The Venomsword

By Stephen Hagelin

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Varida Publishing & Resources LLC
PO Box 1993, Woodinville, WA 98072, USA

Cover design by Wesley Anderson.

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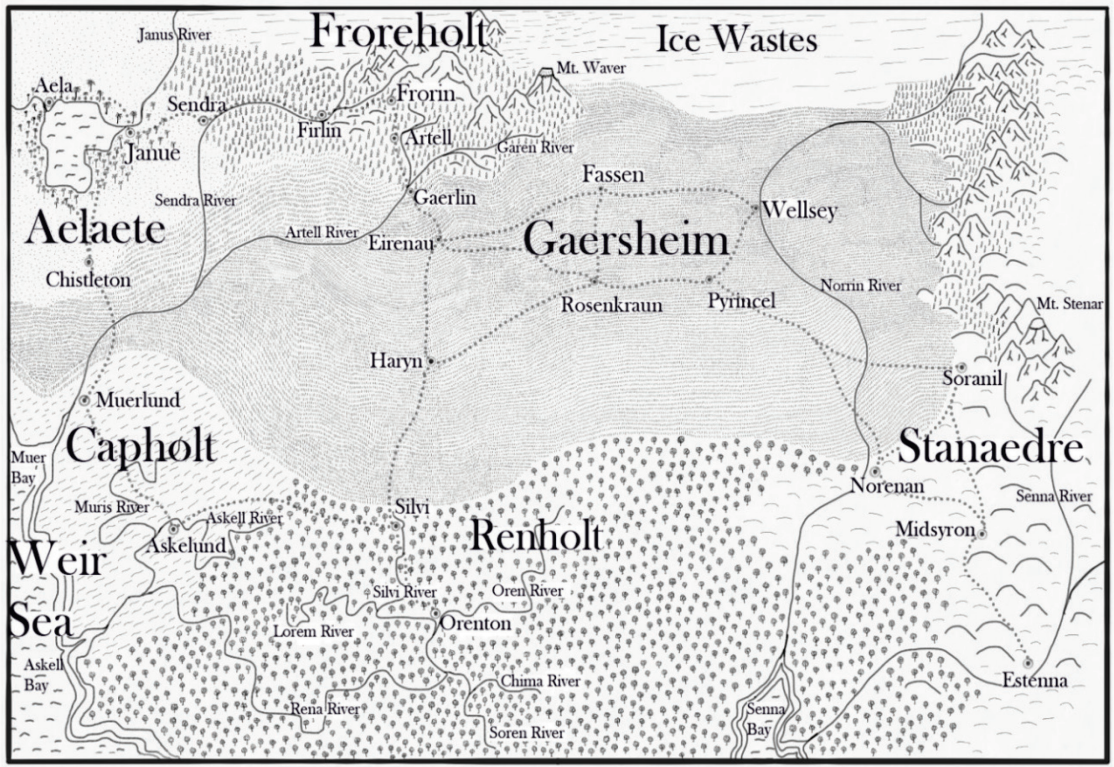
ISBN: 978-1-937046-05-7

Dedicated to my friend, Wesley,
who said I could make fairies cool.


Froreholt
Ice Wastes
Janus River
Mt. Waver
Aela
Sendra
Frorin
Firlin
Artell
Garen River
Janue
Fassen
Sendra River
Gaerlin
Wellsey
Aelaete
Artell River
Eirenau
Gaersheim
Chistleton
Norrin River
Rosenkraun
Pyrincel
Mt. Stenar
Haryn
Soranil
Muerlund
Caphølt
Stanaedre
Muer Bay
Norenan
Senna River
Muris River
Askell River
Silvi
Midsyron
Askelund
Renholt
Weir Sea
Silvi River
Oren River
Orenton
Lorem River
Askell Bay
Chima River
Estenna
Rena River
Senna Bay
Soren River

Party and Meeting

Frorin: Capitol City of Froreholt
Rain District
Faerie-Hunter Bounty Office

Leif tapped his fingers, wings twitching playfully, as he examined the features of the clerk through the glass. It was tough to decide, but he was determined to choose between her most appealing features, to be sure once and for all, which were her very best. She had three qualities that made an impression, first, her eyes, irises tinted white with a violet hint about the edges, second, her blue-tinged translucent white wings, and third, her mouth—red, shaped like a desert flower, perky and small, but not too thin either.

Her eyebrows narrowed as she leaned forward, sliding a small plaque through the opening in the window. “Here is your license, Sigleifr; you are now a full-fledged member of the Faerie Hunter Bounty Commission. Congratulations.” She smiled sweetly, and Leif fell for her knowing that her best feature really was her tiny mouth.

“Thank you,” he said, his heart twisting inside with pleasure, “do you have a break anytime soon?” He asked. “I would love to thank you more appropriately with a drink.”

She chuckled, wings twitching cheerfully behind her back. “Oh, I work all day, even through lunch, which I take at my desk—most days,” she demurred.

“Surely you’ve earned a lunch out then?” He insisted. “Today has to be at least a little special, right?”

“I really couldn’t today, but if you stay in town, maybe tomorrow?” The clerk suggested, glancing at the calendar on the wall by the bounty board.

“What about after you get off for the day?” Leif pressed, searching her milky-white eyes.

“I’m afraid my hours keep me rather busy, and I have plans tonight.” She sighed dramatically, and looked over her shoulder toward the back room where, Leif supposed, the other employees might be listening in.

“Well, then, as you say, I will return tomorrow.” Leif picked up the plaque and examined its enameled, engraved surface. He turned it so it caught the light of her decorative starlamp, which drooped over her desk from its iron sconce like flowers with delicately glowing petals, and he considered the Commission’s emblem and motto emblazoned onto the plaque.

“Justice is rewarding,” he read aloud, tracing the emblem with his thumb. It had a set of scales balancing a dagger in one plate outweighed by a pile of coins in the other. His red-lined wings flicked unconsciously as he amused himself, shivering at the sensation of the cold of the silver on the plaque, and the place that had been warmed by the clerk’s touch.

“It really is,” she laughed, “we reward our partners on commission. Clever, isn’t it, a commission in two respects?” She asked, playfully breathing on the glass.

“The more criminals we bring in or down, the more we are paid,” he nodded, “it is rather obvious, but you’re right, funny all the same.” Leif forced an amused smile, but couldn’t help thinking the only thing worth smiling about, was the smile she gave him.

“If you like, you can take a look at the bounty wall; the board should have a number of easy marks for your first job,” she suggested, brushing the front of her green blazer jacket to smooth its negligible wrinkles, and tapping his papers on the counter to even them out, before sliding them into a drawer in her desk, and awkwardly coughing for good measure.

Leif turned left, keeping one eye on the slight color that showed on her cheeks, and scanned the east wall. Sure enough. There was a framed cork-board formed from the recycled stoppers of several hundred bottles of wine, arranged in a simple alternating pattern. On it, three wanted posters had been secured with silver sword-shaped pins, one of them through the nose of the exaggerated sketch of the face of a burglar with a scar on his chin. Apparently, whoever had submitted the bounty took his theft personally. “Wanted, Grendel Hamish, for robbery, burglary, and larceny, of the Frosthall Winery. Reward posted at 300-mint by the establishment above, approved by the Crown Prince Ieffin Martel,” he read aloud.

“I am surprised that Lord Ieffin became involved in such a small matter, but if the rumors are to be believed, he is quite fond of their wine; so his pity might explain the quick approval,” The clerk stated idly when he’d finished speaking, and her nameplate glinted as it caught the light, “Caelyn,” spelled out in artistically printed typeface in black ink, and Leif wondered whether he should pronounce her name with a hard ‘k’ sound or a soft ‘s’.

“It seems rather simple, and recent you say, so I might as well take this one.” He ripped it from the board with a firm hand,

glancing at the scars that stood out on his left arm, and tugging at his sleeve to hide them.

"No, I sent another Hunter after him," the clerk stood, her stool sliding back with a rough sound, "another newcomer like you who, I admit, looked a bit familiar…" Caelyn, however it was pronounced, shook her head, and quickly adjusted her stool.

"I can't go chasing a mere pickpocket, or an unlawful solicitor," he complained, "is there anything else I can do?"

She paused, tapping her chin with her thin fingers, tilting her head just so as she thought. Finally, when Leif thought he couldn't bear watching such an attractive, charming, pensive sight any longer, she nodded with conviction and a cute tilt to her lips.

"Go look for trouble!" She exclaimed, beaming.

Leif laughed, louder than he'd intended, but the solution was brilliantly simple. "You know, I think you're right. I will go search the shabby streets; I will literally go 'looking for trouble' as they say." He gave her a wave and stepped out the thick double-doors onto the snow-covered street.

Thankfully it wasn't currently snowing, and though he didn't believe in the theory of Seasonal Disposition, he couldn't deny that he'd had a harder time summoning his elemental energies in a snowstorm than in his native desert. He stood on the edge of the South Cardinal in the Rain District, the road that went through the center of the city from the south with collinear sections in each district, not necessarily linked all the way to the center, but regular enough that he could find his way even being a stranger as long as he knew which way was north. He was about to move on when he walked straight into a pair of fae making for the Bounty Office, one practically dragging the other by his arm, and they all tumbled onto the street in a mess of dirty snow and the stench of old wine.

Leif stumbled to his feet, his face red as he offered his hand to the sharp-faced, beautiful fae he'd knocked over, and gave a suspicious glance at her bound companion… who, at second glance, matched the thief from the board. He didn't help *him* to his feet of course; he reserved his attentions for the silver-haired beauty before him.

Though she accepted his hand, she did all the work as she stood, and dusted off her jacket in a perfunctory manner, especially her coat-tails and the back of her dark green skirt. "Sorry to surprise you, Hunter," she said politely, barely noticing his admiration, as she dragged her prisoner to his feet. "Are you off on a job?" She asked.

"Not exactly," he smiled awkwardly, "I figured I'd go tempt the undesirables into thinking I was an easy mark so they'd reveal themselves."

Her thin lips quirked, Leif hoped it was out of amusement. "We already have the Guard for that," she scoffed lightly, and her prisoner chuckled in agreement.

"Well, I can't live on my travel expenses forever," Leif said, waving his hands in resignation.

