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WOODEN BOXES LINED WITH THE TONGUES OF DOVES

by Claire Humphrey

He hoards secrets in them, does Uncle Sholert: a hundred or more boxes, crowded together on a shelf in the cellar above the carboys of homemade wine. The finest-joined ones are his, some of them old enough that the wood has gone dark. He's given that work over to me now, to my keener eyes.

He gave over to me the feeding of the doves as soon as I arrived. I was only just off the train, smuts and cinders still pricking the corners of my eyes, my elbows bruised by the kitbags of a hundred soldiers on their way to the front, my chest aching from the smoke; but Uncle Sholert did not give me so much as a glass of water or a wash-basin before leading me up to the dormer window.

"William," he told me, "this work is my little legacy, and you shall be my heir until the day I sire a child." And he laughed drily as he said this, for he was old and solitary, with his doves and myself his only companions. I did not know then what the doves were for. That first day, when I saw how they thronged to the window, I thought they were his pets:

mourning doves, city doves, rose-grey over most of their bodies, wings dotted with soft charcoal. I thought it was fitting for an old man's pastime. I watched him tease them close, tearing soft white bread between his fingers and tossing it ever nearer the sill until the birds stood and pecked next to his hand.

"You may try," he said to me, and gave me the crust to crumble.

When I moved too quick they fluttered, but they stilled again, and fed again.

"They haven't the trick of memory," Uncle Sholert said, and laughed a little, a murmurous dry laugh scarcely louder than the doves' wings. "Watch," he said, and he snatched out quick as a cat, catching one by the neck.

He squeezed until its beak gaped, and clipped its tongue.

I shied away. Uncle Sholert let his bird go, and it whirred off like the clapper of a fire-bell, taking a few of its fellows with it in its panic.

"It will forget in a moment," Uncle Sholert said.

And sure enough, the doves settled back, drawn by the crumbs of bread and our stillness. I had already lost sight of the one with the clipped tongue: was it fled, or had it already forgotten, and returned?

Sometimes, he said, he would catch one which had already had its tongue clipped, either by himself, or by some other magician. Such was their nature, that they would return again to the same ruse.

It was slow work even still, collecting enough to line a box, one at a time. At first I found it miserably so, waiting at Uncle Sholert's shoulder with a plate covered in butcher's paper, laying each tiny flesh-petal as it was harvested, then waiting for the next. But I grew accustomed, as one does to almost anything.

Most days, of course, no doves are needed; Uncle Sholert, though he is always ferreting, does not find a substantial secret often among the citizens of worthy Beaconsfield, probably because so many of the most dashing young men are off to the front. I feed the doves at dawn and twilight, and although Uncle Sholert maintains they have no memories, they seem to always haunt the eaves, looking toward my window, waiting for my hand to appear.

* * *

I do all manner of things for Uncle Sholert, beyond the feeding of doves. I carry in the coals for the stove; I fetch our victuals from the baker, the butcher and the farm market; I sweep the floors and wash the soot from the windows; I bring

home the papers daily with news of the war; I beat the dust from the rugs.

Uncle Sholert studies, for the most part. Sometimes he reads books, ancient books on the hidden nature of the world. Sometimes he reads newspapers or private papers, stolen from where I don't know, searching for the threads he can follow to a secret worth owning. He stays up long after I am abed, reading by lamplight. I can see the glow under my door. I can hear the rustle of turned pages. I can almost hear him lick his fingertip.

Sometimes he is still there in his chair when I rise at dawn to feed the birds. He does not lift his head from his book. I heat water and brew him bitter tea.

He comes to see me at the bank, sometimes, where my old tutor's recommendation has secured me a position at a wage menial enough to ensure I will be living with Uncle Sholert until I too am old. He keeps a strongbox there. And if that were not enough, I have seen him more than once creeping away to add another roll of banknotes to the oilskin bag hidden within one of the full carboys.

Uncle Sholert does not greet me but lingers after he has finished his business, lingers until I have closed my ledgers for the day and locked them back in their safe. He awaits me outside the door and we walk together through Beaconsfield, past the grocer and the butcher and the baker.

