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TRINITY COLLEGE

Senior Thesis

THE PERPETUAL HARVEST

submitted by

Joey Cifelli, Class of 2023

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for

The Degree of Bachelor of Arts

2023

Director: Ethan Rutherford

Reader: Chloe Wheatley

Reader: Dan Mrozowski

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To Tommy, who I would always be remiss not to thank.

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A Note for the Reader

My intention for this project was to create a fantasy setting that, in presenting pieces of itself, from oblique angles, opens up the world to stories and myths beyond those I've provided. The foundation is the introductory guide, which details the primary social, economic, and supernatural mechanisms of the setting. The following stories are meant to play off the guide, exploring tones, voices, and plots implied or ignored by its limited perspective. I was heavily inspired by Andrzej Sapkowski's *The Witcher* short story collections, which blend the magic and mundane aspects of fantasy beautifully.

Fisselthwaite & Stein's
INTRODUCTORY GUIDE TO THE HARVESTING OF GREAT BEASTS
7th Edition Corrected Text

commissioned by the **Tarnith Carvers' Guild** under the guidance of
Master Carver Artemus Amprock
[Y. DCXLIV]

I. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Avast! Ahoy! A grand adventure awaits you, young novice! You, who has elected to enlist in the most exciting, most daring, most profitable enterprise known to mankind: Beast Carving. Doubtless you have heard tales of the Harvest. Rumors abound, whispering of deadly ghosts and creatures colossal beyond reckoning. They tell of demonic treasures locked deep inside flesh, privy only to Royal blood. They tell of spreading swathes of madness, heralded by monsters from Hell itself. Within these pages we quash such speculation. We provide information, verified by observation and experimentation, and instruct you diligently in its application. You wish to be a Carver? You wish to seize a living from the world with nothing but your hands and your wits? You wish to become a beacon of prosperity to noble and commoner alike? We hear that wish and lay down a path before you. Provided you heed these words, ingrain them into your being, you may yet see that wish granted. It does not matter who you are. Perhaps you were born into this life, a bloody apron and razor your only inheritance. Perhaps you came here by chance, fleeing a heritage of rotten fields and ravaged towns. Perhaps you do not know what brought you here. That is alright. It does not matter. Soon you will find solace in a new life, surrounded by brothers and sisters who share your ambition.

Herein you will find brief yet illuminating examinations of the fundamentals of Carving. We begin with an overview of magic, followed by magic's role in humanity. Subsequently, an inventory of the region's Beasts. Then a discussion of the proper Carving equipment. Finally, a complete depiction of a standard Harvest. No prior knowledge is required.

II. THE NATURE OF MAGIC

What is magic? A simple question, asked often, but rarely answered to any degree of satisfaction. Perhaps this is because magic, by its nature, does not condone definition. A definition is so often static, after all, and magic, at its essence, is change.

Still, we do know some of its form. Magic presents itself in our world as an *invisible, intangible, odorless substance permeating all matter*. And while it is all around us, and in us, it moves, flowing through our bodies as though they did not exist, traveling through solid rock like it were air. The reasons behind

its movements are not understood, but it has been observed to follow patterns on a regional scale—it regularly condenses in certain locales and dissipates in others. In this respect it is something like weather. But also like weather, it is fickle, and unlikely to follow the behaviors ascribed to it.

Now that you know what magic *is*, you may be wondering what exactly it *does*. Simply, magic causes change. It alters the fundamental properties of matter and warps our understanding of reality itself. Physical characteristics such as density, shape, size, color, and texture, to name but a few, are all subject to transformation in the presence of magic. These effects increase with the concentration of magic. Therefore, we may roughly quantify the amount of magic in a given space through observation of the natural world.

In addition to simple, qualitative alterations, magic is known to imbue complex and supernatural effects within certain materials. Consider rubies extracted from the mountain-mines of Gorre, for example. Exposed to sufficient quantities of magic, they become enchanted. Their facets trap light during the day and release it at night, as warm and nourishing as if it came from the sun itself. One shudders to imagine how the people of frigid Vrezia could survive in their snow-capped towers without them. It is well-known that unalloyed metals and minerals are particularly prone to enchantment, a fact that surely puts a smile on the face of any Gorrian alderman come tax-day.

Emotion, the antithesis of reason. Does it come as any surprise, then, that emotions are so sturdily yoked to magic? Again and again we have observed the sites of tragic battles, stained with terror and blood, become infested with foul sorcery. Specters of fallen soldiers roam ancient killing fields, fighting for a cause that long since ate its fill. Rarer, and all the more famed for it, are those places enchanted by joy. The Lake of Love, blessed by the power of a marriage during wartime. Its waters rejuvenate the body and spirit, and those who arrive alone rarely leave the same way. Separated by a man-made hill lies the Lake of Lust, which, it is said, formed from the efforts of a determined young man and an enterprising mermaid. Its effects are far less subtle, and considerably shorter-lived. Scattered far and wide are these shrines to the power of human emotion. Remember, danger lies in the untempered heart. Thus it is worth taking note: do not be frivolous with your praise, and be careful of the words you say in anger.

Lastly, and most importantly for the purposes of carving, is magic's affinity for flowing along certain shapes. What is meant by this? We mean that there are exceptions to magic's intangibility, both natural and constructed. A prime example can be found in the thundering rams of Mount Khrash. The reason for their name, and for the incessant rumbling that reverberates down the valley in mating season, is that the rams' horns bear intricate, miniscule structures which channel magic into lightning. Just as magic changes matter into fantastic forms, so do the fantastic horns change magic into matter. These

shapes we refer to as Siphons. Siphons can be found in many creatures, but the creature of most use to us is man.

III. MAN AND HIS MUTATIONS

Now there are two Siphons at play in the human race. Recall that a Siphon is a structure that channels magic into a particular form. They may appear as solitary structures, typically large, or as a pattern of structures, in which case the individual components are usually small. Humanity possesses the latter. Their Siphons are so small, in fact, that they are invisible to the naked eye.

Before we continue, it should be made clear that the presence of any type of Siphon in a human is an aberration, a mutation. An ordinary, healthy human has no innate connection to magic. Nor are there any recorded cases of Siphons developing after birth. So do not fear, young Pupil! Your life is in accord with nature.

Let us begin. Magical mutations appear in humans in two stable forms. Both are a result of the presence of Siphons in the skeletal structure, which form sometime in the womb. A human may possess only one form of mutation.

