

FEAST OF FATES



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For Cynthia



Ode to the East

*A weeping sky, a sea of trees that eats,
what foolish hands and little feet
Do poke and tread upon its fright
Do dare to brave its darkest nights
Those who enter, go alone
Bare as babes, chilled to bone
No steel or magik will save one here
From the wildest things that prowl
—the Lords of fang and claw
Nor the Oldest that do howl
—in their cairns of loam and age
Or the leaves themselves that whisper, tease, and hiss:
Lost, so lost, and never found,
hope and blood shall feed our ground.
You have entered, and now are gone
Into the shadows of Alabion.*



PROLOGUE

The sky was black over the evergreen sea. No moon, no stars, as if the heavens did not exist in this realm. Creatures sang to a moon that was unseen, each cry more unrecognizable than the last. Elegantly these monsters stalked one another; hunting down in the prison of tangled trees, bracken, and thorns, the serpents' nests and clutching roots that only the maddest ranger might call a forest. Amid the skulking killers, a solitary woman glided through the darkness.

She heeded the whispery winds, which did not lure her into snares as they would other travelers, but told her where to step truly. She asked the tortoise-skinned, ancient trees to move their branches from her path and thanked them as they complied. Many a time, fanged things leaped from the foliage, snarling and slavering for her flesh, and she banished them with the softest whistle or a reproachful shine of her green glass eyes. With her branch of timeworn yew, she prodded her way over stone and twist. When the wind started to natter, she pulled tight her threadbare shawl and kirtle. And if the hike threatened to exhaust her, she would pause, think of her sisters waiting for her, and then push on through the shadows with renewed and ruthless determination: the final resolve of a soul soon to die. She could sense her end in the brittleness of her bones, the fluttering of her heart like a hummingbird's wings, and the snotty rattle in her lungs. Death was such a familiar friend to her that she could time its nearness within a sand or two of the hourglass. She knew that she still had time, but also that she would not live to see another dawn.

Onward she plunged, culling kindness from the vicious woods, taming what those who did not listen to the true voices wrongly called the Untamed. As she went, she basked in the beauty of Alabion; her eyes drawn to dewy leaves glittering as if scattered with diamonds, her ears to the music that echoed through the pines, her nose to the earthy pungency of the mulch beneath her toes. She drank in every sight, sound, and scent; missing none of it, adoring all of it. Soon, the trees thinned to brambles, which rustled themselves apart like kindly doorkeepers for her, and she came to a rocky basin and a steeply rising bluff. Difficult the climb would be, yet she wasted not a speck. Stone was not something that one could sing to in the hope of courtesy: it was stubborn, it wouldn't listen, and it broke in half before it bent to another's Will. So she did not bother asking the stone to accommodate her, but steeled her way up the bluff, not once crying out from the scraping of her hands, knees, and feet. Besides, the journey and struggle of life was half the joy, and she reveled in the toil, pain, and sweat of her decrepit body, for it was to be the last rush of life she would know for a while.

Surely the moon admired her spirit, and it peeked out in a sliver of whiteness. As she stopped, huffing, to look up at its loveliness, she saw that she had nearly reached the slyly tucked escarpment that was her destination. A ghostly female figure with billowing black hair and a gaze that glinted green, even from strides away, leaned over the edge: her sister. Hurriedly, the traveler clambered up the cliffside. But she had reached the limits of her strength, and at the end, her sister's strong, pale arms helped to pull her onto a plateau soft with grasses.

"Ean, the paleness of a death is upon you," said her sister, hovering over her.

"Help me up, Elemech," demanded Ean. "I feel like a boulder on two spring twigs, and we have precious few sands left."

