

## Part I - The Witch

As she grew older, for several centuries now, she found herself more and more incapable of keeping herself occupied in the present instead of wandering into the memories of the past. She was too occupied with her thoughts to pay attention to the campfire, but that did not stop the campfire from growing into a true bonfire. And as it did, the recollections began to flood her mind once again making her pet bees anxious.

Over her seemingly endless lifetime, she had accrued and burned away many memories, but in the end, they would always return. Especially that of the girl. The girl was always the reason she felt she needed to purge herself once again of all those images of her past, but there was always a bittersweetness to it all. The girl might have been the thing she regretted the most, but the girl was also the one person she cherished the most among all those thousands of people she had ever known.

The memory of that frail, malnourished, mistreated little girl, who had taken her clothes off in the cold evening air in order to replicate her, the witch she sought help from after escaping her fate in the village not quite understanding that the witch would have been where she would have been sent in any case.

The bees had not been sure what to do at first. Some of them left the skin of the witch they were keeping warm, but would then retreat back as if not really knowing if it was acceptable to leave their mistress.

Their mistress had taken her time examining the girl before making any decisions. The girl had been clearly weak of body, barely strong enough to live, but she more than compensated with pure determination.

She wasn't sure how, but the witch had known from the beginning that this seemingly small decision would have dire consequences to the whole world, but her dilemma was that she did not know which way things would go.

In the end, she had done what she would have done in any case and took the child in. The bees had taken off and surrounded the girl. The child clenched her fist and shut her eyes as the

drones landed in the thousands, covering all of her to protect her from the chill. She did not flinch.

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## IN THE PAST

That night, Girl fell asleep snuggling against her new, unexpectedly adopted mother after the first good meal of insect-bread and honey she had maybe had in her whole life.

The new mother was more perplexed about her new situation than the child. She had a visitor of sorts every once in a while. Not many were brave enough to face her after hearing all the stories of her powers, but there were those who had no choice. They had been pampered and fed in order to make a pleasing sacrifice to her, but the problem was that she did not want those sacrifices.

At first, she had just returned them to their homes, but she learned that the villagers took that as a sign that those young women had displeased the witch, so they would punish them for it and banish them before finding a new girl to be sent off to the Witch. The witch found that guiding the girls to a new place to build a new life was a much better solution.

This was different. The girl had never had a chance to grow to be self-sufficient enough to be able to build herself a life and this was where the problem lied. What should she do with her?

She wrote the runes on the sand carefully with only one hand as she tried not to wake up the child resting against her. Fly agaric would have helped the process, but that did not seem appropriate at the time when she wanted the child to feel like she would be able to rely on the witch.

Despite the limitations and years since she had done this before, she was still able to let her spirit leave her body and have the meeting she wanted. The sensation was familiar, but still left her feeling out of comfort zone even without the help of mushrooms as she slipped out of her mortal coil.

"Sister, I need your help," she whispered into the void.

The void rippled in response. "Siiisssster, what do you require?"

"The girl. You see her? I need to know her past."

"Innndeeeed I see her."

And there she was. The witch had referenced the girl by the side of the flesh version of her, but now realized the girl had somehow joined her. She was there, floating in the void looking around incredulously. The witch had never seen anything like it. As far as she knew, only a handful of her sisterhood were able to do that and they all had centuries of time to learn.

"Hooow is this possible?" asked the voice in the void. "Hooow did she enter this place?"

The witch did not have an answer. "Can you help me with my inquiries?"

"Yeeees. The usual conditions apply."

The witch hugged the child and covered the young one's eyes as they began to float through the void. She hadn't done this many times before, but knew enough to brace herself for the nausea that would arrive any second.

She let the impossible currents take her into the past. She saw the child stick her spoon into a guard's neck before running into the dark of the night with her tormentors shocked to have lost her.

She saw the child sharpening the spoon against whatever she could find in the small box she had been confined to for a very long time.

She saw a guard dragging her out of the box to be assessed by the priests for their sacrificial purposes.

She saw her being fed minimal amounts of gruel to keep her pliable.

She saw her being sold into servitude by unknowing parents with too many children, who were told she would receive training in a trade and perhaps a place in a rich household as a chambermaid.

She snapped back into the void, holding onto vomit.

"Yooouuu found what you needed?" asked the void.

"Yes, I know who to deliver to you, Sister, but tell me, were they preparing her as a sacrifice for me?"

The void remained quiet for a few miserably long moments. "liiiindeed. They had you in mind, even though their version of you does not really respond to reality." The witch was fully aware of this. They had build their own version of her to use it to keep the population in line with the threat of a demonic being lurking just outside of the village perimeters.

"One more thing. Does she have a name?"

"Noot for a while, but she was known as Eira to her family."

The witch woke up next to the embers of her fire. The child woke as well, but the child did not seem to have the same need to regurgitate her last meal.

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The night had already been long and tiresome, but the witch knew the message would be most effective, if she didn't wait too long, so it was time to prepare. She sent out the drones to call all the hives to her service while she made her own arrangements.

She ran her fingers across the molded bee-themed decorations of her rigid leather armor. The armor had not been made for protection, but rather for ceremonial functions, but would serve well enough for the purpose of making a lasting impression.

She removed the oiled cloth from around her single-bladed sickle sword. She could feel the weapon arouse from its slumber with anticipation. It had not tasted blood for so long. She attached the spearhead to the shaft to rebuild her spear. The spear was more stoic and inquisitive than its brother as sisters of its kind are want to be, but was equally ready for action.

As soon as her legions of bees arrived, she was ready to begin her journey. While she generally enjoyed walking more, she did not have the time and the additional dramatics of flying would also serve her purposes better.

Things had changed after she had last left her domain. The roads were of better quality, there were new houses and farms scattered across the landscape which had all been forested when she was there the last time. Even the place she thought of as a village had grown into a town with multistoried buildings, paved streets and a palisade which was being rebuilt into a stone wall.

Day had already broken and there were people already scurrying on the streets as she arrived at her destination. No matter. She wasn't really about subtlety on this occasion.

Many things still remained the same in the city. The town square was still in the same place right next to the stream which ran through the place. That was also next to the site the witch was looking for: the town temple and its courtyard.

Her targets, the clergy, clearly weren't expecting the witch. There seemed to be some sort of celebration on the way when she descended from the heavens with her friends. Every bee within leagues was there in one huge swarm.

"He is the witness!" she exclaimed pointing at a young monk with her spear, who seemed to be the least threatening participant in the party. "The servants can leave!"

Throngs of bees laid siege on the helpless clerics. There wasn't any shelter, so the soft skinned humans were no match to the insects. The witch dealt killing blows walking through the quivering masses of humans slashing open their throats with her sword or piercing their hearts with her spear.

There were enough victims for her to gather enough blood to write down her message. Whoever found this place later would see "NO MORE SLAVES, NO MORE SACRIFICES" in huge crimson letters on the courtyard.

When she was finally done, the bees had already started dispersing in order to start their daily routine. The designated witness was still cowering in his hiding place. He had seen enough to forward the message if nothing else, so the witch was ready to leave. She felt her Sister in the Void was satisfied as well.

She took one last look at the results of her work. There was blood and mangled bodies everywhere. Some bees were still hanging around, not sure what to do or where they were. She called them to follow her back to their forest as she started to walk through the streets. Her bloodied figure and openly carried weapons were enough to make everyone she met give her room. Even the burly guards, who might have initially felt some sort of obligation or desire to confront her, stood aside rather than risk her wrath.

She took her time. The town was a constant assault on her senses. The sounds were a loud cacophony in her ears and the smells were even worse on her nose. Even the serenely

beautiful romanticized memory she had of the community of farmers had devolved into a bunch of dirty beggars contrasted by richer people wearing gaudy fabrics, sometimes even of silk, and adding fur to their costume despite the warm night.

This whole place made her feel uncomfortable. This world was no longer familiar to her. Her armor was antiquated and even her weapons, while still strong and sharp, felt old and deprecated compared to the unwieldy and imposing halberds of the guardsmen.

She began to focus on her small and frail body, and somehow a need to prove herself to these people the way she had just done with the people within the temple. The feeling was overwhelming. She could almost hear the pumping in the veins of a guardsman she passed by as if she needed to stop it.

The sword joined in as well. It had just tasted blood for the first time in hundreds of years and was not about to return to slumber without a little more action. Even the bees indicated nervousness with a chaotic dance around her.

Then she snapped out of it. Something was trying to push her to further violence. Her first thought was the Sister in the Void, but the Void had never been greedy and had never asked for a death without a rationale. She looked around for clues, but this just further instilled fear in all those who now suddenly found themselves under her gaze.

She ascended upwards in order to get distance between herself and the people, as something was urging her to massacre.

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The operative met the spymaster in a tavern. He was very nervous about the situation. Not only had there been a massacre of the people he was supposed to be keeping an eye on, but this was the first time he would officially meet her. The fact that this meeting had been called that very morning was not helpful.

Her presence in the city had been an open secret for a while. He wasn't sure why she had chosen to work from there. After all, the monarch would probably have preferred her to be in her vicinity just in case, but at the same time he suspected that it just meant that there was something happening in this very city.

Of course, she was already there. He thought he would have found her in a shadowy corner with her back against the wall, but instead she was right there, at the center of it all. The shadowy corner had been reserved for her personal shadow, a former army officer, rumored to have fought in several wars, now acting as her bodyguard. The operative assumed the soldier was himself largely responsible for the rumors regarding his military career and massive bodycount.

While the two had never met, he had been aware of her for a while and he assumed she would have been aware of him as well, but from a very different position. His secret, which he wondered whether she knew, was that she was very much infatuated with her. She was showing signs of aging after more than two decades in her job, but in his mind it was remarkable that she had been able to maintain her looks with her job, which must have kept her busy through more than a few nights.

He had not been sure if she would know who she was meeting, but at the moment he stepped in, she was transfixed on him, even if she managed to keep it under wraps. She wore an expensive, but practical black dress, which made him feel underdressed in his used suit, which was the best he could afford with his student budget. His appointment as an operative had been more of a blackmail situation than typical recruitment, although blackmail was quite typical in this particular line of work.

He was hesitant, as he did not know how this whole process should proceed, so after a small pause, he just sat down opposite her. She seemed amused by his ordeal, even though he expected their discussion to be dire, to say the least.

"Well, what do you know about what happened last night?" Apparently, she was not one for pleasantries or formalities, when there was business at hand.

He wasn't sure what she would know and what he could possibly add to it. "The short of it: What I could gather, there was a naked woman, who fell from the sky and killed many of the ranking members of the church."

"Why? What had they done?"

"I don't know. Maybe this was an act of god? Maybe that was an angel, who was working for the god?"

"I doubt it. This naked woman has been recorded every now and then in the history books. But something must have happened. Something out of the usual."

"There was an escapee." He immediately knew that he should not have spoken about this.

"Tell me more." She leaned forwards.

He took the leaning as a sign of interest, but she could as well have been careful with her drink.

"You know the inner circle of the church sometimes makes human sacrifices?"

She nodded.

"One of them escaped. A young girl of maybe ten, sold to the church to be an apprentice of some sort by her family, but destined to be offered to a demon living in the countryside."

"Yes, we know of her. Very harmless."

Pieces were dropping into place in his mind. "Her? Is that the naked woman?"

She hesitated for just a second. "It is possible. Do you know what they were hoping to achieve?"

"Apparently they think she needs to be placated from time to time when things start to go wrong."

"Interesting. Why her?"

"I guess they just don't know of other such forces close enough."

She smirked. "Yes, despite their immense resources and libraries full of stolen books, they have failed to find several in this very city."

"I think it's a form of control." He was formulating this idea as he was talking. "I think they sucker people into their inner circle by giving them this information about the woman and such, and the people coming in believe they have been given some deeper truths, which in turn helps form a stronger bond between these people."

She had been a witness to the darkest sides of people her whole career. "Or common guilt. Being guilty of buying a child and conspiring to kill her does tend to keep people in line."

He did not have a retort for that. He had just realized how close he probably had been to being one of those people before being recruited to his role as an operative. That was the first time he



was happy to have been picked up by the police as one of the object lessons for a riot in which he had been caught up in, although he had suspected for a while that it had not been a random arrest as the law dictated in those situations. The other six had been executed publicly.

"The church hierarchy has a bit of a vacuum now. Can you use that to infiltrate them further?"

He was not enthused by the idea.

She was not about to let him turn this down and she knew where his true interests lie, namely vanity. "That would mean a higher budget for costumes and living. We need to have someone who can look the part."

With desperation in his eyes, he nodded. His studies had been draining what little money he had. "Okay, I will do it. I know exactly who to talk to."

"Good. Now, you do realize I brought you to this place for a reason. Do not say a word, but we are being watched."

He felt the need to check around for anyone watching him, but realized that it would not be a good idea.

She smiled approvingly. "When the church was still a provincial novelty, some hundreds of years ago, they decided that they needed a spectacle to gain the attention of the populace. With great expense, they bought themselves a bear from the north and a lion from the south. In order to pit them against each other."

He wondered why she was telling him all this.

"They built a coliseum, at even greater expense, just for this purpose and managed to fill it with curious locals and even some visitors from near-by cities. It just happened that the fight was not what they were looking for. You see, apparently the lion has never had a need to grow a thick skull, so when the two met, the bear quickly smashed the back of the head of the lion in."

He was about to say something, but remembered that he was trying to remain silent.

"So, the archbishop decided that after that anticlimax, they still needed a spectacle and in his hubris decided to give the audience one. Before his men could stop him, he stepped into the arena where the bear was still pushing the lion around in anger, and ordered the beast to yield. You know what?"

He just stared.

"The beast did not and completely mangled the man, who was completely taken by surprise by the speed of the bear." She took a sip from her elegant glass, which didn't quite match their surroundings. "This is why we are here."

It began to dawn on him.

"You are here, because I want them to know you are working for me. Because we are going to be one step ahead of them. They are going to try to make you a double agent. In their hubris they are going to think they can turn you, which you are going to play into. We will give you information to give them, so that they are going to trust you and this will hopefully enable you to move forwards within the church."

He did remember that he wasn't supposed to speak, so he tried to inconspicuously cover his mouth in case someone was trying to read his lips. "And you are going to feed them false information as well, through me?"

"Perhaps. For security purposes, we can't actually tell you."

He wondered whether that was a royal 'we'. He doubted the spymaster would have been careless about her language.

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Next night, Eira met the rest of her new family. She woke up in the middle of the night. Something beckoned her to leave the simple tent she and the witch were sleeping in.

"We. Have. Waited." It was an ethereal voice, but there was also something pained in it. Eira couldn't tell where it was coming from at first.

She could see lights in the woods. She was intrigued and that feeling overpowered the fear she might have otherwise felt. She checked that the witch was still asleep before stepping into the forest.

There was a clearing. The lights were flashing softly above it. Eira held out her hand to touch them, but they remained elusive and moved away from her.

Roots began to rise from the ground to form a vaguely human form. It pointed to the lights. "Sister." It pointed behind Eira, where various animals from the woods had begun to gather silently. "Sister." It pointed to nowhere specific into the darkness outside of the lights. "Sister." It pointed to the encampment. "Sister". Finally it pointed to Eira. "Niece?"

Eira remembered a story from her childhood. Before being sold off, there was a neighbor. An old crone, who was regularly harassed by the members of the new religion, but beloved by the children, would tell stories to anyone who would listen. She would tell them of the sorority of goddesses, who remained out of reach for the urban folk, but she would always make sure her most eager listener, Eira, was around to hear. "You are the sorority."

The mass of roots made a motion reminiscent of nodding.

"You are the Sister from Below the Trees, you are Sister from Above, the animals are a sign of Sister Walking Among Beasts and somewhere out there is Sister Beyond the Light. Am I right?"

The mass of roots nodded again.

"You said you had waited. For me?"

"Yes. We. Knew.."

"You knew what?"

"You. Kin. One. Day." Eira had to contend with that as the roots began to disperse. There was one more message: "Don't. Tell. Her." The roots pointed back at the encampment.

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The witch couldn't really say when the change in their living circumstances had happened in those few decades. It was so gradual it was unnoticeable.

The witch hadn't seen much of a choice. Eira wouldn't have survived on her own for too long and the witch didn't see any way of trying to install her to a new life without being taken advantage of again.

So, life went on. The two of them went on living on their own in the middle of nowhere with regular lessons on the arts the witch practiced. The kid learned fast. It did not take long for her to speak with the bees and the witch taught her many more useful tricks for handling the daily

household chores more effectively. Eira had even begun to build extra buildings into the small encampment, including a quite sturdy and livable treehouse in which she would sleep on most nights.

The witch was fully aware the Sister from the Void was keeping an eye on Eira and she had also seen Sister from Above. The latter even would even have her children leave little shiny gifts for the child.

Then, one spring, the witch finally realized something. "Eira, how old are you?"

Eira seemed perplexed, as if she didn't really understand the question. "I... don't know. Maybe thirty."

The witch tried to remember how all this worked. Thirty must have been a fairly high age for most people, if she remembered correctly, most people in her old clan didn't even reach that, but Eira was still just blossoming into adulthood. Even sleeping through the winters of each year surely wouldn't have made this much of a difference.

She realized that while she might not have been aware of it, she had not been comfortable around Eira for a while. Something just didn't fit. She wasn't sure what to do. In some ways she was glad that Eira was there. At least she had some company after having lived with no-one but her bees having only occasional interactions with people or her Sisters.

Still, she needed to know Eira had been able to avoid aging. She had achieved near immortality herself, but there had been a steep price involved. What had Eira done to achieve hers? How had she been able to achieve that behind her back?

Her thoughts were cut off by the bees swarming her. Something was unsettling them and what unsettled the witch was that she was not sensing what that was. Something must have been very wrong, but it was hard to figure out what that was when the best indication of that was that she couldn't tell that something was wrong. Not trusting the bees was unthinkable to her, but... things had suddenly become very complicated and she couldn't even tell what was behind it.

And there was Eira, puzzled, watching over the witch. Or was she puzzled. Was she just interested? The witch couldn't even tell. At first she didn't want to even think about it, but there was only one real solution: It was time to talk to Mother.

Eira wasn't up to the long trek in the winter time on skis as she never had an opportunity to be accustomed to the snow, but did her best to hide it from the witch. The witch tried to take this into account when choosing routes and taking breaks, but she was also preoccupied with her own apprehension about the situation that she often forgot to take Eira into account.

She had second thoughts about meeting Mother throughout her journey. Eira had insisted on joining her, which was one objection the witch had about her own idea, but that was not the only one. Mother had been...difficult for the longest time, but Mother was still Mother and if anyone was able to fix whatever was wrong with the witch, it was Mother.

