

July 2015

# Arigell

Shaylin Carlton

*Southern Illinois University Carbondale*, shayla115@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: [http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/uhp\\_theses](http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/uhp_theses)

This is a preliminary draft intended for continued revision as necessary.

---

## Recommended Citation

Carlton, Shaylin, "Arigell" (2015). *Honors Theses*. Paper 402.

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the University Honors Program at OpenSIUC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of OpenSIUC. For more information, please contact [opensiuc@lib.siu.edu](mailto:opensiuc@lib.siu.edu).

---

Arigell

---

Sister Blackbottom slammed the point of the knife, rather indignantly, into her pork chop. “That’s quite enough,” she huffed, and pushed her chair out from under the dinner table. Her two sisters watched the handle of the knife jiggle resignedly above where the point was lodged in the meat.

“It’s dinnertime, and the foolish weasels don’t have enough common courtesy to raid our barrels until a decent hour? Enough!” Sister Blackbottom rose from the company and strode to the rack of scarves. “I’m going out, and I’m taking care of our slithery mammal problem *now*. Yes, *horror of horrors*. In the middle of my *pork chop*.” With a final *swish* of the scarf around her still-muttering throat, she grasped the handle and was off into the evening.

“My,” peeped Sister Blackthorn, “I certainly hope she’s back in time for pie. It’s cinnamon-lemon today.”

The remaining two sisters finished their meal quietly in the manner of a family quite accustomed to sudden interruptions during mealtimes. For a few moments there were only the soothing clinks and hisses of the demon-powered kitchen stove and the dishes washing themselves in the basin by the smaller window.

Sister Blackmaw peered out the larger window and said nothing, as she was wont on most occasions. Her sister was watching the silver-tipped flames in the river stone hearth behind her, she knew, because of the way Sister Blackthorn’s eyes skipped over her shoulder in a fixed glaze. Sister Blackmaw raised an “*oh alright then, go to it*” eyebrow.

Then Sister Blackthorn rose from the table and veritably skipped over to the fireplace, squeeing “Oh, a *letter*,” and reaching her palms into the flames. “I simply adore getting letters! It’s the best time of the evening, you know, passing them around and—*oh*.” Here her sister withdrew a glistening round egg in a curious color, and passed it to Sister Blackmaw.

It wasn’t the sea-side blue of an everyday messenger egg, but a severe scarlet shot through with golden strands. No visible markings could have clued Sister Blackmaw into the sender, but she knew. And so did her sister. She placed the egg on the knitted pot holder from supper and flicked her eyes again to the larger window.

“Yes, we should wait until Sister Blackbottom returns. You’re right, of course.” But even as she spoke the words Sister Blackthorn was moving toward the kitchen cupboard. She swiped a scarlet bottle and flicked the curtains closed on her way back to the table.

She plunked it down with a “this should do it,” and rifled around in her dress pocket for a sewing needle. She handed the blunt end to Sister Blackmaw, who didn’t hesitate, but moved the little tip to her thumb and drove it in with a sharp poke. Sister Blackthorn pricked her own thumb and together they smeared a bit of the red over the still smoldering egg.

“Now,” said Sister Blackthorn, and she tipped a bit of Sister Blackbottom’s blood from the bottle onto the top of the thing. It dripped down over their own thumbprints. “Now.”

## Chapter 2

The campaign had been going swimmingly up until the dregmar had ripped off the left half of Gell's face. She'd sprayed her fair share of blood on the battleground, but the sweltering hands of the fire fae bubbled away her scales. It was unlike the dregmar's first stab to her gut, this quick tug that freed the flesh from her body. No time for more than a grunt of surprise. She choked on the pain.

It was alien, this feeling of exposed bone to the breeze. The agony sent her sprawling with a swinging arc of the sword, catching the dregmar in the knees on her way to the soaking scarlet grass. There was that, at least.

It was a bloody summer's evening. Someone wept next to her, prone on the ground. He was dregmar, one of a thousand fallen who had died, and would die, at the hands of the caimthu. An enemy. Still, in a moment when her eyes were glued to the stars and her ears were flooded with the groans of a thousand fading devils, Gell singled out the soft weeping of a stranger and felt sorry. There is a gravity that unites the minds of the dying.

That night, scores of caimthu and dregmar filled their lungs with a last breath, but Gell was not among them. As their exhalations met in the air they seemed to Gell to blanket the sky with an overwhelming spread of grief, black as pitch. She closed her eyes. Waited to join the stars.

It was dark, but not the dark of the emptiness between stars. She was still lying flat, and the steel moon gleamed bright across the scales of her arms. When she'd first opened her eyes again, Gell had tried to push her head from the earth, but as if her dried blood had sewn her to the grass, she lay motionless. Only the whirl of her panicked heart stirred in the night.

Her ruined cheek was tucked into her shoulder, and she could see down her left arm the pristine nothingness of an empty valley. The warriors gutted in the hastily-dug trenches were transfigured into bursts of night blooming lilies. The whole place spoke to Gell as something—untouched. The black night was tucked carefully behind the surrounding evergreens and the moon glittered on the snow of the Greatest Cliff.

She'd moved, then.

In her sleep, in a blind fog of pain? Did Arognathalu find her, bloodied in the muck, and carry her to the valley on his back?

Or was it much, much worse?

Gell's empty stomach heaved. *No.*

She wasn't afraid of dying here, or anywhere. But her head rushed and her mind flickered with the truest and most instinctual terror at the thought of Ilubach, his inked wings spread over her dying flesh, his claws sneaking their way between her scales and prying forth her secrets. The army of a hundred nellbach, hungry for her screams...

The thunder in her chest sent her eyes rolling back; she was on the edge of unconsciousness again.

*Enough*, she told her weak heart. *You've been trained for this eventuality every day. Every single day, for a lifetime.* And at the first test, she was frightened.

*Now is not the hour for cowering.*

She closed her eyes to the Greatest Cliff and inhaled her first smokeless, bloodless, breath in 17 days, and commanded herself to prevail.

And she was ready when, in a handful of moments, a snap and a glottal moan danced out from among the watching trees.

Not a heartbeat out of place, Gell lifted her lids to wait.

It approached from behind her. She could not lift her head to watch the approach, would not lift a hand to deflect a clash of sword or fangs. Her entire physical being sweated with the labor of simply not dying. So she listened.

It was heavy on two feet, hooved maybe. Or booted. She heard the grunt of its labored breath, the snorts of its muzzle testing the air and, ever so faint, an inexplicable chatter of teeth, and a racket of muffled *squeak squeak squeaks*. What monstrous abomination was stalking out of the conifers?

It was definitely coming to her. Its noises grew more distinct with each breath.

Gell could not scent the mutant with the remains of her blood-clotted nose, but she could feel the thump of the ground under its feet.

The beast was only steps away.

She was not afraid to die as dinner. Ashamed, maybe. And angry.

It drew up behind her, gave a sniff.

*Come, beast. Show us our fate.*

“In a bit of a pickle, aren't we, beastie?”