Stoutly, Elemech hauled up her sister by the armpits. They walked over a lush meadow of clover, ferns, and flowers, heading for a cavern draped in vines. In the morning, butterflies and birds would play amid the lea on the cliff, though tonight only evening moths were about. Ean indulged in the study of their dances and one longing look to the sliver of the moon until she was pulled into the cave. Illumed patches of nocturnal fungi spotted the walls here, and it was easy for Elemech to find her way deep through the

winding dark, into their refuge. For some time they wandered, deeper, farther into the belly of rock, Elemech never unsure of which branching road to take, even when the fungi dried up and they were panting together in sheer darkness.

Much like Eean was at one with the great wilds, so too could Elemech steer through the unseen. She could find a light in every shadow, a meaning in every casting of the bones, or feel the drop of a tear from spans away in the ripples of her pond.

“Here we are, sister,” said Elemech at last.

Not a sand too soon, thought Eean, hanging her head; her breathing was a rasp, and she was mostly being carried now. Eean opened her heavy lids to the brightness of their home, snapping bits of recollection here and there. She saw the crystal-studded walls, glimmering as a geode’s violet guts. A flash of the pool where Elemech would often dip her hand and sing of far-away lands to them; of the places they would never see. The limestone table, rusty with blood, where they would eat and read entrails together. Their third sister’s cluttered workshop and the stone shelves filled with herbs, skins, jewels, fabric, bones, and knickknacks rummaged from the forest or the cave. Finally she felt the familiar relief of her fragrant pine-and-moss mattress caressing her flesh. In and out she drifted; her pulse and vision ragged. The sand of her death was nearly upon them. She heard small feet running up, and a tiny hand clutched her gnarled one.

“Oh, Eean,” cheeped the sweet young voice. “Do you have to go so soon? The season while you’re away is so gray. You know how somber Elemech can be. Staring in her pool, reciting all the sadnesses of the world. She is so glum without you.”

“My dearest Ealasyd. Let me look at you. At both of you before these eyes fail me,” grunted Eean, and forced herself to see.

Both her sisters were kneeling by her. With her honey-gold hair and innocent gaze, Ealasyd was as beautiful as sunshine. Ealasyd had the same green eyes as her sisters had, tawny skin, and the finest features of the three, yet only because she was the youngest. Come a point, when the cycle repeated itself and Eean was young again, Ealasyd and she would be fair-haired twins. She delighted in those years, when the two of them could play as siblings. Just as many, many seasons past that childhood, she would take

on the wintry beauty of Elemech, with her mystery and darkness, and they could brood and sing as one. As the crone, her final lap of life was always the most tiresome, for she could not play with Ealasyd or contemplate as adeptly with her failing mind as Elemech could, so she was lonely despite all their intimacy.

So, in that season of her life, she would leave, not to be a burden, and would forage the Untamed, gathering gifts for her sisters to use in their craft. A task to which her hardy, dispensable body was better suited than those of her delicate sisters. And she had been lucky this time. She had one parting gift for them.

“Such lovely mothers and sisters you each have been,” praised Ean. “If one of you would reach to my pouch, you will find a few treasures of Alabion.”

Ealasyd clapped her hands and rummaged about in her sister’s garment. She came away with three things: an animal fang crusted in blood, as if ripped out during a hunt; a handful of crimson grass; and a polished black stone, like the scale of an ebony lizard.

“Oh! These...these are perfect, Ean!” Ealasyd clapped again, and scampered off at once, without allowing her scowling middle sister to have a look.

“Bring those here!” snapped Elemech.

“The gifts are for both of you,” reminded Ean, and her sister nodded and took the hand that Ealasyd had left, kissing it.

“She is right, you know. I am colder without you. As harsh as the Long Winter,” confessed Elemech with regret. “I hope that I am to bear you this time. A kick inside my ribs might force some kindness into me.”

“Perhaps. It is so hard on Ealasyd; she is so small, and my head and shoulders are so large,” Ean said, smiling.

The sisters shared a laugh.