She had decided that a sea would do instead of the ocean. That would save her weeks of travel, perhaps more than a month with Eira on her heels even if Mother tended to recede to the deeper recesses of her vast home as the ice formed over the coastal waters.

As they finally neared their destination, the witch had another of her many talks to her protégé about the same subject. It was always the same warnings. Eira could not, under any circumstances, try to reach Mother. Also, she was to keep her composure at all times, whatever she saw happen. She had already decided not to warn her to look away, as she knew Eira would not listen to that specific order anyhow. She did, however, once again remind her that despite experiencing more than most humans, there were still a lot of things she had never witnessed, and this would be one of those occasions where she would see something that might change her outlook on life forever.

Once on the frozen beach, they set up camp to rest before the ritual. Eira was too exhausted to be much use in this regard, but she did cook a nice meal considering what ingredients she had available to her. Not that the witch cared. Her mind was already on the next day which was going to be hard.

In the morning the witch began her preparations. She used her ax to make a hole in the ice and dug up a rock from under the snow on the beach before disrobing as Eira came out of their small tent to watch. The coastal winds were cruel, but she knew the ordeal would have been even worse with any kind of clothing on as she carried the rock and descended into the hole and let herself sink deeper and deeper.

She had always thought drowning would be a pleasant way to die if it ever came to it, but that was not the case at that time. Fish began to circle around her as she could no longer hold her breath and started to draw in the salty water.

Right as she was about to lose her consciousness, she saw a huge tentacle reach for her. It grabbed her gently by the waist and pulled her up to the surface. The huge creature topped the trees on the beach despite not even surfacing fully. The witch could barely see it, but it was an amalgam of various pets of Mother's with the tentacles of an octopus and the shell of a crab covering what one could assume was the back of a sea urchin, if it even had a back.

The witch was barely able to catch a glimpse of Eira, as the huge creature descended back into the murky waters. The girl did not seem fazed, almost as she had been able to predict what was going to happen.

"Ah [...], you have finally returned to me", echoed Mother's voice as the witch felt the icy water against her skin once more. "I was expecting you to return many winters ago."

"But... why?" was the only thing the witch was able to enunciate.

"Dear [...], you are in trouble. Many of your Sisters have turned against you."

The near-death experience had taken too much out of the witch and she wasn't able to form complicated sentences and thus settled for just repeating herself. "Why?"

"They have found something better." There was a pregnant pause. "Remember: You will always be my favorite, but as you know, my influence can't reach outside of my own domain. I will help you, if I can, but you will not be able to count on me."

She didn't know how long it had been when she woke up in the snow on the beach. She was still naked and the sun was already setting, so she must have been unconscious throughout most of the day. She closed her eyes again to force her blood to circulate. It took a few minutes before she was ready to get back on her feet and walk back to their encampment.

She could barely make it to their small tent, where she wrapped herself in whatever she could find to keep her warm. Eira entered soon after with the witch's clothes she had gathered from the shore. She joined the witch under her blankets and furs to help her warm up with her own body heat.

"What happened under there?" Eira asked.

The witch wasn't even sure herself. "Mother came for me and we had a discussion, but I'm not sure it was fruitful in any way." She felt she wasn't going to figure it out right now anyhow, so she just took solace in Eira's gesture and fell asleep.

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It was almost spring when they finally made it back home. The witch had had a long time to contemplate Mother's words, but that had not made a difference. She was more confused by them if anything, as she had been going through all the possible hints she might have seen in the recent past and the recent past in her timeline was close to a human lifespan. Not much had happened.

Well, except Eira. The rational part of the witch's brain told her that Eira was the reason, but the rest of her chose not to believe it despite all the evidence to the contrary. In her more lucid moments her inability to come to terms with this worried her even more, but those didn't seem to last very long.

Then, one day she finally decided to confront Eira. She just wasn't sure how to do it. It wasn't something she had ever done with her adopted daughter. So, she sat back, took a moment to think through her strategy and when she finally felt ready to do it, she rose up and started to walk back to where she had last seen Eira taking care of the bees. Didn't the witch used to make sure that was her own task?

The bees already knew something was about to happen, but there was something unusual about their dance. Eira emerged from among them. She looked part ashamed and part resigned. Both emotions the witch had never seen Eira express. She could feel there was something going on beyond her physical senses.

Before either of them was able to start speaking, darkness enveloped the witch and swallowed her. She could feel herself being dragged outside of her usual reality.

"Ssssiister?" It was Sister from the Void. The witch started to vomit uncontrollably and it did not seem to end. At some point the vomit was no longer physical. It was strands of psychic energy leaving her body and her mind.

"Ssiister?", the Sister from the Void tried again.

"Yes? What is going on?" She felt both kinds of vomit all over herself. She didn't know if it was the environment she was in or the extra energy leaving her body, but somehow the vomit felt more real than anything she had felt in a long time.

"Aaaarre you alright?"

"I must be." She tried moving her arms and legs to feel her renewed body.

"Youuuu talked to Mother. I was worried."

[...] saw a form approach her. She hadn't seen her sister's fragile, bloodied form in millenia. She was still wearing the tattered clothes [...] had taken her mutilated body in to Mother back in the day before humans had even developed literacy. [...] broke down and hugged her sister.

"[...], please remain here." She grasped [...]s head with both of her hands to show what was happening back in [...]s own world. Eira was sobbing. She hadn't done that ever before. The Sisters were surrounding her. They had clearly been setting a trap for [...] and it would have worked if it wasn't for the only one of her sisters she had known in life.

There was Sister from Above, Sister Beneath the Trees and Sister Walking Among Beasts. She could also sense Sister Beyond the Light lurking somewhere within her own domain.

"They are like me, [...]. They crave the blood of the humanity that betrayed them. They just haven't had you to help them sate their desires."



## Part II - Woe to All Who Inhabit this World

### IN THE PRESENT DAY

The witch was weeping at this point. She hadn't had to go through any of these memories in so long that the emotions were breaking her.

At the same time, she knew these memories would be a beacon for Eira. They were probably calling her already, but the process took time. She would have to relive them all and not only that. She had to remember things she had not even experienced herself in order to rid herself of them once again.

Instinctively she knew it was going to be worse from now on.

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### IN THE PAST

It started small. A scullery maid in a nearby manor house saw the butler start to look for excuses to beat her again. This had happened almost nightly throughout the two years she had been responsible for cleaning the pans.

That night things turned out differently. While it wasn't the first time she had found a knife among the pans, even though another maid was responsible for the cutlery, that was the night she found the courage to use it.

As the butler approached her, working up his anger and readying himself for his favorite hobby, she grabbed his hand instead and drove the knife through it, fixing him to the large wooden table. After that, she commenced to beat him to a pulp with a huge cast-iron skillet and with a distant countenance.

When she was finally done and no-one would be able to identify what was left of the man, the maid saw that there had actually been a witness. One of the minstrels, a young acrobat, who played the vielle while doing his stunts, who was too handsome for his own good and thus had become a favored target of unwanted advances and worse from the nobility visiting the house. It wasn't like the maid expected. He wasn't shocked or afraid. He was inspired.

The minstrel went back to their quarters, dismantled his vielle and combined the strings into a makeshift garrote. After that, he returned to the great hall, where he knew the captain of a nearby garrison had keeled over after all the mead the minstrel had served him in the hopes of avoiding the rape he had been subjected to by the officer on several occasions.

The minstrel positioned his victim calmly before strangling him dispassionately. After that he was done, at least for now, and handed his tool to a lady in waiting, who he knew had been a victim of similar treatment from the chaplain, who was even at that very moment in the corner of the room too deeply concentrated on molesting a new chambermaid, who had made the mistake of been just a bit too curious about what was going on at the party. The lady in waiting took the opportunity to dispatch the pervert.

And so it went on. One at a time many of the members of the household finally found the nerve to do what they had wanted to do for the longest time. A wave of murders washed over the estate, leaving behind numerous victims. Those few who remained had an orgy of food, drink and fornication as if to show their victims how it's really done before scattering to the nearby villages to spread their newfound creed of extermination the same way they had found it.

Only the scullery maid remained. Somehow she knew this manor was now hers to take care of. She had a lot of work to do, so she set out to do it.

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The operative woke up with the spymaster sitting comfortably at the end of his bed. "What's going on?" In the passing decades, they had not met personally again, until now, so something significant had to be up.

Age had finally caught up with her physically, but that did not mean she had lost a step mentally. "Well, you tell me," said the spymaster, "I just received a communique from someone observing the manor house you have been visiting. There is something happening. Apparently a lot of dead bodies."

"What?" He wasn't fully woken up yet. The news was too much to handle. "I don't know. It's just been church business. We - they - are trying to convert him. I have to play along. Did anyone see you coming in?"

Obviously plenty of people had seen her within the house. She wasn't exactly stealthy at almost eighty. However, she completely disregarded that question. It just did not matter right then. If it came to it, that problem could be handled in the future. "Yes, nicely done. They have indeed given you many responsibilities and our grants have indeed helped you play the part." She used a cane that came from nowhere to raise the silk bed sheet to remind him of what they had done on his behalf.

"Just... let me gather my thoughts." He stood up and poured some water into a basin to wash his face. "The chaplain of the house did ask me about something. What was it again? Something about stars being too close and ravens forming circles in the meadows right outside of the gardens. I made up some nonsense to keep him calm, but I assumed the whole thing had something to do with the mushrooms he is very fond of."

"Was. At least as far as we can tell, every ranking member of the household has died. Our lines of communication aren't as fast as we would like, so we are still waiting for additional details."

He felt she assumed that he was holding something from her. This was true in general, but he couldn't think of anything specific regarding the manor house he would have omitted from his reports. He felt he needed to play for time. "Are the homing pigeons too afraid to approach the premises if there is a murder of ravens about?"

"That is a possibility."

"Is your contact still alive?"

"I would assume so, but we can't know that either. He is quite good though. And no, I'm not going to tell you he is, unless you actually need to know."

He felt like his ability to prolong the conversation wasn't about to last much longer. "That place. There is something wrong with it. There is this feeling of sickness about it. The people don't trust anyone and they are just malevolent..." He stopped as he remembered that his guest was a member of the court.

She knew exactly what he was thinking. "Yes, sounds like the court, but you have been to both, so compare."

"Actually... it is worse than the court. It wasn't like that when I visited the first time, but that was over ten years ago when I was still trying to climb the hierarchy of the church. It was like there's a poison that works on the minds of the people."

"Continue."

"The people have become vicious. I haven't visited the place that many times, so I can't really tell if the change was gradual or it happened when the master of the manor changed. Still, they punish the servants severely and often. They overwork the peasants and the master has been losing a lot of money on parties and gambling."

"Who did he gamble with?"

"You can't really call it gambling. He would deliberately lose money to his superiors and then force his subjects to play with him as he knew they wouldn't dare to win."

"That does sound expensive, as I bet his workers subjected to this just wouldn't lose as much as he did."

"It would seem so."

"How well do you know the staff?"

He knew what was coming. He wanted to lie, but you can't actually lie to the person, who has risen to a very high position partly for her ability to know everything. "Not that well. I know some by name, but I did not mingle much with them, as they did not want any kind of attention put on them for the fear of unwarranted punishments."

"Well, here is your chance to get to know them better. Your horse is being readied for the journey."

---

Eira was nearing the manor house. She was not in a hurry, although she had been when leaving her previous home. She had only been able to take her skis and the witch's weapons with her. She wasn't sure she'd need them nor was she sure she would know how to use them if there ever was a situation where they would be helpful. She had only ever seen the witch wield them once and even then they seemed more of a stylistic choice than anything else.

She was disappointed in herself. She had been planning this and learning from the Aunties for decades, but she would have needed more time. There were always more secrets to learn and more intelligence to gather. There were risks involved, when everything was not yet in place. Still, perhaps the elements she had already planted might be enough.

She moved through the countryside through the forests, trying to avoid any large bodies of water as far as she could just in case Grandmother was watching. The Aunties were around, but chose not to reveal themselves.

Eira met some of the people leaving. They knew to act with appropriate reverence, the worst of them even kneeling at the sight of her. That wasn't what she wanted exactly, or at least she hadn't known beforehand that she had wanted that kind of attention.

As she arrived at her new base, she shed her furs and took one of the dresses stolen from the dead nobility that had been laid out for her by the maid. The white color wasn't really to her liking, but the patterns of blood on it appealed to her. The maid had rolled in a mirror for her too. Eira didn't really see a point to it. The polished metal just wasn't as clear as the still, clear water she was used to seeing herself in. The dress did not fit her and under other circumstances it would have been seen as comical on her.

She continued to the great hall, where the maid was busy positioning the bodies, often half-naked, in various places to form a macabre court for her new mistress. The maid saw Eira enter the room and quickly scuttled to her mistress to offer her food.

Eira tasted the dried fruit, but quickly spat it out. She was used to the fresh versions, which her mother had been able to keep that way throughout the winter with her craft. Eira also realized that for the first time, she called the witch her mother, even if it was only her inner voice.

The Aunties began to arrive. Weird orbs of light came down through the chimney to form Auntie from Above, roots broke through the floor to make room for Auntie Beneath the Trees and the huge wolveren form of Auntie Walking Among the Beasts made a far less dramatic entrance by simply stepping into the light from the shadows in the corner of the room, where Auntie Beyond the Light presumably remained.

In a way Eira envied them. They had been bestowed with great power from Grandmother, who had taken all of them under her care under various circumstances. But Eira also knew they

envied her. After all, Mother had been the only one of the sistren who had not had to die to gain Grandmother's attention. In that sense they wanted to be like her.

"What. Next?" the messy mass of roots that presented Auntie Beneath the Trees on that specific day asked. Auntie from Above mirrored the sentiment through flickering.

Eira had contemplated this for decades, but was still unsure of herself. After all, this wasn't something one does regularly or can rehearse in advance. The first steps had gone well. The seeds for the destruction of the world as everyone knew it had been sown, but those few who had left this place would be captured soon enough, unless they were able to keep the momentum going.

However, it was no coincidence that they were here. While it was conveniently located on the way to the capital, Eira had been busy behind Mother's back and found out that she was not the only witch around. There had been one right here, at this manor, back in the day when this was just a hearth for one family.

That was the reason this family had eventually grown to prominence, even if they hadn't really known for many generations after the head of the family had croaked unexpectedly before passing on this key piece of information to his sons. That witch had died hundreds of years ago, but had also manipulated the situation in such a way that everything just seemed to fall into place for her descendants, who were happy to perform certain ceremonies and keep certain traditions without understanding their true meaning.

Many other manor houses had dogs for hunting and for companionship, but this one had hares and ravens for other reasons. They were always free to roam the manor grounds and were never to be harmed in any way. Indeed, many visitors knew to come with extra cutlery, as the ravens might steal them and there was nothing the human could do about it, unless they were ready to face the wrath of the master of the house.

While many still understood enough to remain clear of ravens, the role hares had had in the heyday of the Wee Folk had been forgotten as the Wee Folk were relegated into folklore after leaving this reality. They had learned many tricks from the tricksters. The hares were still able to perform various functions, if only someone knew how to ask.

And Eira did. Auntie Walking Among the Beasts had taught her to speak with the animals. Auntie couldn't do it herself, as she reeked of the predators she walked among and would scare off any animals with experience of being on the other side of the equation.

Eira walked outside through the side doors leading into the garden. She hadn't realized how bad the smells were inside until she could once again breathe in the fresh air. She found a small clearing among the bushes, where she sat down and started to sing a song she had been testing for what seemed like ages.

It was working. It took only a few minutes until the first hares showed their faces and cautiously came into the open. Soon enough, some of them joined in and before long there were hundreds of them sitting there, unnervingly just watching her. There were also ravens in the trees, but they weren't as easily tasked as their mammal counterparts, so Eira had decided that she would rather count on their natural willingness to gossip than to ask them to spy for her.

"Hares, hear me, the new mistress of this house! Long have you been withheld your true calling, long have you been dismissed as mere pets, while your true potential has been wasted?"

The hares did hear her. They squeaked approvingly. They had been quite bored, if comfortable, during the intervening centuries. They yearned to take back their position in the world and Eira knew exactly how to use them.

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The first hare arrived at a small cottage a few days later. It was inhabited by an old midwife, who had escaped the new doctrines of burning witches. She had never been one, but just because certain people didn't really understand her craft, she was labeled as such and therefore saw it prudent to move away from the community she had served for 18 years.

The hare sat on its hindlegs in front of the dwelling until the midwife came out. They stared at each other for a minute until the midwife started to tear up. She fell to her knees not quite understanding what was going on, but just like the hare, the midwife knew she had found a new calling, even if she didn't understand the calling itself.

The hare approached her to whisper the secrets it was sent to share with the midwife. The sounds carried much meaning, releasing knowledge and wisdom she did not know she

possessed from deep within the woman. Most importantly, she suddenly knew of ley lines and how she needed to awaken the one running right beside her little home.

She sat down next to it and started to sing a song softly. It was in a language only known by a handful of living people. The midwife was not among them, but the words flowed easily out of her. The hare joined in as best as it could, which wasn't much, but it was something.

It took a while, but slowly the leyline did respond. It felt as if it joined in on the song. The sound it made was barely audible, but the midwife knew it was there. A few hours later the leyline began to gain color. The grass on it was just a little bit greener than the grass around it.

Slowly, she felt others joining in. They were nowhere near her, but somewhere along the same ley line other women like her had started to sing as well. Soon enough, there were hundreds of them. By that time, the glow of the ley line was strong enough to be seen even in daylight.

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The minstrel reached Eira's hometown, or maybe one could even call it a city at that point. The gates had already been closed for the night, but the minstrel had an idea. Well, he might have waited until morning, but it seemed funnier to him to use the blood he was covered in.

"Help, I've been attacked!" he shouted to gain the attention of the guards. He could see a lantern being raised on the ramparts.

"Are they still after you?" asked a disembodied voice.

"I don't think so!"

He could see the small door next to the gate being opened. He decided to play up the situation and fell to the ground apparently unconscious from the lack of blood. He knew he was overdoing it, but couldn't help himself.

He went as limp as he could as he was taken inside the walls. And there he was. He had reached his target and he had a very specific task. He just didn't have a plan beyond that. But he could see that the older of the guardsmen did not like the younger's brashness and hostile attitude towards the general citizenry.



He gave the older guard a meaningful look and the man understood the message. Without hesitation he thrust his spear into the other guard through the spine, aiming for the organs that when ruptured would surely kill the man, but slowly.