The caimthu on the ground didn't respond with more than a fluttering of animal breath and a blink of those glassy green eyes. It looked, thought Sister Blackbottom, like a horse who desperately wanted to bolt, but was staked to the ground.

“Now, there, calm yourself. You're not going anywhere. And I'm not much in the habit of doing the General's dirty work, even if it might be doing you a favor.

“Looks like you've got yourself lost, dear. And lucky for you, this is where all the lost things come. To me.”

It didn't acknowledge her. Simply kept its head trained toward the forest and the Cliff beyond. It was shaped like Sister Blackbottom: two arms, two legs, a neck and face. More slender than her fleshy form, and taller. Hues of pink and scarlet framed its eyes and mouth, and its hair shot pearly white from its scalp. For mortal enemies, the fae and the caimthu looked more alike than they cared to see.

This one's flesh was dulled with grime. Gaps of bare skin shone wet where milky diamond scales had been. To one side of the caimthu's belly, a grievous slash still bubbled blood. It wasn't long for the world.

Without further ado, Sister Blackbottom stooped down over the caimthu. It didn't stir as she lifted it against her chest, nothing more than a few scales bristled to jab pitifully into her coatsleeves. It was certainly dying, to let itself be handled like a large kitten. Caimthu were notoriously quick and deadly, weapons or no.

This one was silent, still, but somehow not submissive, as though indignation radiated from its scales. It kept its eyes wide and alert, staring silent daggers at the Sister. Caimthu were also notoriously proud.

"That's a good little warrior," Sister Blackbottom spoke into the night. "Let's go visit the witches."

Gell noticed three things in rapid succession. The first was this: about a quarter of her scales was missing, replaced by bloodied black flesh and a feeling of despair. Gell lightly tested one of the gaps with her forefinger, pressing gently and then harder into her own skin, a stranger to her fingers. The sting of it surprised her. Without her scales, she felt too soft. Exposed. She moved to test another one when she noticed the second thing:

She could move. The fact that she hadn't noticed immediately only testified to her horror at the missing scales. Now she waved her hands to test them. Wiggled her toes. Tried retracting and releasing her claws. Her movements were hesitant but graceful, back in her control. It was like being free after endless hours in a cramped cage.

She made to stand, and noticed the third thing.

The roomful of witches. She could tell by the smell. All witches smelled sweet, like fruit, and earthy. She'd only ever met one before, but she'd always remembered the scent.

On instinct she unsheathed her claws. She panned the room, counting. There were only three, all staring at her without a hint of surprise or distress in their faces, but the fat one had a look on her face that Gell couldn't interpret. She was unfamiliar with the greater gambit of facial expressions that were not *caimthu*. She knew fear, anger, hatred. None of those were on the witch's faces now, and that was unexpected.

One of them had a nest of thorns growing from her scalp. They twisted in intricate locks at least a hand's breath into the air, and delicate, pink blooms sprouted occasionally to decorate the black nettles. Her eyes were kind, thought Gell. The witch turned back to the stove, where a pot was boiling.

The fat witch who had carried Gell here plunked herself down at the kitchen table to lift a mug to her lips. Only the third witch, with the eyes of flickering orange flame, kept her eyes on Gell for a moment longer before moving them back to her lap, where she was packing jars of greenery into a satchel.

They were not afraid of her. Disconcerted, she sat back down on the cot in the corner of the kitchen. It was stained with her blood, a poisonous-looking green. She remembered the fat witch carrying her through the front door and spilling her onto the cot, but nothing after that. She could only speculate that the other witches had healed her while she'd slept. The sword wound was only a stiff feeling in her side. Her scales, what remained of them, were glistening white again. She felt the smoothness of her head, lifted her spinal spikes. One of them had been broken in the battle by a *dregmar* with a swinging mace. Now it lifted without a twinge.

Why? Why not let her die? Everyone knew the witches sided with the *dregmar* in the war, though they were officially neutral. It had been the witches who created the split in the worlds, so that the two races could keep to their own identical realms. They blamed the *caimthu* for continuing the slaughter even after the division. But it was not the *caimthu*, Gell knew, who had abducted the children of the opposing army and left them on the river bank, scattered in pieces for their mothers to find.

*Arognathalu, what do I do, now?*

*Arognathalu thinks I am dead.*

The thought sent her to her feet again. She was not afraid of three bumbling women. She walked straight to the front door, turned the handle, and was outside without so much as a glance from the witches.

The home was gone the moment she closed the door. Not even an outline of the doorframe shone amongst the dense trees. It was impossible that a house had even been there, in fact, with all of the pines pressing together uninterrupted where the house had been. Gell turned toward the valley under the Greatest Cliff, from whence the witch had carried her.

She covered three miles. It was a dark green afternoon under the thick trees, with no breeze to stir the leaves or wildlife to rustle the bushes. Everything was perfectly still except for her feet pushing through the forest, which sounded like giants' in the stillness.

Through the valley, more forest, and out the other side where she could see the Golden River, which glistened pale and clear through to the sandy bottom, where pink and yellow fishes flicked their way between the blue teeth that jutted from the riverbed. The caimthu lived just beyond. She navigated upstream, looking for a place to cross, but it was too wide to swim and too close to the Sea of Gold to try. She would be sucked down the current and spit out into the sea, where she would have to navigate miles and miles around the edge of the land until she arrived at the northernmost point, where the caimthu caves met the water. She could uncover her gills and swim, but she was much closer by foot.

She rounded a bend where the dry sand stretched farther out into the river. It was shallower, and the water was still enough that she thought she would try to wade across. When she came around the corner, though, something caught her eye. Something wrong, in the sky.

Above the trees, a dark needle thrust itself into the blue. Lower, two straight lines of stone barely peeked out from behind the forest.

She crossed the river and followed it uphill and around more bends, scratching periodically at her itching scales. More of them were starting to peel back around the edges. She smoothed them down over her skin and tried not to think about them. She focused on the sky.

The thing was getting closer and starting to clear up. What she could see of the structure began at a dark, flat stone base and tapered off the higher it went. The uppermost parts looked like metal, some kind of iron. A limited resource, though, best used for weaponry and wheel spokes. Small creations, nothing like this looming point threatening the clouds. Gell's mind went immediately to the dregmar; maybe they'd mined enough to create some kind of weapon, or a siege wall? But dregmar weren't miners or blacksmiths by reputation. This could be the work of the dwarves, but why would they build a fortress on the river, above ground?

When Gell was adjacent to the structure she cut straight through the trees and pushed through another hour of brambles and vines. By the time she emerged from the tree line, her side was echoing the pain of the stab wound. One of her scales had fallen off when she had snagged it on



a sapling branch. She'd cradled it in her hands for the whole walk. It fit perfectly in her palm, and she was loath to leave it behind where the enemy could pick it up.

Now, she clung to the scale and gazed over the vastness of a city silent as the dead.

She had no name for the contraptions that appeared as she edged out from the shadows, not for the great cathedral and not for the stone road that stretched beyond it. She had never seen gravestones grow from the earth like so many reaching fingers. To Gell, the city was a forest of bricks and pointing things.

