

WHERE THE VALLEY LIES

C. J. BARTELS

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NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

To my dear friends, I shall admit, this book is meant more for me than you. Unorthodox in tone, to mix and mingle words may seem to be all I have done. If you wish to set it down, I will not be offended. As for the story, no timeframe has been allotted, no date given. Noun, verb, and adjective have strayed in appearance, and structure has been left for dead. Further, the reason for its origin is somewhat of a mystery. Inspired by a dream and replayed in the voice of a song is all I can remember. No adventure will you find, except if you try to analyze. No tragedy will exist unless you must reread a line. (And for this I do apologize — for it will happen — but consider yourself warned). A fading memory of an old man is all that is contained. If you are a child, no Dickens' ghost will appear, nor character contained with such expertise, though it is a Christmas Eve like no Seuss, Baldacci, or Hegg. If you are a professor of English, or are looking for any literary value and wish to assign a grade, I tell you now—I have failed. If you are a student of the pen, fear not, for I am certain this hazard is not contagious and will only infect a very few. With these words of warning and holiday cheer, I present you a story both beautiful and familiar, written as a reminder, and possibly only pleasing to me.

— C. J. Bartels

YEA, THOUGH I WALK THROUGH THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH,

I WILL FEAR NO EVIL;

FOR YOU ARE WITH ME;

YOUR ROD AND YOUR STAFF, THEY COMFORT ME.

—PSALM 23:4 (NKJV)

DEDICATED TO...

...ALL.

THE KING

Through the rising arched window, the moon cast a pug shadow of his teetering figure. Each finger curled and disappeared beneath clenched fists. Club-shaped forms shuddered at the ends of ridged forearms and bent elbows.

He had felt pressure like this before, against his forehead and eyelids and teeth a year earlier when his wife passed to the nether. Then he had almost not overcome the strain; this night felt a magnification of that night. Like sun against an ant's smoking form, if his skull burst he would have been relieved, though his thoughts were far from his own pain. A powerfully clenching wail rose somewhere from within, though only a quiver and moan reached his lips. His body dropped and his knees made a single thud. His chest swept the cold wooden floor. Another deep cry rang from his lips

and rose above the stone walls, leaving a fading scar on the massive wooden beams overhead. His torso jerked up and wandered light and tethered. Each puff of winter's breath dutifully carried his grieving sobs away as another formed.

He could recall each stage of the boy's life. He choked at the image of his son's first smile, a smile that had given him a sense of peace like no other. He wept as he remembered how the boy's expertise with sword and horse had taught him that he, himself, was not as dangerous as he once believed. The boy's wrist could make a metal blade flicker with unanticipated accuracy, like that of a wick flaming and pressed sideways in a breeze. And yet, none of the spectral dissections stung like the divination of the prince's optimistic approach to the kingdom's problems. Clear to him and his court, the expectation of justice had given the people, near and far, the comfort of knowing that the next in line would treat them with the same respect that the present had ordered... until now.

Like a dagger slicing his heart short of fatal, the king's thoughts went dim as each vision drained from his veins, replaced by a foray of hostility, exposed and uncontrollable. Tears, swollen and new,

turned to question and accountability. His desire to retaliate made him seize the legs of the man who stood before him. His lips spread tight. Each tooth ground its opposite. Each eye squeezed the last of its salty flood from their corners. Unimpeded, he peered upon the one he had taken as his enemy and cried, "How can this be?"

The accused remained bowed at the neck in fear of meeting his master's stare and being perceived as the messenger, though he was the messenger. The king was a tolerant man, but the news had been taken far worse than anyone had feared. And as if a carnival mask, one with both a smile and frown, had broken in two and been aimlessly placed back together, a bitterly hideous face became visible around the king's head no matter which way it swung. "Some say he took his own life after the loss of his friends under his command and pointed his horse over the edge of the cliff. Other's say his horse threw a shoe crossing the narrow pass and he slipped. The ground was of ice."

The lowest-ranking servants had commented that without the late queen's wisdom for a council, His Majesty's temper had taken to rule. His tolerant ways and pitying stare upon despondence had not

shown themselves as frequently. Inconsistency in his mood had made his ministers hesitant to approach him with the country's problems, which in the past could be presented and quickly resolved. Other leaders, lacking interest in the old ways and silently kept in the wings, had begun to petition a change in the form of the heir. The liaison his wife had built between the people and the court, with gentle words and frugal demands, was crumbling, and for the first time the claws of a dormant beast, brutally strong and able, had begun to pull at the kingdom's foundation.

The king's eyelids pressed together as he rose and shook the gaunt man's figure into a blur.

A seam in his messenger's cloak and the strap from the satchel that hung around his neck tore as the trembling figure fell back with a shriek. Wide-eyed, he watched as King Adami's jaw emerged. His flame-reflecting eyes turned in their sockets like a demon behind a flesh-mask. "Bring me the man who is to blame!"

His messenger's quivering rags slipped from his bony shoulders and trembling arms. His boots scrambled against the slick floor as if fleeing a mad dog on the same surface that had taken the king's

son. He had never seen his master with such a look on his face. He stumbled. His shadow, out in front and somehow detached, disappeared ahead of him through the doorway.

The king cried again, "Bring me the blacksmith or I shall hang you in his place!" His voice filled the corners of the cold dark structure before silence surrounded sobs and the scurrying mice vanished.

Within the chapel, no other sound but the weeping bursts of a man broken and betrayed pooled. A crucifix set high at the top of a gold-ringed pole, now visible from where it stood behind the tall, gangly messenger peered down.

A subject to the pearl-white statue, the king studied it as both gravity and hell's minions clung to the man's ankles. The king could feel the urge to take part. All he had cherished was gone. All he had prayed for, betrayed. The downcast face of the pale ceramic no longer understood his pain, though even in clay it was clear the thorns had entered the scalp. "How could you?" his voice bellowed. "How could you do such a thing? Did you not have the courage to face me?... but a son." His body shook before the sacred. "My son!" His fist, coupled with a pure rage the king had never known before, struck out and

toppled the stand, sending the betrayed to shatter and dust. "You are no more!..." His cry climbed before it fell to the sides.

"Do you hear me?"

Sagasi, his general and confidant, stood below the arch at the other end of the room, across from where the messenger had fled. His voice was from a distance and resonated with the calm of a friend. "The crowd has begun to gather, Your Majesty."

In the corner, neither saw the jeweled robes of another, watching and taking note of the king's transgression.

THE CARPENTER

His tools glistened from years of care. Their edges had crossed his whetstone so many times that they no longer reached the length they had when new, yet their balance remained precise as though time had changed the man as the stone each blade.

Round edged and slant-tipped, curled and flat, their palm-rubbed handles had darkened in his grip, and the maker could no longer be seen in the wood. The last chisel disappeared as the cloth was gently tied and the set laid in the box. He looked up.

One final glance at his work had been the tradition. Today would be the last time he'd view the singular patterns of leaves and branches and acorns and weaving bark gathered to compose this work.

Each had been painstakingly shaped and carved into the deep-oiled Sapele, every element drawn from a specimen found on the king's land. No two the same. No pattern created to be carried to another site. Each one held it's own story, like the eyes of the townspeople and the faces of the staff. Each rendered a truth he had not thought to expect nor could have been duplicated by any of the famed artisans recommended by fashion or bid. It was not the parlor that needed his touch. This was clear as the inspiration welled up inside of him and his hands began to turn the wood and chisel. Like a prophet sent to prepare the way, he was the only one who could capture the needs of the king, and he knew it.

The old man turned the whetstone in his hand before he laid it in the corner of the case, next to the chisels, as he had so many times in the past. Its oiled surface was the reason for longevity in a trade that required an edge sharper than a sword, a precision he could feel without looking as it came off the stone. He had an idea from whence this gift had come, but even he didn't believe in ghosts. He was a carpenter, and what he believed was what he saw and touched and formed in front of his eyes with

each press and bend and cut; even so, he had a sense that his prior occupation used the blade in a much different manner.

The moon's light entered the quiet room, reflecting off the falling flakes of snow and blowing drifts that had accumulated outside. He stood and studied the illuminated patterns that wrapped the windows and doors, each feathery detail enough to hold one to silence and make him forget his woes. As a whole, the shapes that encased the fireplace and windows and walls and ceiling would surely make a heretic blush. He had even found moments when the composition had stolen his thoughts for a time, to return and discover his work had continued without him. It was beautiful. It was his masterpiece and the sum of all he had learned, and as expected, tonight, he was finished.

His finger swept the edge of an oak leaf carved three-quarters of the way down, along the right side of the last window. Its extensions had secondary sweeps and turns, rounded and contorted, unlike the leaves he had used in other locations that had grown thin and simple in their appendages. He had made note while gathering his patterns that some were pointed while others held the perfection of the

iconic shapes he had seen in the works of Friesian clocks and furniture and the detail on fine weaponry, though all came from the same grove and sometimes the same tree. He had found it exhilarating that his work had become so exact that even now, in wood, he could tell each detail's origin, whether green when plucked or dried and shrunken and picked from the ground. Like a forest left to the winds and squirrels, the composition worked splendidly. The question was, would its message be considered? Without effect, this whimsical score was no more than ornamentation, and that would not do.

The tip of his middle finger, thick-skinned and scarred, slid down another section of leaf and acorn, veering slightly with each curled tip and crooked branch. His hand touched the sill until his arm fell to his side, and a satisfaction, gathered from peace and humility, blossomed within him. It was a satisfaction that he knew well.

Considerately, wishing it did not have to come to an end, he raised the last piece of the composition, a tiny whittled basket with a sleeping child nestled inside. He brushed the fine wood shavings from its surface and set it in the arms of a small woven doll he had bartered for on his way into town. Its wound

composition stood silently in the moonlight. Each strand of the woman's dress spread and stopped on the table's top. Around its base, a ring of light gave him pause, as though he stared at a lonesome ballerina on a private stage.

His steady hand gripped the wooden handle of his toolbox and lifted it from the floor. With one last transient gaze, he opened the door and stepped out, down the hall, and into the cold.

...but the tranquility of the moment only lasted a flicker in time. Like a fairy left to paradise, hidden below a lily, the tiny eyes of the prince's daughter peaked around the door and into the mysterious. With delight, and eyes wide, she could not believe what she saw. Flinging herself forward, she danced down the wall, lightly touching the beautiful carvings. In the soft light coming through the window, her flittering whimsy lasted a turn, and then one more, before her feet fell still, just past the grand fireplace.

Her heart pattered with excitement. She couldn't believe her eyes. She looked around but saw no one. She took another step forward. Her hands reached but held their distance as she studied the gift that lay

in front of her, on top of the table; the gift she had asked her father to bring her on return; a woven doll.

Again, looking around the room to see if her father stood near or hid in the corners, she ran forward and gently lifted it into the air, making sure not to drop the basket that rested in its arms. Holding it up to the moonlight and studying its soft features she suddenly pulled it close and ran from the room with both the doll and the basket in her gentle grasp.

Outside, the snow had begun to accumulate on the cobblestone. Dimly lit lamps outlining the palace road marked a path toward the large gate that had disappeared behind the translucent wall of flakes. He stopped for a moment to pull his collar up around his neck as he peeked into the night. The winds had picked up. He had finished just in time.

THE WOMAN

A coating of hoarfrost had taken over the old cathedral. Sharp, brittle crystals covered the polished marble columns, the empty baptismal, and burnished statues as if frocked in a sheet of bleached gauze. The king had instructed that the fires remain unlit.

King Adami did not shiver as the rest did. His mind was not on comfort. He slumped in his throne, which had been moved up the aisle from the sacristy and presented to the main doors, as it had every Christmas Eve since well before the town's oldest could recall, in order to bless the village, pardon the unfortunate offenders of the state, and provide clemency of debt to those in need. Year's end was to bring a new beginning for a community that had

remained faithful and strong since the kings greatest grandfather had followed a star to the south. But with time, tradition soon yielded to divergence, generosity the bar. It became the custom that not only the unfortunate, but every woman, man, and child pass before the court and receive a blessing from the church, mercy from the king, and a generous stipend to carry each through the remaining winter. (though most of the children found it necessary to indulge their portion in the delights of sweets sold in the square that very night). The tradition was not recorded as levy but followed as such and, as far as the villagers were concerned, it could not change unless altered in the community's favor.