The minstrel took the opportunity to walk away into the town. It was a slow night, but that was about to change. As he walked to his destination, he saw a linkboy burn his client alive, a rat-catcher feeding a landlord to the vermin he had caught and a baked potato seller pushing a man's face into the coals. Just like in the manor house, things escalated fast from there.

Soon enough he reached the slums and started to look for a very specific hovel. Part of him didn't believe he would be able to find it, but something in the back of his mind kept pushing him forwards into the slum.

He and especially his outfit did garner a lot of interest, but for some reason the curse, as he had come to think of it, didn't work here in the same way it did in the rest of the town. While his first thought that someone would be interested in robbing him, this did not happen. Instead, there was just curiosity.

Then some of the watchers began to follow him. Again, there was no sign of anything nefarious. They just wanted to see what was going on. The crowd following him began to grow as he moved past more and more of these dwellings looking for something specific he didn't know he was looking for. He just thought he would know when he saw it.

Finally he did find something. There was one small decrepit house, with a worn image of a hare painted on the wall and covered in mud. It was a childish drawing and you could hardly make out what it was supposed to represent under all the muck, but there it was.

In front of the house, there was an old crone, barely hanging onto life. The minstrel knew this was the person he was looking for.

"Ma'am," he bowed down as dramatically as only an actor of his stature was able to do, or at least that's what he preferred to think, "I have been sent here to give you a message." He cleared his throat and made the message seem official by pretending to read it from a blank piece of paper. "The daughter you sold for a few coins all those years ago wishes you to know this: Everything that is about to take place here and the rest of the world, indeed has already started to happen, is on your soul."

The crowd behind him lost control. A brawl started with weapons drawn and those who had not been carrying weapons improvising to the best of their ability.

The crone was horrified and attempted to get back into her house, but was unable to do so. No-one was attacking her specifically, but melee was spilling quickly from its initial parameters and the old woman was soon caught in it.

The minstrel attempted to feel sorry for her, but something stopped him from doing so.

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Eira had something very different in mind for the capital. None of her disciples were headed there specifically. The capital was a treat she was saving for herself. There was not going to be anything left of the place once she was done.

Settling into her new home had proven difficult as sleeping on a mattress had proven difficult, so he slept on the floor instead, and the food wasn't to her liking, so she had sent out the hares to gather whatever they could find from the forest, which wasn't much this time of the year. Even the maid was unsatisfactory. Sure, she wanted to please her new mistress, but was a bit too eager, as Eira was used to doing things herself, not letting someone else do the work for her.

Still, she had to wait a few weeks before the ley lines were strong enough for her purposes. On the other hand, since this was a nexus for them, sooner or later someone would be there to investigate them as they were beginning to become more and more visible.

She put on her mother's armor and strapped her weapons to her back. Then she put on her skis and started her journey towards the capital. "Try to keep up, if you can", she said to Auntie Beyond the Light, who was lurking around. Or at least Eira was pretty sure she was. She could never be quite sure.

She gained momentum quickly by utilizing the energy of the ley line. She moved past many of the people, mostly women, she had employed to awaken the ley lines, and their new hare companions. Some of them caught a glimpse of Eira, but she didn't know whether they or the hares knew what was happening.

Soon she was moving so fast it was becoming hard to breathe and the scenery was becoming completely blurred. But the time she did this journey was unprecedented. She started to slow down after a few hours when she reached the farmlands surrounding the capital, where the ley

lines weren't strong enough yet to maintain the speed. It took her a few hours more at this slowed pace to reach the capital itself, but there it was.

She stopped a decent distance outside of the city to wait for the night, so that Auntie Beyond the Light would be at her most powerful. Well, if she was around that is, which Eira hoped she was, because the whole thing did rely on that. Eira wasn't exactly a warrior, even if she was playing one at that specific moment in time, so when the time came to move forwards with the plan, she really, really hoped Auntie was around.

The city gates had been closed and the bridge had been drawn, when it was dark enough to act. Eira walked to the gates and took a defiant stance in the lights above the gates. She was not about to be coy here. "Guards of this city! Hear me, for I am the harbinger of your doom!"

She waited a moment. She could see lights moving on the ramparts and a head popped into view. Then a few more. Some insults were hurled, but that didn't matter. The important part was that they were paying attention to Eira while Auntie snatched them from the light one by one.

After Auntie was done, the drawbridge fell down followed by the grille of the portcullis expanding enough for Eira to walk through. She had never been there before. The smells were awful. The narrow streets were covered in muck. Eira did not want to think about where it had appeared. She was trying to find the docks. She assumed the right direction was where the wind was blowing.

Auntie used the opportunity to kill indiscriminately. Eira could hear the muffled sounds every once in a while as she had passed someone walking alone. There weren't many people around. Some drunken morons did try to accost her, so she took out the sword, which was a strong enough message to keep people away from her. Maybe it was just the ancient sickle shape the people weren't used to seeing.

She couldn't see the stars in the cramped streets. This was disorienting to her and she wasn't sure her direction was correct, but she also figured she would find her way to her destination eventually.

Suddenly, a man fell into her eye line. Eira wasn't sure where he had come from, but she assumed Auntie had thought this was an important person and Eira would be interested in him. The man was clad in silks embroidered in insignia of the new religion that had bought Eira decades ago.

"Are you a priest?" Eira tried to remember the titles those people used. "A bishop?"

The man hesitated, but nodded. "Archbishop."

Eira wasn't sure what that meant, but that wasn't important. Auntie had indeed brought her a gift. Eira pointed the sword at him and used the spear to move the clothes around to get a better view of them. "I have something very special for you. This night you'll see the might of the Old Gods. The gods, you have sought to forget and push aside."

"You will regret this!"

"That might happen, yes, but not for the reasons you believe. Follow."

The man did indeed hobble behind Eira. She didn't bother guarding him, as she knew Auntie would take care of him if he dared to present any sort of danger to her. Well, she didn't exactly know, because you never really do with Auntie, but hoped this the case.

Not that the man dared even try. He seemed like a coward. Perhaps he needed his guards and the authority granted by his religion to push people around, but right now he was just a sheep following orders.

They finally reached the seaside. Eira was happy to find a huge temple dedicated to the new religion. It would be a nice place to make her next move from. "You will stay here and witness this." The man looked around to find some sort of help. There were guards around, but they were transfixed on Eira and her outfit, which had begun to radiate light, rather than paying attention to someone that was technically their superior in the hierarchy of the church.

It took a while for Eira to reach the roof of the building. She had to take a moment. Not only to take a breath, but to compose herself to do something unthinkable. When she was ready, she rose up, pointed the spear to the heavens and the sword at the sea. "Grandmother! I am here!"

This plan relied on Grandmother having found out what had happened with Mother, but since Grandmother was what she was, Eira did not really doubt it, even if she didn't really know how that would possibly happen.

The main breakwater around the harbor was decimated by an unseen force below the surface. A light appeared in the water. It was soft at first, but soon a weird looking organic crane of some

sort, hoisting a biological lantern broke through the waves. Two huge pincers, larger than most houses in the area, slammed on the ground and began to pull a huge body to the surface.

Eira was not about to stay there to take a peek at what was going to happen. Auntie knew to grab her and move Eira to safety. Auntie was not about to confront her Mother either. Auntie's touch was cold and she obfuscated any view of what was happening, but Eira could still hear the storm gathering.

Grandmother was furious and there was nothing that could stop her rage, except distance.

Next morning Eira was looking at what was left of the city from a nearby mountain. She had had no idea of this in the night, but she was barely high enough. She could see the trees just a few dozen meters below her having been brought down by the immense waves.

The waters had not yet fully receded back into the ocean. The formerly glorious city was still fully under water. There couldn't have been many survivors.

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The minstrel had left the town after things had become too hot for him to handle. People were still interested in only killing people they held grudges against, but things had gotten out of hand and people had been burning buildings just because they had targeted someone within that building and did not care about all the collateral damage.

He was not alone in leaving the city. Some others, who felt they were done with their work, had left to spread the message, while surprisingly few had chosen to become refugees rather than take part in the bloodshed, as perpetrators or otherwise.

The minstrel knew he should be sad about all of this, that there was something wrong with the world, and he had been a part of whatever was going on. Or something even more wrong than usual. While he realized this, it did not weigh on his mind. Not even when he walked past the crying children of displaced families or, worse, the children orphaned by people who had found new employment as highwaymen after losing their livelihoods in town.

After witnessing the first murder at the manor house, the minstrel had had a very clear sense of purpose and had known exactly where to go, even though the town had been unfamiliar to him. That seemed to be over. He still wanted to serve the higher purpose of that weird young woman he had met in passing, but while the goal was clear, the road to that goal was not.

Rather impulsively, he decided to follow a ley line that had appeared while he was in town. Again, something in the back of his mind told him that he should be afraid of it, but he just couldn't. So, walked a few leagues, at one point through a small abandoned village with several bodies strewn on the paths.

Some time later, he stumbled upon a small cottage. A weirdly familiar hare seemed to greet him. The former midwife and current witch inhabitant of the cottage came out to welcome him as well. The woman had clearly had a rough winter and was more interested in the satchel of food the man was carrying than the man himself.

The minstrel was happy to share. They sat down together around a fire outside the cottage. She sang a few notes to the ley line, which answered with a few flickers.

As the minstrel laid out their simple meal of wheat bread and dried meats, he couldn't help himself and had to ask. "Is that glowing thing your doing?"

"Well, I think I started it, but there's many more than me." She gave him a little smile betraying some pride in the matter despite otherwise humble appearance.

He nodded. "What is it?"

The woman shook her head. "I don't really know. I have seen a young woman ski on it and some other weird beings travel on it also, but do I understand what it is? No." The hare hopped into her lap from nowhere and she squeezed it lovingly. "This little fellow has been teaching me a lot, but even he doesn't know everything." She held it out to look it straight in the eyes. "Or you aren't telling me everything." She smiled. "Feel free to keep your secrets." She put the hare back down on the ground. It took a look at her and the minstrel before hopping off into the nearby woods.

"Where did it come from? It looks weirdly familiar to me. Is it from the manor house?"

"Maybe. Who knows? It has been telling me a lot about the ancient heritage of its kind. They used to be familiars to many cunning folk."

The minstrel wasn't quite sure what that meant, but he had an idea. He was more interested in other subjects. "Does the hare and your project here have something to do with a young witch? Maybe the one you said went past on skis?"

The woman looked at him. "Why do you want to know?"

"Maybe we serve the same mistress."

"Maybe we do."

---

Auntie from Above had met with her shortly after she left the capital. Since this was one of the Aunties who didn't speak, their meeting had been fairly awkward, but they had managed to draw a rudimentary map of all the ley lines Auntie had been able to find in the last few weeks. They covered most of the landmass of the whole world. As she had suspected, Eira could reach all major human settlements in a few days at most.

While Eira did employ the ley lines on her return journey, she took her time instead of using them to their maximum potential. At one point she stopped to have a chat with a pair of hares which had somehow already heard of her endeavor and were quite encouraging. At another point she stopped at a monastery to see if there were any interesting books. It wasn't very helpful as the language in which she had learned to read from the witch was too ancient to still be in any use, but she did find a book with intriguing images of the insides of a human body and decided to take it with her, even if it was quite cumbersome to carry on skis. She stopped at various settlements to taste the local delicacies, some of which she enjoyed and others she couldn't even bear to swallow. There didn't seem to be much between the two extremes.

She spent the night in an abandoned temple of the new religion. Sleeping did cross her mind, but she decided to spend the night defacing it by using the paints she found to cover the existing artwork with images depicting and symbolizing the Aunties. They would never see her work, but she was still pleased with it, even if it was more with the act itself than the end result.

In the morning she continued her journey. She still had several detours. Eira stopped to take a look at the inner mechanics of a windmill, one of the very few human inventions that actually fascinated her. The miller was still there, hiding on a makeshift platform between the cogs. She gave him a smile and went on her way. She also found a tribe of goats that had lost its herder. She convinced them that it would all be fine in the end and that the goats shouldn't worry about that. Before her journey was over, she visited a grove pointed to her by the Aunties, which had been a place of worship for ancient gods, whose names even the Aunties themselves had forgotten.

Finally, she returned to the manor house. Auntie from Beneath the Trees had been busy rebuilding it to her own image. She had raised a thick forestation to block humans from entering and had also decided that the great hall didn't need a roof. She had grown a huge ash tree there, which had broken through the ceiling.

Auntie Walking Among the Beasts had been busy as well. She had brought her own pets into the manor grounds, where the hares and the predators were now keeping guard together in a delicate truce, delicate because the hares couldn't keep their trickster side in check and they kept on annoying the wolves and the bears that couldn't enter the thick forestation now surrounding the gardens.

The maid was panicking as Eira entered the main house, but Eira just gave her a friendly smile. She was happy with the new decorations. The air was much fresher and she liked sleeping rough anyhow. It also felt like a nice metaphor for what she had started in the world.

Auntie from Beneath the Trees approached her. "Like?"

"Very much so." She smiled at her. "Maybe this place can now feel like home."

The maid, who was still hanging around, was confused about the new situation. Eira wasn't quite sure why she had decided to keep her around in the first place, but also knew the decision had not been completely hers. Maybe having some human companionship wasn't that bad. The maid would just need to learn not to be so subservient.



## Part III - Hell Is Real

### IN THE PRESENT

And there she was. Eira sat there, on the other side of the bonfire. She was wearing a white dress with no stains, so she had not walked, meaning that probably at least one of the Sisters had carried her there and was probably still lurking around somewhere. There was someone with her. Another woman, who seemed ancient. She was silent and didn't move. She was not clothed, but was only covered in a ripped tapestry of sorts.

"Hello, mother".

The witch had never heard Eira call her mother before. Had she or was the bonfire working and had already burned that memory? "Eira," the witch answered with calculated precision, which felt cold against the cautious warmth Eira projected. "Is this it? Are you going to kill me?"

"Would that even be possible?"

The witch didn't answer, partly because she didn't really know.

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### IN THE PAST

*Things that still delight me in this world:*

*People I meet who want intimacy, but no longer remember how to approach the subject;  
Finding a nice place to cook on the road; Animal friends who defy the natural order; A  
ream of untouched quality paper*

The next few years weren't kind to the minstrel. There was no work and he wasn't exactly cut to live in the wilderness. Sure, the few people still left didn't mind entertainment, but there was no one around to maintain anyone who wasn't contributing to the household. So, he would just roam the countryside, slowly moving southward where the winters were not as harsh, scrounge for food wherever he could and talk to any hares he encountered to learn any news. There never was any or at least anything he felt was worth his while, but he would still listen to the hares even if what they were telling him often ended up being only gossip about other hares, because he didn't have any other regular companionship.

One day, after months of loneliness, he did meet someone on the road. The forest had already started to reclaim it, so the visibility was limited, but he could hear her, as she was singing something to herself in a language the minstrel didn't understand, but did sort of identify as a language some visiting knights had used back in the manor house.

She was hunched over the bones of a human, which she had apparently found on the road and laid out into a more restful pose. Her skin was dark, but not in the sun-roasted way his was. She appeared exotic in his eyes. She was young and dainty in ill-fitting clothing, but appeared strong based on the ridiculous looking contraption she had on her back. It was like a backpack made of wood and there was plenty of wares strapped to it. All the metal objects had been wrapped in cloth and furs so as not to make a noise.

She was startled when she finally saw him, but not too badly. The minstrel raised his hands to show that he was not a threat. The woman mirrored him, but the minstrel also noticed that she quickly pocketed something. He pulled out some nuts he had been gathering lately as part of the customary exchange of gifts of food. She won this one. She laid down her complicated rig and pulled out a jar of cured fish preserved in honey from somewhere deep inside it.

The minstrel had seen that at the manor house, but had never had access to anything like it. Those kinds of foods were always reserved for the nobility. "Where did you get this?"

"Speak more", she said in a strong accent, closing her eyes.

"Well..." He was a bit confused. Why did he need to speak more? "Okay, my name is..." Wait, what was his name? Was it important? "What's your name?"

"More."

"Uh... Where do you come from?"

"More. More words." She sounded very assertive despite her small frame.

The minstrel was taken aback. What was going on? At the same time he felt compelled to follow the order. "I have been traveling for a long time from the north. I used to entertain these rich folks, who never appreciated me or my colleagues." At this point he felt like he was losing control and consciousness. "I was an actor and an acrobat. I know many tricks and..."

"Change topic"

"I... I was born in a small village... somewhere. I was destined to be a farmer, but then some monks attacked us and burned down the field, because we couldn't provide them with enough loot to their liking..."

"Confess."

"I... I killed a man. I used a weapon I built myself to strangle him."

The woman smiled and held out her hand to touch his face. "I am truly sorry about this." The accent was gone. "You will have a headache in the morning, but I do say that's a small punishment for killing a person, but on the other hand, most of the people you know have killed if they are somehow still alive. I mean, you did probably have your reasons, but it is still wrong."

The minstrel wanted to answer, but did not remember how.

"Me? I just steal, which did mean in all the chaos that there were plenty of people who were out to kill me, but I've always been able to keep one step ahead of them." She drew him close to her to hold him tightly. "I really am sorry about this, but I needed your language." She gave him a gentle kiss on the forehead. "To be honest, it's more like I wanted your language. I like languages. Perhaps it can be useful in the future."

She laid him down to sleep. He was no threat to her, so she watched over his sleep and left him the jar with the honey-covered fish before continuing on her journey north in the morning.

"By the way, you asked me for my name and it's fair enough I give it to you. I am known by many names, but the few friends I used to have called me Edmée", she whispered into his ear. "Since you probably won't consider me a friend after this, feel free to call me whatever you like."

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"Where did you find this?" asked the former tanner, current gang leader, as he was leafing through a two hundred year old collection of crude erotic drawings by an unusually horny and very artistically challenged monk. Apparently it was still titillating enough.

The former operative, current middle-man just stared at him. Obviously he wasn't going to tell. After all, this was now his livelihood. The question was just a reminder of how far he had fallen from his position as the heir-apparent to the bishop of the city to scavenging erotica from the secret rooms of the church library. "The usual price."

"Sure." The gang leader, who somehow still had the lingering odor of his former profession, waved his hand and one of his men handed over the two plucked chickens.

He returned to his quarters, taking a detour just in case, because he did not want to be followed, even though he was pretty sure no-one else dared enter the former palace. It had been overrun by trees unnaturally fast. Still, the operative found the former rooms of the spymaster the safest place to sleep.

Sure, the rooms had some fire damage. As far as he knew, there were no surviving eyewitnesses, but from what he had heard, a mob had attacked her. While her rooms were very well secured, they were finally able to break in, but she had rigged a trap in the meantime, which killed everyone involved. The operative liked to think she had stared her victims silently straight in the eyes as they burned alive together, although he wasn't sure why he was so attached to someone he had only met twice in the course of decades of their professional co-operation.

