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ARS GOLETICA, THE ART OF GOLEMANCY

By

Aaron Thibodeau

B.A. Colby College, 2021

A THESIS

Submitted in Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

(in English)

The Graduate School

The University of Maine

May 2024

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UNIVERSITY OF MAINE GRADUATE SCHOOL LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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ARS GOLETICA, THE ART OF GOLEMANCY

By

Aaron Thibodeau

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Gregory Howard

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented
in Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts
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May 2024

Ars Goletica is a Gothic Fantasy novel that tells the story of Claire as she begins her first semester at the College of Clay, a school specializing in the art of Golemancy. Claire has desired to be a master of a magical art since her youth, a desire turned to obsession through her natural inability to produce magic herself. While she struggles in school due to her impediment, her struggles are complicated as her mentor and roommate Alana passes away under mysterious circumstances, circumstances whose origins prove a possible solution to Claire's failing grades at the college.

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Ars Goletica, as a project, seeks to engage with what genre has to offer a narrative through blending the tropes associated with them. The following thesis engages with the genres of fantasy, fairy tale, and gothic horror across its three sections. While elements of each genre appear throughout the thesis, each section premieres the aesthetics of one of them, adding a layer of that genre to the narrative as it unfolds. Fantasy is the focus in the first section, gothic horror in the second, and fairy tale in the third. The first section's, *Shaping*'s, purpose is to introduce Claire, who the narrative follows, her roommate and mentor Alana, as well as the relationship between them that defines Claire's navigation of the college-space she now finds herself in. The fantasy element features in this section as it focuses on worldbuilding and the ways that world has defined Claire who, uniquely in the space she has chosen to inhabit, cannot perform magic. While this is more common than not, she is the first in living, common memory to pursue magical expertise despite her inability to engage with it as her peers do. In terms of fantasy as a genre, this allows Claire to view the world through the lens of the mundane she is bound to rather than the magical as mundane. Her perspective is bound up in experiencing the magic of the world as something foreign and new despite growing up adjacent to it. This grappling with her own mundaneness is built on in the second section, *Drying*, where, with the absence of her mentor, she is forced to renegotiate again the magical space she now inhabits and the unique challenges it presents her. Also added in this section is the creeping sense of dread common in gothic horror as she has to confront who she is versus who she wants to be as she grapples not with the loss of her mentor, but the opportunities and exploitations opened to her through that loss. Finally, the third section, *Firing*, sees Claire being sent home due to her failing grades they attribute to her unique positionality and the loss of her roommate. Here, the fairy tale reality and kind of magic she grew up around serves to highlight her

own liminality in both spaces of home and college, while confronting the mirror image of what she could have become in her desperation to be a normalized part of the world of magic she idolizes.

When I began working on this thesis, my focus was purely on the “literary-ness” of genre and how I had to be extraordinarily explicit in the ways I navigated the genres I wished to write in to achieve writing that held “literary merit.” This idea of “literary merit,” while it faded as I worked on this project, derived from the dichotomy of literary and popular fiction, the latter of which genre fiction is usually aligned with. A large part of my own focus as a creative writer prior to this thesis had been built around challenging the monolithic nature of “literature” as an exclusionary concept, of what can be deemed of holding literary value. Again, this idea stemmed from genre literature, especially fantasy, being valued as pure entertainment rather than looked at for artistry as is done with literary fiction. However, this divide proved unrealistic to how genre operates in writing because literary fiction’s strength lies not in how it rises above or outside of genres, but in how it plays with, twists, and adapts them. Through reflecting on the role of the elements of these three genres in my thesis, I feel less pressure to “resist the monolith” due to the way narrative relies on recognizing genre conventions to be able to move away from them. Instead of literary value being an absolute term, genres come together to be literary and it is through that cross-pollination, that thoughtful mediation and combination, that literature is formed. As my concern with literary versus genre fiction proved to be an aesthetic impediment to my way of thinking and writing that skewed my focus and how I synthesized these influences into what I wanted to do, I moved away from such questions of literary value as I worked on this project as they weren’t relevant to the conversation I want this work to partake in. With such questions of merit no longer being a part of the conversations in which my thesis engages, my thesis and the way it approaches defining the characters within it are able to explore the mirroring and exploration of the liminal the combination of these three genres allow. Fantasy, despite commonly being viewed as a purely popular genre,

complicates the act of mirroring common in gothic horror as the landscape shifts to become as much of a mirror as those around the characters whose perspectives we follow. When I started this thesis, I wanted to bend that mirror to have it demonstrate the multiplicity of humanity rather than just the duality of monstrosity and humanity. Claire is met with this mirror on several levels, the magical world around her reflecting her own personally defined inadequacies and the mundaneness she so despises inherent in both herself and her origins, while the use of the fairy tale genre's focus on boundaries, liminality, and the permeability of the wondrous and mundane allows for a further complication of that mirror as it becomes a portal rather than just a reflection. Through the combination of what defines these genres, Claire is able to not only see her reflection in every part of the world, but through exposure to that reflective panopticon she is able to transcend that reflection rather than become mired in or mediating it.

The early iterations of this story were hurt by my original unwillingness to blend genre conventions and my fear of engaging in any way with those of the fantasy genre due to the stigma around it of being "non-literary." When I introduced this piece to a group of my peers in a workshop, the most important piece of feedback I got was how my story didn't start where I had started it. While this at first seemed like an issue of narrative, which it partially was, it was equally an issue of genre. At the time, I was thinking about how to reveal the world as not-our-own slowly over the course of the first chapter. While that can work, it was an intentional neglect of the expectations of the genre in which I was writing, with the expectations around the world and worldbuilding lying in the fantasy genre. As I continued writing, I realized that outside of also showing more of the characters interacting so that this pivotal moment would have the gravity the events implied, I would similarly need to acknowledge and play within the confines of the genre I had chosen before breaking away from them, so that such a movement read as intentional rather than merely neglectful. Following that workshop, I went back further in the narrative and worked to show how the central

characters were intertwined, how not all is as it seems between Claire and Alana. Instead of choosing to begin where the drama began, where elements of gothic horror could be injected into this fantasy backdrop, I had to first establish the world so that blending of genre had impact rather than a disorienting effect. This was an important moment in the creation of my thesis because it was through this moment in particular that I came to realize that literary-ness is not found through a lack of engagement, but through direct and conscious engagement with those tropes and traditions and in acknowledging the flaws associated with them rather than merely skirting them altogether. As I continued expanding on my thesis and locating the place I wanted to start it, I needed to engage with those fantasy tropes to be able to not only let the piece enter a productive dialogue about them, but also for the other genres I wanted to play with in my thesis to be effective in how they deviate from the expectations the fantastical setting brings.

The biggest change in the trajectory of this work was in relinquishing my own preconceived and unrealistic conceptualizations of “literary-ness,” and through navigating that and through reconciling it with the voices I wish to build on as a writer, being Cormac McCarthy, Ray Bradbury, and Angela Carter. While they don’t all engage with the genres I chose to in my thesis, they each embody through their writing the ways this thesis thinks about those genres. Fantasy in particular deals in a sense of place, the world matters for a reason. Vital to fantasy works is the world and landscape as an active participant in the narrative, a factor which the characters ought to grapple with. For McCarthy, while not a fantasy writer, the landscape similarly reflects the internal struggles undergone by the characters and the conflicts there-in. In *The Road* and its post-apocalyptic narrative can be seen the same emptiness within the father and son as the wastes they navigate, only a meager flame of “good” keeping them going. It is only against their meager flame, their struggle to survive without letting the emptiness that permeates the world permeate them in turn, through which the depravity of the setting can be seen or appreciated. When exploring a house for food, the father and

son stumble on a hatch, it is through the light they bring with them, both literal and metaphorical, that the darkness in that basement is lifted, revealing as the father

ducked his head and then flicked the lighter and swung the flame out over the darkness like an offering. Coldness and damp. An ungodly stench. The boy clutched at his coat. He could see part of a stone wall. Clay floor. An old mattress darkly stained. He crouched and stepped down again and held out the light. Huddled against the back wall were naked people, male and female, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands. On the mattress lay a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt

(McCarthy, 110).

One of the more visceral scenes in the novel, the pair run out of the hatch as those kept within cry out feebly for help, dropping the lighter that had illuminated the room as they ran. The worldbuilding that occurs in this moment not only highlights the depravity that has become the norm in the wake of apocalypse, something the father realizes immediately and turns away from, but also in defining the characters as they oppose that norm and struggle against its weight. In my fantastical work, I focus on the mundane, with fantasy's ability to highlight the mundane being its greatest strength. In *The Road*, we see a sense of morality that is mundane to us flung into a world hostile to those values. In my thesis, the environment in which Claire exists mirrors her own existence in a similar way to how the father and son bring to light the darkness around them through contrast. Much like them, in the space Claire chooses to exist, how she has to navigate the world of magic without magic defines her relationship to that space. Only, in place of the goodness represented in the child in *The Road* being found in others at the end, if only a small group, Claire has to figure out how to break past the internal barrier she has that stops her from being magical. However, that goodness in the child is so rare amongst those they encounter in their journey that it becomes spectacular. It is only in the end that she fills a similar position to the child where she is

able to perform magic, making her averageness and how she worked within it spectacular. While the ability to highlight the mundane is fantasy's greatest strength, to make the mundane spectacular, Claire is equally marked by it. As she engages with an existence we in reality can feel, a desire for wonder that is, more so to us than to her, unreachable, it is that weight of her own mundanity that drives her desperation across the novel.

In gothic horror there is often the theme of obsession leading to madness, with that madness then often reflecting or magnifying the monstrosity present in a given character. Beyond the aesthetics borrowed from the genre, the second section of my thesis engages with this element of gothic horror as Claire's desperation drives her towards increasingly questionable acts to try and stay afloat at college. Despite her best efforts, Claire continues to struggle in this section with her schoolwork and can't wrap her head around what is needed to complete her golem without it burning out. Claire's desperation verges on madness as she breaks campus policies and what she would otherwise consider morally-right concerning her roommate's death and the knowledge she has of it as she hoards it for herself in case it might be of use to her studies. When writing this section, I reflected back on Bradbury's "Something Wicked This Way Comes," where Jim Nightshade is determined on using the carousel at the traveling circus, who the boys witness make one of the owners young again, to make himself older. When Jim finally gets on the ride though, his best friend, who is against the idea, gets on with him to try and pull him off. Bradbury writes that:

They traveled half a year in slithering orchard-warm dark before Will seized Jim's arm tight and dared to leap from so much promise, so many fine tall-growing years, flail out, off, down, pull Jim with. But Jim could not let go the pole, could not give up the ride.
"Will!"

Jim, half between machine and friend, one hand on each, screamed.

(Bradbury, 244).

Jim is met with a choice, between right and wrong, the evil of the machine and what he desires and the right of his friend trying to stop him from trading away his years. Jim is locked between them, and when he falls off the carousel, he is presumed dead by his friend. While he is revived, his memory of what happened seems to be absent, his confrontation of his own desire and obsession whisked away with the carousel seemingly. The monstrosity in him aligned with that desire is repressed with the near-death experience he had. Within the gothic depiction of monstrosity in the mirror, something experienced by Jim in the carnival's mirror maze, he doesn't confront it beyond allowing himself to fall to it before being whisked back by his friend. In this way, the monstrosity shown by the gothic mirror is, typically, either repressed or mediated rather than dealt with. It cannot merely be whisked away; monstrosity, or evil as Bradbury references it in the novel, has to be confronted in some fashion either through accepting it as part of oneself or distancing oneself from it, as happens to Jim. Building on this concept, while Claire becomes single-mindedly focused on her increasingly desperate experiments, across sections two and three she is forced to confront her increasing monstrosity as manifested in the golems she creates. However, rather than mediating those choices, she transcends that monstrosity that held her back, shedding it like a second skin through that confrontation.

Fairy tales themselves come up twice in this thesis as narrative tools, the first being in Professor Moratvius's tale to Claire, and the second in Claire's own recollection of the events of her childhood and confrontation with the wolf-beast in the woods near her home. Claire, while not the most interested in these tales, has a morbid curiosity befitting her role as a fairy tale survivor herself, as one who has experienced the stuff of fairy tales and survived, grown up, and mostly moved on from those dream-like events. In Carter's "The Bloody Chamber," the girl wed to this retelling of "Bluebeard" manages to escape him with help from her mother, who charges in to rescue her, a notable twist on the original tale where the girl's brothers or father do the saving. However, what is

intriguing and beautiful about Carter's work beyond that twist is the way she continues past the killing of the husband and the pre-supposed "happily ever after" that should come with the husband's death. Instead, we see how life resumes, and more importantly, how it stagnates even in that movement forward:

No paint nor powder, no matter how thick or white, can mask that red mark on my forehead; I am glad he cannot see it – not for fear of his revulsion, since I know he sees me clearly with his heart – but, because it spares my shame.

(Carter, 45).

Despite her living and doing nothing wrong in her marriage beyond falling for a monster, she feels shame that she ties to the brand her late husband put on her on discovering she had trespassed in the one room of the house she had been told not to. Her survival isn't a change of the fairy tale tropes common to the genre, but the shame which she carries with her irreversibly throughout her life, making the traumatic event of her marriage a recursive one. This recursiveness is something I built on in my defining of Claire's character, as effectively, she is a survivor of a fairy tale horror the same way the girl in "The Bloody Chamber" is. Claire recognizes the signs that something is amiss in the forest across all three sections because she has been in that liminal space of life and death before. Rather than a husband's castle and a secret bloody chamber, the threshold between her mundanity, the magic she wishes to engage with at college, and the wild, primeval faerie magic that permeates the woods around her home and on campus serves as a liminal space in which she resists or falls to the temptation of calling on her roommate's taboo research. In place of a key, Claire follows the wisps. The bone from her roommate's experiments is presented to her by the wisps in the woods not because they are calling to her specifically, but because she is the only one there that knows how to see them and what following their call means.

In my engagement with gothic horror and fairy tale liminality, the gothic act of mirroring brings Claire's confrontation with herself to a head in a monster manifested at her own hands. In these Frankenstein-like moments of the golem's creation that occurs both in section two and three, again and again she tries to resurrect her work through her roommate's stolen work but fails to do so and when Claire does, it almost undoes her. Unlike the running we see in Frankenstein and the near-death experience clearly the madness from Jim in Bradbury's work, it is through confrontation that she manages to move through it, to transcend the mirror rather than merely mediate it within herself through putting aside the fear of failure that drove her. In these gothic and southern gothic conceptualizations of evil and monstrosity, there is an impossibility to it that they must confront. Claire grapples with her cheating and stealing and lying as using any means necessary to succeed, but the futility of those actions as she almost dies and then pursues the instrument of her possible destruction that has been driving her own obsession into the liminal space of the fairy tale woods is a moment of transformation rather than mediation. Recognizing where her actions have taken her, she chooses to take responsibility for them and see them to their end, even if it marks her own. Only after she removes this temptation, or the ability to be tempted by it, from the equation, is she able to succeed in her work in a way that isn't monstrous.

While the thesis itself ends on the third section, after this thesis process, I intend to bring the elements of each genre addressed here into a final section that sees Claire returning to school prepared to succeed, as well as to confront the lingering symptoms of her obsession and failures that continue on there. In her returning, she no longer exists in the liminal space offered by her fairy tale-esque encounter at home and through it solved her problem, meaning that she can now see the area in which she exists through a different light. This will see her primarily dealing with being more sociable with her friends as she no longer has the shadow of possible failure looming over her in the same way, but it also means dealing with the professor that set these things in motion, albeit

unintentionally. Mortavius, as the professor that led Alana to the bone that led her to her demise and as the one who confiscated the fragments of it Claire had stolen from Alana's desk, has a larger role to play than mere mentor as seen in section two of this thesis. While there are moments where his motivations are called into question, namely around the story he tells Claire, I intend for the gothic aesthetic to come to bear in the horror behind Alana's disappearance as Claire uncovers the kind of work he was doing that Alana stole from. In this final section, Mortavius's character will be productively complicated within the aesthetics and tropes that intersect across these genres. I am excited to explore what is coming next, but this version of my thesis offers a complete arc for Claire's character that allows the reader to experience her transformation through the constraints and offerings of the genres in which I engaged. Through this thesis, I aimed to bring these genres together to create a reflective landscape for Claire and demonstrate the power these genres can offer to explore a characters' deepest fears and desires as represented in the world around them and through that landscape to transcend those boundaries.

Shaping - Chapter 1

Her favorite part of the process had always been adding the details, the parts that made her sculptures her own. It had taken her about a week to re-learn how to detail with her new gloves, to get the thick leather used to the bend of her fingers. Sometimes the scalpel would still cut wider or deeper into the clay than she meant it to, but overall she was happy with what she could create. She was happier still with not having to scrub clay out from under her cuticles. She leaned back and wiped her brow on her shoulder, looking down at the beauty of the clay at this stage, how it was malleable, forgiving. Claire's scalpel slid across the mouse's head, taking the excess clay and spinning it into whiskers on its face, returning to divot its scalp in with lines mimicking fur.

The room was cozy, or that was what Claire had told herself when she moved in. Her bed and desk sat opposite each other, each crammed into a corner next to the sole window in her room which looked out East over the campus gardens and the mountains beyond. Dust hung constantly about the air, though it was only visible as the sun rose low over the eastern peaks, its final rays catching each speck in their suspension, like a spell relieving them of their imprisonment if only for an hour. She knew better though. A raven cawed outside the window, and she pictured him cracking snails on a rock, though the tapping she heard was merely her roommate's footsteps in their half of the room.

"Still working on your mouse assignment? I remember doing something similar, but I think they wanted us to make frogs. I would've preferred to make a mouse, the leg joints are so much less complicated." Claire's roommate poked her head and shoulder out of the stairwell that separated their rooms in the dorm, no more than a two step staircase into her quarters. She had blonde hair that hung down parallel to the doorframe at the angle her head jutted out from. It reminded Claire of strands of hay from back home.

“Morning Alana. They gave us a choice. I remember the professor saying that there were too many complaints last year about this being a Golemancy class, not a fine arts course. I chose the mouse because its arms and legs seemed more balanced, less size difference between the front and the back, but I think a few people chose to make frogs still.” Claire wiped her scalpel on her apron and tucked it back into the case with her other tools. Standing, she slid the clay mouse onto the window sill between her desk and her bed, letting the morning sun take its turn working the clay. She patted the clay flakes from her hands against the dark leather apron she had received upon getting accepted to the College of Clay alongside her bronze-plated leather gloves.

“I think it's about done though, finally. Time to let it set.”

“Let me take a look first.” Alana hopped off the top stair, tripping over a small pile of books that had spilled over from next to Claire’s desk, blonde strands reaching out to the air in a failed attempt to keep her upright.

“Claire, I can understand you wanting to study up before classes go into full swing, but did you really need this many books?” Alana gestured around the floor of Claire’s room as she righted herself, her open palm calling out each stack of books that filled the corners around her bed and desk. Between each stack and the teal rug her father insisted she take with her, Claire could barely see the floor.

“Sorry, sorry, I didn’t notice that my tower toppled. I just want to make sure I keep up is all.” Alana worked her way past Claire, putting her nose almost to the mouse’s on the windowsill.

“How could you not have? It was almost as tall as your desk last night.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I’ll be more mindful, I promise.” Claire nibbled at her cheek. Two days into the semester and she was already annoying her roommate. She looked down at her gloves as her father’s words echoed in her mind. There was bound to be more to college than just her and her craft, after all.

Alana eased her hand between the mouse and the windowsill, lifting it under her gaze. She ran her finger just above the surface, examining the texture without truly making contact.

“This is nice work Claire. How are you planning to execute the runework to animate it?”

“I was actually going to wait until it had dried a little more, after I’ve had my first class on runes this morning.” Claire fought with her right glove until it eventually gave, abandoning it in her apron pocket. She moved to fumbling with the books that had obstructed Alana’s stairwell, the one pile refusing to become whole again. She eventually resolved to make a second pile at the foot of her bed.

“Whose it with?” Alana turned back towards the window, the sun having just barely risen over the grape-laden horizon and the student gardens, casting a patch of light onto the sill. She laid the mouse there, to bask in the rays until dried.

“I believe it was a Professor Caius Mortavius.” Claire was in the process of removing her other glove. Somehow she had gotten clay spatter along her nose and left cheek and she could feel it starting to dry, stretch with her speech, and flake.

“Oh I loved him. He’s great, really seems to care that you take something away from all of this. I even did some work with him over the summer. Most students don’t really like Rune-Carving, see it as a groundwork we already know. I felt that way going in, but learned so much about the intricacies I could put into my golems and their functions. Make sure you pay attention ok?”

“Thanks, I’ll remember that. It’s honestly the class I’ve been looking forward to the most. Unlike the rest of you, I don’t have any options other than Rune-Carving to bring my creations to life.” Claire untied her apron, folding the gloves inside of it and placing it on her chair, before packing her notes away into her bag. Alana went back to hovering in the stairwell, leaning against the frame.

“Once you master it Claire, you’ll be all the better for it. Unlike the rest of us, you don’t have a way to cheat your way through. By the way, I came down this early to see if you wanted to grab breakfast with me, figured we could cover your first day seeing as you were already passed out when I got back last night.” Alana patted Claire’s shoulder before dipping back behind the curtain. Claire smirked to herself as she continued tidying up. She had been up for a few hours already thanks to Alana’s snores.

Alana’s head poked back through after a second, “Though maybe you should give your face a scrub first.”

“I thought I felt some clay drying there. Is it there a lot?”

Alana nodded emphatically.

“Alright, just give me a few and we can grab something before classes.”

“Can do. See you in fifteen.”

Claire did a quarter turn towards the door to the dorm, leaning in close to the mirror on its back. She wasn’t sure how she had gotten clay in her hair or on the collar of her night shirt with such a small project, but she had. Grabbing a towel, she headed into the hallway to shower for the day.

When she got back, the room was cast in wavering shadows as the orchard’s trees bowed and dipped in the breeze. She felt as if her room was under water as the light moved in gentle waves across the turquoise walls. She crossed her room, looking up the stairs into Alana’s half, making sure the coast was clear to cross. She shut the shade long enough to get dressed, a sapphire sweater and leather bodice with a black skirt. She looked in her mirror again. She had gotten most of the clay out of her hair, which she tied back into a ponytail, leaving only a few auburn strands to frame her face.

She knocked on the stairwell’s precipice before heading into Alana’s portion of the dorm, a departure from Claire’s own already increasingly cluttered floor space. While Claire had mounds of

research waiting to occur, Alana had months of it already carefully accounted for and stocked away on the book shelves that lined each wall other than the ones inhabited by the window on the far end and the sink next to the stairs.

“Ready to go?”

“Yeah. It looks like it's going to be a beautiful day, if a bit windy.” Alana looked up at Claire, breaking into a smile on seeing her, containing a laugh.

“How do you still have clay on your face? Right in the crook of your nose.” Claire felt along her nose, a small bit of grit rolling between her face and finger. She sighed and moved over to the sink. She rubbed her face with water and soap until she couldn't feel the grit of the clay anymore. Alana chuckled at her process, how she strained her neck over the ceramic bowl as the water came forth, careful that each drop didn't get on her shirt. It was her second day of classes, and this was the shirt she wanted to wear. She wasn't going to get it dirty with clay. Not yet.

“Which dining hall do you want to go to today? I could go for some eggs if that's alright.” Claire turned back towards Alana, Alana was still smirking at Claire as she finished drying her face, her turtleneck still triumphantly dry.

“I want something a little more interesting, but the closest one is the student-run hall in the Ruination School's building. Take my advice and stay away from there. It's always burnt or just gruel. It's a little more of a walk, but I think the one in the main hall at the bottom of the hill has the best food.”

“Sounds good to me.”

“Alright then, grab your bag and let's go.”

The dining hall at the bottom of the campus's hill was run by the academy itself and featured either professional chefs or alumni that worked with the campus. While not as experimental as the one in the Ruination or Manifestation's School buildings, it was more consistent. While the food

wasn't terrible, and Claire had eaten worse in her life, there was something about it she found enervating about half an hour after consumption, like it was eating the stomach in return. In this way, breakfast was the only safe meal.

"Really Claire? The oatmeal?" Alana gawked at her tray as she sat down across from her.

"Is there something wrong with oatmeal?" She had eaten alone yesterday, and no one had said a thing. Claire's spoon, laden with oats, quivered in limbo between her bowl and her mouth. The scrambled eggs watched on in yolky silence.

"No, not really I guess, I just don't think I've ever seen anyone eat it. Isn't it just for farmers and the like?" Alana shoved a bun glazed with sugar and cinnamon into her face. Her plate was filled with similarly sweet carbs, and a pair of boiled eggs.

"I've eaten this for breakfast my entire life. I don't know if I have it in me to change now." Claire dipped her spoon back into her oats, lackadaisically, hesitantly swirling the milk and pockets of fruit deeper into the bowl. She looked at her scrambled eggs with melted cheese and pepper and wondered if those also spoke to her background.

"Look, don't worry about it, but also take this." Alana slid a cinnamon roll from her plate over to Claire's. "While you're here, make sure you try a few things, ok?"

Claire picked up the bun, the sugary glaze dripping onto her eggs.

"Ok." Half an hour later, the bun would be like a rock in her stomach.

"So, what classes do you have today, ward of mine? You mentioned Rune-Carving, but what else?"

"Outside of my rune class though I have history today, but I already told you you don't have to worry over me as much as they asked you to. Yesterday was my literacies of magic course, whatever that means, and of course, Golemancy 101. I'm getting the hang of this part at least. My schedule isn't too bad."

“Literacies of magic is just to get you acquainted with magical forms outside of Golemancy as most that come here don’t immediately care for other subjects, even if they are widely available here, at least that’s how they market it. In all honesty you and I are two of perhaps ten students I know actually pursuing a degree in Golemancy. The College of Clay, as the name suggests, has a very specific reputation that they intend to keep up, one way or another.” Alana choked slightly on her own joke as it came out of her mouth and a pancake went into it, only butter, no syrup.

“That doesn’t sound too bad, though I don’t think I’ll get much that I can apply out of it.”

“You might be surprised Claire, it could be useful inspiration or something. Anyways, I need to get to class. I’m glad your semester is starting alright. Let’s do this again tomorrow maybe?”

“Sure thing Alana. It’s not like it’ll be very hard to find.”

“True.” She chuckled to herself, sighed, shook her head, and made her way out of the dining hall, forgetting her plate, empty as it was. She still wasn’t sure what to make of Alana. She was another student focusing on Golemancy, so that was helpful, though she was mostly just curious about what kind of research she was doing. Not everyone came here just for the thrill of magic for magic’s sake.

“I hope that doesn’t become a tradition.” Claire swepted the plate under her own before cleaning hers in turn. Claire ran her finger down the ridges created from the stacked plates, thinking about what she would even want to talk about over breakfast tomorrow. She tapped her finger twice on Alana’s plate before swinging her leg to the side of the chair. As she rose from her chair, she backed into another student. She felt them back away from her, turning to see them dancing their plate on two fingers before stabilizing both the plate and their own balance. It would have been comical if not for it being her fault.

“I’m so sorry! Did you drop anything? Can I help clean anything up?” She placed her own plates back on the table and began scanning the floor for any fresh food.

“No, no, it’s ok. I didn’t drop anything, somehow.” He pushed his bangs back to either side of his face, a few strands caught on his glasses.

“Well, given the exotic dance you just performed, I can’t say I’m too surprised.” She chuckled at him. “My name is Claire. Sorry again for bumping into you. I was distracted by my roommate leaving her plate behind.”

“It happens, no worries on my end. I didn’t lose a single egg.” She looked into his hands as he lowered the plate instinctively with his words. He was right, not a single egg lost, though there wasn’t much else to lose beyond the five that were there. All boiled, all rolling free on the plate.

“Well it was nice meeting you, though again I’m so sorry for almost causing a mess.” She picked up her things and began to leave, before turning back to him. “What was your name again?”

“Oh! Sorry. Pierre, I’m a freshman this year.”

“I am too! Maybe I’ll see you around then.”

“Maybe! What classes do you have today?” He muttered this through a mouthful of egg as she turned away from him. Her shoulders sighed for her as she turned back.

“In a few minutes I have Runes and Carving Them, Rune-Carving 101 and then History of Golemancy, A Tale of Bronze and Clay later this afternoon. Sorry again for almost tripping you, but I really need to get to class.” She started to turn again as his eyes lit up and he coughed on his eggs.

“Cool! I have both of those. Let me finish these eggs and we can head over together. Think of it as recompense for my shin.” He smirked at her before guzzling down the remaining four eggs. She held back a smile of her own. Maybe college wouldn’t be so daunting after all.

Shaping - Chapter 2

When she arrived in Rune-Carving, the professor was nowhere to be found. There were a few other students already in the room, but they were either already in groups or keeping to themselves. The room consisted of six rows of ascending benchings, each with a desk to accompany them. The left and back walls of the classroom featured large glass windows that made the most of the sun's light, while the front wall featured a massive slab of stone with countless theorems and ideas all written and scribbled over and out in an endless pursuit of the same knowledge over and over again. The front row on the bottom was empty, but Claire chose to sit in the row behind it. She spent the few minutes she had between her arrival and the start of class trying to make out those scribbles, before she was startled back into time by Pierre's voice.

"I'm sorry, what was that, I was reading the board." Claire cleared her throat indignantly.

"What? How can you read those, they are beyond faded." She looked over to see Pierre, his face all smile aside from his left eyebrow, which now twitched in an arc above the accompanying eye at her statement.

"I couldn't really, I was just attempting to read them. What was it you said though?"