She stepped carefully from the grass of a front lawn and onto the paved road. She was noting the unlikely smoothness of the stone, preparing a description for her official report, when she saw the creature.

Gell went still. It was motionless, and she could discern no face, only tufts of black hair surrounding a bald, pinkish skull. Judging by the feet, it was facing away and hadn't noticed her. It was built like the caimthu and the dregmar, two feet and arms, with a torso and head on top. But its skin was closer to the dregmar, who had no scales but soft skin, for the most part, and hair on their heads. She studied the beast's hands: no claws, more hair, more pink skin. No scales, no armor, not carrying any discernible weaponry. Maybe it had retractable claws like the caimthu, but Gell doubted it. It wasn't much of a warrior, judging by its clothing and relaxed, seemingly oblivious pose. Unless it was some kind of lure, meant to take her off guard.

Gell decided to be cautious. She sidestepped the thing without a sound, ducking behind another brick construction and into a gravelly gap between two buildings. And saw another one.

It had more hair than the other and less fatty covering. Its skin was deep brown, the color of the caimthu caves in the sunlight. But most importantly, this one was staring right at her.

Gell held her ground, didn't flinch, but swooped at once into a defensive stance. Her remaining scales bristled. It held its position with one arm by its side, the other uplifted, holding something to its face. It didn't move.

She tested the air. Her sense of smell was keen, but not what it had been. This thing smelled like any other animal: warm blood and sweat, but also, improbably, of flowers. And—

*And fire.*

A warrior? Gell eased to the left, testing. Its eyes did not even follow her. She nudged incrementally toward it, fully expecting the beast to spring from its standstill and unsheathe massive claws of its own. But it didn't. Not even when Gell reached out to feel the skin of its arm with the pad of her finger, trailing all the way to the end of its rounded dull fingertips, where it clutched a soft-looking tube of some kind.

The stick was white, and perfectly still, but what made Gell gallop back two steps and flatten her back to the bricks was the smoke curling out of one end, captured in a small, perfectly still plume before the creature's face. Like it had suddenly decided not to be smoke, but solid.

Gell reached out, delicately, like she was petting a bear's nose. She wiggled her fingers in front of its eyes. It didn't bite them. Didn't even blink. But the smoke twirled around her fingers like a burning glove, following her hands, but never evanescing into the atmosphere like obedient smoke should.

She turned to poke her finger into the beast's cheek. It was warm and gave easily under Gell's touch, even softer than the skin under her scales. This was no warrior race. They were mushy, like wet sand, with full pink lips and uncallused pink hands. It didn't react to her touch.

She stepped back and looked up. Across the alley hung a sturdy rope, and atop it was a tiny bird like she had seen every day in Caimthu, on the branches surrounding her thicket. It stared back at Gell, never twitching or cooing. Forever tied to the earth, instead of in the sky.

These creatures weren't slow or scared. The entire city was stuck. Even the birds. Even the smoke.

"Well," said Gell to the bird, "I don't suppose there's anything to fear from a city of statues." She jogged out of the alley and toward the sky needle.

The city had not been here even yesterday, to Gell's knowledge. Surely she would have heard something about a colossal fortress springing from the earth, from one of the Dominion who commanded her battalion, if no one else.

And it was colossal, that was certain. Gell strained her eyes to see down the road. It seemed to stretch on for eternity. The cathedral was behind her, and in front of her buildings stretched out beyond the...*well, whatever they were*, that lined the street. She puzzled for a moment over their glass fronts and the delicate lettering over the doorways. She could not read the names. She had never seen the like, all swirls and curves and floating dots.

On all sides she was surrounded by pale stone facades that loomed over her, and hundreds of the pink softies posed in half-sentences and midstep. She turned to glare up at the spire that had lured her to this place. It rose in pieces from the ground like a mountain, jagged and layered. Most of the fortress was a bland gray, but the right side, where the needle began, was blackened with dirty smears. Maybe the spire had appeared in the last day, but it was old.

She approached the door, which was ensconced in a row of pillars that made it hard to perceive at first. Even the top of the door stood several feet higher than Gell, who was taller than the softies. Was this a country of giants? she wondered.

As she reached for the handle, the wind carried a whisper of a sound to her ear, the first sound she had heard in this dead place. She turned her head sharply so that the fins around her neck would catch the sound. It was coming from her right, down the path from the great needle, but she could only see the alien creatures, all stock still.

She stepped out from between the pillars and followed the sound. It was a voice, but faint, and unfamiliar. It could even be the enemy, luring her out of the shadows.

But it was speaking Caimthu.

It got louder as she turned off of the biggest path and entered a hollow place between two of the structures' walls. It was closed off on the other side by another wall. Only one little beast stood against the wall, with a head of short black hair, carrying a bulging sack. She ignored it, and as she approached the back wall, the voices became loud enough to understand.

They were whispering.

It was impossible. But she pressed her nose to the bricks, heard the whispers of a hundred caimthu, and hoped.

*Hear me. Brothers--Thal--I'm here.* It was closer to thought than speech.

“Can you hear me?” she spoke into the coldness of the third wall. And even though she knew nothing would happen, she turned and clenched her fists, thought about throwing a punch into the soft little creature's gut.

“I'm lost.” She said louder. Silence.

She whipped around, pushed the watching creature into the dust, cracked her knuckles on the bricks. “Hello?” she called again. On an impulse, she scooped a rock from the ground and hurled it over the wall, where it landed with a snap of stone on stone. *Where were they?*

She put her face to the wall again, trying to tilt her head and find the best angle for making out the voices. It was still just a comforting hum. She tried singling out one voice.

*Like a sleeping giant—*

It was caught up with the rest to become noise again. She chose another, tried picking out words she could understand.

*Bamboo—grew in the night.*

She closed her eyes.

*City—*

*Dregmar—*

*Dead—*

*Arigell.*

Her eyes burst wide and she sucked in a breath at the sound of her own name. “Yes! Yes, it's me! Can you hear me?” she shouted, both hands pressed against the wall, grasping like she might pull it down stone by stone. To be so close, to want something so much and be powerless, it was infuriating.

“It's Arigell!” she tried again.

For a moment, nothing. Not even a breath of wind. And when she heard a response at last, her scales bristled. For it was not the soft whisper of a friend, not Arognathalu's disembodied voice from afar, or the familiar comfort of her battalion.

It was the beating of wings, a shape darkening the sky.

Gell turned to back against the wall, unleashing her claws. It took several tries, and they responded listlessly, like a kitten's.

"Gell?" she heard Arognathalu's faint whisper of a reply behind her, right as a lone, blackwinged fae placed its booted feet to the ground before her. *Idiot*. Now she was blocked in because she'd gotten distracted by the torturous hope.

"Gell?" Thal said again, so gently. It made her heart hurt, because she couldn't stay. The degmar was watching, but not moving. Its eyes flicked to the creature beside her, then to the wall behind her, where she heard two more pairs of boots scud to a landing.

The one in front of her was female, probably. Three beetle-black eyes trimmed her forehead. Across the leather-clad chest she had a vicious-looking bow with jagged stakes at either end. Long, magenta hair trickled about her on the breeze.

