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THE IVY-SMOTHERED PALISADE

by Mike Allen

Dearest Eyan,

If luck is on my side, I'll have returned before you ever find this.

If not, if Bryn is reading this to you, please know first and foremost that I love you and never wanted to leave your side. Nor did I leave out of fear. I've learned who slaughtered our peoples in the other three encampments. And I intend to stop it before it happens again. Before we're all exterminated.

If you read this and I have not returned, I beg you not to follow me. Leave your men behind, leave Calcharra, cross the mountains and never return.

I know you better than that. You won't. But you must at least find new hiding spaces. And never stop moving, though even that might not save you. If I've failed, if I don't come back, you're not safe. The muershadows will hunt down all who fight for Lady Garthand.

They are nothing the tales say they are, not a cult of assassins or berserkers driven by sorcery or vengeful demons. You can watch for them all night with blades drawn. You'll see

nothing till their hands close around your throat and stifle the screams of your men.

I must tell you how I learned who they are, and why I have to leave.

As I write this, I'm sitting in the water room during the small hours. The sun will rise and set, and at dusk I will go to Manse Lohmar. I'm sure you know its grounds—that huge swath of land carved out of the middle of Rosepike Quarter, so overgrown with thornbrushes that their branches snag the sleeves of passers-by in places where the streets abut its boundaries. And I'm sure, like every living soul in all the seven quarters of Calcharra, you've grown up believing no one lives there.

That's a lie.

I've told you my mother and father joined in the Cabal of Grace that bribed one hundred thieves to break all the locks of Auguste Urnath's debtors' prison, and that they were betrayed and murdered in the first of Lord Urnath's Purges, and that I fled and fell in with the urchins hiding beneath the streets of Rosepike Quarter. Only the first part is true. I didn't escape, but the armsmen who forced my parents to drink the poison broth lacked the stomach to murder a child. So they bound me and dragged me to the Rosepike orphanage.

My first month there I cried and asked for my mother and father every night, and the nurses beat me for it and encouraged the other girls to mock me.

I didn't understand at the time what had happened to my parents or why I'd been taken. Over the years the nurses gave me so many contradictory answers that I learned not to trust anything they said. I wasn't the oldest of the girls in my wing, but I grew into the tallest and strongest, and the other orphans learned that snickering behind my back or stealing my reward-sweets brought dire consequences.

The three wings of the orphanage curl around a bleak stone courtyard, sealed on the fourth side by a black iron fence crowned with needle teeth. On warm days, when the Orphanmaster felt unusually generous, we'd be allowed to run in that space, though I angered the Keepers so often that I spent most such days locked in one of the oven-hot fourth floor cells. Yet I had the same view through the window grilles that the other children did through the fence.

The back of the orphanage faced a flat stretch of thornflowers run riot, tall as a man, a half-mile deep and extending north and south as far as we could see from our vantage. Their blood-violet blooms with their reek crossing anise with onion taunted us as much as their spines and their burrs. Beyond that moat of brambles stood a palisade taller

than the orphanage, taller than any buildings we could see, its immense stones so dense with vines you might at first glance mistake it for a forest. I wonder now, Eyan, if our vantage might not have been the only place in Rosepike Quarter where one can clearly view the palisade.

We didn't know the name of the place, only that it had to be centuries old. From my fourth floor cell, my face pressed to the bars, I made out the tops of trees beyond that wall, and past them towers, equally choked with ivy that didn't quite bind shut the mouths of empty windows. The nurses told us many stories about that place, some that gave me nightmares when I was younger, but by my tenth year in the orphanage I no longer believed any of them.

The day I escaped, I stole a knife and wore an extra tunic. In the courtyard, washing linens with the older girls, I simply set my work down, took my tub and washboard to the fence, placed the board on the tub propped against the fence posts, and stood first on one, then wobbly on the other, gripping the posts in my fists. Then I pulled my legs up, clenched the center post between my knees, and started to climb.

The other girls didn't follow me, but they didn't make noise, either. They wanted to see if I'd make it over, or die.

My arms trembled as I gripped the horizontal bar at the top. I swung my legs, hooked one bare foot into the space

between two of the spikes, and pulled myself over with a yell. A spike tore my shin and I dropped headfirst into the thornflowers.

I didn't break a bone or lose an eye, but I hurt in so many places I could have just lain there until the Keepers snagged me with their mancatchers, but I made myself crawl. The girls starting shrieking, "Daeliya's escaped," and I heard the thumps of the armsmen's boots. I stayed on my hands and knees, used the knife to slash through the knotted stalks.

I'd forced my way through several yards of spiky tangle when I heard the Orphanmaster call. "I've told the armsmen not to waste their bolts. They'll be ready whenever you lift your head out."

That made my options clear as water. None of them would ever hear me beg for my life.

Perhaps the Orphanmaster hoped I'd bleed to death in that field. But I kept my head and chose my path carefully. When I reached the palisade the sun had set. Small slashes covered me, and bruises on bruises.

From the courtyard, climbing the bluff of ivy had seemed dog-simple. As I stared up at the weave of vines that at that moment looked taller than the thornflower moat was wide, I wondered if a crossbow bolt could be a mercy after all.

But I refused that fate. I found a sturdy stalk, with handholds and footholds, and started to haul myself up. The ivy proved to be layers deep, with some of the crisscrossing vines thick as tree trunks. Raw skin and bone-deep aches strove to bind my limbs, but I forged on.

It felt like I climbed for hours in the starlight. In the dark, the thornflowers seemed as far away as the stars. Yet I kept ascending, until my arms and legs felt rubbery as gum.

When I reached the top I hoped the width of the blocks would allow me to lie down, but the vegetation mounded at the wall's crest made the surface treacherous. Nor did prospects improve on the other side. I'd thought that because I could see the tops of trees there might be a terraced garden and a short climb down awaiting me on the other side, but the trees loomed immense and ancient, and the grounds they shaded far below were lost in darkness.

