine.”

“You are in the presence of the divine, princess,” he said, and then stepped up onto a pantomimed stepstool, and turned to face the princess while standing in the air. “Essera is killed, but her divinity lingers in a few of us yet.”

Koreine bit her lip, crossed her arms, and tapped her foot. “Get onto the pentagram,” she said.

Hardigar did as asked. Koreine retrieved the scroll.

With words read and a dagger pierced five times through an old cat’s heart, the shape of the world was changed.