"Have you considered a life of crime?" the thief suggested, with a twinkle in his black eyes.

"I didn't say you could speak," the Hunter said coldly, turning on him with a clenched fist, shaking her head. "I literally told you not to say another word an hour and…" she glanced at the clock-tower peeking over the roof of the Bounty Office, "seven minutes ago."

He shrugged, looking relieved that his fate was being handled by her rather than someone else, with a face that said, Leif supposed, 'no offense'.

“I’m Sigleifr, by the way, though most just call me Leif,” Leif said hurriedly as he tried to introduce himself, nodding excitedly as he accentuated the important syllables.

“Fryn,” she replied.

“Grendel Ham…”

“We know,” they said together, Leif giving him a dark look, hoping that he understood just how important this conversation was.

He looked away sheepishly, and scratched at the rope that bound his hands together at the wrists.

Just then, the flow of passersby increased, and fae flitted from office doors, and down the streets, and the clock rang the quarter till noon. Leif and Fryn stood on the curb as the people moved about, rushing to and fro in their business, watching them silently.

“Why’d you do it?” Leif asked the thief, adjusting his sleeves.

“I’m a thief,” he said, forehead wrinkling in confusion.

“No, I know that, but I mean why rob a well-known winery that would only draw attention to yourself?” Leif gave up fixing his jacket and satisfied his nerves by playing with the sandalwood box in his pocket.

Grendel hiccupped. “Why do you think?”

“You drank it? How much?” Leif’s hand paused, one finger tracing the hinge of his tiny box, and his eyes searching those of the thief.

Fryn coughed in her white-gloved hand, eyes flicking to the left to convey, Leif guessed, a pretty significant amount. “He made off with a full crate of wine, and there were only two bottles left when I found him.” She smiled faintly. “They said I could keep them as a bonus.”

“You must be a pretty accomplished Hunter,” Leif said, admiring her pretty face, even if it looked a little cold and unused to receiving empty praise.

She shook her head. “I only just got my license three hours ago.”

“What? I just got mine now!” He said, chuckling, “fancy that.”

One of the people passing by stopped as he said that and walked over carefully. He avoided any old patches of snow that might mar his fine suit and polished shoes, and as he approached, he fiddled with something in his pocket. “Did I hear you right?” He asked, his deep blue eyes searching, as he ran a hand over his combed blond hair.

“Yes,” Fryn said with a start.

“And you, from Aelaete, you have the look of a Hunter as well, are you newly licensed, too?” The newcomer shuffled a small stack of postcards in his hand, watching their faces alternatively, openly, as if it was his pleasure, rather than his business.

Leif liked him immediately. He had that blonde hair that matched his own, and deep blue eyes that looked more mischievous than troublesome, and he had a comical smile that seemed self-aware of its own irony.

“I am.” He and Fryn shared a look, and faced the stranger.

The stranger’s smile broadened as held out two cards. “Congratulations! Our city is indebted to the valiant efforts of your organization, though really I should say it is indebted to the efforts of the Hunters themselves more-so than the Commission… but I am losing track of my thoughts… I would like to invite you both to a little celebration I am hosting as a token of my congratulations and thanks.”

“Really?” Leif examined the cards, staring at the pale blue ink, printed in a fine script with lots of curls and loops, inviting them to

the Final Needle, an establishment in the Snow District he'd heard of before, in the richest ring of the city just around the Palace, and just inside from the Merchant quarter they were currently standing in.

Fryn nodded politely, and the stranger bowed graciously, as he stepped back, and waved, before continuing on his errands, saying something about buying more food and drink that wouldn't be provided. They watched him walk back seamlessly into the noon crowd, until he vanished behind a hare-drawn cab.

"I wonder who he was," Leif said quietly, pocketing the card in his tan jacket.

"The card just says Mythrim," Fryn replied, taking a breath, "well, I'd best hand off my burden. I will see you again at the Final Needle, I should think."

"Yes you will, after all I only just got here, and what better way is there to enjoy the city, than being invited to a party I don't even have to bring a gift for?" Leif shrugged.

She looked him up and then down. "You should probably reconsider your clothes however: the Snow District can be very discriminating… and because of his invitation you'd better bring something small."

"I didn't exactly pack a large bag, crossing the desert," he hinted.

"Well then, at least iron your clothes." She dragged her prisoner into the Office, and left him alone, standing on the street.

Leif shuffled around his various pockets, finally locating the one that held the invitation. It provided an address, but he'd had very little luck trying to figure out the sprawling streets, and hadn't even bothered to study the map of the Snow District—since he'd

figured he would never need to go there. He scratched his head, and adjusted his bangs carefully, before following Fryn inside.

Fryn was already talking to the clerk, shaking the thief by the shoulder of his jacket for emphasis, with his worn coat bunched up in her white-knuckled fist. “The reward was for 300-mint,” she pressed, eyes glaring coldly through the glass.

“The amount was up to 300-mint. Part of that was reduced to account for the 50-mint of wine you are given as bonus,” Caelyn said, strained sympathy plain on her face. “This is what dealing with the Snow District means. They are rich because they are miserly.”

“Then they shouldn’t have called it a bonus,” Fryn said in an edged tone, looking down sourly.

“I am sorry to interrupt,” Leif started to say, but Fryn cut back in.

“The Commission should award the promised amount, regardless of what they were paid by the client—the promise on the bulletin board should be concrete!” She muttered under her breath, something to the effect that that was what she’d been told before she obtained her license.

An older clerk wandered in from the back and pulled up a chair beside Caelyn. He watched the two, staring each other down, neither noticing nor acknowledging his presence. Leif felt there was a tug-of-war going on between their eyes, and that at some point the line had to break, and that when it did, it would erupt into an unpleasant explosion of sparks.

“I hate to interrupt here,” Leif tried again, “but could someone help me with something really quick?”

As the staring contest continued, the thief escaped Fryn’s grasp and stretched out on the bench beneath the bounty-board. The older clerk acknowledged Leif’s resigned smile with a wave of his

gaunt hand, and watched his face through the window, completely unfazed by the tangible tension between Fryn and Caelyn. Leif leaned against the counter beside Fryn—who still hadn't noticed him—and placed his hands on the marble countertop with a wry smile.

"I need directions to the Final Needle," he said, curling his fingers in and considering the roughness of his own skin as he tried not to look away from the impassive eyes of the old clerk.

The clerk nodded thoughtfully, and pulled a small silver watch from his pocket. "Caelyn, you are on break. You should go in the back room and eat your lunch undisturbed, while you have the opportunity," he said, not looking away from the hour-hand of his watch, pronouncing her name with a hard 'k' sound.

The two broke their contest and fixed him with their malevolent glares, but seemed to simmer off, and Caelyn departed through the arch into the back without a word. This new clerk had a refined, trimmed beard, and a more elaborately decorated nameplate pinned to the front of his black suit. It read 'Edgar' but no last name, just like Caelyn's had.

Edgar scooted his chair forward and smiled. "Now, as you said miss, the Commission will take on the difference, for that is our policy: but, what my colleague was trying to convey to you, Miss Martin, was the fact that the difference is not payable immediately, only what amount was set aside by whomever authorized the bounty. The difference will be placed in your account, accessible through the Hunter Bank in any of our locations. Transactions made in different locations must be made after the accounts are updated biweekly, but otherwise, our information travels faster than you can."

“Thank you,” she said at last with a sigh of relief, and looked over at her bound prisoner where he had relaxed in a stupor, sprawled out on the nearest bench. “I’ll leave him in your care.”

“Of course,” Edgar replied, “now, sir, you need directions.” It was a statement, not a confirmation, and Leif disliked the way his steel-gray eyes bored through his sand-worn jacket.

“I do…” Leif glanced at Fryn curiously, “do you have a map I could borrow?”

“We provide local maps for all our members.” He slid a folded document through the gap in the window, and dismissed him with his eyes.

Well, I guess that’s done. Leif wondered, slightly miffed. He walked to the door and pushed it halfway open, when Fryn walked over with a small bag of coins clinking in her hand, and a satisfied smile on her face.

“I can lead you there,” she offered with a victorious smirk.

“Really? That would be great.” Leif grinned. “Where should we meet?”

She looked at the clock tower built into the Holly Inn on the west side and considered for a moment. “The party is in six hours, so I’d say meet up at the southern gate to the Snow District at 5:30. Where are you staying?” She asked.

“I only just arrived, came up to the Office as soon as I could...” He laughed. “Anywhere you recommend?”

She shoved her bag of coins into her pocket, and glanced around, and pointed up the eastward arc of the Ringroad. “About three blocks up from here there’s an inn called The Hillock which is quite reliable, and known for housing Hunters and travelers alike.”

He stood awkwardly for a few seconds, and then thanked her and walked off in the direction she’d indicated.

“Leif, don’t you have a bag?” Fryn asked, her glacial blue eyes mocking him, even if she didn’t laugh.

He did, but he’d left it sitting by the counter when he obtained his license, and he’d forgotten all about it when he thought he’d go searching for trouble. “I really do!” He slapped his forehead, and ran into the Office, returning seconds later with a drawstring travel bag, made of matching tan canvas to his red-trimmed jacket, and he waved to her as he ran toward the inn. She flitted away in the opposite direction, and Leif thought that she cut through the air rather than flew, like an arrow, or a wasp, or a viper when it sprang; he forgot about the clerk from before, with her white irises and flowering lips, he saw only Fryn’s deadly, elegant speed, and watched in awe as one might at an ermine as it sunk its teeth into the neck of a winter hare.

The Hillock was a large building, set on a raised foundation from the street, with a wide covered porch, and little tables meant for enjoying tea or wine, while viewing the mountains. Leif left his bag there and pressed his clothes personally with their iron, even though they’d offered to do it for him. He didn’t like other people handling his things, much less borrowing them. Usually nothing happened, but there’d been enough occasions where a new suit jacket or a favorite hat had been damaged or destroyed that he was not at all comfortable when other people handled his things… but it had been a while since he’d had a little sister try to be helpful, or a younger disciple try to earn points with unrequested favors.