I heard something moving on the wall, an animal rustling, and when I turned, the mat of wood and leaves I stood on cracked and tilted. Before I even understood what had happened I was falling, the twisted trunks blurring past as I scrabbled at nothing.

Perhaps it's blessing that I don't remember the landing.

It should have been the end of me, Eyan, but it wasn't.

I lived in a dream state, awareness surfacing between waves of pain. Most of the time I floated in complete darkness. Sometimes I perceived a wavering light, its edges always shifting. At times I knew I was dreaming. Once I stood before a doorway, the room beyond so bright I couldn't make out its contents. People milled, the intense light reducing them to shadow. A slender woman stood in the entrance, blocking my view. A translucent veil covered her head-to-ankle, exposing only her feet, which were gray and wrinkled with age to an astonishing degree. Under the veil she raised her hand to her mouth, commanding silence, and a voice whispered in my ear, "At last. I won't let him know you're here."

I awoke. I lay in a large bed within a chamber that stretched off into cavernous dark, save for a lamp burning on a table. A slender boy sat in its glow, a huge book open before him. He let a page slide from fingers delicate as any girl's.

He could have stepped from one of the orphanage nurses' creepy tales of changelings. Hair like thistledown, arching brows, ears curled almost to a point. Then he noticed my stare and shocked me with his whispery voice. "You're awake. You must be thirsty."

I must have slipped from consciousness, because when I opened my eyes again his cold palm lifted my head. He pressed

a flagon against my lips full of a drink like honey. Warmth spread through me and the pain receded.

I woke again alone in the black. Dank odors fouled the air, mildew and worse. Somewhere beyond the bed I heard someone bumping around. I called out and the sounds stopped, but no one answered. I lay hardly daring to breathe, yet either I was hallucinating or merely asleep again, for I had a vision of a spiraling stair of gold, more ornate and bejeweled than anything I'd ever imagined from the tales the nurses told. At its top stood the woman in the veil. She didn't speak, but I felt her gaze upon me.

At some point I opened my eyes. The boy with the lamp had returned. He offered food, though at first I was reluctant to try it. Fruits heaped the platter by my pillow, none like I'd ever seen before, as well as mushrooms, lichens, and stranger things. None tasted unpleasant, though they were bitter or salty or sour in unexpected ways.

I could move only my left arm to snatch morsels from the tray. Beneath the covers I'd been mummified in bandages, braced with wooden splints. I discovered this with furtive glances stolen as the boy absorbed himself in another book.

I jolted as he spoke. "I'm re-reading the Cantos of Olderra the Witch." The phrase meant nothing to me. He held up the tome so I could see its pages. "In these stanzas she twines her

life with that of her mortal enemy, the warlock Elalef. So long as he's alive, she can't die, and if she dies, he will die too. I've hunted through many translations for hints to how she did it." The rows of symbols looked ominous to me. He recognized my bewilderment. "You don't know the story? This is one of the oldest versions, you can tell from the ridiculous number of repetitions of the 'H' rune." Then his eyes widened. "You don't know your letters."

A spike of anger jabbed through the warmth of the elixir he'd given me. "What's it to you if I don't?" That spike grew hotter. "Who are you anyway? Where am I?"

"I'm Leonind," he said. "You fell into our grove, but you didn't die, and I didn't let my stepbrothers kill you."

"Brothers?" I asked. "What brothers?"

But he ignored me. "Was I wrong to help you?"

I had no answer for that. Instead I asked, "You bandaged me?"

Impossibly, he grew paler, and I couldn't help but laugh a little, which appeared to humiliate him more. "I gave my stepsisters instructions and they did the work," he said. "I've done nothing improper."

Eyan, you know me best of all, so you know his embarrassment just made me laugh louder. Though I learned then that in my condition laughing led to agony. My broken

bones singing, I reached out for the flagon, and despite my mockery he brought it, his mouth pressed in a dour line.

I dozed and dreamt of a voice haranguing me with questions: my name, where I came from, why I'd climbed the wall. I told the voice to leap off a tower and drown in a well, but it never stopped badgering.

The veiled woman stood at the end of a long balcony, arched doors regimented along the wall on one side and on the other a filigreed rail with an abyss beyond. She walked toward me on those grotesque feet, her steps silent. "Not so loud," she whispered. "Not so loud." I woke as a heavy object shifted in the dark. I lay there and listened with a panicked heart, but the sound never resumed.

My days and nights unspooled as one. I could only be certain I was conscious whenever Leonind appeared.

Once I shouted at him to leave me alone and struck at him. My fist never reached him. An arm lashed out from the shadows and a stone-gray hand clenched my wrist, strong and immobile as an iron ring. And as cold. I stared at its flesh, withered as salted meat, and saw it belonged to a person, or a semblance thereof, that had arms and legs and a head, but I made out no face or features. The shape defied my eyes, wouldn't condense into focus.

"Are you done?" Leonind asked.

Heart in mouth, I couldn't answer.

"Let her go," he said. Within a second the creature faded into the dark.

I understood then that he and I were never alone and knew what I heard moving whenever he extinguished the lamp.

For a time after that, I was much less inclined to taunt him, though he never did anything to threaten me.

Long months seemed to pass in the dark. Slowly, under his unmasked-for care, I healed.

He made it his business to attempt to teach me written words. He said he wanted to share the wonders locked within those leathery books. At first I scoffed and laughed, and savored the sour expression this induced. After my scare, I cooperated.

And I took to it like fire to paper sheaves. Eyan, I don't have time to account for everything to you, not now. We began with simple tales, the ones I knew from the nurses, but he required me to read them aloud from scribbles and if I tried to simply make them up—and several times I did—he immediately knew and his lips curled in a way that combined impatience, contempt, and an odd enjoyment, as if my rebellion entertained him.