He waits patiently enough as Lily O'Reilly, the baker's lass, comes out from behind her counter and offers me a loaf of potato bread.

Lily O'Reilly wears tiny ruffles on the sleeves of her blouse under her baker's apron. Lily O'Reilly hails me by name: "Mr Manning," she says. "William. I have some fine tarts in the oven just now, if you want to stop back in a bit."

Her hair is very pale, or maybe dusted with flour. Her eyes, too, and her face: touched faintly here and there with pink at the lips and nose, and grey at the eyes. When she speaks I can see into the cave of her mouth, where her teeth are white, but her tongue is dark as if she's been eating berries.

I tell her I will return for the tarts. I can feel myself smiling.

When I glance back to Uncle Sholert, he is smiling at her too, even an old stick like him.

* * *

Lily O'Reilly walks with me, north through streets of row houses and brilliant maples. Sheets and petticoats flap from the laundry lines. Gold and carmine leaves ride the warm wind down.

I take her to the park, and lay a horse-blanket on the still-green grass. She sits in her tumbled skirts and feeds me scones, bite by bite, and the sun raises a flush on her face.

I take her to the library, and read to her from a book of fairy-stories with gold stamped on the cover.

I take her to the railway station to see a detachment of troops depart, all bright and brave, hailed with trumpets and paper streamers. I almost envy them their brotherhood and merriment; I did envy them, before the advent of Lily O'Reilly.

She takes me to visit her bosom friend, a plump little lady just delivered of a plump little son, and I find myself sanding smooth the rail of the new-built cradle while Lily makes tea and the baby watches me with huge eyes the colour of dusk.

Later, on a new-moon night, we take the blanket to the park again and lay it in the deepest shadow of a fragrant hedge. I can scarcely see Lily in the darkness, even so fair as she is, but she finds her way to my hand.

Uncle Sholert is not yet abed when I return home. I see the line of lamplight around his door; I hear the creak of his chair pushed over the floorboards and the hush of his slippered feet.

He stoops in the doorway in his nightshirt and cap, his shins bare; a sheaf of ill-gotten papers droops from his hand.

“A fine evening, William?” he says, raising his grey brow.

I am so alight with Lily O'Reilly. There has never been a finer evening.

“I am going to ask for her hand,” I blurt, my eyes welling with the wonder of it. “I think she will accept.”

She will accept; she must accept. She is my wife already in the eyes of the heavens, in the promise of her sweetness.

“I think she will have me,” I say, feeling all the force of my youth and love blazing forth. “We shall be penniless at first, and it matters not at all if only she will have me!”

Uncle Sholert does not look as happy for me as I might have wished; perhaps he feels his age just now, and his loneliness.

“Give me your blessing, Uncle,” I press, as if with the force of my joy I can lift him up and take him with me, take the whole city with me into the world I will make with Lily O’Reilly at my side.

Uncle Sholert sets down his papers, and comes forward to shake my hand.

* * *

The newest box sits neatly on the shelf above the carboys, leaving room for only one more before we start a new row. I touch the lid with my fingertip, slide it a tiny increment to the right; it gives me relief, just as when I line up the numbers in my ledger, uniform characters balanced in mounting columns. I feel the need of order today. An ill sleep has left me out of sorts, cloudy and stiff-necked; I dreamed of the war, I think.

We dry the tongues on butcher’s paper beside the stove. Once desiccated, they barely have a scent. Uncle Sholert has

shown me how to arrange them like tiny shingles or scales, overlapping.

We fix them in place with a glue made from horses' hooves, and then we seal the boxes with beeswax.

I have learned nearly all of it, now. I see many boxes of my own handiwork, amid Uncle Sholert's: the differences are subtle, but when I touch them, my fingertips remember. This one is mine, and this one, but not that.

* * *

Uncle Sholert has been up to Dundas Street to visit the booksellers, and he carries a brown paper parcel with him today, several volumes thick. Some of his books are so old the leather rubs away to powder when I touch them. I do not touch them.