- a. The first mutation we shall discuss occurs in one individual out of a thousand, approximately. They are known by many names, including Mage, Magician, Breaker, Sorcerer, and Glassbones, to name a few. Their Siphons passively absorb surrounding magic and store it within the skeleton. As magic passes through the Siphon it is morphed into a new, active form, which upon being freed from the bone is able to be put to use. Ironic then, or perhaps fitting, that such an extraordinary ability is marred by injury and pain. In order to release the magic stored within a bone, the Mage must break it. The fracture need not be complete, mind you, and in fact such instances are almost always the mark of inexperience or incompetence. A slight perturbation in the bone structure is enough to work miracles. Still, this is no small task, and any Mage worth his bones adheres to a rigorous regimen of meditation, exercise, and pain tolerance. We must always be thankful, prospective Carvers, that in pursuing our life's work our bodies are made strong and resilient—the Breakers have no such luxury. Indeed, the more they succeed, the more they suffer. Following, a description of the Mage's powers, so that you might not become confused and jittery on the job.

Now, the Siphons in a Magician's bones vary in function throughout the body. The bones of the arms and fingers, when broken, enable them to move objects without touching them. The bones of the legs and feet grant them the ability to fly faster than any bird. Smaller bones, such as the phalanges and metacarpals, contain little power but grant a high level of control over the released magic. When brute force and speed is desired, a

Magician will invariably break larger bones, such as the radius, ulna, and femur. The numerous bones of the skull contain similarly numerous powers. By breaking the jawbone a Mage obtains a silver tongue, with which all speech is made pleasing to the ear, in addition to native comprehension of all languages and dialects. The temporal bones provide visions of the future, though not interpretations. The frontal bone allows a Magician to peer into the depths of one's mind as if reading a book. Most terrifyingly, the occipital bone renders one's body wholly under the Breaker's control. The ribs accelerate the healing process. Without their constant use any Mage would be groaning and useless inside a week. Breaking the vertebrae allows a Mage to work enchantments into weapons, tools, and any manner of clothing. At last, the pelvis. By cracking this enormous bone a Mage gains control over the very essence of life, able to imbue dull statues and golems with movement, intelligence, perhaps even the spark of a soul.

It should be mentioned that a Magician's bones absorb magic only to the degree of its concentration in their immediate surroundings. A magician residing in an area with little magic will find difficulty producing much power, no matter how long they wait between breakages. Likewise, a Magician who spends even a little time in a magic-soaked realm will see their abilities quickly become devastating. So do not think too much of it if, on the morning of your departure, your Breaker is nowhere to be found. They are certainly at a well of magic, replenishing their stores for the journey ahead.

- b. Now we will discuss the second mutation endemic to humanity. It is more common than magic, found in one of every four hundred individuals. Its possessors are called Shifters, Shapers, Skulls, and Reapers. The Siphons of these mutants work in much the same way as a Breaker's, as far as gathering magic is concerned. Where they differ is that instead of storing magic within the bone to be subsequently released, the Shifter's Siphons permeate the bone *itself* with magic. Their craft lies in the growth and distortion of bone to augment their physical capabilities. A Shaper can mold every piece of his skeleton as though it were wet clay, and this costs him nothing but a little magic and a thought. In this respect they are the opposite of Magicians. A Magician's powers work in spite of her body. Her physicality is her shackle. But a Shaper's power works in harmony with his flesh. The first technique that Shapers learn is to cover their skin in an impenetrable shell of bone. Their bodies are never safer, even in the keep of a King's castle.

Let us describe the more common skeletal manipulations. Shapers are known to use their bones as auxiliary muscle, contracting and extending them to attain feats of athleticism undreamt of by the common man. They grow their bones through the skin, as mentioned, granting them armor

lighter and more protective than the finest plate. Wickedly sharp spikes, blades, and other protrusions are a common sight, often extending from the Shaper's fingertips, as in claws, or from the base of his knuckles. In certain cases a Shifter will envelop her whole arm in one pale scythe, capable of cutting down fields of armored soldiers like stalks of grain. The more skilled Shapers have been documented splitting off shoots of bone from the spine to serve as supplementary appendages. Chroniclers speak of terrible shapes careening through a battlefield, white limbs writhing like snakes. It is unknown why the Shifter's muscles, organs, and skin, are not debilitated by the bone's rapid movement and growth. The simplest answer, provided by observation, is that the Shifter's powers are meant to complement his body, not unlike the manner in which shield, sword, and scale complement the body of a knight. Of course, if the Shaper is not careful, this harmony can quickly turn to discord. As manipulating her skeleton consumes the magic stored within, a Shaper must always leave herself enough power to return to a functional, mobile state. Otherwise, she may soon find herself suffocating in a coffin of her own design.

IV. BEASTS

Your patient learning has paid off, for at last you have arrived at the discussion of the great Beasts from which you will carve your livelihood. There are almost no claims that can be made that apply to all Beasts. Each displays such singularity in form and function that, by comparison, all of humanity seems a repetition of one design. The nature of Beasts appears to be impenetrable, and yet, if we but descend to a little lower layer, we do uncover a few constants anchored in the sea of variables.

The first constant is great size. Easy enough to comprehend on the page, but few can witness a creature closer in scale to a mountain than a man and keep silent. As much danger as their enormity presents, it is the great quantity of resources held captive within each Beast that makes the Harvest feasible.

The second constant is deep slumber. For reasons unclear, though likely to do with the prior constant, all Beasts are observed to spend the vast quantity of their years asleep. Some Beasts exhibit behaviors during their rest, such as Arachesk's web-spinning. Others remain dormant, and move only when prompted by natural disasters or the actions of Carvers. Given the ubiquity of sleep among their kind, one cannot help but wonder: do Beasts dream?

The last known constant is an affinity for magic. Inevitably, where there is a Beast, there is a significant, stable source of magic. As Beasts have never been observed to hunt, or indeed engage in any type of consumption, it is accepted that they draw sustenance from magic flows. The presence of so many Harvested materials possessing a practical use in sorcery supports this theory. Curiously, no Beast has been found to contain Siphons. Let this be a lesson,

Pupils, that for as much as we claim to know of Beasts, all is but conjecture.

The equipment and procedures with which you will arm yourselves will follow. For now let us relish in the details of these wondrous creatures.

