

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 tongs 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.

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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 heir 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. “Guaaaaards!”

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 lead 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 themselves 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 lead 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.”

“Oookay 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 cantor 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 incompleated, 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 lead 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.