His abilities as a cook had not really developed during the time he had had to prepare his own food, so he threw one of them into a pot full of water and started the fire beneath it. He then sniffed the other one only to notice that it was probably better to boil it as well.

While waiting, he went back to writing his reports to no-one. At least it gave him something to do. He had been very succinct and lazy with his writing when someone had actually been reading them, but now that he had nothing else to do he would go into great detail.

He was certain he had a very good picture of the remaining population of the city. He knew of around a hundred people, which was less than one per cent of all the people that had been living there before the Event, as he called it. He suspected there were at least a few more lurking around, wisely hiding from the two gangs ruling the city. The population had become tilted towards men during the growth spurt in the decades preceding the Event, but that situation was even worse now with only a handful of women around.

Their situation was even worse than the desperate situation the men were living in. Most of the lucky ones were able to prostitute themselves, while the rest lacked autonomy to do so and were used as sex slaves by the gangs.

There were some people like him, living alone outside of the direct control of the gangs, but they were rare and mostly people with nothing to give the gangs. He looked at the crude map drawn

with chalk on his wall. One of the few people, who had been able to maintain their former profession, a ratcatcher, had apparently died, so he crossed him out. He would later remove him completely, if it turned out that he had indeed left this realm.

He would often also read the reports left behind the former occupant of the room. Some of her papers had burned with her, but there were enough notes of various kinds to give an idea on what she had been working on. There just wasn't enough to give a very clear picture of what had actually happened. There were short, sometimes coded, notes from her informants from around the city, but they were mostly panicked requests for help or instructions from a network of scared and confused people, who had no idea of the nature or magnitude of what was happening.

He had been trying to build a timeline from them, but it wasn't revealing him any greater truths. At least she had been helpful enough to write down dates. He often felt he would have been able to learn so much from her, if only given a chance. Not that those skills were very useful those days. Writing doesn't pay, when there's no-one to read.

Still, he was thankful for the ability to think on his feet and form alliances, even if those alliances were based on lies. At least he had been able to stay alive, even if he considered his life beneath him. He often wondered whether things were the same everywhere or was there a place where he could go where he didn't need to barter for food. Maybe someone would someday come and find the notes and maybe his work could help in uncovering the mystery in a hundred years. He wasn't very hopeful, but the idea did help him keep himself sane.

But as he was rereading the notes once again, he noticed that they were not in the same order as they had previously been. He jumped back. Someone had been there. Apparently the ability to pay attention to details was paying off. He tried to calm himself down. What would the spymaster do, or have done? Clearly the lair was compromised and had to be moved, but where? Protect the documents, but how? Who had it been? Someone just looking for his wares?

The erotica was in the next room. He hadn't realized before, but the door was at a different angle than he would have left it. If the culprit was so sloppy in their work, why had he not noticed anything in the corridors? He had set tripwires for just this purpose. Had the intruder entered through some other way?

He stepped a little closer to the door and just then did he see the eyes looking back at him. They hid quickly. The height implied it was just a child, but he was not about to take risks. He took out his knife and slammed the door open.

It was indeed only a child, a girl. She was bloodied and wore torn clothes. "Run," she said, apparently wanting to explain more, but was unable to articulate the words.

He felt there was something else wrong with her and upon closer inspection he saw it: She was levitating. He saw desperation in her eyes and then saw her looking at something behind him, but it was too late.

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*Sister from Above was the first. Abandoned in a desert just because her parents died and no other member of the clan would take her into their family due to her small size. She hungered and thirst in the drought until she was weak enough to try something her parents had always warned against. She drank from the Ocean. Despite that moment of weakness, the Ocean saw her inner strength. The waves flowed gently over her, pulling her down into the depths before gently returning her back to the shore in her new form.*

According to the maps provided by Auntie from Above, there was a continent no one on her own continent was aware of. The ley lines were incredible, as they could take Eira even to places like this. Places her influence otherwise wouldn't reach.

Moving across the ocean was always risky because of Grandmother, but she had done this before. She only needed to move fast enough and try to be unpredictable at the intersections of ley lines when she crossed one. She would sometimes catch glimpses of Grandmother's pets and would sometimes have to face huge waves, but had thus far been able to dodge any attempts to capture her by just skiing faster.

Auntie had indeed been right. Eira did arrive on a shore. It didn't look much different from home. It was covered in similar deciduous forest that covered most of the lands around her home. There was no sign of humans, but then again, she would have been quite lucky if she had stumbled upon a settlement just by chance. The ley lines did seem to guide humans, even if they didn't know about them, so she decided to continue further in case there would be settlements there.

She hid her skis carefully, as returning without them would be hazardous. She also checked the weapons she had brought along. The Sword was anxious, as usual, and the Spear was patiently waiting. Eira wrapped them again in cloth and put them on her back before leaving to explore.

Soon enough she did come across a path. It had footprints, so it wasn't made by animals. For a second, all those weird stories of people with no heads and faces on their stomachs, or fishmen with gills and scales, or half-human-half-wolves flooded her mind, but she laughed them off.

She tried to make an educated guess on which direction she could find the nearest settlement, but there was no obvious sign of this, so she opened her mind to receive the energies of the ley lines. The nearest was on her left, so it was likely that there would be at least a village there somewhere.

She found herself being careful in a way she hadn't felt the need to be for a while on her own continent. The bleating, she recognized as that of a goat, startled her. She realized a young woman with dark skin and black hair was staring at her from behind the woods with her small herd. They were smaller and skinnier than the ones back home, but they were definitely goats.

The situation attracted the attention of the sickle sword and the spear tied to Eira's back, but she was not about to use them here. She just put her hand on them to tell them to go back to sleep.

The woman asked her something, but Eira didn't understand the language. The girl's eyes weren't wide open in fear, which Eira took to mean that the question was more inquisitive than scared.

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*Best marginalia on books:*

*A picture of a nun pissing on the apples in a tree from her position lying down below the said tree; A picture of a giant fox on two legs with a huge erection being chased by a husk of hares; A picture of a king sitting on his crown; A weirdly flirty discourse between two monks regarding a complicated mathematical problem*

A hare on its hindlegs in the middle of the road was having a meeting with a raven sitting in a tree. It would have been surprising, if Edmée hadn't already seen that on several occasions.

She expected them to bolt, but it was almost as if they were waiting for her. "Hi there! How are we today?" She did feel like she could use a break and this was as good a time as any. She laid down the complicated rig she carried on her back. "Would you be kind enough to join me, mister Hare and mister Raven."

The hare took a few hops closer to her.

"Oh, sorry, miss Hare." She pulled out some hazelnuts. Did hares eat nuts? She didn't know. It felt like the best option she had available. "Would you like some?"

The hare approached her stretched out hand to give the nuts a smell before snatching one of them to eat.

"Don't worry, my good woman, I have no interest in hurting you." This wasn't completely true. Edmée had actually attempted to penetrate the mind of the animal, but had immediately seen that the racing mind of a hare would be outside of her skills.

"How about you, mister Raven? I don't have any carcasses with me, but would the nuts do for you as well?"

The raven seemed amused. Edmée had not even dared to try her tricks with it. She had seen too much in the last few years to do that. The raven did appreciate the offering though and did descend from its perch to have a taste.

"Now, please forgive my forwardness, but I do have a question for you."

The animals did give her a glance, but turned back to eating.

"What happened up north? I have seen so many people come this way, either escaping atrocities or spreading them. Something had to start it."

The animals gave each other a glance. Edmée was not sure what it was about, but there was a disagreement here. The hare tried to paw the raven, but the raven was too fast for it. It pecked the hare right beneath its eye, drawing blood, then jumped back and flew into the safety of the branches above. "Yes, my friend here is not interested in sharing the complete truth, as she might not be as loyal to the cause as her mistress would like to think."

The hare made a movement Edmée interpreted to be a shrug. Then it hopped into the woods.



"I suspect you'll be seeing her in the future," the raven said. "I did leave a mark on her, so you'll recognize her if she ever approaches you again."

"Thank you, mister raven, but you needn't antagonize your friends for my benefit." Edmée was trying to be diplomatic in case the hare was listening.

"No worries, human, you humans just aren't able to distinguish between animals of the same kind, so help was needed." It inspected Edmée's belongings from its post high on up. "Does that ladle happen to be made of silver?"

"Why, yes, mister raven, I do believe it is." She took a ladle covered in furs from her rig. "I must say, it has been in my possession for a while."

The raven couldn't stand still. "I would be most appreciative if it would come into my possession."

"I understand, but I must impress upon you that I have had this in my possession for years. I have used it, I have kept it clean, I have protected it from damage." Edmée was doing a complicated negotiation dance, even if the partner was willing.

"I want it, I want it, I want it." The raven caught itself losing control, so it settled down. "I apologize, but I am very interested in this item."

"Certainly, but I do have two conditions. First, you must agree that the item has been in my possession for a long time."

"Yes, certainly. I agree. The ladle has been in your possession for years, as you said."

What Edmée knew and hoped the raven didn't, was that having possessed the item for such a long time had incorporated some of her into it, so she had to be really careful here. If the raven knew and understood this, it might provide it with a weapon against her in the future. If not, she could possibly use it to gain insight into the raven and its life. She decided to risk it. "Second, I want you to answer my question."

"Yes, yes. I will tell you what I know."

Edmée laid the ladle down on the road and sat down. "So, tell me."

The raven looked at the ladle and gathered itself enough to think about what to say next. "Once there was a girl, who felt betrayed by the world. She found a new home, where she was loved and taken care of, but she couldn't rid herself of the thirst for revenge."

Edmée felt this might take a while, so she took out her notebook and started to scribble down some notes with her charcoal.

"So, she started to plan. She learned a lot from her adopted mother and weird creatures her mother called sisters. Using her newfound skills, she would start to experiment with spreading her ideas. She planted seeds of her own suppressed rage into people she found were susceptible to her influence..."

Edmée stopped and put away her kit.

"Wait, why aren't you making notes anymore?"

"I already know all this, but a deal is a deal, so continue, please."

The raven was partly annoyed, because of the snub, but it was also anxious because it felt it might lose the ladle. "You know about the Aunties?"

"Yes." This was partly true. She knew of them, but not a lot.

"You know about the ley lines?"

"Yes." This was pretty much true. She knew of them and knew the potential they held even if she couldn't tap that potential.

"You know about the manor house?"

"Yes." That was a lie. Of course she knew of manor houses in general, but had not heard of a specific manor house, which would be worth mentioning as part of this whole story. However, unbeknownst to the raven, even the question had told Edmée much more than it had wanted. "I assume we are done here?" She stood up, took some time setting up her rig on her back again, gave a bow pointing to the ladle still in the middle of the road, and continued on her way.

The raven couldn't help it and took the bait.

Sister Beneath the Trees was the second. Caught in a war between two tribes, her mangled body ended up in a ditch. As the rains arrived and the ditch swelled with water, her body was found by a wayward hippopotamus close to the Ocean. After being dragged into a larger body of water, she floated back to the surface and was surprised to find herself gasping for air once again.

Eira followed the woman to what she assumed would be her village. She studied her dress carefully. It seemed to be made of some sort of brown animal skin, possibly deer, but someone had gone through the trouble of sewing colorful animal patterns into it, many of them familiar to her, such as hares, horses and dogs. It seemed very ostentatious for such menial work, but the material would also probably handle any weather quite well.

Eira had assumed that if she would find any people here, they would be uncivilized brutes, but the dress was clearly the work of an artisan and a skilled one at that. Eira would know as that was a skill she had never quite mastered while wearing mostly animal skins herself ever since her life with the Witch began. A life, which seemed like a lifetime away.

There wasn't exactly a village. It was more like a farmstead or perhaps a roadhouse of sorts, as there was a road which seemed to see plenty of travel. The road also seemed to be in a remarkable condition compared to the roads back home, which were barely navigable depending on when it last rained and how badly it had been ruined by traffic after that. Based on earlier experiences, she took this to mean that there was an actual, highly organized civilization on this continent.

The few houses had been organized clearly into public and private, with the two public buildings close to the road and the private buildings closer to the forest and nearer to the pens with weird looking birds. The buildings themselves were made of wood with thatched roofs, not unlike many farmhouses Eira had seen on her previous travels.

Their approach had been noticed and the people inside were gathering outside to study the weird looking visitor more closely. They had similarly black hair and dark skin as the woman Eira had been following. They were dressed quite similarly as well, except that it seemed that the longer these people had survived, the more animals their clothing depicted. Eira wondered whether the animals had specific meanings and did they have to be earned in some manner. She took a look at the animals on her guide's dress once again and noticed that the hares were staring back at her.

That would require further attention, but her thoughts were interrupted. A man, an older one, who apparently was some sort of an authority figure, came out of the largest building and was shouting something to the woman Eira was with while pointing at Eira. The message was received. She was not wanted. The reasons eluded her.

The man approached while the woman seemed to know what was about to happen and cast her eyes down in expectation, but as the man was about to strike her, Eira intervened. The man was shocked when her iron grip forced him down to his knees. And just to make sure he wouldn't try anything else, she broke the bones in his arm.

The woman panicked. Eira had not expected that. In her mind she was helping. Was the woman afraid of Eira's strength or was she afraid of possible repercussions when Eira was no longer there to protect her. There was nothing she could do about the former option, but the latter was easy to fix. She kept a close eye on her reactions as she snapped his neck and let the body fall lifelessly on the ground.

The situation was complicated by the fact that Eira did not know how her cold-blooded countenance was affecting it, but the woman's reactions were conflicting. There was both relief and fear. Eira had probably been right on both counts before. Willingness to kill without hesitation was obviously just making things worse.

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*Reasons to rebuild society:*

*Carrot cake; Paper manufacturing; Puppet theaters; Not having to fix my own clothes*

The girl had clearly learned a lesson from someone, but her little brother had apparently been too protected to receive the same experience. Edmée held a handful of berries out for them. The boy was eager, but the bigger sister was holding him back in their little hiding place in the corner of the abandoned bakery.

For once Edmée had no secret agenda. "How long have you two been alone?"

The girl, who was maybe nine, gave her brother a shrug, as he was about to answer.

"It is wise to be careful, especially in these times. You never know who you'll meet." And yes, she was thinking about herself, even if she knew she was no threat to the kids. Everyone else... well. That's complicated.

The kids did manage to keep their distance for a minute, but in the end, their hunger took over and they ran over to grab the food being offered to them, but fell back into the corner right after. It seemed like they had been hiding in this place for a long while and whatever edible they had in the beginning had been ingested a long time ago, and plenty of what should not have been eaten as well. The place was in a horrid condition, with all sorts of smells permeating the small building.

"That's a good start, but I think we need to do something a little better." There was a trapdoor, which seemed like the children had not been able to open. "What do you say, if we take a little look down here." It took some effort even from her as a sort of adult, but she managed to pry it open in the end.

The children were naturally curious and did come a little closer to get a glimpse.

Edmée went down for a moment and then came back with a bag of flour. "All the other bags seem to have gone rancid, but this one still seems to be usable. Do you have firewood?"

The smaller of the children ran out and soon returned with some sticks.

Edmée took one and tested it. It was dry enough to use. "This will work." Apparently the kids had been smart enough to build a stockpile of whatever they could burn. Then again, to survive on your own at their age, you needed to be smart... and lucky.

The children understood what Edmée was doing and looked on with interest. Each menial step was of great importance to them. Edmée would have liked to bake bread, but lacked the yeast and heating the oven for that purpose would have taken hours, so she just made a small fire within the big oven and heated some water in a kettle to make some simple gruel. It wasn't very tasty, but it was better than nothing.

The children fetched wooden bowls and spoons from a hiding place. After a second, the older one realized they hadn't thought of Edmée and brought her one as well. The younger took on an overly courteous role and cleared a table of all the dishes and garbage that had been left there over their tenure in the house. The children then set up the table together.

Edmée followed what they were doing. They were remarkably well-behaved. "Now, this is important. Please do not eat too much. I know you will be tempted, but if you haven't eaten much for a long time, eating too much can be dangerous." She rationed a bit of gruel on each of the bowls.

The children were clearly disappointed, but soon forgot their manners and just went for it.

"Okay, now, hopefully the worst hunger is over. We'll eat again in a few hours." She did want to keep their thoughts on something else for the duration. "We seem to have established that you aren't going to be very talkative with me, but maybe you would rather talk to Edmond." She took some cloth, which had once upon a time been white, from a table next to her, wrapped it around her hand and drew a face on it with charcoal. She took on the gruffiest voice she was able. "Hi there, children, my name is Edmond. I am the brother of this here strange woman, to whom I'm stuck."

The boy was first to crack. He giggled at Edmond right away. The girl was a bit harder.

"Why do you call me strange, Edmond?" "You howl at the moon." She was not in the habit of doing that, but it had happened. "Don't we all do that every once in a while?"

That wasn't enough.

"She used to draw farts on the margins of books." She had done that on multiple occasions. "I'm not the only one."

That seemed to be a bit too esoteric. There was no reaction.

"She likes boys."

That worked. The girl giggled as well.

"What's so funny? Do you like boys too?"

"No."

At least that was a start.

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*Sister Walking Among the Beasts was the third. She fell ill and as the clan was readying itself to move to their winter camp, her parents sought the help of a wisewoman. But while she was not wise, she did know herbs. She knew how to make the child suffer and did so gleefully while her parents were away. She kept the child weak enough to be unable to speak and her parents had no choice but to listen to the woman, who they thought knew better. The child died just before the clan left. There was no time for proper burial, so she was wrapped in whatever animal skins they could afford to give up and placed her in a river, which took her to the Ocean to be reborn like her elder Sisters.*

"Which way?" Eira asked her guide.

There was still a chasm between them since Eira had decided to take her along, but it was closing. The woman had acted like a hostage for the first few days, but had since understood that Eira did not wish to hurt her. Lack of common language was not helping. Not that it stopped Eira from using her own language.

They had some language lessons before sleep each night at camp, but Eira was not happy with their progress. She did concede that she had no frame of reference on how long learning a language should take, so maybe they were doing fine. For example, the woman understood only one of the words in Eira's question, but with the correct intonation that was enough. There was a problem. Eira could not be sure the woman had understood what she was looking for. On the other hand, Eira had all the time in the world. A little detour was not a problem for her.

The woman looked at the signs and pointed to a direction. Eira gave them a closer look. There was a circle one way and a circle surrounded by a square on the other, the way the woman wanted them to go. Eira assumed the square was for city walls. At least that was logical enough. The direction they came from did not have a sign. Someone had ripped it off the pole.