- a. **Arachesk:** A massive, serpentine creature with iridescent scales that glimmer like a rainbow in the light. It has six legs, and its head resembles that of a lizard, with jagged teeth and lidless eyes. Kouqua resides in a sprawling network of underground caverns, where it spins webs of luminous, spectral thread. You must navigate these treacherous tunnels and avoid its poisonous exterior to collect strands of its web, which can be woven into powerful charms.
- b. **Eoleni:** A gargantuan creature with four wings and an intricately barbed tail that follows it like a procession. Its body is covered in jagged, crystal-like armor that glows with an otherworldly light. Eoleni dwells in the highest reaches of the sky, above the clouds, where it absorbs magic from air currents on a scale beyond reckoning. You will use specially-designed flying vessels to reach the Beast and extract fragments of its crystalline shell, which can be used to enhance the strength and resilience of magical artifacts.
- c. **Shuros:** A sinewy, black-furred creature with dozens of glowing red eyes and a long, whip-like tail. It is a master of stealth and deception, able to move through the shadows with ease and vanish at the slightest provocation. Shuros lives in the darkest, most foreboding forests, where it preys on unwary travelers. You must use specially enchanted lures and traps to catch it and shear its fur, which can be woven into cloaks that make their wearers invisible under the moon.
- d. **Kouqua:** A colossal, water-dwelling Beast that resembles a union between a squid and a whale. It possesses a beaked mouth and a dozen writhing tentacles used to ensnare prey. It inhabits the deepest, most treacherous parts of the ocean, where it feeds on the potent magic that permeates the abyss. You must don sturdy diving suits and drills to fend off the Beast's attacks and recover vials of its magical ink, which can be used to infuse documents with a binding power of the highest degree.
- e. **Dullacadra:** A mountainous creature with a body made of living stone. Its eyes glow with an inner fire, and it moves with ponderous grace. Dullacadra dwells in caverns deep beneath the earth, channeling the energy of the plane itself. Heavy mining equipment is required to extract fragments of its body, which can be shaped into powerful talismans that grant their wielders control over everything beneath the ground.

V. TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Now we will take up examination of the equipment required for the harvesting of these Beasts. The specific items will inevitably vary, as no two Beasts may be attacked in exactly the same way, but there are a number of items essential to all successful Harvests.

- a. Your most vital tool is a simple iron hook. Without it you have no chance of maintaining a foothold on any Beast and will be promptly bucked off its back like a bloated fly. Armed with a proper hook, however, skillfully employed, one could see a Beast spin round faster than an ocean vortex and not lose one's supper. A desirable Carver's hook is two feet long, acutely arced, and fiendishly sharp. The tip of the hook should be nothing more than a glint in the morning sun. Furthermore, it is absolutely necessary for the hook to be enchanted with an affinity for grip. So enchanted, a hook will never come undone once lodged in its target, unless you will it, upon which it will pull free without so much as a snag. A sturdy rope is also required to secure a link between yourself and the iron. But good rope can be bought cheaply at any market.
- b. The next piece of equipment is the mask. A Carver's mask is a thing of beauty, Recruits. Minimal in design, yet expansive in function. Once cut from a single slab of Whittywood, numerous sophisticated enchantments are suffused through the grain, whereupon the mask reveals systems of nerves to its wearer. Once donned, the Beast's black, opaque flesh reveals a network of shimmering nodes and ghostly linkages, detailing the finest extremities of the Beast's nervous system. Without a mask a Carver would be cutting blind, liable with every stroke of the blade to wake the creature from its slumber. You must honor your mask, treat it with the utmost care, for it has been worn by countless generations of Carvers before you, and to countless more it must pass.
- c. The knives. There is nothing complicated about these. They must be kept sharp, clean, and above all familiar. You must form a total bond with your knives. Further than an extension of your arm, they should become an extension of your very essence, your innermost will. Two is typical, though again this number is liable to vary by the Beast. There is the cutting knife, commonly called the cleaver, and then there is the boning knife, or the whisper.
 - i. The cleaver ought to be long, around two feet and a half, sturdy, without being heavy, and well-balanced. This will be your battering ram, tearing through scale, hide, gristle, and bone. It will take you wherever you wish to go, and because of this you must show restraint. Do not let power dull your precision.

- ii. The whisper should be a foot long, thin, and flexible. It should bend when brought against a hard surface. This knife is your key to the wealth locked within the Beast's shell. With the whisper in hand you will release musculature from its cage, draw blood vessels out of hiding, pluck bladders and bezoars like plump apples. Never force a cut with your boning knife. You must let the blade guide you along the path of its choosing, which, like flowing water, will meet no resistance. When used correctly, you will hardly feel like you are doing anything at all.
- d. Now the matter of gloves, which unfortunately requires some explanation. Recently, we have seen the emergence of a vocal party of Carvers who feel that Wurmhide gauntlets sully the integrity of our craft. Proponents of 'natural' Carving, as they refer to it, claim there exists an appreciable difference in precision between gloved and gloveless fingers. This, despite the fact that Wurmhide was specifically selected by the Guild for its pliability and ease of use. Not to mention that this opinion consists almost wholly of the few individuals who have not received hand-related burns, lacerations, buboes, or breakages on the job. As you may have surmised by our admittedly apparent bias, we recommend gauntlets be worn by all Carvers, especially those new to the profession. Certainly there is a time and place for egoistic grandstanding, but the sixth hour stuck in the guts of a Beast is not that time and not that place. There are endless methods to see your hands become mere meat while carving. Many Beasts bristle with poisonous barbs, both outside and in. There is boiling blood to consider, and flesh that glows redder than coals. There are cilia that slice off skin faster than the eye can see. And these are only a few dangers. Make no mistake, your skill and sense will keep you from the worst of them, but your gloves will keep you from the rest. Keep them polished, keep them dry, and they will last you a lifetime.
- e. Last, sanity candles. Woe is the Carver who, upon a bountiful Harvest, becomes separated from the caravan without a cache of backup candles. This may be difficult to imagine, but there is nothing more essential for your ability to harvest regularly than a healthy supply of sanity candles. These candles, or 'candy' as they are colloquially known, are distilled from the oil of the Beast of Agloe, and less commonly from the Beast of Fell Nails. The struggle for reason Carvers faced before their introduction one can hardly fathom.

Now, as has been mentioned, Beasts exist most frequently in a state of deep sleep. In this state, there is little need for concern over one's mind. Once the Beast awakens, (which is inevitable, for it is the very waking of the Beast that signals the end of the Harvest) it retaliates against us by shattering the firmament of the world itself. The principles of space and time on which we base our lives begin to come undone. Matter warps,

appears and disappears at will. A man soon finds himself victim of a gnawing at his sanity that snaps at everything logical and good. The Beast unleashes a maelstrom against order, and it is naught but candles that light out way through. A standard-issue candle defines a sphere of five-foot radius within which the Beast's perverse influence is kept at bay. Each caravan wagon additionally lights its own, larger candle, which should envelop all parties. That said, once the Beast wakes, there is not one thing in the world you can rely on besides your own self. Keep two candles on you, always. One for yourself, and one for your comrade. Should the latter every be required, you will not find yourself wanting for drink for quite some time.

VI. THE ORDER OF OPERATIONS

So commences the final portion of this introductory guide. We have explained the individual components: magic, mutations, Beasts, and arms. Now we will combine these pieces to form a complete picture of a successful Harvest. We will suppose it is the day of departure from our own beloved Tarnith. The Beast to be harvested will be Phyladaem the Thousand-Legged, who inhabits the darkest depths of the Deathwood. There are two primary materials to be harvested from Phyladaem. The first is the chitin that comprises his multitudinous segments. Once cleaned of debris and polished, it will be used whole as lightweight, discrete armor. Any cracked or misshapen pieces will be ground up to produce shellac. The second primary material is pulp, or the Beast's muscular tissue. Though scarce in quantity relative to his fellows, Phyladaem's pulp can be mashed and smoked into an effective cure for aches of the brain, ear, and sinus.