We moved on to poetry etched in centuries-old runes. Once I could flex my right arm he allowed me a tablet and a

stylus. On occasion I contemplated stabbing him with it but then recalled all the amazing tales he had spun through my mind, the stories of Olderra the Witch, the sagas of the Ice Prince, the ballads of the Nine Child Serpents, adventures I'd snatched for myself from the very page. Forgive my confession, Eyan, but the thought of ending it saddened and shamed me.

I trained another way, too, that galvanized my blood with fear the first time I tried it and every time after. When I was alone in the dark, when I heard nothing else moving in the chamber, I began to restore my mobility. I made myself crawl. I made myself walk. I couldn't tell you how long it took, but those opportunities didn't arise often. Sometimes, confronted with silence, I waited too long, too scared to move, and the lamp would light and Leonind would appear, my chance gone.

A long time passed, I don't know how long, the orphanage rendered a phantom of memory, before I could stand without collapsing. I started to range out into the room, which was vast and filled with detritus—rotted, splintered chairs, tables, shelves.

After the first painful bruise, which forced me to invent a lie for Leonind, I learned to navigate at a snail's pace on my hands and knees, one arm extended in front of me. That's how I at last found the door. I listened at its crack and thought I heard voices outside, though I couldn't be sure. I didn't dare

call out, and I shook too hard with fear to press further, anxious that at any moment freezing hands would seize me in the dark.

The lessons continued, and if Leonind knew of my excursions he never let on. Reflecting back, I'm sure he didn't. I think he was so confident I couldn't escape that he never bothered to have me watched.

He said he'd share an odd story with me when I could write out the tale of Olderra and the Antlered Man from memory, without mistakes. At last I presented it to him, and I confess I took delight in his delight.

He claimed this story would scare me. I dared him to try—he had before, without success. What tale from the imagination could weigh upon me in that ghoulish place?

He told me that in the Goldbrook Quarter of Calcharra there once lived a man who by day was a powerful merchant in the quartz-mining trade and by night a lord of thieves, so brazen he'd wear stolen necklaces of platinum and bracelets of diamond when he called on other merchants. No treasuries were raided or ransoms demanded without his blessing. Those who defied his law suffered worse than those he targeted for plunder.

He believed that one estate here in Rosepike Quarter held riches that dwarfed his ill-gotten hoard. Its grounds could have

engulfed an entire town, and the walls enclosing it stood taller than any tower. Tales painted this place of fearsome spires as home to a dynasty of necromancers, but the robber-merchant dabbled in the dark arts himself and sneered at the notion that any such person could pose a threat.

At this point in the telling I realized Leonind spoke of the manse itself, and I paused in my next writing exercise and listened in full.

The inhabitants of the manse ignored his offers of parlay. A pair of cutpurses sent to scout the grounds never returned. The robber-merchant stormed through the halls of his own manor, terrorizing his much younger wife and the tiny son who had filled him with such pride not long before.

A man like him had a web of favors to gather, and he reeled in the thickest of all. One of the nine Lords of Night had enlisted his assistance in eliminating a rival prior to ascending to that dark assassins' council. The robber-merchant approached this fell wizard and requested an alliance against the sorceress rumored to rule the manse.

No sooner had that pact been signed in blood than a caller came to the robber-merchant's manor. A wan, willowy girl with snow-white hair, she presented herself as the lady of Manse Lohmar. It's a wonder the thief king didn't snap her neck right then, but they consulted alone, and afterward he announced to

his stunned and cowed household that the lady would become his second wife and the manse would become their new home.

His first wife refused with increasing hysterics to set foot in the place. Within that week, she vanished. Leonind's voice tightened like an oud string as he told me this.

The wedding took place in the grand ballroom the day the robber-merchant's servants brought his son to the manse. The priestess who presided over the wedding was like no other, a woman shrouded in red gauze whose voice cracked like brittle bones. The son never saw the girl with snow-white hair again. He heard his father's howls of terror all through the wedding night.

This story didn't scare me, but it certainly scared Leonind. His huge eyes focused somewhere other than the table and its tomes. An intuition told me he described the screams from memory, that he'd meant to tell this tale as if it had happened to someone else but lacked the composure for the task.

The robber-merchant's servants tended to the son, though fear bent their spines and whited their eyes. Even by day they lived by candlelight. His father turned quiet and pale as ash, and at night his screams echoed through the manse's maze of halls.

Then came the day his father regained color, the flush of fury, and ranted without pause. "The old witch tricked me, but

I've taken care of that now, oh, yes... I'm so sorry, my boy, my boy. We can never leave this dark place, these cursed grounds, never. But we are free of her, and that knowledge will be our sun."

Yet that night his screams began anew, louder than ever before, and in between he yammered and wept, "No! No, no...."

Leonind sat there beside the bed, mouth moving without uttering, until I demanded, "Well?"

And he snapped "Insolent!" and blew out the lamp.

But I refused sleep. I waited long, breathless minutes. Then, braved the dark.

I prowled to the entrance, pressed my ear against the door. And again heard distant voices.

My fingers found the latch, and slowly, so slowly I turned it, pushed the door open. Outside, the gloom only lightened by a shade.

I stayed in the opening a long time, barely breathing, until the dark haze coalesced into outlines and I realized I'd seen this setting before, in dreams. The doorway let out onto a long balcony, with an abyss yawning beyond the filigreed rail. I walked toward the rail in a crouch, and when I reached it I had to stifle a gasp. Above the cavernous pit hung a chandelier larger than a merchant ship, an intricate mass of webs and dust that hadn't shone with light in uncounted years, and yet it

sparked in its depths with the dimmest of reflections from a light source deep below. The balcony I stood on was part of a mezzanine that completely encircled the entire vast ballroom. On the farther side I witnessed ghostly stairs.

I didn't dare to breathe as I peered over the railing.