"Oh. Have you heard anything about this professor?" He leaned in as he asked, his split bangs shadowing his face, light from the opposing window turning his glasses white at that angle.

"A little from my roommate, the same one that left the plates. I'm still getting a feel for her though, so I don't know how reliable her information is going to be."

"Still, what did she say?"

"She said she liked him, but that most students don't like this class because they find it beneath them."

"That means it should be easy right? If everyone hates this class, then it is either extremely boring or extremely hard. Let's hope for the former, yeah?" He chuckled as he spoke.

“Let’s.”

It wasn’t much longer before whispers grew to indirect musings across the room as to where the professor could be. While it was only a few minutes past the start of class, on the first day this was a concerning sign. Claire wondered why Alana had spoken so highly of Professor Mortavius if he was going to be late to his own class.

A laugh echoed from the hallway, followed by an “I will speak to you later, have a good day.” The door to the class glided open afterwards, and teal mist began to pour through the opening. One student in the back groaned “Great, another one!”

“Oh great, looks like it might not be boring, just hard.” Pierre pretended to elbow Claire lightly in the arm to accent his joke, but her gaze was locked on the door. Around it, through the mist, she could see runes dancing in the frame, each one lighting up and fizzling out as the mist poured from them and into the room. She strained her neck forward, her crescent moon earrings swinging like pendulums in response to the sudden movement.

“Welcome to Rune-Carving 101! My name is Caius Mortavius and I will be the professor prosiding over this section of the course.” A voice echoed through the room, and with a subsequent snap, the mist dissipated almost instantly. Standing behind the lectern in front of the stone slab, seemingly from nowhere, was the professor of the class. While they were all staring at the door, he had already written his name and the plan for the day on the board.

Around her echoed a mixture of amazement and trite groaning. To her though, what mattered was the how of the act, not why it had been chosen or what it might mean for their experience in the class. Pierre was still talking to her about how this didn’t bode well for them, but her face was glued to the floor. Around the professor’s feet swirled a few pages with runes scribbled on them.

“Do you see those Pierre?” She nodded towards his feet.

Pierre stopped and blinked at her for a few seconds, Mortavius asking students to pass syllabi around in the background.

“The loose pages?” he mouthed.

“The very same. That has to be how he did it.”

“Why does it matter how he did it? I doubt he’ll give us a lesson about it.”

“You never know. I’m going to ask him after class.” She began to jot down her question at the front of her notes for the day.

“Do whatever makes you happy, I guess.”

“I shall.”

Claire began mimicking what she could remember of the runes that flashed in the door frame on the syllabus once it made its way to her. Before class was over, she had mostly completed what she thought was a spell to produce a similar mist she intended to try in her dorm room, all while following along with what she had come to understand as the standard policies for the classes here.

“Of course, if any of you have any questions or if anything comes up, please do not hesitate to reach out to me. I know that for many of you, this is your first semester and I hope I can do what I can to make it an easy transition for you all.” Mortavius clapped his hands three times as he finished speaking, and the mist flared up around him again.

Claire’s nose rocketed up from her notes, only to see a shower of blue sparks wisping into nothingness where the pages had been around the lectern when Professor Mortavius had entered the room. When the mist disappeared, all that remained were a few faint scorch marks along the floor.

As her peers were filing out, Claire approached the podium and knelt next to it, running a finger through the settling ash around the lectern.

“Missed your chance did you?” Pierre squatted next to her, tracing the air above the scorch lines with one hand while tucking his textbooks under the other arm.

“Missed it? A chance was never there. He left as quickly as he entered the classroom.”

“Well, have you figured it out yet? I saw you scribbling runes all over your syllabus. You should be careful with those. While the ones used in the door shouldn’t cause any harm, they might take whatever paper they are written on with them.” He stood back up, watching her rub the dust between her fingers.

“You recognized the runes he used?” Claire jolted up, banging the back of her head lightly along the lower edge of the lectern’s plateau. Not even acknowledging the pain, she leaned closer to Pierre, eyes piercing through his own.

“You need to tell me how it was done.”

“Sorry Claire, I recognized the spell but I don’t know exactly how it was done. You’d be better off waiting until next time to just ask the professor if you’re that interested. Have you not seen that kind of stunt before?”

Claire leaned back away as suddenly as she had leaned in. “Of course not, alright, I’ll wait. And no, I haven’t. Is it that weird to want to understand a magic one hasn’t yet encountered?”

She began to head towards the door, eyes now set on the frame which, perplexingly to her, remained unscorched.

“No, I guess not, it just seems rather elementary at this point. Sorry, that sounded harsher than I meant it.”

“It’s alright. I know. It’s just not elementary to me is all. What class are you off to next Pierre?”

“History. You?”

“The same. Care to meet up for lunch beforehand and head over together?”

“Sure. I’ll try and tell you what I remember of the spell, if you’d like.”

“Yeah, I’d appreciate that.” As they left, Claire ran her hand along the doorframe, searching for ash or grooves her finger did not meet.

Pierre split off from her shortly after for another of his own classes, and she found herself with little else to do than wander through and get to know the campus. The campus furlled out and down across the hill on which it was built, a stone crown atop the hill. The jewel of this crown was the library, a massive conglomeration of pillars and spires that was here before the college was established. Claire climbed the steps to the library, turning at the top to look out and over the campus, which in turn overlooked the town beneath it, and it in turn overlooked the sea. It was breezy on the hill compared to the plains back home, and she could feel it play with her bangs as it whispered across the campus, the smell of the sea from which it came only a memory by the time it reached campus.

Claire closed her eyes as the sunlight and wind washed over her, and she could hear the trees rustling around the library in the breeze, the soft leaves clattering together like the links of chain on a knight’s mail. It had been over a decade since she had thought of knights and the like, since she last saw her uncle. Claire shook her head, wincing as she opened her eyes to the light. Turning to the nine-foot tall oaken doors of the library, she secured her satchel behind her back and put all her weight against it. After a few seconds, it cracked and yawned against the floor as it budged and she slid through. They hadn’t been as heavy as she had expected.

Sitting down at a table, Claire took out her notes from the previous class. They were a mess of marginal notes regarding her theories about the professor’s trick, though she doubted she had missed much in her obsession as, based on his outline, they had mostly just gone over the syllabus and the basic schematics for the mice they were all working on in Golemancy 101. She had studied it long before she even arrived on campus. Mortavius’s trick however, was something new.

After an hour or so of staring at her notes and conjectures and finding little in the stacks of the library to help given her limited searching time and lack of specifics beyond the visual, she returned to her seat in a slump. As she turned her head back towards her notes one last time, she noticed for the first time the doors on the opposite end of the library from where she had entered. A few students had just come in through them, exposing a sliver of the lush greenery that populated the other side. Claire thought about the gardens that sprawled underneath her windows and recognized this as one entrance to them. Packing up her things, she decided she needed a break from her “research” and that a stroll through the garden might lift her spirits.

The garden branched out in seven paths from a central plaza, the plaza itself sporting a fountain twice the height of the doors from which she had just exited. It trickled gently in a series of cascading basins into an octagonal base, which in turn gurgled out into little rivulets in the center of each cobblestone path in all directions extending from the building, continuing on into the garden. A handful of browning leaves swirled across the basin’s surface, the first sacrifices to the season. Each path was marked with a series of signs, telling what a peckish student might find along each path out in the maze. Her eyes settled on the path leading to the corn, which she knew wouldn’t be ready yet, and began to turn towards that familiar crop, when a blue sparkle caught her eye down the center path. Turning towards it, this path had no signs, but led to a stream that cut into the fields and the forest beyond, that in turn was crossed by a small bridge.

She took a few steps amongst the evergreen columns that dotted the path until she reached the bridge. Claire knelt down beside it, running her hand through the ripples. Looking to the north, the forest stretched out beyond the confines of the campus and through it ran the great Sombre. This stream was likely channeled from it by the hands of man and magus when the campus was first built. Standing up, another blue flicker danced on the edge of her vision, this time melding with the dark woods on the other side of the bridge rather than the gentle flow of the stream, and in an

instant, the air grew heavier around her, or seemed to. She looked across the waters, the path turning from cobblestone to weed-scarred earth, the untrodden grass heralded by two sets of evergreen columns that extended long and dark into the forest that lay behind. The boards creaked beneath her and she scanned the edge of the forest for another twinkle or wisp.

She sighed, looking back to the library plaza behind her. It was about time to meet Pierre for lunch.

When she got back from class, she could hear Alana moving around in her half of the dorm, singing something muffled to herself. Claire slung her bag at the foot of her bed, knocking over the stack of books she had just added there this morning.

“Saints preserve me.” She wrung her head in her hand, kneeling down to fix the stack again. She was on her stomach fishing for the final book under her bed when she heard Alana come down the stairs.

“Looks like you’re having a great time.” Claire could picture the smug smirk on Alana’s lips.

“This isn’t even the situation I’ve been in today.” Claire mumbled this to herself from under the bed, then realized her phrasing was more concerning than she wanted. She extracted herself and the book from under the bed, sitting on her knees to face Alana. The book in her hands was “Faeries and Where to Find Them.” A shiver went down her spine and sat in her legs. She was glad her skirt covered her goosebumps. Happy endings had nothing to do with faeries.

“What was that?”

“I said that that wasn’t the worst digging I’ve had to do today. I spent an hour in the library trying to figure out a spell Professor Mortavius used to sneak in and out of the classroom. I saw runes flare as it triggered too. If only I had gotten to study them Alana. I just want to see how it works.” Claire rose and dusted herself off as Alana rolled her eyes at her. She sat in her desk’s chair,

book still in hand, and tilted back to stare at the ceiling of her room, feet on her desk and chair with only two legs on the ground.

“That’s hilarious. He did the same thing in our class. I don’t know if anyone ever bothered to ask him about it though. You’ll have your chance to ask if you go to his office hours, if you are that desperate to understand what amounts to a party trick.” Alana’s voice echoed slightly, almost inaudibly, as her derision eked out between her words.

The first day of Rune-Carving, while she had been excited for it, was relatively boring. Like her other classes, it incorporated very little actual material and featured primarily a syllabus and class expectations. As had been explained to her the day before in her Golemancy 101 course, everyone had to take some variation of these two classes their first semester as these were the cornerstones of the College of Clay’s curriculum. While you could major in other areas outside of Golemancy, you had to interact with it in some fashion while here as that was the school of magic which the college was founded on. As such, there was a joint assignment between the two classes, which is where her mouse came in.

“How goes the mouse project now? Has your afternoon of syllabi reading and parlor trick pondering properly set you up to animate your mouse?” Alana had come down and was looking over Claire’s mouse, motionless on the windowsill.

“To be honest, I haven’t the slightest idea of where to start with the rune-carving part.” Claire was being anything but honest, but she was hoping this would get Alana back to her own side of the dorm so she could get started working on it.

“Not surprising, but here.” Alana picked up the mouse and grabbed a textbook from next to Claire’s desk, grabbing the binding between her fingers and whipping it free from the center of a stack. The plan had backfired. Claire continued to stare at the ceiling, as if how to get some time alone with her mouse was invisibly inscribed there somewhere.

“This one should have what you need to get started. Don’t expect it to happen all at once. Learning to inscribe runes, especially on an object you intend to animate, is a hard and tedious task when done by hand. For now, work on getting the central nervous system engraved. If you want, you can practice the rune forms on some blank paper first. Trust me, it will help. It would be worse for you to ruin your actual clay than a piece of paper.” Alana set the book on Claire’s chest and the mouse back on the window sill.

“For now, keep letting the mouse enjoy the view until you know where you need to start.”

“Thank you Alana.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m going to go out and catch up with a few friends from last year, but if you end up getting stuck just write down your questions and we can go over them tomorrow before breakfast or whatever.” She shouldered her backpack and hung her head between Claire’s and the ceiling.

“Don’t blow anything up, ok? Not that I’m sure you could.” Another snide remark at Claire’s situation. She knew it would be like this when she got to college, but she had hoped her dorm would’ve been a safe haven from them.

“Alright. See you tomorrow.” Claire gritted her teeth. The judgements were annoying enough without them being served directly in her face.

“See you tomorrow.” Alana slid between the door and the frame, opening it just enough for her to slip through. It closed with an almost inaudible click.

After Alana left, Claire got up and locked the door behind her roommate given it wasn’t as if she had taken the portion of the room with the door leading into the hallway. Laying her faerie book on top of the stack near the desk, she reached for the book Alana had directed her attention to. Looking at its cover, it read “Inscriptions and Animations: A Golemancer’s Guide to Making Life from the Loam.” Fanciful, but required for her Golemancy 101 class. Inside was a guide for the

most basic runes. Near the back, she found what she was looking for, an anchor for her golem, the central point of its artificial nervous system. She reached for her mouse, but put it back as soon as she had grabbed it, instead reaching for some blank paper.

“‘Begin with a circle.’ Easy enough. ‘The circle then needs an intersecting line for each appendage on the golem, including the head. Once each of these lines have been added as points of entry for the other runes, a nexus must be created. While there are many ways of going about this, the most common is the rune for life below.’” On the page was a very simple rune, an intersection of three lines with another perpendicular on each of their ends. If not for the length of the lines and the distance needed between them, it would have just been a hexagon.

“‘Once the rune of life has been inscribed, other runes to determine personality and purpose may be added, though these can be added later if so chosen.’ Ok Claire, follow it step by step. You don’t want another explosion incident like back at the farm. You still aren’t sure Dad has forgiven you for that cow and I doubt he’ll be any more forgiving if the college sends you home in your first week.” When the image she wanted was complete on the page, she leaned it against the wall behind her desk and collected the mouse, laying it on its back. Its front paws punched up into the air, stiff from its lack of movement all day.

Claire started the circle in the mouse’s belly three times before she was happy, carving out a line of clay only to replace it a moment later, smooth it over with the edge of the scalpel. Her lines extended vaguely towards the mouse’s extremities, as the book told her to do. When this was done, she added the rune for life, a few others documented in the book, and followed by adding one other command rune, one she had put on every creation she had ever attempted, the rune for love. Hopefully this would be the first to work for her.

“Ok little guy, all we need now is a few runes connecting your life rune to your limbs and a power source and you should be good to join us in the realm of the living!” She had it held up to her

face, her thumb and forefinger under its front legs. Setting it back down, she carefully traced a line to each joint, wherein she placed a circle where she inscribed the runes for binding and movement. While the forces were contradictory, they were important in her mind for keeping it together. Her assignment didn't specify the runes she would need to make her golem operate, instead assuming each student came to the college with such knowledge. She had made these work in the past, and she knew she could do it again. When she was done placing the runes to the head, she laid her precious experiment back on the desk. From her bag, she extracted a small stone, no bigger than the tip of her thumb. It glowed and pulsed in her hand, a soft yellow light escaping from between her fingertips. She placed it in the back of the creature, watching the life rune on its stomach light up.

"We have a connection, that's good." Claire set the mouse down on the desk again, waiting for it to get up and move, to twitch its nose or bounce its tail. Instead, it lay there, no more than a dry lump of clay.

"Oh come on! I followed it, I followed the guide. So be it. Alana will just have to tell me I'm stupid in the morning." With that, she threw her gloves on her desk and herself into her bed.

When she awoke, the sun was barely rising over the mountains to the far end of the horizon, and the light from the moons was as prevalent as its groggy beams. Claire got out of bed, still in her clothes from the previous night, and went over to her desk.

"Maybe with a set of rested eyes I'll be able to see where I went wrong." Saying this, she picked up her mouse and began to examine its belly and her own handiwork again. Looking at it, none of the limbs carried the dull light that still pulsed from her anchoring rune, except the head. Jerking the mouse's head to eye level, she could now see its nose twitching in greeting to her, its whiskers, misshapen and broken in the drying process, flicking in the air next to her face, trying to sense her with senses foreign to clay.

“Saints alive it worked! It worked!” Claire danced around the room, and both piles of her books fell inwards on the floor in the quaking earth.

“Claire, what is going on? Are you alright? It's so early, the sun isn't even rightly up.” Alana poked her head through the curtain again, still in her night clothes.

“Alana it worked! It's only the head but it worked!” Claire bounced over to her roommate, thrusting forward the ball of twitching whiskers and bouncing nose.

“Claire, I'm happy for you, but come on. It's too early. I'm glad your experiment worked at least somewhat, but let a girl get some sleep.” Alana jutted her head back through the stairwell and Claire could hear her collapse back into her bed. As she turned to go back to her own bed, Alana hollered through the divide. “And make sure those books are picked up before I get up!”

Claire watched as Alana turned back into her room, Alana's head shaking at the carpet whose fronds parted between and beneath her toes. Claire stood next to her desk for what felt like hours held within only a few meager seconds. She gulped, shaking her head as she turned back towards her sleeping corner. Placing the mouse on the windowsill next to her bed, Claire crashed back into bed. When she awoke, the sun had fully risen and Alana had already left the dorm. Cursing to herself, she rushed over to shuffle the books that had fallen in front of the stairway back against her desk in a pile. However, as she stood up after organizing them, her gaze was met with a sheet of maroon. She stared at where it met the floor for a moment, and another after. She hadn't even gotten to discuss the color.

Claire pictured the sun peaking through the slit between Alana's window's curtains, edging slowly closer to her bed, a knife through the pleasant darkness. She reached for her most recent journal, its predecessors covering every inch of her bookshelf where textbooks were meant to be. Alana still had a few hours before she needed to tend to her latest project. Claire imagined Alana

sprawling across the bed, nestling into the covers, mingling with them, before realizing sleep was lost to her this day. Her curtains, a soft maroon, did little to eclipse the sun on its ascent.

Claire knew it only took her a few minutes to rip the curtains down and replace them with her spare comforter. While not a permanent solution, it worked for the moment, it worked for her. Claire ran her finger along the impromptu curtain rod, picturing Alana sliding on her Golemancy gloves, tapping a few runes to life along each fingertip to give them time to heat up. The welding was crude where it had been bent and shoved into the wall, grooves from fingers gripping and melding still present. She must have taken a spare rod from her miscellaneous golem supplies, driving one end into the wall at the bottom of the stairs. This must have been while Claire was snoring. Alana told her she snored at least. Alana probably hoped this barrier would help mitigate that noise as well. Claire ran the maroon curtains along the rod to where the other end was melded across the doorframe, where the metal had melted itself into the stone. Claire sighed. If asked about room damages, she would insist Alana pay them. Claire couldn't afford them anyways.

Shaping - Chapter 3

Claire watched out her window as the other students below her worked the fields far flung to the eastern edge of campus, where the rows of budding corn and squashes of various hues, shapes, and sizes petered out from the forest beyond into the expansive apple orchard that butted against the dorm building. She wondered what kind of view the dorm across the hall had on the southern side of the building, down the cascading hilltop on which the campus had been built and down across the town below. She had moved into campus a good week before the semester started, but that week had been filled with introductions to each of the schools of magic and what such a major could offer her, introductions to the different clubs around campus, and team building exercises with those who would be living near her in her dorm. She barely saw any of them now, and the rest hadn't been of much more use now that she thought about it.

Claire turned back away from the window, her eyes falling back to the mouse that sat in front of her on her desk. She knew what she was here for, and she was going to do just that. Yet, she wasn't doing as much as she thought. The mouse was alive, well working, but only its head was animated. She watched as it twitched its earthen whiskers and nose in response to some imagined scent, its eyeless sockets staring back at her all the while. She was here to create golems, to create constructs that would help others in their day to day life, others like her and her father. This couldn't be the best she could do.

Picking the mouse up in her hand, she parted the curtain that now separated the two rooms in the dorm. She knew Alana was still out of the dorm, but after that morning she didn't want to spend more time in her room than was necessary. The curtain had sent a clear message after all. It was dark in Alana's room, and Claire looked over to the window, now covered by a comforter that did a better job than Alana's curtains ever had at blocking out the sun. Claire turned to the bucket that held their clay and the juices that kept it fresh, if that was even something one could describe

clay as. Lifting the lid, she began to lower her hand with the mouse into its depths. As she began to dunk it beneath the surface and tighten her grip around its body, to make it one with the waters from which it had been birthed, she felt its nose press into her palm, she felt it nuzzle into her and try to pull itself above the water. She loosened her hold, and brought it back to her face. In the dim light, she could see the light indents where her fingers had pushed against its rump, and from its empty sockets, trickled a fine line of water from its submersion. Yet, to her, it appeared to be crying as it still moved its head deeper into her palm.

She grabbed a cloth from the sink and began to pat the excess moisture away from the already dried clay, reshaping the mouse's hind quarters back into shape as she went. Damage undone, she returned back to her side of the room, mouse now cleaned and clutched to her breast. This wasn't something she could throw away and start anew. This wasn't something she could turn away from and build from scratch. She had made something incredible, something of her own, and it was something that she was going to see through. Placing the mouse back on her desk, she tucked it into the corner on top of the cloth she used to wipe away clay spatter when working. It nestled in, as if for a nap. Taking the crystal that powered it from its back, she watched its head stiffen into slumber. Nodding, she put the crystal into her bag, and headed out for her second class of the day.

Claire's morning classes had been uneventful, and her afternoon was looking to be little different. Compared to her advancement this morning of course, classes were bound to be boring. She wasn't really learning anything new in this course anyways, not yet anyhow. She had been a voracious historian before coming here. In fact, her studies in history played a large part in her choosing to come here. Claire continued to doodle rune schematics in the margins of her notes, when she felt a nudge against her elbow.

Pierre had spent most of the class precariously teetering back and forth on the hind legs of his chair, but had recently returned the forelegs to the earth. Claire looked over at him, and he nodded his head forward. She smiled. It was nice he was paying attention for the both of them.

“Now that we have concluded our first two weeks of classes and the most cursory elements of the history of Golemancy and its role at this school, we are going to have our first exam this coming week. Naturally, my office is always open if you need help, though you should find everything you need across your class notes and our readings thus far. This isn’t meant to be a hard exam, just one meant to move us past the founding of the school and the civil war from which it spawned. Of course, I encourage you all to study amongst yourselves as well. So, don’t forget that next class will only be the exam. Class dismissed.” The professor scribbled the details on the board as he spoke, ending the speech with a twirl and a clap that left him facing the class. He stood there and nodded for a few seconds, and Claire traced his eyes as he scanned the room for any lingering questions amongst the students packing up before gathering his own things.

“That isn’t a bad idea, you know.” Pierre’s chair screeched across the floor, slamming gently into the row behind him as he stood. He wasn’t looking at her as he spoke, instead rereading what the professor had left on the board about the exam.

“What?” Claire had yet to stand up, still making a few more notes on her rune schematics that she wanted to try on her mouse when she got back to the dorm.

“Having a group to study with. I know this test shouldn’t be that bad, but we should still study for it. Would you be interested in joining if I get one together?”

“Yeah, that sounds great. Would you just want to host it in the library?”

“I was thinking so, at least for now. I know a few other people from across classes that are in other sections of this class that might want to join. Why don’t we plan for the night before, right before dinner?”

“Sounds good. I’ll see you there.” With that, Claire shoveled her sprawl of notes that dotted the desk in front of her and that jutted into Pierre’s much neater space together and into her satchel. It wouldn’t hurt to try studying with others. She was going to do most of her studying in the library anyways from now on. She followed Pierre out of the building and split from him in front of the library.

While she wanted to go into the library to study, she couldn’t work on her mouse there tonight. Not only had she left it in the dorm, but the library wasn’t the best place to make a mess with clay on campus. There were other places, like the Crucible, but again she would’ve needed to bring her mouse with her for that. She sat down in front of the library as the nature of her situation hit her. It was one thing to be unable to do magic when studying history, another when creating a golem in a public space, a space meant for magic to be done in. Her shoulders slumped and her eyes drifted down along the cobblestone paths cut into the exposed grass of the campus mall, the staircases that connected them between the hills invisible except for the railings that marked them. At the foot of the hill, a small forest gathered to obscure the gate she knew sat there, the one she had passed through only a few weeks ago that separated the mages here from the townsfolk below. It was moments like this that she missed the smell of the cornfields and the lavender forests of home, when she questioned her place in this ivory tower on the hill.

“No. This is where you are meant to be, where you want to be.” Claire stood, patting her skirt to oust the imaginary dust that had settled across her lap during her musings. It wasn’t the weekend yet, and she had a few more assignments to get through before tomorrow. It was time to go back to her room.

It was silent when Claire returned to the dorm, with only the wind raking the trees below her window to be heard. It wasn’t long after she sat down with her mouse however, that Alana burst through the door. As she walked past and up the stairs, Claire could smell burnt clay and something

else on her person, something rotten. She chose not to comment, a favor unreturned as Alana came back down the stairs in her bathrobe.

“I thought you said it was working this morning.” Alana teetered in the stairwell, leaning over Claire’s desk, a vulturous timbre to her voice. Her smell bothered Claire more. While she wanted to ask where on campus Alana had found a bog to be witch of, she gulped and pushed back on her remark.

“Its head was. I’m working on getting the rest to follow suit.” Claire didn’t look up as she spoke, continuing to tinker with the runes on the creature’s lifeless belly.

“Well, it’s clearly missing something then, so why don’t you just ball it up and put it into the mud bucket?” Alana motioned to the ceramic jar that sat next to the dorm sink on the other side of her curtain, a squat thing whose water they were supposedly meant to freshen every week. Alana had said she’d take care of it given it fell on her side of the room, but based on the smell Claire doubted this had been done even at the beginning of the semester, even if that was only a week ago. Though evidently, the smell could just be Alana herself.

“No! I can’t just kill it.” Claire caught herself, or rather Alana’s face did. Claire could see the question forming on her lips, the one if she thought it was actually alive. “I haven’t figured out what I did differently on the head than on the limbs yet, why that’s the only part working. Throwing it away would be a cruel waste at this point.”

“And you’re sure you don’t just want a pet? I can make you a pet golem to study if you really want. There is little you can learn from a failure as absolute as that” Alana turned towards the door, her disinterest after Claire’s objections barely overshadowed by her disdain for Claire’s approach to Golemancy.

“An absolute failure wouldn’t move at all, and while I appreciate your offer, this isn’t about having a pet. Sure, I could learn from studying a functioning golem, but I can do that in the Kiln as

well. Besides, clearly mimicking methods that call on magic won't work for me, if this little guy is any evidence of that. Besides, learning from failure is the way forward. Ignoring it will only plant me firmly where I already am." Claire lightly pinched the mouse's nose, and it wiggled in her palm.

"Then study failure to your heart's content. From where I'm standing, it's all I'm seeing. Alright, I have work for my own classes that I need to tend to and need to take a shower." Alana turned towards the door to the dorm, sticking her nose in the air as if to exaggerate the initial point. From where Claire was sitting, it merely looked like she had finally caught a whiff of herself.

Claire sighed, and decided to try one more time to connect with her roommate around the duty which she had been charged when she agreed to mentor Claire.

"But if you could just look at it briefly, you might see something that I've missed." Claire reached out to offer the mouse to Alana, her palms flat and open so that the mouse might slide between their hands.

"You want me to point out what you're missing? You're missing the point. If that comes any closer to me Claire, you won't be getting it back. I've already given you my thoughts on it, and I wouldn't recommend pushing me for anymore." Alana stopped as she spoke, but did not turn. Claire curled her fingertips back and pulled her creation into her core.

"Ok. Thank you for your... help." Claire turned back to her work. Alana didn't look back as she went out the door, though Claire heard her footsteps fall heavy as she progressed through the hall. She imagined Alana breaking through the floor and falling into the rooms below with as much noise as she was making. For her to be that dirty, that clay laden, she must have been working on something big though. Perhaps she was making a small guardian golem so she wouldn't go into Alana's room again. She doubted she'd bother going that far, but the thought felt right after today somehow.

Shaping - Chapter 4

The first week of classes, Alana had been very open about sharing their spaces, but now, since the curtain had gone up, Alana would make her mind known if Claire came into her space for any reason other than drawing water. Even then, Claire had found it best to not speak outside of announcing herself coming through. She had forgotten to once, right after the curtain had gone up, and Alana had given her an earful for it as if she had had someone intimate over. She had just been reading in her bed. The week before she hadn't cared if Claire announced herself or not.

Claire sighed and placed her creation on her desk. She petted its head twice before sitting down herself. The hind legs had dried up and fallen off a few days ago, and now the front paws were following suit.

"I'm sorry little one, if I had known I would bring you into this world just to suffer such, I would have held off doing so until I knew I was able to do it properly, assignment or not." Claire whispered to her mouse as she scratched under its chin, it in turn nestling its clay head into her fingers. "At least your head seems to still be healthy!" She smiled at it before placing it in her apron's breast pocket, its little head barely poking out without the use of its front paws to grasp the pocket's edge. She looked down at the clay flakes now under her fingernail and thought about taking his body to the Kiln once she had fixed her creation, to solidify its body properly. She smiled at the idea before turning to her work for the day.

It had been a few weeks since she had originally created the thing, but for all her effort and the surprisingly good grade she had received on her initial attempt across her Rune-Carving and Golemancy basics courses, she wasn't content to just let the poor thing out of its perceived misery. Besides that, she enjoyed the company.

“You aren’t Ferdinand, but you’re the closest I have out here. At least you can’t get fleas I guess.” She nuzzled her knuckle into its head and it nuzzled back. Obviously she had done something right and before she attempted a new golem, she was going to find out what that was.

While Alana was of little help, Claire had made an appointment with Professor Mortavius that afternoon. She had wanted to run her mouse past the Golemancy professor, but they were currently out on a research trip and the class was being run by their teaching assistant who had just told her what Alana had. Hopefully, Mortavius would give her more insights than just “try again.”