The base unit of the caravan is the wagon, which consists of one driver, one Carver, and one apprentice. The driver will also serve as a loader once carving commences. As the expected bounty increases, so does the number of wagons. For the purposes of this hypothetical we will assume four dozen wagons. In addition to the basic crew, there are spread out across the caravan several cooks, carpenters, cartographers, apothecaries, blacksmiths, and barbers. A Quartermaster oversees these craftsmen and the caravan's logistics, while a Master Carver directs the Harvest itself. Particularly large Beasts may demand multiple Master Carvers. Four Shapers and one Breaker make up the mutant crew. If the Breaker happens to be skilled in flight, they will often forgo the voyage and simply meet up with the caravan at the last safe haven. It is thirty-day's travel from the gates of Tarnith to Phyladaem's lair. Once loaded up, the caravan departs posthaste.

The first weeks of travel bear few incidents as the caravan rides on well-trod roads outside the Deathwood. Once bound by the Shadow Mountains, however, the party must delve into the forest. The Shapers begin the brunt of their work here, as they patrol the lengths of the caravan and eliminate any of Phyladaem's conjured servant-creatures, as well as any of the other monstrous

beings that inhabit the Deathwood in great number. The nights spent in the forest are few, but harrowing.

Upon arriving at Phyladaem's lair, the Carvers depart from their wagons and travel on foot. There is no turning back now. The Beast at last sighted, curled within a great sleep, numberless legs twitching incessantly, the Breaker cracks his frontal and occipital bones and begins to suppress the Beast's waking instinct. At this point half of the Carvers and their apprentices scale the many-segmented creature. They don their masks and promptly start cutting off pieces of chitin. Another team of Carvers makes for the interior, sawing through its armor and extracting chunks of pulp. The loose materials drop to the forest floor, where the rest of the crew pack them into barrels and load them onto the wagons. During this time the Shapers are hard at work keeping all personnel safe from the waves of servant-creatures summoned by the Beast's discomfort. Many a Quartermaster have tried to cut costs by skimping on Shapers, but you will not oft hear from them. They scarcely return.

The carving continues for as long as possible, typically between eight and twelve hours. The length depends on the skill of the Shapers, the skill of the Carvers, and the skill of the Breaker. Shapers may become overwhelmed by monsters, in which case the Harvest is immediately abandoned. This is rare, but devastating. The Carvers must be careful to avoid striking any nerves during their work. This stimulation increases the Beast's waking instinct and places further strain on the Breaker. The Breaker truly holds the success of the Harvest in her hand, for it is by her powers that the Beast does not wake at the first small disturbance.

Returning to our hypothetical Harvest, we will assume that the carving lasts for a good nine hours. Few mistakes were made, but Phyladaem was particularly unrestful this evening. As the Beast squirms and writhes, the Breaker finally signals to the Master Carver that she is relinquishing control. The Master Carver blows his whistle, and immediately all persons on or in the Beast cease their work and rush back to their wagon. The drivers, having made sure all along that their cargo is secure, set off at once. The sanity candles are lit, and just as the Breaker loses control she is picked up and placed on the back of the last retreating wagon. The next instant there is a hiss that seems to come from within the head of each man. A terrible, agonizing hiss, like skin splitting endlessly, which is the sound of Phyladaem's scream. The trees surrounding the caravan begin to splinter into tendrils that weave together into a maze. The head driver navigates through the twisting paths, beset on all sides by the howling and chattering of beings with unnaturally large mouths. Two Shifters ride the lead wagon, slashing the black branches with scythes of bone in an attempt to keep the path clear. The other two Shifters man the rear, hacking away at the horde of morphing monsters that threaten to gain purchase on the rattling wood.

Near the middle of the caravan, a wagon's candle flickers for a moment. Perhaps the wick was not set properly, or perhaps this too is an act of the madness closing in on the crew. Whatever the reason, it is a fatal error. In an instant the dirt below the wagon opens, revealing a bottomless black gash in the earth. An arm the size of a trunk rises out of the darkness and grasps the front axle. And instant later arm, wagon, and crew are disappeared, and the driver behind them rushes to close the gap. For what may be hours, or may be minutes, the caravan proceeds. At last, a ray of light breaks through the canopy. They have reached the limits of the Deathwood, and reality has begun to solidify.

Once under the open sky, past any immediate threat, the Quartermaster initiates a full count. One wagon lost. Three souls. Six barrels of chitin. These are minimal losses. So minimal as to make the Harvest a total success. The perfunctory rites are held, quickly, because all are tired, hungry, and haggard. Then there are cheers, and the opening of casks. Shortly, all settle in for the journey ahead. The day has been profitable, and civilization is only a few dreams away.

Recruits, this is a hypothetical, but we have endeavored to construct it out of the averages of true Harvests. Once you grip your knife for the first time, fear becomes a scheduled portion of your life. As does pain. As does loss. These things will come to pass. Prepare yourself for them, build defenses against them, or you too will be lost. It is a perilous path we travel. Know this, wherever you are, whether deep in the womb of a mountainous Beast or drinking with friends upon your return. Ignorance of death is death. Ignorance of fear is fear. Welcome, Comrades. Welcome.

May you sow what you reap.

The Skin Game

Master Morgan wakes me early. The world outside the dormitory window is still black, and the other apprentices are still asleep.

“Kit,” he says, moving my shoulder.

“I’m awake.”

“We’re leaving. Pack your things.”

I grab my knife from under my pillow. “Done.” We smile. It’s a joke we share, packing. Carvers don’t carry much. We take what we need from the ground and its creatures. I pull on my shirt and trousers and boots. We slip out of the academy. We slip out of the city.

The only sounds I hear are the rustling of fabric, and my breath, cooling into white clouds that crash against me.

*

The sun shines at us from across the world. My boots are slick with dew and grass. I am nervous. Not for our current trip. I am excited to spend time away from school. Morgan is taking me hunting in the inkwood. Strange animals wander there, filled with treasures.

No, what scares me is the harvest. The caravan leaves in seven days, and, for the first time, I will leave with it. I should not be afraid. Morgan has trained me well. I move my knife like a finger, and the use of every piece of equipment is engraved in my heart.

Still, I cannot stop imagining myself curled deep within the Beast, cutting flesh, and through a simple error, maybe an itch on my nose, severing a nerve and waking the monster, knowing as its screams break me apart that I have sentenced my companions to death. I feel for my knife at my hip, run my fingertip along its blade. It is smooth and cold. It soothes me.