In a wind of excitement, Ealasyd was upon them again. “Look!” she cried, shoving her arms over Ean and scattering her with items. First, Ealasyd picked up a rudimentary, four-legged clay figurine, which had the bloody tooth jammed into the bottom of its head. *A wolf*, thought Ean. Then Ealasyd claimed the second toy: a rag-doll woman made of pale mouse skins with a mane of red weeds. *A maiden*, decided Ean. The third creation lay on Ean’s stomach while Ealasyd had the wolf chase the maiden around it, and

Ean debated how to classify the thing. What was this ball of nettles and the bird husks—a skylark and a crow—that shared a black stone between their beaks?

“What...is that?” wheezed Ean, curious.

Ealasyd looked to the talisman and shrugged. “I’m not sure.”

Elemech’s face waned with shadow. “Give those to me,” she demanded, and snatched the playthings from Ealasyd and the talisman that lay on her sister, too. While Ealasyd protested, Elemech raced off to a still pool that glimmered with soft light. Although Ean could not turn her head to see, she heard the splash as her sister tossed the items into the water.

“It took me so long to make those! Hunting rats isn’t easy, and neither is scraping clay! Do you see, Ean? Do you see what I shall be left with?”

“Hush, my sister. You made your toys well. It is Elemech’s turn to play with them,” said Ean. A wave of pain suddenly ran through her, and then the cold hand of death gripped her spine. “I love you, sister...I shall see you soon.”

Ealasyd nodded her golden head and then placed it on her sister’s chest. She listened to the slowing heartbeat and wept. A few heartbeats later, Ean’s eyes fell shut, and that sorrow-sweet vision of Ealasyd was the last thing she saw in this life. However, even if muffled with cotton, she heard Elemech’s chanting, a rhythmic and fading echo, as she drifted down a swift river that her sisters could not follow. At the pool, the waters ran black, the discarded relics whirled deeper and deeper, and although her body remained upright, Elemech felt herself tip and flounder after them.

First comes the tearing of her immaterial flesh: pins and needles stabbed into every nerve, a thousand mouths nibbling at her tenderest bits, a thousand whispers that hiss every weakness and failure she has ever known. Such magnificent torture should not be, for she is a ghost in this vision, not bone and meat that can be harmed. This is the Hungry Dark, and it has swallowed her utterly. But even as a watcher she is strong, even against the greatest of evils.

“You shall not have me today, Black Queen,” she declares.

She steels her Will and cuts through the clinging darkness like a blade of sunshine. In an instant, the blackness splits, and she is free of the Hungry Dark. As a bird, or a wind, she now soars over a scorched and fiery wasteland toward a grand city. A city once golden and now as red with the presence of

murder as the great moat of fire that encompasses it. Coiled about the city's spires are black serpents of smoke. This is Zioch, the Golden City, and it has fallen to evil. She does not need to contemplate the fate of Zioch's Immortal King, for she can hear his tormented howls echoing through the haze. Amid his madness, she senses his sadness and knows that he has done something terrible to his brother.

"Fair king..." she says with regret, and then her wind is borne upward, and she sees a white moon, bright and full, bathing the rich woods of Alabion. A pair of birds flies past the moon, one pale to the point of being silver and the other black. The black one is chasing the other; she knows that he wishes to kill it, just as she knows the men whom the birds represent. Suddenly, speedily, she is pulled downward through the netting of trees toward a campfire and an oddly laid scene. Beside the sparking fire is a weathered corpse; its grimace could be interpreted as a smile, and a magpie is pecking at its yellow teeth.

"A kiss," she thinks. "How sweet." For these shapes do not hide the true selves of these beings, and she knows them for who they truly are. It warms her that they will find each other.

A growl commands her attention elsewhere, to the shade outside the campfire's reach. She sees him prowling the darkness there, a great man or beast—a bit of each, she thinks—and he is not hidden in allegory as with much of her vision. He is clear, this enormous, grumbling creature who walks on all fours and snaps his teeth to the night. The man's bearing is defensive, protective. "Of what?" she wonders, until the glimmer of ivory and red courts her eye from the circle he paces. Again, there is no couched meaning to be found, and what he guards is as clear to her as her own name: a maiden. Elemech's heart twists with emotions—excitement, fear, joy—and the vision twists with it and shatters.