Claire could still hear Alana through the wall behind her desk, getting up every so often to refresh her clay or to grab a different book. At times, she thought she could smell burning, but everytime she went up there for water or clay, there wasn’t a scorch mark in sight. In front of herself, she had only worksheets and textbooks on the history of the college and its implications beyond these walls. She sighed, and figured she could fit in a little studying for next week’s exam before her meeting with Mortavius.

“After the civil war with the Norbrani Empire, which has itself only officially become defunct in the last fifty years under the rule of High King Beowulf, the College of Clay was founded from the remains of a Norbrani archive here in Chlorthyr. While this is far from the only organization within Chlorthyr to have such an origin, it has become the foremost college in the country due to its unique studies in Golemancy...” None of this information was new to Claire, far from it. Her grandfather had fought in that war, and she could remember her father laughing hysterically when the news finally arrived at their little farm that the latest king of the Norbrani had finally deemed Chlorthyr worthy of being called a nation. As far as he was concerned, the soldiers of that war had decided the value of the opinion of a king.

Claire put down her history work, instead pulling out the sheet of paper she had mapped out her runes on before putting them into her little friend. What had always interested her about golems,

beyond the fact that it was the only attainable form of magic for her, was their history. Her father would tell her stories of his own father, fighting for the freedom of the Chlorathi people against the far off kings of the Norbrani. What had always interested her though was the last decade or so of the war, when her grandfather saw the first golems in action on the battlefield. Those stories were the ones that captivated her, not the tales of loss and blood and gore, but the stories of a new nation birthing something new to come into its own. She wanted to be a part of that, even if it was two-hundred years later. She wanted to save her father's life as a golem had her grandfather's. She thought about what her father would think as he looked over the rune-map she had made. She was sure he would have no idea what she was doing, but she couldn't help but smile at the thought of giving him a tireless farmhand one day. She also couldn't help but smile at the thought of this mouse coming to life, and shoving its fully limbed body in Alana's face. Alana's input was meaningless, she was going to do this, one way, or another.

Gathering her things, she headed towards Mortavius's office. The breeze across campus heralded the first air of autumn, and though she couldn't see it in the leaves around campus yet, she could feel it coming as she always had on the farm back home. She watched around at her peers on campus. One group was huddled in black robes around an upperclassman near a tree, watching a lecture written on the air in blue sparks on what she could only imagine was some kind of summoning club. That, or they all just had a very specific taste in fashion. Some of the professors here clung to that old fashion sense of robes before all else, the proper attire of an academic, though from what she could tell her generation was less into that kind of thing. She had only ever seen Pierre in a button-up vest with a long, white coat, and Alana, in her own words, dressed like a "trash goblin." Claire couldn't remember perfectly from the old faerie tales, but she was quite certain that goblins didn't go around in torn pants and hole-riddled shirts. If they were real though, she

supposed that is what they might wear. Alana was more of a goblin than Claire originally gave her credit for.

When she arrived at Mortavius's office, she withdrew her mouse from her breast pocket and knocked on his door. It had fallen asleep, or mimicked doing so, on her walk over from the dorm. Initially, there was no response, but when she brought her ear to the door, it sounded like two voices echoed within. One belonged to Mortavius, though the other came from a mouth she couldn't picture, sounding like he was speaking with the muttering winds. After a moment, she knocked again, and all fell silent before he beckoned her in, the door unlocking and opening ajar before her of its own accord.

Mortavius's office was not particularly small, but it felt more narrow than the preceding hallway, shelves overladen with books, some of whose covers had not likely seen the light of day in decades. He had been waiting for her, traditional black robe draped over the back of his chair, billowing out slightly in the breeze from the window behind him. It made him stand out in his white shirt and purple vest as if he were sitting back-to an expanding void.

"Glad to see you Claire. Please, come in and have a seat. What did you wish to discuss today?" The room was lit mostly by the sun as it thought about setting, but he had lit a series of candles around the room that made the dust laden shelves feel eerie and dark even in the midafternoon sunlight. She could see the various flames around the room echoing across his eyes, the green of them devoured in the light.

"Hello Professor, thank you so much for agreeing to meet with me. I wanted to discuss this with you." Claire coaxed the mouse from her palm and onto the desk between them before taking her seat.

“I am always happy to help where I can. I see you’ve brought your first project from my class with you. What seems to be the issue with it? I see it is missing a few legs, but I have a feeling there is more to it, otherwise you would not be here, yes?”

“Yes. As you can see, he is missing a few parts, but, and I have my prep-work to compare to, I followed the instructions to the letter as far as I can tell and yet he still is failing to stay together.” Claire added her notes and practice runework to the table, sliding them next to her mouse which was trying to slide its way back towards her. In this process, its remaining legs detached and fell to the side with a barely audible thud. The mouse squirmed on the desk, now bereft of leg and tail, dried appendages that had fallen into dust without anything animating them. Next to the poor creature was a hastily scrawled diagram of the runes its legs had once carried.

“So what do you believe the issue is?” Professor Mortavius lifted the mouse into his palm and brought it to eye level, scratching it under the chin before lifting it by the same to expose its belly and the inscriptions upon it.

“Professor, that is why I came to you. I am unsure what I did differently. Looking at the sketch here compared to the one in my book, I fail to see a difference.” Claire held up the sheet of paper between them, a confessional veil that did little to hide her self-imagined sins. When she lowered the paper, she couldn’t tell if Mortavius was staring at her or the sheet she had been holding.

“Well, whether you followed the instructions to the letter or not, something is not functioning here, yes?” He set the mouse back down on the desk. It shuffled its way back over to Claire, staring at her with its empty sockets. “What you have done though is very impressive. I rarely see golems so lifelike from sophomores, let alone freshmen. However, I want to be clear that I do not think your issue lies in your runes, but some other part of your construction.” Mortavius traced

his fingers along the runes on Claire's notes. "These do indeed follow the patterns I would expect to see on a golem of this size and complexity, outside of your binding runes of course."

He slid the paper back across the table to her.

"What do you mean? Did I miss something?" Claire picked up the paper and held it an inch from her face. Nothing looked missing to her, though she figured that was the bigger part of the issue.

"Nothing is missing, but rather, you added more." Mortavius pulled out a sheet of paper from inside his desk and dipped his pen in the inkwell that sat on the desk. "What I am currently drawing is what I would have expected the belly of your mouse to house. Do you see how I only have five runes within my circle? Your mouse has six. The diagram you used only accounted for five, though I suspect the number is less of the issue than the runes chosen." He slid the drawing over to her. "Claire, I do not think it is in your benefit to start over and attempt to create this diagram I am giving you one for one. That would teach you nothing. Do you know why I gave you the grade I did for this legless mouse?"

"To be honest, I assumed it was out of pity?"

"Pity?" He leaned back in his chair, the calm lights of the room seeming to flare in his eyes for but a moment. "Why ever would you think that? I gave you the grade you earned, nothing more, nothing less."

"I failed though, didn't I? My creation only has a working head." Claire placed the papers in her hands on the table, scooping the mouse into her hands to proffer towards her professor. "How is this a passing grade?"

"I can change it if you like, though I would not think it fair to you, who worked so hard and accomplished so much in this creature." Mortavius leaned forward, one finger pushing her hands back towards her in turn. "This mouse has more life in it than any other in the class. That is why its

limbs won't work Claire, but it is also why I passed you on this assignment. Next week, we have an assignment to make a more complex mouse. However, you have already done that here. What I think would benefit you most is to give this one legs that work. Do you think you can do that?"

Claire fell back into her chair and stared into her clay friend's eye sockets. "Do you think it is possible to give him legs, Professor?"

"I know it can be done, otherwise I would not task you with doing so."

"I mean do you think that I can do it? I know it can be done, but I do not know if I am capable of doing so at this moment." Claire looked up to see Mortavius chuckling to himself.

"Claire, you have already done the hard part of animating the thing in the first place. What makes you think you cannot figure out the rest?"

Claire smiled first at him, then at her mouse. "I'll do what I can."

"That is all I would ever ask."

"Thank you Professor. That helps more than you realize." Claire put the mouse back into her pocket and put both her and Mortavius's drawings into her bag.

"Good luck to you Claire, just remember to not assume that whatever you are basing your designs off of are the only ones that work, alright?"

"Of course, Professor, thank you again."

"Have a good evening Claire, I will see you next class."

After the door closed behind her, Claire pulled out the notes from her bag. In the center of her circle, the rune that was missing from both diagrams that she hadn't accounted for, that the runework she had laid into the mouse hadn't accounted for, was the rune for love.

Shaping - Chapter 5

When Claire opened the door to her room, she was accosted by the scent of sulfur and something more rancid she couldn't place. It was something simultaneously greasy and acidic, something that stung her nose hairs as it mingled with the scent of burnt clay and that was only exacerbated by the uncharacteristic heat the room had taken on. She had heard from Pierre about some students setting up small kilns in their rooms and how such activities were forbidden for being fire hazards. However, after this week, it wouldn't surprise her if Alana had set one up in an attempt to keep her research more secret.

What can be so special that she'd need her own kiln? It can't be anything that revolutionary to risk expulsion. Claire sighed as she locked the door behind her, throwing her bag against the foot of her bed before opening the window above it. She had planned on taking a nap, but with the room smelling as it did, she wasn't sure she was going to be able to. Just as she fell into bed and her nose adjusted enough to the smell to start to drift off into a mid afternoon nap, she heard a crack and a small pop from the other side of the curtain. She groaned to herself. Life just wasn't being fair today.

I suppose I should check. She rolled out of bed, catching herself in a squat. She hovered her fingers over the curtain divide, lowering her hand after a moment, and choosing to knock on the frame instead.

"Alana, is everything alright? I heard a crash and it smells... odd in here." Her request was met by silence.

"Alana? If you don't respond I'll need to come check on you. Are you there?" Claire shook her head, preemptively flinching despite nothing happening. Cautiously, she parted the curtains and put one foot intentionally loudly on the first step, tapping it twice. Splitting the curtain unleashed a more intense version of the smell that had welcomed her back to the room. She gagged more loudly than she had yelled up the stairs, the interior of her lungs all but catching flame. Claire could

definitely make out clay starting to smolder, but outside of that scent remained only the sulfur. Either way, the combination made her want to vomit. As she took the second step, she could hear movement above her at least. When she took the final step into Alana's side of the room, her eyes stung in the smoke. The window was open, but it didn't help much. Alana was hunched over her desk, eyes behind goggles and ears covered with protectors. Claire's shoulders dropped in relief and her eyes drifted about the room. On the desk was laid a sheet of bronze, the same as what was used in their special gloves she thought. Against the wall on the back of the desk sat a series of vials, each containing a deep green liquid that bubbled voraciously in their sealed environments, except one, whose lid was off and whose meniscus sat lower than the others. On the sheet of bronze she could make out what appeared to be a mixture of clay, the green liquid, and clumps and stains of red that were in various stages of drying. Yet nowhere did she see a source of the smoke that permeated Alana's room. It was at this point that Alana snapped her head around, and like daggers Claire felt her eyes fall upon Claire.

"What are you doing here?" Alana snapped, her voice heightened by her blocked ears.

"I was checking on you. The room reeks and I heard a crash, so I I came to check on you." Claire backed one foot down the stairwell, her eyes falling on the desk rather than her meeting Alana's gaze.

Alana, tracing Claire's line of sight, jerked her body into a position that covered most of her work. Her earplugs remained firmly in place. "Claire, I don't have time for you right now, begone! Get out of here before I report you to the dean for attempted plagiarism."

"Alana no, it isn't like that. Take out your plugs, I was just trying to make sure you were alright." Claire started to take a step forward, mimicking the motion of taking something out of her ears, before falling back, one foot already on the middle step.

“I don’t care if you are struggling, I...” Alana stopped. Shaking her head, biting her bottom lip, she turned and threw her apron over the workstation and removed a glove, taking out the ear plugs after.

“Alright, make your case before I do report you to the dean, now that I can hear you.”

“Alana, I heard a crash, and with the smell, I just was checking to see if you were alright. I didn’t know if you had a fire that started or something exploded, or if you left the dorm and let a candle burn too low. I was just making sure you were safe and that there was no fire.” Claire rose back up to her full height at this, but left one foot down the stairs. Her eyes were watering, but she wasn’t sure it was because of the smell.

“Fine. Sorry. I’ll believe you. I’ve told you not to come up here before, but I suppose I couldn’t hear much with these in.” Alana turned to lay her gloves over her apron, but in an instant was spun back around, finger a hair’s breadth away from Claire’s nose.

“However in exchange you are not to breathe a word of what you saw or heard or smelled to anyone, understand me?” Alana leaned down to meet Claire’s gaze on the steps, her head still a few inches higher than Claire’s, finger still hovering away. Her voice had calmed down, but Claire could still see all the words she wasn’t saying in her eyes. In those unblinking mirrors laid wide and bare Claire could see where Alana wanted her, back down the stairs and across the curtain.

“What did you see anyways?”

Claire gulped. “Not a thing. Just clay in the bucket, that’s all. Not a thing.”

“You didn’t even see that.”

“Of course.”

“Fine. Now go back to your side of the curtain, and open your window if it isn’t already. This place stinks.”

When Alana stepped away, Claire was sweating, though that could have been from whatever was creating the heat in this room. She was already back halfway down the stairs, slowly pushed there by fingers and eyes and accusations. She slid down the stairs the rest of the way, her heel catching on the bottom and almost making her trip into her own dresser on the other side of the room. Dusting herself off, she looked over at the curtain, and a tear rolled down her nose. Grabbing her bag and her apron, the mouse tucked firmly in the pocket still, she left the dorm, locking the door behind her. She didn't want any part of Alana's research, not now. She couldn't work here. She wouldn't work there, not now.

After Claire left, the door slamming into place marking her departure, Alana unveiled her work. She had been harsh, but necessarily so. This wasn't some project just anyone could know about, especially not someone like her, so new, so impressionable. This was real research, the kind on which the college had been founded, or so she assumed. Putting her glove back on, she grabbed a pair of tongs and picked up a small shard that was embedded in an unfortunate mixture of meat and clay. Despite being surrounded by both blood and mud, it remained pristinely white in its own jaggedness. She slowly lowered it into the open vial of acid. Within seconds, it began to boil and she jammed the bottom-singed cork back into its home. Taking the sheet of bronze in each hand, she went over to her rubble bin, and dumped what remained of the rat into it. She would take care of the rest in the morning, before Claire woke up, before anyone woke up.

Shaping - Chapter 6

Claire was still shaken, unnerved by Alana's wild eyes in the dorm, the words she knew she wanted to say but didn't. She had already said enough that she could hear the others echoing behind them. Alana hadn't always been like that. She couldn't have been. Claire shook these thoughts from her head, letting the soft breeze of the little woods that separated her dorm from the heart of campus scatter them. Taking out her notes from her bag, she shoved her face into them as she trotted.

"What about love makes it unable to conduct the magic?" Claire was lost in her own thoughts, nose shoved almost through the pages she was reading as she made her way to the library, when a rumble echoed throughout her body. Her stomach growled like a wild animal, and the clay mouse still in her apron pocket tucked its head in further as the dancing boughs amplified the sentiment. The sun was kissing the horizon, and the dining hall was closer to her than the library anyways. It would benefit her to get some real food.

The center of campus featured six buildings that rose above the treetops that infringed on their back ends, all but two a home for a different major of magic. While there were other buildings dedicated to other disciplines across campus, these were the original seat of the college from which everything else furlled forth. Claire looked to the top of the hill, the library silhouetted in the twilight hour, its buttresses casting sideways shadows across the lawn as it cascaded down towards the admissions gatehouse. Pierre had told her once that at the right time of day, when the sun set behind the building, you could see the pattern of the rose window that adorned its uppermost arch fire across the horizon. She had seen it come in during the morning when the sun matched the window's height, but had yet to in the evening.

The dining hall was hosted in the Ruination School building, likely due to the popularity of the Magical Culinary Arts minor that relied so heavily on producing one's own fire. That, or it served

as a means of offering a place for their students to create rather than destroy. As this dining hall was primarily student run, and those students were of the Ruination major, it was always empty except at the fringes of the room this time of day, as dinner was streamlined to whatever they hadn't burnt. Today, there was hardly anyone around at all in the murky corners of the open floor. The room was all but made of glass, tall windows characteristic of every building on campus taking the place of entire walls beyond the one that connected to the kitchens, a balcony that caught both dawn and twilight and held onto them until the light faded entirely. Claire thought it would've been a popular place, but supposed the food ruined whatever ambiance the place might have held. She wondered how the architect must've felt, their marvel reduced to undercooked meats and burnt soups. On her tour here when she was first accepted, she had been told that later in the year, when the winds turned sour and the earth cold, you could see the moons rise as the sun set from this place, and that with how the windows took them both in their glass was stained a gradient of orange to blue, west to east. It would be another month before she had any hope of seeing Faern return to the northern sky after his yearly hunt, though Orlia's light was a constant for her in the hours she worked at least.

Claire inhaled deeply. While she could smell burning, it was different enough from that of her dorm and she relaxed a little. Looking over the selection there wasn't much she would deem edible. A scrap of chicken, unintentionally fried. It was a good thing she liked a little char. She grabbed a few pieces before turning to the soups. She had always hated soup growing up, but not much else was edible tonight and she was rather hungry. The only thing that didn't reek of garlic or burning was the potato stew. She grimaced as she ladled some into her bowl. It looked wholly edible but this wasn't a meal she wanted, not after growing up on the farm. No wonder there wasn't anyone here. She added a crust of bread hardened in the afternoon light to her tray, and made herself at home at a table against the west wall. She could see everyone go in and out from there, and began to splay her papers out around her plate in an arc, just close enough to read without the

possibility of sullyng them with soup. It wasn't until halfway through her bowl that she noticed them.

They hadn't caught her attention when they first entered, but now they had turned around and she could make out their voices. She recognized a few of the group from a few of her classes, but towards the back of the group she could barely make out Pierre's voice and even more barely his face. Yet, there he was. This must be the study group he put together.

"Saints preserve me, I totally forgot." Claire mumbled to herself through mouthfuls of bread. She had forgotten about the study session Pierre had organized. She sighed, her spoon dropping into her bowl sending a droplet of potato and cream cascading onto the plate beneath it.

I don't think I'm ready to talk to Pierre right now. She wasn't wholly in the mood to entertain right now, not after what she had seen in her dorm. She hastily collected her notes and shoved them haphazardly into her bag, replacing them with a book from her history class. He didn't need to know she was struggling even if it was just the one subject, not like this, and she couldn't leave yet. She had barely started eating. As far as he knew, she was good at this, at history and runes. She couldn't change that. It was important to her that she maintained a professional image, even here, in the dining hall. It was important that he didn't see her struggle with something so basic. She had just flipped to a random page around where they were supposed to be reading when he saw her.

"Hold on guys" she heard him say. "Isn't that Claire over there? Go ahead and find a seat, I just want to go and say hello."

"Claire from Physics of Thermomagics or Claire from History of Golemancy?" Claire glanced back down at her work, double checking the page she had flipped to to make sure she looked like she knew what she was doing.

“History and Rune-Carving, you guys don’t know her, but I just want to ask her about class.” Claire heard a wave of “oos” and “ahs” followed by a disgruntled dismissal from Pierre. She chuckled to herself. They both knew better.

“Hi Claire, you eating late too? We missed you at the study session.” He slid himself along the bench on the other side of the table, spilling a little of his own soup as he did so.

“Yeah, sorry about that, I had a busy day. How about you?” She took a spoonful of potato into her mouth and flipped to the next page. It had said something about the war, that was enough to get a general understanding to cover if he asked her what she was reading.

“It was alright, I spent a lot of time on my runes for Mortavius. Would you be willing to look them over, since you’re here?” Pierre peered at her over his glasses after he spoke, and she couldn’t help but think how he looked like a concerned dog begging for scraps. This wasn’t how she wanted to be seen either, as a reproachful peer, someone who hands out their knowledge in scraps rather than a fellow academic. She didn’t want to be Alana. She wanted to be someone who helps, not someone who chases away, who tells people they can’t.

“Of course. Do you have them now?”

“No, they are back in my dorm, but I can go and get them if you want. That, or we could discuss them over breakfast tomorrow, if your roommate wouldn’t mind of course. If I remember correctly you two usually get breakfast together, from when we first met.”

“She won’t mind. We don’t talk much anymore.” Claire paused for a moment, moving to take another bite before coughing instead. Pierre’s eyes suddenly focused on her after that statement, where before he was still watching his other friend group where they sat to his right. She lowered the spoon slightly, speaking before quickly returning it to its predetermined destination.

“What kind of runework are you doing though?” This bite was particularly salty, and thus hard to swallow.

“Are you alright?” His voice was cautious, but serious. He was half smiling as he asked, but only half-so.

The question caught her off guard and she almost choked on her soup, almost. She dabbed at her mouth with a handkerchief as if she had coughed anything beyond her lips. Had what she said been that concerning? She had had a few classes with him, and she thought she appeared put together. She was in control of her work here. She was a good student, why else would he ask for her help?

“I’m fine Pierre, thank you. Alana is just...” Pierre only knew of her in passing anyways, from the little they had talked during class. What was Alana? She didn’t know and that was the problem wasn’t it? Claire didn’t have time for that though, she was too busy keeping herself afloat to spend time understanding her rude roommate. Besides, a good student needs to have a good relationship with their roommate.

“Busy. She has a lot going on with her own projects that we have just slowly slipped apart.”

“Didn’t you say she was a second year that you had been paired with on some sort of mentor program? That doesn’t sound like a very effective mentorship if you two don’t talk.” Pierre sipped on his soup, bowl cupped in hand like a mug.

“I’m sorry Pierre. You can go back to your friends if you want. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.” She nodded towards the group he had arrived with.

“Them? They aren’t my only friends here. If you want me to leave, I will, but if you need to talk, I am happy to stay.”

“Thank you Pierre. Things have just been rough with her lately. I’m sorry for missing the study session, I just got caught up in that mouse project we have.”

“Wasn’t that due last week?”

“Yes, he gave me a grade, but I don’t feel done with it is all. I haven’t quite gotten it right yet.”

“From Mortavius? Was that what you were in his office about? From what I’ve seen, you have a great grasp on your runecraft, it’s part of why I asked you to look over mine.”

“Thanks, I appreciate that, but even if my runes are right, something else is off.” Claire swirled her spoon around her soup, eyes locked on a stray float of potato bobbing in the mire, barely bobbing for breath amidst the brine.

“If you don’t mind my asking, what was the reason for your mentoring? I haven’t heard of any other similar programs and, from what you’ve said to me tonight, it doesn’t seem like it’s helping you. It’s fine if you don’t want to answer though, I don’t want to pry anymore than I already have.”

“It’s alright. I know it’s odd. Pierre, if I tell you this, I need you to promise me you won’t spread it. Right now, the only student aware of this is Alana.” She looked him over as she paused. She had been studying on and off with this man and his friends for weeks. She knew he just wanted to help. If she kept swimming alone, she would drown.

Pierre nodded solemnly, the concern swelling in his eyes.

“I cannot do magic Pierre. I am physically incapable of such a feat. Yes, I can string runes together, bend the magic of the universe to my own whims, but that is the closest thing I will ever be capable of doing to real magic.” She turned away, unwilling to see his concern turn to judgement.

They sat in silence for what felt like half an hour, but was no more than a minute. She looked up when she heard him sigh.

“You must be even more amazing than I thought then.”

“What?”

“I mean you must be incredibly gifted if you got into a college to study and perform magic if you cannot in fact do magic.” Ever thoughtful, Pierre’s voice turned to a whisper halfway through the sentence. There was no judgment in sight, only a different concern, concern for a friend.

“Thank you Pierre, for obvious reasons I haven’t wanted to tell anyone about this.” She put her head into her hands, now looking at him from between her fingers.

“I’m flattered, but I don’t think it’s something you should be ashamed of. I mean, I would hope it’s flattering that I want you to look over my work instead of anyone else, admittedly even more so now given your unique viewpoint. This is all especially true given you are ahead of some of us that can.” He continued, blushing as he went. He was clearly out of his depth, but she appreciated that.

“Tell me Pierre, what do you make of this then?” Claire pulled out the two diagrams she had been working on with Mortavius, the set of runes she did with and without “love.” She leaned forward as she passed them to him, reaching into her pocket and sliding her mouse onto the table between them as she did.

“These look standard Claire, immaculate as well.”

“Look down at the table Pierre. While they might look immaculate, the product of them is not.” He shifted his gaze below the papers, and smiled at the mouse as it jiggled as much as clay can.

“That’s adorable.”

“I know he is, but look closer. He doesn’t have any limbs Pierre, the poor thing. Professor Mortavius said that my conduction of the magic was off because of this here.” She pulled the papers down so they could both look at them and pointed at “love.” “What do you make of it?”

“Looking at it, and I’m not exactly the best with runes, it seems that the extra rune should be fine so long as you accommodate for it, though I am unsure of how you would go about doing such a thing.” He drew his hand to his non-existent beard and began to stroke it.

“I’m in the same boat is the problem. I have no idea how to reinforce the magical pathways for the currents they need to carry.”

“How do you go about doing that, given your uh, position.” Pierre gulped. She sighed.

“What do you mean? I carve the paths, the connections between the runes by hand.”

“When I made my mouse, I didn’t draw the connections by hand. I burnt out the gaps with magic, letting it feel its own way. It didn’t look as neat as this, but that way the magic went where it felt it needed to. I don’t know how to help you here because we have two completely different approaches.”

They stared at the paper, then each other, then the paper for a moment each. The mouse did circles, or tried to, underneath. Across the dining hall, Pierre’s name echoed from his friends. One of them was starting to sing some obscene love song, using his name instead of the actual lyrics. It sounded like a woman’s voice.

“It sounds like I am being summoned. I need to go before they get the wrong idea, though from the sound of that song it sounds like my girlfriend is the one doing the teasing. She’s a second year. Maybe I can introduce you sometime? We can’t have you running around here thinking all the second years are terrible after all, if you’re ok with that, of course.” Pierre stuttered the last few words in a hasty addition.

“I would appreciate that.” She looked up at him as he rose, a sad smile across his face. “I’ll see you tomorrow for breakfast though, and happily look over your work. Bring more notes on mine if you make any, ok?”

He turned and waved back over his shoulder as he left, almost dropping his plate and bowl in the process. She chuckled. Some things didn’t change at least. More than that though, he had given her some valuable things to think about. If she couldn’t animate a golem the normal way, the right way, then she’d have to create her own way.

Her soup was cold when she finished it, but she didn't care. It wasn't very good to begin with, but it was one of the most satisfying things she'd eaten in months. She had a direction to go now, she just needed to follow it.

It was dark when they eventually left the dining hall, when they split up in front of the library. Claire stood at the front of the library for a while after wishing Pierre and his friends goodnight, watching them as they splintered across campus. She watched as they headed back to their own dorms, arms cradling their own burden of books and notes before their exam tomorrow. Claire looked up at the night sky, and for the first time since she got to campus, let out a sigh of relief to Orlia as she hung amidst the stars. It was a beautiful night, with the far stars of Alavastus burning orange behind Orlia tonight, and there was no reason for her not to enjoy it. In the morning, she would meet up with Pierre and they would catch up on runes and what she had missed in the study group, and she would be ok. There was nothing Alana could do to ruin that.

Shaping - Chapter 7

“If you don’t mind my asking Claire, how did you get into magic if you, well, you know?”

Pierre didn’t look at her as he asked, his head instead tilted up at the morning sky as Orlia began to fade away against the sun’s light. They were sitting on a bench outside of the breakfast dining hall, the one run by actual chefs and graduate students getting their culinary masters. Pierre had gotten a few strips of bacon, some ham, and fried eggs on toast. Claire had gotten her old favorite, oatmeal with a pinch of cinnamon and lots of bananas. Pierre hadn’t said a word about it.

“Honestly, I think if I could do magic I wouldn’t be interested in it to the degree I am. Don’t take that the wrong way; I love magic and know that if I could perform it I would still be right here where I am today, just with a different focus. I love golems and runes, but if I could do other kinds of magic I can’t really tell you what I’d be most drawn to.” Claire continued to pour over Pierre’s designs and they were good. Basic in the sense that they were exactly what had been learned in class, but good. She ran her finger across each line, trying to tell which were added by hand and which connections were burnt into the page with magic. Outside of a scorch mark on a single page, she had no idea.

“But what if you could choose anything Claire, if you woke up tomorrow with fire shooting out of your hands and ice out of your toes, what would you want to do most?” Pierre turned to her, wiggling his fingers for effect, his head hunched under his shoulders like a faerie tale crone.

Claire sighed and shook her head at him, placing the runes on the table. She was flattered he wanted her opinion on them, but she couldn’t find anything wrong with them.

“When I was a little girl, I would’ve taken you up on the fire shooting out of my fingertips. I mean, who doesn’t want to feel powerful in that way, to soar through the sky on knives of flame and rain down fire on your enemies? At this point though, I’m just glad I can work with magic at all.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. As I grew older I thought more about being in tune with nature, being able to talk to wolves, helping the plants on the farm grow, and of course throwing a fireball at the stray direwolf threatening the cattle. I thought a lot about how I could help out on the farm without doing it the mundane way. Now though, away from the farm, I don’t know. What I do know is that I love what I am doing here, every aspect of it. I even enjoy Bisset’s history class, even if I haven’t learned anything new yet.”

“Are you a history buff? We really are approaching things entirely differently, aren’t we?” Pierre reclined further against the picnic table, sliding down so his knees formed acute buttresses for his body. Claire watched as another group of students walked past them, flitting across the campus green between breakfast and what appeared to be the divination building.