Eira wondered why there wasn't a settlement there. Crossroads like this were often good places to provide services for travelers. She had already seen some on this continent as well. She thought for a second about how to ask her guide about this. "No food?" she said in the end while showing the woman one of the coins she had taken from the roadhouse. It was made of some sort of bone with a hole in the middle and what seemed to be a brand, but smelled like magic Eira was not familiar with.

The woman took a few seconds in turn to think of a response. She raised her arms to the sun and faced it with closed eyes before turning back to Eira to see whether she had understood.

"A holy place? A... a... place of worship?" Neither of these descriptions were helpful, because they had not been high priorities during their lessons. Still, Eira was sure she had understood. She just wasn't able to see any signs of a ceremonial ground of any kind. The new religion, she hoped to have wiped out, would have built an ostentatious building with tower reaching for the sky and a bell to wake everyone up early in the morning, while the worship of the Old Gods, which her Mother had practiced more for the habit than anything else, would have left signs of some sort of sacrifices.

Her guide understood why she was surveying the area and took her by the hand in an unexpectedly familiar manner. She led Eira to a tree a few meters away from the road. Just walking past, one probably would not have paid any attention to it, but there was indeed something special about it.

The bark on the tree was not like that of the other elms around it. It had spirals in it. Eira looked at her companion to make sure touching the tree was not forbidden. As she followed the grooves of the spirals, it felt as if the tree reacted. She snapped back. Was it a trap? The guide only seemed confused by her reaction. It would be quite an elaborate trap if it was one. Unless it wasn't specifically for her. That didn't seem likely either, but she looked around for other signs.

While it was possible that she just didn't know what was unusual in such an environment, the only thing she could see that seemed weird to her was a monkey riding a dog looking at them. Well, she assumed it was a dog, even though it was sleeker and had longer legs than most dogs. It was hard to tell. She had only seen a monkey once, a long time ago as a child. It had been a miserable thing in a chain performing tricks for an audience, but it was very much like the thing she was looking at right now.

The weird pair froze like they had been just caught doing some mischief before each of them bolting into different directions. Eira's guide seemed perplexed. Eira couldn't tell what in the situation was so puzzling for her. Was it the dog, the monkey or the combination of the two? Were monkeys indigenous here? If so, how had the man with the performing monkey found one? Were dogs indigenous? The woman did have a dog embroidered on her dress, so probably.

Eira attempted to ask her about this, but did not know how, so she tried to mimic the monkey in her own clumsy way. It induced a laugh. Eira was taken aback by this. Mother never laughed.



She would only give her a warm smile if she was amused. The woman tried her version of a monkey as well and Eira found herself laughing as well.

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*Best herbs readily available in these forests:*

*Black locust; Spinach; Alliaria; Spruce tips*

"You, drop your backpack, now!" It was a man. He grabbed Edmée by the arm. Edmée had been too preoccupied and noisy teaching the children about various berries along the road to notice him approaching.

Edmée could see he had not eaten enough during the winter, which didn't help her. He wasn't alone either. There was another just a few steps further.

Edmée was disappointed in herself for allowing someone to surprise her in such a way. "Please, sir, I do not want to break my wares. There's a lot of glass in there. Breaking it would spoil the food and we don't have much of it."

The bare mention of food made the man drool. "Okay, put it down. Slowly."

Edmée did as she was told. "Sure. I'll obey."

"Yes, you will." The man decided to get grabby.

"No, not in front of the children." Edmée managed to invoke panic in her voice.

The man stopped. "Take them into the woods," he told the other man

"Just do as they tell you, children." Edmée's voice had lost all the panic that had been there just a minute ago. "Everything will be fine."

Part of the man was a little dismayed about the sudden turn in his victim, but was too arrogant to react. "Yes, children, you go along, while me and your mother will have our own fun."

Edmée waited for the children to be out of sight. "Well, you are forgetting about Edmond."

"Who is Edmond?"

Edmée pointed at the white cloth with a distorted face on it that she had tied to the backpack.

"What?" He stepped a little closer to see whether he really saw what he thought he was seeing.

"Well, Edmond does have another form." Her voice changed as she was saying this.

When the man looked back, the person had grown a beard and gained a lot of mass. Edmée was gone and Edmond punched the man in the face.

"Sorry, Edmée can't play with you right now." He punched the man until his knuckles were mush and his fingers weren't really working any more. "Stay there while I take care of your friend."

There was no need. The friend had heard that something was going on, came back to check and felt it was more prudent to run than to try to stand up to the man with blood splattered all over him.

Edmond didn't exactly sit down, but rather fell on his ass with exhaustion and vomited. The speed of the transformation had taken a lot out of the body shared by the two and he was not at all comfortable with the violence, even if he was much more familiar with it than he wanted to. He was already shedding his beard and Edmée was about to return. But there was something else going on inside their head. There was someone or something else there. He was just too tired to investigate further.

The children took their time before they were willing to return. The combination of a dead body and their nearly unconscious guardian, who had by that time lost all of that extra hair and muscle, wasn't really encouraging, but they did feel protective about her.

Deep inside Edmée was smiling even if she was unable to summon the strength to do it physically. All the while, a mental note Edmond had left her was also most alarming.

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*No-one is quite sure, but apparently Sister Beyond the Light was the fourth. Where she came from no-one knows, how she died is a mystery and how the Ocean found her has been left in the dark. Yet, they know she is there. Always watching, always paying attention. For what purpose? That is an enigma.*

"Yes, no," Eira sang with a synchronized nod and shrugging.

"Me, you," her companion responded with correct pointing.

"Left, right, front, back," they continued together with looking into the proper directions.

"See, hear," Eira took over.

"One, two, three."

"Danger, run."

Eira's guide could not remember more of the song they had constructed together, but it was fine. They were making progress. They gave each other a knowing smile.

Eira was wondering if she had made a friend for the first time in her life. After their initial shared laugh, Eira and her companion had actually become closer. Sure, their communication was still limited, but they were both learning.

Eira had not been allowed to have friends as a child and had been locked up for much of her childhood. After that, she had lived with the Witch, which had been a cozy and close relationship, but a certain inequality had always shadowed it. Mother was just that much older, millenia in fact, than her and was thus always in an authority role.

She felt guilty about kidnapping her companion, but her feelings on the situation became more complicated after finding out that she was some sort of a slave among her people. Eira wasn't quite sure it was the same exact role slaves had in her society, but as far as she could tell, the woman had been owned by the man Eira had killed and was forced to work for him, but also had a lot of freedom, as evidenced by her being alone in the woods with her flock. Not that there was probably anywhere to run.

Whatever the case, she did want to do this right. For that to happen, she needed to make sure the other side of this relationship understood that she did not wish to be seen as superior. There should be no hierarchy. She just lacked the words to explain this.

Instead of traveling for Eira's purposes alone, she wanted them to travel together to see this world, as friends rather than as a master and servant. In some ways it was obvious to her how they should proceed, but in other ways she was very unsure of herself in this situation.

She wanted to show her companion that she trusted her. So one evening, as they were camped and playing some dexterity game with small rocks they might have just invented or it might have

been a variation of something the locals played, she decided, out of nowhere, to give the local money she had to her companion. Perhaps that would show that she had faith in her new friend.

The friend was confused. Eira realized that the gesture she had thought was friendly might be understood very differently, as if she was paying for services or giving her a task. She regretted it immediately, but did not take it back.

The monkey and the dog, the doghood of which Eira was less and less convinced, were back. "What are you doing here?" she asked without thinking.

Her friend followed her eyeline to see the two animals as well. Still confused by Eira's gesture, she offered one of the coins to the animals. The dog-thing and the monkey looked at each other before the monkey cautiously approached via the branches of nearby trees before finally quickly snatching the coin and returning to the canopy. The woman looked at Eira quizzically to see if she had done the right thing.

Eira did not want to disappoint her, so she smiled. She did not need to force it. She did find it kind of adorable that her companion had taken the expression of trust in such a peculiar way.

The monkey inspected the coin before biting into it. The dog-thing climbed after it into the tree with such agility that it further confirmed Eira's suspicions regarding its doghood. The monkey offered the coin for the dog-thing to sniff, but the dog-thing was not interested. The monkey dropped the coin and disappeared into the canopy. Its companion looked at the engrossed humans as if to apologize for the behavior of the monkey before jumping down and disappearing into the underbrush in a different direction.

Eira's guide was startled by this and went to look for the coin. Eira assumed it would be more or less impossible to find it in the underbrush, so she grabbed her companion gently by the arm and smiled reassuringly.

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*Things I wish I had known before all of this:*

*How to follow itineraries; How to keep belongings safe from the rain; What to use as a bait for fish; How to eat with a fork; How to avoid flash floods*

"Edmond and I are a bit like... twins." She stopped. "Do you know what twins are?"

The children didn't.

"Okay, Edmond and I are like you, a brother and a sister" That would have to do. "Except that we just happen to share a body." That wasn't exactly it, but what else could she tell them? However, she couldn't help herself, once again. "Our family just couldn't afford two when we were born."

This puzzled the children. Their family had been extremely poor, but they both had bodies.

"Seriously," at least for a few seconds, "didn't you ever want to be a boy or didn't you ever want to be a girl?"

The children hadn't really thought about it. Sure, they understood the physical differences, but being from a poor family, they weren't really treated that differently from each other.

"Maybe Edmond should explain." This was a time for the less complicated form of Edmond. Edmée put on a gruff voice again. "Well, you see when I was a child, I wanted to try what being a girl would feel like." "No," Edmée interjected, "I wanted to try to be a boy." They looked at each other intensely for as long as Edmée could maintain her composure before laughing. Edmond continued. "Well, whichever is the case, I, or we, just found that maybe we don't want to follow the rules and maybe we just sometimes can be a girl or a boy, whatever we feel like at the time."

The girl finally spoke up. "So, you are a girl, because you choose to be, not because you were born as one?"

"Yes, that's the heart of it."

"Would you like to meet me?" asked the puppet. "Yes, would you?" Edmée continued. "I will still be here. I'll be in the puppet."

The children nodded apprehensively.

Edmée began to fill the baggy clothing and the beard began to appear again, but this time the process took its time. Edmée spoke: "It's going to be fine." Edmond's Edmée wasn't nearly as good as Edmée's Edmond.

The children actually weren't scared. The boy did pay a little too much attention to Edmond's crotch.

"We'll discuss that when you are older. Maybe in ten years or so."

The girl did the talking, as usual. "Why are you Edmée most of the time?"

"Who says I am? You've known me for a few days. But yes, we decided that Edmée, being the smaller of us and needing less energy, should be the one active during the winter."

"Are you the same person?"

"Yes and no. I'm more of a thinker and I like to read," said Edmond, while Edmée from the puppet added her own insight, "...but I'm the one who actually learned to read and I'm more of a curious person, who likes to explore, which is also part of the reason I'm the one who is usually awake." "But yes, we are basically the same person deep inside."

"Can you teach me to read?" She took a look at her brother. "... us to read?"

Edmond smiled. It seemed weird to him that that was the specific part they took most interest in, but was also glad they did. "Of course, but we do need something to read first." Behind the smile he was scanning his own mind. While Edmée/Edmond had wanted to make sure the children wouldn't panic if Edmond needed to resurface fast again, he seemed to be better at a certain kind of self-reflection, which enabled him to see that there was something going on inside their common brain.

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*The two were not actually twins, but Mother always liked to think of them as such as they had joined the family at the same time, even though there was a power dynamic between the two due to their previous relationship as a big and little sister with a significant age difference. Mother did not like to play favorites, but she cherished the pair, especially the older one who had seemingly maintained her good nature despite the challenges of her previous life.*

"Rac-coon," Eira's guide said as she offered food to the weird little apparent mammal with paws almost like childlike hands splashing the water of the stream the pair was currently bathing in.

"Raccoon," Eira repeated after her. It wasn't the first time they had seen it.

Their language lessons were going well, except that Eira wasn't always sure what she should be teaching. It was hard to know what to expect in a new land and this teaching job was new to her

as well. There had been several misunderstandings, as clearly the two thought of many things in very different ways. Still, they sort of understood various sentences from each other's languages. Eira and her companion had started to cook together and, as the nights had been cold recently, cuddled for warmth when needed. The guide had become more and more relaxed around Eira. Eira was not enthusiastic about the idea, as she was afraid Grandmother would be able to find her, if she spent too much time in a body of water, even an insignificant one, but she also needed to wash, so she accepted the risk.

They would still occasionally see the monkey or the dog-thing the guide called a 'coyote', although they were no longer traveling together. Eira entertained the idea that the other two animals had somehow birthed this newcomer, because in her mind it was just a fatter version of the two. It was quite dextrous and friendly. It would come fetch food if offered and was able to handle it almost like a human with its front paws. It would mostly only appear at night, which made Eira a little wary of it, as she couldn't know whether it was visiting their camps when the two were sleeping.

That was not the only reason to be wary of them. As far as Eira understood what her guide had tried to explain to her, both the coyote and the raccoon were often forms taken by some sort of trickster god of her people. She did not know what a monkey was and that was the first one she had ever seen.

Her thoughts were interrupted when she noticed her friend's brand on her back. Instinctively, not even thinking about it, Eira reached out to touch it. Her friend flinched and seemed embarrassed about it.

"Don't be afraid," Eira tried to comfort her as she moved her finger around the ridges of the burnt skin as gently as she could.

Her friend moved her hair away from it, so that Eira could get a better view. Not that there was anything special about it. It was just a few lines, which looked like something resembling an 'H'. Apparently it wasn't painful except emotionally. "Whole family," she explained as well as she could.

"You were born into slavery?" Eira tried to rethink her question with words her friend would know. "Always work?"

"No. Before..." She couldn't find the words.

"Free?" Eira paused for a second to find a way to explain that concept with the tools she had and finally decided to point at a bird hoping that the idiom used in her language would resonate here.

It didn't.

Not that it mattered. Eira understood from the context that her family had been at some point captured and forced into slavery. Having been burnt every now and then in the past by accident, she liked to believe that she could tell that the scars couldn't be more than a few years old, but a part of her also knew her estimate was suspect at best.

The Sword and the Spear she had taken from her Mother vibrated with anticipation under Eira's clothes on the beach.

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*People I wish would have survived:*

*That cute novice that let me use the library when no-one was looking; That weird beggar, who always had a nice story in exchange for a coin, if that is even begging; That baker who always slipped me an extra pastry behind her father's back; The rat-catcher who was too kind-hearted to kill the rats and always just freed them in the forest; The town-crier, who always put a fun twist on his messages*

"A long, long time ago..."

"Before you were born?"

Edmée laughed. "Yes, I might be older than I look, but this was way before I was born. No more interruptions, if you please. There's not going to be enough daylight to read much longer."

Edmée wasn't really serious about this, but did try to take on a facade of authority, just not very well.

The girl did want to hear this, so she decided to keep her mouth shut for a while.

Edmée continued to read from the book they had found in a monastery that had been largely taken over by the garden plants, but the library was still mostly intact even if the weather had reached some of the books. "But yes, this started before there were any humans around as it states right on the next line." She returned to the book. "A long, long time ago, before there were



humans, before there was even life, there were three forces, the kind we would now understand to be gods. Their true names have since been lost, but we would know them as Sky, Earth and Ocean."

The children laughed as Edmée made her crude pantomimes of the three forces and played along.

"Sky was restless and impetuous, while Earth was stubborn and grumpy, but the two did share something: their love of Ocean. Ocean was a mystery to them. She was serene, but playful, full of grace and too innocent to understand that there was more than simple friendship motivating them when the other too kept approaching her."

"What does that mean?" asked the girl.

"I guess I'll put that down on the list of things we'll talk about in a decade."

"Am I an adult by then?"

"Maybe. Most people are by that age, whether by choice or not." Edmée cleared her throat. "Sky and Earth were resentful. They did not understand why Ocean was not reciprocating their feelings and answering their inept advances. Soon enough they both came to a common conclusion: The reason must be the other one."

The children moved to a window to look out where they could see both the earth and the sky.

"They were eager to fight each other, but did not know how. Sky attempted to push Earth with winds, but only managed to raise clouds of dirt. Earth had stronger weapons and spewed billows of smoke and lava out of newly formed volcanoes, but only damaged himself more than Sky."

The boy didn't often speak up, but for once he spoke instead of just letting his older sister do the talking. "What's a volcano and what's lava?"

Edmée thought for a second about how to explain this. "Back south, there were mountains, which would sometimes vomit out molten rock. We called these mountains volcanoes and we called that molten rock lava." She mimicked a volcano belching out magma. "The lava is very hot."

"Hotter than soup?"

"Yes. Much, much hotter. You can't even go close to it." She had to find her place in the story again. "While the two were having their futile fight, they both began to grow angrier and angrier. They needed some way to release all that anger, but as the other was of no help, they eventually came together to find a new culprit. Maybe it was Ocean all along? Maybe she should have chosen between them? Maybe she should not have played with their feelings?"

The children came a little closer here.

Seeing the two exhibit more interest, Edmée took on a more dramatic voice. "Sky and Earth decided to confront Ocean. 'Which one of us do you love?' asked Sky, 'Which of us will you take as your man?' asked Earth. Ocean was confused by this. Why should she have to choose? 'Friends, I have no interest in choosing between you. You are both dear to me.' This was not the answer the two were looking for, so they once again pushed the point. In unison: 'This is your last chance. You must choose between us!'"

The eyes of the children couldn't be wider.

"Ocean refused. 'I would ask you to leave me alone, but as we are forever connected, all I can ask is that you do not talk to me until I feel inclined to speak to you again.' The two would not take this as a response. The two now had an understanding between them and they would rather subjugate Ocean together than to leave her alone. They tried the same tricks as against each other. Sky raised winds, but Ocean would just infiltrate them and use them against him, Earth would spout lava, but Ocean would just cool it and use the water raised by Sky's winds to cover him."

"Wow."

"The two soon found that they were unable to compete with her. She was just too powerful, too creative, too flexible for their unimaginative attempts at harming her. The two covered and retreated, leaving their bodies behind. Ocean was not happy about this. While she might not have loved the two in the same way they loved her, she had considered them brothers."

The children took a look at each other.

"Unbeknownst to the other two, she had already started to experiment with life. Deep inside her, there were small beings that had started to organize into larger beings and when Ocean sent her body into the now dead sky and over the now dead earth, these small beings also reached

those places. Over time they too formed larger beings and while their Mother had not planned this, she watched lovingly as they started using the sky for their benefit and slowly covered the earth."

The children returned to the window trying to imagine how all of the trees could have come from those events. "Is it true?"