But on this December night, a bitter chill had crept into town. A frozen sentry had taken up a post on every corner, cold its weapon, sleet its load. No more bitter an Eve could one remember. Ice covered the land. Windswept was its surface. Each belching blow pressed winter's blustery hand with a slap of sting against the bare skin of all ill-prepared, and yet the doors remained closed, and faith dimmed in the blind elder who had clearly stated, in frustration, that custom ordered the cathedral be opened by

dusk.

The king's minister could hear the crowd's huddled laughter and shouts of excitement coming through the door, but he could tell they held a measure of restlessness. The knowledge that a handout was the only thing between them and a mug of ale was no longer enough to calm the breed.

Behind the king, the robed bishop and his attendants also appeared agitated by the fact that the doors had not opened. The intolerance only lasted a moment.

With a loud bang of wood against stone, the wide oak doors of the cathedral blew open. Pressed by wind and advanced by two of the king's knights, a woman, young and belabored, was dragged and dropped to the swirling wintry dust that swept in beside them, presenting the air with a new definition of cold.

The bishop and his flock pulled back and shielded their bleaten-moan as the candles behind them grew cold and stiff below their blackened wicks.

Filthy, the woman's hair hung in sharp tangles. A whistling current of chill surrounded her with gentle taps after slapping and whirling about the

people huddled at the entrance.

Outside, the mass was sure this was the sign for which they had been waiting. It was not.

The woman, heaved forward by her neck, slid across the floor. The king's deputy, Amicus, split the crowd with powerful sweeps of his arms and climbed the last step and rove below the arch of the door. Bellowing along with the rush of wind that snarled and hissed at his presence, apparently convinced he had victoriously returned from his hunt for the mighty beast blamed for the king's suffering, he bowed. "Sire, as requested." His sterling black locks hung heavy and framed the face of youth, though his position was of long years and many battles. His cadre stepped out of his way with his advance.

"Who is this?" The king's saucer-eyed sockets and sunken flesh surrounding his cheeks scorned his deputy. "I ordered the blacksmith, not his servant girl." The tears had long slid from his face, and an iniquity not witnessed before by staff nor other blazoned each word with rue.

Amicus bowed before his lord. "Sire. The blacksmith cannot be found. We bring his daughter in his place."

"This filthy girl, his daughter?"

"She is all of his," Amicus said as his eyes rose toward his venerate, "that has value." He flounced to the side of the king and cast his attention back toward the woman, whispering to his sovereign's ear: "And she is a true beauty when polished."

The king studied the weeping woman, both trampled and terrified by her situation.

Her stuttering plea unexpectedly tumbled forward. "Liege, I have done nothing wrong. Tell them! Please! Tell him!" Her words begged the soldier that stood above her. She knew this man.

His Majesty's attention wandered to his knight's slink form, which stood beside him. His voice was calm, each word punctuated with a pause: "Why does she speak?"

Amicus did not respond in word but in a resounding gaiety that grew loud in the face of the king's sardonic wit. It had not been expected and welcomed with glee.

The king burst in, "—Do you not have a husband to take better care of you? Look at you. You are in rags." His heart remained cold with the idea of why she was before him.

Amicus again leaned in close, this time his eyes

cast to the floor, relinquishing any bond to the charge. "Her husband was a soldier in your army until last year when he was killed while in wait for the battle of Tramica. A weak, ungodly man who let your son down when he needed him most, so I have heard." He cast a scornful glance at the bishop, for he was the only one present that knew his penance for the crime.

The king's expression did not endow pity. "Have no others stepped forward to take his place? Answer me, woman! A beauty as yourself must certainly keep the company of approach." He studied the fouled bundle. "Tell me there is not one kind soul within my ranks that has offered to care for you in his absence?"

The woman's face seized the ground. She could not see her king through the snarled hair that stood frozen and serrate before her face.

Amicus awaited her step to see if she would reveal his series of advances, in his attempt to help.

"No, Sire. I have a son." Her reply was weak and indignant.

A sudden and unexpected ruse proclaiming a candor in the true spirit of the man rang from below Amicus' tongue. "It should be known, Sire, the

locals treat the husbandless with child worse than you treat your dogs, and yet," his hands came to rest above his heart, "I have tried to persuade her to marry, but she will not listen. I fear she will become," he paused indignantly, a whore." The deputy stepped back as he finished with a rigid sneer that only appeared to move one side of his face. She would regret the day she spoke the word "no."

Sagasi, who had witnessed the spectacle, and had seen the change in the royal's subjects since the queen's passing, noted the quick shift of reason. Random reports of short-tempered reactions in the outlying sectors of the land by the king's royal police had not escaped his ears. As he watched Amicus revel in his newly found freedoms, he thoroughly understood how easily benevolence could topple if left to an apathetic magistrate.

"Like a dog... after the kindness, I have shown them all these years? After the kindness, my father died fighting to uphold?" The king gazed at the snow that dusted the woman as it swirled in through the open door and attached to her dress, brushed the stalwart crowd, and gathered around his boots.

"Please, Sire." Her sobs petitioned him from within the jumble of stiff hair and between quivering lips. "Please, let me go to his care. Please, show him your mercy—"

"Mercy?" The king's shout rattled the hoar clinging to the statues, set in the walls, dark and peering. Amicus too lunged forward, striking the girl into a tumble.

"Enough!" Sagasi launched himself forward and grabbed Amicus before he struck again.

Amicus knew his position to be one lower than Sagasi's, but it was clear, in both expression and stance, that even with that wisdom, if the king had not been present, Amicus would have swung his blade against his commander.

Sagasi was no fool and readied himself.

The king, in pomp and step, rose from his throne and ascended the rabble in strict form. The woman remained timmering below two soldiers. "You, a woman of nothing, have a son that lives and breathes stench, and I have one at the bottom of a cliff, in fine cloth." His voice cried out for all to hear, "This husbandless whore, a son? I should ask, where is the mercy in that?" His voice seemed to whistle in theatrical relevance.

The crowd immediately behind the withered testimony of tradition's frailty fell to the clutches of strange looks and filed rumors, though not even the warming of hands scratched out a sound amongst the visible. Behind them, laughter and cheering echoed as the crowd outside were confident that the open doors remained a sign of warm wishes and soon-to-be fat pockets.

King Adami stepped past her; his council separated with his press. "What is the boy's name?"

Her voice was soft, almost indistinguishable. "Adie."

"After your king?" Adami was quick to question.

"Yes, Sire." She spoke unequivocally.

Considering the young lady's figure that of a tortoise withered in a shell, he turned to face the gathering at the entrance of the cathedral that puckered below the arch like an overfilled vessel, still contained, but only slightly. His tall form could see over the throng. "A son named after me, no husband, and a father who has left you to take his punishment." The cold descended over the throng in a mist of feathered breath carrying the talons of a devil's paw. "This must be remedied."

It took only a moment before the signs of

understanding broke into a plea, and its courier scurried to find the judge. "No, Sire, I beg you." Her trembling voice bore the painful cry of a beaten dog pressing its master for pity. "He is all I have."

Amicus moved quickly with erratic and personal haste to quiet her babbling, but like hound under strain of breeding, he held position at the raised hand of His Lord. "Your father's poor craft killed my son. If I have no blacksmith to hang, then I will need another, and since it would not be proper to swing a lady, bring the boy." An authoritative glance swept the still faces at the entrance. "Or I will have my knights swing you both from the same rope, proper or not."

Sagasi fell limp below his hide.

The young woman grabbed the king's legs and pressed her lips against his mud-encrusted boots. "Show mercy! Show mercy, your highness...." Her cries rang in the street outside the building and through the doors that remained open in the back. The woman's smoky white breath frosted the top of the dirty black leather and circled her hair as the blowing snow collected in measure around her. The front leaches of the crowd, agog to what was taking place, shuffled back into the oblivious, who

continued to press forward.

To no effect, His Highness lurched toward the door, pulling the girl off balance and to the side. "Mercy? Did God show me mercy? What mercy did God show my son? Tonight, tradition shall deviate once again and not by the hand of the pack." Free of the pile of chattering flesh with a shake, his robes strayed his position with spin before returning to stand and face the stares as one still beast beside its master. "You gather like children in front of a vendor's barrel, expecting something that has become ordinary for the price of a bow." Not one of the present would have said they were cold at that moment. "What is this day of Christmas but that of a child born to die? I no longer see mercy in such a story." His boots slapped the floor with his change of posture. "Mercy? You cry for mercy? Mercy is that I don't hang you all as fools." His voice fell to a mumble. "You spend when you have nothing, knowing that tradition will replenish without trial." The leading mass squirmed and pressed backward against the people who had not heard the king's words in whole. "Tonight, I was shown no mercy. Expect the same." His robe rose with his turn as the cold twirled below its fur-lined edge and swept the

woman's quail form. "The boy ... by dawn." With a mighty slump, the king fell to his decorated chair and looked out over his sheep. "Now leave me so I may show the next man his due."

"No, Sire." Her cry slid into the murmurs and shuffles of the crowd as Amicus and another dragged her into the throng, which no longer seemed so anxious to step forward from outside.

"What have you done, Sire?" Sagasi found the moment one of disbelief, but his voice was only a whisper that received no response.

Faintly, from the back of the cathedral, the king's messenger could be seen hurriedly navigating the great columns rising to the painted blue ceiling. Each step echoed of an awkward stride. He, too, could see by the somber faces around the king's slumped form that time had not softened the royal's mood.

Discarded, a new cloak adorned the king's messenger's thin shoulders. Around the young man's spindly neck, which rose to meet each bony cheek and sunken eye, a new satchel hung. With a final step to match leg to leg and boot to boot, his upper body dipped like a peacock searching the ground for seed. "Sire, I beg your pardon in this

moment of grief, but you bid that we notify you upon the completion of the parlor renovation you ordered for your son at castle Hensing....” His voice was cowardly.

Sagasi placed a hand on the messenger’s shoulder and drew him back from his audient. “Not now, Bazzo.”

The king remained in a brood, his fingers against his lips, his curiosity upon the people at the door who could not move backward and did not want to come any closer. “Finished?”

Bazzo slipped from Sagasi’s grasp and to the king’s side with his head again ready for pecking. “Yes, Sire, it is complete...” He paused, not wanting to be the bearer of another unfortunate circumstance. He would soften the news. “However, your carpenter has... well,” he said as his forehead rose, though strangely the rest of his head appeared unmoved, “done more than expected.” The king did not respond and Bazzo took it as a reason to continue. “The architectural drawings were ignored. Yet, Sire, I think under the circumstances we should postpone your review and bring your family to Carrin for Christmas, at least until you have rested —” Sagasi took hold of Bazzo with a firm grip and

slid him to the side as he appeared to squeak a last.

The king remained distilled in thought, before lifting his hand to signal the messenger's leave as though he had not noticed that his military leader had already initiated the command. "So you now are a consultant as well as a courier of bad news?"

Amicus, tethered in strain, roared in amusement. No other met his rally, bringing forth a sudden disdained curtsy to the council and swirl of hands to the obsolete as he stepped to his king. He would prove once and for all that the kind ways of the kingdom would never be the same and glee at another's expense would be tolerated. "I recommend we close the doors, bring up your carriage, and return you to Carrin. These people do not feel your pain as a clan raised in humble and gracious kind."

The townspeople around the door could not move, for the expectant crowd behind them had locked them in. A chant behind the front rows had risen from the street with impatient pride. "Let us pass! Let us pass! It is our right."

Sagasi watched the king in contemplation over the ultimatum that if the doors were closed, the kingdom would never be the same. Everyone

present knew as well. "Sire, I think it would be wise to let the people receive their ration. We can consider the alternatives tomorrow. Tonight is not a night for ultimatums, not with the current situation of cold and hunger."

Adami rose from his throne, ignoring his friend's appeal. "Close the doors. I have shown all the kindness I wish to show."

Only a murmur from the bishop's attendant fiddled a scratch before being stilled at the bishop's motion. The knights at the door did not move to do as Their Lord bid. Tradition had gone on so long that not even they believed the king could ignore the custom without facing punishment. The old women, sagged below tight shawls under the arch, could not look away from their leader, and the king could see the fear in their yellowed eyes and withered faces.

Not even the creak of brittle wood rose through the silence at that moment, nor the one to follow. "Close the doors and bring my carriage."

Drawing out the moment to assure all would shake, his loyal gleamed before signing approval's tone. "Yes, Sire. To Carrin!" Amicus bowed with a wicked smile.

The king was quick to correct. "No. Take me to

Hensing. I want to see what this carpenter has done."