He was grateful that his fighting style didn’t require the use of a weapon because he saw himself panicking if anyone asked to hold his sword or whatever, if that had been the case. Still, he lounged in the inn’s lobby by the fire with a hot cup of pine-needle tea, watching couples whispering, or sharing bites of cakes, or glasses of wine in the bar, waiting patiently till 5:00. When that

time finally arrived, he wandered down the streets to the South Cardinal again and waited by the gate to the Snow District. Two guards in white uniforms, with glacier-blue piping, and silver decorative plates on their shoulders and chests, watched him nervously on either side of its unbarred opening. One kept checking the position of his short sword, and the other just gripped his halberd anxiously, eyes darting around, scanning fat merchants, and rail-thin messengers, as if they were really a threat… but if they were… Leif would've known.

Leif supposed they just weren't used to loiterers. "So," he addressed the one on the right, "what's the news in the city?"

The guard made a slight jump in surprise, hand dropping from, and then rising to the hilt of his sword, as he managed to assume a pleasant demeanor. "We… guard the city traveler; we don't collect stories for the journals."

"I see, I just arrived in town. Do you know of any places of interest I should see while I'm here?" He worried that his attempt at small talk wouldn't be successful in the least, and decided to scratch the back of his head purposefully to put them off guard.

"Well," the guard softened a bit, showing an awkward smile, "those of rank should visit the wineries along the Vineroad on the eastern and northern sides of the Snow District." He suggested.

The guard on the left frowned. "Those of less… nobility… should confine their visits to the Cloud or Pine Districts as there are plenty of common-houses and pubs to entertain country-folk."

Leif bristled, wings straightening, and tightening, as he tried to repress his reaction at what he *knew* was an insult, but before he could say anything he might later regret, Fryn appeared from the west end of the Ringroad, wearing a shining gray dress, with a silver scarf, and her hair pinned into an elegant braided bun. He softened immediately and stared in awe as she drew near, smiling

wider and wider as she returned his smile without any of his awkwardness.

There was a slight wrinkle at the edge of her dress on the right side. Leif suspected she'd hidden something there, after all she *was* a Hunter. Sure, he couldn't be positive, but she was bound to have a hidden weapon, just like the Askasalè. And a Hunter should always be prepared.

The guard on the left tipped his white cap graciously, and smiled. "Greetings m'lady," he said, stepping aside to let her through with a proud wave of his hand.

"Leif," she turned, holding out her arm, "are you coming?" Her mischievous eyes laughed at the guards whose wings shot up in surprise.

Leif nodded stiffly, trying to look purposeful, as the guards watched him pass with a mixture of suspicion and understandable envy. Fryn was both wonderful and young, as well as pretty… and strong, and Leif couldn't come up with enough modifiers to describe her in any letter, if he ever decided to write back home. He took her arm for good measure, and they walked together until out of sight of the guards, when she withdrew her arm and coughed lightly into her gloved hand.

"Did you see their faces?" Leif chuckled. "I bet they didn't think I'd be in the company of such a fair lady."

She looked away for a moment, and when she faced him again, she looked much the same, except a little paler than before.

"I'm sorry; I didn't mean to… um… imply anything by it," Leif said, rubbing the back of his neck anxiously.

"It's nothing. We only just met, I don't know you well enough to be embarrassed," she smiled, "though I suspect you might give me plenty of reason to be." Fryn's cheeks revealed a bit of color,

but it was quickly suppressed, and she looked ahead. “The Final Needle isn’t very far.”

They walked up the eastern wing of the Snow District’s Ringroad. He supposed that was the Frorin equivalent of a main street, since all the others branched off from it into alleys and residential areas. “I have barely known you half a day, and already you tease me. What is it about me that invites it?” He asked, noticing how the well-dressed merchants made note of their passing, recalling how he’d always suffered under light jabs, and well-meaning disparaging remarks from friends, and family alike.

“Probably your naïve face, your sloppy hair, and that set smile. Do you make any other expression?” Her eyes were light, but a deep sort of light, blue, that matched the piping of the guards’ uniforms, and the way they caught the light made them seem only more intent, and more interested in everything they looked at.

“Well, there’s nothing I can do about that.” He frowned, but it only made his mouth look flat, and it felt terrible, like it took too much effort to pull his face down.

“Now you actually look serious, it’s unnatural, stop that!” She laughed, and pulled something from her clutch bag, it looked like a breath mint—a tablet of crushed mint and caramel. She popped it into her delicate mouth, not like the clerk’s, hers was thin, not small, and she had dimples that appeared on her face with every sideways glance and self-conscious laugh.

“I think you look far more innocent than I do; for a Hunter that might not work in your favor.” He shook his head. “Look, when you smile, with those dimples you look like a little girl.”

“Thanks, that isn’t exactly what I wanted to hear,” Fryn chewed her mint with a sigh, and felt her cheeks subconsciously while smiling. She rolled her eyes, wings twitching in thought.

They walked in silence till they reached the East Cardinal. Fryn had grown quite serious in that time and Leif felt more

uncomfortable than he could put into words, it was like there was a weight in the air, and it was chillingly cold. Fryn's face had set into a blank look, as if she were reliving a grim memory.

"I'm sorry about what I said," he said, "I'm not very good at conversing naturally… especially with… foreigners."

She nodded, as if she only half heard him. "No matter. We feel the same about you. So, Leif, why did you become a Hunter?" She asked, looking painfully aware of the dimples that stood out with her smile.

Leif felt the sandalwood box in his coat pocket, carefully. It was something he always carried with him, engraved with the symbol of a silver serpent on the lid, which he traced with his thumb. "The school I come from has a very unorthodox way of graduating its students. Any Seventh-Rank student may compete for the honor of pursuing master status, but… it would appear that the test actually just required a term of service in the Commission. My master said that only when I become a recognized Hunter will I be called a Master of his School."

"What school is that?" She asked.

"Strafe-Curling-Viper school, it is a martial art native to my city, small but well-known among the Aelaete schools. My master was actually sent to prison for accidentally killing an opponent in a duel—only for three years," he added quickly.

"It sounds like a dangerous style, what kind of weapon do you use?" She brushed her leg, where Leif guessed she'd hidden her weapon.

"Just my fists and my sparks," he said, holding a hand up, sending a delicate tendril of electricity curling around his wrist and fingers, "What do you use?"

She nodded appreciatively. “I am a graduate of the Soft-Point-Fist, local to the city. We fight with a knife in one hand, and the other hand open for splitting strikes, or blocking, or grappling.” She demonstrated a fist in her left hand, and her right arm swished through the air with a sharp cutting motion as if her hand were a blade.

Leif was about to ask another question when they turned down a side street and stopped before a large building, five stories tall, with a wide display of windows showing a view of the ballroom, and on the other side, a banquet hall.

A fae stood beside the door, greeting a trio of blondes in blue dresses with white crowns patterned on the fabric, and waved them inside. He wore a white suit with green lining, and the angled view suggested a matching bowtie. He cut a sharp figure as he turned to Leif and Fryn, and groaned magnanimously. It was Mythrim.

“Oh, how marvelous, I am so glad you were able to make it to my party. Please, come up.” Mythrim said, coming down to meet them, with light steps, and an honest grin.

They ascended the steps and shook hands, looking inside curiously. Their host’s wings shimmered and twitched excitedly, as he held the handshake for too long.

“Who is your tailor?” Leif asked without thinking.

“Now that would be telling,” he laughed, and patted Leif’s shoulder, “but I’m afraid I cannot reveal my secrets. You’ll have to bribe me with wine. You! My lady, you look ravishing, positively stunning! Please, go and join the dancing and drinking. I have quite a few party games planned, and many toasts, so make sure to eat something.”

They walked inside, and found eleven other guests, some twirling in pairs on the dance floor, others playing a game of cards, but most standing about talking with crystal glasses of wine and spirits in hand.

“I am going to get a drink,” Leif said, “would you care for anything?”

Fryn looked at each guest carefully, but paused in her inspection to reply. “Yes, I’ll have a glass of sparkling.”

Leif walked over to the bar, and found once he had ordered her drink, he had no idea what to choose for himself. The shelves were lined with so many bottles of so many shapes and colors; that he couldn’t even read the labels, their fonts so varied and unique that he entirely gave up hope of deciphering them. He rested his hands on the cedar-bark bar and stared intently along a single row, finally noticing a square glass bottle with a matching glass stopper, filled with an amber liquid, which caught the warm light of the stained starlamps and made him think of home.

“I’ll have a glass of that sceppe there,” he said, pointing with as much class and authority as he dared.

The bartender poured him two fingers of the liquid, but as he passed it over, he smiled. “This is ceren.”

Leif’s head slumped, and he gave a dramatic sigh. “Well, I won’t drink that out of a tumbler, in fact, I think I’d like something else.”

The bartender’s eyes mocked him silently, as he picked up the glass, and raised it to his lips, and he downed its contents, eyes never releasing their hold on his. He set the empty glass down, and placed a fresh tumbler on the bar. “So then, have you decided?” He asked, smiling with his thin lips pressed together like the fingers of his hands.

Wine and Dine

Frorin:
Snow District
The Final Needle

In the end, Leif chose a glass of mead, dark, and cloying, made from caramelized honey that smelled like spices and, unsurprisingly honey. He found Fryn talking with a girl, maybe twenty or so, whose excited twirl as she talked, sent the edges of her dress spinning, a red and white dress that pulled in delicately at her waist and ended in a skirt a couple inches above her knees. It was both endearing and maddeningly attractive, and Leif had a hard time remembering Fryn's merits, until he saw her smile, and her dimples sprang rebelliously to life.

"And so that is how I was invited to the party!" The girl exclaimed, brimming with energy.

"I would never have expected that our host would be so well connected," Fryn said, taking the flute from Leif's hand, and sipping from it.

"Would you like a drink, miss?" Leif asked the fae in the red-swirled dress.

“Oh yes, please, that would be wonderful.” She beamed, and looked longingly at the bar. “I’ll have a glass of Yardall Sceppe,” she added, casting a wink at Fryn, who nodded, apparently in on the joke.

“Coming right up.” Leif wondered what he’d missed, but returned a few moments later with the drink she’d desired. “What’s your name, miss?” he asked as she accepted the tumbler.

She took a healthy sip, and placed her hand over her chest as it went down. “That is much better, thank you.”