Uncle Sholert wears an old greatcoat and a grey muffler: how is the weather so cold already? On the grip of his cane, his fingertips are bare, but the rest of his hand is encased in a grey glove.

It is all old men in the bank now, but for me. All old men in whatever finery has survived their prime.

"Did you ever think about going for a soldier?" I ask Uncle Sholert.

He does not answer but fixes me with a heron-bright look of indignation: clearly not.

When I have finished locking up my ledger, I walk out with him, past the grocer and the butcher and the baker.

Uncle Sholert pauses at that last, asking me, "How are we fixed for bread, my dear William?" A girl comes out from the bakery, a woman rather, pale and flour-dusted, tiny ruffles at her sleeves.

"Mr Sholert," she says. "William. I have a lovely mince pie just going in. You might want to stop back in a bit."

"Thank you, miss," I say. I cannot imagine how she knows my name. "But my uncle and I have no need of a mince pie today."

"Well, Miss O'Reilly, you heard the lad," Uncle Sholert says. "Though for my part I would not mind a sweet."

She looks strange, I think. She whirls away in a flutter of skirts, eyes rolling white, without a single mannerly word.

Uncle Sholert and I walk home under the arching maples, bare now of their leaves. I hear the doves calling and calling as the twilight begins to come down, and I wonder if they still can call when their tongues have been clipped.

* * *

The doves are so used to me that they will fly down and cluster at the window if I so much as twitch the curtain. Their droppings whiten the sill. The mutter they make while they

feed—musical, satisfied—threads through my dreams at night, and grows louder at dawn.

I take to sitting by the window, on days when I am not working at the bank and I do not have Uncle Sholert's attention. I make my way through some of his books, the ones in English at least.

Everywhere I am, silence fills the space beneath the quiet rustles of bird-wings and paper-sheets. In the distance, streetcar bells clang, iron wheels ring on the tracks, and newsboys shout about the progress of war; but not here.

I take to listening for the newsboys' calls. As my hearing grows stronger, I hear trains at Union Station, rifle drills at Fort York, freighters in the shipyards. Distance comes to be no obstacle, and with time I begin to hear all the way down the St Lawrence to the ocean, and the ports there, and the munitions ships filling their bellies full of powder-kegs.

The war is busy. The war is bright, and terrible, and loud. I dream of it more and more often, and the dreams leave my hands hungry for the grip of a gun. What would it be, to fire?

Uncle Sholert, sitting at the hearth one evening, turns to me with an air of unusual hesitation. "You would not, would you?" he says. "You are so well situated, here, with me, my dear William. You would not think of leaving."

At this time it comes to me that I have never cut out a bird's tongue myself, and that it is time to learn.

* * *

On my way home from the bank in chilly dusk I pass the bakery. The fair-haired young woman rushes after me, catching at my sleeve.

“William,” she says. “William. Why are you so cold to me? You will not even say my name. And now I am with—now I must—”

She bows her head, cold or shame pinking her white cheeks.

I have forgotten her name, if I ever knew it. “You are overwrought, miss,” I say. “Surely there is someone better to turn to than a near-stranger.” I tug my sleeve away, not roughly, but her eyes flood as if I had slapped her.

I watch her disappear indoors, hear the click of the latch. I walk on.

* * *

On my next day off I find two more boxes joining my own newest addition on the shelf above the carboys. One is so fresh the wax is still warm to my hand.

When I mount the stairs to ask Uncle Sholert about it, I find him gone; he has stoked the stove for me, though, a kindness he usually omits. I sit beside it to drink my tea.

Over and under the quiet fire, I hear the newsboys again, and the city groaning with the heavy trains at the stations and the heavy ships in port.

I have birds to catch. But I cannot summon the stillness I need. They flinch from my restless hands.

Impatient, I snatch at the nearest, and catch it too tight. Frail bones snap under my grip.

I wring its neck for mercy, cut its tongue for need, and toss its body out with the kitchen scraps.

* * *

Uncle Sholert returns at dusk, with a fresh loaf from the bakery and a look of triumph such as he usually wears when he has found an ancient book for his collection.