*Vain little show-off.* thought Gell. *letting her hair blow about like that during a battle.*<sup>2</sup>

Gell waited for her to make the first move. She wasn't sure what it was after. Maybe the kill, maybe information. She allowed two of the degmar behind her to jump down from the wall and take hold of her arms on either side, still waiting to see if the one in command would say something, give something away.

"Fly," was all she said, and Gell sighed a little.

*Wait*, she thought, pointedly, at the two on her sides. The commander kicked off from the ground a few feet, but she stopped when she realized her two assistants were still bolted to the ground.

They all hesitated for just enough time. Gell windmilled both of her arms and brought them back into the degmars' throats, breaking their hold and sending their heads back into the wall with twin cracks.

Before the woman could plant her feet again, Gell sprinted for the alley opening, ducking under her floating feet.

The female recovered just in time to turn and catch the collar fin around her neck, which tore within excruciating tug, but didn't come completely off. The thing was startled just enough to let Gell lose, but gave chase, she with a serious advantage on wings.

Gell needed to find somewhere that would give her the edge over the winged Fae. She looked left out of the alley and threw open the first or she came to, one covered in colorful squares of more mysterious scrawls. It took the degmar a crucial moment to duck down to the door level and into the room on foot. By that time, Gell had sprinted past rows of unidentifiable wares and pried open the back door. She launched herself into another alley, and was flinging open another door when the fae's head thrust out into the alley, a few feet behind.

Gell grunted, frustrated. She had hoped to make it inside before the degmar had seen where she'd gone.

*Damn, damn, damn, damn!*

Still, it was safer inside. Gell was lightning fast and the fae was best on wings.

It was quiet in this room, and dim. Nothing moved or made a noise—she took just one valuable second to survey for weapons.

The female followed her into the room a few paces behind, crashing into the silence. She gave an animal growl and hissed a warning: “Give up the chase, youngling. You’re outnumbered.”

Gell chose another door on a split second whim, too quick for the fae to slow her pace. Gell slipped out of the hall and into a pitchdark room filled with more foreign furniture. Her eyes were equipped for this level of darkness; she only hoped the dregmar would stumble and give Gell a chance to overpower her. She climbed up onto a metal partition that divided the room into smaller pieces.

The Fae burst in, and Gell leapt from the partition to land on her back, taking them both to the ground. The creature’s black feathers filled Gell’s mouth and nose, obscuring her vision for precious seconds while she grappled for a grip on its wings.

The cursed thing was shuddering and flapping her wings, trying to throw her off. Gell wrapped her arms around the bases, squeezing them into submission and taking four concussive kicks to the neck, chest, and nose.

“Filthy creature,” she spat.

“Save your heathen breath, monster,” the Fae said, in strained Dregmar, “I don’t speak your – err—” Gell dug her knee into the fae’s back and pulled its wings toward her, making it squawk.

Unfortunately, its legs were still free. A black boot swung up behind Gell and stars exploded behind her eyes. It swung again to smash into her skull. When she was rocked forward by the force even just a little, the dregmar seized the opportunity and buckled forward too, so that Gell’s body slid forward and she had to let go, so her arms could stop her face from smearing across the floor.

The dark fae flipped Gell onto her back and jumped after her, trying to pin her. Gell rolled just enough that she only captured the left half of her body. That was all the fae needed, though. Gell had seen this type in gruesome action on a score of scarlet battlegrounds.

The degmar peeled back its lips, uncovering the four glittering fangs that lined its upper jaw in a murderous smile.

Gell released the claws on her right hand with a swish, relieved. She sliced them across the beast’s cheek, so soft like the pink creatures’ outside. It split open with a spray of cold blood.

On the back swing, the fae caught her hand and pinned it to the ground. Gell’s arms and legs were open wide and smashed under the fae’s weight.

“You know,” grunted Gell, “for a creature of the air, you don’t exactly float on your feet. Your wings must get tired from swinging your bulk around all the –”

It had a solid grip on her, and it snapped its mouth to the vulnerable skin at the base of her neck, where scale had been, once. Gell’s face was full of the noxious purple hair.

When its teeth flashed in front of her face, going for the kill, Gell thought, desperately, *stop*. It was powerful in her panic, a commandment aimed squarely into the mind of the dark fae above her.

The dregmar stopped, it’s teeth just grazing her skin. Gell suppressed a shiver of revulsion. Her heart was hammering.

Then, the fae lifted her face to Gell’s.

And smiled.

“Pathetic little beast,” she said, and struck.

## Chapter 4

Atop the highest building in the city, perched in full view of the chaos of invasion, three witches stood, discussing pie.

Sister Blackthorn, especially, was really getting into the spirit of the debate. “I’m telling you, plum and oat is standard for rejuvenation. That’s novice-level baking, *Sister Know-it-all*.” It was she who made the pies, after all.

“Oh, anticipating a bit of action, are we, *Sister Soldier*?” Sister Blackbottom retorted, waving a hand to deflect a rogue arrow from the swirling mass below. A thousand green, red, horned, winged, or otherwise uniquely armed bodies painted the calm streets a violent palette.

“Not for me. You know that. For *her*.”

“Oh, that’s all nonsense.” Sister Blackbottom said, entirely too flippant for her sister’s liking.

“Nonsense! *Pie*? Why, you take that back, you--you--” Blackthorn was going purple. “Squinty barbarian! I can’t think of anything more magically potent than *pie*.”

Sister Blackmaw nodded, gravely.

“How about using your eyes and focusing on the catastrophe at hand?” Retorted Sister Blackbottom, nodding to the city streets under them. “The city’s already chockablock full of Fae, thanks to me. If I hadn’t gone back for that ingrate...”

“Maybe we would’ve had a head start. A few hours, maybe,” said her sister. “But this,” she gestured to the army of hissing, crawling, and howling below, “would have been the same result. In the other world, the caimthu are surely doing the same.”

“Maybe you’re right,” conceded Sister Blackbottom, “but a few more hours and we might’ve sealed the leak. This city didn’t just grow out of the ground.”

Sister Blackmaw looked pointedly at them both, gesturing to the city around them with an open palm.

“You must be right, I’m afraid. This whole city oozed out of the wound we made into the worlds. And now...”

*It’s too late*, Sister’s Blackmaw’s eyes seemed to say.

“Well, we’ve got to do *something*. Get all of these creatures out and seal the leak.”

“And how do you propose to do that, ask them politely to leave now, please?” Sister Blackthorn replied.

Sister Blackbottom smacked a flat palm against the top of the roof railing. “It’s my fault. I had to stop for that wounded degmar. If I’d just kept going --”

“We would never have found the most powerful weapon in either of the Torn Realms. You know who she is as well as I do.”

“Fat lot of good she’s done us so far, going off on her own to single-handedly fight the war.”

Sister Blackthorn sighed, and the petals from one of her blossoms trickled away on the breeze. “She doesn’t even know who she is.”