"There's some truth to it." Edmée had to think about this for a second. "The people who originally told the story weren't lying, but they were trying to find a truth that would be helpful for them to understand the world. Does that make sense?"

The children nodded.

Edmée could tell they were lying, but she also knew that they would figure it out if she just gave them time. She had lost her place on the page again. "Ocean loved her children. She would nourish them with rains and create complex systems to help life create more and more complex versions of itself, always finding and testing new possibilities. Still, she grew sadder and sadder for she felt her many, many children could never fill the empty void left by the departure of her two friends. Over time, she would retreat deeper and deeper back into her own self." She scanned a few pages ahead. "That will do for today. There's not enough light anymore. Maybe we'll continue the story another time."

The children were a little disappointed, but they had been given a lot to think about.

Edmée had her own reasons for stopping. The story was veering into the birth of gigantic sea monsters and she wasn't sure the children were quite ready for that. There was also a section on the Sisters Edmée was very interested to go through on her own.

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*Sister from Above fell from grace. She was wily enough to keep her Mother unaware of her doings as she slowly manipulated two co-emperors into a feud against each other, which turned into open hostility, which in turn developed into a civil war. This became her playground. She took on the role of an angel of death from the myths of that people and descended on the battlefields and villages, taking lives indiscriminately. But that was not to be. Mother found out. Mother always found out, as evil on that scale could not hide for long, so Sister from Above lost her form.*

The Sword was sated for the first time since Eira's Mother had taken her revenge on the clergy on the night of Eira's escape. The Spear was much more stoic and was simply pleased with its efforts. Eira herself was not sure what to feel as she stood over the bodies of seven slain men.

She understood that she had been responsible for the deaths of countless people through her own actions, but it was easy to distance herself from that act, when she wasn't covered in the blood of her victims. It wasn't even the first time she had killed, but somehow killing seven people in such a methodological way. The weapons weren't helping. The Sword was egging her on to revel in the moment, while the Spear's approach was to continue in these acts without a second thought.

Eira's friend was a counterbalance to the ideas of the weapons. She covered nearby in the bush she had escaped when the patrol found them. She was clearly rethinking her relationship to Eira right then and there.

Eira, on the other hand, shrugged off whatever doubts she had about what had happened and chose to be pragmatic. The patrol had two pushcarts and a pack of dogs loaded with bags of something. The dogs were restless, but easily enough pacified with a few words. She gestured to her companion to help the dogs and she did as she was told and started to let the dogs free of their burdens, while Eira took a look at the contents of the pushcarts.

There were coins, preserved foodstuffs, animal pelts and small golden idols. So, they were either merchants, or more likely based on the number of coins, tax collectors. Her companion seemed to become more agitated when seeing the coins, which in Eira's mind confirmed the latter assumption.

They had been dodging various patrols for days now and Eira was angry at herself for letting this one see them. Perhaps that anger was what had enabled the weapons to take over. She went through the whole ordeal in her mind.

Her companion had seen the patrol first, tucked Eira's sleeve and pointed them out before diving into the bushes. Eira followed her, but had been too intrigued by the packdogs, and had tried to slip closer to see them, which had blown their cover.

The violence itself had been lightning fast. The weapons were in her arms before she even had thought about taking them out and the first panicked man had died with the Spear through his throat before any of the others had even realized what was happening.

Eira had moved faster than she had previously thought possible, slashing and thrusting with the Sword in quick succession with a few graceful dodges in between. Perhaps those weird, but fun, dance lessons by Mother had indeed finally paid off.

She looked at her clothes, noticing that she had inadvertently torn the skirt, and wondered how easily she had managed to shake off what had just happened. The Sword was telling her not to try to wash the blood off.

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*Things a good man should know:*

*How to write beautifully, both in handwriting and content; How to know who invites them to flirt; How to bind a book; How to cook dumplings; How to take care of their personnel; How to avoid leaving footprints*

In their dreams, Edmée and Edmond didn't have to share a body. Instead, Edmond would wear several layers of clothing, with immaculate patterns made of gold and jewels to help him channel his magic, and a knightly full-helmet with similar patterns. Edmée had chosen a scandalously form-fitting suit made from red and black silks, topped with a hood and a mask with a crown of horns accompanied with leather enforcements protecting vulnerable parts of her body. While Edmond relied on his spells, Edmée carried two long curved daggers.

They always planned to go on epic adventures to hunt down mythical monsters and discover ancient mysteries to solve, but they mostly just ended up discussing the possibilities instead. Sometimes they would spend the whole night just tinkering with their outfits, designing new constellations or whatever they could think of.

But on that night, looking down the beautiful rolling hillside, they had an agenda. The problem was that they did not know how to approach it. If there is something living in your mind and wishes to stay hidden, how can you find it? They couldn't exactly discuss the dilemma, nor were they sure they could even think about the problem, because they just didn't know how all of this worked.

Whatever they were looking for was elusive, or at least they thought so. If a memory or a detail of a memory or just something you know is changed, how can you tell? If they met someone,

how could they tell if that someone was an actual figment of their imagination or if it was some sort of infiltrator.

Edmée quickly became despondent due to the complexity of the problem. Edmond went deep into a rabbit hole with approach, coming up with more and more complicated scenarios, which would eventually lead into nothing, because of the lack of understanding.

However, because they were the same person, the two came to a conclusion at the same time. "What do we know and don't know how we know that?" Edmée started understanding fully that it was likely they were being listened to.

"The Aunties?"

"Yes. How do we know about the Aunties? Where did we learn about them?"

"I don't know. When we met the raven, we just knew about them."

"Exactly. Isn't that something we would remember a situation or a book where we heard or read the story from?"

Obviously Edmond had thought of this at the exact same time as Edmée, but it was helpful for them to think through things by discussing them. "So, you are saying that whatever has wormed its way into our mind brought that knowledge with it and somehow it has leaked into our understanding of the world."

"Indeed."

"So, what do we actually know about the Aunties? Or should we call them Sisters?" Edmond did have a habit of overthinking things. "After all, they are not our Aunties, but they are Sisters to each other."

"That makes sense. Sisters it is."

"What do we know about them? They are ancient. Perhaps thousands of years old. Some of them were born before civilizations."

"They have changed over time. They were born as humans, as women, but have since evolved or devolved into something very different."

"They've been hurt." There was silence.

"Yes." Edmée tried to scan their memories for how. "Badly. They are resentful of something and they have had time to let that foment for a very long time."

"That book we knew about them, so they are not completely unknown."

"But it didn't say much and some pages had been ripped off."

"We did learn that they are somehow apparently related to this sea goddess, who was a major figure in the book. However, they were humans at some point, so they were maybe adopted in some way for some reason."

Then another idea hit them. Edmond continued: "What are we doing anyhow?"

"Can you clarify?"

"We have been moving north even though it would be easier to stay where the winter is much milder. Sure, the culprit of the apocalypse is apparently there, but why do we care? What are we going to do about it?"

"What else were we going to do?"

Edmond was silent for a second. "I guess you're right."

"I think it would be more precise to say that we would have eventually ended up trying to figure out how all this happened, but that doesn't mean the decision to do so wasn't influenced by others." There was a lot to think about. Edmée decided it was time to dream about something else.

The scenery changed. The ground began to flatten and buildings made of bricks and blocks of stone began to rise all around them. It was home, even if neither of them had ever felt home in that city with the city guard and a number of other people always harassing them. It was the evening the Apocalypse reached them. It was a little different than the first time, as now they had some control over the situation, so there weren't dozens of people attacking them. It was weird. They weren't really seeing what was happening, but as they were accessing memories of their former self, they could only sense what they could remember, which was a combination of vague recollections, assumptions and what their former self was sensing at the moment.

"Why are we here?" asked Edmond, knowing the answer fully well.

"To see if we can find clues on what is happening to us." She dodged a thrown bottle instinctively, even though it could not possibly hurt her and would have missed anyhow. "Can we pinpoint a moment when something pervaded us."

"Where are we anyway?" Edmond didn't mean their dreaming selves, but the memory of themselves in this very situation.

"Right there." Identifying their current hiding place was made easy as things would become clearer in some parts almost as if a beacon was pointing at a specific area. And yes, there Edmée was. Hiding in a cellar. The past-Edmée was not as self-assured as her future counterpart. She was no coward, but her mettle was more of a necessity of her circumstances than her current almost arrogant fearlessness. A lot had changed in the last couple of years and that had affected Edmée deeply as well.

There was a sense of wistfulness. The past-Edmée had been much more innocent. She had done her fair share of crimes, but that was for survival. Edmond wanted to hold her, but it would not have been very helpful as it would have disrupted what they were trying to do. He did use his best puppy-eyes to gain permission from Edmée, but Edmée was not having it. This was a version of herself she had worked hard to bury somewhere deep inside of her. Life is just that much easier, if you don't have to care.

Edmée didn't have to try to distinguish her compassion for long, as suddenly everything went black. It wasn't just darkness. There was nothing there. No ground, no air, no stars to watch. "What is this?"

"Do you have any recollections of this?"

Then as suddenly as everything had disappeared, the past-Edmée was there once again, just somewhat dazed, and the world returned with her.

Edmée woke. She was uncharacteristically shaken. A feeling which wasn't nearly as fleeting as the memory of the dream that had caused it.

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*Sister Beneath the Trees lost her way. She enjoyed her beauty, especially by luring men into the woods wherein she would taste of their blood and violate their flesh. The rains fell on the remains of her victims, bringing the word back to the Mother and thus was this*



*Sister banished into the realm she used to her advantage, but this time without the weapon of beauty she had used before.*

Eira clutched the Sword and the Spear in her hands once again, as the city guards approached her. Could she take on the whole city? It felt like it was the weapons talking again, but they were also making sense. This small patrol would be easy and while she could not possibly take on all the armed men in the city, if she would be able to keep them in small groups like this one by moving fast enough and not letting them organize against her.

Then, while she was still deep in planning out an attack without the amount of information that would be required for such a feat even with her newly found confidence in such things, a spider larger than the hand attempting to swat it away landed on the patrol leader's face. A quick look told Eira that the monkey was behind the incident.

Eira's guide took the opportunity to slip into the city while giving Eira a conflicted glance. Maybe she wanted to leave Eira behind after her previous massacre or perhaps she was looking to avoid a new one by leading Eira peacefully into the city. Eira could not tell. May have been both.

Eira knew she would stand out in the city anyhow. Thus far she had not met anyone with a skin tone or hair color similar to hers. She decided to follow her companion and left the weird conflict between the animals and the guards behind. One of the men did notice her, but almost as if planned, the raccoon jumped into the fray and bit him.

Upon entering, Eira couldn't help but notice that the city was meticulously organized. No organic growth of the cities back home, which were barely navigable mazes, where one could easily stumble upon a dead-end or just be stuck with a horse cart in an alley that wasn't nearly as wide as it had been at the point where the owner had entered.

The houses themselves were cleaner and more uniform. They were built of something solid, but which looked like it had been poured and molded into place. The houses had narrow staircases on the facade to allow for multiple levels of occupation with the street levels usually reserved for businesses where the locals sold basically all the things they would sell back home.

And Eira had been right. She stood out so badly it felt as if the otherwise busy city fell silent. Some parents ushered their children inside and some of the shopkeepers moved the more expensive wares behind various covers.

Since she wasn't wanted anyhow, Eira walked to a vendor and grabbed a big fruit she had learned had a mix of sweet and sour taste. She took her time cutting it into edible pieces and handed some to her companion, who hesitated for a second, but then took the fruit and ate it with a guilty look on her face.

At this point Eira wasn't going to try to lay low. She had come to investigate and to judge. Her own continent had been found inadequate. This new one had not shown a good face thus far.

Her guide followed her, but tried to keep her head down. If it isn't for Eira, she would have been conspicuous on her own as well with her peasant-slave outfit and animals in her garments. When the people around them finally found the courage to confront the pair, they did not find enough of it to stand up to Eira, so they chose her friend instead.

A man grabbed the woman by the arm, but Eira noticed, spun around and stared the man down. He whimpered and backed down under the gaze of the woman who was head and shoulders shorter than him.

They continued their journey. Her companion stayed closer to Eira. There was a crowd noise, which attracted the attention of Eira. It came further down the road.

There was a plaza. The people around it did not immediately notice the approaching pair, but when they did, they made room for them. The plaza had two men fighting with primitive, but deadly enough weaponry. They were surrounded by guards and on-lookers from all sides.

Eira couldn't help but notice the brands similar to her companions on the men's backs, as well as their reluctance to fight each other. They were forced into this situation either for amusement or, based on one member of the audience with a multi-colored outfit Eira found garish, a religious ceremony of some sort.

Eira turned to her friend. "I am sorry." She was not lying. She placed her hand on the side of her friend's head as she recited a few words in the ur-language she had learned from Mother.

Her friend was no longer afraid and took the Sword Eira handed her. She tested its balance in a way she could not have known before taking the Spear as well. She was ready.

Eira turned her back and walked away weeping as her friend began the massacre. She was not as graceful as Eira, but she was very effective. She did not kill indiscriminately, but as before in the manor house, inspired those who had been wronged to take the opportunity for revenge.

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*Weirdest animal hybrids in my dreams:*

*A crocodile head on a stork body; A giraffe with a turtle shell and a snake for a tongue; A bull's body with a sheep and a lion head, with the lion head drooling after the other head, but not being able to eat it; A hippopotamus with emu legs; A rat-king*

The former city had been largely claimed by nature. If not for the roads, which themselves had also been largely overgrown, Edmée and the children might have easily passed it without even realizing.

There was something unnatural about the trees. They had grown much closer to each other than trees normally would. Many were intertwined in grotesque ways. The children definitely sensed something. They took each other by hand and came closer to Edmée.

"Sorry, children, I need to find something in there."

The children were clearly terrified of the idea of having to enter the city. They pleaded with their eyes in that way only children and puppies are able to.

"Okay, you don't have to join me. If you wish, you can wait outside. I'll give you something to eat. Maybe you can cook something while I'm inside." The children had become eager cooks, so that would give them something else to talk about. Eager, mind you, not good, but they were learning and Edmée was at this point at least willing to entertain the idea of letting the two play with fire by themselves.

Of course, there was also the risk of discovery, especially near these larger settlements, but Edmée had already introduced the idea and did not want to take it back.

"Here's what we'll do. You gather us a nice pile of berries, while I visit the city. When I return, we can make a nice salsa out of them and then maybe grill some chicken to go with it. Does that sound good to you?"

The children nodded eagerly.

"Just remember what I've taught you. Remember which berries to pick, remember to keep the noise down and remember to keep your distance to any strangers. Right?"

The children nodded, but weren't really listening as they were already in the woods.

"I'll meet you here!" Edmée sighed. It was time to ready herself. She took out an outfit better suited for the occasion and changed her ill-fitting, more Edmond-friendly clothes to a suit which would provide her with some cover, opportunity to take her equipment with her and wouldn't get caught on whatever spikes she would encounter. She did enjoy the occasion of not having to take Edmond's bigger body into account in her choice of attire, but she also immediately scoffed at her own vanity.

She went on to revise the rules she had set herself for such occasions. "One, be aware of your surroundings," she mumbled, "two, make good use of your tools", which she was laying out to check, "and, three, if you need to fight, assess the situation, find their weaknesses and exploit them." She took the short dagger from among her tools and tested it.

She went through her tools. She didn't expect to use most of them, but wanted to make sure they were available just in case. The lockpicks were there. She touched each of them almost lovingly before returning them to the elaborate pouch she had made for them and attached it to the harness she was wearing. There was a small crowbar and some wire. She unraveled and then coiled again a small rope to make sure it wouldn't be tangled when needed. She had several hooks from as small as fishing hooks up to the ones used by deep-sea fishermen to drag their bigger catches around. She decided to leave her fake passport behind. She wasn't exactly expecting to meet anyone able to read the language, let alone be impressed by any kind of documentation.

She hid her backpack and started to climb the wall. She didn't want to use the main gate. Those were often kept an eye on even in these times. The flora made it easy and in combination with her natural nimbleness, she made it to the ramparts fast even if she did feel out of breath at the top.

Many of the buildings had crumbled as the roots of the trees pushed themselves out of the ground, but many of the buildings were still in somewhat livable condition. And then there was a hovel. Somehow it had remained intact despite being raised from the ground by a huge tree that had grown under it. That did not feel right. How could the tree possibly be fully formed as it came up? Maybe she would find out, as she somehow knew that was the place she was supposed to call on.

There were signs of life there. Someone had constructed a pulley system to raise supplies up there and there was firewood piled up against the wall. What she did not see was a clear way to reach it. There were no stairs or ladders. Climbing the tree would not be easy, but Edmée welcomed the challenge. First, she would have to reach the tree.

As she was scanning for a route, she noticed that she wasn't the only one keeping an eye on the house. There were at least two guards, wearing pieces of uniform so badly you couldn't really call it a uniform, who seemed to be patrolling around the place. They weren't quite open about it, keeping their distance, but at the same time, there wasn't anything else going on, so they were there to do something. Whether they were keeping something in or keeping something out wasn't quite clear. Not that it really mattered to Edmée. Her presence would provoke them either way.

Her rational side said that she should scout now, then return to the children and try to infiltrate the place during the night, but after some careful consideration, her curiosity won out. Besides, she had promised the children some chicken and she didn't have one, and she was sure she could hear some within the city, so she would have to enter in any case.

She checked back to make sure that the children kept themselves out of sight for those who might pass by using the road or would look out from the city before using the trees to descend into what was left of the city streets. There were skeletons everywhere. Many of them were tangled in the trees, some held up in grotesque poses.

For a moment she felt great. She was finally getting back to her own element. She was finally allowed to really flex her muscles that had been mostly used for carrying for the past couple of years. But then the reality of the situation hit her. The streets were covered in feces from various creatures, rats were ubiquitous and, really, she was out of practice, which her muscles immediately reminded her of. While the last point was against this, the first two encouraged her to quickly return upwards and make her way over the rooftops.

That presented her with its own difficulties. The roofs had not been maintained in a long while, so they were in a very poor condition, many of them having given away already. There were also people up there. Not many, as she assumed that there weren't many people left in the whole city, but she was exposed to being seen by someone. She made sure to follow rule one and made sure she was fully aware of her surroundings once more.

On the other hand, if someone did spot her, what were they going to do? Follow her? That seemed unlikely. The few people she was able to see from her perch seemed to be on guard duty. It was as if there were two gangs, which had divided the city amongst themselves and were now suspiciously keeping an eye on each other in case someone decided to enter their turf..