Morgan puts a hand on my shoulder and hands me a hunk of bread. I eat as I walk, glad that he knows me without speaking.

*

At a crossroad we see a small village. Just a few huts and fields of grain. A woman comes out to meet us. Her apron is worn and ragged, and her smile stops at her eyes.

“You sirs headed to inkwood?” Her voice sounds like crops failing.

“Aye,” says Morgan.

“I’d speak with you. Got some work inside for the young sir, if he would. We’ve fresh plums.”

I look at Morgan. He thinks for a moment, then nods. I run to the cabin. Fruit is worth any labor. It’s one of the few riches they have in the country. The interior of the

shack smells of damp earth and chaff. A child sits on the floor, shucking a pile of corn. In the corner an old man creaks back and forth in a rocking chair.

“Greetings,” I say.

“Mm.”

The child passes me an ear of corn. I sit on the dirt with him and begin to peel the husk. We work in silence. It’s easier than skinning animals, and soon I’ve made a stack of gleaming cobs.

“Wow,” says the boy.

The old man coughs. “I suppose you’re going to the woods then.”

“Yes.”

“Best be wary,” he says, his voice low, “shifter runs loose up there, mad as a hare in heat.”

“That can’t be. Shifters are loyal to the city.”

He sits up suddenly. “You think I joke? Why, a band of the king’s men stomped around here weeks ago, looking for him. Ate their fill from our stores. Twelve soldiers marched into those woods, but a few nights later only one crawls back. The madman had his fill of them too!”

The old man cackles to himself. I don’t know if I believe him. I don’t know if he’s even sane. He settles down and coughs.

The boy pulls two plums from a basket and hands them to me with a serious look.

I leave, and the moving air brings some relief from the old cabin. I’ve never had a plum before. I hope I’m able to eat both. I hear the end of the woman’s conversation with Morgan as I get close.

“Still, sir, anything would be a blessing.”

Morgan sounds distant. “I don’t promise what I don’t have. But we will return this way, and at that time I may be in a more charitable position.”

“Oh, thank you! That is all I ask. Forgive me one moment.”

She hurries back to her home. I show Morgan the plums. He takes one and sniffs it, then places it back in my palm.

“Not good?” I ask.

“They’re fine. Too sweet for me.”

The lady returns, breathing hard and cradling something in her hands. She holds it like it was the last ember in winter. Fangs, carved with agricultural sigils. Each one strung on a piece of thread.

“My husband made these, back when. Please.”

She places one around both of our necks. The fang is the size of my middle finger, but it feels light against my skin.

“Many blessings upon you,” she says, “good hunting.”

“Thank you, madam. Fare well.”

*

We walk by a lake, the surface of the water sparkling like stars. I ask Morgan what the woman wanted.

“What country folk always want. Anything. It shouldn’t be hard to bring something back. Not if you can help it, eh?”

I grin. For most the inkwood is a treacherous place. They think of the creatures that live there and only perceive their threats. But we carvers see the rewards threaded within the danger. There are many opportunities open to those willing to tread where others won’t.

Thinking of the inkwood reminds me of the old man’s warning. I share his words with Morgan.

“Is it possible? Shifters are bound to their code, aren’t they?”

I wait for a response, but none comes. It is minutes later, when I’ve almost forgotten what it was I said, and more concerned with a stone wedged under my heel, that I hear Morgan’s rough voice. His face, too, is coarse with thought.

“Their code is a leash, Kit. The king may speak of honor, but really it’s all about control. Don’t you sleep better, knowing that the deadliest people in the world kneel to the crown, that they’ve sworn their lives to the city? The king does. But sometimes the leash gets pulled too tight, and it snaps.”

I am afraid. The shifters are unnerving enough when they’re on our side. The thought of one gone rogue makes my blood shiver.

“Are we in danger?”

Morgan stops and looks me in the eye. “Consider this. The inkwood is vast, and we are only mites in its fur. When we move, we are silent, and when we strike, we are lethal. If a shifter so happens to cross our path, it is him who will be in danger.”

He is right, of course. I will face creatures much more frightening than anything in the inkwood soon enough. When we are walking again, he adds, “there is no insignificant bounty on a traitorous soldier, let alone a traitorous shifter. Let that temper your fear.”

“I will,” I say, my voice stronger than I feel.

I will.

*

My feet begin to ache in my boots. I take a bite of plum. The skin is crisp and cold, and the flesh dissolves into syrup on my tongue. I wipe the juice off my chin and lick the back of my hand. The other I will save for later. Something to look forward to, tonight.

*

The day sinks into dusk as we arrive at the inkwood. It is an eerie place. The tree trunks are as white and gnarled as bone. The leaves are black and heavy. We make our way quietly through the ashen grass. The leaves block almost all of the sunlight, and what remains is faint and waxy. Whatever lives here learns to despise the sun.

We tread carefully, the woods getting darker and darker all the time. A breeze rolls past. The trees shiver. Morgan holds up his hand, and I stop mid-stride.

In front of us, out of the gloom, emerges a long, pale head. Its eyes are the size of my palms. A body follows, covered in a hide as deep and dark as oil. Four thin legs poke into the ground. It moves silently. Morgan pinches the tip of his knife between his knuckles, brings the blade to eye level, and waits. The moment hangs in the air, swaying back and forth like the handle of polished bone. The creature pauses, turns a watery eye toward us.

Perhaps it knows, in the way that animals know these things, that it has wandered into its death.

It tenses its muscles, but before it can jump there's the sharp sound of Morgan's breath, and the flash of his wrist, and already the knife has vanished from his fingers and buried itself in the creature's chest. It stumbles beyond a line of bushes, black blood dripping on the chalky grass. I grab my knife and run after it. One push upward into the throat flushes out the rest of its life, and it crumples to the ground a corpse.

Soon we have a fire going. We skin the beast, which Morgan calls a Siltin. The hide dries on wood poles as we eat its violet flesh. The meat is full of salt and keeps me thirsty long after I've emptied my waterskin. Our fire casts black figures on the pale trees. Shadows stretch across the forest, their limbs long and thin. We put out the fire and unfurl our bedrolls. That night I dream of pale shapes writhing.

*

The morning, when it comes, is quiet. The contrasts that defined the inkwood on our arrival seem softer now, almost gentle. Layers of mist course through the forest, as silent and peaceful as a distant river. They take away the edges from this place. Far away a songbird sings something lonely, perhaps, like me, finding a kind of companionship in the echo, even as it leaves us behind. I lie there with my spine against the earth. I've never felt so perfectly still, as if for the first time in my life I'm where I'm supposed to be.