The illumination came from a pair of torches, each held by a wide-eyed armsman. Two more gripped a shivering figure between them, a child, a slender youth or even a woman, I couldn't tell. The figure occasionally struggled, which revealed feet bound at the ankles.

A fat man in robes stood before them all, bent on one knee in submission before a towering basalt throne. Whatever sat there glistened in the torchlight. It said, "You have prepared to pay the price?"

And when it spoke, I wanted to shield my ears and cover my nose. It sounded like screams bubbling from quicksand. Its mere words poisoned the air with a stench like corpses piled at the bottom of a well, so powerful it even reached me on my perch eight floors above.

The kneeling man swayed and stuttered. "My Lord Audrind, I would have the House of Ayfel trouble me no more." And then stammered, "Is it truly necessary to...."

"You are welcome to change your mind," the thing said. "But you will never leave."

The supplicant sobbed, “Yes, Lord,” and the captive whimpered.

“Let it be known then, Earl of Syburgh,” said Lord Audrind, “On your behalf I will send my children out into the world where I cannot go, and each night they will seek anew and never tire of the search until every sire and babe and servant and soldier of House Ayfel breathes no more.”

His voice so sickened me as I cringed behind the rail that I hardly understood his words. I heard the Earl say, “Yes, Lord.”

Audrind’s chuckle made his voice seem mild. “Now then,” he said, “the overture.”

A hiss, a scrape, and the Earl cried out. I had seen no one approach him, but he clutched a spurting stump where his left hand had been. One of the armsmen passed his torch to the other and rushed to his employer’s side, applied a tourniquet. The Earl’s mutilation had been expected and planned for.

“You will leave me to enjoy the aria alone,” the thing on the throne said.

The captive must have had a gag in all along, because it slipped loose. “No, father, no, no!”

But the armsmen and the light retreated, leaving the captive to plead in darkness. And then, the shrieks.... I am no stranger to death, Eyan, but at no time in my life have I heard

such terror and pain expressed in a single sound. And they went on, and on, and on.

Oh, Eyan, so often I've reflected on this moment and been so ashamed, that instead of trying to do something, anything, to help, I cowered and crawled away, groping blindly in the dark for the room Leonind kept me in, which in that moment of dumb-struck terror actually seemed a place of safety.

I found the door, slightly ajar, and fled inside with an awkward thump. I didn't recognize until I'd scurried well into the room what a terrible mistake I'd made.

A flare of illumination washed the chamber in flickering shadow and gleam. I'd gone through another door, into a different room, longer and wider than the one I knew. Runes were scratched on every visible inch of walls, ceiling and floor, some of which I could read. Repeated phrases: Death feeds life. Life breeds death. Death breathes.

Tall and heavy armoire s slithering with gold filigree lined both sides of this horrid space, most with their doors open, spilling out once-beautiful gowns now molded and rotting. Other rags, hung within their cobwebbed interiors, reminded me of molted skins.

The glow came from behind the drawn curtains of a canopy bed larger than a house in the Rosepike slums. As I started to backpedal, the curtain parted. The woman in the veil

stood there, silhouetted by wavering light, its source hidden behind her.

She wasn't as I'd seen her in dreams. Her filthy veil hung in shreds. Her feet, her legs, weren't of veined gray flesh but spun of bone and shadow and wet gristle. I saw hair through the veil, white as milk. Her eyes—I couldn't look at them.

The same voice that had spoken to me in sleep rasped in my ear. "You arrive too soon," it said. "Hide, or you will stay forever."

Behind me the door from the mezzanine creaked. I threw myself into the nearest open armoire as Lord Audrind slouched into the room. Eyan, I'll never know how he didn't spot me or hear me. Pressed against the back of the wardrobe amongst those chill leathery hangings, I couldn't see all of him, couldn't bear to look at what I did see. Only a massive, man-shaped thing, wet with decay, that paused, chest heaving, his stench threatening to turn my stomach inside-out. The monster started to thrash, and the light in the room thickened and contracted and pulled as if it were the lure and net and Audrind the fish. The air clotted and I struggled not to gag.

"Your petty games of torture and murder make you no braver, husband," the witch said. "Oh, my lovely children, afore your father turns you out for the hunt, *bring him hither.*"

And the skins fluttered around me in a bat-wing storm and flowed into the room, gaining mass as they did so, faceless gray shapes that swarmed Audrind as he flailed against them.

Fear blazed through me in a white fire. I gave up on hiding, sprinted for the exit.

Arms wrapped around me the moment I sprang into the hall.

To my credit, I didn't scream but fought for all I was worth, and though my attacker was strong he was also small. I punched him several times before I recognized the voice hissing at me. Leonind. "What are you doing? Stop. Stop. He'll hear you."

I fell still and he let me go.

"We have to get you back," he said. And I knew he meant back into the dark.

I backed away from him until I pressed against the rail.

"Please," he said, and for the first time I heard genuine sorrow in his voice. "If my father finds out you're here he'll tell my stepbrothers and stepsisters to kill you, and then they won't listen to me anymore."

And at that moment, Eyan, I began to connect all the strangeness together—the shapes in the dark that were his siblings, the story of the treacherous witch wedding and a father's evil ambitions, the woman in the veil and the monster

that feared her. A husband and wife who walked though their flesh rotted, whose unnatural children lurked in darkness.

I finally voiced what I'd wanted to say for so long. "I want to leave."

He clenched his fists, closed his eyes. Grimaced. Opened them again. Of what he muttered in response, I heard only, "...someone to talk to...."

I thought of all the brave heroes in the stories he'd forced me to decipher. My sorrow alarmed me, stoked my anger even hotter. "In another place, Leonind. Not here."

He moaned. "I can't. He told me I can't leave. He says the witch's spell binds my flesh as fast as it binds his."