“Right now, if I could choose anything to do with magic to become part of my reality, it would just be to give this little guy some working legs.” Claire rubbed the mouse’s head gently with her finger in her apron’s breast pocket. She had started getting used to taking it everywhere at this point. She knew better than to be petting her golem where others could see her, but she wasn’t caring today. Alana had made quite clear how odd it was to get attached to what was just animated clay, but Alana was wrong about many things. Namely, her.

“You know Claire, when I was a kid, all I wanted to do was become a famed alchemist. Crazy I know, but I wasn’t concerned with turning things into gold. No, I wanted to figure out how to transmute more meaningful things. Well, when I first got the idea I just wanted to transmute my mother’s cooking into desserts, but later that idea came back to me and I got thinking about how I could go about transmuting things in a more meaningful way.”

“Wait, you can actually transmute food?” Claire tilted her head in confusion, though Pierre wasn’t paying attention.

“In my studies preparing to come here I looked into the limits of alchemy to find that most of the research done was around finally cracking that whole thing about turning various minerals into more valuable ones. What a lack of imagination. Imagine what rewriting the basic, fundamental structures of the world could do! You could feed the hungry, create homes for the poor out of nothing!” This was the most passion she’d heard from him since they met.

“You could completely ruin the natural balance of resources present in the world.”

“What?”

“Isn’t alchemy’s whole thing that you can’t get something for nothing? That it all has to come from somewhere? Isn’t that why not much research has gone into transmuting food?”

“It must be possible otherwise I’m sure I would’ve gotten a much different letter from this place regarding my application. That was what I came here to do, but now look at me, studying runes. I know they are basic parts of magic, but I pictured it all being more glamorous, even at this starting level. I don’t mind making golems, they are just practical in any field, but I don’t know how far I intend to pursue it after I take the courses I need to.”

Claire shrugged, realizing she wasn’t going to get any solid answers about alchemy from him. She had studied some when she was applying as one of the few schools of magic she could’ve pursued along with Golemancy and Herbology. It hadn’t appealed though. Sure, some was involved in her work, but more-so on a theoretical level. More than that though, after the process of transmutation, alchemy was invisible, and she wanted visible proof of her magic, something more tangible than lead to gold or rocks to bread in her mouth. Besides, the former was outlawed in Chlorthyr, a begrudging hold-over from Norbrani rule. Claire bit her cheek thinking about it.

“I thought about doing alchemy here, and Herbology. I dabbled in it at home, but I’ve never been into that ‘witch stuff,’ you know? Potions and all that Norbrani fire-witch stuff. How many people in our class do you think are here for Golemancy?” spoke Claire, putting her elbow on the

table, chin in hand. Another group of students was passing by, and one of them was wearing a long, black gown decorated in stars. She scoffed. She hadn't seen many students in formal attire outside of convocation, let alone one decorated beyond the usual sash or pins. They must be an astrology minor. Looking down under her own apron, she was wearing a violet turtleneck sweater with a leather bodice and a long, pleated black skirt. If it wasn't for the apron stained with clay and the elbow-deep leather gloves fitted with brass and runes, no one would have even guessed her for a Golemancer, let alone a mage.

"Based on how some of our classmates smell, I would think botany would be the most popular area of study among them." Pierre waved his hand in front of his face as if dispersing some stench before winking at her.

"It wouldn't surprise me either. Seriously though Pierre, when I came here I knew this was what I wanted to do, not just because of my limitations, but because I've always wanted to. It just surprises me that at the premier college for Golemancy, not everyone is interested in it."

"I mean, I'm interested in it. I chose to come here because of the practical applications I mentioned earlier, but most people probably just minor in it. The higher up you go, the more specialized I'm sure it gets. You mentioned wanting to help out on the farm, so I assume you grew up on a farm. Did you have golem helpers out there?"

"No, it wasn't that. My father has a small farm, local village level supplier kind of thing. We did everything by hand. Part of why I chose this path was to be able to make helpers for him in his old age."

"That's sweet Claire."

"Oh stop." She rolled her eyes at him.

"No, I mean it. Not everyone is thinking about their family in any capacity beyond getting away from them here. Most people aren't thinking outside of their own lives. But that doesn't

answer the question I'm thinking about. If you didn't have any golems around, how did you know you wanted to come here and do this?

"When I was a girl, my mother served in the army, my mother and my uncle actually. There weren't any real battles going on beyond a sea skirmish or two, but they were both landlocked so they mostly fought off the occasional dire wolf, shapeshifter, highwayman, or any combination of the three. The difference between them though was that after the war ended, while my mother had us, he only had her. I don't remember much from those years, but what I do recall is my mother lamenting to my father about how my uncle joined a knightly order after leaving the military."

"Oh. That does sound like... uh... a choice." Pierre audibly gulped.

"I know, I know. They don't have the best reputation around here, too close to Norbrani systems of government and all that. From what I understand he tried to stay with the military for a while until told that he, like so many others, had to go. So, like so many other displaced soldiers with no other skills, even if he had never seen a real battle, he chose to join up with a knightly order. Knowing him through what my father has told me, it wasn't much of a choice for my uncle."

"What does that mean?"

"Beats me. I think it was the Order of the Blossoming Rose or something along those lines that he joined up with though. Ironically, we saw him less after he joined whichever order than we did when he was in the army. Mother didn't talk of him often outside of the letters I saw come in every so often. I remember my father and him arguing about his choice of occupation as a kid, but I think it's nice that he found a home for himself. Anyways, it was through him that I got my first Golemancy crystal, though that had more to do with his time in the army than his choice of occupation afterwards. He told me he had snuck a few out of the army, but that was too many years after his unit was disbanded. My guess was that he asked an old friend or something. It was his gift to me that summer."

“What summer?”

“What do you mean?”

“You said ‘that summer.’ What summer?” Pierre had turned around, now sitting on the bench as the carpenter had envisioned when putting it together, a quizzical look on his face.

“I, don’t worry about that part Pierre. Sorry, I didn’t mean to unload so much on you like that. Suffice it to say it was my uncle’s idea for me to try Golemancy and he was the one that got me the crystal you see in my little friend here.” She referenced the mouse that inhabited her apron pocket.

“Alright. Well, I had probably better get to my other class. I’ll see you for Rune-Carving later. Thanks again for looking my work over.” Pierre collected his notes and haphazardly tucked them into his bag.

“I didn’t really do anything. I just read them over for you.”

“And it was much appreciated.” He smiled. “I’ll catch you around.”

With that, he headed off towards a lecture building across the lawn.

Claire sighed. She hated when she did that, just kept going too deep into herself. No one wants to hear that. Yet, it had hit everyone hard, when her mother died. Her uncle though, he took it almost personally. Dad theorized that he was upset she died first, given they were all they had left of their side of the family. She figured he had run off into the woods to hunt the dire wolf they thought had killed her. If he wasn’t so old, he might have even made a good swordsman. She knew he was dead, but pretended he was off in the woods somewhere, fighting or seducing a wolf girl just like in the faerie tales, rather than slumped in a drain ditch with a bottle of booze like she knew he ended up.

Shaping - Chapter 8

“How are you making out with your third week of classes?” Alana peered over Claire’s shoulder, her roommate hard at work. Claire’s head was pressed into her notes, fingers tracing her scratchings in ways that gave her meaning from the mess. They hadn’t spoken beyond Claire announcing herself into Alana’s room for water and clay since the incident last week.

“It has not been so bad thus far, thank you. I am unsure how to feel about my history professor given he has stared at the board the entire course, but my other professors seem nice enough.” Claire closed her notebook, a mixture of social exercises and actual notes. She had lit a candle hours ago, the tail end of a lavender infused stub she had been gifted during orientation. While it had burnt out more than an hour ago, the air was still suffused with its waxy aroma. She could tell from Alana’s tone that she wasn’t asking because she was interested.

“Who do you have again? I know we talked about it during our first week, but that was already so, so long ago.” Alana sat on the corner of Claire’s desk as she dug around in her bag for the class syllabi.

“Aside from the one I just mentioned, I have a class with a Professor Carmine, Mortavius, and Sternhoff.” They had talked about this already, but Claire hadn’t spoken to Alana all week and she doubted that she remembered their conversation from three weeks ago. When she looked up, Alana was rifling through the notebook Claire had just closed.

“Still stuck on the mouse thing? Was Mortavius not of any help?” Alana was rapidly flicking through the pages, but Claire knew she wasn’t reading them. They hadn’t spoken about Claire’s work since Alana had told her to talk to Mortavius about her mouse instead of her, and she certainly hadn’t read anything of Claire’s since the letter explaining why they had been paired together.

“I am getting through it.” Claire tapped her collection of papers against the desk, tapping them into place with one another before flipping through the ones for her rune-carving and

Golemancy 101 courses. She had been given an informal extension on her mouse so long as she continued to make more progress on it through Mortavius as where she was making progress was in Rune-Carving.

“It doesn’t look much like it.” Alana threw the notebook over Claire’s head, a discus splintering in the air, and landing open on Claire’s bed. They had managed to stick to their weekly meetings for the first week, with a few breakfasts intermingled. That one time they had made a point of meeting outside of their dorm to catch up, on the hill under the observatory, when checking in on Claire’s progress throughout the week. Alana had taken that obligation seriously for the first week, but struggled to find the time for her freshman beyond this now, sitting on her desk for a five minute debriefing.

“Just because it has not changed physically does not mean that I have not been working on it. I know the defect in the design and am working to alleviate it.” Claire gritted her teeth. She had come to dread these sporadic little “talks.” She was starting to wonder if she would’ve been better off being paired with another freshman. Alana certainly wasn’t making her time here easier.

“Good luck with that. My research has been coming along steadily these last few weeks. You’ll need to tell me later how your class with Carmine goes though. I’ve worked plenty with Mortavius, but I haven’t had them at all. Don’t bother telling me of Sternhoff; I could care less for the woman. She was so boring, but I’m sure you’ve noticed that already, looking at your notes from her class.” Alana looked down and over her shoulder at Claire, offering her a smile, her eyes all but closing in the action.

“Thank you. I appreciate your willingness to work with me this semester. You mentioned your own research is coming along well? I’m glad.” Earlier in the semester, she would have been excited to hear about how it had progressed. Claire leaned back in her chair, placing her thumb under her chin and looking at nothing in particular, a scowl set across her brow. The sunlight from

her window made her auburn hair glisten almost as much as the goggle lenses on her head. While she wanted this conversation to be over and nothing to do with Alana's work after last week, it was best to at least feign interest, though she couldn't lie that she was mildly curious about what exactly Alana was working on.

Alana hopped down from the desk, catching herself with one hand where she had previously been seated as her feet slid on a misplaced book. She moved the strands of hair that had fallen into her face and moved onto the pair of stairs that separated their rooms from one another. She was scowling as she smiled at Claire, and Claire thought she could see Alana thinking about last week as well. "It is, but as much as I'd love to share the details, I don't think it wise to share anything at the moment. I want this work to stay underwraps so I can go back to it for my thesis work in two years. That being said, I'll be out late tonight, so don't wait up for me. I know how you like to stay up late for me, but I have the lab booked all night. It's going to be an important one." Alana began to duck through the curtain that accompanied the steps rear first, taunting her with promises of a grand experiment she couldn't be privy to. Claire had stopped caring after the second rejection to see what Alana's project was and the voracity with which she guarded her work. She never actually stayed up for her after the first night she was left waiting, but Alana didn't really pay her much attention anyways so long as she stayed in her "place."

Claire leaned forward on her desk, elbows slamming a little too hard into the charred wood. Alana smirked at her as she grimaced at the momentary pain. She hesitated in the doorway, misinterpreting the motion as a desire to help, to spy.

"A little eager aren't we now? I appreciate the offer, but you know you would be out of your depth. You've come a long way in these few weeks, but I don't know what I could even ask you to do. Maybe next semester we will be able to work together on this project, or better yet, one of your devising." Alana smiled at Claire again, this time the delight showing through her teeth.

“I know. Good luck to you” Claire choked through her teeth. Alana wasn’t the one who needed luck.

“Thanks, but at the rate I’m going, I shouldn’t need it.” Alana ducked through the curtain, and Claire could hear the clinking of glass as she gathered her materials. She knew Alana was right, but that made it sting all the more. From the other side of the curtain, she could hear her still taunting her.

“Oh, and if you haven’t fixed that thing by morning, you really should just kill it and make a new one. It isn’t like it has a soul. Just move on.” She continued on for another few minutes, though by that time Claire had long been droning her out. Alana had pointed something worthwhile out that made her return to her notes, strewn across the bed as they were. One day she would be stewarding her own research. Soon, but soon was never enough. Claire opened her notes again, pouring over that day’s and the next’s contents. She didn’t notice when Alana slipped out for the night. If Alana would have returned the next morning, she would have found Claire asleep at her desk, a small puddle of drool dried into her notebook.

Claire first noticed something was amiss when she wasn’t groaned at by Alana the bed-banshee when freshening up her clay from the bucket on Alana’s side of the room. Claire was an early riser, Alana was not. It wasn’t until after she had begun working on fashioning new legs for her mouse that she realized this.

“Alana?” Claire crept up the stairs, whispering as loudly as she could her roommate’s name. No response. At the top of the stairs, she turned to the sink and let a trickle of water come down. Still nothing. She washed her hands before approaching the clearly empty bed. Looking over the side, still nothing.

Well at least you didn't fall out of bed. She laughed at her own joke through a sigh. As she turned around, her gaze fell on Alana's desk. A lone journal sat in the center, the date along the binding marked up until last night. This must've been her most recent one. With shaking breath and twitching hands, she picked it up.

If you can flick through my notes, I should get a peek at yours at least. She flicked through, page after page as the sun crested higher over the mountains that silhouetted the horizon. She expected Alana to burst through the curtain any minute, angry that the floor on Claire's side still hadn't been tidied. What she was reading was messy, and beyond her current understanding of the field, but even she could pick out that Alana had begun the taboo work of using materials other than clay and bronze. Yet, she couldn't help but read on, skimming to the most recent date. When she was done, she carefully rested the book back to where she had found it as best she could.

When Alana still hadn't returned by dinner, Claire came back to the dorm and placed the journal in her bag. If Alana wasn't in her bed in the morning, or more likely scavenging through Claire's side looking for her journal, then she would take it to Mortavius. There were things in there someone needed to see, diagrams of flesh imbued with runes and bound to bronze, of a substance only referred to as "the bone" throughout as a power source. While not necromancy, to her, to someone not familiar enough with the schools of magic beyond those they practiced, it certainly looked like it was seeping into Alana's work.

A slight breeze flowed through the campus vineyard that night, causing the shadows to twist and bend in time with its currents. Grapes jumped from their overburdened vines and patterned the garden grounds a sweet violet. The trees shook in the light of the moon. It was not until the sun rose and set the dew alight that they found her bones, burnt and strewn across the fountain plaza.

Drying - Chapter 1

Claire awoke to her head jutting into the backboard of her bed frame, generous though that was for the two by four that was screwed into the posts holding up the bed that her pillow had slipped under in the night. It was barely able to be called morning, though she could see a thin strip of pink broken across the horizon, speared by the mountains whose fingers reached up from the east. She raised her blind the rest of the way from the bed, a jerry-rigging she had made the second night to adjust her shade from bed, and stared out into the fleeing night sky. Orlia looked so lonely on days like this, her brother Faern running about, chasing off the bat moon on nights like this or obscured by the same. Silly tales to explain nature. Though she thought about her mother, telling her the tale of how it is when Faern is gone from the sky, that dire wolves are born, or worse, that the Shiora lose their ability to shapeshift and become more beast than human.

She jerked the shade again and it came crashing down, halting just before the window sill that would bark back at her. She had gotten decent at that maneuver, practiced it all day when Alana happened to be out. She had been barked at by more than the window sill the first time she had used this system. Swinging her legs over the bed, she reached one hand towards the ceiling, bracing it with the other. Her wrists popped as they did every morning, her ankles responding in kind on her feet meeting the floor.

Things were quiet on the other side of the curtain, meaning Alana must already be out. The room still reeked of sulfur. Nodding to herself, she resolved to purchase a candle that afternoon. While they weren't supposed to have them in the dorms, with there being designated space for rituals that required them on campus, she needed something more than the autumn breeze to filter out the scent from Alana's experiments. She didn't have time for that yet though. Pierre would already be waiting for her for breakfast and she didn't want to miss a meal before Rune-Carving.

As usual, they had planned to meet in the library before heading to the dining hall; she usually had a book or two by this point in the semester she needed to swap out. She had grown accustomed to the campus, she felt surprisingly fast for a farm girl, in these three weeks. Entering the great hall in which the library unfurled, there was an unusual number of people present. Professors from all schools of magic flitted across the forum in front of the great arboretum gates, with only a few going through them. Standing near the back, against one of the stone pillars that kept the vaulted ceiling aloft, was Pierre.

“What’s going on here Pierre?” She stood next to him, both of their gazes fixed on the gate. She hadn’t paid much attention to it before, with her eyes usually focused on whatever book she had come to investigate or her own work, but the gate to the arboretum was composed of a series of vines, dancing inward upon themselves in layers of leaves, stalks, stems, and immortal grapes embossed in iron on oak stained mahogany with time and, naturally for the vineyard it contained, wine. It was early enough that the sun still showed through the stained glass window above the doors, but late enough that instead of casting the rainbow petals of the window down in perfect symmetry, they shattered on the floor in hops and skips across the cobbled-stones.

“Concerning, isn’t it, how they haven’t told us anything yet?” Pierre was crunching down an apple as he spoke.

“Good morning to you too, Pierre.” Her eyes remained fixed on the door as she spoke. “Do you not have an idea of what’s going on though? That would be what I’d call concerning.”

“Concerning does not even begin to describe it Claire. All I know is that I heard a few classes around campus had been canceled, and that all of the professors were here in the library not letting anyone into the gardens. I’ve been sitting here almost an hour, and the most I’ve learned is that I think I heard one of them mention something about charred bones, but professorial mutterings are unclear even when one is meant to hear them.”

Something about that statement should have sent a shiver down her spine, or set her skin crawling, but somehow, it wasn't surprising. Claire traced the vines on the door as they intertwined with each other, the gate sitting unusually, firmly shut that morning, watched over by a pair of faculty members who rotated with the hours. Her mind wandered as she played with her auburn hair, tying all but the bangs pulled back into a high ponytail and picturing Alana's fake smile laid bare in bone next to the fountain outside. She pulled a small blue ribbon from her worn leather apron, and leaning against a stone pillar across from the gate, her eyes tracking the professors that went in and out of the garden, she tied it around her hair. She rolled her eyes as Professor Sternhoff re-emerged immediately, choosing to wretch into a pot of lavender next to the gate. Poor lavender. It must have been bad if all of the professors were here, but it wouldn't be Alana. Not as careful as she was.

"Well Claire, I don't think we're going to have to go to class today. I don't think it's just a few of the professors canceling classes."

"It must be something awful then. You wouldn't happen to have another apple would you? I was on my way to breakfast and my stomach is turning against me."

"No, sorry. I'd tell you to just go pick one yourself but it doesn't look like we'll be getting into the garden anytime soon." Pierre played with his hair as well, attempting to stroke his chin before realizing it wasn't satisfying to pull at mostly skin and pinprick startings, instead settling to adjust his curls to either side of his glasses. He looked overdue for a shave of both.

Claire continued to stare at the doors.

"You know, we are still going to have our study group tonight, if you want some help studying. Or even just to talk."

Claire didn't respond, eyes remaining fixed on the door, mind wandering beyond it.

"Are you alright? Sun above, you look as if a ghost has passed through you."

Pierre turned to look at Claire to see a face as pale as the marble against which they leaned, only dripping with sweat.

“You know such things aren’t real Pierre. Necromancy is a myth at best, a parlor trick at worst. I’m just hungry, desperately I guess.” Claire wiped her brow, incidentally sending a shower of sweat across the floor. Her hands were shaking, though she didn’t know why. She hadn’t seen her roommate since last night, and while she didn’t miss her, something felt off. She locked eyes with the gate again, and her stomach did a set of gymnastics.

“No. This isn’t good. No one has seen Alana since last night, Pierre, have they? Rumors are going to start going around soon that someone is dead, and within them probably echo some truth. I just hope my gut is wrong is all.”

“As do I, but for your sake, not hers.” Pierre nodded solemnly, before standing from the pillar. “We need to get you something to eat. You look a wreck.”

He reached out his hand to Claire, to aid her in leaning forward and heading to the dining hall, when from behind him she made out Professor Mortavius leaving the arboretum.

“If I can just talk to Professor Mortavius, I should feel better, Pierre. He just came out of the garden and ought to know something. Besides, we should find out if our class is canceled as well.” Claire inhaled what felt like knives.

“I’ll be waiting here for you. Go ask whatever it is you need to, then we can go grab breakfast. I’ll even see if I can get my girlfriend to join us so you can finally meet her.” Pierre took a small stone from his pocket and placed it against his mouth. After whispering a few words, he pressed against a small rune emblazoned on it and it sparkled turquoise for but a moment, something that Claire usually would have paid greater attention to. Yet, she had already turned away and headed towards Mortavius by the time Pierre had crushed the stone between fingers.

Claire sighed as she fully propelled herself off the pillar with her left foot. Her first class that morning was meant to be on runes, but seeing the professor here not an hour before class didn't bode well for that remaining true. She had seen a few professors flit in and out of the arboretum in the last half-hour, and the best way to describe their dispositions were grim. She began walking towards the gate, but she didn't know what exactly she planned to ask.

"Is Alana dead in the garden?" The thought echoed through her mind. "Don't be foolish," is what followed.

"Just a quick explanation, that is all it needs. Oh Alana, what did you do?" She muttered to her books, flicking the papers that stuck out of the covers' grasps with her thumb.

"Claire, what are you doing?" She clasped her Rune-Carving notebook into its place in her chest as she looked up to find Professor Mortavius behind her, staring at her with a grim disposition. "I canceled class, if that is what you are here to ask. If you have sought me out to take advantage of the canceled class time to work on your mouse, I'm afraid I'll have to disappoint you. There is a... situation in the arboretum that requires my attention. In case it is not obvious, there are things of more immediate import than your project at the moment."

"No, Professor, I am acutely aware that something is amiss. I need to talk to you though. I promise it is just as important." Claire began bending the journal inwards on itself, pulling it in and out of her chest slightly. Mortavius looked down at her, a look of confusion on his face she had never seen before. It lasted only a moment, before he seemed to shake it off and return to his normal disposition.

"Claire, I understand you are likely to have questions about the new material however, and it pains me to say this, I do not have time at the moment. I am needed back in the garden. Perhaps we can talk tomorrow. Is there a time that works for you?" He stepped around her, in two precise taps of his feet on the stones, a blur of black cloth and silver tassel.

“Professor, I think it is more important than you realize, I just need...” Claire spun around to find him, hand already against the wine-stained doors, his voice muffled by the constrained space, his hand shooing her back to her dorm.

“Just stop by my office anytime tomorrow, I am sure I will be there all day at this rate. I promise we will talk. As you can imagine, today is not a good day.” With that, he pulled the door open, and put one foot through.

“But Professor, I need to know if you’ve seen Alana.” .

He paused in the doorway, and she watched as his spine shot itself fully erect at that name. “No, Claire. I haven’t heard from her in a few days. Why? Has something happened?” His voice slithered through the crack, soft and measured, his face obscured by the wood.

Claire stared down at her book again, a drop of water appearing on the cover, pooling in the “a” in the center of the name.

“No Professor, I’m not sure. I just haven’t seen her since last night is all. I figured, as she works with you on her project, that you might’ve seen her.”

“Her project? I am sure I do not know what you are speaking of. She has been helping me in my own research, but what has she been working on?” He remained still in the doorway this entire time, and based on his voice Claire wouldn’t have been surprised to have seen his mouth remaining closed as the words echoed forth from him. His question gave her pause though, and her mind ran through the scenario from last week, from what she had seen in Alana’s room, on her desk. If it wasn’t Alana charred and strewn across the plaza out there, it wouldn’t behoove her to discuss Alana’s research with anyone, especially a professor.

“My mistake Professor, I think I mixed up whose research was being worked on. Thank you for your help. I’ll let you know if I see her. Thank you.” Claire nodded a small bow, though she knew he couldn’t see her.

“Of course.” With that, Mortavius stepped through the door, though his voice remained unchanged, and they shut behind him, offering no insight into what lay beyond.

I'm sorry Alana. If I let something slip, I promise I didn't mean to. I don't know why I'm so worried about you. I'm sure you'll be back at the dorm this afternoon to berate me for getting Mortavius on your back about nothing. I'm sorry. Claire, book again tucked into her chest, left the garden and returned to Pierre to head to breakfast.

On the other side of the doors, Professor Mortavius returned to the group of professors huddled in the center of the garden plaza. The body wasn't mangled so much as fluttered loose by the middle dawn breezes, lines of ash sent sprawling across the ground. A leg misplaced at the roots of the nearest grape vine, its twin over by the entry door. Each part was traceable, yet displaced from the initial scorch that patterned the plaza stonework, except for the left arm. In its stead was a single bone, free of char and large for the body whose ashes it resided in. Flexing his fingers in twists and furls, Mortavius formed an orb around the bone, and floated both into the bag he had carried in with him. The remaining ashes crumbled from the shape they had held all night, and the other professors and custodial staff began to clean the ash from the area. Once shut, the bag jostled and undulated in weird fashions, the bottom slowly dampening and growing weighty as Mortavius headed back to his office.

At breakfast, Claire decided to try something new, something Alana had insisted she try that she hadn't because of the rift that had come between them, to spite her in the small ways she couldn't elsewhere. However, today, it looked delicious and she couldn't place why. She had ordered an omelet, with cheese of three different kinds cooked into it, and, this part was of her own devising, filled with sausage, green peppers, and onions. Alana had recommended corn beef hash, but the smell was too sulfurous for Claire to stomach. Then again, perhaps that was why Alana's room always smelled that way.

“So how are you liking it here Claire? Arboretum aside obviously. Pierre has mentioned you a lot. He finds you just a little inspiring.” The girl, woman, that sat across from Claire had long, dark hair, and emerald eyes not unlike the sea at the bottom of the hill. Claire’s spit caught in her throat. She could see why Pierre liked her, even if she was a tad forward. It was almost nice to have a moment alone with her while Pierre got his boiled eggs.

“What has Pierre told you about me? You seem to know quite a bit.” Claire ground her fork into her omelet, the metal tongs grinding and squeaking nigh inaudibly into the stone.

“Oh! Nothing bad, I promise. He hasn’t really told me why he finds you inspiring other than your creative rune work, but to me it seemed as if there was something else going on too. I’ll get him to tell me one day. We’ve known each other since we were kids after all. He rarely hides things from me for long.” She grinned and took a sip of her cranberry juice, staining her lips a temporary yet unsettling shade of red to Claire.

“I have no idea what he finds inspiring, he does much better than me in the classes we share, or at least it seems like he does. Going back to your question though, outside of the living conditions, I quite like it here. It feels like home, a different kind of home than I’ve known or ever expected, but home nonetheless.” Claire leaned back in her chair and stared up at the ceiling for a moment.

“Yeah, home is a good way to put it, especially in the library and arb. I’m just close enough to the corn that I almost feel like I brought my room from home here with me.” Claire punctuated this though with a bite of omelet.

“Sorry both of you. They were busy this morning I guess, or it's because we came later. They had to make a fresh batch just for me.” Pierre sat down next to his partner, eggs rolling haphazardly across his plate around a large, central, circular slab of ham.

“Good of you to join us, knucklehead. Claire was just telling me about her home. Something about corn fields is where we left off.” She didn’t take her eyes off of Claire as she spoke.

“Did you grow up on a corn farm Claire? You never said what kind of things you grew the other day.” Pierre choked that out between bites of an egg he had somehow already shoved into his maw.

“We grow mostly corn, some wheat, and a few other things meant more for our own pantry. With my father and dog, Ferdinand. We live over on the border with Lorinwood and grow all kinds of things. It’s a large part of why I wanted to come here.”

“To get as far away as you could? Ow!” Pierre received a loving elbow to his ribs as soon as he spoke. Claire chuckled. It was as if any and all tact left him as soon as his girlfriend had joined them.

“No, though maybe that was a part of it, secretly. No, I came here because I want to learn how to make helpers for the farm. It isn’t exactly easy to get people to move out to the frontier, let alone those that want to farm it. It’s mostly soldiers coming through. That’s how we ended up out there in the first place.”

“It sounds lovely. I’ve always wanted to see Lorinwood. I hear it’s beautiful this time of year.” Pierre’s girlfriend leaned back and motioned up in an arc with her fingertips outstretched, as if to catch invisible beams of light and leaf.

“It’s mostly evergreens on the border, though there are a few of the lavender leaved-boughs that poke through now and again. I don’t know what it looks like beyond that and the darkness underneath.”

“You’ve never been in the forest?” They spoke in an eerie unison.

“Only once, as a child, but I really don’t want to think about it. It’s beautiful I’m sure, but only if you can get past the horror of it. There is nothing you could give me to go in there again. Not

going to happen.” Claire paused as she drove her fork into her last bite of omelet. She would go in there if it let her perform magic. A wolf’s grin danced across her mind’s eye and she shuddered. No. Not even for that. Not again. She couldn’t again.

“Well, it was nice meeting you, but I need to go take advantage of this extra time off. I was supposed to have an exam today, but it got rescheduled for tomorrow due to recent events. It was a pleasure meeting you Claire.” She got up and dusted off her black sweater and white skirt.

“It was nice meeting you too! I don’t think Pierre actually introduced you though. I’m sorry, what is your name?”