Amicus paused, cautiously casting an uneasy glance toward Lord Minion, who stood to the side and had seen the work at Hensing in progress, before waving receipt and stepping back and away from His Majesty. "Yes, Sire."

The front rows of on-lookers were crushed against the large cathedral doors as they took their king from sight.

Outside, the crowd of thousands watched in drowned silence as the mighty slabs of oak, nail-studded and carved with the prophets' shapes, pressed shut and rumbled of beam somewhere within. No one moved. No one but those in front understood. However, the cold was no match for indecision, and in time the lot slipped away, one by one, like mice at first light, leaving only a shivering clump at the base of the steps where the woman lay weeping.

The blacksmith's daughter shook with such cold that she was no longer under her control as the townspeople shuffled away, leaving her exposed to the elements. The snow that had melted and run down her neck while she huddled before the king

had taken stiff. Sections of her dress seized the ground like a dared tongue lashed to winter metal.

“Why are you crying, my child?” His voice was warm and full of age. From where he had come, she did not know. His toolbox was set to the ground as he carefully placed his arms around the young woman, feverishly rubbing his hands over her back to heat her trembling flesh. “Don’t you cry.” He smiled at the warmth of his words. “Everything will be as fine as tomorrow’s light.”

The woman swept the old man’s face in her flickering gaze as his touch brought back the memory of her husband’s gentle hands. “The king has gone mad—” But as though life had returned to the feeble as fright, she tilted back and away from the man, stumbling on the edge of the cathedral’s bottom step. The frozen bodice of her dress, still clenched in her hands, pressed her lips. “You are dead?” As if a specter stood before her, opaque and unexpectedly kind, her body shuddered at the familiar lines in his face, the color of his eyes, and the cleft in his chin. “You died...years ago?” Though old and worn, there was something about him she recognized. She knew this man.

The carpenter spoke in a whisper, ignoring her

fear, understanding none of it. "Bring the child as the king has ordered. Tonight is a night of goodwill. No king can change that. Bring the boy."

With a lean, his toolbox was in hand, but as he stood to speak his last, he realized the woman had already turned and fled into the night. He watched her fade behind the fall of snow as he whispered. "Bring the child and you shall see, Mara."

His voice quietly disappeared.

THE PARLOR

The gilded wings and red cherub panels held back the night as the carriage skidded to a stop. The door opened and the steps were placed. Four large war horses blew a cold thin smoke from their nostrils, their lips spit, and their strong heads jerked against the reins as their hooves clawed the frozen ground.

Black eyecups covered dark sockets where glistening brown balls twisted and turned as though the leather before them was worth revolt. Carved hickory mouthpieces with shackled swirls stuck out to where thick leather straps ran back to another set of powerful beasts and then to the strong hands of the conductor. Steaming hides rippled with warm sweat, and the glow of lanterns set into the mortar of

the castle made the frozen clumps on their bridles and rigging shimmer with a crystalline gleam. In huddled mass, they stomped and tugged at the straps, for they knew something about this place was terribly wrong.

The door to Hensing was already open. The servants present in the entryway bowed and did not rise.

Their king, standing in the midst of his son's grand entry, soaked in the shimmering marble and polished wood. Across from him, the dark double doors of the parlor remained closed. He ignored them for the moment, his attention on the child. She sat on the fifth step of the turning staircase that climbed to the second and third floors.

Oblivious to the men and their ceremonial dress, she continued to play with a small woven doll that spoke softly in a pitch of her own.

Adami studied his grandchild, wondering what his daughter-in-law, though noble, would be thought of without husband and with child if what Amicus had said about that woman was correct. Truth or tell, it would be a lonely life. He understood this firsthand and knew its curse. He reminisced in the hazel eyes his son had endowed the child. She

was a beauty and in every way his son's image. "Open the doors. Let us see what this carpenter has done."

"Yes, Sire." His minister bowed, stepped toward the oversized handles, and pulled the panels with a soft pop. Each left his hold and swung open in unison to a silent pause.

King Adami advanced below the simple framing of the door and to the middle of the empty room with a gasp.

The candelabra glimmered in conjunction with flickering shapes of his forest.

Adami's body tingled below shivering flesh. None of it was as detailed in the drawing. None of it delivered to the specifications he had approved, and yet, he had never seen anything more beautiful. Every nook and turn and rise and fall more potent than the one before. Leaves, curled and twisted and twirling, were suspended midair, silently clinging to branch or nestled within the deep cracks. Twigs, bent and contorted, sprung from new branches that had sprouted and fallen and now wrapped the windows, walls, and mantel. As though a witness to a story of life and death as told by the forest, he felt his loneliness melt away as if he had wandered into

an enchanted grove. Like no other had been able to comfort, the room mysteriously gave back his son in condolence displayed by what had no heartbeat at all.

The king took another step as the room wrapped itself around him. Leaves danced in set motion. Branches swayed and stayed where they had bent. For a moment, he was a child again, rolling and jumping in the tall grass below the towering trees past the gate and beyond the glen. It was only a whisper when it left his lips: "It is beautiful."

His minister did not hear the king's words as he readied himself and stepped from a small table set near the back. The rolled documents outlining the project and what had been approved rested under his arm, the seal unbroken. "Sire, by some mistake the carpenter you hired has ignored your plans. He shall be found and punished."

"My architects could not have imagined such a thing. He was right to ignore them."

Sirdar held his tongue for a moment. After what he had seen in the cathedral he wasn't sure if he should respond, and yet he did. "Yes, Sire, I would agree... the architects must be punished—"

"—It is magnificent. My son would have been

pleased with this gift."

Sagasi approached. He too had accompanied the king in the carriage. "Sire, I have seen work with detail like this before. In France, near the sea. Please, tell me, what is the artisan's name?"

The king turned to his minister, looking for the answer.

Sirdar appeared worried. "I do not know."

"Did you not record his name when you gave him payment? Is this not customary?" The king had returned to the carvings above the mantel. His fingers studied the edge of a branch where the scar of a snapped twig appeared to have overgrown it's wound as a gnarled knot, and an acorn now hung by its side.

"No, Sire. He did not seek wages, and who am I to argue with such generosity."

The king stopped his scrutiny but did not turn away from the chiseled patterns. "What do you mean?"

"He left, your highness, before anyone knew the room was finished. He asked for nothing." Sirdar continued toward the middle window and pointed outside. "Your son's daughter, the princess, found the room as you see it and observed the carpenter

through this window, walking away.”

The king’s finger touched a leaf. The wood felt soft and warm like the memory of his wife’s flesh against his skin, and he did not pull away. “We must know his name. Find the man who did this work. I must thank him.”

“You will not find him, Adami.”

Adami turned to see his friend and Lord of Cunnings, his face hid in the shadows at the side of the room where the candlelight did not reach, yet his beaded clothing held an illumination as though an inner light had gathered. He dressed a nobleman, yet not so presiding in presence. He spoke from where he had stopped to examine the craftsman’s work near the door. “I know this work, my friend. I do know this work, and I hesitate to say... he is an apparition.”

“—Yes!” Another who had accompanied the group, and by dress had come from quite a distance to celebrate in the feast, canted his recognition of each cut. “It is he.” The man moved across the floor as the candles illuminated his face. A king from another land, his skin was dark as coal, and he spoke with a grace more refined than the rest. “And I also attest, you will not find him, My Grace.”

“Why do you say this, Zeal? I am his king.” His Highness turned to admire another clump of leaves and acorns gathered around a scone. “I will hire him to do another project. I will have him finish the entire palace in memorial to my son.”

Unfamiliar in tone and candor, another voice, resoundingly clear, entered the room from just inside the doors. “You have been honored by this space. Do not seek another.”

Adami spun abruptly to see who had spoken to him with such insolence. He did not recognize the voice. His servant, Sabi, interrupted before another word parried between them. “Sire. This man insisted that he be allowed to enter. I could not stop—”

“Show yourself.” The king’s order was quick and powerful.

The beastly soul stepped beyond the servant and peered about as if he knew what to expect. He was not surprised by the detail, though a strange curiosity seemed to pull him back to the carvings he had already passed. His face remained in the shadows. “Your wife recognized satisfaction in the possessed, not desired.” The strange visitor continued into the room and finally stopped to gaze at the work that surrounded him. His clothes were

of skin and fur and his face concealed by a thick beard. Large hands hung at his sides. "His name is Iudicium. Just Iudicium." The deep voice was but a whisper; his thoughts had drifted to a section of detail near the side door. "Yes, this is his work—"

"Step into the light. Identify yourself."

The innominate wore the thick hide of an animal the king could not identify. His beard dripped of melting ice where his breath had frozen around his mouth, and he ignored the order and continued around the room. "... and they are correct. You will not find him. He is a ghost. He comes and goes as sent. No more, no less, shall he be." His voice had changed to that of a shadow-drizzled narrator, speaking to an audience of inquisitive onlookers, each anticipating a dreadful surprise at the edge of the story's dark truth. "I have followed him for two years, and still I am unable to meet up with the man though I move fast and do not stop. But now, I can see he is close...." The noblemen were captivated by the strange man's voice. Amicus was the only one surprised that the king did not have him flogged for his insubordination.

"Who are you?" Adami stepped closer.

"...I cannot tell you why he chooses his

audience, but like a prophet he can see the future and lets you know your favor with what is to come.” The intruder continued to ignore the king as he became entranced in a section of work, as had two of the other ministers. “Yes. I have followed many like him, but none his equal.”

“You are mad. I demand you tell me who you are!” Adami stepped toward the beastly remains that hung from the man’s shoulders, though he received no response.

“He tells the truth, Sire. It is he.” Lord Chicane of Cunnings, captured by the stranger’s words, stepped forward and placed a hand on the king’s shoulder and turned toward the strange visitor. “You said the name Iudicium. I have also heard of him. He did work like this in France and...” He paused as he searched his memory for the story he had heard from a traveler who came through town in the spring. “...Romania. But there is something about his legend that contrasts the peace that I sense in this work. Please, sir. Help us with its muse.”

The bearded man caught his last word. “Beware! He leaves a prophecy.”

Chicane spun to face the entrance of the room. “Yes, that is it! It is hidden.” Quickly he stepped

toward the carvings that commenced by the door. "Please, look for the words. They will begin here on the left and follow the wall." He reached for a candle and lifted it from its socket and stepped toward the carvings immediately to the side of the main door.

"Prophecy? You mean to say he has left my future on these walls?" The king's voice responded in strained merriment toward the bearded one, who had also taken up a candle and moved in close to another section at the front of the room near the fireplace.

"He weaves a story into his work that when finally read," the Lord of Cunnings continued, "destines the prophecy to come true. So is the murmur of the Outlands."

"...Morning's first light! Yes!" Lord Minion had stopped near a window. His voice was almost too unsure to be heard, yet he continued: "In France, if it is the same man, he said a plague would end and their crops would thrive in abundance." Gracefully, he faced His Lord. "You must know that the crops had been cut to the ground by beetles for the fourth year in a row. Witnesses say that the earth moved with the beat of their wings and those captured in curiosity would fall dizzy to their spell. By morning,

sprouts, green and full of life, had pushed up between the insects' hollow shells, and by night the fields held more bounty than ever recorded—"

"Their king remained solemn to his appeal to God for patience." The bearded man spoke softly from the corner of the room.

Zeal slid in close and searched the carving behind Lord Chicane.

The stranger raised the lit candle and turned to face the center of the room. Downcast, the light caught his face and gave him a hauntingly stoic hue of smoldering brush surrounded by darkness, as the light flickered off his unkempt beard. The king knew this would not be a prophecy like the first. "Yes, in France it happened as you say, but in Romania the prophecy told of a king who had ignored the testament presented as a child, and for this, he placed himself equal the earth below his feet." The king's ministers shuffled uncharacteristically and, by appearance, were more affected than the one for whom the prophecy was intended. "The emperor was struck that night with worms where his eyes had flashed and dust where his flesh had hung."

Minion quietly finished the tale for the stranger. "They burned the castle; the town is no more. Yes, I

have heard tell."

"Who are you?" Adami spoke less pronounced than before as he studied the strange dark shadows that concealed the man's hidden eyes and windblown hair that appeared to descend in stringy waves.

"My name is Cerberus, and we shall meet again."

"—It begins." Zeal interrupted from the far corner of the room. "I have found where it begins."

King Adami swung toward him but did not close the distance.