"The one lost," Elemech mumbled, paler than cream.

She was still gazing into the pool, which had returned to its clarity and had no more secrets to share with her. She had enough to deal with anyway. Instinctually, she called for her elder sister, whose wisdom would be needed for this matter.

"Eean," she whispered.

"Eean is dead; come mourn with me," pleaded Eealasyd.

Elemech went to join her small sister over the body of Eean, and they huddled together and cried. Elemech's tears came from sorrow as much as

from what the pool had shown her, which neither she nor Ealasyd had the power to face alone. If only Eean were with them now, she would know what to do. How to grease the wheels of possibility without breaking the machine.

“We are lost without her,” sniffled Elemech, unusually emotional. “What an inconvenient time to die.”

“She’ll be back soon,” said Ealasyd. She started undressing the corpse. “We should return her flesh to the forest, as she likes us to do. Come help, sister.”

The sisters stripped Eean’s body and neatly set her garments and staff aside on a shelf; these items wouldn’t be used again for many, many years. Using the water from Elemech’s pool, they washed her, and then anointed her skin with badger musk and animal fats so that she would be a sumptuous-smelling meal for the beasts of the woods. For Eean’s dignity, they placed a crown of dried ivy about her head. Carefully, with Elemech carrying the shoulders and Ealasyd lugging the feet, they dragged the thin carcass of their sister down the labyrinth of dark tunnels and out of the cave. At the edge of the meadow they stopped, taking a breath before finishing their task, as poor Ealasyd was spent from the haul. A handful of stars had joined the shy moon to watch Eean’s passing, and the night was crisp, windless, and calm.

“I don’t feel anything yet. In my belly,” noted Ealasyd.

Come to think of it, neither did Elemech; the candle of new life had not been lit in her womb. Eean was not returning to life. *What is she waiting for?* wondered Elemech.

“Do you think?” said the sisters together, and bent over to examine Eean.

As if on a spring, Eean’s mouth popped open and a gasp escaped. For such a tiny breath, it roared past the sisters’ faces like a monster of air and thunder. The sisters stared up at the sky for a while, trying to guess where Eean’s breath, this wind, had gone. Their souls and faces were bright, knowing that Eean had not forsaken them, that she had held on to her flesh for as long as she could. She had given them hope. Elemech was more mirthful still, for with that final breath the miracle of new life had stirred within her; she would bear Eean this time.

“Where do you think her breath went?” asked Ealasyd.

“Exactly where it was supposed to,” answered Elemech.

They tossed Eean’s body from the cliff.

PART I



I

WHERE THE WIND WENT

I

A RMSMAN, the sign read, in script so fine that it appeared penned on the swinging board, not wrought in twists of metal. Morigan squinted and could decipher that the original lettering of the sign had been erased. WONDERS OF THE ARCANE was there no more, which left her with few options to find a sprig of fireroot for her particular master. If she hadn't been all over Eod today, she might have been less inclined to pop in and ask the proprietor of Armsman if he knew what had happened to the last merchant to set up shop here. But she had paced Eod's hot white streets since first light, wandering from tent to stall to shanty in the Faire of Fates, and finally to the smaller workshops in less commercial districts. From counter to counter she'd gone, almost pleading with the proprietors for a maddeningly rare herb that they simply did not carry. She was footsore, sweating, aching in her bladder, and ironically, quite thirsty, too, and the reaching shadow that fell off the tall pale building was inviting, even if its bricked-up widows, smoking rooftop, and pitted facade leaned toward menacing. The iron-banded door was opened a tad as well, as if a wind had pushed it ajar, and she took this as fate's final invitation.