“Pour us a little glass,” he says, setting the loaf on the board. “Lily O’Reilly has agreed to marry me.”

“My felicitations,” I say. “I hope you will introduce me to Miss O’Reilly.”

“You may have seen her now and then at the bakery,” he says, wiping dust from a pair of long-stemmed glasses with bells no bigger than a child’s cupped palm.

I call to mind a blur of light hair and a troubled countenance.

“You will remain in the household, of course,” Uncle Sholert says. “I am sure we will all three do famously together.”

He looks very sharp, triumphant. I keep my own triumph from my face: what sense is there in protecting your secrets if you cannot refrain from using them to gloat? I thank him as warmly as I can manage, and drink my two mouthfuls of wine, and eat my two slices of fresh crisp-crust bread, all the while thinking of the newest box upon the shelf belowstairs.

* * *

The day I come home for the last time is also the first snowfall. I watch the flakes crowd thick in the circles of lamplight: I am very late.

Uncle Sholert sits studying, but he rises when I open the door.

I set down my new canvas bag. I watch his eyes catch on the place where it is stamped with the coat of arms.

“What are you about?” he says.

I push past him, down the cellar stairs, my new boots loud on the treads. I find my own box on the coldroom shelf.

I carry it upstairs and stand before Uncle Sholert. I use my fingers to break the wax seal and lift the lid.

The dry tongues within begin to whisper. Their speech is not human speech. It is more true than that.

It tells Uncle Sholert what I have hidden from him this last month and more: that I am bound to the railway station and then up the river and over the sea.

“You are going for a soldier?” Uncle Sholert says. “I guessed it from your kit: but why you would do such a thing I can’t imagine.”

“There is a war,” I say. “You don’t follow such things, I know. But I do, and the government has asked for men.”

“For men,” Uncle Sholert says. “Working-men, they mean. Brutes like the butcher’s boy. If someone must stand before a cannon, let it be someone else. Not you, nephew. I have taught you...”

But he halts his speech as the tongues in the box continue theirs, rising from whisper to clamour. They sound almost as full and round as if they still ran with blood, and they tell him how much I want to go.

“Is this about Lily O’Reilly?” he says.

“The girl you are going to marry?” I say.

“She is with child,” he says.

“What is that to me?” I say. “Isn’t it yours?”

Something crosses his face then, terrible and bitter. “Of course it is mine,” he says. He closes his mouth trap-tight, and lays his palms flat on the table. “And so are you. You may not go.”

The voices of the severed tongues crescendo, and cease.

In the sudden quiet I hear, as I have heard for weeks now, the tread of feet on faraway ground, the thrum of engines, the bugles and shouts.

I shake my head. "You can forbid me. You can even make me obey. You can make anyone bow to your will, I think, for a time," I say. "For a time."

Uncle Sholert hesitates.

I pick up my new kit bag, and turn from him.

I leave on the table the opened box, with the tongues inside silent now, and dry.

* * *

On my way to the station I pass by the bakery, and knock at the door.

The baker himself answers, a florid man in a stretched-tight waistcoat.

"I have a message for Miss O'Reilly," I tell him.

His face darkens further. "What business do you have with my daughter?"

"I wanted to tell her not to marry my uncle."

"That's rich, coming from you," he says, and spits at my feet. "You haven't showed your face here in months. And now she's gone and done a foolish thing, and she must marry someone."

“She won’t be happy with my uncle,” I say. “He only wants an heir. He only wants to rule the house.”

“At least he has a house,” the baker says coldly. “Now, off with you; I won’t have you trifling with my daughter’s chance at a decent match. What kind of nephew tries to scuttle his old uncle’s chance at happiness, anyway? You ought to be ashamed.”

And he shuts the door in my face.

I hesitate a moment. It seems cruel to leave any lady to that silent house, although she’s a stranger and her father seems a lout.

But she must like Uncle Sholert well enough, however odd it seems. She is carrying his child, after all.

I walk on, then, kit bag over my shoulder; Miss O’Reilly, whatever I had of her, already fading from my memory, and the sounds of war beating louder.