“Oh, sorry about that. Claire, this is...” This time the elbow careened, lovingly, into the back of his head, where it remained as she propped herself up on the back of his stool.

“I can introduce myself Piere, you had your chance. Evelyn. My name is Evelyn. Let me know if you ever want to know anything about the area. I’ve been around a whole year extra on Pierre here, and know the lay of the land like the back of my hand.” She dismounted and turned away. “That being said though, I need to get going. Again, it was nice meeting you!”

Drying - Chapter 2

Claire pushed her door into the room, papers and books flying away from it and into other stacks of the same, some toppling over and joining the swamp of knowledge on the floor. She kicked her boots off into the mess. A few books flowed into the hallway, copies of “The Art of Clay,” “Ancient Runes and How to Use Them,” and “Tales of Fae Folk and their Shrouded Realms.” She had only ever read one of them. Claire picked up the lost tomes and, dancing through the dangerous mix of metal odds and ends that hid amidst the books, added them to another teetering stack. She was careful to place the notebook on her desk, the only tidy place in the room.

Going to Alana’s side of the room, she grabbed a few lumps of clay from the swampy murk of the bucket by the sink. Alana’s desk was messier than usual, with remains of her last experiment strewn across it. She decided not to pry. Sitting down at her own desk, Claire pushed her notes to the side and pulled out a small lump of clay from a bucket next to the desk. The clay was always sweatier than she remembered, but she could never get the shapes the same when she wore the gloves she was supposed to. The piece she had pulled out still resembled a hind leg, but it wasn’t big enough for what she was testing. Fishing around in the basin of discarded limbs and attempts at art, she pulled out a larger clump from what had settled at the bottom. From it she pinched into existence a set of hind legs, before beginning to add in the small claws and fur detailing she had grown accustomed to seeing around campus. However, she stopped there, after the second nail was added. Details needed to wait. She always forgot that part. It was always where she went wrong.

The body was as an egg, flattened on the bottom to help it sit correctly, with legs splayed out on either side with unrefined joints and balls for feet as she attached the new, wet limbs to the dried but energized body of the mouse she had been working on since the start of the semester.

If I were smart I would make another one, yet I am just so tired. She looked out the window. The sun was barely past its zenith, but the professors were still flitting about as black specks amongst the grape trellises below.

Claire ducked through the curtain that divided her room from Alana's, going up two steps that further reinforced the difference in seniority Claire had always felt between them. Alana had insisted the curtain be put up after Claire had started her "book collection," but she knew there was more to it. While it had gone up after Claire woke her up on accident once, she never felt that was the lone cause. Supposedly, the organized chaos out of which she worked threw off Alana's entire "vibe" and thus kept her from being able to work properly.

Claire scrubbed the clay off of her hands in the sink, eddies of water and mud depositing chunks of partially dried clay in the basin. Alana had gotten the sink side when they divided the rooms, but she had never really minded Claire using it so long as she was quick about it. Not that such a thing mattered now. The room was immaculate outside of a few papers scattered on her desk, an inverse of the other side of the curtain. Next to Alana's desk was a stack of journals twenty or so volumes deep, a treasure trove of experience which Claire had only recently started plundering. She never figured out if Alana knew or not. She liked to think she must have, though this was doubtful. If she had, she was sure Alana would have put more than just a curtain between them.

Claire's eyes wandered to the remains of Alana's last experiment, and on her desk, now that she was paying full attention, she saw the remains of a black rat, scorched and scattered along the metal sheet on which Alana worked. She pulled her hands free from the faucet, drying them on her clothes but forgetting to turn off the water. Drawn in closer to the desk, she first noticed how the rat hadn't always been black, its fur singed down to the scalp flesh beneath. Next to it, lay open Alana's last notebook, the pages muddied with clay, ash, and blood. She ran her finger a hair's breadth off the page and down each line of text, attempting to follow along Alana's charts and

schematics for whatever she had been doing to that rat. She bent down closer to desk level, examining the corpse with a pencil stolen from the desk, lifting its foremost leg and exposing the disemboweled belly beneath. To her, it looked as if a droplet of stone had burned its way out from within. She found no mention of anything matching that within Alana's notes on the open page, needing to dig more through the notes to find out what she was planning on using to, as she assumed at least, animate the rat. It was as she was starting to flick through, that her eyes wandered off the page and along Alana's desk, where she noticed five vials of green liquid, one of which being open and drained. She picked one up from the far left side and brought it to her face. It bubbled as she touched it, the small, white shard within seeming to heat up at her touch and sending a cascade of bubbles up and down the sides of the tube. Whatever it was, it was highly reactive.

Her attention was pulled away by a knock on the door. Without thinking, she placed the vial in her apron pocket alongside the journal, and went down to answer it. When she opened the door, Professor Mortavius was standing there with two others she did not recognize.

"Good afternoon Claire. May we come in? I know it is unusual for a professor to show up to a student's dorm, but I figured it would be best to deliver this news to you as personally as possible."

"Of course, come in. Just watch the books. I have a few too many at the moment."

Mortavius's mouth arched up the slightest bit, an action that seemed to bring him more pain than any sense of joy.

"I understand that. As you know my office is also overflowing with knowledge of this sort." He looked around the room as he motioned to the myriad book piles, his eyes searching for something before landing on the bed. "Why don't you have a seat on the bed while my colleagues go into Alana's room? I assume its just through that curtain?"

"Yes. Professor, is this about all the commotion in the arboretum this morning?" She watched as the two other professors parted the curtain as Mortavius knelt before her.

“I am afraid so.” His voice caught in his throat, reaching out one hand as he spoke, hovering it above her right shoulder, flinching back ever so slightly before putting it down to rest there.

Claire, I am sorry, but your roommate, Alana, is dead.”

Claire blinked twice. She heard the water shut off in the other room.

“Her remains were identified earlier this afternoon from the garden. I won’t go into any more details than that, but I need to ask if you know of anything strange going on with her of late to have resulted in this.”

The vial in Claire’s pocket seemed to burn a hole through the leather, the heat radiating from it now like a dying ember. Professor Mortavius removed his hand, and the heat abated ever so slightly with it.

“No, I’m afraid I don’t.” Claire pointed to the curtain. “She was very secretive. I’m surprised she let me use the sink and clay bucket in her room, not that she really had much choice on that part. But no, I don’t really know what she was working on beyond the fact it made the dorm constantly smell of sulfur.”

Mortavius’s nose wrinkled in an almost instinctual response to her words. “My colleagues are currently investigating her room for anything that might have led to her unfortunate end, but if you remember anything, please come and see me, alright? Same goes for if you need to discuss any of this. The Dean’s office will also be in touch with you regarding the death of your roommate and mentor, but I figured it would be best for you to hear it from me given we needed to search her room anyhow.”

“Of course. If I find anything, I’ll come straight to you.”

“Thank you Claire. If you need anything, please let me know.” With that, Mortavius stood and went through the curtain himself. She couldn’t make out what they were saying, if anything, on the other side. She looked over at the corpse of her own mouse, drying in the window, and thought

about what Alana could have been doing with something of flesh and bone rather than brass and clay. It wasn't until the professors had left that she stood up and from her pocket fell the journal.

"Oh no." She reached down and picked it up, and her eyes fell on the page it had opened to. Scrawled in the immaculate handwriting of her ex roommate was the experiment header for the experiment, "Rat Augmentation Attempt 34." Beneath it, was a list of materials, and it was the last of them that boggled her mind most. Listed beneath the live rat, which had its own ethical implications that made her skin crawl, was listed a shard of a demon's bone. Her hand fell to the pocket against her chest, and her fingers curled around the vial. She felt it roil and boil in response as she recognized what she now held and what she had stupidly forgotten she had taken in the wake of the news.

Returning to her own beautiful mess, Claire threw her apron on a hook on the back of the door, revealing a white blouse above black pants. She shoveled some books out of the way of her dresser, extracting a pair of volumes that caught her eye and adding them to the pile at the foot of her bed. All the while, she held onto the stained journal of her deceased roommate and the vial she had unwittingly pocketed.

Do I care if I wear the same outfit more than twice in a row? She flicked through a collection of clothes, most of them repeats of what she was currently wearing. She looked over at a pile made not of books but of laundry that had been infringing on the territory of the history books by the door.

No, not really. It is not like I have not already been seen today anyways. Closing the closet, she grabbed a bag and slipped her boots back on. Clothes were flung everywhere as she tactically selected what articles of clothing made complete outfits, delicates being added to the sack as she came across them. With that done, she parted the curtain to rinse her hands again. In Alana's half of the room, she found her desk completely absconded with everything from the rat to the vials in the back removed by the professors half an hour earlier. Everything except for the vial in her pocket and

the journals still decorating the walls of Alana's room. Only the two most recent were missing, one from the shelf likely taken by the professors, and the one they needed, taken by her.

She stared at its cover, an odd mixture of reddish clay she didn't ponder too much dotting its cover. The others on her shelves were immaculate comparatively. She placed the journal on Alana's desk, washed her hands, and returned to her own room. She stared at the curtain, one hand poised to rip them down, before cowering back. Leaving things as they were for now, she slipped into the hallway, locking the door behind her.

Drying - Chapter 3

The sun was just kissing the mountains behind the college and the arboretum that stretched between the two when she emerged from her dorm. She had been on campus for a few weeks now, and the air was just starting to turn bitter for the harvest season. It reminded her of home in more ways than one. Most of the students here had come from the city below or one of the others that dotted Chlorthyr, but not her. To them, this wind likely meant little to nothing. To her, it meant it was time to help in the fields, to start preserving what they needed for the winter, and most of all, to be vigilant for the dire wolf packs that roamed near the edge of the forest as the onset of autumn heralded in a colder cold for Lorinwood than those in Chlorthyr could reckon with.

It had taken her a few weeks to get used to the campus, though a few less than she had expected. It wasn't so big that she couldn't break away into the trees every once in a while, though the gardens on campus worked just as well in that regard, nor was it so small that she felt stranded in a new world. There was just enough that she could call it home. The gardens had helped, though now that relationship was made more complicated by Alana's death. The city that sprawled out to the sea however was a different story. As she wandered through the campus gates, the air seemed to lift up the hill and assault her nose and mouth with the smells and sounds of salt ripped from the earth and borne into the air amidst a sea breeze.

It wasn't uncommon for students to caper into town, either in search of groceries outside the dining halls, ingredients for their various spells and rituals, or just an old fashioned night on the town. Claire however didn't know what she was after beyond a space outside of the campus that the arboretum no longer satisfied.

While the sun was yet to cross the horizon on its nightly watch around the world, the town below sat in the shadow cast by the hill across it, each light below in the buildings setting the coast alight like a valley filled with evening fireflies. Claire paused on the hill, adjusting her bag across her

shoulder as the wind whipped her ponytail back towards the college gate. She breathed it in deep, and left it behind her, the college, the journal, her mouse, and Alana. Beneath her the shadow grew, taking the town until it sank into the sea, whisking her away with it.

The streets were quiet when she found her way to the bottom of the hill, the gate leading out into the wilderness to her left and a series of houses with a mixture of bright and dark windows scattered down through until they met the pier above the sea. From it echoed light and sound matching that of a sunlit morning, or at least what this country girl expected of one.

Even in the fading light, the pier was busy with more life than she could have expected. Fishmongers mongered on each corner, some from stalls, some from wheelbarrows still coming fresh off of the ships at dock, and some from within barrels. Around her, the world traded in the treasures of the deep and the manual labor that brought it in, and amidst the throng she was just another potential customer. She inhaled deeply the sea air mixed with the smell of once-fresh fish, gagged slightly, and exhaled. She never would have seen anything like this back on the farm or up on the campus hill.

Feeling a tap on her back, she spun around and found a man in a trench coat standing before her, one arm outstretched behind him and towards his cart.

“Buy a fish love? Only the finest of yesterday’s catch.” His grubby fingers reached towards her back, a green-yellow nailed fist unfurling, revealing a myriad of black spots along his palm. Dodging his attempt to bring her closer to his wares, she stepped to the side and leaned slightly towards the barrels. He tilted the lever he was pulling upright and leaned on it, one hand stroking his pustule riddled beard.

“Thems is snappa darling. Lovely aroma on em, gets even better once theys cooked!” He let out a cackle that rent her spine in twain. “The other barrel is a bunch of mystery fishes, though you might find an eel if your luck is right.”

“Thank you sir, but I am not really in the market for fish at the moment, though these do look lovely.” Claire worked to not make eye contact with a particularly corpulent salmon whose eye was pulsating out of its socket.

“Nonsense! No time for fish? What is you in the market for them, I can hook you up.” He reached into his pocket, and pulled out a slip of paper as yellow as his teeth, if slightly less green with algae. Unfurling it, he showed her a map of the port town scrawled in fisherman’s black chalk as the handle to his cart hit the boards with a clang.

“Anything you need, I can get cha, and for a wonder of a bargain. What’s your vice love, you look the college sort. You need some eye of newt for you cauldron up on the hill? Eye of fish will do just as well.” He grabbed the fish whose gaze she had been avoiding and brought it between their faces.

“No, no.” She took a step back. “Thank you but, I, I’m not with the college. I was sent here to get some new seed for next year’s crop on my farm out east.”

“Oh. A farm girl eh?” He threw the fish haphazardly into the bucket, the other fish corpses seeming to wriggle in response, their flesh writhing just beneath itself. “Well, I can’t help much with that, but I know someone who can. You’re in the wrong district is all, that should be plain to see. What you want then is to turn here, head down this street, and end up here at Bernard’s Seedy. He’ll have quite the stock coming soon, believe you me. The fastest route would be to cut through this alley then.” He ran his fingers all throughout the map, the lines blurring together with each stroke, until they landed on an alleyway whose borders were even more smudged than the rest.

“What kinda seeds you lookin for anyways love?”

Taken aback by how quickly the man switched his gears, she stammered. “Corn.” Corn. That was what they mostly grew, though she had convinced her father to start a small pumpkin patch, though that was more of a personal garden than one whose crop they went to sell.

“Corn is corn isn’t it?” The man stepped back, looking confused. “Might I suggest something a bit more exciting?”

“Don’t tell me you’re going to recommend magic beans.” She began to slink away, trying to keep him distracted. Her mind wandered to all of the faerie tale crop hijinx and what she had tried to convince her father to grow all those years ago.

“Now you are pulling my chain, miss. Magic beans, that’s a good one. No, I was going to suggest something the people want, something native to our good Chlorthyr and that got us old soldiers through the army before trade opened back up with them other empires.”

“And what is that?” He was a soldier like her father then. Their appearances and bearings couldn’t have been more opposed.

“Barley love. Barely bread every day got me through the war. We’d dip it in water that had the bones of last night’s dinner in it and call it gravy. Them was the good days.” His gaze fell onto his fish barrels as he went to lean on the cart’s handle. Finding it on the ground, he leaned over and picked it up. By the time he had stood back up, Claire had disappeared into the crowd.

As she walked away, she couldn’t help but dwell on his words, “those were the good days.” She shuddered. The fishmonger looked nothing like her father, but she couldn’t help but see their faces overlaid in her mind, her father sitting in front of the fire, staring at the rifles above the fireplace, his and her mother’s crossed atop the mantle. She couldn’t imagine those being the good days, but she couldn’t help but hear those words in her father’s voice.

Claire weaved her way through the crowd, dodging the siren call of fishmongers and beggars with their outstretched arms and hands and fingers, until she found her back against a storefront between the cobblestone streets and moldering pier. It was quiet there, it was dark as the onset twilight. Turning around, the window before her was filled with books, the wooden sign above the door swaying lightly in the breeze with a copper scroll emblazoned upon it.

A bell rang softly as she stepped in, the sea salt air mingling with the familiar scent of book dust ground tightly between weathered pages. An older man sat behind a counter, the candle before him on the counter reflecting its dance in his spectacles. From the angle he was sitting at, she could tell he was reading.

“I don’t think I’ve seen you here before. Is there anything I can help you find miss?” He spoke without looking up from his reading, the turn of a page punctuating his welcome. Claire approached the desk silently, thinking over if there was anything she might be looking for in a store like this. In reality, she was just looking to get away from the surprising number of grifters along the pier. She looked him over again in soft candlelight. Based on the apron he wore, he was a Golemancer, at least might have been once.

“Miss?” His head tilted slightly more towards her, his right eye becoming visible behind the reflection of the flame.

“Oh, sorry sir. Yes, I am new to town and just wanted to see what kinds of books you had here.”

“Well, we get all kinds of things through here, with our proximity to both the sea and the college. What might be the lady’s choice tonight? Romance? Adventure? Perhaps a map of the area?” He licked his thumb, turning the page once more, before grabbing a slip of ribbon and stowing it between the pages, the book closing gently and landing behind the counter with a thud. The old man crossed his arms and leaned forward on the counter, his eyes dim and blue in the encroaching shadows.

“A map wouldn’t be a bad idea, but I was curious if you had anything on Golemancy.” Her eyes wandered to the stacks of books that lined the walls of the store, aisles of them rising out of the floor and making a labyrinth of knowledge beyond the counter.

“Well, if it's just a Golemancy tome you're after, then I assume you must be a new apprentice at the college. If you head down into the stack against the right wall, you'll find a special section for first year students that should cover Golemancy and quite a few of your other classes, though the pickings might be a little slim this late in the semester.” He began to turn back to reach for his book, his work done with another wayward first year.

“I already have the books for my classes, but I was actually thinking about something else, something for perhaps, the magically challenged?” She shuffled her feet as his gaze turned quizzically towards her again.

“I have a research project on how to possibly reroute magic by hand rather than with magic itself. It's a little complicated and in the first stages of development at the moment, but I've been looking to see if there are any older spell tomes that might deal with that sort of design. If it's too specific I can just take a look myself.” She casually referenced the rest of the store to the man, as if trying to extricate herself from this bout of customer service and situation she created.

“Well,” he sighed, “I don't think you'll find much in that regard here, though you are welcome to try. The Golemancy section will be just past the special section I mentioned, though will similarly be slim of pickings. We have trouble keeping anything relating to magic on the shelves.”

Claire turned to go.

“And good luck with your project miss. As an old Golemancer myself, it sounds interesting as a theory, though I recommend you don't put too much extra time into it. Even if it is a successful method that comes out of your research, there's no way it will be able to compete with magically crafted golems.” With that he turned back to his book.

“Thanks, I'll keep that in mind.” Not that it was ever not on her mind.

Claire ran her hand down the shelves as she walked, her fingertips bouncing off of each book's spine as she passed it. Reaching the Golemancy section, it was ever more depleted than she

would've guessed. She recognized a few volumes from Alana's shelves, but most of the others that remained ranged from treatises on the ethics of Golemancy to the basic principles and histories on which it was founded. She did find one poorly bound text, obviously deposited by a student from the college, entitled "The Expendability of Golems and the Line Between Clay and Flesh" that was still scarred in professorial ink. She grabbed it, intending to take it to the store's clerk to be properly disposed of if necessary. She shrugged, and began to skim the first page of this rejected thesis.

The first thing to know when choosing Golemancy as the school of choice, is its inherent and principal similarity to the Necromantic arts. Now, of course, such dark magics are abominable at best, however the similarities cannot be denied...

Claire jumped as she felt a pair of fingers tap in sequence on her shoulder. Turning around, she was faced with a pale faced man, who, if only from the light of the dying candles around them, could have even been viewed as having skin of silver.

"I'm sorry. Am I in your way?" She began to move to the side, thinking she was blocking another patron from browsing that section, when he held up a hand as if to stop her.

"Sorry for startling you miss, but I was just browsing through the Ruination section across the aisle, when I thought I smelled something, how to phrase this, specifically horrific about your person."

"Alright?" She stared at him quizzically, starting to slide away.

"Hold on, hold on. I know it sounds strange, but it is unmistakable for those of us, for anyone, who has lived around them for any amount of time to mistake such a scent." He backed away from her a few steps, hands raised next to his hooded face. They were clearly silver.

"What are they?" She almost spat the words. She just kept encountering strange stranger after stranger this evening. Maybe this was why she had yet to leave campus and visit the town.

“Why, demons, miss.” He lowered his hood briefly, pointing with one finger to a large scar cut across his left cheek that ran under his chin. The scar tissues looked like dried black blood that would begin to bleed again at a moment’s touch. However, Claire’s eyes clung to the scar for only a moment, before finding the small horns that protruded from beneath the man’s peppered hairline.

“You look rather demonic yourself.” She took another slide-step back towards the front of the store.

“Oh. Those.” He quickly put his hood back on. “If you had ever seen a demon, you would know the difference. Well, all I wanted to say was to be careful miss. That smell is unmistakable and, whether you realize it or not, you have been in the proximity of a demon. Whatever you do next, be careful.” With that, he slinked back into the stack across from her, and she booked herself back to the front.

“Find anything helpful back there, miss?” The clerk didn’t look up at her again.

“Nothing for my research, no.” She was breathing heavily, working to catch and hold that breathlessness until she got out of the store.

“I did find this back there, but I assume it was placed there by a disgruntled student hoping someone would give their work a chance.” Claire laid it on the desk before the man. He side-eyed it, and nodded.

“Thanks for bringing it up. You have a nice night now.”

“Thanks, you too.”

“And I wouldn’t worry too much about whatever that fiend-born told you. He likes to hang out here every day I add new books to the shelves, though he still won’t tell me what he is looking for. He seems harmless enough, though you aren’t the first he’s approached like that. Seems to have some obsession with demons, or at least a mean dislike of them.”

“Who else has he spoken to?”

“Another girl who came through here a few months back. I didn’t ever catch her name though. Not really my business after all.”

“I see.” Claire’s mind now pictured Alana receiving a similar warning, and her mind wandered to the note in the journal, the fragment of a Demon’s bone. She stared down at the floor, there was no way something like that actually existed. They were just old stories, religious propaganda for Norbrani crusades, nothing more. Alana must have just gotten the idea from this “Fiend-born.”

It was then that she felt another hand on her shoulder, though this one stayed there, beckoning her to turn around.

“Claire? I thought I saw you through the window. You out book shopping?” When she turned and looked, Evelyn was standing behind her, with a satchel full of various ingredients and reagents spilling over.

“I was just browsing, trying to clear my head a little after this morning. Evelyn, what are you doing here?”

“Oh, I was just out shopping, picking up a few surprises for Pierre and his recently renewed attempts at alchemy. I’m surprised to find you here of all places though. My dad didn’t ignore you did he?”

“Why, hello to you as well my lovely daughter. So kind of you to come and see your dear old father at his place of work.” The old man shook his head as he spoke, eyes still glued to his book. Evelyn walked over and gave him a brief hug before returning to Claire’s side.

“You can ignore him. He’s nice, but if you hang around too long, he’ll start talking in war stories. What did you think of the store?” She asked as she ushered Claire out the door. When they left, Claire looked up to see the stars laid sharp and white against the navy sky, the dome bleeding into the waters below. Claire thought about how it might be water above, just as it is water below.

“I think it’s a great bookstore, your father had quite a few interesting tomes on higher Golemancy arts, though I did find a rejected thesis from the college tucked into one of the shelves.”

“Oh? That happens all the time, but we just send them back to the college. Did you bring it up to Dad?”

“Yeah, I left it on the counter.”

“Thanks for that. If you ever are after something specific, let me know. Dad has a way of finding the most obscure things.”

“Thanks, I’ll keep that in mind. By the way, I had an odd encounter there with another patron your father seemed to know. He referred to him as the ‘fiend-born,’ whatever that means. Do you know them?”

“Ah, Dad must be referring to Sylvarus. He spends a lot of time in the store looking for various books on Ruination, though he’s only bought a few. Not sure what exactly he’s after, but he usually leaves frustrated, though appreciative. He’s only been coming there for about a year now. Why? What happened?”

“Nothing too bad really, he just came up to me and started talking about my smell.”

“Strange. You don’t smell to me.”

“That’s what I was thinking. I take pride in my personal hygiene, you know.”

Evelyn chuckled.

“I wouldn’t think much of it Claire, you’ve got enough going on. Next time I see him though, I’ll ask him about it.”

“Thanks.”

“No worries. You headed back to campus, or do you have some other things to do in town?”

“I can head back. I just came down here to clear my head anyway.”

“Care to walk back with me then? Pierre is going to be so excited to try and transmute these various substances into bread.”

“He’s back at that is he?” Claire smiled and shook her head. It wouldn’t surprise her if he found out how to turn lead into gold before he transmuted slime into bread.

“With a fervor.”

“More power to him then, I suppose.” They laughed as they ascended the hill back to their dorms. On the docks however, staring out to sea, stood a man in a black cloak with silver skin.

“I just hope there aren’t any here, is all. It’s part of why I left in the first place.” The fiend-born muttered to himself, watching the moons above him shimmer momentarily. If anyone had been paying attention, they would have seen a moon larger than the other two combined with a carven serpent on its surface manifest for but a moment before fading back behind the night sky.

Drying - Chapter 4

It was late when she got back, the only light in the room coming from the moon's chin peeking in through the window. She reached into her bag by her desk, her hand settling on the crystal used to power her mouse. The gem pulsed softly in her hand, the warmth penetrating through the leather of her glove. She set it down on the desk and grabbed a stone from the pile on the desk's back corner. She tapped it onto another rock in the pile and let it fall only to be caught in the stone's stirring. The rocks began to glow, spinning into a column, each stone orbiting the others until they created a sphere of light. The light was soft, just enough to illuminate her desk. Each rock had what looked like a glowing tail. She was proud of this device, a creation of her own design. A light rune on one side and a levitation rune on the other, with a simple modification that linked them all together. If she were to take one rune away now, the construction would simply fall back onto the desk and go back to being mere rocks. If only she could have the same creative spark with her golems.

The mouse's muddy bits had dried in the afternoon sunlight, though each limb was still pliable and delicate. Taking a finer scalpel than the one she used for the details, she began inscribing a series of runes into the mouse's drying flesh, refreshing those that had been inscribed earlier to match.

"A rune for life, a rune to carry the pulse, and a rune to bind it all together. One for each limb, and a link in the head and stomach." She always talked through the inscription process. It made her feel more sure she wasn't missing something. Even still, she set down her tools and began rummaging through the mess of tomes that served as her carpet.

It isn't here. Saints betray us, where could I have left it? Claire sighed and removed her gloves, the brass plating clanging against itself as she threw them to her desk chair. "Did I leave it in the library?"

The room's mess shifted clockwise as pillars of books fell and rose with her search until her hand rested on a book she knew she had already passed twice. Claire froze as the realization hit her, sweat dripping down the tip of her nose and onto the cover from her flurried digging.

I must have misplaced it somewhere. Perhaps it fell out of my bag at the cafeteria at breakfast. She looked at her bag, slumped against the desk where she had left it that morning on returning to her room.

Or perhaps it's just become one with this mess. Alana was right, I need to clean more.

At the mention of Alana's name, Claire's eyes made their way over to the curtain that divided their living spaces. "Or, perhaps you have a copy lying around." Claire walked softly through the curtain and over the stairs to Alana's room, ball to heel along the wooden floor. It was quiet and cold in Alana's room. The raised elevation was enough for the moon to be seen in full out of the window, casting the room in a frigid blue beneath the moon's grin. She was not sure which moon was out tonight, but she hoped it was Orlia. Orlia had always been nicer to her.

Alana's bookshelf was a mixture of romance novels, scientific dissertations on Golemancy, and her own notes and failed attempts at publication. No sign of anything even close to a beginner's handbook to Golemancy. Claire sighed, leaning on one hand on Alana's desk. Under her hand sat the last of Alana's journals she had hidden by accident, containing the diabolic experiments her roommate had undertaken on rats just before her death. Picking it up, she took her finger and ran it along the spine. It was dated as starting just a month ago.

Claire set the journal back down on the desk. If she had looked carefully, under where she had placed Alana's final journal, under where her hand had landed on it the first time, she would have found her own notebook.

She knew the professors had taken her other most recent ones to study and try and find the reason for her death, but she needed to go back further. In lieu of her own notes, she could call on Alana's now that she was gone. *There. Just shy of a year ago. She would have been where I am two months prior.*

She traced her finger back along the spines of each journal, each one encompassing roughly three weeks of classes. *If I were this organized I would rule Chlorthyr already. By accident no less.*

Finding the date she was looking for, Claire pulled out the journal, and sat down at Alana's desk. Flicking through the pages for around a week ago in the semester as it would correspond to the current year, she began to read.

This is all just basic algorithms. Claire sat with both hands fisted against her temples. Her head was throbbing. While Alana's room was prim and proper and organized to the smallest detail, her thoughts as they manifested on the page were not.

I would have an easier time drawing blood from a stone. She had tried that once before. It was bad alchemical business. Her uncle had told her to try, thinking it would keep her off his back with questions for a while, but the only blood she had drawn was her own. She still felt ashamed anytime she thought about that day. It was so stupid for her to have thought that the other soldiers in his company had wanted to give her real advice. It was of little consolation that two of them died to a dire wolf the next day. In fact, it made it worse.

Continuing flicking through the pages, she eventually came to a schematic Alana had copied during one of her classes. "Here we are. Thank you Alana, you have been so helpful, finally." Claire shot up from her seat, taking the two steps back into her room in one.

I knew I was forgetting something. Back at her desk, she traced a few more runes into the mouse's hide, drawing circuit lines between each to direct the energy flow when the crystal was embedded.

She set the journal down, pages feathered out on the table. She picked the mouse up, its arms now dangling over the sides of her hand. She gave it a jiggle, lifting each appendage one at a time, watching how the clay inorganically maintained shape in spite of gravity. She had copied the basic design, but she knew it wouldn't work. From her discussions with Pierre and Mortavius, her mouse had too much draw on the current power source to support the limbs and her extra rune, the

one that gave it personality beyond a mindless drone. She had to find a way to properly divert the magic, to make it rebound and fortify rather than fizzle out and dry up.