I guessed at a piece of this puzzle he had not shared with me. "Will the curse end if you kill him?" And when he didn't answer I spat. "Coward! One way or the other I'll leave this place."

He stepped closer. "You'll never find the way out. My brothers and sisters will bring you back."

I climbed onto the rail, one leg dangling over eternity. "I will not live here." I couldn't stop my voice from trembling.

"No," he said, with no hint as to in what sense he meant it.

I'd called him a coward, but perhaps I was no better. I knew there'd be no nursing back to health after this fall to hard marble. So I said the thing that either might be the greatest

mistake I've ever made or else the thing that might save us all. I told him, "Let me go, Leonind, and I'll come back for you."

I can't swear I meant it as a lie. Eyan, please don't hate me. It was long ago.

From behind the witch's chamber door, a deafening scream muffled Leonind's reply. He repeated it softly. "You swear on your poisoned parents' graves."

As I said "Yes," a gust disturbed the air.

We returned to the room where I'd lain so long in the dark. He asked me to drink the elixir one more time and told me his brothers would bear me out. I closed my eyes, certain they'd never open again, but they did when sunlight seared them. I lay in horse-barn straw in the Steermast Quarter, as far from the Manse Lohmar as Calcharra's battlements allow. Leonind had kept his promise.

But I didn't keep mine.

Many things happened, Eyan, between then and the first time I met you. Most of them you know.

I already despised Lord Urnath for the same reasons you do. Yet Lady Garthand won my heart long before Urnath drove her into exile, when she exposed the Earl of Syburgh's depravities without a single sword drawn, and even Urnath couldn't spare him from the guillotine. That was the day I

learned that the cruel cannot always trump the fair, and you, Eyan, couldn't know till now how my heart sang.

As you hear this account you may have recognized the House Ayfel, once enemies of Syburgh, snuffed out overnight after the Earl's son vanished. Everyone believed the one was retaliation for the other. I know differently. The son was the price.

And I'm sure you've heard the word "muershadows" whispered when talk turns to the deaths of House Ayfel. Or to other horrors. The slaughter of the Candlemakers' Guild. The sudden deaths of the entire Oceanside Prelate.

I lived with the knowledge of who the muershadows really are, and tried to forget that I knew it, that I had ever learned it.

I believe Ariste's son Worulz has become so frightened of Lady Garthand and her forces underground that he's made this dark bargain. I wonder which heir has gone missing. Or perhaps even more than one?

Eyan, it's only because we're so scattered and so well hidden that we're not all dead already.

I can hear you now: "What makes you so sure?"

Last night as the camp slept, as I slept, a hand cold and unyielding as a gravestone clamped over my mouth.

I opened my eyes in complete darkness and for a second believed I'd undergone the worst wakening of all, that I was still in the manse, lying in that pitch-black room.

But my vision adjusted until I could see the crumbling plaster frescoes of this buried cathedral, the old tapestries hanging from ropes that partition our pallets from the rest of the revolutionaries. The thing gripping my mouth crouched beside me, not moving, not breathing, no pulse in its fingers. I knew instantly what manner of being it must be.

An edge pressed against my throat. I flinched, but the object flexed and failed to cut. Then the hand was gone, and the creature with it. A folded letter lay across my throat. I recognized the script, though I didn't need to guess who had written it.

I've enclosed the letter, though Bryn will not be able to decipher its runes. It reads, "You are in grave danger if you stay. You must leave that cell of thieves and never return. You know why. And you know the only place where safety lies."

You told me, Eyan, you thought sorcery must have had a role in the slaughter at the camp within the Pauper Catacombs. But I tell you sorcery has been behind every attack on Garthand's fighters, at Toothgate, at Speaking Cavern, even in the massacre of our people as they prepared to storm the Urnath vault.

Every sire. Every child. Every servant. Every soldier. Lady Garthand herself when she returns. Audrind's brood will come for all of us. There will be no warning, no time even for screams. And if you go to the Manse Lohmar yourself to bring the battle to them, you'll meet the same end.

Only I can go, because Leonind has allowed, and because his father still knows nothing of me.

I don't want to go back. And yet, Eyan, the dream that troubled me before that hand touched my face—it could not have been coincidence.

In it, I was climbing down the outside of the ivy-smothered palisade. I looked up to see Leonind following, anxiously seeking purchase. He looked no older than he did when he cared for me in the Manse all that time ago, and I imagine for an enchanted creature such as him this could be so.

Hurry, I said, though I heard no rustle of pursuit.

He descended gingerly, and I knew the heavy sack tied at his hip held something terrible inside. *Hurry*, I hissed again, and kept urging him on until I let go and dropped into the thornflowers.

A wind sighed as he struggled the last few yards. Thin as he was, his clothes billowed on his frame. He either chose to leap or lost his grip, I'm not sure which.

When he landed his legs snapped beneath him. He collapsed as if kneeling.

His elfin face withered tight to his skull and blackened as if licked by fire. His eyes rolled and bulged between shriveling eyelids. His mouth stretched open as his teeth dropped out. He touched my arm with fingers like old twigs, papery and long-dried.

I can't tell you if revulsion, rage, or pity drove me to strike. I kicked him.

He burst in a gout of dust.

Then I knelt and sifted through that dust, searching for the bag and what it contained—his father Audrind's head. Yet I found nothing.

The wind rose again, shrill cackles carried on its breath. I looked up and saw the witch standing with me in the brambles, her veil stretching around her skeletal form like demon wings. She rose into the sky until my gaze could no longer track her.

And then I awoke, that cold hand over my mouth.

So, Eyan, if I've been granted a vision of what's to come, of what will save us, it can only happen if I do as Leonind demands.

May the goddess who guides our Lady bless my steps and grant me luck, that your ears are never cursed to hear this story.

The dusk is thickening. I go.