*What,* Sister Blackmaw’s lifted eyebrow corrected, *she is.*

Gell stumbled out into the gray alley. *It bit me,* she kept thinking. She maneuvered the thought around, probed it like a new wound. She walked. Came to an opening, turned, walked farther. She trotted as quickly as she could, but couldn’t risk an all-out run. They would hear her, and come. She ducked around a spotted carthorse and crossed the road.

*It bit me.* One of the brick walls was lined with metal piping that ascended in easily gripped protrusions to the roof. She hoisted herself over the edge of the roof and crouched, popping her eyes just above the ledge to survey as far as she could into the city. It was all brownish stone and strung ropes, towers rising and falling in bumps on the earth. She could see colorful little creatures spotting the streets in between the stone facades. Nothing moved, not even a breeze to sway the leaves on the single, malnourished tree on the gray street below.

She prodded at the wound from the fae’s teeth. It was barely a notch in her soft skin. It should’ve been a gaping, weeping gash. She should still be lying on the cold floor in the dark of that room. *Why didn’t I die?*

A buzzing lined insides of her ears and she shook her head to clear the fuzzy sound away, but it persisted. Not a minute later, a darkened speck of the sky grew rounder and rounder, floating toward her on the breeze, lifting and falling with the unmistakable thump of wings beating the air.

It wasn’t the worst news. She knew she was only three leaps from the alley where she’d heard Thal’s whispered reply, it was just a matter of remaining unseen long enough to get another response. With any luck, she’d escape unscathed and hike her way back to Caimthu. But there was the problem of the fae thrashing their way through the city, and the hulking mystery of the city itself, that kept her from making a break for the woods. Her best bet was to call in recon, report what she knew, and wait for them to back up an assault and gathering.

When the flying creature was close enough to make out details on its whipping cloak and sharply-filed tusks, she balled up against the roof ledge, ducking out of sight until it was overhead, retreating with its back to Gell. She whipped around and flung a leg over the side of the building to climb back down when it wasn’t looking. She just needed to make a dash for the alley, get it done and skulk quietly back into the woods to wait.

But when she swung her other leg over the top and looked at the ground, she felt the crush of certainty that she would be stuck on the roof for a long, long time.

Any army of demons clotted both ends of the street, rushing forward in a relentless swell that sent her swinging back over the ledge and shrinking back into the shadows. She curled her legs tightly to her chest amongst the leaves and the pooled rainwater, trying to be small. She’d never



been good at it. Gell pressed her forehead to her knees, snaked all ten fingers through her cloudy white hair, and planned.

## Chapter 5

There was a forest in Caimthu where Gell's people walked on the air. Any strange passerby would look up at an unexpected noise and be mystified by a hundred painted bodies, floating between the branches of the ancient blossoming trees. It was a veritable castle, made of glass, stretching for miles of forest, sweeping up and down in the branches in layers upon layers of crystal suites that were home to the caimthu. Walkways stretched between trees and rooms were snuggled between branches, where perennial blossoms provided some privacy, as long as the children didn't pluck them for a laugh.

Gell's home had been a small nook nestled in a thicket of spiky green pods and red bristles, only a step up from her mother and father, where they had a bigger box with a sapling branch growing up through the floor, a pet that they called Iri and kept trimmed in miniature.

The glass path out of their room could take her anywhere, but it usually took her to Neth's, who lived with her parents in the next block of rooms. Every day, with no prompting, they would meet an hour after sunrise and go galloping through the castle to the hatch, where they would slip down the tube and into the woods. Everyone ate together outside in a clearing about twenty steps from the hatch, a space big enough to fit the thousands of caimthu who lived in the glass castle. All of them wandered up and down the stalls of brewing teas and smoking meats throughout the day. Neth and Gell always went straight for a bread cart nestled at the edge of the great wisteria tree that stood court at the center of the clearing. Its purple gauze draped a perfect background to Henna's bliss-scented stall.

Every day, she turned to her oven for the mountainous rolls, glazed them with coconut oil and sugar, and wrapped them in linen for Neth and Gell to relish while they lay under the darkened magenta dome of the wisteria, between a pallet of woven rugs and a flautist's stand of hanging flutes that clanked together in time with his playing. They lay with their backs against one of the tree's trunks, licking the syrup from their palms and laughing together when the flautist missed a note, cursing and muttering to himself. The breeze barely tickled the curtain of sweeping branches, a rustling music that was almost as soothing as silence.

They were there every day. It was the unspoken bliss of a friendship rooted in routine, as sweet a memory to Gell as the memory of her parents' faces. Those days were the encapsulation of everything she loved, and missed.

Strange, how the mind had singled out those memories when there were a thousand she could have conjured to call home. Maybe to beat back the insanity that seeped around the edges of her mind when she thought about what she'd done. Who she'd become now.

The bubbling heat of the street washed over Gell in frothing waves of whistles and screams, growls and glottal shrieks unlike any battlefield racket she'd overheard in the heat of war. She was fluent in Dregmar, unlike most caimthu warriors, but what she heard was more baffling than the battle cries she had expected.

One of the fae, a feathered blue beast with two legs and four arms, sawed suddenly left, breaking her stride. She stood smack in the middle of the street, fists clenched and feet shuffling ever-so-

slightly toward the other side of the road, though she tried desperately to look like she was just following the tide of feet.

*Invisible*, she thought. *Nothing here. Look forward.* The feathered fae veered back out of her way.

It was almost impossible to maneuver with the thousand screeching bodies pressed in like branches on a pine. Everywhere Gell looked, trying to find fresh air or the next step, she was met with another menacing row of teeth, each unlike the last. One behind her had flashed a pair of fangs as big as her fingers. Their skin flashed a rainbow of colors, like the caimthu, but furred, feathered, smooth, and scaled. Their wings, iridescent, fluffy, or scaly, almost beat her to a pulp every time they moved.

She was steaming, and ready to be free of this insane march. Gell pushed slightly to her right and slipped behind a midnight blue wing, under a reaching gold claw, and between a pair of hissing green fae. She ducked under another pair of black, fluffy wings attached to a blue-skinned dark fae, and was sneaking out of the crowd and into a dark alley when she felt a concussive blow to her skull, the beat of a wing, and knew, even as she went sprawling into the rocky dust, that she was finished. Her face and all of her hopes smashed into the dirt. She tasted ashes.

Two heartbeats. One. Two.

And then a foot, heavy atop her head.

And then silence.

“Let’s just do it, Neth! Just jump!”

“Are you *crazy*? You’re crazy.”

They were on the shore of the river, notched between two ruby teeth that spiked out of the sand in gleaming bunches. The Teeth sprouted up and down the Golden River, gemstones in every color of the caimthu’s scales, filed to points on the shores but rounded, innocuous molars on the river floor. They caught the light just right, shining a wavy red patch on Neth’s bottle blue face.

“What, can’t swim? Don’t be stupid! People do it all the time.”

“You’re stupid!” she said, but she was smiling, and gave Gell a nudge that knocked her into the ruby tooth. “Those are full-grown adult caimthu, practiced in the art of--well, whatever it is they’re practicing down there. They have the strength to swim all the way to Iscule. And we, well, *don’t*.”