She laid the mouse on its back, reexamining the line work she had just completed. Perhaps if she added a smaller set of fortification and flow runes to the base of each joint, there would be space for the magic to swirl as it animated each limb.

I think it's ready. She set it back down on the table and pulled her gloves back on, making sure to unfurl the leather up and around her elbows. From a drawer in her desk she procured a pair of goggles and a slender metal tube that jutted out of a glass orb. Inside of the orb were three stones, each emblazoned with the rune for fire. While not a design of her own, she had put this one together herself out of one of her books. “Practical applications for Runecrafting,” or some other such thing like that.

She jostled the stones about inside the phial gently, watching as the runes ignited. Pressing another rune on the metal spigot, a small knife of fire extended in blue and in purple from the nozzle. Claire ran the flame gently across the mouse, the flame bending into a pink arc across the clay as it hardened. She was grinning. She hadn’t done this last time as it was meant to be more of a trial run, but now she was committed to this mouse.

When she was done she pressed the rune again and placed the contraption on a towel, careful to keep it away from any loose papers. Smoke spun inside like a dog hunting for its own tale. It was now time to insert the crystal.

“Please don’t melt this time,” she groaned. Claire, picking up the gem, inserted it gently into the back of the mouse in the slot she had carved out earlier. For a moment, it did nothing. Then, its eye sockets began to glow the same color as gem.

Did, did I do it? She began to reach her hand out to the clay creature. It turned its face towards her, nose twitching as if to send the smells it couldn’t smell to a brain it didn’t have. It lifted

one paw to pull itself forward, to raise itself up off of its belly, before each leg began to crack, crumple, and collapse before it landed belly down on the table in a pile of clay shards and dust.

“No! Of course of course of course...” She flung herself to the bed, her hair a whirlwind of frustration manifest. *Of course it would fail. Why would it not? My runes must have burnt out again, and I can't even see if the changes I made failed a certain way because they shattered with the clay. What am I going to do...*

With that realization, she looked up to inspect the lifeless lump of clay, only to find its head still twitching, its nose dancing up and down as it sniffed the air. Out of curiosity, she leapt up and nudged the living clay into her hand.

Well, at least you're still alive. She ran her fingers along the runes on its belly, hovering over the “love” she had originally inscribed at its center. Perhaps she had taken the wrong approach. Maybe less current was needed, not more.

Oh you poor thing, but you work! You work even if you can't walk. I will make you work. Claire danced around her room as much as she could, which in reality was a frantic skipping in place due to the mess. This was something new for her, something that held together, even if only a little. It wasn't something she was going to let go of, not yet. Sitting at her desk, she fashioned another set of legs for her mouse, before taking out its crystal and setting it on the windowsill to dry through the night and the next day before going to bed.

Drying - Chapter 5

It had been a few days since the incident, since the gardens had been blocked off to the student body. Claire had tried meeting with Professor Mortavius the following morning to give him Alana's journal, but to no avail. The gardens remained closed off for the remainder of the week, and his attentions lay therein. It wasn't until the following week that Claire managed to set up a meeting to hand over her roommate's final journal, though she wasn't sure that was what she wanted to do anymore. It wasn't the best look, rifling through her roommate's things. It was an even worse look to be withholding information that would help in the college's investigation of her disappearance, not that there was anything they could do to help here. She was already dead, which meant the harm was already done.

"You can come in now, Claire." The doorway opened next to her, Mortavius's shadow cast long across the hall by the fading light of the sinking sun.

Claire rose and entered the office. Mortavius was an organized man, but not a particularly tidy one. The room was dusty, though not the kind of dust that makes itself at home from neglect, but from books. Much like her own room since her and Alana's falling out, books seemed to tower and loom about the room, only his were placed in shelves. Some rows had a fine lacquer of dust on them, their pages not having been seen in years, or so she imagined. Outside of this the room sported a desk and three chairs, one in front of the window facing the door and two others facing it in turn. It wasn't much bigger than her dorm room, and far dustier. Despite being well lit by the sunlight coming in through the large window behind his desk and the candles he had lit around the room, the space felt like a zone of twilight made permanent.

Mortavius shut the door to his office behind her, and she watched as that motion reverberated throughout the room, sending a wave of dust from each bookcase as the tomes within chattered like teeth. Mortavius ushered her into a seat and she watched as the cloud of dust whirled

in the beams of light as he passed through them to his own chair. He had barely sat down before he began speaking to her.

“Claire, are you one for faerie tales?” He strutted over to his desk, hands firmly behind his back, pinning the long black robes synonymous with his presence there as well. Before she could speak, a book had already been placed on the desk between them, though she was unsure if he had had them prepared or dumped them from out of his sleeves like a magician whose pay grade was far above the venue they had been asked to play. It was dusty enough she couldn’t read the title fully.

“Passingly, though I’ve never been one for happy endings, I suppose.” Claire unloaded her bag from her shoulder and extracted a leaf of paper and a pen. The question brought her back to her childhood and how her mother would tell her the wildest stories of her exploits on the border between Chlorthyr and the wild country beyond, of the lilac pines and lavender birches dipped in snow and left to melt and refreeze each night as winter chased autumn before the break of spring. She knew most were made up for her amusement, but there were some that she never could be sure about, the ones her mother’s scars made come to life. Admittedly, she had been returning to them of late, first for one of her other classes and then as a means of avoiding the work for the rest of them. “I have come to know quite a few more since my time here,” she added.

“Wonderful. They are a passion of mine, though I cannot claim any specific scholarship on them. If you are interested, I have one that I doubt you, or many others, have come across though. Many years ago, after the war in Chlorthyr claimed sovereignty from the Norbrani Empire, long may it crumble, there was a soldier looking to make his way home.” He paused and looked expectantly at her, his eyes prodding her memory. His back to the sun, they glimmered from within his silhouette, peering over his crossed hands. “Do you care to guess?”

She pondered for a moment, titles running through her head and being drummed into the world through her fingers before tapping out a name on her paper that resounded louder than the

rest. “Is it *The Wolf and the Swordsman*? Though a soldier aiming to go home is not the most specific bit of information where faerie tales are concerned.”

“I am afraid not. While this story shares quite a few elements and motifs with that tale, not to mention a certain grim disposition, it differs greatly in that it is based on more than a culture’s take on the nature of soldiers, their duties, and the kinds of relationships they tend to engender. No, this story is the tale of a man who lived and breathed, once. It tells not of a soldier struggling to find his way home through a forest of magic and shapeshifters, but through a bleak desert full of nothing but whispers of the past.” He paused, nodded to himself, and cleared his throat before adding a final detail. “It was of interest to Alana at one point in her research.”

The mention of Alana was like an iron rod to her throat, cold and weighty and evoking the scent of rust one cannot help but associate with blood. Claire swallowed, rubbing her leg against the journal in her bag. “What is the story called? Perhaps I might have seen it in a book somewhere, though not read it.”

“It does not have a name, nor is it written anywhere to my knowledge. None of the best stories are, you know. Would you like to hear it, this story?” He polished off the book in front of him, the filigreed letters shining in the interplay of sun and candle light. With the dust removed, the title read *A History of Histories: Chlorthian War of Secession*.

Claire nodded. “May I borrow your ink?” She proffered her paper as an explanation.

“Of course. Now as I mentioned, this story does not begin in the land of myth and wilderness but in a history steeped in blood and atrocity, in a time of war.” He opened the history book that sat between them, bringing it up to his chest and flicking through it until his finger landed on a specific passage. “The Battle of the Fens. Occurring roughly 150 years ago, to summarize, it is estimated that out of the thousands of soldiers that fought on both sides that day, neither faction left with more than one hundred amongst the living. While in terms of numbers, the Norbrani Empire

walked away with more soldiers retained, it was agreed upon by both sides that victory belonged to no one but the survivors of that unfortunate day and that the territory that stretched across the peatlands of Chlorthyr where the battle had been fought would remain a site of neutrality in future encounters. The casualties were of such high consequence that the next skirmish between the two sides would not be seen until five years after the Battle of the Fens.” Mortavius put the book back down on the table and spun it around for her to read what he had just spoken. “It is said that the swamps in that area retain the memories of those slain and that their moans can be heard on the wind in the surrounding areas.”

“Unusual that they would include such speculation about supernatural phenomena in a history account, is it not?” Claire flicked through the surrounding pages, failing to find any explanation or reference to what was just spoken buried in the numbers and political analyses.

“Keen observation. However, it is worth noting that since that battle no new structures have been built within those swamps and the existing one, being the keep the battle was fought over, has remained uninhabited since the conflict. That is not to say that there are not those who have tried, but to say that no one has stuck it out and reclaimed the land from the dead. Remember Claire, not every detail will you find in a history book, some need to be dug up and examined with your own experience.”

He leaned back in his chair, grabbing his staff from where it leaned in the window frame behind him. He jostled the end slightly as he spoke, emerald sparks escaping the iron lantern-cage that adorned its top. “What is not in that book however is that there was a soldier that survived where the rest of his company did not. This soldier was not one born of royalty, not that anyone was back then. They fought because they were told to, because their parents had.”

“If we all fought because our parents did, I fear what our country would look like.”

“If our ancestors had not fought as their parent’s parents had, then we would not have a country.”

“Professor, if I have learned anything from those in my family that served, violence begets more violence, no matter the cause.”

“It varies with the times, I suppose, with the cause. When there is no wrong to right, perhaps you are right. Might I continue though? We have gotten rather off topic.”

“Please, do.”

Morativius tapped his staff against the ground, the lantern head seeming to absorb the other lights in the room before flaring a bright seafoam that flooded the room in turquoise mists. As he began to speak, the fog rolled across his desk, shaping to his words.

“The soldier here did not fight for passion, did not fight for anything more than his country asked him to, told him to. This soldier did not fight for glory or home or kingdom, but for family, for legacy. Since childhood they were directionless, having learned little more than how to use the pointy end of a blade. Later, they learned that they were going to die. His parents knew this, his commanding officers knew this, and he knew this. He was alright with that, until he saw his first comrade fall. This soldier fought at the Battle of the Fens and came out the sole survivor in his company. Any guesses as to how he escaped the great harvest that occurred there?” Mortavius leaned back in his chair, stroking his stubble once before crossing his arms, eyes like burning jades set in flesh set on her. The staff floated next to him, light turning to mist, turning to figures falling on swords on each other in cycle.

“Did he run away? Did he show a cowardly streak?” The staff flared red briefly, responding to her input. The soldier pretended to fall on his own blade before running away from the battlefield after the enemy line walked over him.

“No.” Mortavius leaned forward, elbows on his desk. “He was buried alive, his comrades in arms his unwilling, but much appreciated, tomb to be.” The room turned blue yet again, and the soldier was pulled to the ground by his own comrades. “Yet, it did not end as he had expected. Crawling from under the bodies of his comrades for time lost to his senses, he finds the battlefield still. All that remained were the countless corpses, strewn in fashion that would make even the Saints gag. Then, the silence turned to cacophony in his ears alone, and he could hear his comrades moaning from the earth around him. He checked their bodies, but to no avail. They were dead. He repeated this process with others, friend and foe, but to similar results. It is only when he goes to leave that he notices them rising and following in his wake.”

“Them?” Claire gulped, guessing at the answer while simultaneously avoiding it.

“Come now Claire, who else is there but the bodies of the deceased? Afraid he would be hung for such sorcery, even if it was not his own, he deserted. Eventually, the bodies fell and properly mingled with the earth, but their voices grew no quieter in his mind as their specters continued on. Some left after a while, but his comrades whose bodies he had been spared by lingered by his side. They named him a coward, though he was only by circumstance. Or so he told himself. In shame, this soldier journeyed far from his home looking for an answer to his apparent curse. While he had many exploits over the course of his travels, there is one that I think would benefit you the most. This is the story of the Soldier and the Child.”

“Professor, I really appreciate this story and do find it interesting, but what does it have to do with me?” Claire’s mind had wandered away from the journal in her bag, busy wondering what exactly the story of this unknown soldier was meant to evoke for her. Perhaps it had something more to do with Alana. Maybe it had something to do with her research. In her time with faerie tales, there was always an element of wonder, yet here, there seemed to be no promise of such, no

mythical element beyond the speaking dead. “What does this soldier offer a golemancer struggling to hold up to the title?”

Mortavius grabbed his staff, standing and spinning it once on his finger in the process. As he spun the rod, the lantern extinguished and the mists faded back into candle flames. He began to predate about the room, like a hawk gauging its prey below. “Well, you remind me a great deal of this soldier. What do you see in this first portion of the tale, of the buildup to the narrative proper?”

“I see a man with no purpose and with no talent. I see a man cursed by the weight of circumstance.” Claire stared at the blank leaflet of paper before her, and wrote the words “cursed to uselessness.”

“I understand that reading. However, what is this man doing now, at this point in the story?” Mortavius was now three circles around her, the staff touching the ground each third step. With each pass he collected a book from his desk or that had fallen off next to it and placed it on its proper shelf. He was no longer looking at her, but Claire didn’t notice.

“He is searching for a solution to his curse, to the ghosts following him.”

“Yes, but what else is going on? Claire, I am your rune studies professor. However, at its core, rune studies is just the act of reading, albeit in a magical language. What do you read here, what more is there to this action? Just as a rune is changed by the others around it, how is the soldier’s seeking action understood through its contexts?”

“He has nothing but a sword and a curse, both of which he has little understanding of. He leaves in the pursuit of knowledge. He is searching for meaning. Yes?” Claire did not look up from her notes, but if she had, Mortavius would have seen her scowling.

“Better. What kind of meaning though? The meaning of the curse? I think that is plain enough for him to figure out some kind of punishment for his survival at the cost of others’ lives. What the soldier is missing is something more integral. I want you to think about that.” He ended

his pacing on the seventh trip around, only five books put away properly and three more withdrawn from the shelves in his arms, before sitting back into his seat in front of her. “I want you to think about what that missing something is. What is the integral bit that is lacking for this man of swords and ghosts? He may be setting out to find an answer, but what do you think he really needs to find? I was originally going to tell you how the story ends, his final journey, but I think it might be more beneficial for you if you go home and think on this. Besides, I have another student coming in the next hour and we would need more than that to tell the rest. Get back to me when you come up with an answer Claire.” The candle lights sputtered, the flames flicking in a breeze that should not have been.

“I will. Thank you Professor.” It wasn’t until after he had shut the door behind her that she went to put her notes away in her bag and noticed that she still had Alana’s journal on her. She flicked the top of her bookmark before closing her satchel and heading back towards her room. *I’m sorry Alana, but it looks like you will be staying under my care a little bit longer.*

The evening sun peeked in through the windows and set the ground ablaze with its orange glow on her walk back to her room. It was almost autumn, and she could feel the harvest calling to her back home. Her father would understand. He would have to. What she still didn’t understand though, was the story she had been told.

What is the soldier missing? How can he be missing anything when he has nothing? It was a bit arcane, dry, and dusty for her liking. Not surprising given where it came from, she supposed. Walking past the library, she decided to stop near the fountain again, take in the air as it turned to that of night.

Maybe some fresh air will do me some good. The room still reeks of Alana’s experiments. Claire made her way through the library, passing under the shadows of the columns and through the two sets of wooden doors that bookended the place, into the arboretum. Looking at the fountain, it was clear the professors had tried to clean the scorch marks, albeit not well.

Strange, I figured that would be easy to clean with magic. Kneeling down, she ran her fingers over the air above the marks, looking at the arm-like scorch that ran up the side of the marble fountain and into the basin.

At least now I know exactly what happened I suppose. Claire stared at the scorches for a while, letting them sink into her mind as they had sunk into the stone. Alana was gone. Alana had been awful to live with, but this still wasn't right somehow. She had the room to herself, yes, but something was missing with Alana. Something she couldn't place.

The sun sank low over the horizon and into the sea, and in the twilight's last sparkle, a blue wisp hovered above the fountain, above the scorches, before fluttering off towards the bridge. Claire stood, sighed, shivered, and swallowed.

Not again.

Her legs moved like lead, yet she urged them on. She didn't notice when she stepped off of the bridge, the creak of the wood being replaced with the soft cushioning of the grass beyond. A few more steps, and the light of the emerging moon was all but lost to her except for behind, only coming through in patches and rays.

I'm being silly. It was probably just a trick of the fading light. Claire spoke as she began to turn, when again she saw the glimmer in the corner of her eye. As she spun around to catch it, she saw only a shadow of a tail, blue and effervescent in its constitution, a fleeting image there and then gone. She ran over to the tree it had disappeared behind, but there was no sign of a footstep or anything having disturbed the wilds that held root there. She leaned her head back and stared at the canopy above her, a different feeling of familiarity from home setting in. She gulped, before slowly rising and walking backwards towards the plaza. She counted to ten, then twenty, then thirty. This is how she had gotten out at home, this place should be no worse than the lavender boughs of Lorinwood's border, not on a college campus.

Claire continued walking backwards until the faerie's tail was just a memory, a half dreamed fantasy. That was all it had been anyways. When she opened her eyes, she had carried herself back to the plaza, her hand resting on the side of the octagonal fountain's rim. She looked back up into the sky, Orlia and Faern directly above her now.

As she crossed the threshold back into the library, she was met by a surprised Pierre.

"Hey Claire. You come to join us tonight?" Claire jumped backwards, spinning on her back heel, the largest textbook drawn ready from her bag, back against the door. When she stabilized on her back foot, Pierre was standing before her, an apologetic but amused smile on his face.

"Can you not man?" She brushed imaginary dust off of herself and put her impromptu sledgehammer back in her bag. "You need to warn me before you just come up like that, especially as a girl is going through a door."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to sneak up on you. I was just about to grab some fresh air before going back to studying." Now that he mentioned it, she could hear their, no his, usual cohort in their usual study spot further back. "I don't know what to tell you."

"Sorry, I suppose I'm just a tad jumpy tonight."

Pierre nodded sympathetically. "I suppose your earlier meeting with Mortavius didn't go well then?"

"I'm not really sure. My meeting went well enough I suppose. I had meant to return a book to him, but he told me a faerie tale instead." She had started to get used to Pierre's sudden appearances, but in reality she knew they were sudden because of her own mental divergences from the space she occupied. Still, she often wondered why he hadn't joined a shadow organization of some sort, given his natural talents for stealth, intended or otherwise.

"Are you having trouble sleeping or something?" Pierre's smirk was something that had always puzzled her as much as his proclivity for being unnoticed. He was the only person she knew

who could smile so convincingly without showing his teeth. Just another reason he should have been one of those shadowy agents of the state her father swore were real. To her, it seemed no more than some rural conspiracy.

“No, not anymore than anyone else. I am reasonably certain the course schedule is designed to promote sleep deprivation, but I digress. Is that not your study group back there? I hope you are not ditching them for my sake.” Claire tossed her head back towards the fading sound of their classmates’ voices while keeping a steady pace back towards her dorm. From what she could tell, it was now a merged group of History of Golemancy and Rune-Carving.

“You meant ‘our’ group, right? We can catch up with them later. Now that you are here though, I was wondering if you’d be interested in joining us tonight, given the test in history at the end of the week. Professor Bisset’s tests are on the longer side after all.” Pierre’s posture made it appear as if he was always leaning forward, casting his bangs like curtains on either side of his face. Tilting forward like that, his eyes peered at her over his glasses. There was a hope in them that she could not fathom why it had not yet been squashed. “The others were asking about you last time we met.”

“I appreciate the offer, but I am not particularly worried about Bisset’s tests. Everything has felt like a repeat of information for me in that class, more or less. I was, admittedly, a little over zealous as a child when it came to history. Here.” Claire stopped and faced him. “I would rather you catch up to them before they get too far without you. Thank you, perhaps another time. Professor Mortavius gave me a lot to think about.”

“With a faerie tale?”

“There is more to them than you might think. Sometimes.” She winked at him, an awkward wink, the overexaggerated kind meant to denote a joke that otherwise would not be considered

funny. She didn't like turning his invitations down so often, every time, but she had other things going on. Her hand drifted to Alana's journal in her bag. "I'll come back soon, I promise."

"Ok. I'll let the group know not to expect you tonight." Pierre fixed his posture as he spoke, pressing his glasses flush against the bridge of his nose. The lenses of his glasses caught the light just right so as to glow white, obscuring his gaze from hers. Claire heard a sigh as he walked away, and she watched him slump again as he went around her and into the arboretum.

Drying - Chapter 6

“What is the most common kind of magic?” Professor Bisset had his back to the class as usual, the board already covered in scrawlings arcane only due to their resemblance to hen scratching. Claire had stopped bothering trying to decipher them months ago. She was doodling in the margins of her notes when he posed the question, but it wasn’t anything she hadn’t read before. Even before coming to the College of Clay, she had been interested in history, especially that of magic. This class felt like a refresher course for her.

“No one can tell me the most common kind of magic?” For the first time in weeks the professor’s question was more than rhetorical. He turned to face them, his chalk-streaked beard an unfamiliar site for the class. It took a second for the question to register, or rather for the need of their response to register. It wasn’t until the question had been asked a third time that the first hands were raised.

To Claire, the answer was simple. Household magics were the most common in Chlorthyr by far, in no short part due to the abundance of them put out by college students such as herself that imbued everyday objects with enchantments to aid in daily life. She continued to doodle.

“Combat magic,” one student posited.

“No, I’m afraid not outside of myths and legends anyhow. Think bigger. Here is too small of a sample size. What is the most common magic around the world?” The professor turned halfway back to the board, chalk threatening to strike the board at a moment’s notice. “You.” He pointed to a girl a few rows behind Claire.

“Runes and enchantments, right? Household magics and commodities?” Claire nodded in response to this statement. It was what her studies would indicate anyhow.

“I can see your logic, but again that is too local to Chlorthyr and the Norbrani of the Pyrenean Archipelago. While ubiquitous in these areas, especially around campuses such as this, they are far from the most common kind of magic.”

Claire put her doodling down and lifted her head from her notes, resting it on her hand. The room was quiet outside of the shifting of pages as students searched for the correct answer. Claire stared upwards, recounting the histories she had read. In most of them, like the myths and legends the professor had mentioned, there was mainly the accounting of war magics and other advancements that impacted daily life.

“Would anyone else gander a guess before I give it away?”

Claire looked down at her bag. In it was, regretfully, Alana’s journal. Next to it however was her textbook for this class, her textbook for her rune scribing course, and the literature course’s textbook on faerie tales.

“What is the most common kind of magic in faerie tales?” Claire whispered as the professor shrugged, and began to turn around. “Curses.” The word came out as much of an exclamation as it was meant to be addressed to the class. She blushed as the professor turned back around.

“Sorry Claire, did I miss your hand? I guess my eyesight is not what it used to be. What did you say?”

“Curses, sir. You mentioned legends and myths glorifying war magic earlier, but there is another kind that appears in many of those stories. Curses.”

“Curses.” The professor nodded before turning back to the board. “Curses are indeed the most common kind of magic. As Claire pointed out, think back to the stories you were told at bedtime. Think back to the stories of knights and heroes coming across unexplained events and warped kingdoms. There you will find the truth of the world, masked by the myth. Curses are the

only kind of magic known to occur unnaturally, such as one person cursing another, and naturally, such as being a part of the world itself.”

The professor continued to drone on, but some of what he had said stuck with her. She turned again to Alana’s journal, and thought about the encounter with the demon she had written within. In the margins of her notes, Claire wrote “For what is a demon, but a curse on the world?”

Back in her dorm, Claire laid her textbooks out on her desk. Before tomorrow she would need to read the next chapter of her history text, though she didn’t expect it to hold anything new for her. Better safe than sorry. She pushed the others near the lamp, its rotating stones casting vague shadows across their covers. The faint metallic hue of Alana’s name as it was emblazoned on her journal flickered in the light, calling her attention. When Alana had disappeared, Claire had thumbed through this most recent journal for any clues as to her disappearance, but hadn’t really, truly read it. The history text was simply covering the events that led up to the Chlorathian War of Secession. Her grandparents had fought in that and she had heard plenty of stories. It was of little interest at this point. Closing her textbook, she retired to her bed, Alana’s journal in hand. There were about fifty others like it in her room, but this one was the last, marked and dated to cover roughly the last month. Opening it however, the first day recounted her first day back from her expedition to the Ziggurat on the northern edge of the country, the supposed origin of Golemancy during the war. Claire wondered if she would find the same account in the journal from the summer she went on the expedition.

It still haunts me, the demon, its face little more than an amalgamation of teeth and razor barbs. When it had me pinned, it looked like a tunnel to hell, swirling not into darkness but a faint crimson glow more horrid than darkness itself. Words do not do the beast justice. However, if not for Professor Mortavius, I would surely have died. Yet, I feel that it was worth the trauma to have returned with such a sample as this. Professor Mortavius seems to think so as well, though we have yet to really discuss those events. I somehow doubt we will. He has seemed rather

upset by the whole procedure, yet his research must go on it seems. I suppose it is not my position to question such things, not that that has stopped me before.

There was something about this first page that she couldn't get past. Claire remembered Alana mentioning something awful about her summer expedition to the Ziggurat, but in even less detail than this short paragraph had offered. She had assumed it was something closer to not bringing enough underwear based on Alana's tone at the time, though reading this she was just impressed by how much Alana downplayed it all. It wasn't until after digging through library records that had learned that three people, one professor and two students, died on that expedition. She had always wondered how Professor Mortavius kept his job after that one, though she had not the courage to ask. She wondered if perhaps Alana had, and that was when Mortavius told her the story about the soldier.

Reading further along, Claire came to a series of experiments with something found at the Ziggurat performed across the early parts of the semester here, at the college. Reaching into her desk, she pulled out the vial of green liquid with the sliver of something floating around in it. To her it looked like a shard of bone.

The sample taken from the Ziggurat radiates a heat it did not within the temple or during transit. The sample in Mortavius's workshop does not share this trait. I, sadly, did not notice this heating until I had already begun testing on it, so it is inconclusive as to whether or not my tests have made this occur or if this is due to some other factor. I had left it on a display last night to find it scorched into the floor this morning.

Acid. Acid seems to abate its heating somewhat, enough to stop it from being a fire hazard. A low quality acid is enough, and our gloves are able to withstand it just fine. The acid solution used by Mortavius cannot be watered down however, as the bone reacts violently to water. I still have glass peppered in my gloves. Happily, I wore a face protector when handling this thing.

While cleaning the glass out of my glove I burnt myself on the brass plating. I found a small shard of the demon bone, a few actually, embedded with the glass in my glove. These shards have been moved to their own vials of acid, which seems to have the same effect.

Mortavius's research is going nowhere. The demon bones don't seem to react "positively" with anything, though I am uncertain as to what he aims to do with them. The bones are like razor glass to handle, only stronger. I do not think a golem made from such a substance is possible; it is too volatile.

However, a golem powered by it might work.

Claire thought back to the burning smell, and to the fiend-born's comment about her own scent, putting the vial back safely within her desk in the leather lined-bag she had picked up for it. She had always thought of demons as nothing more than faerie tales. Flicking forward more, Claire found failed attempts at golems made this way, repeated, in the cellar of the distillery building. More than that, she saw they were all failures, each and every last one. Until Alana moved to rats trapped in that same cellar. They all exploded in the end, but apparently Alana was making progress until she decided to steal a larger sample.

Claire flicked back to the earlier notes on making a golem powered by it. Perhaps that was her issue, that her rune was drawing more power than could be provided by the standard crystal. She poured over Alana's notes and schematics, then began to draw her own. She wouldn't risk adapting her mouse to this new power source, but that didn't mean she was opposed to perfecting what Alana had abandoned in pursuit of the flesh.

Drying - Chapter 7

Both moons were out as she passed through the arboretum to the distillery that night. In front of the fountain, she saw that they hadn't quite properly cleaned away the scorch marks from where she presumed Alana's corpse was found. She nodded to them, thought about asking them for luck as she built on Alana's research, then remembered how asking her for help had gone in the past, and continued on.

The basement was damp, the smell of fermentation swelling in the stagnant air. Along the ground, hastily diluted in water and wine, she could still see the scorch marks from what she presumed to be Alana's past experiments. Taking a broom from the corner, she tried to push away most of the remaining dust and must, exposing a ritual circle beneath the grime. Flicking through Alana's notes, she found no mention of it, though even through her attempts at cleaning it away, the scorched earth clearly matched her handwriting.

Claire dropped three bags to the ground, each unfurled at the touch of a drawstring, revealing two larger lumps of clay, hardened overnight, and two pairs of clay shafts to serve as limbs. She had done the majority of the rune work in her room, though she had had to shape them in the Kiln. There was far from enough clay in her room for a project like this.

Taking the stockier pair of stumps, she placed them over the center of Alana's old circle. Taking out her scalpel, she began to slowly carve out and refine the runes she had laid out the night before in her room, preparing them to connect to the larger whole as she built it. The larger ball of clay was next and served as the chest, followed by the smaller of the two being plopped on as the head. She hastily, but methodically chiseled in the remaining runes on these before doing the same with the arms.

Claire flicked through Alana's journal, comparing the runework she had just done to Alana's schematics.

“It looks to be all there.” Claire nodded to herself. Now was the time for her own touches to Alana’s formula. She had already worked in a few cursory precautionary runes on the limbs that she had practiced on her own mouse project, but now she added the rune for love in the center of its chest before carving out a little slit for the bone shard in the center of that rune. Hopefully, she prayed to her ancestors, this would be what fixed her issue, a stronger power source.

All preparations made, Claire slotted the shard of bone into the golem’s chest, and took three steps back.