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Mike Allen's first short story collection, The Button Bin and Other Horrors, is scheduled for an early fall release from Apex Publications. He's been a finalist for the Nebula Award for short fiction and won the Rhysling Award for poetry three times. He's written two novels, both of which are house-hunting. He's also editor of the poetry journal Mythic Delirium and the acclaimed anthology series Clockwork Phoenix. He records a monthly column, "Tour of the Abattoir," for the Tales to Terrify podcast site. He lives in Roanoke, Va., with his wife Anita, a goofy dog, and two cats with varying degrees of psychosis.

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PRIDECRAFT

by Christian K. Martinez

“When man governed, there was food and peace. There were clockworks to hold the sun and twist the moon, and magic teeming in the crafts....”

The children huddled around Weaver’s crusty slippers, like they always did, listening to our myths. Humanity fell so long ago we’ve started calling the years “countless.” We’ve only been kept around because of our usefulness. People like the trains.

The children “oohed” as Weaver began the tale of Son the Carpenter and his thousand willow flies. Beneath the lure of the old man’s voice and the mudra of his hands, they forgot their empty bellies and the haphazard patches holding rags around their ribs. They were in the past.

The braces restricting the movement of my hands didn’t release me from the present, and so I envied them. I could not indulge in the mything voice, couldn’t lose myself to its words or pleasure.

“Honor, Twin,” Weaver said, prompting the children to mimic him in a caucus of falsetto warbles.

I returned their bows precisely, trying not to appear rushed. “Service, Weaver.”

He returned smoothly to Son’s story, reclaiming their attention and letting me walk on.

I cringe to think it, but I sped up considerably when nearing the exit. Being the Chief Engineer of Trakhander line meant I was often away. My ventures allowed me to forget how wretchedly we lived sometimes. This human race. Rag-patched, with latrines sloughing over thoroughfares and door-curtains woven from chickenbone and dust-curled moss.

I knelt in the guard post marking the transition between our caverns and the city outside. The walls were lined with jade-framed mirrors designed for a Dani’s sight. Any patterns or art that might be captured there looked more like shady clouds to me.

Two visimancers stood watch, waiting for me with mirror staffs gripped in all their hands. Their floor-length jade plate robes ground against each other in a continuous symphony of rock, hiding their rail-thin, transparent bodies from easy reach. Their ovular and almost featureless heads were uncovered. I’ve always thought they looked like teardrops.

Their Dani “faces” were barely grooved, and they had only the three arms of youth. I risked lifting my eyes to waist level to

take in the familiar room; it was nice to be in a clean place again.

My fingers constricted in their leather bonds, pulling the sliver of jade scribed with my identity from my sleeve and into the open.

The Dani closest me, with a face almost tinted blue, released one arm's grip from its staff and reached out with the vacuous webbing they use for hands. It ran one of its four tiny fins over the scrip, then formed a cone with the others.

Glimmery runes floated, light by light, from the tip of its hand to the air in front of my face. The Dani could hear, in a way, but they had nothing to form words for human ears. I read, they listened.

“You are late, Engineer,” it said.

I lowered my eyes again. “This servant is sorry, sae. This servant came as soon as he was informed.”

“You have a reputation for truth, obedience, Engineer. This is known. You are not at fault. The messenger will be punished.”

I tried not to tremble, waited. Nothing I could do. I felt sorry for the messenger - but not terribly. Punishments were to be lived through. They were part of being human.

There was a flash of light, much brighter than their speaking spectrum. It bounced a combination through the

room until the panel wall that was a gate laid down and transformed again into a ramp. I didn't need to be told to leave.

* * *

Kandor is breathtaking in any season, at any time. It began as a joint effort between Odrm and Dani to maintain control of Trahkander, the central service depot, and keep it from human hands, but if you leave the Dani anywhere long enough they'll make something beautiful.

At first it had been small, mirror traps on roof tops catching the sun at certain heights and reflecting back spectrum arches in pretty shapes. Nothing unusual for a Dani city, until the Odrm joined. Visimancers, illusionaries, architects, docket men and equaters convened. They planned. They built.

The legacy of those plans, six hundred years later, raised Kandor to a singular state. A conglomerate of crystal lattices, mirrors and jade-sided towers, partly physical and partly chromatic, make up the city. Rivers of dancing light run through the streets. Ancient shadow-plays shimmer over the wall in progressively changing and erratic displays. Streets change and pulse with vivifying filters and patches of roaming drab or shaped temperatures. The city metamorphosizes hourly, and by season, and by year. Visitors rarely travel Kandor's streets without a guide.

The only mar on the city's graceful decadence is Trahkander itself, looming like a thousand-foot turtle above the plum and golden temple districts, smelling of static and coal. Once-shining brass filaments and iron cogs now grate with rust, turning beneath the corrugated tin overhang, almost concealing ragged steel or jade repairs.

Trahkander is always suffering one crisis or another, the structure's age exacerbated by understaffing and paranoiac overseers raised on nightmare stories of what an empowered humanity might do. I figured it would cease functioning entirely in another century or so. Hopefully not till after I was dead.

The southern service hatch at the base of the depot was only a few hundred feet from the caverns, close enough so I only had to bow a handful of times on the way there.

Rattle was waiting for me at the foot of the brass stair inside, squatting in greased leather coveralls and drinking pungent wine. Her hair looked like someone had copied her outfit, shredded it, and nailed it to the top of her head in loose braids. It fit the pocked and spark-burned appearance of her otherwise young face quite well. She nodded at me and continued drinking.

If she'd been any less talented with her metal craft she'd have been killed years ago. The overseers kept her isolated,

from her people and from them. She visited the caverns even more rarely than I.

“Service, Rattle. Which line needs work? Message didn’t say.” I closed the thick hatch behind me, letting a few operable ghost lights flicker into grey luminescence around us.

Her tongue pushed at the edge of her cheek from the inside, eyes not lifting from the bowl.

“None, fixed it hours ago,” she replied calmly.