I wake up for the second time and see that Morgan is still asleep. I can't recall this ever happening before. For as long as I can remember my master has been a force in motion, a pair of moving legs, eyes held forward, scanning, fingers twitching above a knife-handle. Never have I seen him at peace, but he is at peace now, his chest rising and falling in the same rhythm as any man's, the same as any child's.

I pull the remaining plum from my bag and clutch it in my palm. I'll be able to savor this one. As I'm about to bite a murmur comes from Morgan's lips, and his brow draws tight with fear. It must be a nightmare, though with everything Morgan's seen I can't imagine what still scares him. Then again, with everything he's seen, maybe it isn't a nightmare. Maybe it's just a memory. I put away the plum and draw my knife. Pulling myself up against the base of a tree, I wait, the tip of my blade held out against the mist.

I'll wait as long as I need to. I don't know it yet, but I no longer fear the harvest. It isn't a choice, and it isn't earned, it is simply what's necessary to protect the people I love.

The Old Country

In a small cottage outside the iron walls of the city Hema, a young girl was about to fall asleep. Her grandfather, who also lived in the cottage, and had not received a moment of peace or quiet all day, awaited this development with great interest. The battered old man softly creaked back and forth in his chair, watching his daughter's daughter as she yawned and laid her head down on the straw mattress. The red coals in the hearth, dying down since supper, at last burned themselves away. The room was dark, save for the milky rays of moonlight peeking through the open window. Mumbling, the girl flipped onto her other side. The man took out a tinderbox and set about lighting his pipe.

"Grandpa?" came a voice from the girl's turned back.

"Ayuh."

"Tell me a story."

The girl's parents had both died in the last attack from the city Darse. Harvesting rights, again. His father had gone the same way. The old man tamped down the dried vine with his thumb. Nimble fingers procured a match.

"Little late for stories, little one. Close your eyes."

"I really can't sleep Grandpa, please. I'm serious."

He bit the stem and inhaled. Fragrant smoke pooled within his mouth and leaked from his nostrils. Tomorrow he would sell the last of their grain, if anyone would take it. Blight had struck their field like a fever. He sighed, an old kind of sigh that was the closest he came to a form of worship.

"Alright, you've caught me in a sentimental mood. I'll tell you a story my Grandma told me when I was only a cub. A story from the old country. But you promise me you'll be asleep before I finish."

A small yawn. "I promise."

The old man released a phantom of smoke into the moonlight. Half his face was made silver, the other half made black.

"Very well. A long time ago, before your grandpa's grandpa's grandpa was even a thought in someone's head, there was a world, and it was filled with monsters. It had people in it too, but there were not many of them, and besides, they didn't have much of a say in anything. They were slaves to the monsters, and eventually food. And there were many different kinds of monsters, back then. Some had eyes covering the whole of their ugly bodies. Some had tusks that sprouted from their jaws like wicked swords. Some were covered from horn to hood in impenetrable scales, and others wore skin as pale as the full moon. There were monsters that slithered, monsters that crawled, monsters whose footsteps made no sound at all. There were monsters that shrank, and monsters that grew, and monsters that filled up the sky as they flew."

"I get it, Grandpa."

“No you don’t, little one. Now be quiet or I’ll say the rest in my head.”

The girl was quiet.

“Now let me see. Yes, there were countless monsters, and no matter what shape they took, or what size, they found no greater pleasure than in inflicting terrible pain upon a human before gobbling her up for supper. So this world had existed for untold ages, and so it would exist for ages more. Or so it seemed. In a small, violent corner of the world, where the monsters were exceptionally cruel and the humans exceptionally enslaved, there lived a woman who had the strength to do something about their terrible situation. This woman, called Yvaine, managed to kill her monstrous overlord, and took its great magical power for herself. Now, back then no one knew anything about glassbones or skulls, and the monsters made sure to eat anyone who did. But the monsters didn’t get Yvaine. No, she was quite tricky and secretive about her abilities. She sent messengers under the cover of invisibility across the continent, armed with scrolls and enchanted items created by the sorceress herself. Along with these tools she sent word of her plan: freedom for humanity. Every human, no matter how far, would make the journey to the sorceress’s home. The plan seemed impossible, but, as with much of the impossible, it was only new. The monsters had grown lazy in their eternal rule, and with the enchanted items at their disposal, most humans escaped from their masters without a trace. Some, of course, were not so fortunate, and the joy of those who escaped was tempered by the loss of their brothers and sisters.”

The old man sat in silence for a moment. He looked out of the window at the night sky, trying to remember a time when he had not had to struggle to stay alive. He could not. The girl was still.

“Once gathered at the sorceress’s home, humanity had its salvation revealed to them at last. At Yvaine’s command, a doorway opened in the air, beyond which lay a beautiful and boundless land. Grass covered the ground instead of jagged rock, and trees scraped the fathomless sky in the thousands and tens of thousands. Bewildered, the humans stepped through the doorway into their new home. The new land would bare its own trials in time, but humanity was finally free to prosper away from the tyranny of tooth and claw. And so we have ever since. That is the end of the story, little one. Have you kept your promise?”

He watched the slow rise and fall of the girl’s back. The muffled sounds of dreams escaped her lips, disguised as breath.

“Very well. Sleep peacefully, little one.”

True, his life had been a hard one, cruel more often than kind. And yet, was it not also true that he was alive? That his granddaughter, somehow, was alive? Despite the toil, the war, the blight, they carried on, just as their ancestors had carried on. Perhaps that was enough. Perhaps that was everything they needed. If it was, then he had done his job, and soon his turn would be over. Soon, he could rest.

The chair creaked softly as the old man rocked back and forth, dancing with the moon.

The Fae

Our voyage, doomed as it was from the start, quickly abandoned its purpose and devolved into a futile struggle for survival. A broken axle forced us to stop for repairs just three days out of Aluria. Had Nemil's wife not just come down with fever, or had Grisha's brother come back from the front, we might have taken our time and risked the job. But things happened as they happened, and the mood was dire. Despite my pleas we took the shorter path through the Faerie Woods. There are reasons people do not take the shorter path. Lost and panicked, we were captured by the Fae before sundown. When dealing with the Fae inside their domain, there is little chance for survival. Not survival of the body, but of the mind. Unable to kill the former, the Fae long ago turned the whole of their cruel and devious nature toward breaking the latter. We were doomed.

The high-pitched whine of their wings stung my ears as they restrained me. Of course to us a Faerie restraint appears like a warm embrace, and there was no speck of malice in my captors' prismatic eyes, but I could not move all the same. The leader of their band sorted through our wagon with fluttering hands and took the blood-oil meant for distant Kroenbor. I couldn't imagine what use they had for it. Reports are thin, but all know the Fae despise machinery. Its logic is ill-suited to them.