Fryn placed a hand on his shoulder. “This is my colleague from the Commission, Leif.”

She made an ‘o’ shape with her mouth, and blinked. “I am Clair Yardall.” She punctuated this with a presentation of her glass, which nearly caused the contents to slosh over.

“Ah! Well, I am going to have to try your family’s sceppe before the night is out,” Leif said.

She nodded authoritatively, and stole a sniff of his mead. “You really shouldn’t drink the Guldhand Company’s wine—they are a crooked business.”

“You seem to know an awful lot about alcohol,” Leif grinned.

“I do, and I must, if I am going to inherit the business.”

“How responsible,” Fryn praised gently.

“I wouldn’t object to learning a bit more,” Leif said, taking a larger sip than he’d intended, spilling a small amount of it onto his jacket—luckily intended for travel, and already tan-colored to begin with. It didn’t stain, but he turned away quickly to brush it off. The two snickered, but kept straight faces when he turned back, so he decided not to complain.

“Well then, perhaps I’ll tell you.” Clair winked. “Sceppe is made from malted grain. Here in the north we use wheat from the foothills, and occasionally we mix in rye.” She leaned in confidentially. “I can’t tell you the proportions, or our specific methodology.”

He and Fryn leaned in close to hear, so that they all cracked heads, and rocked back, each expressing their own small amount of pain or discomfort. Leif rubbed his head with a smile. “I wouldn’t dream of asking you to divulge your secrets.”

Fryn’s effervescent wine swirled as she shook away the ache in her head. “I think I could use something slightly stronger than this.”

Just then, one of the waiters whisked by in a smart suit, cufflinks shaped like silver stars, wearing a blue cravat under his sharp chin. He interrupted Fryn cautiously and presented a tray of appetizers. “Would you care for a plate of cheese?” He pointed to the small dishes arrayed with several slices of different ages and consistencies arranged in a star-shape on the tray.

She nodded distractedly, and took one of the small plates, then, examining the cheese she sighed and passed it to Leif. “I can’t stand the taste of blue cheese.”

He gave the plate a sniff, and passed it to Clair. “Would you like some cheese?”

She laughed, and rejected the proffered plate with the palm of her hand, pushing it back. “No, I’m afraid that would be in conflict with my sceppe.”

“Of course it would,” Leif said, looking it over again, and decided that one of the types might go with his mead and hesitantly took a bite. It was a semisoft cheese with some kind of fruit, apricot perhaps, chopped and scattered throughout. He chewed it with a frown, and took a sip. The mead washed down smoothly,

blending with the mild cheese. “That wasn’t so bad. Fryn, are you sure you won’t try one of the others?”

Her eyes rolled halfway before she thought better of the motion, and picked out a soft slice of brie. She popped it in her mouth and chewed it without reaction, and then finished with a gulp of her wine. “No, I think that’ll do for me. I’m not fond of cheese to begin with,” she said, “and I wonder if this was on the list of things Mythrim went out to buy… I thought he’d have better taste.”

Leif raised his eyebrows at her, and took a bite of the blue. “Yeck, that’s disgusting.” He drank a large gulp and sputtered for a few seconds. “I think we should just set it aside until something nicer comes along.”

“Agreed,” Fryn chuckled.

Clair waved another waiter over and accepted a bowl of toasted nuts, and popped a couple in her mouth with a crunch. “So,” she said, looking between them, “how were you invited?”

“Well, we met Mythrim outside the Bounty Office, and he congratulated us on obtaining our licenses.” Leif stole a nut and tried it. “Mmm… that goes much better.”

She returned a knowing look, and turned to Fryn. “So you are entirely new then? This must be a fine way to start a career.”

“It is,” she replied, smoothing her dress, still devoid of wrinkles. “In fact, I already caught my first prize.”

“Really? Wow, you must be an incredible hunter.” Clair’s eyes widened considerably.

Fryn laughed. “No, I merely caught a drunk wine-thief.”

She nodded. “I heard about that, Frosthall doesn’t deserve such hassles.”

“I’ve had several of their wines before,” Fryn said, her eyes bright as if watching a happy memory, “I have a preference for their sparkling wine.”

“I didn’t ask what they were serving,” Leif said, pointing to her nearly empty glass.

She finished it off and gave a slight calling gesture to a nearby waiter. “I’ll have a glass of Frosthall.”

He hurried away and returned soon after with a lighter-colored bubbly liquid in a crystal glass, and then rushed away to attend to one of the three pretty blondes they had seen when they entered.

“We don’t see many Hunters at parties in the Snow District, or anywhere else for that matter,” Clair said. “Most hunters, except some of the more renowned veterans, are a bit too rough to be invited. It takes a certain amount of class to fit in here.”

As she finished her comment, Mythrim stepped in to ask how they were enjoying the party, an obvious pretense, as he had been listening and quickly joined the conversation. “Indeed Miss Yardall, but I saw something refined in our young friends here, and thought they’d do nicely.”

She laughed prettily, and blushed. “I think you’re correct, Mr. Mythrim.”

“Just Mythrim, please.” He pinched at an imagined piece of lint, on his sleeve self-consciously.

“Alright, Mythrim,” she took a glass of white wine from a passing tray and sat at an empty round table, “anyone for a game?”

Mythrim nodded sadly. “Only one round, I have other guests to mind, you know.”

They all sat down comfortably with a bowl of nuts, and various glasses, as Mythrim produced a deck of cards from his jacket. “The object of this game is to be the first to use all your

cards," he explained, dealing a pair of face down cards before each of them, and then setting face-up cards on top.

"I think we all know the rules to 'Serendipity'," Clair interjected.

Leif's wings itched, and he straightened the fit of his jacket. "I haven't heard of this game…" he said, reaching for the cards on the table.

Fryn stopped his hand with a smile and a headshake. "Leif, these are the cards we use at the end, for the majority of the game we have a hand of five cards from which we play, and draw to refill that number."

Mythrim dealt five cards for their first hands, and placed the remaining cards in the center of the table beside the bowl of nuts. When they'd picked up their cards, everyone else proceeded to change out the face-up cards before them from their hands, favoring Kings and Dukes, and the occasional five, or nine. Leif had two threes, an eight, a nine, and a Queen, but had no idea how to play or whether he should replace the five and one, or whether in this game the five suits mattered.

"The loser has to get fresh drinks," Mythrim proclaimed, patting his shoulder, comfortingly, "I'll have a glass of Yardall."

"Oh will you?" Clair blushed again, and sitting to Mythrim's left, she played the first card, well cards plural actually: a pair of twos. "I think I'll make it easy for Leif since he's never played."

"I'll have as full a glass as they can give me," Mythrim added, "that I might enjoy it *all*, and all the more."

She blushed furiously, and then looked at Leif's cards. "You might not want to keep that five," Clair said, stifling a laugh.

Leif wondered if Mythrim had made some kind of euphemism, but focused on Clair's advice. "Why should I keep the one, and what do each of the cards do?" he asked.

Clair fanned her face with her newly stocked hand of cards, and nodded importantly. "I forgot to tell you, didn't I? Well, it's really quite simple, no really, don't give me that look. You can play multiples; five of a kind discards the pile, saving anyone from picking it up if they were unable to play, and there are a number of special rules. First, until the deck is exhausted, always redraw to five, and second… what was it?" She cast a desperate look toward Fryn, who smiled in return.

Fryn's smile, much more relaxed than Clair's, seemed to expand openly, and naturally on her face. "You can't forget that the most important rule in playing cards is that you must play a card greater than or equal to the one that came before, and, if it amounts to five of a kind, through however many people that have played in sequence, the pile is discarded as well."

"True. You are absolutely right, we should teach Leif the rules, if only so we can enjoy it all the more when he has to refill our glasses," Mythrim said, sharing a mischievous look with Clair. "But that reminds me, there is a special rule about primes."

"Primes?" Leif asked, feeling like he was the butt of some joke, but unable to grasp what it was.

"Prime numbered cards, five primes in a row also discards the pile, and if you play a non-prime number after a series of four, you have to pick up the pile. That is why this game is called serendipity, but it relies quite a bit on whether you have enough of the right cards, from the first, and in each play, so be wary of playing too many multiples of prime numbers." Mythrim took another sip of his wine, looking eager to move on to his promised glass of sceppe.

“So there’re no wild cards then,” Leif confirmed, draining the last of his mead, counting the cards in play. Out of 65 cards, 38 had already been taken from the deck, so he switched out the cards on the table, leaving his Queen and the five, to Clair’s chagrin, and then playing his pair of threes. Fryn chuckled, but he drew a Duke and a seven, and leaned back in his chair, listening to the string quartet’s strains of some chamber music, and watching the other partygoers alternate their conversational cliques, between the small society tables and the bar.

Fryn played a six, and Mythrim a pair of sevens, and Clair a matching pair, with a sly grin on her innocent face. Leif uncrossed his arms with an affected sigh, and placed the fifth seven on the pile, and as he cleared the pile, his eyes never left off their mocking at the ones who’d set him up. He led with his one, and drew another eight, and a ten, and from there it circled through four ones in a row, and Clair discarded the pile with a two, saying astutely that twos also counted as prime numbers.

After that, Mythrim got stuck with low numbers, picking up hand after hand, as Fryn tossed out her slightly higher cards with subdued glee. As Fryn ended up with just her face-down cards, Leif found himself picking up more and more cards he was unable to play. She won, only because Leif played four nines, and Fryn happened to choose the fifth nine from her unknown pair, and discarded the pile with one hand as she slapped the other, a five, alone on top of the table.

She cheered, blushing from the wine, and rested her chin on her hand. “I suppose the loser has to get the drinks.” Fryn’s eyes and dimples watched him impatiently, and Leif almost forgot what he was supposed to do if he lost.

“Oh!” He exclaimed, sitting up sharply, “What would you care for, sir, ladies?”

Mythrim shook his hand in disappointment. "*We* are going to have Yardall Reserve, and I believe your colleague was going to have Frosthall."

Leif ran off with their orders, frustrating the bartender in his haste, slurring over important syllables, and then considering what he should drink. The bartender just poured two glasses each of Yardall and wine. On his return, Mythrim took a sip and apologized, and sweeping out his hand led Clair to the dance floor, and they swayed carefully on the polished marble, her skirt swishing in the slight breeze they created. Leif set his glass of bubbly down, enjoying its refreshing variation of heat. Fryn placed her glass, noticeably lower than his, on the table beside his and looked at him expectantly, wings twitching, and a pulse of reddish color pulsed out to the tips.