Something was off. I tried not to get irritated, she was like that. Rattling cages, pulling at people’s bars. I didn’t quite succeed. “Then why?”

“Hail wasn’t up to inspection. Dreth threw her on the tracks, number-wove her onto them. She went thud. Maybe broke a leg. Eastbound passenger ran her down. Heard her last scream - sae. Felt her engine craft trying to stall the train. He laughed, that hissy fucker laughed.”

Her voice didn’t deviate a decibel from her usual monotone, but her hands shook gripping the bowl. A little wine spilled on the floor.

“Hail,” she whispered. My whole body was stiff.

The girl had been Rattle’s niece, one of the few relatives she’d known close or got to work with. Hail was a sweet girl, patchy-looking like her aunt. Had a scar from childhood running down the side of her face, a reminder of smacking into

an iceblock as a child and screaming about the sky. She'd been young; everyone liked her.

I remembered when I was younger, there were a lot more punishment deaths then. Right after the Dagen riots. Bad times. There hadn't been a killing in years, though. We'd forgotten.

I dropped to my knees, taking Rattle in my arms. We weren't like that usually, but she needed it and I'd been there before. The wine spilled out of the bowl down my front and under my braces, but I didn't care. Couldn't believe we'd forgotten.

We shouldn't have.

"It'll be okay, everything'll be good, sae." It was my job to make things okay, to keep things level. Even when it meant with pretty lies. Lies weren't much.

I'd already failed. We always failed. Failed, forgot, faded. Hail had been bright though, bright and sweet and the best of us in a kind way. I forget most of the dead, and punishments are part of being human - you just live on after. Live on, forget. But I wouldn't this time, not now. Rattle was crying in my arms.

I felt something like steel begin to sharpen in me, like the tacks and winches in my braces had spilled into the blood. I took breaths and clenched my fists, the pain was heady.

“It’ll be okay.”

* * *

The room had space for maybe a dozen operators, though it was staffed by only four. Each human was dressed in a clean-pressed brown robe and seated in an astoundingly uncomfortable tube of metal. The tubes were square at the edges and fronted by old-craft screens of flickering silk, displaying shifting images of numbers and runes. Each was flanked by an Odrm, their length laid in serpentine coils against the operators’ backs. The one I’d come for had ripple band patterns of green and black feathers. His name was Dreth.

My fists clenched thinking of Hail. We hadn’t been any closer than the rest of the train staff, but I knew her family. They’d trusted me, everyone in the caverns trusted me. I’d stopped the deaths, when I took over. Bow deep, I said. Service and honor, I said. Bow deep, walk with quiet steps. Obey. Live. It worked, worked well enough that we’d forgotten how bad it could be. How bad they could be.

I bowed when entering the room, kept myself bent at the waist.

“Sae Dreth?”

He turned his single multi-faced eye towards me, and I struggled not to launch myself at it, fingers extending like claws

to rip. Braces be damned, I'd tear out his eye and burst it on the ground. Dreth was the cruelest of them, we all knew that, but he hadn't gone this far before. Hail was obedient, unobtrusive. She even liked a few of the overseers—not Dreth, but a few.

Dreth remembered the long before, the stories of what we could be, what we had been. He hated us for it, lashed us with number-magic and the cruelest deadlines. But this....

“Yesss Engineer?”

“This servant has assembled a report concerning the cracked rails. This servant has determined his craft is necessary for full repair, and requires supervision before its employment.”

“Iss thiss sso engineer?” he asked, slithering closer through the room. Tempting me more to violence. I'd never felt like that, never really understood tempers and fistfights down in the cave. I'd gotten angry, sure, but never wanted to hurt someone. Not since I was old enough to really fight.

“Yes, sae.” I bit over my lip, glad they had trouble reading our tones. He slithered near, wrapping himself slowly over my arms and torso, I stiffened. He was heavy, and the feathers itched. Every one of my muscles tensed and coiled, which was normal with them. Good.

“Procceed,” he hissed. I did.

Walking with an inconsiderate Odrn wrapped around you is a little like wrestling and a lot like a game of chance. Their weight shifts on a coinspot; they never stay still. Walking down a few flights of already-straining stairs while carrying Dreth was not a pleasant proposition.

Failing was decidedly less pleasant, and as I did with Rattle an hour ago, I steeled myself.

I was going to die for my craft.

The thought didn't bother me significantly. I was always resigned to it, but I'd hoped it would be less violent than my mentor's... or my sister's. Seemed like it wouldn't. With thoughts of her, and Hail now too, I felt familiar pangs. My braced hand touched my chest. Not on the heart, I've never had much opinion of hearts, but on the ribs. They were already a cage; they might as well capture memories. The thought made me smile, anger forced it wider.

There are some things that won't ever change about humans.

* * *

The stairs took nearly twice as long as they should have. Dreth shifted continuously from limb to limb, taking pleasure in the way his length draped across my arms. The screws pressed deeper every time.

I was sagging, listing in pain, by the time I could see Rattle and the crew. They were waiting on the Eight-B platform, a sporadic circle of friends near the engine console. The mirror-sided cage containing it served as a hub, routing the wires for every ghost light, dismantled travel-aid, and railing mechanism on the platform. It was operable only by the engine-crafts, like most of the depot. It was the best place for repair work, especially on Eight-B.

Eight-B was an older line, from the first refurbished set. The original grating had worn away from rusty tiles, so you had to leap or use a lead-ramp to board most cars. It was passenger and courier only. No freight. The line had a rust-and-people smell that mingled into a peculiar musk. I imagined the stench of Hail's blood and body beneath the usual platform scents. From Rattle's face, I knew she didn't have to. Everyone was tense, bowing stiffly and a bit more slowly than they should have as I stepped down level with them.

"What are the damagesss?" asked Dreth, expedient and without nicety.

I took a breath, wavering. Rattle answered.