Zeal pressed the candle's light up against the wood and read the shadows cast to the sides of the raised letters that hid within the ornamentation of leaves and acorns. *"Fall on your knees,"* he sidestepped away from the main doors, inches from the wall, searching for the next word, *"and hear the angels sing. This night is divine... even for those... who have forgotten... me."*

A silence no one dared pierce hung in the air. Not a sound twitched within the space except for a creak below Zeal as he advanced like a blind man searching for an opening to the other side. The candle pressed in close, warming the wood in front

of him. The next letters were not as defined as the first. *"Mercy will... be shown ..."* His fingers crawled the ridges of finely carved foliage and the candle's light could be seen sweeping deep shadows and flickering raised edges in front of the minister's eyes before the foliage broke toward the ceiling and down toward the floor, leaving a line open to a rail. *"...not as ... granted."* Zeal turned toward his sovereign, the carving left in darkness. *"Mercy will be shown, not as granted."*

"Sire. I think we should stop—"

The king's gesture quickly ceased movement of Bazzo's tongue without actually seizing its control.

Zeal retreated and adjusted the candle before he continued. *"The... child,"* he lifted the candle a bit higher, *"was born... under a... star ... and you... believed it ... true. ..."* He stepped past Cerberus and found where the line picked up at the edge of the mantel. *"... For this you... were... blessed... with kingdom."* The emperor advanced to the first window and stopped for a moment as all present watched him peer out upon the new-falling snow. The night seemed brighter than any other in weeks.

"Continue, my friend, or I shall open the window and push you out, granting your silent

wish." The king did not move, but spoke impatiently in a voice no louder than a murmur, though 'in vain' was not his intent.

Zeal brought the candle around in a small circle, trying to find the correct distance and direction to discover where the words again began as he reached the far side of the wooden sill. *"But this... night, you... looked into ... her face ... and struck... him... d —"*

"Stop!" Bazzo spun toward his lord in pleading. "Sire, I do not think he should continue. If it is true what they say, it will not take effect until the last word is read. Please, Sire. I beg—"

"How dare you speak to me like that? I will fear no one."

"That may be a fault!" Cerberus stood in the shadows near the massive fireplace as he spoke. He did not receive a response other than the eyes of a king considering his warning.

King Adami peered from person to person. A defining chill, as thick as ice, drifted among the council. No eyes had strayed. No thought had left the moment, and the king knew this to be true. "Continue. I will take my place as given."

The nobility in the room, as well as his staff,

crept back from their lord and glanced at each other as Zeal allowed a moment for Adami to reconsider. He did not.

With a twist of his wrist, the candle's flame caught the wall's detail once again. Zeal shifted by the moon's light coming through a window. "But this night you looked into her face and struck him down." Zeal adjusted the candle. "*For ... this ... you will be...*" With a staggering step, he stumbled up against a small table that rose next to the window. "For this, you will be..." His candle moved up and down the panel, but he found no more. "I do not see the last word, Sire."

Bazzo, eager to regain His Majesty's favor, stepped quickly to the section where Zeal had ended, also to find no words, large or small.

"What does it mean?" Adami had already placed his hands against the flesh of his arms, waiting for it to decay or his sight to blacken. His lips pattered. "...you looked into her face and struck him down. For this, you will be?"

"It does not continue. It stops here against the window. "*... For this, you will be ...*"

Lord Minion bent to the side and spat his fears toward the king's first knight. "Amicus, you fool.

You should not have struck the woman for denying your lust. See what you've done!"

"What." Amicus lunged forward as the king's hand deflected his attack.

"I will not tolerate such behavior from my leads."

King Adami faced the section where the words had ended. "I alone take responsibility for my knight's behavior." Adami pressed himself up against part of the trim where Zeal and Chicane had already looked, though his attention was not on the search. His thoughts were on the crucifix crashing to the floor in the priory, as the words *'and struck him down'* diminished in tone and mingled with the frenzy.

Chicane dropped to the floor and crawled along the intricately carved baseboard, below where the king had taken up his search.

"This is maddening." Adami pulled back from the wall with an awkward step. "I must know what it means!"

"Sire, I have found something." Bazzo, who was closest to the window and also on the floor, below the table, looked at his royal.

"What? What is it? Don't wait. Speak, for God's

sake!" The king had lost patience, though in silence, had begun to rethink his position on discovering his fate. "Wait!" No one moved. "No! Speak. I will take my punishment as deserved." Adami's eyes closed as his head sank toward his chest. "Yes, speak of it's last."

Bazzo tilted the candle and pushed the flame close to the wall. "It says..."

The king swung around toward the center of the room. "Wait, I must understand this for myself." Adami broke into a murmur of thought. The meditation lasted but a moment as he repeated the words read from the walls. "Now, I command you to continue. Yes, I shall take my sword as I have presented to others. Continue. I am ready."

Bazzo held the candle still for a moment before he repositioned the light to catch the word. With a glance toward the king, he repeated, "It saaayyys ..."

Adami's downcast stare did not rise this time but awaited his fate.

"It says ... Schmood." Even Bazzo looked a bit perplexed by the sound that came forth. Again he read what was illuminated by the small flame. "Schmooooood. That is what it says. Schmood." He repeated the verse so it could be understood. "You

looked into her face and struck him down. For this, you will be Schmoooooooood." Quickly he looked up. "That doesn't sound so bad—"

"Schmood?" The king ambled toward the mantel, not sure if that was good or bad.

Lord Minion twisted and spoke authoritatively. "I think it is of another language. Zeal, you must speak twenty. What does it mean?"

Zeal did not respond. He had never heard such a word and proved it in his appearance.

Chicane crawled up to where Bazzo's candle illuminated the dark space below the table and peered in. "Wait. There is more, Sire."

"Then speak of it!" Adami's voice rose in a temper.

Chicane pressed past Bazzo and tilted the flame. "It says... Schmood ... Importers of ... Lumber and Trade." He looked at Bazzo, who had slipped away from the wall. "You idiot. You were looking at the label on the table leg."

"—Get out, you fools." The king's voice rang through the leaves and branches. "Get out of here now." His head fell back and toward the ceiling where more chiseled wood hung below thick beams. "Get out!"

“But, Sire?”

“Get out.” The king turned with flapping arms about to give him rise. “Get away from me.”

“Yes, Sire...” The words rolled over the shoulder of Amicus as he scrambled for the doors in unfashionable scurry and pulled them closed behind him and the court.

“If I am to die tonight I demand to know how it will come. Where is the bishop? Someone send for the bishop. I want this resolved.” The king’s voice flared like stoked fire at the tip of a bellow as he spun to where the bearded man had last stood—but Cerberus was no longer in his company.

“What has this man done to me?” His voice echoed through the empty room, but no response came. The doors had shut and he was alone.

The room suddenly seemed darker than ever before, though the lit candles had been returned to their holders.

King Adami stepped from the wall and gazed into the room and once again took it in as a whole. A strange shiver rippled through him and captured his skin in a tingling embrace as though winter had

given him an unwelcome hug, illuminating his fate. He had to wonder if the phantom had entered the room.

He followed the carvings. He studied the bends and twists. He watched the leaves caught mid-flutter. There was no question... It was a beautifully devilish way to set up his demise.

He dropped to his knees, his head fell back, and he screamed, but there was no one there to hear him. Outside the window, Cerberus' footprints vanished as a translucent curtain of snow fell on the path leading away from the castle...

THE COTTAGE

Winter's deviance had stolen the touch from her fingers and toes and now, standing on the melted ground, she knew only that the night was bitter and all else a horrible uncertainty.

Her stiff, frostbitten hands slid from the iron pull to the surface of the heavy wooden door with a muffled bang. She could not make the lever do as she silently pleaded. Tears dripped from the rise of her cheeks and stung her flesh where they plunged toward her knuckles. Again, her shoulder struck the door as her thumb fumbled the latch. This time it released and she tumbled onto the floor.

"Mumm, whatch ya be doing on a nights like dis, keepings your hands uncovered. You'll ketcha

death to ya. Here, now ...” The old woman’s crumpled and twisted hands pressed the door shut; she turned and scooped her sigh. Though her vision was poor, she could see the wear of a beating, swollen and in contrast to the ghostly white cast that was so familiar. “Gott sakes, girl. Whersh ya been with yourselves? A spirt’s been dancin’ on ya.”

The young girl let her pleas fall to a long cry. She pulled herself into a ball and tried to squeeze the sadness away.

The old woman set the sleeping infant down and hustled over and pulled the girl into her warm chest. Softly, she whispered to her fears. “Now, now, sweets. You shan’t cry or you’ll make me do such, and no good would come of it if we both be aching. Not on a night as tis. Shhee, now.” She rubbed Mara’s head and back. “It’ll be the Yule in a sleep and I’ve been working on a gift fors yas. Been talking to me master, ya might say. Ones yadl never be ables to believe if I’d tell yas, so stops your cry’in and let’s gets ya cleaned up, as ya be on usual.” The old woman her father had discovered sleeping in the tall grass near Sansulo Creek the day Mara’s husband was killed pulled Mara closer. They had invited her into their home that day, the woman that

now pressed her lips to the side of Mara's head and blew softly as if warming the inside of a mitten. "We'll evens throws a bit extra in yor hair for the morn. It'll be a wonder. You'll see. Honey, it's the Eve."

The woman's voice was like a song left to the wind's blustery accompaniment as it whistled through the pine and tender grasses. And since she could not remember her birth name, Mara's father had given her the name Mandolin. She was different. They had seen it immediately after taking her in. Each word she spoke seemed plucked from a string rather than cast from a fleshen cord, and she bore a kindness that was equal to none. As well, there was another side of her they could not explain. Like a flower that had dried, there were moments when you could swear her age was only a withered mask to fool the bees. No matter. The reason they had kept her on was her logic ill suited a woman her age and position.

Mandolin pressed her cheek up against Mara's. "Now gerl, tells me what's become of ya before I get your papa's sord meself and discover the hoodlems.

"Who knows who'd get the best of such encounter."

The side door swung open and Mara's father hobbled in, his leather apron marked where strikes of hot sparks and molten shavings had branded themselves one on top of the other. His gloves fell to the side chair as he stretched to place his jacket on a peg.

The blacksmith was a man twice his daughter's size, and it was no secret, in the village or across the land, that his warm spot for the unfortunate matched his spirit for invention. Some said he stood too close to his fires and had melted his heart when referring to his deeds. Others noted that the melt had taken place farther up and called him ill when he rigged a system to collect the fumes from a pile of manure to power a blue-flame torch. A group of scholars once traveled from across the mountains to see how he had created a way to draw the lost heat from his stoked furnace, through the house, and into a room at one-meter intervals. Even the small dwelling's exterior remained warm in the dead of winter, as did anyone within a length. The contraption was said to be able to warm the entire valley 'if the door be left open too long. Like hell itself rests inside. Not a particularly Gott-fearing man,' one in town had replied to the inference.

Though most characterized him as just plain odd, a comment to his mental state that remained distant from his ears for fear his hands would take offense. In truth, Bonhomie was a man who found it more in favor with his constitution to dress and feed the unfortunate rather than pass. Those who asked received. Those who knew him understood. His heart was like his hands, big and strong, though his body had begun to shrivel in the last year and his movements were not as steady as they once had been.

“Well, well, what we got here, Mandolin? Another little friend of yours from the woods—” He looked closer before he realized that the woman of dirt and rags was his own. “By Gott, Mara.” He stumbled forward to her side and pulled her from Mandolin’s grasp and squeezed her tight. “Mara. Oh, Mara. What has happened?”

“Papa ...” Mara was crying again and could not make her words understood.

“Who did this to you, Mara? Tell me!” He lifted her from his apron and looked into her face. “Tell me, Mara. What has happened?”

“The king has gone mad. He has ordered that I bring Adie. A son for a son. He will hang ... He said

he will hang ...” Her trembling voice slipped back into her fears with a cry rattled by shakes.

Bonhomie held her and covered her face with his warm hands. “You speak nonsense. The king? It is his night for mercy of all things. It is a tradition. It’s ridiculous.”

“No! He has gone mad. His son is dead, fallen from a horse, and now he blames you.”

“Me? Why would I be to blame for a boy’s death? All soldiers die.” He ran his finger over his daughter’s swollen eyes as rage at the idea’s stupidity boiled within.

“The prince’s horse threw a shoe. He fell to his death on the mount.”

The old blacksmith stopped stroking the edge of his daughter’s scalp. “My Gott, Mara.” He knew what that meant if it were true. Behind him, Mandolin pulled a blanket over the two of them and scuttled off to the child.