Leif straightened his jacket seriously, and held out his hand. "Would you dance with me, Fryn?"

She smiled, and accepted it, and they moved to join Mythrim and Clair on the floor, easily matching the soft rhythm of the waltz and smiling.

"Who do you think would win in a contest?" Fryn asked him.

"We are the trained hunters. I imagine we are much more in tune with our own bodies, and each other, than they are," he said, holding her close, hand on her waist, thinking he felt a travel belt under the thin layer of her dress.

"What hunter goes without their means?" She whispered in his ear.

"Not a single one, I should think." He winked.

Mythrim gave Clair a spin, as if he had heard Fryn's challenge, and the music picked up a little. Fryn and Leif matched, he twirled her away, and spun her back, holding even closer, blood pulsing to the pace of the music, and the drink.

They danced, as the music quickened even more, and then, somehow as if they had expected it, Leif and Mythrim twirled their partners out, and switched.

Leif grinned as Clair laughed in his arms, and the music slowed to a more romantic waltz again.

“You’re quite good at this, for a hunter, Leif,” she said, looking up at him.

“And you seem to be quite a natural yourself,” he replied, switching sides with another twirl.

“Shh…” she said, leaning her head against his shoulder. They slowed, swaying to the tempo of the new piece that the quartet seemed to choose simply because of the two pairs of dancers that the other partygoers had stopped to watch.

He glanced over at Fryn, slightly more reserved than Clair, suddenly looking unaffected by the wine she’d had, compared to the rosy cheeks that Clair tried to hide from him. Fryn met his eyes playfully, and gave Mythrim a twirl, making him laugh softly, and the other guests cheer, especially the trio of blondes in the crown-patterned dresses, who giggled and looked hopefully at the other men.

Clair stirred, and watched them, shaking softly with a quiet laugh. “My turn to lead,” she said, moving his hands to her shoulders, and placing hers where his had been.

“This feels quite odd.”

“Shh… It’s not odd.” She placed a finger on his mouth, and then gave him a spin.

He felt somewhat disoriented when she pulled him back, and found himself laughing. “Ha, ha, so this is how it feels?”

“Nice, isn’t it?” She pulled him close, and they rocked to the music till the song ended, and bent him back dramatically.

The guests cheered the performance, and Mythrim called for a toast. The waiters brought out trays filled with glasses of Frosthall for all, and they raised them as Mythrim found a chair to stand on. Leif and Fryn returned to the card table and reclaimed their glasses.

“Hear me! Settle down,” he said, waving them to stop their applause, “it is time to move to the dinner table, and enjoy the three-course meal our fine chef has prepared for us. I think we ought to honor him with our appreciation of his hard work, and, to thank these lovely partners with whom we have danced.” He raised his glass clumsily, some of the liquid trailing down from the lip, and he looked as if all of Fryn’s spinning had made him dizzy.

Leif and Clair clinked glasses, and cheered with the rest as they drank their own health, and that of their chef, and Leif wondered who the chef was, since he hadn’t once come out into the party.

They drank roughly half the glass, and then moved to a long dinner table occupying the dining hall to the left of the dance floor, a room with windows lining each of its three walls, looking out onto the snow-covered roads and the cloud-covered sky.

Leif pulled out Clair’s chair, and Fryn’s, since Mythrim was now busy helping the blondes in the blue dresses sit by him. When everyone was settled, the chef came out in a black suit, with a blue cravat, a white apron, and midnight-black hair. He was young, and Leif supposed they were close in age, and the chef had deep blue eyes that looked cheerful and thoughtful at the same time.

He wondered whether ‘calculating’ would be a good word to describe him, but tossed the idea when the chef opened his mouth with a warm smile. “Greetings, everyone, I would like to thank you for coming tonight to my humble establishment.”

There was a chorus of disagreement when he said ‘humble’ to which he grinned bashfully. “The first course I have prepared is a vinaigrette with gorgonzola and toasted pecans. It is nothing extravagant, but I hope it prepares you for the second course: a butternut-squash soup. Which in turn should ready you for the hare-roast at last.”

Mythrim stood ceremoniously and held up a hand. “Is there some kind of desert or aperitif afterwards?”

The chef stared. “What dinner would be complete without one? I beg your patience, because that is a surprise.”

There was a general “ooooh” among the guests, and they chuckled or laughed all around, and the chef gave a cough to call them back to attention. “I am Aldyr, by the way, and I hope this meal is to your great satisfaction. Thank you for your condescension.” He waved the waiters forward, and they placed all the plates of salad down in front of each guest at the exact same time.

Leif looked between Clair and Fryn, but they didn’t move to pick up their forks. Clair pointed surreptitiously under the table toward their host, who speared a bite of salad and took a bite. He chewed for a couple seconds, and swallowed. A few more seconds followed, and he looked relieved. “The food is fit for eating, or I have lost my mind.”

Several people chuckled at his remark, and everyone took a bite, Leif slightly behind, trying to watch how they ate with a formal manner. He wished they’d taught him table-manners back home, but even if they had it wouldn’t have suited this affair. He had no recourse but to copy everyone else… which was how he’d learned from his Master anyway.

Fryn smirked at his helplessness, and fixed his hold on his fork. “Two fingers and the thumb at the end, where it widens.”

“I know how to hold a fork,” he complained quietly.

Clair shook her head. “But you don’t know how to use it correctly either.” She turned the fork upside down with her forefinger along the shaft, and speared a bit of salad, and closed her mouth on it.

Fryn looked a little embarrassed.

“Salad is slightly different, Fryn, but I suppose you have as little practice as your partner,” she continued.

Leif and Fryn shared a look.

“Oh, I just assumed you were a team,” she said thoughtfully. “Many hunters work together when they first start, or didn’t you know that?”

“We knew that,” Leif said, turning to Fryn with one eyebrow arched up, “right?” He added to her in a whisper.

She shrugged, and ate her salad dutifully, ignoring the bits of gorgonzola. Leif agreed with her on that, the marbled cheeses did taste as bad as they smelled, though; Clair seemed to enjoy them. Perhaps it was an upper-class thing. They enjoyed the salad quickly, and sat waiting hungrily for the next course.

The soup didn’t take long to arrive, but it was already cold by the time everyone took to eating it. It was so cold, that Leif wondered why no one complained, as if they didn’t mind it at all.

“Is there anything wrong with your soup?” he asked Fryn.

She pondered for a moment, swishing a mouthful carefully. “No, it is perfect.”

“Don’t you think it is a little cold?”

Clair snickered. “It is supposed to be cold.”

“Not to mention, whenever you receive something, you ought to assume that the state you find it in is the state it was intended to be in,” Fryn intoned.

“Even if it’s cold?” He thought the flavor was nice, but it was a little sweet and rich, almost like the next day’s serving of gravy. He ate it too quickly, and hoped that the hare would be hot and spiced. He buttoned his jacket, feeling cold, and that was not something he liked when he was indoors.

The chef himself brought out the first plate for their host, setting the steaming porcelain, its contents drenched in thick gravy, before him with a dramatic flourish. One of the blondes clapped at his performance, and the others laughed.

Once more, Mythrim sliced a small bite of food, and smelled it on the fork, making the most engrossed sound of approval Leif could’ve imagined. “Mmmmmm… I have no doubt this is safe, but here, for the sake of propriety I will once more test its quality.”

“Oh that’s what he’s been doing.” Leif felt his box in his pocket. “I thought he was making sure it was safe for the guests.”

“I’ll have you know, Leif,” Clair shook her head, her shoulder length hair swishing; “there hasn’t been any need for that for a hundred years.”

He’d thought her hair had been brown, when they’d met, but as it moved in the light, he saw that it was a subdued auburn. “That is nice to hear.”

Mythrim chewed with the most foolishly delighted expression, and pronounced that it was fit for the King himself, and winked at the girl on the right, who laughed ridiculously.

“My cousin,” he overheard her say, “has recommended me here many times, but I haven’t had their roast hare before.”

Their host grinned, but his eyes met Leif’s and didn’t seem quite as pleased as he made out. “Master Aldyr, this is the best you have made yet.”

The waiters laid out the plates, heaped with meat, mashed potatoes, and gravy, before the guests with the same precision as before. Leif tried his best not to eat too much, but the light appetizers before had somehow only increased his hunger. The other guests seemed just as engrossed, and no one spoke for several minutes. Their glasses ran dry, and soon the guests drank a variety of beverages of their choice, red and white wines, sceppes, and clear cocktails, and Leif wondered what he should use to wash down the increasing warmth of his food, and whether just a plain glass of water or nectar might be better.

It seemed that the spice only grew more intense, and the hot food retained its heat even in his stomach, cleansing him of the discomfort from the soup. Fryn ate a little more than half her food, and leaned back in her chair tiredly, and Clair was only able to finish a third.

“Oh that is so filling,” she said, using a handkerchief to fan her flushed face. “I’m not used to such spicy food, but my word, that is delicious.”

Fryn nodded in agreement and brushed the front of her dress, as if worried about too much food ruining her figure for the evening. Leif had to admit that was his worry, since he’d eaten all of his food, and his jacket felt a little tight. He marveled that no one except he and Mythrim had been able to finish the meal, and they each sat back in their chairs with a mixture of satisfaction, and happy discomfort.

Mythrim stood stiffly, and waved the chef out to join them. “I remember a promise of desert, but I hope it is something soothing and light, that might make us feel as though we hadn’t eaten so much.

Aldyr smiled, but Leif felt he was a little dismayed that so few had eaten as much as they were served. “It should please you to discover that my aperitif is one such item.” He held out his hand,

and one of the waiters placed a dark glass bottle with an obscure white label on his palm, and his fingers reflexively gripped it from the base.

"What is this, now?" Mythrim walked over and inspected it. "Stanaedre, hmm… I'm not too good at reading their script, but if I am not mistaken, this is an herbal liqueur."