As light as a dancer, Morigan was up a few steps and had slipped through the crack of the entrance.

“Hello,” she called boldly, for it was dark inside the hallway in which she stood.

Morigan was hardly a timid girl; she had watched her mother die, and the dark or any other anxieties since then were minor to her. So she called again and went farther into the dimness, following the sound of a hammer on metal.

What an odd shopkeeper, to have no lights inside. I can only imagine what sort of strangeness I'm getting myself into—all for a glass of water and a piss.

Quickly it brightened with the glow of a fire, and the hammering rang louder. The short hallway ended, and she was in a heat-congested space. When last she had been to this store, before its conversion to a forge, the room was set up from floor to ceiling with shelving and jammed with all manner of baubles, crystals, bundled spices, and animal heads. Now the room was stripped bare to its white foundation, with its casements filled in and its second floor torn out to create a lofty ceiling. A hole was carved in the roof for the smoke to escape. Whoever worked here also lived here, and she could tell he was a humble person, for in one corner lay a dingy straw pallet. Nearby was an undignified lavatory, lacking so much as a screen for privacy. Gleaming weaponry was heaped along the walls and scattered around a grated pit of fire dug right into the floor. Bellows, tongs, molds, and other smithing instruments were laid about in disarray.

Nearly every smith in Eod used the cold flames of magik for his forge. *Not this one*, she cursed as she daubed herself. Indeed, most of Eod was so cultured and proper. From its pearly streets to its sandstone bricks that were shaped into orderly, elegant towers, gabled courts, and even quaint byres for the poor, everything was crafted with symmetry and meaningful precision. The Everfair King would have no less than perfection in his city. In contrast, this forge, with its raggedy roof and its proprietor who lived as meagerly as an escaped slave from Menos, was surely the messiest place Morigan had seen. She knew messiness. She spent her days tidying up after a sloppy and forgetful sorcerer, running his errands, and arranging his life. A bit irately, she called out to the hammering man—it had to be a man to make this sort of chaos—for a third time. A shape was veiled behind the thick smoke of the pit; she thought it was a standing suit of armor and gasped when it moved.

The Wolf had heard the woman enter his shop—not a dropped pin or the nightly bickering of his drunken neighbors escaped his notice—and her light tread, as if a deer was stepping upon grass, was no exception. He held his breath when he heard the noise, for it caused a queer feeling in him: a quickening of his heart that for once was not the thrill of chasing, hunting, and tearing. He continued to hammer, working the kinks out of an already flawless shield. He continued to ignore the other signs of the stranger's entry. Signs like the sweet onion and honey scent of her sweat, a smell that made his mouth water. Or the sweep of her perfumed hair, silkily swishing in his ears and surely as soft to touch as it sounded. He knew that her locks were the deepest shade of red, for she smelled of autumn. The Wolf wasn't afraid of this stranger, for he feared nothing but a cage in which he could be kept. Yet this confusion of emotion persisted nonetheless, and waffle he would not. He was a creature of absolutes, not one for questioning his nature. Finally, he stood and strode through the smoke to meet her.

Morigan gasped a bit more as the man emerged, immediately disarmed by his size and the surety of self that allowed him to walk in his brass-fitted boots through lightly flickering flames without a care. She had never known a man so large, and he carried his immensity as naturally and weightlessly as she bore her slenderness. Likewise, they were in many ways contrary to each other. She was pale as milk, while he was tanned to darkness and shimmered like the coppery metals that his enormous hands might squeeze. She was as delicate and smooth as any woman would desire to be, and he was as knotted and veined as an oak, with thick-black hair on his chest, upon his naked arms, and over his stony chin and chops. Their faces were each beautiful—if again polarities of soft and hard—with her supple angles and pink pout of a mouth and his hewn cheeks and wide red lips. If her hair was a mane of fire, then his was an unkempt flame of darkness, almost as long as hers was, but somehow suiting the man.