Mara could see the fear rise in her father’s face. “He wants Adie in return, Papa. A son for a son.”

“How could he? He’s a Gott-fearing man, Mara.”

“We have to leave. We must flee.” Mara pleaded.

Her father pressed her head against his chest to silence her as he peered from his daughter to her

child to the sword above the door. "Shee, sheee sheee. Rest for a moment while I think."

Mara pushed back from her father's embrace, something she had never done before. Nothing had ever felt safer than when he held her, but he did not understand the situation. "Papa. Look at me. The king has gone mad. We have no choice. We must leave here immediately—" Her voice seized in a gasp. "Oh, Papa. What has happened to your leg?"

A stream of blood, dark and thick, suddenly showed itself at the edge of her father's boot. "An accident, my dear. I will wrap it. It will be fine."

"Papa, your leg!" Mara lifted his pant leg and slid his boot down, almost forgetting her own pain. "Oh, Papa, it's bleeding so..."

The front door rattled with a smack against the inside wall as Mack, her father's apprentice, stepped through and quickly slammed it shut. "Three knights have taken position down the path near the bridge. I can see them against the moon." He looked across the room. "What have you done this time, Mandolin?"

"—Mack, help me get him over to the bed." Mara stood quickly.

"It isn't as bad as it seems, it seems. No sirree.

No sirree." Mandolin stepped forward, her arms around the little boy as she began to sing and dance in a tight circle. "It isn't as bad as it seems. For it's the night, tonight, tonight."

"Stop it, Mandolin. We have to think...." Mara was quivering as she cried out to the woman, who continued to prance as they tried to help her father to his feet.

"No!" Mandolin's voice rose loud, like none of them had heard before, as she stopped and looked at Mara with a smile. "No thinking needed. All is taken care of. My gift to you."

"You're mad as the rest. Adie must leave. Papa, listen to me." The tears streamed across her cheeks. "Please, Papa." Her voice was of desperation as she tried to get him up.

"There must be some mistake." There was only the sound of Mandolin's humming and Mara's sobbing before Bonhomie settled back in his chair and spoke with the first suggestion of fear any of them had recognized. "Leave me be. I will go and talk to the king and find out what happened. He has always been a reasonable man. I will—"

"No, Papa. He is no longer the man you knew, nor his soldiers. Amicus is crazed." Mara's head

swung back and forth as her chin remained in his large hands and she was pulled down to her knees and against his trembling chest. "Something has happened to them. Please, Papa. Listen to me."

"What is my choice, Mara?" His voice cracked as she had never heard before, as if he had lost control of its pitch. "I cannot let you take the blame for something he blames me for doing, even if it is one of my tradesmen that made the mistake. I trained him. You know I can't allow that." He unexpectedly stood up but stumbled back as the loss of blood rushed him, and he tumbled to the side where the pooled red liquid glistened deep and wet across the plank floor.

Mandolin had again begun to sing her song in the background as she lowered herself down into the rocker while Mara and Mack caught Bonhomie and helped him to the edge of the bed. Mara took control. Soft and caring, she spoke to a calm. "Papa, let me look at your cut." She ripped back his pants as his hand fell to her head with a gentle stroke.

"Be quick, woman. If it is as bad in town as you say, I don't have much time for you to be fixing what needs not more than a wrap." His voice was weak and slowed near the end of his words.

Mara could see the gash was deep. "You and your principles, Papa. Forget the town. We must take care of this leg and get across the river."

"We have done nothing wrong, Mara." His hand lashed down and slammed the edge of the table with a bang. A spoon teetered off the edge and rattled against the floor.

Mara noted his erratic behavior and for the first time while by his side, she was scared. He had never been wise enough to stop his work for food or care, and she suddenly felt she was losing everything she loved and there was nothing she could do to change it from being so. "Oh, Papa. You need to rest. It doesn't want to stop bleeding—Mack, hand me that towel on the hook."

"There is no time. I must see the king." His words came slurred and unsteady.

"Papa! Please, Papa! You must rest. We can make it through the woods to the ridgeline and cross to Mastinville there once you've rested." She tore the strip of cloth into three pieces. "You know people who will hide us." Mara's efforts had stopped the bleeding for the moment. She rose and placed her arms around him and held him and whispered into his ear. "Please, Papa. Close your eyes and rest."

Mack had begun to strap on a sword. "It's the brightest night I've ever seen. The snow falls, and yet the moon is as full as round. With no foliage, I fear we will have to fight."

"Sheee, Sheee." Her lips pressed up against her father's ear as she felt him relax below her arms. "Sheee. Rest, Papa. We will leave soon."

Her father had drifted from the room as his lips muttered, though his eyes remained shut. He could feel his senses spinning as though a top upon his shoulders had just left its string. "Leave the sword. It will only get us into trouble." His head wandered to the side with his eyes wavering toward the lit candle. A surge of strength moved his lips. "We can't take on the entire army if it is true that they are out for us, Mara. Mara?" His call was loud as though he suddenly feared that he was alone.

Mara held his cheeks and whispered to his face, though each word stumbled on a quivering plea. The wound had begun to bleed through the wrap. "Papa. I am here. I am here, Papa." Mara felt his heart beating but could see he was losing strength as he slipped into a drifting slumber and let his weight fall against hers. "Mack, help me get his leg up. Hurry."

In the corner, Mandolin hummed softly, and for the first time since their meeting appeared to ignore the efforts of the others. Her smile was focused on the child in her lap as her words purred softly over him.

THE BISHOP

Both doors were held open for the glittering robes and golden staff of the almighty and respected Bishop. The king faced the cold ash below the brilliant mantel.

Not a word came from his lips as he stepped forward and stopped in the middle of the room. His eyes grew wide at sight behold. "Who has carved this masterpiece?"

The king turned toward Ranthial's draping purple and jeweled robes before he gazed across the room and picked up where the bishop's admiration for the carvings had left off. "A man more powerful than you or I."

Ranthial wielded himself toward the blasphemy before catching himself, and his control. "You are truly in need, my child."

The bishop had taught the king, a prince at the time, when he was just a priest. He had presented the teachings of the church learned in Rome while they were both young and honest, but he had also witnessed the change in the crown's behavior since the queen's departure. And now, with the death of the king's only son, the idea of Dictatus Papae seemed a powerful reality with the timing perfect for presentation, since he, the bishop, was sure to be the candidate for this reign. "You look scared, Adami. I don't believe I have ever seen such emotion on your face."

"It is of death, for nothing in my life shall ever be the same."

"A child's passing is a thing to grieve, not to imitate, my friend."

"You are so wise, Ranthial, yet we shall see how so."

Bishop Ranthial held his chin cocked in the air and turned to look at the work left on the walls that he had not yet examined. He could tell that the king's veins held little in the way of patience. "You have a spiritual dilemma, my friend, and I am here to solve it for you." He stepped toward the wall next to the mantel. "But you must understand I am not

sure if I can. What you see as prophecy, I see as mortal deception. Games played and trickery fool even the wisest when allowed to seep into the imagination as God's hand, and I assure you, I shall not fall into the trap that has captured you." His voice lashed an old friend who had pulled rank, yet remained calm and almost graciously presented.

"I do not ask that you step from grace, Ranthial. All I ask is a word missing from the text. No more. No less. If these are your God's words, then I assume you are the one to give me the answer. If they are not from the Almighty, tell me, and I shall forget them."

Ranthial shuffled toward the mantel, selected a section of split oak from the pile at the side of the hearth with one hand as the other kept his robe from falling near the dusty opening, and dropped it on top of the dying embers. "What is it that you ask, Adami? If it is by the hand of God, I will give you your answer, but if it is the work of a demon, you shall not find me your shield." He spoke to the king as his equal.

"I promise, no arrows will you take for me. A single word is my desire." The king remained slumped in the chair at the center of the room, which

his servant had slid from the wall earlier in the night at his order.

The bishop was slow to respond. "Well, then. What is this riddle, Adami?"

The king had gone over the words so many times they were requisite prayer, though he was not sure for what he asked. His tone was weak. Life had already begun to leave his body.

The bishop could sense his fear and understood the advantage.

"Fall on your knees and hear the angels sing." The king began in a timid voice, yet clear enough so no question of word or phrase would remain. "... this night is divine, even for those who have forgotten me." Adami observed Ranthial turning each word in thought as he stepped toward the side window where the words ended. "... For mercy will be shown, not as granted." His words grew in strength to cover the distance that now stood between them. "Shall I continue?"

The bishop turned from the carving he had stopped to admire. "By all means."

Adami watched as the bishop reached out and touched the section of wood and quickly pulled back. He continued. "The child was born under a

star, and you believed it true. For this, you were blessed with kingdom.”

Bishop Ranthial mumbled to the room. “Hmmm.”

“But this night, you looked into her face and struck him down.” Adami held his tongue as Ranthial turned and faced him. “For this, you will be...”

Ranthial studied the king, repeating the last and unfinished line to himself, as he slid from the shadows. Each step creaked. Each stride swept the still with disrespect. “How I have preached to you, and still you do not listen. Have you not learned a thing, Adami?”

“—Stop this prideful impudence!” Adami lashed his neck out toward the priestly figure as if releasing every word on the tip of a spear. “I am still your king here on earth.” His eyes grew narrow below tilted brow. “And if I possess the demon that will hang a child I will certainly not hesitate to swing my sword in your direction.” His words fell to the walls in held silence before he continued. “Tell me, without your condescending banter, are these the words of God?”

The bishop had not seen such disrespect for his

position ever and did not know how to respond other than to claim his presence as the superior of the two. "Yes. Oh yes, I believe them so." He shivered to accent the words, as he peered across the room toward the far wall's decoration. He knew the king was vulnerable. He had seen what the man had done in the cathedral and knew the fear of God's wrath that twisted within the king's mind. This was his chance, for Rome.

"Then all I ask of you is one word, and if you do not know the answer, leave my sight for it will be proven that you are no more in contact with God than I."

"You fool, Adami." Ranthial stepped to the king's withered form as it sank back in the chair, his chin resting on his propped elbow, which now pressed against the armrest with the situation's weight. "You ask for an answer that will bring you back from hell. Well, I cannot ease your burden with some false word." Ranthial cocked his hand and pressed on Adami's shoulder as though degrading a child. "Do you not listen to yourself? Fall on your knees. I cannot spare your life if you will not obey."

Adami slipped low under Ranthial's weight before he grabbed the bishop's hand and squeezed

until he could not squeeze any tighter.

With no choice but to lower himself to ease the pain, Ranthial's eyes dropped to the king's seated level.

"I have fallen to my knees. My knees are bruised, and my ears are silent. I need not you to tell me this. I have read it. I have responded to it. It echoes within my head like the blacksmith's anvil. It is not the obvious that I ask of you. It is enlightenment. It is closure. What is it that I must understand in this final word that eludes me? Tell me or leave me." His eyes sizzled like coals steeped with the fuel of pine tar, though a weakness seemed to slide from under them. "Will I die!"

"You shall die. I shall die. Did you think you were immortal, King Adami?"

"What is the word?" His voice rang through the palace hall as if the bishop stood across the square. "What will be, Bishop? Answer me that."

Ranthial pulled loose from the king's hold, though he could still feel where the king's fingers had gripped him. "You struck him down. For this, you will be ..."

Ranthial paused and studied his king.

"... counted." His voice was less than irrefutably

presented.

"Counted? " The king's eyes dropped to observe his open hands. "Explain."

Ranthial stepped toward the window and studied the beautiful carvings where the words had ended. "As written by this woodsmith, as left uninscribed, it is clear; there is no simple answer. Even if you wish for one, there is none."

"Counted?"

"Are you listening to me?" Spit tore from the bishop's mouth and caught the candle's light in a shimmer of scathing pronouncement. "Counted! You will be counted one of the fools who will burn in hell if you do not obey ... me."

The king did not respond but continued to study his flesh and the floor beneath his throne.

"I can do nothing for one who believes himself more powerful than I. Give yourself up from this premise, and I will save you." The bishop's voice had softened to almost a plea in the end.

The king watched his flesh as he turned and twisted his hands, waiting for hell to devour him or suck the skin from his bones.

Ranthial moved closer to the king, speaking the man's penance as though the king had fallen to his

knees and now begged the favor at his hand. "The blacksmith's child must be spared, and your son must be sprinkled with the water of the blessed fountain before he is turned over to God, or he will not ascend to heaven. And you, sinner, from this moment on must consent the church its rightful position by stepping down and not sinning again, or you shall be counted. Anything less will be your damnation. I assure you, this is the message this prophet carries."