After a few seconds, the rune in the center of its chest lit up a sickly red rather than the soft white-gold seen when using the regular crystals on her mouse. The light slowly ran across its entire body in a wave as the energy animated it. She had only given its face a pair of eyes, its head otherwise remaining an oblong lump of clay, smooth aside from the rivuleting runes that cascaded across its visage. The light settled as it passed across its face into those eye holes, the red light remaining only there and on the rune for love around its chest.

Once the light settled in, it began to look around, the lights in its eyes shuttering as it blinked. Once it saw her, it took a step forward, leaning its head towards her. However, after that step, it stopped in place, staring at her. Raising one fingerless hand to its face, it felt around its own blank visage. The lights of its eyes flared when it found nothing, and it beat its hands together until they were mangled, falling into three strands of clay it flexed as if they were prehensile in its mind. It clawed with both stumps at its non-existent mouth, the runes scrambling around its face as it rubbed them around. Giving up, it leaned back, its body vibrating in a silent scream, before charging at her.

In that moment, she watched as another wave of red flared in the runes across its body, as the shard of bone fell to the floor, and the golem collapsed at her feet. As the light faded from its eyes, it crawled towards her, the scratches along its face resembling a mess of teeth and fangs just

beneath the surface of its clay-like flesh. Its hands, molten to the touch, wrapped themselves around her boots before the arms bearing them fell wholly lifeless to the ground.

As she untangled herself from its dead grasp, she wondered where it had intended to grab her with them. She kicked it, rolling it over. Where she had made the rune for love, there was only a blackened, ashened hole from which the bone had fallen out. Grabbing the bone, she looked over her creation again, when her hand grazed one of the divots of Alana's original circle. On the floor, her hand grazed the edge of the circle, and as her finger instinctively traced the rune there, she understood its purpose. It was an extended dampening rune, to block out the sound and the damage of the explosions Alana had written about. More than that though, realizing its purpose with the added context of what she had just witnessed, Claire saw it as a cage for the golem, for the demon housed anew.

Claire stood up, turning back towards the doorway and her bags. She couldn't leave this clay corpse here, it would need to be wetted and re-merged with a bucket to be used again. However, in the doorway, leaned Professor Mortavius, his eyes staring blankly over her experiment, but simultaneously locking in on the bone shard in her hand.

Drying - Chapter 8

The hallways smelled of dried clay and paper, but there was no one else around. She looked down at her hands, the gloves still clinging to the mud she had worked with over the last few nights, each day a different layer and shade coating the dark leather fingers and brass guards. Each flake was a testament to her failure. Each flake was a testament to what was about to come. Claire laid her gloves out next to her bag, careful not to wrap the fingertips, still damp with clay from that morning, into the palms. Reaching into her bag, she pulled out Alana's journal, flicking to the final pages she had yet to read. When Mortavius had found her in that basement, he had taken the bone. Now it was time to turn in the journal. However, she wasn't going to do so without first seeing exactly where Alana's research had ended up taking her.

I have tried using larger segments of bones in the rats, to augment their forearms or hindquarters with greater strength. The results are promising, however, like the golems, they all end with fried or exploded specimens.

Mortavius hasn't noticed it missing yet, and the experiments with him have led me to a colossal discovery. The bones work well to augment one's strength, but require an appropriate, attuned vessel. The clay responds well, but violently in this manner. But Mortavius lacks imagination. I am going to do what he never even dreamt of. Tonight, I will replace my own arm with one of the bones found in the Ziggurat. With it, I will be unstoppable. I won't be forgotten as the third or fourth name on this publication, but have my own. I will be making history with this simple transfusion of bone.

Claire set the journal down. She grimaced as she thought about the scorch marks in the garden. Claspng her hands together, she leaned over her knees, and praying to no one in specific, she asked for one thing. It wasn't long after when a call from within the room behind her stirred her.

"Claire, you can come in now." The voice was deep and echoing, the kind of voice that settles in the back of the mind and makes it its home. The kind of voice that calls to you when you know you have strayed and questions all that you are.

The voice came from a man whose spindles were cloaked beneath a black robe, whose eyes festered with a green not unlike the wilting of flowers in winter. He was flicking through a folio, the bone shard displayed prominently in its new vial in the center of his desk, the light from the window filtering through it and casting the doorway in an appropriately sickly green.

“Professor Mortavius, I...” The girl was cut short by the professor raising his hand.

“Is this about your final exam?” He set the folio down between them and slid it to the girl.

“I assume that was what you were working on in the distillery at least. I know not how you came by this, but I am most disappointed in you.”

Professor Mortavius picked up the bone in his hands, viewing it through the light of the window as it refracted across the room. “You know this had something to do with Alana’s disappearance, yet you faltered in bringing it to me as you had promised. More than that, you endangered yourself by attempting to use it to cheat your way through crafting a golem. I was just looking it over and I’m afraid there isn’t much I can do to help you in this scenario Claire. I’d like to, and you’ve shown great promise in my classes, but I have not the authority to overturn your lack of progress as a Golemancer on top of this violent breach of safety protocols.”

“Professor, I tried on multiple occasions to hand Alana’s work over to you, just with my failing, I thought I could learn something from her this way. It isn’t like she did a great job mentoring in life, perhaps her notes could pick up the slack. I know it’s wrong, and I’m sorry. Here, before you expel me, at least take the other piece of the puzzle.” With this, Claire slid the last of Alana’s journals across the desk to him.

“Claire, I appreciate you coming wholly clean here, but there is little I can do in this situation.” Looking at him, he seemed as close to tears as she felt.

“Is there nothing that you can do though? I just need one more chance, I’ll make it work. I know I can fix my issues with creating a whole golem. I know what I did was dangerous, but I

learned so much from it. I just need to find a way to augment the power around this rune, to make things flow evenly. I almost had it in the cellar last night. It's just melding the power source is something I haven't been able to make work yet without the thing crumbling to dust."

"The problem is not that you cannot Claire, it is that you have yet to do so." He leaned back in his chair, hands clasped together against his chin, the thumbs scratching just beneath it. "I cannot speak for your other courses, however it is that very reason that I cannot aid you in your predicament, on top of the obvious. However, last night's incident is not something I have brought to anyone else's attentions yet."

"I understand this is supposed to be the simplest part of the whole experience but it is also the most vital! If I can grasp this everything should fall into place at the expected pace. I just need to figure out how to compensate for my lack of magic with runes. Here, look." She reached into her bag and pulled out the small, clay mouse. It was legless and its rump was worn down from countless wiggled scurries, an empty hole set in its back. Setting it on the table, she inserted a crystal into the hole in its back. It began to scurry around the table, its lack of hind legs leaving a trail of dirt crumbs along the polished wood. The runes glimmered sunlight gold as it did its circles, attempting to jump up and down before its creator in excitement.

"Claire, this is no better than the last time we met."

"I'm aware, but Professor, give me some clay and fifteen minutes, and it will have front legs. If I can do this, will you give me another chance?"

"Do you truly believe you can, with what you learned last night?" He looked down his nose at her from over his shoulder in disbelief.

"I do. Professor Mortavius, this place, this art is all I've ever wanted. If I don't get one more chance to make this right then the dream is gone forever."

“Very well then. Go down the hall into one of the labs and grab some clay. I will prepare a space on my desk for you in the meantime. When you return, I will give you twenty minutes to inscribe them. I will aid in the hardening as that part would take hours otherwise. Be fast. Your time starts now.”

With that, Claire was off down the hall. Bursting into a class in session, she ignored the professor’s protests, stealing a vat of clay, before disappearing back down the hall. She hadn’t heard what was said in the class she had just raided, but it didn’t matter. If she couldn’t do this, she was expelled anyway.

In ten minutes, she had the legs made and runed. Mortavius dried them with magic as promised, and she went about attaching them. Inserting the crystal into its back, she watched as a wave of golden light pattered across its runes, settling in the eyes as had the golem’s last night. It looked around, its nose doing the familiar twitch, before wiggling towards Claire. It wasn’t using its legs, but they weren’t crumbling either.

“Claire, I can see the legs, but it isn’t using them. Just because they are attached, doesn’t mean they are functional. I’m sorry, but this does not satisfy me. I’m sorry.”

“Do you really see its front paws, Professor? Normally they would’ve crumbled or fallen off by now, but I think it just doesn’t know what to do with them given it's never had them before. I had to graft these legs on with different runes and clay to make the bond happen but now he can pull himself along just fine. I haven’t gotten the flow of energy to support the back legs yet but I know I can make that happen.”

“How would it remember its past activations?” Mortavius whirled around, nose to the desk as he examined the legs. He reached out, and touched one of the clay paws from behind. The mouse jerked it away, but proceeded to wiggle rather than walk.

“Well I’ll be. This is impressive. You did what you said, but also proved something about golem memory. Remarkable. Record this Claire. It will help greatly with a thesis when you do one.”

“You mean I can stay?”

“Yes, but only if you do two things for me. First, hand over everything else from Alana’s work pertaining to this summer’s excavation. I believe I have all of her work from the summer trip confiscated already, but be honest with me, did I miss anything else?”

“No professor, that journal and shard were all I had accidentally kept.”

“Very good. Second, I still think it would be best if you went home over break to focus solely on your mouse. Obviously, as I will write to the college, you have been deeply affected by the loss of your mentor and need some time away. Take this time to finish your work on the mouse and transfer it to a full-scale golem. I trust you have clay available at home?”

“I do. Will this small crystal power a full golem though? How am I to test?” Claire thought about how she was already struggling to power her mouse with it.

“Just practice with the mouse. They will give you a full crystal when you return” said Morativus. “What you have done is remarkable for a first year, especially considering how you have had to go about it. Alright. I will approach the examination board with this development and ask for a temporary leave for you. I believe that this is enough of a change to warrant your continued studies aided by college resources even in light of last night.”

“Thank you professor.”

“Here, what I will write is that ‘Due to your declining grades, we believe it would be best for you to take a few weeks to yourself off campus. The disappearance of Alana Moreau has been weighing heavy on all of our minds since her disappearance. As she was your roommate and the person you expressed being closest with in our last academic advisory meeting, we cannot help but equate the trauma of her disappearance with the slipping of your grades. As such, before the

upcoming break, you will be asked to take an extra week off from your classes so that you have time to process these recent events and breathe. Feel free to bring your projects home with you, but don't focus on them alone. Your professors have already been notified. When you return, we will reevaluate your standing at the college.” He took out a piece of paper as he spoke, scrawling out the note in flowing letters. All of his letters splotched as he traced them onto the page, too much ink on the tip of his pen.

He reached down and grabbed the mouse, petting it once on the head before removing the crystal and handing both back to her. “Understand Claire that this will be your one and only second chance here. Don't let me down.” Mortavius's voice was as grave as when he had caught her in the basement.

Turning away from her, Mortavius raised his hand with an open palm, as if pondering some invisible quandary, before slowly lowering it to a flat position next to himself.

“Claire, do you remember that faerie tale I started telling you a week ago now, about the Soldier and the Child?”

“Of course I do, but I do not see the relevance of such a thing right now.”

“That is expected. Take a deep breath. While you may think Alana's disappearance has little to do with your current academic predicament, I am not so convinced.” Mortavius turned around and began pacing around the room, still avoiding eye contact with the exasperated undergrad.

“Where did I leave off?”

“You left off with him having gone into a desert.” Claire was indeed exasperated, but knew better than to think she was getting out of this part of the conversation.

“Ah, thank you.” He made almost a full cycle around the room before he began, the room itself seeming to transpose itself into a desert with the dust his movements called off of the bookshelves. “This soldier had traveled almost the entire continent at this point, from the lands of

our forefathers and those they disowned, to the far off kingdoms of the mushroom peoples and the snake peoples they subjugated. However, he had yet to travel the desert wastes that few humans dared live in. However, he was far from normal at this point. Lost in the act of traveling, this Soldier had wandered his way amidst the dunes of sand, the wails of the spirits that followed him being dragged away by the desert winds. He was at peace for a time. However, other voices began to plague him, dryer voices whose tones were one with the winds themselves. Do you know what these voices told him, Claire?”

“No, Professor.” She was barely listening. Her eyes were still fixed on the letter he had written regarding her standing with the college.

“They told him to go south, to a village whose name was lost with the sands of time. So he did. By this point he learned to heed the spirits that came to him. Eventually, he came to a village that matched the descriptions he had been given. It was a small space, not much more than a circle cut into the sand whose outer dominions had been usurped by the dunes and whose center featured a sandstone well. A few buildings stuck out sharply from under the dunes though, and it was clear where the residents had worked to keep them from being swallowed whole. Dominating the plaza though was a massive building whose outer walls had barely been scaled by the surrounding sand and whose entrance was supported by a set of columns that bookended a pair of gargantuan snake men. Their coiled tails supported their weight as their cobra hoods supported the ceiling, their stone gazes cast down upon those that passed between them.”

“So it was a village of snake people then?” She figured it would go faster if she played along.

“Yes and no, but I will get to that in time. As this soldier of ours approached the well in search of a drink, he was interrupted by a man who looked to be at risk of blowing away in the wind, his bones wrapped tightly in his skin with not a muscle between them. The man asked this soldier what brought him to their village, and not wanting to appear a lunatic, he told him nothing of the

whispers. Water, he answered. Shaking his head, the bone man told him that no such thing would be found here until the morrow, after the full moon passed back over the well.”

Claire was starting to feel like she had heard this tale somewhere before, only in a different place and a different time period. “Professor, does this story happen to end with the town being full of ghosts, an illusion only the soldier can see?” She was hoping she was right so she could return the topic back to her having to go home to her father.

Mortavius merely shook his head. “This soldier was offered room and board until the morning when he could refill his waterskin and be on his way, but was asked to not leave the room he had been provided with. When he passed under the statues of the snake men, to him it looked as if sand was slowly falling from their stone eye sockets. This soldier was not to be so easily fooled. He waited up all night, expecting to be jumped in his sleep. Yet, no footsteps came for him until the moon had come and gone and the first rays of light broke across the sands. When the bone man brought him back to the plaza children of similar constitution were playing in the streets and others milled about the well, gathering water in bucket loads. Curious, this soldier asked the bony man what had happened. As he had said last night, when the moon passed over, the well refilled, and the man invited this soldier to drink his fill. Now alone amidst the crowd, this soldier gazed deep into the water he drew from the well. It was as fresh and clean as a natural spring. Asking around town, no one seemed to have any more information for him about this phenomenon. However, worried that he had been fooled, he asked if he could stay longer as he was overly weary from travel. At this, the bony man seemed nervous, but in the end obliged.”

Claire was shifting constantly in her seat, her anxiety obviously building.

“Am I boring you?”

“No Professor.”

“How about instead of sitting there and listening, you join me in pacing.” He paused his walk next to her and helped her from the chair, directing her to the side of the room opposite himself. “Now, keep pace with me and we shall orbit one another like the sun does us.”

Playing along, Claire fell in time with Mortavius’s pace.

“Now where was I? Ah, right. This soldier stayed there for another lunar cycle. For the first week, nothing changed. However, after that first week, he watched as the well produced less clear and clean water each day. Concerned, he again approached the bony man who seemed to follow his every movement. He asked him why the water was getting worse and less each day. The bony man simply answered that that was how things were. This soldier offered his services as a fixer of things, for in the previous tales that involved this particular character, he went around and tried to cleanse the land of curses that plagued the people around them. The man declined, and said that it was simply how things had to be, how they had always been. At the man’s behest, this soldier agreed to leave town after the next full moon, once he had refilled his water again. Mind you, he had yet to drink a bit of it.”

Claire paused her strut. “Hold on, if he had been living here for a few weeks now and had needed to refill when he got there, how could he have survived without this long?”

“Keep moving Claire, do not let your feet or mind stop. This soldier had his own curse to deal with, remember? Part of that was not needing to eat or drink, though he still would sometimes out of habit. Getting back to it, when it came time for the full moon to make its pass again, he pretended to seclude himself in his chambers before following the man who had been hounding him since he arrived in the village. The man, and others he had seen about town, went into a building in the village he had yet to see be used. Watching, he waited until they all emerged and went back to their own homes. When he entered the house, there was just a small bed in the back corner of the room, and the windows that had once led to the outside were boarded up, and slowly seeping in

through the cracks. There was a wheezing coming from the bed. Can you guess what is in this room Claire?”

She had never heard this one before, and found herself at a loss. The room remained silent for a few minutes in between the echoes of their feet.

“I would assume a child.”

“Yes, it is always a child, it has to be a child. In the bed was found a child, blue and smelling of rot. This soldier sat next to him, and spoke of his past, his home, and how he had come here. ‘Do you have a family here child? Do they truly care for you?’ he asked the child. ‘Does your rot bring you any comfort child? The diseases wriggling around in that small, innocent vessel of yours?’ This soldier could not imagine this child’s curse doing any more for them than it had for him. This soldier spoke to the child until morning, of the sins of their ancestors, of how it was all the more sinful that they had confined the child to a single page at birth, to being an unwilling martyr for a curse they knew nothing of. The sins were not those of the child, and this soldier seethed at what the child was paying for them.”

“Professor, what sins are you referring to?”

“The sin of living. There is no other here, in this place. This soldier promised to take the pain away, if only the child would reach out and take his hand. He promised to show the child the sun for what, as far as he knew, would be the first time. He promised to drink from the well under the full moon’s light. He promised the child that he had been carrying a similar rot longer than the child could know. This soldier then lifted the child from their bed, arms falling limp at his touch. This soldier drank from the cursed well, drank it dry. And in the morning when the villagers awoke to find their well neither wet nor cursed, they turned to the stranger with the bundled child.”

“Do they kill the soldier? It sounds to me like the child was a sacrifice they deemed necessary for their water. Do they kill him in exchange to bring it back, or perhaps in revenge for rendering the town unlivable?”

“No. If this soldier had died then, in that place, the story would not be getting told today. By the time the sun had reached its zenith, the well ran red with blood and this soldier started his journey home, the ghosts of the village people in tow. Walking beside him, hand in hand, was the spirit of the child, bright and radiant against the dark specters that otherwise pursued this soldier.”

With that, Mortavius stopped at his chair and sat down, looking over the paper Claire had thrown down an hour prior.

“Is that it Professor?” Claire, unable to stop now that her mind was going and deep into the tale, continued to pace around him.

“You tell me. Do you think the story ends simply because this soldier went home?”

“No, obviously not. Their curse still haunts them, and if anything, seems to have gotten worse with the village people added to their entourage.”

“Then what do you need to do Claire? This soldier realized his wanderings brought him further from where he needed to be. It was not until he saw that child, diseased and bedridden and beyond life and death, that he knew what needed to be done. So again I will ask, what should you do?”

Claire stopped near the door, eyes gazing out past Mortavius’s over-glasses stare and out through the window at the evening skyline. She could smell it, the hay, the dirt, the dog dandruff in the autumn breeze, and the lilac petals so sweet. “I need to go home.”

“Alana would want you to. I want you to.” Mortavius rose and put the parchment back into her bag before handing it to her. “Go and pack, Claire. Take some time to yourself. Not all of the answers are to be found where you think they ought to be.”

When she left his office and felt around in her bag, checking that everything was there, she found not only the letter from her advisor that Mortavius had replaced but also a small gem, glowing and pulsing a slight heat. She smiled, and nodded. For once, his instructions were clear.

When Claire left, Mortavius leaned back in his chair, the front legs hovering off the ground, held in place from teetering by his knee on the bottom of his desk.

“What do you make of her, you with eyes that see more and less than I ever have? Do you think she will be alright?”

The child, hiding between the bookshelf and the wall, emerged and stood next to Caius Mortavius as he stared at the ceiling. In their hands was a bundle of dust, not larger than a mouse.

“Of course she will. She is a strong student.”

On the wind whispered dust like sand, “so was Alana.”

Caius stood and walked back to the window, his cloak gently cutting through the boy’s arm, ephemeral wisps scattering briefly before being suctioned back into place, a reversal in space. Caius nodded to the child, as he knew the child was right. “I know. Remember though that the happy ending only comes so far after the story that it often isn't worth including.”

Drying - Chapter 9

When Claire closed the door to Mortavius's office behind her, she didn't notice the man sitting in the chair next to it.

"Hey Claire."

She jumped back, almost tripping over the other chair on the other side of the doorframe. Collecting herself, she saw Pierre sitting across from her.

"Well hello Pierre. You really jumped me there. What are you doing out here? Mortavius doesn't have office hours today."

"I came to ask you the same question, though I have an additional one or two as well now. First, what did you steal that clay for like a maddened goat who's been starved for a week? You looked like an absolute animal. Second, why have you been avoiding the study group? Finally, if he doesn't have office hours, what were you doing in there?" Pierre stood up and crossed his arms.

"It's... complicated. Professor Mortavius asked to speak with me about Alana's disappearance is why I'm here today though. There's just been a lot going on revolving around that." Her face was facing the floor, and she bit her lip, hoping that hiding her face would hide her half-lie. What would Pierre think if she told him she almost got expelled?

"Is that also why you stole a jar of clay from my lab class today?" She looked up, and his expression had softened slightly from the angry friend to the concerned one. She liked that one better.

"You know Claire, Evelyn told me she saw you the other night at her father's book shop. She told me that some guy was smelling you or something. Is everything alright? You know I'm here for you, we're both here for you, if you need to talk."

"I know, I just... Alana's death has echoed throughout my life in ways I didn't expect. Professor Mortavius has advised that I take an extra week during break to sort things out at home"

“Why don’t you come and join us at the study group tonight then? As a send off, given we won’t see you for two weeks.”

“I’d like that.” For the first time that she could remember, she smiled back at Pierre’s perpetual grin.

“So, have you made any progress with your mouse yet? It’s been awhile since you updated me with your love rune issues. Spill the details please.” He nudged her shoulder as he said this. The night was cool outside as they made their way to the library, the evening air blowing with the full scent of autumn.

“Good. Actually, that was part of what I needed the clay for. I had to prove to Mortavius that I had improved on my initial project. I don’t think he was expecting me to still be working on my mouse though.” Claire chuckled. “I’m just relieved it worked, well worked enough.”

“Me too. It’s inspiring really, to see a golem made without any magic beyond that contained in its power source. You’re going to have one hell of a thesis when you get to your senior year.”

“Funny, that’s part of what Mortavius said today too.”

The study group went as she remembered, though for some reason, even though she had that test tomorrow, she wasn’t stressed or anxious. Giving up that last part of Alana’s issues to Mortavius seemed to have taken a weight off of her shoulders. Maybe it was just the near-expulsion experience. Either way, she felt at home here for the first time in months. Ironically, she felt at home now that she was going home.

When the study group broke up for the night, Claire lingered behind. “I just need a few moments more before I go back to that dorm room, to the curtain and the journals and my own mess.” Claire told herself this as she wandered out into the gardens, resting against the fountain and staring at the scorch marks. Claire closed her eyes and leaned back slightly against the rim of the fountain. She felt guilty somehow, though not in a way she could explain. Alana liked to do

everything alone, and perhaps that was what brought her here. Even with whatever she was secretly helping Moravius with, she tried to work alone. She was jealous and dangerously independent. Claire didn't need that. Unlike Alana, she had worked with Mortavius rather than to undermine him. Same goes for returning to the study group. Claire nodded to herself. This was the way. She was back on the right path.

When she opened her eyes, the scorch marks were centered in her gaze, the ash now gone exposing the corrosion dented into the stone, but on the periphery, blue sparks danced amongst the corn rows and grape trellises of the arboretum. She blinked, and turned to see them dancing into the woods she had encountered them in in her first week of classes. She had all but forgotten that day, yet here they were, undeniably this time. Gulping and shaking her head, she followed them into the woods and across the bridge into the black thicket before her.

"Just like home," she muttered.

The woods loomed tall and dark all around her, and soon even Orlia's moonlight was obscured in all but shafts and beams around her as the canopy swallowed her whole. The sprites danced just out of reach, beckoning, calling her into the wood. There, at the end of the path they drug her down, laid a single bone, charred black at the ends, laying on a bare patch of dirt amidst the overgrown road. She put on one of her armored gloves, and wrapped her hand around the bone. It was warm to the touch, and seemed to almost wriggle joyously as she grabbed it. When she looked up, the wisps were gone, and she was back at the fountain, bone in hand. Wrapping it in one of the bags she had used to transport the clay body of her basement golem earlier that day, she placed the demon bone in her bag, and returned to her dorm, where she packed it away for her journey home to the farm.

Firing - Chapter 1

Hills rose high along the northern edge of the road out of Merour, while to the south, another hill dipped into the sea below. Claire supposed that was why they had built it there in the first place. It would be a day's travel east before the carriage would be able to turn north, and another day back west along the other side of the hills as they turned to the mountains Claire could see from her dorm window before turning north-east again along the Sombre river which, while they weren't going through but rather around it, ran through the capital and towards her family's farm on the eastern border of Chlorthry and Lorinwood. While it was mostly dark in this carriage as it ran along the road, through the raised dust out of the carriage's cracker-box window, she could see the sun barely rising over the hills that dipped slightly into the south beyond.

Claire stared down at her skirt, hands clenching tufts of the fabric as it sat loosely across her lap. On the floor next to her, wrapped in leather and cloth bearing runes of various protections and suppressions, was the bone she had been shown by the faeries in the dark corner of the forest beyond the stream on campus. She could hear it, inaudibly hissing in its cage, no acid to corrode it back as it ate away at the existence around it. Claire had never really known her roommate, as they had only been rooming together a few weeks. She had been stuck with the girl despite their seniority difference because of her inability to do magic the conventional way and need of a mentor, though she suspected that it was due to over-enrollment issues and wouldn't be surprised if, on her return to campus, found someone else already moved into Alana's half of things. Something about an over enrollment here, a disgruntled privileged apprentice there, too many seniors demanding a single room with a laboratory section as they thought they deserved it in their last year, that it would prepare them for the outside world when they wouldn't have to share with other students. They would be gone soon, and then would return years later to suck from the teat of the university once

more when the outside world was not what they expected. Claire knew that most people at the college were of this disposition, but that is why she had hoped she and Alana would one day get along. Even though Alana was incredibly paranoid, she couldn't help but feel connected to her through their obsessive natures. When they were in the room together, her roommate used to just draw the curtain separating their rooms and begin scribbling away in a journal of some sort. If the roles were reversed, she wasn't sure she wouldn't have done the same.

After the incident though, Claire had been alone. The college had been nice enough to let Claire remain in the same room without filling the empty space with another student, though she doubted that would last after her "vacation." Claire did find it mildly amusing that she had gotten what Alana had been rejected for despite being far less deserving of a private research area, being a single dorm for a few months. It also felt ironic considering she only got the room because of her old roommate's follies.

Claire leaned back in the carriage, posture slumping as her knees butted against the seat opposite her. Even though having the space to herself was more comfortable, she wished someone else had been on the carriage with her. Then again, any conversation likely would have led her to a discussion of what she had wrapped up and bound so carefully on the floor. It would only be another day of travel before her father would meet her with their cart half-way.

She continued to watch as the hills rolled, roiled, and flattened alongside the road before rising in reverse as they made the bend back the other way west. The ride itself wasn't very eventful coming in, and she expected the same going back. The hills dominated much of the landscape around the college and the town beneath it, with the nearest town being about an hour more east along the coast than where they had turned along the foothills. She nodded as she curled into a ball on the seat, her bag a makeshift pillow. That was why everyone took the boats at the pier, even

those who came from that fishing hamlet. She could afford no such luxury. The only port that would make her journey over land any shorter was itself a week away from the college by boat. She nestled in as the sun began its descent along the sky, watching it until her eyes could stay open no longer. The bone hissed through her nap, but to her, it functioned as nothing more than white noise.

She awoke a few hours later to a rapping on the carriage door. She lifted her head hazily to see the sun's light barely peeking over the mountains behind them, a sight that was shortly obstructed by the carriage driver's face appearing in the small window, a singular eye all but kissing the glass. She stretched quickly, cracked her neck, and grabbed her things before cracking the door and stepping out.

"Have you got everything ma'am?" The man spoke low, his irritation clearer to her than perhaps it even was. Behind him stood a family of three, a woman slightly older than her with two children. Behind them stood the inn she would be staying at for the night, a lone building with two adjacent stables on either side whose roofs likely did little beyond keep the largest drops of rain out.

"I believe so. Thank you so much." Claire patted herself down to check that she had everything before producing her purse and handing the man a few coins. She watched as the brass imprints of Hemil and the cracked visage of his axe on the other side of the coin passed through her fingers. It wasn't until she had turned away, bag in hand, that she realized what was still on the floor of the carriage.

She heard a yelp as she was already turning, a small cry she expected to have come from the small boy of the three or the mother. Yet, it was the man standing there holding his arm in front of his face with the other. Half right, the boy was standing to the side in his mother's arm, pointing towards the open carriage and the bone that lay on the floor, partially unwrapped by curious hands

summoned by her own groggy forgetfulness. Skipping over, Claire wrenched a glove onto her hand and snaked it into the carriage, procuring the bone. She could feel it hiss in her soul, and she wrapped it as tightly as she could in the leather before binding a string around it. She would have to drag it behind her to the next carriage like a dog the owner refused to accept was dead.

“What is that thing? What are you lot up to in that college?” The man snarled as she procured it. She stared at his hand, blisters already forming along where he had gone to touch the bone. It was still in her hand, and as far as she could tell, even through the leather, it was wholly cool to her touch. She questioned if it had always been like that.

“I’m sorry, the wrapping came off. It is just a ...” she faltered for a moment. What was this thing in her hand? She began to rotate it in her grip, a finger falling on a rune hastily etched in the leather.