"Precisely. In that land it is a common practice to lighten their stomachs so, and this has the perfect properties to alleviate such a… lethargy as the end of the dinner might bring. I wouldn't be surprised if you all felt like dancing again," he replied, taking a towel from his waist, and fixing it around the cork.

"It isn't bubbly, is it?" One of the girls asked.

"Not quite, but there is enough pressure that it requires similar treatment," Aldyr said, with a tilt of his head.

"Is this enough for everyone?" Mythrim asked, narrowing his eyes.

"It should be sufficient for the party, sir."

"No, I mean everyone." Mythrim patted his shoulder. "Here at the close, I would like to include, in appreciation for their service, *all* those who have attended here tonight."

"That is very generous, sir, but there is a policy against combining work and pleasure here." The chef seemed to hide a glowering look under an impatient huff.

"Nonsense. I'm paying, and the business is ended. If you would be so kind as to furnish everyone with glasses, I will give the meal's end toast." Mythrim puffed out his chest, and looked quite silly, but Aldyr consented, much to the waiters' delight.

In a minute, they had all gathered in the ballroom, holding tiny crystal tumblers filled with a nearly black, licorice-scented liquid.

The guests beamed and loosened their coats, and the staff of the inn abandoned their aprons, and put on their matching jackets. *I fit in more with them now*, Leif thought, as they whispered and talked among themselves happily.

"Alright everyone, this evening is at an end." Mythrim began.

There was a spout of applause, which he waved away.

"And I would like to thank all of you for making this such a great occasion. It makes me sick at heart that it is the end." He held up his hand to forestall any more clapping. "Now, first, long live the King!" There was a general cheer. "And may his heir be his equal!" An even more enthusiastic cheer sounded through the crowd. "And, may you and your families, and this establishment be most successful in all your endeavors!"

The closest waiter, laughing with his coworker, remarked that he'd never had an opportunity to try anything like this liqueur before. There was general agreement amongst the group, and they looked at their host with a mixture of joy and respect. Leif hadn't either but decided not to comment.

Mythrim held his glass high, and with one final indistinct pronouncement, clinked glasses with the blonde standing before him. Everyone rushed to collide their glasses, and they all drank at once.

"This is amazing," Clair whispered, sipping like a lady.

Leif looked guiltily at his glass, it was nearly empty. "Aren't we supposed to down it all at once?"

Fryn rolled her eyes. "No, why would you do that?"

"This is not moonshine," Clair added.

They finished their glasses quickly all the same, and Mythrim himself turned his to his eye sadly. "I wonder if there is any more?"

Aldyr reappeared with two more bottles, his long coat trailing behind him. “A toast is not complete without a second,” he said, shaking his head.

Mythrim waited as he filled all the glasses again, and passed them around. “I’ve already given a toast, who would like to give the next one?” He looked at Fryn mysteriously. “How about one of these two hunters? You know, they have only just obtained their licenses. Perhaps we should congratulate them?”

The murmurs in the crowd seemed to think so, and they were both pushed onto the musician’s dais beside him. There were several calls for ‘toast’ and Leif shoved his hands into his pockets awkwardly.

Fryn decided to go first, swirling the contents of her glass in one hand, and fixing her scarf with the other. “Hear me,” she said, somehow looking important, “I want to thank you all for your company and well-wishes. Further, I want to thank our host, who has entertained us so well.”

Leif nodded cheerfully, and cut in with as much care as he could. “And to all who served us this evening!” There was a loud cheer of approval. “And to the fine ladies we’ve danced with!” An even larger cheer followed, and Leif thought he saw Clair blush. “And in closing, a very, very good night to all!”

Everyone applauded and clashed cups as they raced to finish their drinks. Leif settled against the wall beside Mythrim, touching glasses and drinking it pleasantly, though feeling a little nauseous. He really had eaten too much.

“You don’t look too well,” Mythrim said, examining his face, “don’t let nerves get to you. It was a fine toast.”

“I’m fine.” His stomach didn’t roil so much as ache, as if he were being stabbed by a pen collection. “I just…” Leif noticed that

Fryn leaned against a music stand, gripping her stomach in pain. The other guests sputtered and coughed, and fell to their knees, or piled on the dance floor.

"I suppose it's time." Mythrim yawned. "I'm surprised it took this long."

Leif glanced around; Mythrim had his hands on his hips, and his jacket loosely thrown on. His eyes scanned all the guests, and met Leif's with surprise. "You're a lucky one, hunter, to have eaten so much." He walked over and kicked out his legs, and he slid to the ground against the window. It had begun to snow heavily. "You're lucky too, that you get to die such a nice death."

Leif dug his hands out of his pockets, and clawed his way to his feet with the drapes. "I'm also quite resistant to toxins."

Mythrim laughed. "Not this one." He held a wide cork in his white-gloved hand, and smirked. "The problem isn't the venom or a poison, per se, it is that it is naturally quite toxic… and only in Stanaedre are the people accustomed to it."

Leif coughed, and doubled over, spitting blood on Mythrim and the floor.

"Tch," Mythrim grimaced, "and I only just had this suit made."

"You killed them…" Leif struggled. "Even the staff… the chef?"

He did a quick spinning inspection. "I really did, Leif, and why do you suppose I did that?"

"So much for your generosity." It was getting more and more difficult to speak.

Mythrim smiled, and grabbed him by the collar of his jacket. "It's simple, they knew my face."

"I figured." His voice gurgled as blood dripped from his mouth.

Mythrim released him, staring at the blood that clung to his white silk glove, and Leif fell to the ground in a heap. “I should get going, I hope you enjoyed yourself before the end—it was a kindness.” Mythrim laughed maniacally at his own joke, bent and checked the pulse of the blondes, and stalked off, waving as he strode out the door. The stained glove flew off, and covered the face of the chef.

Hills and Pine

Frorin:
Snow District
The Final Needle

Stars flashed before Leif's eyes, and he swung his head around trying to clear his vision and find someone else alive. He was fading fast, and drew a full charge of sparks into his hand, and arced the energy into his stomach with a sharp flash. His stomach burned, and the toxins broke up as he ionized them, and they bonded to his food. He vomited all over the floor, and wobbled on his knees to Clair, where her eyelids fluttered, and her delicate wings shivered, and foam gathered on her lips.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, placing his hand gently on her stomach as he shocked her as well.

All her muscles contracted, and she writhed in the forced convulsion, and he only just managed to turn her on her side as she spewed her meal onto the cloak of an already-dead waiter. She fainted, but the greatest danger was past, so he left her there as he rose to his feet and staggered to Fryn, where her head lolled against the window, seeking desperately for air. She mumbled, and her hand looked deathly cold against the glass.

Leif took her shoulders and focused her eyes on his. “Fryn, this is going to be painful.” He used the last of his sparks on her, and they seemed to have an even greater effect, as a nearby spoon flung itself to rest against her leg.

Fryn relieved her stomach, and pulled the spoon from her magnetized hidden sheath. She struggled to her feet, pale as death, though she flushed with fresh color almost immediately.

“Fryn.” Leif gripped her shoulder. “Are you alright?”

She grimaced, and looked at the singed portion of her dress sadly. “Better than my dress.” She turned to Clair, who was coming back to consciousness, and moved over, wings drooping. “Clair! You’re alive…”

“I couldn’t get to anyone else.” Leif sat on the edge of the dais, and sighed. “They’d never been included before.” He trailed off, regarding the pained face of the nearest dead waiter. He felt the most pity for them. The other guests might’ve deserved a bad death for all he knew, but the staff, they were common, and had died with misplaced excitement.

Struggling to their feet and lifting Clair between them, Leif and Fryn stepped outside.

“We should report to the Office immediately,” Fryn suggested.

“Can we make it there in our condition?” Leif watched the slowly falling snowflakes suspiciously. It was a wet snow, so he thought it wouldn’t be dangerous, but he really couldn’t say.

“I’ll be fine,” she replied, following his gaze. “They shouldn’t be a problem unless it gets colder and sharper.”

He didn’t want to face a sharp snow.

Clair stirred, supported on either side. “The forecasters said it might shift that way, we should hurry.”

Leif started, relieved to hear her speak, and rolled his neck. “Then, Fryn, I’ll rely on your guidance back.”

She led them back to the south gate and as they passed, they informed the guards and pointed them to the scene of the tragedy, who then ran off with an indistinct exclamation.

The snow fell thicker. Fryn batted flakes away as they went, but pretty soon they shrank and sharpened to delicate, vicious points.

As they neared the office, Leif tried and failed to dodge one, and it sliced his cheek. He pressed his free hand against the cut bitterly, and shivered at the cold water that went under his collar. They burst through the door right as the clerk, Caelyn, was putting on her coat, with the keys in her hands.

She froze, and stared as they collapsed on the bench where the drunken thief had slept. “What happened to you?” She asked, dropping the keys with a clatter to the ground.

Leif shook his head. “Trouble found me after all.”

Fryn chuckled, but her throat was raw, so the sound was guttural and rough.

Caelyn checked their eyes and felt Clair’s forehead. “You look like it was quite serious.” Glancing toward Leif’s cheek, she added. “Hold on a minute, I’ll stitch that cut,” and ran in the back before they could argue, returning with a small tin in hand, and her sleeves rolled up.

She knelt in front of him and surveyed the gash, and nodded. “It is a deep cut, but it’s clean, and should heal nicely.” Her white and violet eyes stared into his, and Leif was glad he was too tired to blush. Then, in one shocking movement, she leaned in close to his face, and licked the wound.

Leif shrank away, but couldn't get far because of the back of the bench, and found he wasn't too tired to blush after all. His cut tingled, and went numb, as a layer of ice closed the wound.

Caelyn looked away awkwardly, annoyed by his embarrassment, and her cheeks grew equally red. "I probably should've warned you. We all have some mandatory medical training here and that's the most effective way to clean a wound …"

Her dubious explanation left much to be desired, in Leif's opinion, and Clair and Fryn laughed. "I guess that's another one of our 'foreign' customs you find so strange," Fryn observed.

Caelyn turned back, straight-faced and composed, and threaded a needle she'd produced from her sewing kit. "I always bring one of these in case I need to sew a button, but I'm glad it came in handy for this too." She held his chin with one hand, and pierced his cheek with the other, her eyes firmly on her work, avoiding his. Five stitches later, she tied it off, and leaned back, brushing her forehead with her sleeve. "Now, tell me what happened."