"The third gear is clogged, the mainstay pipe is cracked up and down half the length of the platform. Too delicate to meld piecemeal, too big to do it in one go."

It sounded credible at least; enough to get him off me so I could work. This was good – it'd be hard enough without his weight. If I didn't want them all to die in an hour's time, my hands needed to be free. It would give us a chance to fight at least, if not win. A chance beyond Dreth.

We waited, Rattle fidgeting with a pocket on her coverall, more hole than cloth. Dreth nodded, shooting himself from my chest without warning and landing in a squirming mass on the tiles. I staggered, suppressed a sigh rising up from relief.

“You are credited. Engineer, your ssservicesss are necesssary. Your crew will be rationed meat tonight. Isss thiss all of them that will be required?” He turned his eye on each of us, pulling his head two yards from the ground - almost half his length. The bribe-reward of meat would usually have us salivating. Instead I found myself imagining what an Odrm would taste like over a spit.

Not civilized thoughts, but then, who threw a young one on the tracks to die? She'd have been six and ten. Birthday last month, I think. There was a candle gift, a new story about her explorations as a child, and a scarf almost free of grease. She hadn't taken the thing off since.

Rattle had missed the celebrations.

“Procceed.”

His serpent tongue worked a number, thrust it dull and flat against the air. The equation wormed itself into my braces. Screws biting at my flesh loosened. Straps fell away, the wood warping into curls and dropping to the ground. I was free to work.

I looked at him, then the others. They bowed their heads, I returned their acknowledgment. This was most dangerous for me. They'd be killed, but I'd be kept for my replacement.

I remembered my mentor; of all his limbs they left one arm. One hand. What was necessary to teach but not to work. He had to train me fast, in case there was emergency. They'd found ways to motivate him. I had no family left. That was good.

Breathe. Remember. Breathe, I let out the tension of my body. My shoulders slumped, relaxing. My eyes went far away. I pulled up memory from my ribs, good ones. Bad. They soared.

Rattle whispered something across the platform; again when I didn't hear.

“Honor, Twin.”

The pangs were still there, as they always were in my name, but different now. They serviced rage. Service and something else, what fire was this I had not known. I asked myself a question, staring at this snake.

Where was my sister now?

“Service, Rattle. And-”

My head bowed, Dreth’s didn’t. There was nothing after the exchange of Honor and Service. Nothing to say. My speech was unusual. Cruel he was, but not stupid.

Where was my sister?

“Engineer?”

I reached inside, rolling my shoulders and flicking open the folds of my robe with calloused fingers. To work craft, you form fingers into shapes. You learn the mudra of working from those gone before. You make new what has been forgotten.

First form, hands spread. Press down my doubt.

I remembered my predecessor, remembered Weaver’s ever-moving hands embedded in the stock of his work. Remembered teaching Hail and so many others the first shapes to make with tiny fingers. Remembered Rattle’s first day, when she nearly ripped a hole in the roof. Remember. Breathe.

Second form, fists closed. Raise them to chest. Drawing blood.

My eyes closed, heart pounded. Dreth was whisking numbers from his tongue, darting toward me with maths. I laughed, time slow in the Craft. In this craft that they, our masters, so suppressed. They feared my work, feared the

workings of Man. It was good to be feared, to hear a copper and wordless hiss from that monster's mouth.

Third form, extended with fingers. Thumb back to bind. Arms wide. Calling brothers.

I felt them, felt my kin. Felt humankind exploding into me. Breaths were coming quicker. Wasn't sure, had Dreth bitten me? His braces were slapping at my hands, they'd return the second I paused. So I didn't pause. Couldn't stop, my hands moved. I saw my sister dying, again. Felt her leave me, felt that connection shatter and extend. Craft born along the edge of a name.

Final form, fingers loose, hands relaxed. The Crafts of man.

Rattle. Calm. Welder. Tin. Lards. Seven. I crafted them, pulled them into me and bound us tighter than I'd ever dared. My mind saw through seven sets of irises, my hands moved with the strength of seven arms. I gloried in it. My work, my crafting. The place I met my sister in, without words, inside the ribs.

I was unfinished; something remained. Yes, that was what it was. That fire caught in Weaver's hands. Rekindling.

“- Pride.”

We killed Dreth with the screws from my hands; they knew the taste of blood. We slashed them through his body with

metalcraft; we stopped his number-making by cutting out his tongue. He did not beg for life. I think I might have. I didn't know. All of it was new, making harm with the craft.

Standing over his corpse, nothing was right. Hail wasn't back, we were going to die, but we were still smiling. I looked at them, still wrapped in power. I did not feel the fear Dreth had died in, didn't feel the rage and sorrow of Hail's passing. I knew I would in moments. For now, all I felt was pride.

It was new too, unhidden pride. It was new to see friends looking up without feeling nervous for them. Nervous they'd be disciplined, nervous someone might see. It was new, needing to think of what was next. Not just fearing, but knowing I would die soon. None of it tempered the pride I felt in them.

I would live a horrid death, but I always would have. The end of my sister and teacher assured me of that. The scars running the length of my fingers and arms proclaimed what and who I was and how I would surely end. There was not escape from that, but for them - they could live, breed, grow old and die. They could choose to be small. Small as humans were. They had chosen to be greater.

Our pride sang along my work, between us. I crafted it, hammered it deep. This was the work of man. More beautiful than the shining rivers of Kandor, more terrible than the numbers prompting an overseer to act.

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Christian K. Martinez has been known to disappear into his own mind for weeks at a time in search of faeries, D&D campaigns or just to dream. On one such occasion he moved from California to New York just in time to meet the blizzards. His short fiction can be found in [AlienSkin](#), [Bards and Sages Quarterly](#), [Jabberwocky](#), and [Every Day Fiction](#). He can be found online at dayswithaknight.com.

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COVER ART

“Remember,” by Zsófia Tuska



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