With all their opposing aspects, their stares bore an eerie similarity. Morigan's eyes held a flash of silver, the legacy of a bastard father she had never met. Whereas the Wolf's eyes gleamed with the cold gray indifference of an animal peering out in the darkness.

He is like a man sculpted from the earth. Am I dreaming? Have I hit my head? Passed out in the street from the heat of walking all day? Get your wits

together, girl! What in the king's name am I doing in this ratty forge with a man who watches me as a beast would its supper and from whom I cannot look away? Morigan cautioned herself.

Sands fled, and they stared and stared, unable to remove their gazes from each other. Morigan had forgotten why she was here, yet she was unafraid, if uncertain of the hungry way in which the large man watched her: his nostrils flaring bullishly, as if he could smell something that she could not. Uncomfortable, she pulled her summery shift tighter about herself despite the stifling heat, and the Wolf noted the teardrop outline of a breast against her damp garment. Her clothing was almost transparent to his cutting eyes, as if she were wrapped in mist, and his heart raced harder. In his head danced thoughts of chasing her through a field, of drinking in her laughter or cries as he nipped at her flesh.

Morigan was not prone to flighty indulgences. She had been offered her share of fair-weather romances; she knew the promises that men made only to break. She recovered her sensibilities first.

“Pardon my intrusion. The door was ajar. I...I am Morigan. Morigan Lostarot.”

How strange, thought the Wolf, for he never left the door to his den open.

She went down into the room, which had a small step, and stood outside the circumference of the grate. She offered her hand for him to come forward and shake. Curiously, he beheld it. The Wolf operated by requisition only. Slips were left under his door, with orders for weaponry and no face attached to the order. He had his meat delivered in the mornings by a meatmonger, whom he never welcomed in. Rarely did he see a two-legs. He needed to think about how mortals greeted one another. After dusting off his hands on his blackened apron, he walked off the grate and put forth a calloused paw that engulfed Morigan's hand entirely. As they touched, her arm hummed like a tuning fork, and being close to him, she noticed his queer smell. Underneath the stringency of iron shavings, body odor, and charcoal were more enticing scents of woodland ferns or silky pelts. Morigan couldn't explain any of it, or why she was so captivated.

The enchantment was shared by the Wolf, and he struggled against the urge to rub her satin skin or even lick it, knowing that such practices were frowned on by slow-walkers.

Following a much-delayed introduction, he said, “Caenith. My name is Caenith.”

His voice was raw, deep, and cracked, like a stone bounding down a chasm in the earth.

“A pleasure to meet you, Caenith. No promised or family name, I take it?”

Promised name! For the love of the kings, Morigan, it sounds like you're throwing yourself at the man like a common tart!

“No blood or bloodmate that I would answer to, no.”

Nervously, Morigan continued with a smile. It was as beautiful to Caenith as the sun dancing over the water of the deepest springs in the oldest forests; it was an expression of true purity.

“Bloodmate! There's a term from the ages. In any case, terrific to meet you! If I could have my hand back, that would grand.”

“Yes, of course,” said Caenith, and released her.

Feeling a touch more at ease, Morigan asked the curious smith for a glass of water (she decided against asking to use his toilet, however, as it was not ladylike to squat in an exposed corner). Caenith went off to rummage through his den for an object to use as a cup. A particular quandary, as he tended to fill the sink or tub with water when he needed to drink, bathe, or otherwise refresh himself. While he was away somewhere in the smoky chamber, Morigan wandered to the wall and perused the smith's wares. At once, her breath was taken away by their exquisiteness, and she drifted with an open mouth, sighing at each item she passed and was afraid to touch out of the delicacy of its construction. If she had her say, these pieces would be displayed above a great hearth, mayhap even in the golden halls of the Everfair King. She ahhed over foils decorated with metal leaves to look as though they were entwined in ivy. She oohed at blades with thorns run down their haft and embossed with flowers. While she said she would not, she dared to trace her fingertip on the cold shields of steel roses, the iron shillelagh made as a grayish leafed branch, and the gauntlet that had the seeming appearance of marble with streaks of gold, platinum, and silver. Each piece bore some element of the natural world, as if flora had miraculously survived the smith's fire and grown on inside the metal. Every artifact could have been chiseled from the land itself.