Adami rubbed his fingers over his lips, and as silence fell between them, both contemplated the price of condemnation and penance. "Counted as a sinner?"

Ranthial closed his eyes and bowed his head in acknowledgment.

"You're a fool. You speak of things manufactured by men, but for discussion let us deliberate this pronouncement." The king pressed himself up and stepped toward the priestly minister. "What of my soldiers who have died in the fields and are covered en masse by the enemy? Do they not reach heaven because your water was not present? What about those in the mountains who have no church nor money, only their faith? Do they perish for lack of

stipend?

"You ask me. I have answered."

"I find your answer unacceptable, though I do not hold it against your faith."

"Adami—"

"Do not call me by my name. You will address me as Sire, though I do not ask you to kneel before me, Bishop."

Ranthial shook with a rage that was quickly turning to fear. He closed his eyes and lowered his head as his lips tattered in parry for this lost soul who now stood in front of him, and the miscalculation he had made.

"Open your eyes so you can find your way," said the king.

Ranthial shuddered. "You asked. I answered."

"If you were right, the floor would have opened and I would have been dragged to my doom, for I will never bow to you."

Ranthial did not concede. Having calculated the potential for the response toward the Vatican's demand, he pulled a handful of shattered white porcelain from his pocket. The broken pieces made a soft patter as they hit the floor. "You may say to me anything you like, but do not forget the words that

were carved in wood long before this day: *'You struck him down, for this, you will be ... counted.'*"

Adami could see that the pieces had once been part of the crucifix he had toppled in the priory. He stepped in close enough that the bishop's robes brushed his legs, his foot on top of the remains of the priory's statue, and ground the white shards below his sole. "An image that should never have been created if your Commandments are correct; but an Idol."

Ranthial trembled with rage.

The king matched him in mirror.

With a sweep of material and glittering golden braid, Ranthial rotated and stepped out as the king's sentry presented him an escape. This time only one door opened.

King Adami turned and held his gaze over the dark field that lay on the other side of the window and before the castle. Slowly, he knelt and sifted a handful of the white dusted clay and watched its luminous powder slip between his fingers and fall back to the floor.

"Shall I leave you, Sire?" His sentry and servant

remained bowed at the entrance.

"No."

A moment strayed in silence. "Is there anything else, My Lord?"

The king pressed his finger in the white grit and stirred it around. A dark line of the wood floor remained behind where it had traveled. "Yes."

The thought sat on his tongue. The idea soured his mouth, yet he found no alternative. With a lonesome gaze toward his servant, he spoke without lifting his head any further than needed. "Send for Medea."

The sentry held his acknowledgment out of respect but still could not find it within himself to provide the appropriate response. "But Sire, you banned her from the kingdom. Sagasi will not allow my petition."

"Sagasi is not in charge." The king rubbed his fingers in the small pieces of broken porcelain before scattering them with a broad sweep. A woeful stare tore his sentry's eyes from his own.

"Send for her. That is my order."

THE BLACKSMITH

Mara pulled the blanket up around her father's chin and lowered herself onto a stool. With her hand on his chest, she could tell that his breathing had further retreated. His heart beat not much stronger than faint.

He was an old man and had outlived most of his friends; she had not thought this day would ever come. However, looking down on him and stroking his hand, she knew his time was close.

Wringing a damp cloth from a bucket of warm water, she placed it on his forehead and wiped her father's clammy skin. "Mack, I think you should go home to your family. I will stay with him until he feels well enough to travel." Her empty stare met up

with Mack.

Mack understood, but could not find it in himself to do as requested. "No, Mara, I will help you and Adie get across the river and to the next town. Your father deserves that much."

"Go, Mack." She turned directly toward him. He noted that she no longer looked scared, as she did when he had first entered. A strength he had always admired since their first meeting, a strength she had gotten from her father, was now in command. She had accepted her fate. "Go home. I have changed my mind about where Adie and I will seek refuge. Please, it would be better for both of us if you left now."

Mack did not move, and Mara could have sworn she saw tears in the powerful man's eyes. "I will check back within the hour."

"No. Do not come back here. It will no longer be as it was."

Mack lowered his head and hesitantly picked up his tools. "I do believe you are as Mandolin always said, your father's little angel." With a click of the latch, Mack stepped out and pulled the door behind him.

Mara watched the cold darkness disappear

behind the heavy slices of wood, locked away, as the door rumbled to a close. Beside the stove, she could see that Mandolin had placed Adie in his basket for the night and had gone back to the rocking chair Mara's father had made for her a few weeks after her arrival. A thin blanket was tucked up over her shoulders, but the rocking and humming had stopped. Peacefully asleep, her face revealed a calm as though none of the evening's events had been understood.

Mara studied the calm face that Mandolin displayed. There was something unusual about her, but she was not sure what it was. In some ways, she had only seen such serenity in paintings. By the light of the candle, Mandolin's flesh appeared smooth and unweathered. A dormant youth spurred the surface as though age had not been calculated and the life they knew of hers never was. If Mara had passed her on the street, she would not have recognized the woman. She glowed as if an ember had crawled from the stove and replenished her prime.

"Papa?" Mara spoke as though he were listening. "Papa. I have learned from your kind ways. I have seen where you have placed others before yourself.

You will surely be rewarded.” Mara stroked her father’s forehead with the warm cloth. “I will miss you.”

Mara’s sad smile trembled as she let her hand fall from her father’s forehead. She knew he could no longer feel her touch or hear her words. She dropped her face to his side and held the tears no longer.

THE SORCERER OF THE WOODS

Morbidly tranquil, Medea slithered through the door and hugged the dark wall, unsure of the reunion. The king had banished her a year earlier for practices that would have had her burned by the church's latest decree — no matter. If she were ever to seek revenge while the king was vulnerable, this was her chance. She would not let such an opportunity slip away.

Her shadow, dark and partially consumed by those already in place, fell toward the last window and hung close to the corner before she caught sight of the king's slumped form in the center of the room.

Her bulged eyes peeked where the light fell, then shrunk back with its touch. Their white edges, cracked of red veins, appeared to float detached before they too disappeared into the dark confines of the room.

"I did not think you would come."

"Kheeeeeeeeeee." A scraping hiss rose from where she stood, no other response followed.

"I have nowhere else to turn. My counsel has disappointed me. The bishop has proved himself incapable."

Medea stepped into the light, though the king could not see her from where he sat. Her voice was gritty, yet atomized and not more than a whisper. "And why should I help you?" She hunched further toward the floor as the candles illuminated her position.

"I assume you will tell me that, if you are as you say; a seer of all. Am I correct?" The king did not adjust himself to look her way but remained soberly tilted in his chair as though his spine had given up to gravities pull.

"Yes, but it has been months since I have allowed your image to pass my eyes, except for the odd curse amidst summon." Her breathing grew erratic and

somewhat uncontained.

Adami lowered his chin. "I will leave your update to your potted nymphs and vesseled trickery, for if you cannot see the past, then you will certainly be unable to tell my future."

Medea stepped further into the room as she noticed the woodwork for the first time. "Soooooooooooo." She cast a line toward the door, though her feet remained in place. "I see he has come to you. This man who roams the earth and tells what only a god can see. Ah-h-h, I understand your desperation." Her hand slid to her side and gathered a handful of coarse powder from a loosely tied satchel hanging at her waist.

Adami did not respond and remained slumped and unmoved.

Medea shuffled toward the wall and oscillated up and down the chiseled wood like a bat working its way into a tight confine. She did not need a candle to find the words as she mumbled and tumbled around the perimeter. Her bony fingers, black as coal, worked the air as though it silently pleaded to be scratched. "Of course, I know why the bishop is not present. As I told you, he is a demon like me, though he hides his cauldron behind

Rome's cloak, a pot much too deep for a mere mortal to see into." She slid past the mantel and up to the spot where the words ended next to the window. She did not look further.

"Tell me what it is that I must know!"

"Truly, Sire, seeing your pain, I would rather boil in my stew than relieve you with that response, though it is as simple as can be."

"I will grant that wish, or reinstate your place within my council. It is your choice, but beware, Medea, if you speak foolishness, I will hold you below-the-surface myself."

Medea sank back into the shadows at the thought of the seething concoction touching her skin. "Your guerdon has me enticed, My Lord."

Adami cringed at the idea but said no more.

"kheeeeeeeee." Medea suddenly scurried toward the corner and hoisted a mouse by its tail. As it hit the light, its back curled and its feet poised like that of a dropped cat. With the movements of a magician pulling a potion from the air, she placed the trembling creature between her fingers and rubbed the sides of its head. "Beware, you will perish with my word."

Adami pushed himself from his throne, proving

his skeleton remained intact. "So you assume it is my fate that eludes me rather than encouragement?"

"Yes."

Adami felt a cool wisp with the scent of deception as he withdrew from her crooked form. Keeping his distance, he studied the dark rags that hung like demons from her bones. "Make no mistake, traitorous one, you are only the translator, not the one to carry out its ploy." He observed her slink frame. He had never trusted her, and now wondered how he had fallen to such desperation. "I will listen to your translation, but will never admit that you have the powers to do more than garble words and tremble the hearts of the unsure."

Medea did not pull back from the king but remained a captive to his challenge. "May I assume there was a moment when you counted yourself one of them ... at your bid?"

Adami did not answer as he circled.

Medea bowed superficially. "But how can you not believe I have the power of life, death, and transformation?" The king watched Medea slink toward him. "If I squeeze, this mouse will open, will it not? If I let him go, he will live. Either way, the others in the corner will change their habits and

remain close to their holes in my presence." Medea enshrined the foreign dust she had begun to warm in her other hand. With a quick toss and the jingle of her long metal-bladed fingernails scraping the other's sharp sides, the powder caught the candlelight and shimmered in a tumble. A cast reflection of purple, red, and yellow fluttered before him. "You see, I have the power of all three."

"As does Bazzo, my messenger and his satchels are empty of such colorful dust."

"And yet he has not been summoned." Medea swung away as though dodging the expected plunge of the king's sword. "Do not mistake me for a simple messenger." Her voice had dropped and gurgled deep in threat. "I have the power to destroy." Her bulging eyes, spotted with yellow, twitched in motion. "But, yes, I will leave your inscription to the carpenter ... for the moment."

The king stepped through the flickering cloud with a blind sweep at her robe, again questioning his decision to allow Medea into the palace. "You foul creature, tell me what it is I want and be gone." He suddenly caught the combined scent of sweet earth and the astringent odor of dried coumarin.

Medea slithered away as she set the scared

creature on her shoulder. It shuffled and twisted. She threw herself toward the fire that now crackled below the chimney. Adami set his footing. He watched her rhythmic movements and felt his senses renounce their position like incense at the end of a chain. "Allia contrastino tia manta ... Don't you find it enchanting that the carpenter's words were set in wood before you struck the woman, Adami? They were in place before you sliced the bishop's idol from the post. Yes, I have seen." Medea jerked and jazzed. The mouse clung wildly. "This is a dark day for the kingdom, for I have come to decide your fate."

An unexpected flash of blue came from the burning logs as a cloud thundered into the room and a thick syrup of reddish pale rolled out and across the floor. Adami could feel his nostrils sting, yet could not respond in retreat. He was captivated. He was under her spell. The purple vapor's sweet haze had entered his mind.

"Yasida medisita motoniata marooo." The chant arose to mix with the king's dizzying spin at the center of Medea's path. Her fluttering garments and ghostly pale flesh had captured him as her hands spun out and away from her body and slapped her

chest. More dust belched from her side between beats. "Sota ma raetonaē figar ah say." Her head fell back as each muscle released its hold. Another sharp blast rolled from the sparkling logs with her loiter. "I will tell you your fate under one condition, Adami." The king did not respond in word, but appeared to consent as his head drifted above his shoulders in nod. "You must assure me that the heir agrees with our arrangement. Ari mosto na tader ..."

Adami continued to turn inside the wide circle she had formed around him. His head bobbed in a trance. She danced and chanted. "Hodallimas wtutd ia manscrip motray mistat da ..." Another blast rolled from the flames below the mantel. Adami's pupils slid from view. They burned, and he stumbled. He knew the presence of evil, yet his body would not respond. "I can see your fate, My Lord. It is so clear. Open your eyes and you shall see it too, Adami. Open your eyes and take a breath of its presence." The talons on one of Medea's hands clawed the cloth that covered her chest; the other shielded her face from the smoke.