“A smaller problem than it seems.” Gell stepped into the river, wiggled her webbed toes in the sand. “It has to be around shore somewhere. Probably north of the mouth. It’s close to the caves, and the water is deeper.” She pulled her hair back into a knot and shoved a stick through it. “And if we don’t find it, no harm done. Just a lovely day of swimming with your best friend!”

Neth rolled her eyes, but stepped into the river, tying her hair back as well. “You don’t actually think there’s a city somewhere down there, do you?”

Gell grinned. “You don’t believe in Iscule?”

“Not since I was six.”

“We were born with gills for a reason, Neth. There has to be something down there,” she said.

“And if there’s not?”

“Well,” Gell said, and shrugged. “We might never find it. Doesn’t mean it’s not there.”

Two heavily armored dark fae kicked the feet from under her, sinking Gell to her knees in the open square of the cathedral courtyard, before the commanding general, a snakish purple female with slits for eyes. She honed the full force of her narrowed gaze on Gell. “How is this possible?”

“Well, it wouldn’t have been, if one of your oafish peons hadn’t accidentally clubbed me with those sausages you folk call wings.”

The general’s mouth twitched up in a red, razor-sharp smirk. “Not you, smart little soldier.” She looked up at the guards standing on either side of Gell.

“Well,” the one with glowing green irises hissed. He rubbed a hand against his bald scalp. “That’s not an inaccurate summary of events.”

“He means,” piped up the other, shorter one, with lavender skin and hair black as ink. “We found her in the midst of the march. Disguising herself with magic.” His voice was clenched tight, deep and smooth, pouring out between his teeth, and the *ck* at the end of *magic* popped loud in the airy stone room, like a cork out of a bottle. Probably because she’d worked her arm free and sliced through his leather pants with her left hand. He was good, though. She gave him that. He didn’t flinch more than a little, just brought his injured leg around and clocked her in the back of the head with his boot, then gripped her arm again while she flailed to catch herself.

“With magic? You’re certain?” the snake lady said. She smiled wider, genuine, and greedy. Gell wondered what unspeakable horror she was plotting behind those black slits. Public execution? Torture by Ilubach?

“What is your name?” she demanded, looking back down at Gell, who was caked in dirt and bleeding from a shallow wound in the chest. It pained her to know what a pitiful sight she presented for these inept enemies.

“Chida.”

“You’re right. It does not matter.” She looked to the servants. Nodded.

“Ilubach will be hungry.”

They soared easily above the coral shelf, blinking away the tiniest of the purple *ecrunál*, the slim flickering fish that kept crowding around their faces, giving them soft kisses. The water was clear for what looked like miles, tinged with an azure glow, and only growing foggy in the far reaches of their vision, or when one of their feet kicked up a spray of algae. The luminescent coral under their bellies lit their skin with a light like sunset, especially on Gell's white scales. She looked like a flickering fire, inexplicably caught in a wave and rolled out to sea.

There were a thousand fishes, urchins, snails, and waving greenery. They had seen a water dragon, a flock of alven, almost invisible clawed creatures that travelled in bubbles of air, and a shadow that Gell swore was a selkie, though it slipped too quickly under the rocks to be sure. They still had yet to see signs of Iscule. No spires of an enchanted castle rose from the depths, no signs of cavernous homes, or caimthu who lived in them.

Neth wanted to find Iscule so badly it felt like the wish might escape from her throat, a bubble pouring from her chest and into the ocean that contained an entire city, one that might grow if she planted it in the sand. She wanted it for Gell, to see the hope and joy blossom in her face when she was proven right. She wanted it for herself, to know that not every hope was a fallacy. That magic sometimes happened, if you wished for it with all your heart. She was happy, yes, very happy in the glass castle with her family. But she also felt the weight of age creeping in, the weight of being firmly grounded in reality, without hope for more. She saw her parents, filled with love for their home and their children, the way they sparkled with laughter when she asked about the *Elibough*, the daughter birds. *You're a child*, they seemed to say, *it's alright to believe, for now*. They never lay under the weeping tendrils of the wisteria, wondering if they might climb the ropes to a city in the sky, where everyone ate from the soft clouds and danced all night. She had sworn to always believe, to keep listening for the call of the daughter birds. She wanted to be different.

But she also felt the way she'd started thinking about her parents' tapestry cart in the market, the chip in their living room ceiling, the chores that needed doing before dinner, whenever she and Gell were exploring the woods. The magical haze of childhood was sloughing off like an old skin, and the new skin was growing back with all the steely awareness of adulthood.

But if she could find Iscule...

"*There!*" said Gell, pointing ahead to an abrupt halt in the reef, where the water grew deeper, a sapphire glaze dropping off into sudden night. Neth's heart gave a precarious thud.

They swam to the edge of the reef and peered over. They could see the rocky wall, adorned with wriggling plants and blue and yellow barnacles, stretching downward for a while, and then nothing.

"Well," Neth said, "I guess we go down."

They were at the edge of town. The two peons had her by the elbows, and had covered their hands in thick hide gloves to keep her scales from piercing their skin. She hadn't tried anything yet. She was waiting for her best chance. A quick attack and a quicker disappearance. In the

middle of the city, she would be hunted down by an entire army, but maybe once they were far enough away from the crowd, she stood a chance of outrunning her two captors.

They dragged her off the street and into a wide field, where yellow grasses grew up to her elbows. Their wide steps trampled the plants, but Gell struggled to keep up with her gait. The weeds tangled in her legs. She was becoming winded. It had to be now. And she had to get it just right.

Gell let her mind drift subtly toward her targets. She folded up a thought, a tiny one, and sent it out on the breeze.

She saw the moment it worked. Both of the fae stiffened, the one on her left twitching just enough to be apparent. They kept walking, neither noticing the other's reaction, but with a telltale limp, a stiffness that meant both of them were having the exact same, unignorable urge to scratch an itch in a rather embarrassing, unreachable place. Gell was careful not to smile. She focused on her steps, reaching each foot out to stomp down a clump of ticklish grass.

One of the goons tried to be subtle, pretending to adjust his quiver of arrows and reaching down, giving a scratch that was designed to look like he was pulling his pants into place. It wouldn't be enough. Gell sent out another inkling: not much, just enough to suggest that maybe, probably, there were minute insects living in these tall grasses. And maybe, probably, they were the biting sort. And maybe, probably, they were making their way up the legs of two particular dregmar soldiers right now...

"Gah! Damned bugs!" one of the guards spat. He jiggled his right pant leg with the arm that wasn't attached to Gell. The other tried to keep his composure, but she could see beads of sweat forming around his faintly twitching nose. He scratched at his thigh.

They stopped walking. "Ah, my legs!" shouted Gell. "Please, let me scratch them! Ah, they're biting me!" She gave some jerking movements to demonstrate her point. "Ow!"

The guards were busy scratching at their legs, pulling up their clothes to look at the flesh there. Searching for bugs, or bites, still holding tightly to Gell's arms. They were distracted, though, and didn't seem to suspect anything.