The Fae led us deeper into the trees, frequently lapsing into bouts of hysterical laughter and at all other times wearing toothed smiles so wide they seemed carved. The vegetation I recognized from saner realms appeared now in the colors and textures of gemstones, never once repeating. The fauna took on strange and improbable shapes, as though cast from early and imperfect molds. And yet for every corrupted counterpart I could place were a dozen that baffled me further. So capricious was the Faeries' influence that all I had seen morphed into new forms as we passed. I only hoped that my end would come in one piece, and not as a gentle descent into a similar madness.

Shortly we were brought to a twisted and burnt palace and placed at the foot of the Faerie Queen, whose wings were like infinite stained glass, and whose skin blushed with every color of the rainbow. Our fourth man, Reynard, was missing—likely lost wandering the labyrinthine palatial corridors, where he would no doubt be subsumed.

As children we are taught that the Thrairni may not harm a Human. We are told the story of how ancestor won this right from their game-loving king. But I assure you that, trapped in this court of mad devils, one wishes more than anything that our ancestor never bothered, and the Fae abided by the same violent codes as the rest of us. For it is obvious that this forced pacifism only drove them to practice trickery and deceit over the sword and axe, and the cruelty with which they wield these implements surpasses that of any mortal man.

The Queen began with Nemil, posing him a riddle in a jovial hiss. The Fae adore riddles. They are the preferred mode of speech. Perhaps overwhelmed, Nemil floundered, and could not bring himself to raise an answer. The Queen expressed her displeasure in a shower of emerald dust, and Nemil fell asleep. The courtiers who took him away cackled gleefully, already plotting what sort of nightmare his life would become.

The Queen then placed her eyes on Grisha, and asked him a riddle. Grisha answered with his eyes closed, his tears and sweat mixing into one substance on the polished floor. He was wrong. Giggling sprites snapped a birdcage around him and hoisted him to ceiling, sliding him into place among what I only then realized were hundreds of the same. The hollow men inside the cages stared at him, silently, before thrashing their limbs against the bars and uttering stilted chirps. The unnatural animal sound amused the courtiers, who hummed and sang along.

And then there was only me, and the Queen gave me her riddle. I did not need to think, because I already possessed the answer. It is the answer to every Faerie riddle, which is mankind. For this the Queen was pleased, and I was let go. But though I found my way back to firm ground, and even, after a time, to my family, I was not free. The sky was no longer an azure lake to my eyes, but a stagnant pond. The summer breeze was rank and cheerless. Even my wife's face, for which I married her, seemed to me as plain as an earthen plate, and I could not tell apart my children.

The Vines

Crucifer followed the scent of blood. He stalked through the forest without a sound. A cloak covered him below the neck and shifted like a shadow as he moved, brushing by leaves made silver in the moonlight. He was hungry. He had not eaten for several months.

The scent, by its perfume and strength, was obviously a human. They tasted best, of course. Crucifer's claws bit into the earth as he stepped. His nails, long and sharp as razors, twitched at the tip of each finger. The scent grew thick in the air, so close to something Crucifer could sink his dripping fangs into. He anticipated the burst of oxygen-rich blood that would accompany the bite. A red tongue moistened red lips. He had arrived.

He stood behind a curtain of hanging vines. A soft voice in song drifted through from the other side, and underneath, water dripping and lapping happily. Crucifer smiled. She was taking a bath in a pond. He didn't smell another human scent. He would not be interrupted by a sister or lover whom he would have to drink later. Crucifer slid his finger through the vines and pulled them apart. She was there, glistening as she washed in the clearing, flush with light from the lantern beside her, scattering wet reflections on the water's surface. She brushed back her hair.

Crucifer closed the vines. It was a reflex. He inhaled, quietly, and clutched his rough, knuckled hands against his heart. His heart had not moved in six hundred years. It was dead. And yet, he had felt something course through it then, something awfully light and painful. He heard a crack and glanced down. He had stepped on a twig. Crucifer had not stepped on a twig in six hundred years. The singing from the pond cut off, and a clear voice followed.

"Hello," it said, "is anybody there?" Crucifer turned to leave at once, then stopped himself. What had changed? The conditions remained ideal. He could still catch her and shrivel her into a husk. But despite this information Crucifer stayed as still as a frozen lake. He felt cornered all of a sudden, restrained by the woman's call. It was pathetic.

"Lo, Madam. I..." Crucifer coughed. His voice was hoarse from neglect. "I heard a song, and was drawn here. I will leave." Crucifer paused and, hearing nothing, began to slip away as noiselessly as he had arrived. Then the bright voice came ringing back from the cleaning.

"There's no need for that, Sir. I'm always flattered to have an audience, particularly when one appears all by itself. I think I'll sing a bit more for you, since you came all this way. Though please, do me the service of coming closer, would you? Then I can take a look at your face, and you can pay me all sorts of compliments."

Crucifer stood and thought. She was not afraid. Why? Dangerous creatures lived in the woods. Some of them more dangerous than himself. He spoke, "are you not frightened? Men who happen by the woods at night oft possess...ill intentions...and besides men, beasts roam after dark. And hunt."

Laughter emanated from beyond the vines. "Sir, if you possessed any such intentions, I'd die of shock before you could act on them. Such men do not speak so

modestly, in my experience. As for beasts, well, you may be right. All the better you accompany me for a while, in case a dreaded beast comes seeking its pound of flesh!" She cackled to herself in a surprisingly deep voice. A breeze weaved through the vines. Crucifer heard her sigh. "If nothing else, I do tire of shouting into the trees. You'll make me ruin my voice, and then all will be for nothing."

Crucifer's fingers clenched into fists. He could not reveal himself and let the woman live. She would run back to her village and speak of him, and a mob would whip itself into fury hunting him, and he would have to hide, or kill them. It had been a very long time since Crucifer allowed himself to hide. There would be blood, and death. So it had gone every time Crucifer failed to kill his prey. But blood and death had never before made him feel regret.

He suddenly felt incredibly exhausted, as if the leaden weight of every one of his years were stacked upon his back. It was the sensible thing to do, to turn away. It would cause less suffering. But Crucifer could not help himself. "Madam...forgive me, but I could not reveal myself while you are indecent."

A silence fell about the clearing. Insects chattered to each other in their clicky tongues deep in the forest. The solemn coo of a lone owl slipped through the leaves. The woman was silent. It was as if she were not even breathing. Then she spoke again, carefully. "Excuse my ignorance, but may I ask how you know I am undressed?" Crucifer found that the stale air in his lungs had left him.

"Forgive me..." he started, until the woman said, "I only ask because my clothes are right beside me, so it stands to reason that in order to know of my indecency, you must have gazed at me while I bathed." Her voice was mocking and sharp. She clicked her tongue. "Perhaps I was mistaken about your intentions, Sir. Perhaps you are one of the beasts who hunt in these woods at night."