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THINK OF WINTER

by Eleanna Castroianni

The cards knew he was coming. The cards warned Folu.

Day in, day out, sun up, sun down. Light peeks through the holes on the roof, stretches in long, narrow rays between stained glass. Ivy and clover grow quietly, tangled between the rotting planks of the lectern. When it rains, a puddle as big as a pond forms on the floor. Folu hops over it and gets deeper into the cathedral, where it's warmer, cosier. A rug to sleep, a cooking pot, a gourd.

Folu walks to the river every day to bring fresh water. Then, after foraging all morning, Folu returns to the cathedral with nettles and dandelion in spring, raspberries and white mushrooms in autumn. Summer is long and food is plenty. But winter looks grim because Folu can't catch game. The days are still warm with wheat and bran, but the chill is creeping in from the broken windows. Leaves turn orange; now they're falling fast. Soon it will be winter. Finding mushrooms takes time. Can't think of winter now. Think of today's food.

The little pot sits on the little fire. Dinner is cooked. Sometimes one day's leftovers are two more days' dinner. Then

Folu lights a candle, for there are still so many in the cathedral's wooden boxes, sits on the rug and looks at the cards 'till midnight.

The cards are the only language Folu ever bothered to learn. Mother used to read them. Day in, day out, Mother read the cards and knew things before they happened. She saw the deaths of her children; she saw the Grey Men coming to the Village with their piercing knives, saw them killing her kin, taking them away to foreign lands. Mother saw other things too, things she would never talk about. She must have seen something about Folu too.

“My little chicken,” she'd say, squeezing Folu between her plump, soft arms. “You're like Mother. The cards chose you.”

When Mother's other children went out to play or work in the fields with their fathers and aunts, Folu stayed inside the cottage, like Mother. Mother never set a foot outside. Even when the Grey Men came to take her, she stayed there, on her mat, doing her last reading. Then she brought the deck together again, wrapped it in its cloth and put it underneath the obsidian stone where she always kept it. Folu came back to find her, but only the cards were there—Mother's last gift. Crying, Folu took them and walked away, never returning home again.

The cathedral is silent, comforting, like Mother's lap. Folu can read the cards all day and night without rest, sometimes with no food or even water. Day in, day out, Folu knows what happens in lands near and far from the cathedral. Thirty-six cards is all it takes: the Lion, the Dog, the Tower, the Key. Thirty-six cards, thirty-six letters in an alphabet. The combinations are endless, the meanings infinite. If one can't read the alphabet, then the symbols mean nothing. But Folu can read them or, perhaps, the cards can read Folu. The cards read the world then whisper its secrets.

The Village—still plundered, wrapped in death. At the City, not far from here—more ships coming in, carrying Grey Men. The Man in the Mountain House—he's given up, his Woman taken away. The North—starving. Rebellion in the South. Sometimes, the cards speak of Mother. How she is in another world now, waiting for Folu. Sleep in peace tonight. Mother is not with those who suffer, not anymore. Mother is waiting.

Sun up, sun down, then like a dried twig the world snaps: the Knight falls on the floor. Folu stares at the man on the horse, the man on the half-faded card with the torn edges. The moment it touches the floor it is no longer a living thing; its voice is stolen away. Now it's just a picture of a Knight on paper. Day in, day out, the Knight card shows up again and again, shows up every time Folu touches the cards. Blank, Folu

reshuffles them and reads one more time until the Knight comes and ruins everything. Autumn is nearly gone and Folu can't read the cards; the cards won't speak. Sun up, sun down, the days get colder, the nights get longer. Folu is mute. The little candles light little fires, but their numbers are diminishing. Firewood is getting scarce. A little fire keeps the corner of the cathedral warm, but it too, is slowly dwindling away, too small a fire, too small. Too cold to read the cards, too cold.