What artistry! Eod's sorcerers were its artists, gardeners, and architects. Here in the City of Wonders, you could not escape their ostentation. The watersculptors, firecallers, earthspeakers, and windsingers created fountains of ever-flowing water, statues of heatless flame, orchards from plots of dust, and skies free of the deadly sandstorms that swept the desert around Eod. Their grandeur was undeniable. But for Morigan, the smith's work embodied the denotation of *art* better than any sorcerer's spell could. As she was reaching for a butterfly unfurling its wings on a helmet of netted vines, half expecting the insect to leap onto her fingers, a shadow—and the smell of man, woods, and beast—dropped over her. She jumped and did an about-face.

“Water,” said Caenith.

What she judged to be the broken end of a hollow metal staff was thrust before her, dribbling water. How or why the staff had been snapped was a question she never thought to ask, but probably should have, and she was instead amused by the crude charm of the gesture.

What an odd bird, this one. I swear he's never had company before. Here I was worrying that I might embarrass myself to a man who doesn't even have a cup in his cupboard. Or a cupboard for a cup, even.

She drank the water, thanked the smith, and passed back the makeshift cup to him, which he tossed to the floor. Again the heaviness of his stare, as if his eyes alone could consume her, shivered over Morigan's flesh.

“Your work,” she said, striking at the tension.

“What of it?”

“I am not a warrior—in fact, I've never held a blade—but the craftsmanship is...extraordinary. I've never seen anything like it. I feel that I should ask if you have cast some magik into the metal, even though I am inclined to believe that you have not. I simply cannot imagine how hands by themselves can make such beauty.”

The smith looked at Morigan, or through her, as if envisioning another space. “Hands and patience...*Geadhain*—if you don't know the old name of our world—has secrets that she speaks to any creature, but only the most willing hear her. The sorcerers of today do not bow to the Old Laws, they scribble over them instead. They do not ask the skies to rain; they rip into it with their Wills, and the tears fall. If we listen to the metal, if we hear how it

wants to be made...well, then true beauty can be found. To touch is as much a pleasure as it is a gift. I honor that gift. I honor what I touch.”

Morigan noted that the smith’s attention had returned from its faraway reminiscence and was upon her again, burning off her clothing, sniffing her presence, eating her right up. Other than his flowery, compelling words, there was something about this man that was as off as it was alluring. There was a quality to him that was unlike any person she had met.

“What of you, Morigan Lostarot?” Her name rolled off his tongue like a slow song. “What do you speak to? What voices do you hear? What do you touch?”

Touch? she wondered. He seemed to be asking about her vocation in his outlandish way. Suddenly, her responsibilities and sensibilities rushed over her, and she recalled that she had a purpose before wandering into the dreamy forge and talking with a strange, talented man who smelled like a beast—pleasingly so, a dog she wanted to pet—and spoke like a philosopher poet. Waving her arms apologetically and rambling in staccato, she fumbled to leave, nearly tripping over helmets, poles, and whatever else cluttered her path. Yet the smith followed her closely, stealing touches of her softness as he moved her around these obstacles or kicked them out of her way.

“Oh shite! I’m a handmaiden to a sometimes-cranky sorcerer! I daresay I’ve been here far too long! How long has it been? An hourglass? More? If it weren’t so dark in here, I’d have a better idea. I’m sorry, Caenith, but I really must be off. My master is quite helpless without me. Old, very old. He doesn’t soil himself, but I don’t think we’re that far off. Oh, thank you, thank you, I didn’t see that. I never did find that firewort, or wormhazel, or whatever I was supposed to find! Where is my mind today? I didn’t get the address of the last shopkeeper that lived here, either. I meant to ask you that, funnily enough! That’s how I ended up here. You probably have no idea where he’s gone. Oh, thank you once more, forgot about the stair. Here we are, then.”