That would complicate things somewhat. They had no reason to be cautious about anything happening above street level, unless they had been mapping or building routes up there. Searching quickly for something like that, she did find a couple of planks, which seemed to have been placed there specifically to make traversing the rooftops easier. Those would probably be watched more closely, so she would have to try to avoid them.

But then something peculiar hit her. Even though it was daytime, she could see stars. Still following the first rule, she also noticed that the stars were only visible in one area. Again, she reminded herself of the first rule and forced herself to concentrate on the job at hand.

She moved carefully, watching both her step and signs for other people, to the roof of the next building. There was a huge hole in it and for some reason a man was sleeping directly under it. At least she assumed he was sleeping. If he was dead, it would have been a recent incident.

She didn't linger on that and instead, once again following the first rule, decided to take a short detour to keep out of sight by moving into a balcony on a higher building next to her. As she was trying to assess whether her planned handhold on the next building, she again caught a glimpse of the stars.

Except that she shouldn't be able to see them. They should have been behind the building she was currently in. Did she misremember? She doubted that. Was her mental map of the area wrong? More likely, but still probably not. Were they another set of stars she didn't notice before? Maybe. Based on the third rule, the one about physical confrontations, wasn't helpful against something like stars, so she made the quick decision to hurry up even if she was risking discovery by the guards. It just felt like dealing with the guards would be easier than dealing with whatever that thing might be.

Following rule two, she took a hook and leaped to the next roof, moving quickly to the next. Not stopping to check her next position was nerve wracking, but risking that felt safer than confronting the stars, whatever they were.

Another fast decision later she found herself on the next roof and while she found steady footing, she also stumbled right onto someone. She cursed herself. She should have smelled the small fire the man was using to roast a rat, but as she hadn't, she needed to think fast. The man was clearly more afraid of the situation than she was, so there was no need to hurt him. Edmée simply tripped him and quickly jumped onto the next roof, where she gave a quick glance backwards.

She had been right to run. The stars were following her and the man was in their way, which meant that there was some sparking and a series of small fires as the man disappeared into ash.

Edmée was not going to wait to see what would happen to her if the stars caught up and took an even riskier route. She leaped over a street she wasn't quite sure she could make being as out of practice as she was. Indeed, she missed. Not much. Her fingers actually grasped a roof tile, but it didn't help, as the tile couldn't hold her weight.

She fell, trying to find something, anything to grab on her way down. And then, suddenly, her momentum was gone and her whole world became black. It reminded her of the emptiness she experienced in her own memories in her own dreams, but this was different. That had been nothingness, this was.. something. At least she felt like she was drifting instead of just being. She also felt strangely safe.

"Welcome." It was a fragile voice. It belonged to a small girl in as fragile a body as the voice suggested. She was bloodied and wore tattered clothes. She was sitting on what seemed to be a cocooned woman.

Edmée could sense that the small body hid a very powerful being. "Thank you." She took a look around to see if there was anything else. She couldn't find anything. "If you don't mind, I would like to ask you to tell me where I am and who you are."

"I don't mind." The girl was not being facetious. She just seemed to take Edmée's words too literally.

"Thank you. Where am I?"

"This is my home. They call it the Void."

"Thank you once more. And who are you?"

"I am the Sister from the Void."

"Oh! Oh. You are one of the Aunties?"

"No. Not really. In a way."

Well, that was clear. "Can you elaborate?"

"They are my Sisters, in a way, as we were all created by the same Mother, but they don't talk to me, because... we are not friends. She is my real sister." She pointed to the cocooned woman.

"She is Eira's Mother."

Edmée couldn't help but notice that there was indeed a different cadence to her voice when calling the woman next her 'sister' than the others. "Why is she here?"

"I needed to protect her. She would have tried to confront Eira and that was a trap."

"You are keeping her your prisoner, because you assumed she wouldn't be able to protect herself?" Edmée realized that this might not have been the best approach when she was completely at the mercy of this being, but didn't even try to walk it back.

"Yes. I just don't want to be alone." There was immense sadness in those words. The kind that understood the true meaning of eternity. There was a silent moment. "I won't keep you here. I know where you are headed. I will bring you there."

A light started to shine behind Edmée. It wasn't very bright, but it was there. She tried to turn around and see, but without anything to push against, she wasn't able to. Sister from the Void came a little closer and pushed Edmée with a single finger.

"Do not worry. I will free her soon," the Sister said. "And you should know, the woman you are about to meet is the true mother of Eira."

Edmée had more questions, especially about the stars, but there was no time before she hit the portal back to the world she usually inhabited. She fell on a floor. She guessed, correctly, that she was in the hovel she had been trying to reach before the interruptions.

She had startled an old crone with her thud. The crone was naked and filthy, There was something off in her behavior, as she hunched up against the wall in fear.

"I'm not here to hurt you." At least Edmée assumed as much. "Are you Eira's mother?"



There was a hint of recognition in the crone's eyes, but it was quickly followed by a tear. She tried to say something, but was only able to mumble.

Edmée looked around. The hovel was small, as expected, and it was full of garbage. She had been dropped on the largest single spot Sister from the Void had been able to find. She also realized something. The crone was not the one she was looking for.

There was a curtain, which covered a wall. Edmée was uncharacteristically hesitant to look behind it. The crone egged her on, but when she still wouldn't the old woman came over and tried to pull the curtain aside, but did it with such force that the rod holding it up fell down to expose a row of clumsily embalmed dead bodies held up as clumsily on various pegs on the wall. Their faces had been suspended in fear. The crone giggled.

Edmée's curiosity won again. "Why are they here? Who are they?"

The crone made what Edmée first assumed was a rude gesture.

"They are you children? Eira's siblings?"

The crone nodded.

"I guess it's time to go to work then." She took out a few grains of rice.

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*Sister Walking Among the Beasts succumbed to her animal side. She hunted the countryside for both sustenance and amusement. Neither humans or animals were safe from her and her pack as they butchered whole villages. But Mother had learned from the older Sisters and she was already watching. The Sister had to learn to fear humans just like her comrades had done before.*

Eira was aroused from her sleep, if you could call it that. She had been fluctuating between dreaming about the friend she had sacrificed and just thinking of her, and the two modes had become so intertwined she wasn't sure at which points she was doing which anymore. This added to the confusion regarding her visitor.

There was a tall, ethereal figure standing near the embers of Eira's campfire. She was impossibly beautiful in her blueish green dress, which flowed in the air despite the stillness of

the night. Eira did not need to be told who this was. "Grandmother?" They had never really met, but who else could it be?

"Eira." Despite the bluntness, there was love in that simple statement. "You gave away your [...]s weapons. It will be interesting to see how they find their way back to her this time from another continent. Oh, well."

"Are you here to kill me?" Eira felt immediately stupid for asking that.

"No." There was an enigmatic smile. "I don't kill my kin, but there is something I should warn you about, since [...] was never able to. I have, in the past, tried to teach my children and for that purpose I did unleash something into the world you should be on the lookout for."

"What is it?"

Grandmother wasn't listening. "I don't usually walk the earth, because of the bad memories." She caressed the dirt with elegance no-one had caressed it before or has caressed it since. "I am also sorry about the behavior of my pets. They are sometimes too eager to please me."

"Can you ask them to stop?"

Grandmother had already moved on to another subject. "You know, you are the first of my family I did not choose personally. In that way you are an interesting case. Your Mother and your Aunties all petitioned me in some way to gain my blessings, but you had a different idea. You did not come to me, but instead approached [...]."

Eira wasn't sure if she wanted to interject with her own side of the story, but thought it better to let Grandmother keep talking since stopping her would be risky.

"While it took me a while to come around to it, that was the right choice. She was a better parent to you than I ever was to any of my children. Sadly, the ripples of my parenting will come back and bite."

Eira thought to herself that there was this titbit again, but wasn't sure how to approach the subject.

But Grandmother had once again moved on from the thought. "I would so love to enjoy this world above my own, but alas, being eternal has perks, but also has disadvantages. Memories

being one of them." And with that the meeting was over as abruptly as it had started as she was gone

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*My favorite tools:*

*My quill I found in a rich banker's office; My pan I've used to cook so many nice meals; My small hammer, I don't really have a use for, but the etchings in the ivory handle are to die for; My compass which has a mind of its own.*

That night Edmée was not in control of her or their dreams.

Sister from the Void had helped her out of the city, which did mean that she had to disappoint the children, who had been looking forward to some chicken. It did turn out that the only one who was actually disappointed was Edmée herself, as the children had found a nest on the ground with some eggs and had managed to steal them with minimal damage. They presented their loot to Edmée with pride they had not displayed before during their short association.

After a nice omelet flavored with berries and just a little bit of truffle Edmée found near their camp, they went to sleep and Edmée began to dream immediately. Unlike her usual dreams, Edmond was not there and the dream was drained of color. She was looking at a scene from above.

A woman in a simple fur attire was on her knees holding the body of a girl. They were on top of a cliff, overlooking the ocean and despite a storm, Edmée could hear her voice clearly.

"Ocean, Giver of Life, Mother of Us All, the Only True Goddess, please, I beg of you, save her! I will pay any price you see fit to ask of me!"

The storm rumbled and the waves crashed against cliffs. Then a tidal wave of immense proportions rose within the bay and suspended itself as if looking at the woman from above. A voice, vaguely feminine and coming from nowhere and everywhere at the same time began to speak. "No price required, my child, I only wish to warn. There are rules. First, your sister will never be the same as she was in life and, second, you will have to join her. Do you wish to pursue this?"

Edmée came to realization. Was that Sister from the Void? Did that mean that the woman was her sister, who was now in the cocoon? Was this real? Was this something that had happened in the past? She tried to will herself closer and managed to do so, but she also felt that something had understood her wishes and brought her forward.

The woman heard what she wanted to hear, which did not include the additional information given to her. There was hope in her eyes as she smiled despite the rain beating her face. "Yes, Mother, I am ready! We are ready!"

Edmée wasn't sure how she could tell, but the wave seemed to be apprehensive. Then a gigantic tentacle rose from the water and climbed slowly up the cliff until it reached the two people at the top. The woman closed her eyes and let the tentacle take them. The tentacle retracted back into the ocean, holding the two as tenderly as it could in its grasp.

Edmée was transfixed on the event, but also noticed something moving in the bushes behind the clear top of the cliff. She couldn't be certain, but it seemed like a hare.

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*Sister Beyond the Light did something wrong. No-one knows what, but it has been speculated that she was forced into the shadows as punishment and the lack of memory of her or her misdeeds is an extension of that. It is unlikely anyone will ever know.*

Grandmother's pets were indeed somewhat reluctantly leaving Eira alone as she traversed the ley lines on her skis back to her own continent, which was good for her as she was still largely occupied with the thoughts of the friend she had given up. Their short relationship might have been full of turmoil, but if she had been thinking about the whole chain of events in such terms, she would have seen it as the second or third most positive relationship in her life, which would have been even more depressing.

There was a storm in the horizon and for a fleeting moment Eira thought about changing her course to meet it head on, but it felt futile as she wasn't sure she could even die, nor were there ley lines to that direction as far as she knew. She did slow down as much as she felt comfortable to do without losing her balance to admire the majesty of the lightning and the thunderclouds.

Part of her had felt powerful the first time she commenced the end of the world, but in comparison to the unimaginable forces at play in the tempest she felt small. And even that feeling of success of her first apocalypse was not there any more after this more recent one.

She fortified herself. She was certain it had to be done. In her mind, humankind simply did not deserve to live in that form. They had had their chance and they had failed.

What she was regretful of was the methodology. Perhaps she could have controlled who survived better. Perhaps she would have been able to find a way to make sure the few good people out there were the ones left behind. Perhaps her friend could have made it. Well, perhaps she did. Eira just did not have a way to find out. Perhaps she would try to find her in the future.

Could she dare? She had, after all, betrayed her. Part of her tried to defend that betrayal, because she had also given her friend weapons, which would give her an edge against any mortal, but there was also the problem that the weapons might also corrupt the minds of such weak beings.

Her thoughts continued to skip from subject to subject as she began to doubt her own relationship to the weapons. She had clearly felt them trying to influence her from time to time, so had they managed to warp her or her goals? She had given them away willingly, which was proof enough for her that she was not under their control.

She felt the need to get back on land, so that she wouldn't be alone with her thoughts where there wasn't much to occupy her mind.

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*My favorite people I found on my travels:*

*That one woman, who had chosen to learn everything there is to know about a forgotten temple to a forgotten god; That bridge where a guard did not want to believe the world had ended and still kept watch, but let me cross; That hermit, who didn't even know the world had ended, but was an excellent cook; The fisherwoman, who had kept the hermit ignorant just to see how long she could keep it going; That poet, who was trying to write an epic based on the apocalypse; The children*

Someone passed Edmée and the children on the ley line they had been following. Whoever it was, he or she was moving too fast to identify. Edmée led the children a little further from the ley line just in case the traveler had noticed them and decided to investigate. The encounter with the stars had shaken her more than she had initially realized and now she was being more careful than usual.

The ley lines were very strong in this area, which led her to think that they somehow emanated from around here. This piqued her interest, but at the same time she began to worry about the safety of the children. Wherever she was going and whatever she was going to do there, the children would be a hindrance, even if she did not want to think of them in those terms. Still, her feelings had to be pushed aside and some solution needed to be found. Especially after the events of the city. Her confidence in her own ability to survive whatever was about to happen had taken a hit.

She entertained the idea of just leaving the children on their own. After all, they had survived for a very long time on their own, but at the same time that nagging feeling of caring for someone other than herself raised its ugly head once again.

She thought about taking them back to the city. Perhaps one of the gangs or tribes or whatever they thought of themselves as would take them, but returning to the stars did not feel like a good idea either.

On they went. Edmée attempted from time to time to carefully hint to the children that she might have to leave them, but the children were too smart and did not engage in that conversation. So, the problem persisted, until they did meet someone.

First there were hares. Of course, that was not unusual, especially after all the people were gone and didn't hunt them as much as they used to and the predator population had not caught up yet. What was unusual was the way they would stop to stare at Edmée and the children. That would also happen often, but these would take just a little too long.

The children also understood that something was wrong. In the beginning they had the standard childish enthusiastic response to seeing such cuddly animals, but that was killed fast as the numbers of hares began to grow into unsettling numbers.

Edmée did notice that one of the hares had the mark left on its face by the raven. She considered the possibility that this was some sort of retaliation for that whole encounter and in

her assessment it was quite likely. But where to flee? The hares were all around them and they would definitely be faster than Edmée, never mind the children, if it came to that. Trees were one possibility, but Edmée wasn't sure how she could hoist the children up fast enough and she had already established in her mind that she was not ready to sacrifice them.

Gladly, there was a slender pillar of smoke, barely visible in the daylight, coming from somewhere just beyond a small patch of woods. Edmée judged the situation and was confident that they could reach it. Not that the hares were even acting in an adversarial manner. Their proximity in such numbers was just unnerving.

She took the children by their hands to comfort them and found a footpath to follow to the source of the smoke. The flora around them had been ravaged by the amount of hares and would probably eventually lead to the deaths of many trees around them.

The short path led to a small cottage right next to the ley line. There was an old woman sitting there, singing a song softly and dispassionately as she was cutting up some carrots. There was a boiling pot next to her and the smoke rose from the fire under it.

"Well, hello there," the woman started, "the hares hinted that someone was coming, but they didn't tell there would be children involved." She sighed. "I haven't seen children since... You know."

Edmée found the dead hare she was preparing for the meal to be somewhat macabre considering all its cousins all around them, but there it was.

"Don't worry, she volunteered." The woman gave a disarming smile. "It happens every now and then. I guess they feel I need to supplement my usual vegetable-based diet." She had set up for two. "You don't happen to have some plates and cutlery, do you?"

"How long have you been expecting us?"

"I was expecting you, dear. Well, I don't know who you are, but I was expecting someone. The children are a nice little surprise."

"The children have been with me for a fortnight, so have you known of my arrival before that?"

The woman smiled. "The hares have kept me informed, but our communication is often limited and their understanding of time is very inaccurate, so I have known that there would be a guest

ever since they arrived almost two years ago, but that was the limit of it." She took a pause. "I am glad to have someone to talk to."

"You have been alone here for two years?"

"Not alone." She glanced at the hares. "I just haven't had human company ever since that young man came through on his way to the city."

Edmée, who had been examining the woman closely, including her surface thoughts, wondered if the man she was talking about was the same man she stole this language from. The woman's memories seemed to indicate as much. If so, that felt a bit too much to be a pure coincidence.

"Why did you decide to stay here?"

"I have work to do. I sing to the ley line to keep it strong. You might not hear it, but there are more like me. I can hear their song through it." She looked at the ley line. "I don't know how much longer I can keep doing this. I am old and I feel my days are almost numbered."

Edmée's curiosity was piqued. "Why? I mean why do you keep the ley line alive? Do you use it for something?" Was she the one that had passed them earlier in the day?

"The hares asked me to do it. The lines are important. That is about as much as I know. They travel using them."

That was not news to Edmée. Except maybe the 'they' part, but the woman's surface thoughts were chaotic and mesmerizing. Then she noticed something, which made her force herself out of it. "Stars?"

The old woman raised her eyebrows? "Excuse me?"

"What do you know about the moving stars?"

"Well, dear, all stars move, but just very slowly, but I know what you mean and I don't know. I see them sometimes as if they are checking on me. They hover over me for a while and then just move on."

Edmée wasn't sure what to think about the woman. Like so many of the people she met these days, the woman seemed a little touched, but unlike many of the people she would meet these days, she seemed harmless. However, she knew things and Edmée did find her harder to trust for that reason. Not that knowing things was bad, but usually in order to know such things, you



had to deal with people or entities one would find untrustworthy. Still, she needed to find someone to take care of the children for a while and there weren't many options. "You said that you've been here alone with no human company for a long while. How about before the... event?"

"Well, dear, I do not want to make myself an object of pity, but it is a sad story."

"You don't have to share if you do not wish to talk about it. No need to surface those old bad memories." Well, they had already surfaced and Edmée had found enough information. She was a midwife, she never had her own family, but longed for one. In Edmée's appraisal, a midwife might not be quite exactly what she needed, but would have to do for now.

"Thank you, dear."

"I would like to ask for a favor."

"Sure, dear, whatever is in my power to give."

"I need someone to take care of the children." The children reacted to this, but Edmée shut them out of her mind, because she still wanted to concentrate on the thoughts of the midwife to see if this would really work out.

The midwife was surprised for sure, but positively. She didn't know what to say.

"I don't know how long I will be away, but if it's alright with you, I would like to leave them with you until I've done what I came here to do."

The midwife was still unable to grasp what she was asked to do, so she asked about the part she apprehended. "What are you going to do?"