Fryn detailed their invitation to the party, rubbing Clair's back comfortingly, and related the end of the dinner, and their involvement in the toasts.

"Stanaedre liqueur, hmm?" Caelyn said at last. "I didn't know they had something like that." She rolled down her sleeves and buttoned the cuffs. "This Mythrim character, for such a serious massacre, I'm surprised I haven't heard his name before… but everyone was poisoned…"

"A fae so deceptively charming must have used an assumed name," Leif supposed.

Caelyn retrieved some forms, and asked them to write their account, and sign and date. She insisted that without documentation, the Crown wasn't very likely to issue a bounty.

"I don't care if there is a bounty at this point," Leif frowned. "I'm going to kill him."

"You should be wary of choosing your own marks. We are only authorized to go after approved targets, and only when there is a reward posted." Caelyn tapped her chin thoughtfully. "Still," she said, "I don't think there will be a problem."

"Mythrim thinks he killed us. It won't be safe to return to our homes, if he discovers we still live," Fryn said.

Clair shifted anxiously and Caelyn placed a hand soothingly on her knee.

"Employees of the Commission are welcome to use the Hunter's Lodge in the West side of the District. I'd recommend you stay there," Caelyn responded, patting Clair's knee as she added, "You should come too, I think."

They agreed, and followed Caelyn to the door. Clair didn't need as much help walking as before, so Fryn led her out with a steel umbrella, and Caelyn held one over Leif. The Rain District Ringroad was pretty empty, but even so, it took them a while to get to the Lodge because of the distance.

It looked like a five story apartment building, or a hotel, with windows glimmering with lights spread out across the corners of each floor. They passed into the lobby, and the desk secretary looked up at them in surprise. He rose from his seat and waved Caelyn over, who folded her metal-plate umbrella smoothly.

"What's this then, Caelyn?" He asked.

She explained that they were supposed dead, and needed to remain out of sight. Leif and Fryn presented their licenses, and were furnished with new clothes and room keys. Clair would have

to stay with Caelyn, or Fryn, since they didn't give rooms to nonmembers.

"I am sorry about this, Miss Yardall, but I'm afraid I can't circumvent policy," he explained, subconsciously looking at the desk.

They parted at the stair-junction between the second and third floors. Caelyn led Clair away, arm in arm. "Come by in the morning. I'll see if there's a warrant by then," she said, with a wave.

Fryn and Leif had opposite rooms, and she paused with her door half-open. "Good work, Leif."

"You too Fryn." He folded his coat over his arm.

"It seems we're a team after all, huh?" She pulled her scarf from her neck and folded it carefully.

"Yes, I look forward to working with you."

She smiled, and was about to close the door, when he added, "Why didn't you point me to the Hunter's Lodge this morning?"

She shrugged. "I didn't know about it." She shut the door, so he went into his own room.

Leif wondered if he'd have any trouble sleeping, but when he'd changed into a thick set of nightclothes and crawled under the quilts, he felt his eyes closing, and relaxed.

These northern fae really are something else, he thought, *So much more playful, yet reserved, than back home.* He slept soundly for most of the night, but close to morning, he saw Mythrim's face, and heard his mocking voice, as he choked him.

Leif shook himself awake, and noticed the small clock by his bed. It was slightly past three. He washed his face in the basin by the window, and meditated on the floor in the center of the room.

His breathing calmed, and he went back to bed at four, and slept through the remainder of the night.

Frorin:
Rain District
Hunter's Lodge

Leif met Fryn in the Lobby. She sat in one of the cozy chairs in the lounge area on the opposite side of the reception desk, adjusting the lacing of her boots, glowing in the warm light of the hearth. Her wings twitched irritably as she undid her knots and unlaced her boot to start over.

Leif sat down in the chair beside her. "Good morning, Fryn, technical difficulties?"

She shot him a mean look, and returned to her business. "I didn't think I would have to wear a messenger's uniform."

Leif snapped his fingers. "I forgot all about that." He was wearing his usual travel set.

She shook her head. "I was going to ask what you were about."

"I wouldn't have been able to answer." Leif got up and stretched. "I'll be down in a minute," he said, and dashed back up the stairs.

The messenger's uniform was an unusual combination of the utilitarian and the fashionable. Leif suspected that it made messengers better regarded and received, since the gray vest, stenciled with green detailing, even on the inside, seemed of high quality. Apparently the entire uniform was tailored, the boots were cut with barely noticeable wingtips, and the slits in the shoulders of the coat were padded with silk. He buttoned up with purpose and

rushed back down to the lobby, and stopped before Fryn with a flourish.

"So," he grinned, "how do I look?"

She shook her head with a smile. "Like a messenger?"

"Come on, stand up. Give us a twirl." Leif took her hand and pulled her up from her seat.

"I was perfectly comfortable, I'll have you know." She sighed, but tested the range of motion of her shoulders in the fitted jacket, which hugged her waist and shot out into long coattails, and continued around when she gave it a spin.

"Quite dashing I should say." Leif tapped his chin. "Just imagine how often you'll be harassed by the guards asking your business now."

She frowned. "I hadn't thought of that… but as it is I already have trouble getting through checkpoints without ten minutes of meaningless conversation."

Leif sat in the chair next to hers, where she stood. "Are there female guards in Frorin?"

"You're wondering if they'll stop you for conversation. That'd be a dream come true, wouldn't it?" She snickered. "I'm not sorry to tell you the truth, there are, but they are not at all as interested in flirting with the random passersby as are the low level officers."

"Such a pity," Leif smoothed his jacket, and flexed his upper and lower wings out to his fingertips, "I haven't looked so good in years."

She gave a snort and walked to the door. "Come on, we should meet Caelyn for breakfast."

He got up and hurried after her. Thankfully it was a clear day, and the morning sun bathed them in light from every angle thanks

to the fresh layer of snow—which had yet to be cleared from the street. Their gray boots left crisp prints as they walked leisurely around the Ringroad. Few fae wandered about and they only passed one pair of guards on their rounds. *Rounds around the Ringroad*, Leif supposed, laughing to himself.

Fryn ignored him, and they arrived outside the Office at 8:05, where Caelyn and Clair were waiting for them. Caelyn was dressed for work, white blazer, black silk vest, and a jacket, with matching dress boots and slacks. Clair however, wore a messenger uniform, like Fryn's.

Fryn lifted one eyebrow at her. "I thought they said they couldn't do anything overt for nonmembers."

Caelyn nodded, and Clair looked away. "This morning I received a reply, in light of the circumstances Clair was inducted as a part-time member in the messenger division—which means she will have to do some running around looking busy—like the other messengers. Who knows when *they* do any real work."

Leif smiled. "If you are such a good dancer, I think you'll do fine with the extra effort," he said, turning to Clair.

She blushed, whether from the compliment or from disagreement, he couldn't tell. "I'll have you know I am not unathletic."

Leif bit his lip, but couldn't help but reply. "You mean you are athletic."

Her wings changed to a slightly redder shade, and she stuffed her hands in her pockets, mumbling.

Fryn placed a hand on his shoulder and coughed. "It is not acceptable to correct someone's grammar in Froreholt, Leif."

He nodded sagely. "I'm pretty sure that's true anywhere, but for the sake of humor – even politeness is at risk."

“Anyway,” Caelyn interjected, “I only have a short amount of time to eat before my shift, so come on in and I will brief you before I have to start working.”

They exchanged confused looks but followed her into the office. Apparently, in one of the back rooms the Bounty Office had a lounge with a hearth, a coffee table, and an assortment of chairs, benches, and bookshelves. There was a table by the array of windows on the west side with a stack of small plates, mini pastries, and a large pot of tea. The windows looked out on an alleyway parallel to the South Cardinal, but one block removed, and led into a small residential cul-de-sac.

They sat around the coffee table with their small plates and tea cups, and Caelyn allowed everyone to enjoy a minute or two before beginning her brief. “Last night, the Justice Council decided to endorse the bounty of this killer known, in this case, as Mythrim. Therefore, the Commission is authorized to pursue him, for the reward of 5,000-mint.”

Leif gulped. “That’s more than I expected.”

Caelyn nodded. “It turns out that three of the King’s nieces were attending the party and were among those killed. He wants capital justice: Mythrim is wanted dead, not alive.”

Fryn’s eyes faded for a second and sharpened back to focus. “The three blondes.”

“I see! That’s why they had the crown-patterned dresses,” Leif said almost in sync.

“Correct.” Caelyn tapped the side of her cup idly and closed her eyes. “There have been other cases of guest poisonings in the realm, though none so large, and I wouldn’t be surprised if they were all executed by him.”

“Different names of course,” Leif supposed, “it wouldn’t make sense to use his name, or the same one each time.”

They looked at him oddly. “What a cognitive leap.” Fryn smirked.

Leif shifted, and mumbled. “Well, it makes sense.”

“Exactly, it didn’t need to be said.” Fryn fixed her jacket.

“Do you still have the invitation he gave you?” Caelyn asked. “In each case, there was one common symbol, different shapes, sizes, fonts, but each one had a sword somewhere on the card the guests received.”

Fryn pulled hers out promptly before Leif could even remember where his was. “Yes,” she said, “there is a sword!”

Leif snapped his fingers as the image of the invitation flashed through his mind. “A threaded needle crossing a silver embossed sword!”

Caelyn nodded slowly. “That’s why in certain circles, he is referred to as The Venomsword. You,” she pointed generally at them, “are the first ever to have seen his face and survive.”

They were silent for a moment.

Fryn changed the subject. “Since we are now uniformed as messengers, are we supposed to deliver letters around town?”

Caelyn shook her head. “No, I shouldn’t think so. It is just a disguise, if anyone asks why you don’t have a bag, you can always say you’re on a break.”

“That’s a relief, but I don’t see how we’re going to find Mythrim,” Leif said, reaching for the teapot.

Clair coughed lightly as she had reached for the pot as well, and had placed her hand on his.

“Oh, would you like some more?” He smiled, and filled everyone’s cups. “But really, how will we find Mythrim in Frorin, of all places?”

“Is it that immense of a place?” Fryn asked. “I hadn’t known.”