Crucifer's blood did not circulate, and still it froze into glass at her last words. He knew the woman could not see him. He was tempted to prove her right anyway. To step into the light of her lantern and let her see his monstrous form. Once more he was overcome with exhaustion. "I happened to glance through the vines, Madam. Forgive me."

The woman's voice returned right away, indignant. "You mean to say that you saw me, fully stripped, washing myself, and still you refuse to come closer? By the gods above, I've never been so insulted in my life! Do you find me repulsive? Have I offended you with my indecency?"

"No, not at all," said Crucifer.

"Then tell me, what do you think of me, if I am not so intolerable to your eyes?"

A tinge of playfulness threatened to emerge in Crucifer's words, only to be gutted by an unblemished mass of fear. But fear of what?

"To tell you the truth, Madam," spoke Crucifer, "I found you too beautiful to behold for long, and, as with the sun, I was forced to avert my gaze. But like the sun, the sight of you has been burned into my mind, and reveals itself again each time I close my eyes."

Crucifer smiled, for he was finally able to speak truthfully. Also, did he smile, because he found his skill with language had not waned over the years, as he had suspected it might. His smile displayed long, curved teeth, made to kill. The woman beyond the vines crooned.

“Now that, that is better. What a treat, for a stranger in the woods to be such a towering poet. But now I must ask. Why do you stay away, if my visage delights you so?”

The smile on Crucifer’s face vanished, and left a hard line in its place. Still, he could not help himself from speaking truthfully. Perhaps because it was his desire. “I am afraid you will find me repulsive,” he said. The response came after a moment.

“How silly. If I found you repulsive we wouldn’t still be speaking now, would we? What’s more, I feel compelled to inform you that the water’s temperature is simply perfect. Don’t give up such an opportunity so lightly.”

As she spoke Crucifer had stepped closer and closer to the curtain of vines. Her voice carried him forward, as if in a trance. He felt no obstacle to walking into the clearing and laying down by her side. His hand brushed against the vines as her voice fell quiet. Now he hesitated. In all his centuries of life Crucifer had never felt so afraid. He had never felt there was so much to lose. But if he was so afraid of loss, loss of something he couldn’t even name, something he didn’t even have yet, had only spotted for the briefest moment, caught for the slightest touch, then why not discover what it truly was, even if it disappeared forever after?

Crucifer stepped through the vines.

He watched as the woman turned her head, droplets of water falling from her golden hair, and fixed her eyes on his face. She had red eyes, and the light reflected against them like drops of blood. She exuded warmth and fire. She was the sun, and Crucifer had been cold for a very, very long time. A smile bloomed on her face. Her voice flowed over him like honey, and he felt the petty pins of fear melt under such soothing weight.

“There you are, at last! And to think you feared my disgust. Please, rinse yourself off. After that, I’m of the mind that you should tell me your name.”

Crucifer smiled, and his fangs caught the light of the lantern. It occurred to him that he had not thought of his hunger since he first peered through the vines. The hunger no longer felt so raw. It had slunk somewhere deeper within his body, or, perhaps, become replaced by something else. It was not a bad feeling.

“Forgive me, Madam, for making you wait,” spoke Crucifer. He removed his cloak, set it down beside the other, and slid into the water without a sound.

A Story for Children

They sat around the fire, two weeks separated from the city. It would be another week before they crossed into the mountains, into Cotholon's domain, and, all going well, carved her to shreds. They told stories to pass the time, as they did every night when no one had died. Most were exceedingly vulgar and little else. Some were myths, more than half-forgotten, about people who died for honor and other old things. The tales went around and around, until someone remembered a story from their youth, told by a shoemaker with one eye. For some reason it had stuck with him all this time, and it went like this.

It was once said that there existed a wealthy baron who, after carving for many years, made his fortune in trade, buying and selling all the sorts of things one has to buy and sell in order to furnish a merchant vessel and keep it profitable. Also, it was said, there existed the baroness, who was both beautiful and deeply sad, despite her husband's assurances that the latter could not derive from the former. The components of her life did not provide her with much meaning, and she grew tired of treating the symptoms of her woe rather than the cause. In truth, the baron was also sad, because ever since he retired his hook and blade to the fireplace mantel he felt as though the world was simply waiting for him to die. He did have children after all, children increasingly familiar with the power of gold and the rites of inheritance.

Thus the manor fell into a gloomy torpor, even in the summer months when life seemed incapable of withering. Until one day when a breaker by the name of Grindaenacker stormed the manor with a gang of mindless golems and, among other crimes, killed the servants, drank the wine, sacked the vault, and turned the baroness into a fox, whom he stuffed in the sack with the gold. By the time the baron finished uttering curses unto Grindaenacker and his entire foul lineage the sorcerer had already vanished into the sky.

The baron's son pleaded to call for their bannermen. It was the sensible thing to do. When one's manor is sacked, one ought to call his allies at once and engage in some well-deserved countersacking. But a strange kind of fire seized the baron then, a fire unfelt for so long he had thought it lost. Ignoring his son, he grabbed his dust-streaked knife, saddled a fresh horse from the stable, and set off alone for the breaker's tower with the wind at his back. Despite the pain in his joints, he couldn't help but smile at the thought of the righteous and harrowing quest to come.

All to say that it didn't take long for the baron to arrive at Grindaenacker's lair, break down the door, and scale the winding stone steps. The surface of the stone was covered in elaborately carved runes that glowed when touched, releasing spikes and blasts of heat and ice, and whatever else Grindaenacker had been able to stuff into them. The baron's carving reflexes, dormant for decades, kept him alive, if not unburnt. He burst through the laboratory door, where Grindaenacker sat bent over a table. The breaker looked at him with eyes and mouth agape. Without further ceremony the baron grabbed the mage's head and struck it against the wall until he turned his wife back into a human. The baroness snarled, then looked around in confusion. Quickly the couple recovered

their stolen treasure and headed home, leaving Grindaenacker to groan softly on the cold unforgiving floor.

Like a pond after rainfall, the surface of life returned to its natural state, while underneath all was forever altered. Business carried on as it had. But the baron kept his knife sharp and well-polished, so that it carried the sun as he swung it through the air on horseback, laughing like a child again. If the world wanted him to die, it would have to catch him first. Meanwhile the baroness had learned much from her time on four legs. The simple joys of sensation opened themselves up to her in ways long lost to humankind. Under the full moon her bed often lay empty, and servants were wise to ignore the blood freckling her lips and stray tufts of fur caught in her hair. Purpose, it seemed, could be taken just as much as given. And so it was, and so it is, and so it will be.

Of course, this is not a story for children. It is told to children, but it is for the adults they will become. Adults who will willingly jump into an open maw, in the chance they might slip between the teeth. Many will die, and most will leave, but some will get exactly what they seek. This is a story for those people. So that they may not die while they live.