Folu now dreams of the Knight again and again dreams of the little fire and its flickering tongues. Knight and fire become one and Folu, startled, jumps out of the shroud of sleep. The ancient door creaks open. Someone is coming in. Someone found Folu out. The Grey Men are coming to take Folu and there's nowhere to go. Too cold, too tired, too hungry. Shrink, play dead. The Grey Men won't notice; the Grey Men will go away. The cards gave no warning. Folu forgot how to read them. Nothing matters anymore.

Through the dream, the Knight appears inside the flame, more alive than ever. His golden curls glisten, reflecting the fire; his eyes are two pieces of stained glass. The Knight is here. The Knight has come to take Folu away.

“Are you hurt?”

Folu doesn't understand. He is big, covered in thick clothes that shine like well-polished pans and pots. Only then, Folu knows. The cards were right. The Knight has come. The cards tried to speak, but their voices didn't get through.

“Are you cold? Here, you can have my cloak.”

The Knight unclasps the blanket that's hanging from his back and covers Folu with it. Like Mother's kiss, it falls on shivering knees and elbows, making them warm again. Folu grabs it greedily, turns it into a cocoon. Long, larval dreams follow and life and sleep are not too different.

The Knight comes and goes into the dream, rekindles the fire, makes it stronger, brighter. It smells of Mother's cooking, heavy with thyme and rosemary. Tummy growls. A bowl of soup. A smell so strong the food jumps from dream into senses.

“Eat.”

“Eat,” Folu repeats, without understanding the meaning of the sounds.

“Yes. Food.”

The Knight stirs the soup in the little pot—Folu's pot. The soup is hot, tastes like rabbit caught in early winter, its summer fat still on. It's gone in an instant.

“Food,” Folu repeats and returns the empty bowl. The Knight smiles; two dimples light up on each side of his smile. Why is he smiling? He must be thinking Folu is a fool. What

does he want? He's a Grey Man and Grey Men took Mother away. Folu shoots him an angry glance but won't take the bowl back. The second serving is gone even faster than the first one.

"Food?" the Knight says again, his mocking smile pasted on his face. His horse is grazing on the grass that sprouts from between the cracks on the cathedral's floor. It's shining in the moonlight, covered in the same thick clothes the Knight had when he came in, clothes that make it look like a pot of cast iron. From the Knight's shoulders only a thin tunic hangs loose, all his metallic clothing set aside, as if he's mocking Folu's cold, mocking Folu all the time. But the fire is warm and its light is like the morning star and the broth as filling as Mother's embrace. Soon, sleep comes again, strange dreams and sweat, then Folu wakes up and although it's still winter, the terrible chill is gone.

But the Knight has stayed along with winter; the Knight is still here. He comes in carrying firewood and game, doing all the things Folu can't do. Has he got nothing else to do, no other place to stay? Foolish Knight. Folu hates him.

"What's your name?"

Folu ignores him.

"I'm Eric." He points at himself. "Eric. You?" He points at Folu.

Gratitude wins. “Folu.” Now, ignore again. Back to the cards.

Folu has forgotten how to read them, but something is stirring—maybe it’s because of the good food and sleep. The symbols start dancing again, even if only a little. The Lion, the Knight, the Sun. The Knight is finally here. The cards knew he was coming. The cards warned Folu. He came to ruin everything, with his warm blanket and bright fire and hot soup. The Sun. The Knight has brought the Sun. The Sun burns. The Grey Men’s Sun burnt Mother. Folu will never forget.

Day in day out, the Knight hunts fresh game every day, shares it with Folu. His skinning is bad, so bad that Folu has to take over.

“No,” Folu says in the language of the Knight. Folu knows that word, has heard it often. That word is the Scythe.

His eyebrows lift, his mouth is a gaping hole of astonishment. He stays quiet, watching and learning. His knife is good. Knife. Good. Sharp. The Scythe.

“You like the knife?” he asks and Folu, strangely, understands. Undecided, Folu holds it, bloody, admiring its edge. “I give it to you. It’s a gift.”

“Gift,” Folu repeats. Gift. The Flowers.

Folu wipes it clean, puts it back in its sheath and hands it to him.

“No. Gift,” he says, smiling, two dimples lighting on each side of his smile. He pushes it back towards Folu.