Caelyn chuckled. “You could always go looking for trouble. It worked well for you last time.”

“I wasn’t actually looking for it then…” He sighed. “So what, we should just patrol each district, and ask questions?”

“I would advise against asking *too* many questions. Some information can only be gathered without looking for it,” Caelyn said, tapping the tip of her nose with her finger.

“You mean asking questions would raise questions?” Clair laughed.

“I’m fairly sure that’s what she meant,” Leif said, taking another sip, and brushing crumbs from his jacket onto the marbled floor, regretting it as soon as he saw Caelyn’s displeased glare.

They sat around the table quietly, each locked in their thoughts. Leif worried no one would speak again, but after about five minutes, Fryn made a ‘hem’ sound and drew their attention.

“Patrolling the districts is a good start. We could always eavesdrop or ask one or two questions periodically around various gathering places in the city.” She lightly hammered her fist into the palm of her hand to accentuate her point.

Leif imagined a light ‘ding’ as if from a small bell, sounding from her gesture, and swallowed a laugh. “I recommend we check the restaurants and inns, maybe he frequents one.”

“Just because you like your drink Leif, that doesn’t mean he does,” Clair said, swirling her tea. “But, it is a sound idea, better than most.”

“You know, Fryn,” Leif began.

“I don’t…”

“There is a liqueur from Aelaete I think you should try.” He held back a sly smile.

“If it’s Agalia, don’t even try.” Her eyes narrowed.

“It’s worth a try, you know.”

“I don’t…”

Caelyn coughed, and set her teacup on her saucer with a noticeable ‘clank.’ “That is probably for the best. Now, I should get started. You never know when a respectable hunter like Yarrow will appear—and they despise incompetence.” She added the last part with a sharp, but playful, look. “Clair, I’ll get you set with a few letters that need delivery, but I’ll keep you moving around the Snow District. It’s safer than the areas *they* will be frequenting.”

“What if Mythrim is in the Snow District? He did manage to arrange such a high class party,” she hesitated, her knees knocked together nervously.

“He won’t notice you, but you can tell us if you see him.” Caelyn waved Leif and Fryn over. “And when you are done for the day, go pick her up for dinner. Not safe to leave her out after dark.”

Leif looked away, coloring slightly. “I had thought I’d do that, anyway.”

“Well, both of you should go.” She looked to Fryn, who nodded with a cryptic expression.

In the end, Clair ran off with a messenger bag strapped over her shoulder, and promised she’d meet them at the Tallow Inn restaurant at six.

Fryn guided Leif down to the farthest and most dangerous district of the city: the Pine District. Technically, there was a worse one but the Sky District barely counted; it was mostly populated by the poor, filled with slums, and did not have a restaurant to speak of. Fryn insisted that it wasn't the kind of place Mythrim would walk through, let alone, visit. Moreover, that it was actually less corrupt than the Pine District.

He wondered about that, but they rushed past the guards at the District checkpoints into the Hill District, and then followed the Ringroad around to the gate to the eastern end of the Pine District Crescent.

They walked down the main Crescent Road toward the north-east, looking down the long intersecting side streets where old houses and stale shops sat under tired awnings in the snow. The street was not as nicely cobbled as the upper districts. Here and there holes were filled with ice and snow, and Leif slipped across the first one he found.

He landed roughly on his back, limbs and wings spread-eagled, and shook his head. "Does anyone look after this place?"

Fryn bent over with a smirk, her braid nearly touching his face. "You could say that the Pine-Martin does."

"Who is the…"

She hushed him with a finger on his mouth. "It's best not to draw attention to that name."

"You just said it." He struggled to his feet and felt carefully on the ground to make sure he wouldn't slip again. An old fae watched them warily from the porch of a shabby bar, smoking a pipe, with an unwavering gaze. She took his arm and led him a little further. The wind bit his face: that was why he was a little red.

“The Martins have many eyes in this area. They control most of the district, and all the guards.”

“What do they smuggle?”

“They deal in games, races, and everything where a bet is placed. I doubt Mythrim is involved with them, but they might know something of him,” she said, adjusting her scarf.

They stopped before a lavish restaurant not unlike the ones in the Snow District. Leif coughed. “It’s like they want everyone to know where they are.”

“It’s not like they’re committing any open crimes…” Fryn smiled and pushed open the door. “But underneath that, they have power and connections.”

Inside there was a giant staircase that swept from the back wall into two branches encircling a stage where a band of musicians played soft music as important-looking fae sat at various coffee tables with newspapers, pocket watches, and glasses of various drinks. In the center a sophisticated, but particularly rough-looking fae sat at a decorative table with a fur mantle over his suit and a cigar in his hand. He was the only one who looked, only with his eyes, in their direction.

“We wait here,” Fryn whispered. Sure enough, an elegantly dressed waitress stepped forward, her slim-cut dress too thin to obscure the evidence of the knives beneath her apron, at least for his trained eyes. Leif swallowed.

The waitress was tall, with dark black hair, and maroon eyes. Leif forgot all about Caelyn. “Would you like to drink or dine?” She asked; her eyes narrow as they passed over their interlocked arms. Leif felt stiff.

“Dine, please, and if you have a paper?” Fryn asked placing her far hand over the one already interlaced with his arm, almost protectively.

The waitress blinked twice while surveying the tables, and spotted one behind the center figure. “Please, come this way.”

They followed after smoothly but quickly, suddenly feeling as if everyone were staring daggers into their backs. Fryn mouthed “follow my lead” and they sat down at an oblique angle to what Leif guessed to be their host.

The waitress placed a single print-sheet menu on the table, and turned to the center figure. His hand tapped a newspaper on the table while he took a drag on his cigar. “Excuse me sir, if you are finished with your paper, may I let these other customers read it?”

He looked at her as if coming out of a daze. “What? Oh, yes, of course, could I have some tea?”

“As you wish, sir, thank you.” She picked up the folded paper, and set it on top of the menu with an order slip and a pen. “Please look over the menu and write your order, when you are done, I will deliver it for you,” she directed with a dangerously smooth voice. Leif forgot about Fryn on his arm.

Fryn unlaced her arm from his, and looked over the menu. She made a show of having mixed feelings, and wrote down “two specials with recommended pairing” on the slip. Then, picking up the newspaper, she found the daily puzzle: a crossword puzzle.

“Do you like this sort of thing?” Leif asked, leaning over it. “Oh, number twelve is frostbite.”

She ignored him and wrote as she pleased: “Looking for information, Mythrim, connection to dinner-party incident” in various boxes.

She then worked to fill in the surrounding ones with correct answers and set it down on the table. The important fae with the cigar noticed, and grunted gently. “Excuse me miss, are you finished with that paper? I think I missed an article.” He set his

cigar in a notch on a porcelain ash tray, and leaned a white bone cane against the table.

She smiled and passed it over, and he nodded in thanks as he noticed the crossword and mumbled, “oh, frostbite” and smiled.

“Fryn, do they…?” *know you* he meant to ask, but she squeezed his arm slightly and glanced away. At that moment the waitress returned and took a look at the order slip. “It won’t be a minute, two steaks, and reds.”

It really wasn’t even a minute before the wine arrived, a dark tannic wine that Leif had to smell three times before taking a sip. They leaned back and enjoyed the wine until their lunch arrived, and they finished eating. They didn’t speak to the newspaper fae again. Fryn asked for the check, and left a generous tip, and led him back out.

They didn’t talk until they passed through the gate to the Hill District when Fryn noticeably relaxed as she let go of his arm. “That was Eljaren Pine-Martin, the patriarch of the Pine-Martin clan. He governs the entire district, and deals with hunters in a very strict fashion. There has never been a price on his head, and I suspect there never will be.”

“How will we hear from them?” Leif shivered.

“We will order a drink in the early evening tomorrow, or the day after. And yes, they know me. After all, I’m a distant relative—one of the ones who got rich and moved into the inner rings. I’m not popular, but I’m not unwelcome.”

“Does that mean you’re a Pine-Martin?”

“No, I’m distantly related. Anyway, let’s go find Clair… I need a drink. I couldn’t enjoy the wine.” She led him north, growing more and more relaxed, the farther they got.

They found Clair in the Snow District at one of the police boxes chatting with a bashful guard, and went out for a late drink at one of the guard's recommended locations.

When they'd all ordered, Clair shifted her bag across the booth and sighed against the cushioned back. "I can't believe you went to Martin-hall, I suppose that's a good source of information, but it's going to be expensive."

"Well, even if they find nothing, I paid for food and drinks, so they won't complain, it's their entry fee," Fryn said, taking a breath as she relaxed in her seat opposite Clair.

Leif stood with a tray of snacks looking between them hesitantly, wondering where to sit.

Fryn shook her head and patted the place beside her. "Sit down and let me eat. The tension made the steak unenjoyable." She muttered something to the effect that they would make gourmet food turn to ash in a guest's mouth, and Leif guessed it was out of fear, or the kind of guilt one feels when they try to eat something extravagant in an impoverished area.

The bartender waved him over, and sent back three tumblers of honeyed Yardall. They all clinked glasses cheerfully. "You made it out Fryn," Leif said, "I'd say that means that you get to live to drink another day."

She gave him a cold glance, and smiled. "You were practically shaking. If I hadn't held your hand, well, you probably would have embarrassed all of us."

"What a thing to say, and so soon in our friendship." Leif took a sip of sceppe and looked at Clair. "Are you all like this?"

"Who?"

"Fee."

“No, I’m nice.” She blinked. “But only to fae I like.”

“I’m nice.” Fryn chewed a piece of dried fruit. “At least, I didn’t hurt you.”

Leif was beginning to feel that she could just as easily hurt him by accident as on purpose. Still, he shifted in his seat and rested his elbows on the table. “Well, it won’t be as tense tomorrow, right? And, Mythrim still doesn’t know we’re alive. I can’t wait to see his face when we catch up to him.” He laughed quietly, but still earned a raised eyebrow from the bartender.

“You shouldn’t disturb the other guests in the Snow District,” Fryn chided.

Clair agreed, pointing out that laughter carried, and it smacked of the lower classes.

“Well, I’m sure they make some allowances for foreigners,” Leif said.

“Just don’t push it.” Clair chuckled, and took another sip.

End of sample