The guard on her right, the one with the purple skin, leaned down to look at his legs. Gell struck, swinging her right leg over his arm and down with a crack onto his wrist, breaking the bone with the butt of her heel. The jerk pulled her off balance for a moment, but he let go as he fell. He wouldn't be down long.

She caught her balance just in time to strike out with her left leg, catching the guard on her left in the knee. He bent, but didn't buckle, and didn't let go of her arm. He swung his left fist around toward her face.

Gell ducked his punch and went in for two jabs at his exposed kidney with the full force of her fist. It was enough to break his hold on her arm. She ran.

Gell, being tall, was at no advantage in this grass, though she tried to duck down to present a smaller target for their arrows. She ran back toward the road. Although it wasn't ideal, she figured she would rather face patrolling soldiers on the street than Ilubach in the other direction.

She tried not to think about it. About the creature sliding its oily black trail through the foxgloves. About the sharp shadows of its talons, sliding their way up her skin. It was lurking, somewhere in the field, and could most definitely smell the fear wafting in a cloud behind her sprinting figure.

They must have marched farther than she'd thought. Every time a flash of blue gleamed in the distance, she felt her heart leap with relief. But it seemed between her and every hope there was an endless run through these brambles that never ended, and she would be running here, chasing the sky, until her feet were sucked into the earth, down to the roots, and she grew out of the ground, a patch of broomsedge forever knitted to the field. She ran for a lifetime.

The weeds were starting to thin out. She wasn't sure at first, but now she was able to take wider leaps, focus less on pushing the nodding heads of the grasses away from her face, and more on sheer speed. When she saw the final wall of vegetation before her, and the clearness beyond, she jugged immediately to the right, hoping that her pursuers would assume she'd already burst forth from the jungle of weeds and down the street again. They would give chase, and she'd lurk behind, waiting for them to become specks on the horizon that she could blink away.

She remained perfectly still for a minute, then two.

*Did they even bother to chase after me? Where are they?*

She should've fought back sooner. Should've escaped before they had gotten her this far. She eased a foot out of the weeds, into the soothing sunshine beyond.

*Leaving already?* a silky whisper, deep and blood-dark, leaked past her ears and steeped into Gell's mind, down her neck, soaking her spine. *Why don't you stay for awhile?* It wasn't audible, it was tangible, like a flute player twinkling his fingers across her mind and pulling the strings there, beating them with tiny mallets to make a sound that wasn't sound but hot panic. She shook her head, blinked, surged forward into the street.

*Arigell. Stay.*

She ran, scrambling against her own weight like when she ran from monsters in her dreams, when no matter how hard she pushed, she never quite got moving.

*Bliss, power, the depths of eternity. I can show you such lovely things, Arigell.*

Up ahead, the two guards blasted from the grass field. She had to make a choice. She turned right, into the woods across the road from the field. Ilubach could find her there, but she would buy a few seconds to think about her next move.

*Passion, strength, the joy of the kill.*

It was darker under the black pines, but the sun still angled in from the west.

*Karineth, the daughter birds, magic.*

A shadow cut across the needled floor. She broke a branch from a limb.

*Your own soul.*

The ground wept wells of ink that coagulated together, seeping upward in a slow ooze of night that swirled like smoke around a finger, rounding at the top and flowing down again, squirming until a fae took shape before her. Gell kept her front facing the thing, but retreated as quickly as she dared, toward the road again. *Why, why had she come into the forest, into the dark?*

When his face hardened into flesh, it wasn't the blood-smeared monster of the caimthu soldiers' campfire stories.

His eyes were so dark she felt like they were drinking her from the soul out. But the rest of him, well, was no more remarkable than the pink softies in the city streets. A straight ledge of a nose, much more pronounced than any caimthu. Skin the color of gritty sand.

"I don't want to hurt you," the creature said. He smiled. It looked fierce, Gell thought, like a soldier's smile when she found herself hand-to-hand with another warrior. But Gell wouldn't know any other kind, would she?

"You'll understand if I don't take your word for it," she said.

This smile was wider, Gell thought, and maybe more terrifying. "No. I suppose you wouldn't."

She took a step back. He slid in a pitch cloud toward her.

"Then what do you want?" she asked. He was wearing a string around his neck. Something was knotted in the black cord.

"I told you, Arigell. I want to show you who you are." It was metal, perfectly round. It jumped out from the rest of his clothes.

She had to think of a way out of this. He stopped a few feet away, but she felt the pressure of his presence like a buildup of smoke in a small room. She had always heard he could murder with a thought.

"You'll need me, Arigell, in the coming weeks. And I'm sorry for that."

There was the rustling of feet in the woods behind her. She took two more steps. She couldn't gage anything from Ilubach's eyes or face, but he hadn't killed her yet. She turned away, sprinted the rest of the way out of the trees, and he let her.



---

Part II

Bekah

---

Bekah was a good third of the way through a manuscript and doing an impressive job of disregarding anything and everything that fit into the category of “real life,” when the Sikh pounded a heavy fist into the desk, loud enough to be heard three rooms away. He wanted coffee, and when he wanted something, Bekah got it.

It was an unwritten rule. In spite of the presence of three other apprentices--and all of them well below her both in skills and experience--the Sikh was unrelenting in his belief that no one, anywhere, ever, was as capable as Bekah was of taking change to the corner and handing it to Bells for a drink.

So she stepped into the study and slipped the coin from his desk into a pocket without a word, or even a glance on his part.

He was always like that, the Sikh. It was a routine he and Bekah performed a few times a day. She always hated returning the coffee the most, when he insisted on taking an immediate and lasting gulp from the mug in her presence, and if he refused looking at her before, now he kept his gleaming blue eyes fixed on Bekah's for the few soul-searing seconds it took him to gulp, swallow, pronounce judgment. His face always surveyed her as if skeptical of the cup's contents and warning her against *funny business*, though she'd never tried any, not for two years.

She and Web had started calling him the Sikh during their years together as apprentices, due mostly to his unsettling propensity for wrapping his head in silk turbans, but also for his distaste for spoken language, preferring to communicate solely by way of soul-withering glares and fist pounding.

So Bekah hopped downstairs and across the street into Bells's for a dark roast with two milks and then carefully cupped the mug on her way back up to the Sikh's little library. She endured the apocalyptic stare and eased the door shut behind her, thinking of the open chapter on her desk, waiting to be devoured. But when she turned around, she found herself face-to-chest with a sweeping tanned duster the color of a desert storm.

She knew this cloak. More importantly, she knew the chest wearing it.

“Oh, Bekah, I'm glad I caught you!” said the black-topped, sculpted beauty of a man. “I'm just stopping in for Mr. Speith.” He had just a tantalizing hint of an accent.

“Some new chapters for us, I hope, Mr. Shakil?”

His face twisted in a half grin, stretching pale the scar that cut through his bottom lip.

*How is it even possible*, thought Bekah, *that a scar makes his face utterly perfect?*

“As a matter of fact,” he began, when a dream-shattering *thump* rattled the door frame. Bekah could almost feel the heat of the Sikh's eyes through the wood; if she opened it, she was sure she'd see him sitting in the glow of a silent, radiating fury, eyes locked unforgivingly on the two of them.