“No. Gift,” Folu repeats. The Scythe. The Flowers. Folu understands.

Sun up, sun down, and in the evening after their bellies are full with the last fat rabbit of the season, Folu takes out the cards. Slowly the Knight shifts, glances towards them. Like a mouse, he sneaks in closer, looking at the cards curiously.

“Can you read the cards for me?”

Folu knows what he means. Everyone thinks the cards are there to tell them something—as if they cared! Annoyed, Folu deals the cards for him anyway. One after the other, they tell a story: The Knight. The Child. The Lion. The Coffin. The Ship. The Cross.

Terror. A second ago the words were muffled, the images distorted. Now everything has clear outlines: the lines of fear. And what Folu sees, at last, would rather be forgotten forever.

“Well?” the Knight asks impatiently, stupid smile pasted on his face. Folu turns to meet his cool, grey-blue eyes. Stupid man. Why did he come here? He is danger. Folu reads it in the cards: the Knight will ruin everything.

“Go!” Folu shouts in the Knight’s face so suddenly he cowers like a dog. “Go!” Folu yells and protectively collects the

cards and retreats in the sleeping nook that is Folu's and Folu's alone.

The Knight doesn't ask again about the cards.

Day in, day out, snow covers the woods, frost gathers on the riverbank. One day Folu is happy with the Knight's cooking and his grey-blue blue eyes and the next day Folu is grumpy he's still here, an intruder that has no better task to do. Sometimes, Folu dreams of the cards that were dealt that day, the cards that were so terrifying. The Knight is a problem, a nuisance. He must go.

At night, Folu often looks at the knife-present, its cool steel glimmering in the moonlight. The Knight is fast asleep. He is a Grey Man and Grey Men took Mother away. He might take Folu away too. What if a knife is plunged between his ribs? With these thoughts, Folu puts the knife back in its sheath every night and goes to sleep. In spring, Folu thinks. In spring, when food is plenty and he won't be needed to hunt game. In spring, he'll die.

Day in, day out, spring comes and with it come the Grey Men. Eric wakes Folu in the night, his grip so tight it hurts.

"They're coming," he says, "they're coming to get me." The Knight. The Child. The Lion. The Coffin. The Ship. The Cross. What a fool you've been, Folu.

"No!" Screaming, Folu pushes him away, seeking the knife.

His grip doesn't loosen. "I'm a traitor, they're coming to get me," he says but Folu doesn't know what the words mean, Folu only knows what the cards mean. The cards speak of ruin. The Knight's eyes are bright, shining in the darkness like embers. There is madness in his eyes; those are the eyes of a wild beast.

"Come with me."

Folu freezes under his clutch.

"Come with me," he says again and this time Folu pushes him away.

"No! No! No! No! No!" Hiding inside the blanket, Folu tries to shut the world away. Again, the Knight's hands feel hot on Folu's skin, Folu's mouth. His grasp is tight, but it's not meant to hurt, not meant to bruise.

"Be quiet. They'll hear us. Come with me now or they'll kill you." He means every word. He isn't asking questions. He's keeping Folu's mouth shut. He's a Grey Man and has more Grey Men following his trail. He brought them here. Foolish man!

"Come with me," he goes on, "and I can take you to the West Sea. From there we can go anywhere you like. We can see places far away, down the tropics. We can run away, live only hunting game in the wilds. Come with me Folu. Now. There's no later. You have to come now."

His hand on Folu's mouth loosens, allowing an answer. Folu has relaxed, the Knight's voice strangely soothing. There is only one word between Folu's lips.

"No."

"They'll kill you if they find you." The Scythe. The Coffin. Folu understands.

"No."

There's a bang on the door, wood against wood, voices, a sudden rupture. The smell of sulphur is in the air. The Lion. The Coffin. The shadows in the cathedral grow longer; lit torches and fire wait outside. The Knight's horse is neighing, nervous and afraid inside the door, the light of the flame reflected on its steely mane. The Ship. The Cross.