"I wish I knew." That was not for dramatic effect. One thing did bother her, though. How was she able to read the midwife's mind? Why had she not thought that was weird until now?

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*Mother did not like to play favorites, so when the younger of the "twins" found a way to separate spirit from flesh through magic and used it on unsuspecting wood collectors, Mother knew she had to act even if she did not want to break the heart of the older of the*

*two. Thus the younger sister was banished into the void. But Mother had had enough of keeping her children in line and another way needed to be found.*

"It's done." Eira looked solemnly at a fish weir and the fish that had been cannibalizing each other in it as no-one had been collecting them. The Aunties had congregated around her with Auntie Beneath the Trees on her left, Auntie Walking Among the Beasts on her right, Auntie From Above on top of her and finally decided against trying to look for Auntie Beyond the Light, who was supposedly behind her somewhere.

"More. Death?" asked Auntie Beneath the Trees.

"Yes, countless. A whole civilization." She eyed a pike that had apparently made the weir it's own.

"Good. Deserved."

"I hope so." Eira felt like she was being judged, but was not up to hiding her feelings. The bees had taught her some of the mathematics her Mother had been disinterested in doing, so she had an idea of how many people might have died or would die in the days to come. While she did not know the names of those numbers, it would probably have nine digits when including all the people in her own continent, probably starting with a four or five. The whole idea was mind-boggling.

How many were still alive? That was a harder question, but she assumed maybe one in a hundred survived the initial waves, so maybe there were a few hundred thousand people still living, probably scattered around. She almost reached for the Spear before realizing she was no longer carrying it.

Auntie Walking Among the Beasts understood what she was thinking, at least part of it, and had a bear jump into the stream. The pike tried to hide, but was quickly pushed to the bank by the huge beast. It looked at her looking for approval. Eira forced herself to smile at it. But something else was catching her eye. There was a shadow in the water. The form reminded her of the raccoon, but that couldn't be it, could it?

"Return. Home."

Was that a question? An order? An observation? It was often hard to tell with Aunties. "Yes, I'm returning to the manor." She didn't really want to, but what else was there to do?

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*Things I want to do before dying*

*Find the edge of the world, if there is such a thing; See all the wonders and the great cities of the world; See all the waterfalls in the world; Climb all the mountains in the world; Learn to climb mountains; Meet a god; Name all the stars; Learn to make paper; Read every book in the world; Learn all languages; Write a book; Write a play; Find a troupe to perform the play; Taste every food in the world; Learn to make the best dishes in the world; Learn archery; Learn to be a fletcher; Canoe a great river all the way to the ocean; Build a canoe; Be the oldest person alive; Meet everyone left in the world; Kill a god; Build a proper burial site for the god; Desecrate the burial site; Find out what happened to the people I liked before; Learn the names of the winds; Find the perfect cloud; Find the most beautiful view to die looking at; Build a workshop; Ride every animal you can ride; Visit the bottom of the ocean; Build a football; Play a game of football; See that the children survive into adulthood; Find a way not to die*

"How did you find me?" The raven was confused.

The wall of trees would have been impossible to traverse for most people, but Edmée wasn't most people, so reaching the raven's nest had been easy. As for the question, the answer was simple. She showed the raven the silver ladle she had given it a few weeks ago. "Did I not warn you?"

The raven started to move anxiously. "So, you're here to steal it back?"

Edmée laughed. "No, I did not walk all that distance just to steal back something I have no use for."

The raven seemed offended by this. "Then why are you here?"

"I would you believe me if I told you I don't know? For some reason it did feel important to follow you here."

The raven stopped moving and took a closer look at Edmée. "Yes, it did, didn't it?" It seemed as if the raven felt the balance of power moving, but at the same time it did not want to be fooled again like with the ladle. "But I do feel you are not telling the whole truth."

"I'm telling you enough of the truth." Edmée did not want to dwell deeper into that subject. "What is this place?"

"Oh, this?" The raven looked over to the manor house within the wall of trees. The house itself was so overgrown with flora that it was hardly distinguishable from the wall. "That's the start of it all. That's what they call an epicenter."

"What's an 'epicenter'?"

The raven seemed to shrug. "Heart of it all. The place where the disaster started." The raven held back on saying it disagreed that the whole thing was a disaster, but reminded itself of the ladle once again and thought it better not to risk it.

# Part IV - All Who Dare Look Upon Me

## IN THE PRESENT

The witch was disoriented. She had fallen asleep at a bonfire, but didn't really know where she was when she finally woke up.

There was someone else there. A young woman wearing a very inappropriate dress for the situation sitting on the other side of the embers. The witch could see tears in her eyes and her motherly instincts kicked in even if her self-preservation instincts were telling her to stay clear.

The young woman stood up and came to her. They just watched each other for a while until the stranger laid down next to the witch and placed her head on the witch's lap. The witch was taken aback by this, but didn't stop her.

Instead, the witch caressed the hair of the young woman. She could hear her sobbing.

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## IN THE PAST

*What I would like to see on my headstone:*

*Who?; She died doing... something; Gone too soon; Looking for me?; The 24th best lover in the world; An eater lacking mouth and even maw, yet trees and beasts to it are daily bread. Well fed it thrives and shows a lively life, but give it water and you do it dead. What am I?*

*Or just some stupid list.*

\* \* \*

*There was one more sister. The others never spoke her name in fear of her. When Mother softened and retreated into her own realm underneath the waves, she took it upon herself to make sure her sisters would not step out of line.*

Eira was baffled. "Who are you?"

Moving closer through all the roots and underbrush that had covered the floor of the manor house was somewhat difficult even for someone as nimble as Edmée, but she managed. She felt like having a little bit of fun at Eira's expense. "You don't recognize your own Grandmother?"

Eira was visibly confused. She had actually seen Grandmother in her true form, but this was nothing like her, but then again, the Ocean is ever changing. Could this skinny, young woman in a badly fitting costume really be her?

Edmée couldn't help but laugh. "No, not really. I'm Sister Who Keeps Watch." Even Edmée herself was surprised by her answer, but she also recognized that her words were true. "Or Auntie, if you prefer." So, that's what had been going on in her or their brain.

Eira gathered herself, but her mind was still racing. "There is no Sister Who Keeps Watch." She noticed that the animals had retreated from her sanctum and the leaves were no longer rattling. Whatever she was, the other Aunties did not want to confront her.

"No, there is no Sister Who Keeps Watch until I am needed." There was a dichotomy between Edmée's unthreatening countenance and the gravity of her words as the Sister. "But I still keep watch." Edmée was listening to her own words. Maybe some of the strange things she had been doing for a while now suddenly made sense.

"Why were you needed, then." There was sarcasm in her words.

"I keep the family in line. You were used, dear Niece, but you will have to pay the price, because in the end, despite those around you manipulating you, you were the one who took it upon yourself to do what you did. Those are the rules."

"So, you are going to kill me?" Eira was still trying to sound sarcastic, but failed.

"No. I don't even know if you, or us for that matter, can even be killed. My Sisters know that it's not that simple. That's why they used you." She removed her rig from her bag with care and dug to the bottom to find a specific pouch. "I was thinking of tricking you into eating these, but I'm not going to have to, do I?"

Eira was once again puzzled.

"I have been collecting memories of all the people that died unnecessarily due to your little stunt." She laid down a piece of cloth and opened the pouch to show a grain of rice. "This one is

from a girl, who was killed by her neighbor just for getting the attention of a man." She laid the grain on the cloth carefully and picked another from the pouch. "This one is from a single mother who lived a destitute life, because she would rather do that than live with the abusive father of her child. Guess who killed her?" She again laid the grain down carefully and took out another. "And this one..." She leaned forward a little bit. "This one should be special to you."

Eira leaned forward as well.

Edmée took interest in this. That was a sign that her words had reached something within Eira. "This one was your older sister, a member of the family you were born to. She fought your parents over what they did to you. She ran away from home to rescue you, even though she was powerless to actually do anything about it being just ten at the time."

There were tears on Eira's cheeks.

"She was taken off the street by some enterprising tradesman who was planning on using her as a maid, but as soon as he realized there was a market, he forced her into prostitution."

Edmée paused to gauge Eira's reactions. "Obviously, the work she had been previously doing still needed to be done, so when she was too distraught to do it, he would beat her. Carefully, mind you, he didn't want visible bruises or scars, so he learned to do it in a way that minimized the signs while maximizing the pain. And he was meticulous about this."

Eira covered her face with her hands, but Edmée walked right up to her and forced her to lower them again, pushing the grain of rice right up to her face.

"No, you will know this and more." She made sure Eira was paying attention before commencing. "Still, she persevered. She took years of abuse at the hands of that man and his clients, but gained her freedom when the man managed to drown himself while drunk one night. She actually made it out and met another woman with a similar past on the streets. They became friends and eventually fell in love."

Eira felt utterly helpless at this point, but also knew that this wasn't the end of the story.

"They were still young, but they began to take street urchins under their wings. Their life was full of hardship, but they managed. They would do anything they could legally or ethically to raise money and after a couple of years of raking muck, carrying water and dodging the advances of drunk men as linkgirls, they were able to scrape together enough to buy a house. It wasn't big,

but it was a home for both of them, their adopted children and the brewery they set up in it. Miraculously, she was able to build herself a life." She moved very close to Eira and whispered the rest. "What happened to her? Do you know? No, you don't, do you?"

Eira shrugged.

"Your other sister harbored a grudge after decades for leaving her alone with your parents and when your influence reached the city, she took the opportunity to kill her, just because she had been forced to choose between you and the other sister." Edmée paused for emphasis. "And during all of those years, she had never stopped looking for you. She was still spying on various brothels and nunneries and other places where you could have potentially been held captive just to find you."

"Please..."

"Please, what? She had to work to have a chance at life and you took that away from her. And why? Because you were bitter. She wasn't. Sure, she had her scars, both physically and mentally, but she worked through them. You had the same opportunity and at one point you were strong and self-assured enough to escape from your captors, but instead of using your opportunity for a new life, you decided to use that opportunity to take that away from everyone else."

"They deserved it."

"Who deserved it? Are you telling me your sister deserved it? Do you know how many good people like your sister died in your little project? Suppose you do think revenge is good, as you apparently do, do you think all the people who were just living their lives, not really bothering anyone, deserve it?"

Eira was completely despondent. "What is going to happen now?"

"As I said, you are now going to ingest all of these memories." Edmée's personality regained some control here. "But I'm going to make this easy for you. Well, easier." She signaled the maid, who had been lurking around for much of the story. "You, show me your kitchens."

The maid glanced at Eira, who sat slumped on her throne. "Please follow me, lady."



Edmée followed, as did Eira albeit with some hesitation. They took the stairs down to the kitchen where several makeshift renovations had been made to make it more manageable for the smaller number of people for whom food was prepared.

Edmée was not in a hurry. She laid down the ingredients and put the water on. She was very meticulous, almost painstaking, in all of this as she wanted to make sure to handle the memories with the respect they deserved. "I learned this back south. It's a simple recipe and they eat this quite regularly."

Eira wasn't listening. Edmée's story of her sister had hit her hard.

The maid kept glancing at Eira, but was also in denial about the state of her mistress, so she was trying to follow Edmée's work at the same time.

Edmée took a long hard look at her. "While you have your role in this mess, I will allow you to remove yourself from here before I begin the worst part."

The maid wasn't sure. She looked at Edmée then the unmoving Eira and back to Edmée again before deciding that removing herself from the area would indeed be a good idea.

The memories Edmée had collected permeated the room as she poured the rice from the pouch into a bowl. Even Edmée, who was very capable of distancing herself from such things when needed, had to struggle to maintain her composure.

There was a memory of a child killed by a step-sibling, because he would have received their father's inheritance. There was an elderly nun, who hadn't done anything wrong besides looking like a nun, which had been enough for her assailant. There was a cobbler, who had only lost a shoe he was fixing. All these, and hundreds more Edmée had found on her journey, were bombarding both their senses.

"You know, I found these two children on my travels. They had been living on their own for two years. They had been eating whatever they could find and had been protecting each other as well as they could, but they weren't in a good condition."

Eira wasn't listening.

"What did they do to deserve that? How many like them had died out there? The few who did survive are never going to be fine." Still, Edmée couldn't help herself. "I'm going to make these

rice cakes into animal shapes. It's not like we can't have any fun." If she wanted to make them into animal shapes, it was good that she explained this, as there was no chance anyone would recognize them as such. Not that she was even making rice cakes. Not that she even knew how to make rice cakes.

Eira still wasn't listening, or she didn't find that funny. "Who are you?"

Edmée smiled. "As I said, I'm just one of your dear Aunties."

"Why did no-one tell me about you?"

"Well, most of the Sisters don't want to talk about me and your Mother doesn't even know about me." She paused for a second to see if there was an additional question, but it wasn't coming.

"Have you ever wondered why your Aunties are the way they are?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why are they no longer human in form? Why can't they talk anymore? Why do they feel the need to hide in the shadows?" Edmée turned from her work to stare Eira straight in the eyes. "I take things from them. They misbehave, I collect. It's that simple. Then they have to adapt and that is how they have become the monstrous beings they are."

"And Mother?"

"Ah, sweet [...]. Never had a reason to collect anything from her." Something within Edmée sighed. "She's actually boring in that sense, but there's a reason why she's your Grandmother's favorite." Edmée's mouth smiled coyly. "She's just a bit too good. Or at least your Grandmother doesn't care about occasional retaliatory massacres."

Eira finally snapped out of the dejection. "Whose rules are these anyway? Who gets to say I have to bear the burden for the rest of my life!"

"Not really my business."

"What? You just punish me and my Aunties for the fun of it?"

"Not for the fun of it. I mean, don't get me wrong, I don't want to lie", yes she did, but not right now, "I do have fun, but that is not the reason."

"You're having fun punishing me?"

"It's not quite that simple. It's more like I learned to enjoy my work. Not the punishments themselves, after all, I'm not a cruel person." She wanted to believe she wasn't lying, but wasn't sure, especially with the new role she had suddenly learned she had. "I do enjoy the process, the investigation, the figuring out and execution of a proper retribution." The water was boiling at this point and she poured in the rice. "The punishment? After all that work that went into it, why not?"

Eira could think of plenty of reasons, but knew it wouldn't help.

"There's something I would like to know, dear Niece," Edmée was learning to like the sound of that, "Why did you do it?"

Eira shrugged. "Why does anyone do anything?"

"That would be a fine response if we were talking about your choice of breakfast or why you decided to fart in front of people who can't appreciate it. It isn't quite enough in your situation."

To Eira, it all felt so distant now. Thinking back she couldn't justify leaving behind her home for all this. "I guess... I guess I just felt I had the opportunity and I just took it." Eira had never really let herself reflect on it all. "And I felt that if I had the opportunity, why shouldn't everyone else? Then it all got out of hand."

"A little bit, wouldn't you say?"

"Auntie from Above tried to explain the magnitude of it all to me, but my basic understanding of counting just wasn't enough to understand it. I guess it's easier when you don't really know."

"Do you think that's enough?"

Eira didn't answer at first. "No, but what's done is done. You can't fix it."

"Well, that is true." All the while Edmée had been working and the rice was ready. "So, here's the thing." She began to grow a beard. "I don't appreciate your Auntie choosing to live in my mind." She placed the rice in a bowl.

Eira was startled by the voice suddenly becoming deeper.

"There are limits. Even for immortal beings such as you." Edmond had fully taken over. "Now, Edmée, she's a collector. Your Auntie needed her for the collecting." Edmond took a handful of

the painfully hot rice . "I like to think of myself as more of a giver. While you, young lady, who just happens to be almost 50, would definitely deserve the punishment she had planned for you, I don't see anything good coming out of it. It won't save the world. That's just too late, but there is something I can do with this." Edmond held up the rice. "You see, I wanted to switch this to ordinary rice, while Edmée wanted to see what this would do to the visitor within us. Or to us for that matter."

Eira, who had felt she was finally able to grasp the situation, was completely lost once again.

"The hard part is that you, or she," Edmond pointed at his head, "can't really know who was in control when the decision on that was made. What do you think, Eira?"

Eira stepped back. "What are you doing?"

"Isn't it obvious, dear Niece? I'm playing a bluffing game with your Auntie." He stopped for a second. "Okay, I can see how that could sound confusing, but the idea here is that I am going to eat this rice. If it happens to be the memory-laced rice meant for your punishment, I will take that burden upon myself, but I will also put it on the visitor within me." He waited for a reaction which wasn't coming. "On the other hand, maybe I'm a coward and don't want to risk myself in order to free myself. I guess we'll find out." He filled his mouth with the rice and went for another handful.

Eira took another step backwards.

Edmond began to gag, but didn't let that stop himself from eating. Finally he had to spout the rice in his mouth out as a form forced itself out of him. But Edmond wouldn't let go of it. He tried to keep it inside, but the form pushed itself out through his fingers.

Eira found something familiar in the weird ooze that began to take a human form. It was a young woman cradling herself in a fetus position.

Edmond was covered in a combination of puke and rice, but was still smiling. "I understand why someone would try to take our body, after all, it is glorious, but there are risks involved, but I guess I'm a coward." He began to shrink and the beard began to shed as Edmée started to return. "Well, that depends on whether your Auntie did actually want to live forever. Based on your other Aunties, immortality does seem to be a curse more than a blessing. Hopefully she wasn't planning on using hers, because it is now mine." She tried flexing her muscles. "It doesn't

feel different. At least not yet, but no worries, I'll have time to study it. In fact, all the time in the world." She touched the woman on the floor tenderly.

"How... how did you do that?" Eira moved to protect the still body on the floor from Edmée, but stopped on her tracks. "What will happen to her?"

Edmée shrugged. "I don't know. She'll probably have to learn to live like all the people out there." She took out a pouch, which looked very similar to the one she had been working with earlier.

"You did switch the rice, didn't you?"

Edmée smiled. "I don't know. That's the key. While it would have been an interesting experiment, it felt a little bit too risky, so I let Edmond eat regular rice instead. Maybe. Or I wanted to punish your Auntie badly enough to risk myself. If I didn't know, she couldn't know." She moved her tongue around her mouth. "He could have been a little more careful. The blisters are going to be awful." She turned back to Eira. "I'm leaving her to you. She is your responsibility now. She has a lot to learn. She hasn't even eaten or slept like a human in thousands of years, so you will need to teach her the basics." She also made sure Eira saw her leave the other pouch of rice on the table. "On these, you decide for yourself."

"Who are you?" Eira resorted once again to the question she still had not received a straight answer to.

Edmée gave her one more ambiguous smile before slipping into the shadows.