“That's my cue,” said Mr. Shakil, and his smile melted into a thoughtfulness that was equally endearing.

“Good luck,” Bekah replied, trying to sound encouraging rather than crestfallen, and he stepped into the Sikh’s office.

---

“Please tell me you brought chocolate,” Web said when she threw open her door.

Bekah smirked and said, “Even better.” She proffered a tidy packet of lovingly-handled papers. “Make us some tea?”

Web managed the happiest groan Bekah had ever heard, clutching the papers and cradling them next to her heart. “Yes! Just what this day called for!” She took the envelope to the parlor. Bekah stepped inside, closing Web’s door behind her.

It was a stately home, not three blocks from St. Stephen’s cathedral and surrounded by manicured grounds with strolling paths. Just private enough to say “old money” and just close enough to the city center to say “and plenty of it.”

Technically, it wasn’t Web’s, but the proprietor, her father, was stricken with paralysis and unable to venture throughout the house. He lived a solitary life, Bekah thought, and a sad one. She’d only met him once, accidentally, when she had mistaken his bedroom for the library on her first visit. Never again, and Web was disinclined to mention his condition except when absolutely required.

Therefore, Web lived as the mistress of Tollhaus, alone but for the handful of house staff. It was surreal for Bekah when she visited, watching her friend, who spent her afternoon at the book binder’s tossing crinkled notes across the hall to Bekah’s office and pretending to swoon over Mr. Shakil, waving away servants for tea and sweets in the sitting room.

But then she plunked Indian-style on the authentic Moroccan rug, skirt pluming around her. “I saw the strangest sight today,” she started, sliding the papers out of the envelope and eyeing them like she might try to take a bite of one.

Bekah settled beside her and leaned back against a fainting couch--which was much less comfortable and much gaudier than the carpet. “I bet I can top it, but you first.”

“Alright,” Web said, raising a dubious eyebrow. “Today in the carriage I passed a small metal contraption, moving about the streets like it was some kind of coach-and-four, but, and this is the mysterious part, there were no horses! Bekah, if only you had seen it, the thing was bright blue and rolling on past us like it was going about on Tuesday calls.”

“You’re right, that is *unbelievable*.” She gave her a pointed look.

“I’m serious!”

“Well, fine then. But I saw--in broad daylight, marching about the park like a gentleman on a stroll, just there, on the path, I saw--”

The lights disappeared for a moment when the decorative couch pillow spun, frilly lace protruding like a ninja star's spikes, across the sitting room to collide with Bekah's forehead. "Spit it out!"

Bekah threw the pillow back, but she was laughing, and took out a waving porcelain kitty instead. It dashed harmlessly against the plush carpet.

"Fine. I was walking to the shop yesterday when I saw a *woman in trousers*."

For a moment, Web said nothing, but her mouth formed into a little *o*.

"I told you it was shocking!" Bekah said.

"What's happening in the city?" She said it like she was joking, like she didn't mean it as a real question. But the shades of her eyes were pulled down a little.

Bekah was uneasy, too. It wasn't just the woman in trousers. It was the way she had looked, alone in the park. Her eyes were darting about, and she kept tilting her head to the sky, squeezing dents into her arms. She looked past Bekah like she was a spirit, living on the misty plane beyond, unable to reach out to the world. Bekah hadn't said anything, or offered to help, but the woman had definitely been lost. She hoped the woman hadn't been ill, and needed help. Her chance to be a good Samaritan, and Bekah let it pass without thinking.

Web was still giving Bekah a sober look. She moved her mouth, lips closed, like she was chewing on a thought. "Bekah," she started. Her eyes flicked down to the carpet, and back over to a window in the shape of a pineapple. "Bekah," she said again, and Bekah felt her stomach drop a bit. "I've been thinking lately, and it keeps slipping my grasp, like one minute it's the most important question in the world, and the next...well, I keep thinking, and I can't remember what *day* it is. What year." She looked sick. Her eyebrows turned down at the corners like she might cry. "Can you?"

Bekah tried to laugh now. She wanted to move on, to drink tea and read chapters like they always did, and never worry about the day when they couldn't anymore. "Well, of course I can! It's Tuesday." It wasn't. "You've just been too long in your lush mansion and lost touch with reality since quitting the printer's, haven't you?" She felt a creeping blush blossom from her bust and to her cheeks. Something buzzed in her ears. Tuesday...

Yesterday was Tuesday, and the day before was Tuesday, and--

"*Ahem.*"

Bekah shook her head and there was Web smiling again, eyes clear as a perfect morning, and Bekah found it impossible to stay upset. She smiled back.

Web fanned the pages in front of her. "Me first?"

"Of course."

---

The sky dripped darkness. A thick, hot mess of clouds smothered the city, glowing a little green in the gaslight and trapping the glow of the moon.

Bekah turned the key in the lock of Speith's Scribandry. It slid in with a rattle that made her cringe, huddling closer to the doorframe and refusing to look back into the alley behind her. *Oh, why hadn't the old tightfisted tyrant ever forked over a key to the front door?*

She creaked up the steps to her office and tenderly smoothed pages onto her desk. Again without looking back, she jettisoned herself downstairs and out. She wished she's just taken the pages home and brought them back under the friendly heat of the sun, when axe murderers and opium addicts were tucked safely in their beds, instead of dropping them off on her way home from Web's.

The lock snicked shut, and a crunch of footsteps announced itself behind her.

Leaving the key jutting from the door, Bekah whipped around. She couldn't avoid the gruesome crash of memories as she flicked her eyes frantically down the alley.

A figure was there.

No defining features, only a shapeless suggestion of a human being, but when it moved, Bekah saw two legs and no axes, only a dark square package in its right hand. Still, she didn't step out from the shadow of the doorframe.

When it drew closer, she saw that it had the shadow of stubble and tufts of undoubtedly male hair sticking from either side of his head, as if he had just run his hands through. She thought of opium-glazed eyes, a burn scar on her right thigh.

She pondered her options. Turn the key and bolt inside? She would have to turn her back to him for a precious second, possibly her last on this Earth.

She snuck her hand behind her back and withdrew the key from the lock. She let it jut, jagged-end out, from her cold fingers. She stepped away from the door, clear away from the wall, so he couldn't pin her against the biting bricks in a struggle.

His eyes registered Bekah. She saw his head tic up from the ground, a slight twitch of startled muscle in the hand with the package. He moved it up to his heart. Hesitated.

Bekah felt the edge of her terror slough off onto the gravel. The night, suddenly, had stopped pressing into her ears, down her throat. He spoke.

"Evening." He regained his confidence, strolled past her to the door of Speith's Scribandry. He seemed to consider it for a moment, then looked back at Bekah, who had turned about-face to stare after him.

She blinked. Turned to go.

When she peered back over her shoulder, there was nothing left of the stranger, save the black square of the package, waiting purposefully at the foot of the door. It was the perfect rectangular shape of paper.