"No," Folu repeats and the Knight loosens his grip until he lets go completely. Another bang on the door. He takes Folu in his arms, small like a rabbit, and Folu struggles again. He's taking Folu away, just like they did with Mother. The Grey Man is taking Folu away.

"Stay here. Don't move. I'll make them go away. If you want to live, don't move."

He puts Folu in the cupboard that smells of beeswax and vellum. Folu is watching him from the slit in the wood as he goes forward, as he walks past the horse that is now wrapped in ivy too, like everything else, past the puddle on the floor, past

the rotting chairs, watching him as he stands in the middle of the cathedral, arms wide as if in a plea to the skies.

The door bursts open; the Grey Men are holding fire. The Knight simply stands there, talks in his language. Then another bang and the Knight is on his knees. He falls on the floor and they take him away, take his horse away. The Grey Men take the Knight away.

Day in, day out, sun up, sun down, Folu lives on nettle and watercress and bitter dandelion buds and leaves. Spring turns into summer; the grass on the cathedral's floor has grown so tall it's become hard to walk through. Autumn comes with apples and soon chestnuts too. Folu prepares for winter. Folu now knows how to catch game, how to lay traps and get fat rabbits in them. The Knight's knife will skin them. The knife-gift. Winter will be cold. Must think of winter now. Gather firewood. Cover with the blanket to keep it dry.

When the day ends and the sun heads to its resting place, Folu lays out the cards. What happens in the City, who rules beyond the Sea: everything is in the cards. The mother with the sick child and the craftsman with a debt. The butcher with the unfaithful wife and the old woman who has no one—just like Folu. But Folu doesn't care. Everything is in the cards. The cards are company.

Folu draws three cards.

The Knight. The first card is the Knight. And then? The Child. The Knight, the Child. And then?

The last card is the Heart, glowing, covered in vines and wild flowers. But Folu can draw another one. Folu will then see where the Knight is, what he's doing. But Folu doesn't want to. The Knight, the Child, the Heart. If the cards wish to say more, Folu doesn't listen. There are things to be done, dry wood to be collected. Folu sleeps. There's nothing more the cards can tell.

Some things one knows already.

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Eleanna Castroianni was born and raised in Greece, where she teaches and writes after spending years in the UK. Following one obsession after the other, she studied law, gender and sexuality, and is currently pursuing a PhD in cultural geography. "Think of Winter" is her first fiction publication.

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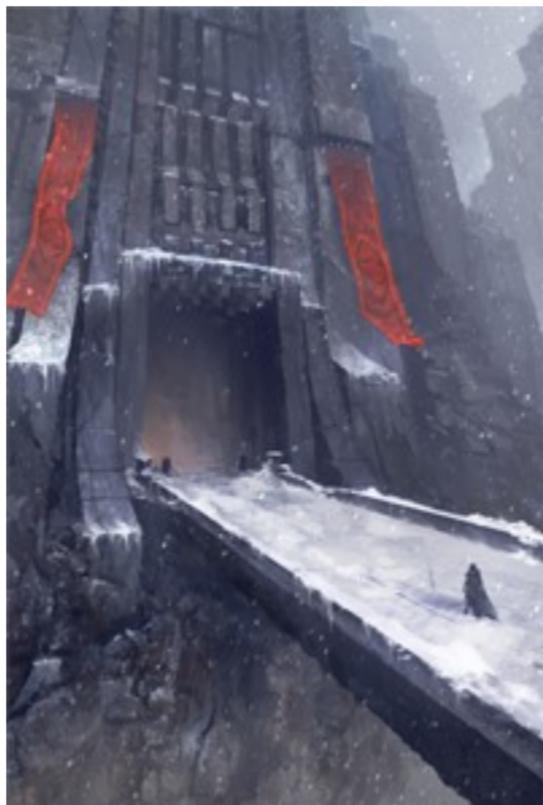
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COVER ART

“The Sacred Flames,” by Jinxu Du



Jinxu Du is a primarily self taught artist, now enrolled in school to pursue a career in concept art and design for entertainment media. See more work online at ishutani.deviantart.com.

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