Her gods had surely dropped from above and swallowed his sense. His flesh bit as though torn from his skeleton and his nerves stung as if exposed

to air. His arms fought with flailing inaccuracy against the invisible spector, no longer under his control. They defied gravity and now swung as though nailed and spinning. He cried out. There was no response to his plea. He was a victim, his vision uncertain. The leaves carved on the walls and ceiling shook as though each branch now tried to rid their hold and the undertaker had chosen his spot. His palms brushed Medea with each closing pass, her crooked smile below her now-hazel eyes. Features earlier not present appeared on her surface, though he knew not the form. What had he done? Why had he summoned her? He lunged with all that remained innocent.

Medea tumbled from his path and to the ground, though her chants did not stop. “Yattar a monita sintopina. Seeeeeeeeeee.” From the floor, each tone hissed like a snake cursing in a foreign tongue. She had rolled and coiled and was ready to strike. Her arms fluttered. Red rings rippled from her elbows, where they appeared and disappeared at the surface of the thick red steam collecting across the floor.

Adami, cast of broken trance and sightless tumble, reached and tugged at the latched window. “... sarron tapicata montra misim grats ou ...” Her

chants had not stopped, and the smoke around him appeared to obey as it crawled up his body and clamped his lips. "... yallia ta seenopioastiano raytor ...". His tongue fell limp and his throat stung. "Heteramish nickot kitno serita—" With heave and thrust, He seized the candelabra by post and crashed the window. Hot wax singed his cheek. Cold air rushed him, blowing all backward and blasting a path through the center of the muddled haze that engulfed the room. To retreat now would have been a disadvantage. Choking what he could from his throat, he struck.

"You fool! What have you done?" She warbled.

"I am a fool." With a wide swipe, his hand latched her neck. "Do not speak, serpent!"

Translucent scales, covering her exterior, bit his flesh in increments. Each cut burned of searing poison as Medea's growl rumbled against his palm. "I have seen you strike the girl and I have seen your fate."

Adami pressed harder. "Silence, demon. I have no longer a desire to hear your words." Trying to snap what he held, Medea slashed quickly. His wrist went numb, and she slid to the corner. The bag in her hand dropped as she spat to the air, again trying

to steal his wits.

"I saw your fate—For this, you will be—The answer is mine. Alitaminio rastif carats ..."

Adami shuffled closer to the Medusa, consumed by the shadows and settled red fog.

"I know your fate—You must listen."

It was too late. Adami held tight. She could not pull loose or lift her defenses, for the king had clamped her hands together. Their tips quivered to a blur. His voice, only a whisper, pressed close. "Then tell me what you see in my future before I tell you what I see in yours."

Medea lay in the grasp of what she now knew as one more powerful than anticipated. Her white, exposed skin hung still and firm against her pale chest and illuminated a section of the dark wood as her lips twisted and opened, and she curled to loosen his hold. "I see—

"You see what, demon?" His words cried over the drone that had gathered within the bustling winds screaming through the shattered window and whistling against the candelabra, bent from its wound.

"I see you ..."

"Say it, you despicable creature."

“... at the bottom of a cliff, destroyed.”

Adami held her still as she tried to wriggle free. “Destroyed?”

Medea scowled as she continued, lips tight and curled. “I saw you limp and white before you summoned, just as I saw your wife the day you banished me from the kingdom. My vision was clear, just as the other true. You shall fall, Adami. You have fallen.”

Adami staggered back, releasing the vile seductress as she suddenly took on the form of his beloved in face and smile.

Like a man who believed his God no longer listened, Adami cried, “It was not me in your dream,” He bit into his lip with the pain of the memory as the blood salted his tongue. “... but my son!”

Medea’s eyes grew wide in their sockets, and her skin gathered pale and transparent as his wife’s form left her features in shivering disguise. “The prince?”

Adami dropped to the ground with a strangely calm smile of defeat that opened the door to a fatal blow. “You should have looked closer, temptress. You could have surely made your prediction come

true.”

The frightened mouse, which had tumbled from Medea’s shoulder in the clash, held its stunned position before scurrying to the wall.

Adami remained down, watching the wretched woman’s quivering form as it curled strangely. Yet he made no attempt to change his vulnerable position. Broken, he could not move. He had fallen, and if Medea struck now, he could only believe that it would be to his benefit.

Medea lunged for her bag, holding the remains of the poisonous root, before taking one last look at her king and slipping a small blade from her belt. Remaining vigilant, she dropped it next to him. “You are mistaken. I saw you ... as you are, selfish and fallen.”

With a murmur he could not understand, she scurried toward the open door and vanished without a word.

Adami remained a tangle of limp limbs and forlorn ideas as he lowered his face, dropped his cheek to the cold floor, and let the snow now entering through the shattered window blow over him. The warm blood from the fresh wound on his neck and wrist ran down his chin and

across his hand and onto the parlor wood.

THE LAST WORD

Through the window and at the edge of the front garden, the night sky caught its first tint of light as the sun's crest hung invisibly low over the twinkling frost.

The king's swollen face remained buried between his outstretched arms. He lay prostrate to the words on the wall and the cold that had entered through the jagged opening in the window and claimed its ground. Powdered snow covered the sill and highlighted the whittled branches near the floor, but unlike the forest beyond the gates, the leaves did not drop to its presence and the brittle white rime that had followed its master, cradled the space in a death-like silence.

“Sire?”

The king remained aggrieved. He could not shake his son’s absence. He could not remove the image of his wife’s silence. He could not find pardon for what he had done in response to both. He eyed the blade Medea had placed next to him at some point during the night.

Sabi, his servant, wondered if His Lord had frozen to solid, yet he kept his distance. He had never seen such death and could only believe it contagious. “Sire?”

The king’s sunken stare peered up from his despondent remains. Frozen pools that had not yet slipped from the edge of his face chilled his lids, and the freshly drawn puddles dripped between him and his servant to blur his vision. He did not respond in tone but simply looked forward.

“Sire. There is someone here to see you, as requested.”

Whom could it be? He had not summoned another. He remained stricken, though his words appealed release. “I ... req ... sted no ... els. ...” Each word skipped in a stiffened beat.

“It is the girl, Sire.”

His eyelids shut. He would wait for the earth to

swallow.

His servant lowered his head, clearly demonstrating that confrontation was not his excuse for continuing. His voice only a whisper: "Sire, it is the woman from the cathedral."

Adami could feel the mortality that had settled within his legs and chest from their long arrangement against the cold wooden floor.

"Sire, shall I ask her to leave?"

Adami had already taken steps, mentally, to begin the transition from the dying, yet remained still. His fingers would not respond. His arms would not raise.

Sabi's head remained low.

Stiffly, his hands slid under the snowless patch that retained his shape. Brittle as frost, his joints fought the gesture but let him follow. Each bend said no. Each twist tore at his wounded flesh and pride. Each motion came at the expense of time.

Sabi did not move.

With trembling strokes, Adami clumsily stood and brushed down the front of his smock. The blade that Medea had left slid into the pocket of his gown. "No." He braced himself, hobbled a step, and then braced himself again, this time successfully. "I must

“speak to her.”

Sabi waited for His Highness to steady himself before stepping aside and motioning way.

Both watched.

She approached below the half frame of the partially opened door. The outside cold suddenly swept her bare face. The king could see her silent reaction to the room’s array.

“Seal the window and light the fire, Sabi.” The king’s voice was strained as if the fight had left him, each word a whisper of air. Struck by the woman’s presence, Adami stepped backward. Clean, her hair hung in smooth lengths and her clothing fell delicately over her slender body.

Sabi quickly slid behind the woman and closed the shutters on the broken window, then rushed from candle to candle, bringing a renewed glow to the room that dawn had not yet been able to deliver.

“You have come, with your child?”

Mara bowed her head. “I have, Sire.”

He studied her beautiful features, now untouched by her circumstances. Her brown hair glistened in the light, her dress white below her dark shawl. If it were not for the pain in his legs and chest, he would have thought he was dreaming. So

peaceful did he feel in her presence. "What is your name?"

"Mara."

Adami let his head drop slightly, though she was unsure if it was in retaliation against some inner sensation or in a bowed receipt. "Where is your father? Did he not choose to take your place?" His voice remained frail, though accentuated. He was surprised that she had come in his place.

"He has found a better place than here, Sire. I beg your pardon, but I bring word that he will no longer be able to tend to your soldier's needs." She did not cry, nor drop her head in memory. Her gentle gaze remained on the king's shadowed face.

"I am sorry to hear such a thing, as would be my son." Adami took a step to resecure his tenuous position as his legs faltered, threatening to give him back to the bare patch. "I now believe he would never have blamed his misfortune upon another. Please accept my apology." The king's attention remained cast low, and he did not look her way for some time until he addressed the basket in her hands. "As requested?"

Mara approached. The King staggered back. "Yes, Sire." She continued forward and met the

king's sunken face and quivering hands, which were just now beginning to lift from his side to meet the gift. "... in exchange."

Gently, she slid her hand inside and pulled the blanket back so that the king could see the sleeping infant's tiny features.

The little one's pinkish-white cheeks were perfectly smooth. The little boy's nose was as dainty as the king had remembered his son's on the first glimpse. His hair was thick, and the color of his mother's, and his little lips moved as though a meal had just been graciously accepted.

Mara's tone was calm, unlike that of a mother setting her child in the hands of an executioner. "He is a wonderful little boy. His name is Adie."

Adami could not take his attention from the child. So clean and untarnished by life, the child illuminated the white of the cloth that snuggled him like that of a candle set against marble. The king looked at Mara. "Adie." He studied her face before finding her gentle eyes. "Adonai, not Adami."

Mara stepped back from the basket.

The king continued as he looked down. "He is so beautiful. It is like staring into one's mind when simple words and pure thoughts still held its

attention." Adami closed his eyes. "How I wish they were all I knew right now, those simple thoughts of a child."

Mara did not appear frightened by his ghostly appearance or his quivering grasp upon her child. "If that were the case, Sire, you would never understand your fortune."

Adami thought on her words before stepping to the center of the room to set the child, still in the basket, on the pad of his throne. On his back, he could feel the warmth of the newly lit fire. "May I ask you a question?"

Mara placed her hands in front of herself and held them together. "At your request, I am listening."

Adami released the basket, making sure it would not tip. Taking a moment to breathe in the child's unassuming youth he glanced up at the carvings that he wished had never been presented. Slowly, he positioned a section before himself. His hand gently swept over a group of leaves. They now felt cold, like his skin, though the room had begun to feel the warmth of Sabi's work. "A carpenter gave me a gift last night for which he demanded no payment, nor word of thanks." Adami's hand rubbed across a

knotted branch that reached for the floor and dripped like a tree limb in mid-thaw. "But it was a trick that my counsel could not decipher, and yet I am sure to know its wrath in a moment." His hand pointed weakly toward the dim light that now presented itself at the edge of the front garden, just outside the window. He stepped away from the wall before he looked up at Mara again. "Would you tell me what they were unable to?"

Mara could see that the king had become vulnerable. He was no longer under the spell of the venom that controlled him in the cathedral. She studied him for a moment and then turned and looked at the way the leaves and branches swirled the inside of the great room, but did not comment on their appearance as the others had. "Beauty can be deceptive when attached to an ultimatum."

Adami watched her stroll the length of the wall. Her pure white dress fluttered with each step, though she remained in gentle stride.

"What does it say to you, Sire?" Mara continued to study the composition, though she did not try to decipher the words.

The king had noticed that the light had brightened across the frozen palisade on the far side

of the garden. "Fall on your knees and hear the angels sing. This night ... is divine, even for those who have forgotten me." Mara passed between the fireplace and the basket, stepping daintily as if royal. "... For mercy will be shown, not as granted." The king watched the twinkle of frost in the new-fallen snow catch the blush of morning on the tips of each branch surrounding the road, leading to the castle. He could see the sun was near bloom and could only expect the hand of death to appear at any moment.

Mara's voice was sweet and soft. "Please continue, Sire."

"Yes." He responded immediately, methodically, clearly at the edge of remorse. "...The child was born under a star and you believed it true. For this, you were blessed with kingdom." Mara stepped in between the king and the window, shielding him from the morning light, though she did not look his way. "... But this night, you looked into her face and struck him down." He closed his eyes. "... For this, you will be ..."

She held her place for a moment before turning to face her sovereign. Behind her, the sky graciously accepted the morning's light. Around her head and body, a brilliant yellow glow illuminated her as if

she was a spirit. He knew better. He had touched her when she handed him the child.