They had reached the door, and Caenith opened it wide to the day. Sunset was upon them, and light poured from the metal roofs of the buildings in the street behind Morigan and lit her in an aura of crimson. Right then, she was a woman of fire, and Caenith was overcome by her loveliness and her honey-autumn scent that a breeze blew his way. His heart hammered as though it would shatter the bone that restrained it, and a revelation split his skull. After

so long alone, after wandering a world where the wind only sang when it was whipped to obedience by the new magik, and the true beauty, the old magik, was a whisper when it had been a roar...here was a miracle. Something of the past, something that should not be, unaware of who or what she was, of how precious a dream she represented. Akin to the pack he had lost, a thousand howling beasts of emotion tore through his spirit. He thought of hunting amid pine forests or loping over golden meadows. He dreamed of tasting freedom and breathing life. He felt the rush of blood in his mouth, the splash of water on his snout, the crash of lightning in his ear. In that instant, the Wolf felt it all: every forgotten beauty of his soul. The realization of who this maiden was or what she could be paralyzed him, and he dumbly sensed his hand being shaken and her bidding him farewell without finding his voice.

He sprinted out the door and into the street and was upon Morigan in a whirl of speed—somehow in front of her when she hadn't even sensed him coming from behind. The smith had a desperate enthusiasm to him that was misplaced on such a large imposing man, though Morigan found it endearing, as she did with so much of this relative stranger.

"I never said farewell. That was rude of me," said Caenith.

"Oh, well, I suppose you didn't."

"Will you come back again?"

"Why?"

The answer was plain to the Wolf.

"To see me," he said.

Brazen. Kings be damned, I think I like this man, thought Morigan. If she was honest with herself, she felt more than a simple budding interest; she felt a gravitation toward his being, as if he could pull her right inside himself. A terrifying experience this was, for a woman so used to being alone. Collecting herself, she spoke.

"You've convinced me. I shall come again. Another staff tip of water, another day. Now I really must be off. My master will be worried sick. It was...an unintended pleasure meeting you, Caenith."

Politely, Morigan bowed and took her leave.

"Safe steps, dear fawn," Caenith shouted after her—almost in a roar, which garnered the attention of many passing folk. "Perhaps when the Gray Man is ripe and full with beauty, we could stalk the city for a bite!"

A bite? chuckled Morigan. Dear fawn? Stalk the city? Gray Man? Is he talking about the moon? I certainly pick the wild ones. If I don't find a toilet soon, I may just wet myself from laughter.

Long after Morigan left, the Wolf stood in the street, as immobile as stone, and a source of much elbow pain for whatever folks attempted to nudge past him. He could see the maiden well beyond the time she would become a dot to a slow-walker's eyes; she was breathtaking at any distance. And when he could no longer spy her, he could smell her still, or at least the memory that he had captured and never let go. The fragrance of the old magik, of earth and spice, of sweat, honey, and nuts: a bouquet of life.

What the Wolf did not know was that Morigan could feel his hungry sight upon her for almost as long as he held it there, and she smiled, knowing this was the case. Traversing Eod's dusky streets, its usual wonder seemed dull. She passed under spidery bridges and through extravagant, ornately molded gatehouses. She felt the shadows of sky carriages soar over her head, walked by street sorcerers conjuring birds of fire, or took shortcuts through Eod's many gardens—great expanses of nature, with tree mazes and trellises of fruit and flowers—and stopped not a speck to dawdle. She even forgot how badly she needed to pee. Her heart, her mind thought only of the smith. Of when she would next take the trip to see him.