Her voice was sweet. She did not ask him to continue. She did not seek the last word. Again she asked. "What does it say to you, Sire?"

Adami gazed at the wonder in front of him. "I have fallen." He could no longer see her features in the cast silhouette that stood before him. "What I have done cannot be willed away by man or woman." He squinted and yet could not find feature in the furled light that twinkled around her. "It is all there. I cannot dispute it; the riddle speaks the truth. I struck him down and now I shall pay."

"There is no riddle, Sire." The king watched her circle back to where she had entered, just in front of the open door. "It is of hope. You are a lucky man."

"Hope? You speak words that I never thought I would hear again, but I hear no hope in its message."

"Then surely your priests have not taught you everything. There is always hope. Ghost or goblin, witch or bishop, all may be equal. Do you not remember his words?" She drifted about a section of floor and glanced at the wall. "Not that all deeds should be forgotten, or repeated, but to continue to

hold one accountable for their past is certainly not at its core. That is no more than a way to punish one's self." Mara returned a fluttering gaze toward the king but did not step from her place. A gentle smile cloaked her face, now visible under the sun's crest. "You were pardoned, Sire."

Adami did not respond. He could feel his heart's pounding rhythm shake him. "If it were only that simple." He could not stop his body from shaking. "If it were only that simple ..." His attention suddenly shuffled to the partially opened door, just behind Mara. She could see the shift of fear in his tired face.

The hinged panel moved, just slightly.

Mara turned. Adami took a step back. "Present yourself. You, behind the door."

Mara could see nothing. The door remained still.

Adami trembled and spoke again as if addressing a phantom sent to finish its chore. "Show yourself—you coward, bring yourself to bear. I will not fear you," though his appearance told a different tale.

The door shifted again, but no goblin conferred.

Mara could not help but present a weak mirror of appearance to accompany the sorrow she saw in

the small face.

From the edge of the thin panel, two tiny matched hazel jewels of the king's granddaughter cautiously peeked out. Her tender features floated above a clean white sleeping garment, lined with lace flowers. Her braids wrapped the sides of her head. Within this finely groomed child, there was sadness. Her eyes, though still youthfully clear, held dark red rings where her hands had wrung them of tears. The little girl threw herself forward and into her grandfather's arms, shielding her doll so as not to crush it further.

He had not seen her since the night before when she had been playing on the stairs. He could tell that the news of her father had reached her ears. Adami scooped her lightly and into a clutching embrace as if he were a giant oak bearing a little one in wonder. His left arm cradled her as the other blotted her cheeks, and once again he noted the features of his son. "Ohh, my dear, do not cry. It's not as it seems."

"But papa is not coming home?" Tears and sorrow's wail mixed to form a serum for agony, and yet the king did not succumb.

His strength tested as never before, came from deep within. "No, he is not, my dear." It was

apparent this child understood only the idea of absence and not yet the true meaning of the experience. "But you must understand," he said, her cry held as breath, "your papa was needed ahead, to care for grandmother."

She did not respond immediately, but the sobbing softened, and she appeared to be thinking on the matter. Patience held the room and, ever so slowly, she pulled herself in against her grandfather until her head lay between his neck and shoulder.

Her grandfather pressed his cheek against her. "That's a good girl. There you are, now."

They held as the crystal edged pains of the windows began to glimmer with morning light. Time stood as still, long enough to allow the field outside to brighten.

Gently, the king slid his hand over her's. Rough at the edges, he realized she still clutched an object he had not noticed in her haste. Lifting her hand out in front he studied the crisp husk that had once been tucked in at the ends. Loose and frayed and unfurled where the wide prairie grass had been used to hold its torso together, the figure below the round formed head was no longer recognizable, yet did not appear to have lessened in its ability to provide

comfort.

Mara understood what he was doing and wished she could take part, but remained silent.

The little girl's grandfather held her hand and tried to relieve the remains of sorrow that still ran the length of her cheeks, now without the mournful accompaniment. "Where did you get such a beautiful doll, my dear?"

The little girl ignored his words and studied the woman by the open door, her pure white dress, golden hair, and gentle demeanor before her soft voice floated across the room. "Are you an angel, sent by my father?"

Her grandfather also looked toward Mara.

Mara's smile remained with the little one. "A friend of mine used to say I was his, just as I imagine your father must have claimed you as his own. Am I correct?"

The little girl also drew a smile and nodded, though her head remained against her grandfather's shoulder. "But I have forgotten how it feels to hear him say it."

Mara did not stray, though her eyes closed. "It is like warmth against cold, as your grandfather will attest." Her smile had risen high on her cheeks. "It is

more sweet than honey, and when you hear those words," Mara said as her words lit the room with a mysterious calm, "you know you are home."

Adami could feel the warmth Mara spoke of being drawn from the child, and he knew he wanted no other to come between the child and him. He wished the hand that wrapped around his neck would never release its hold. He pressed his face against her little forehead and kissed her to seal the thought. "You have come a long way; you must be hungry." His voice rose to address his servant who had positioned himself outside the door, yet could not be seen and did not show himself. "Sabi! Take our guest to the kitchen and give her whatever she desires." His voice fell in tone. "Please, accept my son's home as your own this morning. When you return from the warmth of the kitchen, you may take the boy with you." The king allowed his smile to fade as he clenched his lips together and spoke. "... for all of this, I am sorry. " Again he called out. "Sabi?"

He did not appear.

"I will find my way, Sire. Thank you." Mara did not take her eyes from the little girl, who continued to stare back at her, not even to glance toward the

basket where her son lay still and sleeping. "You will see, Sire, how wonderful the carpenter's words were meant to be." With a gentle turn, she stepped from the room, one arm by her side, as if leading another, invisible and small, in hand.

Adami watched as she disappeared below the arched doorway.

"... I got it from over by the window." The little girl's voice was soft and sweet. "I hope you don't mind. Papa left it for me... before he died."

Adami did not look away from the opening through which Mara had left, but squeezed his granddaughter before settling on her gentle features, which now appeared to have accepted their comforting words. "What was that, my dear?"

"My doll. I found it over by the window on the table."

Her grandfather took her hand, brought it near, and studied the remains of the beautifully woven doll of grass and husk that lay in tender grasp, this time in a different light.

"And see, she was holding a baby." Her other hand came from behind his neck and set a small wooden basket, carved with a child's face at the edge of a curled blanket, into the king's trembling

palm.

Adami studied the tiny wooden child, not sure what to make of it, though his thoughts on the matter had begun to circle. "You found it over there, on the table by the window?"

Only her head moved this time in a nod, concealing a sudden uneasiness, now wondering if she had done wrong by taking it without asking.

Adami lifted it from her as he looked to where the empty table stood against the wall, just below the last word the carpenter had carved. He adjusted it to catch the candlelight. He could see the detail. The basket was the same shape as Mara's, and the whittled child was meant to be asleep. He examined the surface but saw no inscription. Carefully, he set the little girl down.

She hesitated to release but did so. Adami regained full height before he took his next breath. Rotating his wrist, he cautiously peered down upon the bottom surface of the little wooden basket.

Polished and smooth, the flat surface was bare except for one tiny word whittled into the center. With a quivering lip and a tear-filled sigh, Adami drew his attention toward the window as the sun gently touched his face. He whispered. "For this you

will be ... forgiven."

His smile grew as he repeated the word no other could reveal. "Forgiven!"

Adami spun toward the door, handed the doll and basket back to his granddaughter, and released a joyful shout. "Sabi! Sabi!"

In a moment, Sabi stood inside the door with his head bowed. "Yes, Sire?"

"Bring me the woman. Bring our dear guest back, at once."

His servant did not raise himself from his bow. "Sire?"

The king's frustration and impatience showed in the form of a growing smile as his excitement built. "Mara! The woman you took to the kitchen, bring her to me."

Sabi perked his head and timidly peered across the room toward His Lord. "Sire? I took no one to the kitchen." His appearance supported the idea that the lack of sleep had driven the king mad.

"Have you been standing at the door all this time?"

"Yes, Sire?"

"Did you not see a woman leave a few minutes ago?"

Sabi took a step back, obviously worried for his position. "No, Sire. The woman did not leave. I assure you, I was here all the time and I saw no one leave." Sabi looked toward the corners of the room. Was a joke being played at his expense?

"The basket, Grandpa. Look, she left her basket!"

Across the room, sitting before the fire, the basket remained. The warm cast from the burning logs emblazoned the woven reeds with motion.

With steps to match a shy child's and the warmth of his granddaughter's hand in his own, Adami glanced toward Sabi before presenting himself over the woven edge.

Inside, the basket... was empty. A small wooden tablet with a single word inscribed onto its surface was all that remained in the child's place.

"Sire? Is everything all right?"

Adami placed his hands inside where the child had been lying and slid the tablet to the side. The bottom cushion was still warm.

"Sire?" Sabi had taken on a look of concern.

Adami looked from his granddaughter to Sabi, who remained at his designated post.

"Is everything all right, My Lord?"

Through the window, a bright light reflected off

the snow and shone in as if each gleaming stroke belonged to the hand of the carpenter. Adami watched as the light worked its magic. Before him, the shallow words in wood and at the edge of the sill disappeared in shadow and relief. The sparkling snow-covered branches, just outside, shivered and fell still as if waving their *adieu*. "Yes, Sabi, everything is perfect."

Holding his words with patience and a slight tilt of relieved disbelief, Sabi said, "Shall I look for the woman, Sire?"

With a quick turn in step, the king addressed the subject. "No." Sabi remained in bow, attention cast toward His Lord. "Take word to town; there is to be a gathering at the cathedral when the sun is high. It is to be attended by all..." Adami watched in glee as his servant tallied the options.

Sabi lowered his head further and took a step back before stopping and casting a glance at the basket on his master's throne. Adami could see the tally was not as he had imagined. "Yes, my friend? Please ask it. Something troubles you."

Sabi rose, his eyes wide in anticipation of what he hoped would not be the case. "Sire? Is it to be a hanging?"

Adami's cheer slid from his cheeks. His heart fluttered.

Sabi remained soberly upright and awaiting his king's response.

Adami stooped and picked up his granddaughter and looked into her face. He knew what he had done would be difficult to explain, he knew he was wrong, and yet, as he found the young eyes of his granddaughter, her heart so in love and adoring, even after all she had endured, he was sure that the people would, as the kingdom had always... *forgive.*

Adami's tone was calm and his cheeks damp. He cradled his granddaughter in his arms and turned toward the brilliant sunlight, now warm and bright upon his face.

"No, Sabi, it is to be a celebration —"

—The king suddenly sat up, leaving the dream behind. Sweat dripped from his forehead and face. The chill of the night pressed each droplet with a damp cold that shivered his body from head to toe, overriding the warmth of the blankets that covered his lower half.

Outside, the moon was full and bright, and the room appeared lit from inside as it reflected from the gold leaf that covered much of the furniture and trim. The coals in the fireplace had burned to glowing embers, and the new logs placed on top had not yet relit.

Another gentle knock came at the door.

King Adami gained his composure from the strange dream that had haunted him for three nights in a row and spoke directly. "Enter!"

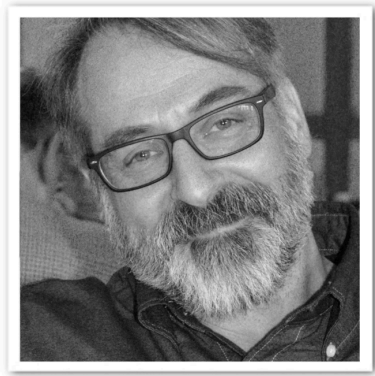
Quickly bowing at the neck, Sabi, the king's personal attendant stepped forward and spoke. "Sire, I am sorry to wake you but we have received a message that your soldiers are returning from battle and will arrive within the hour."

The king slid from his bed and dropped his legs over the side. He had grown old and his body stiff and tired. "Wonderful news, Sabi. Please let my commanders know to gather and be ready for their arrival. Tell the others to prepare for a feast of celebration. We shall meet at the cathedral."

"—There is more, Sire."

"Yes?" Adami had already stood and slowly turned toward the door from his position next to the bed. "What is it, Sabi?"

Sabi took a moment to collect his words. He knew this would not be easy for the king after what had happened to his wife months earlier. "Sire, word has ridden ahead
that there was an accident
in the mountains."



“Thank you for picking up my little winter tale.

CHRIS LIVES IN MINNESOTA WITH
HIS FAMILY.