“It is a sample that needs to be kept heated, hence the outer shell of leather. It must have been taken off. I’m sorry you were burned, but I know it was wrapped properly when I brought it with me.” She turned slightly to reintroduce the child into the driver’s gaze, hoping that would suffice as an explanation. While he continued to stab at her with his eyes, he nodded towards the building and she took advantage of his generosity. It wouldn’t be until the sun rose again that the child would point out to the driver, now miles away, the burn marks along the floorboards.

Firing - Chapter 2

The inn was as musty as the docks below the college, only replacing the smell of fish and fin with that of horse and hay. Claire only had to wait a few hours for the next carriage to come through heading back the other way, though sometimes the driver preferred to stay the night and leave in the morning. She would cross that bridge when it arrived. She placed her things by the fire, and a deer's head, who still smelled of dust and preservatives even above the fire smoke, leered down at her with a blank, eerie expression. She traced its antlers with her eyes, a detail she hadn't noticed the last time she was here, the way they branched into an astounding thirty-six points, each base in its skull containing not one but two sproutings of spikes. They interwove like veins against an invisible wall that broke the basic laws of geometry.

"Quite a sight, isn't he miss?" The bartender was a wiry old man, and his skin reminded Claire of a parched seedbed, pocked and cracked through a lack of water, his one good eye like a dark sprout with only a speck of color hinting at life. His left hand sat firmly behind his back, his right hand polishing the waxed-wood of the chair it had come to rest on.

"Yes, he is. I've never seen a deer with antlers like these. Where did you hunt him?" Claire took a step closer to the fire, looking at the shadows cast by the horns as they shifted across the walls.

"It was an age ago, dear." His mouth cracked as he wetted his lips for the speech he had given every visitor who'd cared to listen.

"But it is a day I will carry with me to my deathbed. It wasn't here, golly no not here, not in these hills. It was back in the days of the frontier, when we needed to cut back the forest to make homes. You ever been to the frontier girl? Not that they call it that anymore." He rested himself in

the chair behind her. There wasn't really anyone else in the place aside from a few other travelers who she presumed had already heard the old man's yarn.

"I grew up there actually. My farm is sprinting distance from the old forests of lavender and shadow, as the soldiers used to call it." She swung herself into a chair adjacent to the old man, careful to place the bone safely on the floor behind her, away from the flames. She didn't know if anything would happen, but preferred to not reintroduce heat to the thing.

"Ah, sounds like you know it too well." His gaze didn't move from the fire as she sat down. He recited it as if from a script, one embedded into his mind deeper than the hunt it recounted.

"A beast like this could come from nowhere else. While I wasn't a soldier myself, I was about your age at the time and working to clear back the forest for the soldiers at the time, once we had won the last sea-fort on the northern coast, you know the one. We all do. But anyhow, it was around that time us laborers were called in to harvest wood from the forest for construction of farms and forts and the like, but the rations around camp weren't the best. I woke early that morning from my hunger, but with no food, I went to the stream we had been clearing around to fill my belly with water where I couldn't get any food until lunch. That was when I saw it, drinking then from the stream. I thought to myself, that would be greatly appreciated back at camp, and more importantly, in my own stomach. Only, at that time, it had just the original horns there. If you look closely, you can see then start thicker at the base of the skull." He pointed a finger whose crook matched that of an axe-haft towards the left antler base.

"I tucked my water-skin into my pocket, and grabbed an axe left on the ground from the previous day. I was hungry. We all were, but I wasn't thinking about how foolish it was to even try. I also wasn't thinking about how the captain had said not to touch the animals there unless they came

at us first. Even if we had killed one or found it dead, he said, it was best not to eat them. But I was hungry, the kind of hunger you don't forget even sixty years later, the kind of hunger that echoes in your mind as much as your stomach. And I killed it. I forded the stream and sunk my axe into its neck. I remember it looking into my eyes as my axe cleft into its spine, a pair of brown pools speaking a request, or a warning, I was too hungry to heed. Only, when it cracked down, it didn't make the sound I expected. Instead of the squelch of blood and crack of bone, it sounded as if I hit wood and the beast crumbled before me, nose blowing red bubbles in the stream. It was then, back behind it in the autumn leaves along the deer-path back into the woods that I saw it, a creature unlike anything I'd ever seen and have ever seen since, other than that in the fading moonlight of Faern as it sunk behind the trees was silhouetted the very horns you see before you now. Beneath them, obscured by a thin curtain of hair, peered a set of eyes that shared the color of the moonbeams that came down through the forest. They glowed in the last of midnight's shadow before turning to orange. I couldn't look away. It wasn't until I felt a hand on my shoulder accompanied by the warmth of the midmorning sun that I felt I had truly woken from its gaze, just to find it gone, with my axe still plunged into the deer's neck." Claire watched as he held his hands before him, the curve of each finger a reminder of his craft, of his kill.

"I remember one of my fellow woodsmen pulling the beast's head from the stream by the extra antlers, antlers that had grown into the shape of those I saw silhouetted in the moonlight." He paused here, hands settling into his lap before clenching into fists. She watched the fire dance in his good eye, the other a blind, pallid mirror that reflected the flames paler than the other. Suddenly, he threw his hands in the air in front of himself, as if dusting off the memories, before bracing his knees and standing.

“Needless to say, no one believed me and we didn’t eat the deer. We buried the body, but I insisted on keeping the head. I never did see the other beast again, beyond my dreams of course. The others stayed away from me after that, and I shortly inherited this place from my Pa and have been here ever since. But you’ve listened to enough of this old man’s stories. Can I get you a drink dear? I imagine you’ve got a long night ahead of you in a carriage.”

“I’d appreciate a water or two, yes. Once you come back I have a question about your story though, if you don’t mind my asking of course.”

“A question? No one ever has questions. I’ll be right back dear, don’t you worry. Then you can ask whatever you’d like.” Though she knew it was a trick of the light, she could’ve sworn she saw his face grow younger as he turned away, a skip setting off his journey to the bar and back.

Claire stared at the horns again as she waited for the innkeeper’s return. Though it was hazy, these horns seemed familiar to her. Her mind wandered back to the family farm, to the edge of the forest and its perpetual twilight, to the sick-sweet call of the wisps that danced in the moonlight shadows of Orlia and Faern as they hung seemingly within the trees, to her mother.

A pair of wooden mugs clunked onto the table behind her, and she heard the rattle of the old man sitting back in his chair by the fire.

“So, what did you want to ask an old man deary?” He leaned forward on his knees, hands clasped together, each thumb fiddling with the other. Claire didn’t respond at first, eyes still locked on the antlers. “You did have a question, didn’t you?”

“Sorry, I was still thinking about these. I’ve seen these before, back home, but not on any deer.”

“You know that just isn’t right, mocking an old man like that.” He began to stand, to head back to his bar.

“No, no, I promise I’m not mocking you sir. Please, humor me here.” Claire stretched out a hand, beckoning him back. “I was a young girl, when I wandered into the woods, into Lorinwood. I remember two orbs in the darkness as the sun set behind me, and as the wisps scattered into the woods. It was a new moon that night, and the woods, it, it...”

“Warps time, doesn’t it lass?” The old man nodded in his seat.

“It did. It does. I was so young that I remember very little more than two orbs floating in the darkness, but they weren’t any wisps. Crowning those orbs as the light of the sun set behind me in the edge of the forest was a series of antlers like these.”

“It sounds like the same beast I saw when I killed this deer here, or the same type I mean. How’d you get away?”

“I don’t know, the next thing I can remember is waking up in my mother’s arms back at home.” Claire paused here and the old man rocked in his chair even though it had four legs.

“You alright dear?”

“Yes, I just haven’t thought about this day in a while. Sorry.” She sat upright and composed herself, reaching over for one of the mugs of water. When she finished downing it, she looked up to see the old man’s good eye trained on her, the brow above it arched in concern. Behind him though had entered another patron in a long, black cloak.

“All going to the capital or beyond, I’m stopping here for fifteen minutes and then we’re moving out. Where is the barkeep? I need a drink for me and my horses and a run to the privy.”

“Ah, pleasure talking with you dear, but I believe that my duty calls and your ride has arrived. Safe travels.”

“You as well.” He was gone before she realized he wasn’t traveling anywhere. She looked into the fire for a few minutes while the driver went back outside and, presumably, into the outhouse. The old man scurried outside with a bucket of water. In the fire, she saw not the antlers or eyes of the beast in the arcing flames, but her mother’s face, her eyes shut as the earth covered them the day after Claire’s foray into the woods. It was a memory she had forgotten, a memory she had forgotten to remember, a memory of her mother’s desperate swinging at the darkness as she screamed for her to run before stabbing at those eyes, before her sword crumbled and was sucked into the darkness, before her mother grabbed her and ran home, before Claire was found by the tree in their front yard, cradled in her mother’s dead arms.

Firing - Chapter 3

The carriage was more cramped this leg of her journey, with an older man and his son, perhaps grandson, accompanying her from the inn. They had talked a little at first, but were more focused on the scenery after the first half-hour or so. They were here visiting from some kingdom or other to the east, Ycelra. They had said something about getting away from the mushrooms, but in reality she hadn't been paying attention to much beyond keeping the bone wrapped in leather under the seat inconspicuous. The harder she focused, the more she could feel it, calling, protesting, warming. It wasn't until they were passing the capital that she joined the man and child at the window to look out over the valley and at the marble walls of the city.

"Would you look at that son? It's massive! Not as tall as some of the towers back home, but it's made of stone, and that's what makes it impressive."

"It's made of marble actually, at least regarding the walls. The designs were, if I remember correctly, modeled on old Norbrani accounts of the first city ever built. An achievement obviously meant to be rubbed in their faces."

"Marble eh? Stone is stone and stone is good." The man hadn't even looked over at her as she spoke, behind them as she was catching what glimpses were visible over the child's head. He hadn't heard anything she had said past the marble.

"Look at that son, they've even got giants along the sides, glaring down around the walls. A work of art, that. Must've taken years to carve those out."

"It took about a year after the walls went up, once Golemancy became the magic school of the state when it was created here in Chlorthyr. Do you see that one on the north-eastern wall? That

is the largest golem ever made.” Even from here and through the tiny window, she could see it dominating the city-scape. The only golem to reach above the walls and the only one to be made of the same material as them, it was as much a part of the northern gates as it was their defender. It had never been activated since its placement there, but it was Chlorthyr’s greatest achievement, at least to her.

“Are you a complimentary tour guide or something?” The man turned back towards her, and she couldn’t tell if he was earnestly asking or just being sarcastic. She chose to assume the latter.

“No, sorry. I just thought you might like to know some of this country’s history is all, given your moving here and all. That, and those statues are just so much more to us here than decoration. There is no crown in Chlorthyr other than the golems you see against the walls of the capital.” At least to her, that was what they stood for. Even if they were merely decorations, to her they represented everything she dreamed of.

“I see. Thank you for the history I suppose. Boy, thank the stranger. If we are going to live here, these are things we ought to know.”

“Thank you miss.” She could barely make out his voice as he whispered into the window.

“Of course.” Claire smiled at them, though neither saw it.

The carriage turned north down the hill, and at the bottom they slowed to a stop. This was where she was going to meet her father. It had only been a few months, but something about her semester thus far made it feel like it had been much longer. That, or she just wasn’t ready to be going home. She hadn’t planned to until Mortavius had recommended it. She sighed, making sure to

grab the bone from under the seat first. She could tell that if she were to touch it beneath the leather, it would be searing. She felt confident though that her runes had held up this long.

“Good luck, to both of you. I hope you like it here.” Neither man nor boy responded to her as they exited the carriage and seemingly skipped to the next, already waiting at the exchange station just outside the city. When she stepped out it was midday, and the sun cast a stubby shadow of the colossus at the gate a few miles to her north-west that, if not for the valley between them and the city, might have touched the back of her father’s cart where it was sat next to the building.

Claire inhaled with her arms, shoulders, and cheeks, breathing deep before letting it all go in a slump. With that, she opened the door to the station and saw her father, sitting by the far window, a glass of water cupped in his earthy-fingers.

“Hey Dad.” She eased herself down across from him, setting her bag down between herself and the wall. The bone was set between the bag and the wall.

“Claire.” He didn’t look over at her from the window, merely taking a sip from his glass.

“I didn’t think you’d already be here. Was it an easy ride here?”

“It was.” Another sip.

“Have you been waiting long?”

“Nope.”

“Is everything alright Dad?” She leaned back in her chair before catching her posture. Her father wasn’t a talkative man, but this was taciturn even for him.

“I should ask you the same thing Claire. You haven’t written a single letter other than the one here saying you arrived alright.” He plopped a letter, open but still in its envelope, onto the table. She recognized it as her own postage work. Another, more official looking one, topped with a wax seal, fell on top of it. The seal wasn’t attached anymore, but she could make out from the impression it was from the college.

“I received this a few months ago from the college saying your roommate had died and that you were struggling with the magical practice aspects of your classes as we had worried. Why didn’t you write to me about any of this?”

“I didn’t want to worry you is all Dad. I’m doing fine, honestly. Just the roommate situation has been complicated on multiple fronts is all.” She also hadn’t expected the college to involve him, not yet.

“You know you can talk to me sweetie, you know you should talk to me. Stars burning above, even the dog got worried when he smelled the letter. Had to give his own steak before he calmed down. Now you promise everything is going alright?” Claire moved her foot over to touch the bone.

“I promise Dad.”

“Ok.” With that, he drained the remainder of his drink and laid a single coin on the table next to it. “Let’s get on the road then.”

Claire saddled her things into the back of the wagon, clearing any remnant of crops not dusted out of it from under the bone before climbing in herself.

“What, you don’t want to sit next to your old man? It isn’t like I haven’t seen you for a few months or anything.”

Claire smirked, laughed for his sake, and swung herself over the front of the cart onto the wooden bench.

“Shall I do the honors Dad?”

“Please.” He handed her the reins and leaned back, tilting his leather brim down to an effective angle. Claire tapped the reins lightly, pulling the horse’s head towards home, before whistling three times in short succession, the horse replying by bolting off down the road.

“I see some things have stayed the same at least with you, my sophisticated college girl.”

“I’ll always be a farm girl at heart Dad, one way or another.” She had almost forgotten that, but the wind rushing against her smiling face stripped away any illusion otherwise.

“I’ll always just be a farm girl...” She muttered to herself as her mind wandered to the letter her father had shown her from the college and her smile faded. “Just a farm girl.”

Firing - Chapter 4

As they crested the hill, the setting sun bathed the fields an eerie gold, the wheat rippling in liquid throes of finery wearable only by the Autumn. At the bottom of the hill, amidst the miles of grain and corn and the one patch of various squashes she had insisted they grow when she was eight, sat their house. It wasn't anything special, a log cabin in the shape of an L, comprised of two bedrooms, one of which had been added at a later date to form the L, a kitchen, and a storeroom, though there was another underground as well. A stick fence ran around the property, a small yard contained within which itself contained little beyond a tree, a firepit, and a stable for their lone horse. As she drove the wagon alongside the fence, a bolt of black and white fur dashed from the porch, and, in a single bound and a single leap from ground to fence and fence to Dad's stomach, a dog had its face in her lap. His tail wagged in random arcs, his pupils nearly touching his eyebrows as he nuzzled his face between his paws.

"Ferdinand! Who's excited to see me? Is it you?" She held the reins in one hand while scratching behind his ears with the other. The white line that narrowed from his muzzle and between his ears furrowed and was buried by the black fur that dominated his head.

"He may have missed you but I wish he would've spared my stomach in the process of saying hello." Her father groaned, still under the majority of the dog. This was how things had always been, Ferdinand subjecting her father to the entirety of his body weight while Claire received only the weight of the puppy-dog stares.

Claire stopped the horse in front of the gate, handing the reins to her father. Ferdinand jumped down with her, landing on the gate posts before she opened it. She took a step to the side to let the wagon pass, watching her father as he let the horse loose and led it to its trough. They had

only gotten him two years ago, a wild thing at the time. Her father had done a lot with him, a lot in the last year she had missed. While she would let loose with the horse on the open road, she could see the difference in understanding in the beast's eyes. Other than that, nothing had changed more than the growing of the corn, a pumpkin added ripe to the porch. She wondered if her father had put it there in hopes of her wanting to carve it like when she was little. She had read a book that talked about harvest festivals around the world and, like many other Chlorathian children, had taken to that strange Ashling custom of carving wicked smiles and cruel eyes into the flesh of a ripe squash to remember their dead god. She shook her head and went inside, Ferdinand on her heels.

It had been a couple of months since she'd left for college. As promised, her father had left her room just as it was when she left it, sans a window that had broken during her second month away and had been replaced. Her father had been so excited to see her come home and she was excited to see him, but it was more important to first set up what little of her lab and workstation she had been able to bring with her from the dorm.

Claire set her bag down on the rug next to her bed, her boots clacking against the uneven hardwood floors. The room was bigger than she had remembered, though that was likely due to the more limited space she had experienced at college. The floor was devoid of books if nothing else, even if they were a walking hazard of her own doing, it would be nice to not worry about twisting an ankle getting out of bed. The room was sparse overall, not because she had taken much with her to college, but because it had always been that way. Her bed shared its wall with the door, her lone dresser sitting neatly beneath the window which occupied the wall opposite her bed, and her desk sitting against the wall between the other two furnishings. Her father had made her the desk when she first expressed interest in Golemancy, and it consisted of two small birch trees each cut in half and strung together and waxed to form a flat surface. It was supported by the extra pieces and

tended to rock towards the back left. She had never bothered to figure out if it was the table or the floor's fault. Could've been both. The wall opposite the desk was empty save for a mounted rifle which she hadn't shot even years before moving to the College of Clay.

Claire stood in front of the rifle, Ferdinand sitting and wagging next to her feet. It was rusting in places, but wasn't much worse than when she had last seen it. She ran her fingers along the barrel, feeling each scratch and groove the metal had taken on between its previous owner and herself.

"Hi Mom. I'm home." Ferdinand stopped wagging his tail, and leaned his head against her, his blue eyes staring up at Claire. She patted him twice on his head.

"It's good to see all of you again."

Firing - Chapter 5

“Ready for dinner Claire?” Claire’s father poked her head in, the brim of his hat bending slightly against the timber of the doorframe.

“Sure. What can I help with?” Claire was sitting on her bed, rubbing Ferdinand’s ears. He was making a noise as close to purring as a dog can create, eyes shut tight in the process of the massage.

“The meat’s already on, but if you want any vegetables come cut 'em up. I was just going to throw on a jar of green beans, but I know you like your various squashes with everything.”

“You still grew my squashes this year?”

“Of course. Isn’t like you weren’t ever coming home.” Her father leaned off the frame and turned into the hallway and down the hall to the kitchen.

“You didn’t have to do that.” Claire called after him as she patted Ferdinand on the cheeks before kissing the top of his head. “Thank you though.”

When she got into the kitchen there was a massive summer squash on the table, almost as long and as wide as her arm.

“Wow, I guess you really grew some squashes this year.”

“You set the patch for them up well. Would’ve been a shame to not use it. This one here is the biggest by far though. I thought you’d like to see the fruits of our labor.” He spoke to her back-to, focusing his attention on flipping the steaks in the cast iron skillet.

“Thanks Dad.”

“You’ll need to do something special with it before you leave. Speaking of, how long are you here for? When you wrote to me confirming you were coming back for break, you didn’t say how long for.”

“Two weeks.” Claire picked up the squash and took it into the pantry.

“That’s a long vacation isn’t it? I always thought they only lasted a week at most mid-semester, back when I worked in the city as a guard that’s what I thought I heard the kids say anyways.”

“What did they tell you in that letter Dad, the one from the college?” Claire laid the squash upright against the shelving, scanning for a jar of green beans and one of the jars of zucchini she had preserved last fall. She had taken some with her to campus, but found three left on the shelves. She would need to make some more depending on what her father had grown in her absence.

“Mostly things about your grades and a dead roommate. I think the exact term they used regarding your grades was that they were ‘dubious at this time.’ Something like that anyhow. But I figured if you were having real issues, you would have talked to me, like always.”

Claire placed both jars on the dining table before moving to a drawer next to the stove her father was cooking over, drawing out a large knife whose tip was already bent from the procedure she was about to perform. “That is mostly true and the reason why I am home for two weeks rather than one. One of my professors advised this be the route I take. However, he wants me to come back ready to pass my exams. And my grades aren’t ‘dubious’ Dad. I’m excelling in all of my classes but one, which is why I didn’t feel like I needed to reach out.”

“And which one is that?” His sentence was punctuated by the hissing of the green bean jar as she drove the knife under the lid to pry it open.

“Golemancy 101.”

“So the class you wanted to go there to specialize in?”

“Yes.”

“So what do you need to do while you’re here?”

“I need to make a working golem.”

“Alright then.” He spun around with the skillet and poured the steak, the blood from which had melted in with the salt and butter to form a gravy-like substance that hardened as it cooled on the meat, into a bowl. He set the skillet on the stove and motioned for her to take over with the beans and zucchini before stepping outside.

She heard a clang and a clap before he stepped back, bucket in hand.

“I had a feeling you’d need some of this when you came back, so I’ve been keeping it watered for you.” He set the bucket by the door, and she could see it flowing with frothy clay.

“Thanks Dad.”

“I love you too sweetie. Now tomorrow you go ahead and get started on blowing this test out of the water. Can you do that for me?”

“Absolutely.”

“Right now though, worry about getting those beans done and onto the table, then you can walk me through what you’ve learned over a pile of deer steaks.”

While her back was turned to the table, she heard him sit down and start divvying out the meat.

“Your mother would be proud either way you know.”

“I know Dad.”

“Good.”

Firing - Chapter 6

The tip of her torch blurred blue, its orange tongue licking runes into the bronze and the clay. It fizzled and sparked as it came too close, sending rivulets of black down the brass plates of her gloves. This was her favorite part. To watch them fly and twirl and burn, bursts of life and heat extinguishing themselves upon tasting the air. This was all she had been able to complete after the failure of her last experiment, of her semester exam. A new right arm. She finished the leafing around the runes that would bring the golem to life once it was assembled, once she finished building the rest of it. She was lucky to have been given a second chance; lucky to have been sent home to do it. Claire set the arm back down on the table. Her eyes fell on the grain where the wax had melted back from the errant sparks, another blemish on the old thing. The addition of another burn added to its surface brought back memories.

All she had ever wanted was to be a mage, but Claire had never had the talent for magic she so desired which is what in part made her so impatient with her current work. She never could conjure lightning from the sky or fire from her fingertips. Yet magic was as boundless in its forms as its very nature. It was her pure lack of potential which drove her to the alchemic art of Golemancy and to Rune-Carving. The latter was her specialty, the inherent magic of language and inscription developed long ago in ages forgotten to all but themselves. The current practitioners of Rune-Carving could only guess at how to create new runes, but as such had become adept over time at combining them for various effects. Out of this study was born the art of Golemancy, of using the words and script of the world itself to grant artificial life to clay and metal constructs.

Claire stared at the arm she had spent the last two nights crafting, perfectly sculpted in the block and cylinder shapes she had been taught at the college. The thought process behind making something so simplistic was that if it looked perfect then failing to animate it would just make the disappointment and frustration all the worse. She wouldn't want to risk destroying her

work of art, so art was not what she made. She pulled out a notebook and her mouse golem from her bag and inserted the small crystal into the slot on its back. The crystal glowed a soft white, but a fragment of those used to power larger creations. Yet, this one was hers, issued to her at the start of the semester. The mouse scampered around the desk as best it could, but without its hind legs it could only move so well. While most of her peers destroyed their early projects, Claire couldn't help but still be amazed that she had created something like this, broken though it had become.

"Looks like he's struggling a bit." Dust drifted off him as he entered the room and became one with the planked floor as he ground it under his boot toe. "Sometimes I wonder if I'll have to shovel this place out; I swear that my head comes closer to the ceiling every year and I sure as shit ain't growing anymore." He smiled at her. "I would sit on your bed, but I just came in from the fields."

"I can see that, and yeah, he does struggle. I've tried repairing his legs but they never stick. Doesn't seem to slow him down all that much though." Claire put her hand down on the table and the mouse scampered into her palm. She petted it once before removing the source of its life. She replaced them in her pack before turning to her father. "How are things out there this year? The fields looked good the other day when we were coming in, but things are always different up close, when you dig into them."

"I'd like to say the farm is doing well, but I think we've got a wolf problem again. Don't worry yourself on that though, just get your schooling done. Now how come your little friend doesn't have any back legs again Claire? Why do they keep falling off?" He leaned against the frame of the door, wooden posts rising out of the dirt floor.

"I'm just having trouble with my runes is all."

"Right but why do they keep falling off? It sounds like an issue with the clay. Can't you put a new pair on him?" His eyebrows encroached on each other as he walked over to her bag. Dusting

his hands off on his pants, which merely exchanged dirt between the two, he extracted the mouse and began to examine the thing, having picked the mouse up by its clay tail and spinning it between his fingers.

“You were real young so you probably don’t remember, but there were some soldiers who came by with one of these things made of steel or something. They were complaining about how much harder to repair it was than the clay variety they were used to or something like that. Then again, that might’ve been the same day you asked to study this stuff.”

“I remember. I watched them go by from my window while Mom put some things together for them. That was what gave me the idea to pursue this field. It was probably made of brass though. Steel on its own is a terrible conductor of magic.”

“That’s right. I’m sorry dear. It’s just been awhile, since you were home and all.” He removed his hat and again went to sit on the bed before catching himself. “So, you can’t give the poor fellow some legs?”

“It isn’t that simple, sadly. I could make some, but they would just fall off again. I just made him wrong, missed something more integral when I made him. Its body can’t support two more legs. When I started he had no limbs and I got two forepaws on. I just can’t get myself to destroy him though. I know I can get him to work.”

“Your mother always did say you were too sentimental. Like with your baby blanket. She would tell me you got it from my side of the family. And yet, where is that baby blanket now Claire?” He plopped the mouse into his hand and inserted the crystal into its back. It slowly jerked back to life, nuzzling into his hand.

“Part of it got incorporated into my quilt and the stray strings and patches became the base for some of my work rags. The patch Mom made herself is stitched into my handkerchief though. What’s your point Dad? How is this anything like the blanket?”

“You aren’t like the others at school, I take it. When something doesn’t work, they scrap it and start fresh right?”

“Yeah.”

“You, my daughter, are a salvager and a scavenger. Ever since you took interest in this you had to make what you had work and you did. This is no different. If anyone can do it, you can and you can do it your own way.” He set the mouse down on the desk and it wobbled over to Claire. Her father picked up the book on her desk, shut it, and handed it to her.

“I bet you’ve learned a lot since you got there, but don’t forget where you came from. There’s as much you can do with what you know from home as you can with what you’ve taken from college. Put the two together. You’ve done your book learning, now is time for some experimenting.” Claire dusted the book off from his grip and looked at the “Golemancy 101” title. He was right. She wasn’t doing 101 level Golemancy, she was finding her own way through it all.

“At least he hasn’t been reduced to a pair of strings at this point like your poor ‘ning’ as you called it. Well, I suppose he is kind of cute even without a proper rear. I’ll let you get back to it though. Just make sure you do it on your own terms, and in the way that makes sense to you, alright? There is only so much they can teach you given they don’t see the world the way we have to.” The man beamed at his daughter for a second before ducking out of the room.

She looked at the mouse where her father had left him on the table. It had been sniffing at the runework on the bronze of the arm before she removed its crystal. “While this little guy may not have legs Dad, he has something more important, he has more personality than any golem I’ve ever seen.”

She put the mouse back with her other materials and watched the crystal pulse in her bag for a few beats before starting work on the other arm. While it dried, she pulled out the schematics she had drawn up with Mortavius in his office months ago from her mouse and that she had looked

over with Pierre, and began to redraw them, paying special attention to what runes were being directed to what parts of the body.

Just like the soldier in Mortavius's story, I have moved too far from home. Before learning about Golemancy, she had considered going into the army as a marksman. At that point in her life she had been willing to do almost anything to get off of the farm. College was the far superior choice to conscription, not because of any kind of real preference for it or school; she could have learned similar things in the army. She chose to go to the College of Clay because it would best allow her to help her parents back home, now parent. The army never would have let her visit or send golems home to help tend the farm or kill wolves and bears and such as they came onto the farm. She had gotten in somehow, but the bigger concern now was staying there. It had taken her months to do it, but she had managed to gain an audience with the admissions committee. She had practiced day and night to hone her craft as best she could, to refine her runework to such a degree they had never seen before from someone with her background. She had overestimated her abilities, but she had still impressed them enough to get accepted. However, somewhere along the way, she had fallen further behind than either party expected.

Yet, Claire found herself thinking more and more about her old roommate, a phenomenon which she attributed to it being her fault that she was sent home to “take some time to take it all in.” Maybe that was why when she heard about her roommate’s disappearance, she had dug through her desk and taken her private research notes and samples, even if she hadn’t meant to keep them. She hated the way they assumed she cared, even if she did. Alana had been reclusive, desperate for a private lab. Of course, the college had never given it to her, instead giving her the responsibility of Claire, something Claire knew she resented. Alana haunted her in weird ways, but mostly the image of the scorch marks in the garden plaza stuck with her. In her dreams, she could see Alana clawing her way towards the fountain before burning into ashes, the few parts of her that

made it to the water slowly sifting down into the fountain as naught but bone and the only bone remaining on the pavement being the one that now sat, bound, under her own bed.

Claire thought back to Alana's disappearance and remembered hearing something about there being a demon in the Ziggurat expedition reports released, it having killed a bunch of researchers before being resealed within the giant tomb. She had figured it was just a rumor some upperclassmen spread to freak out the freshman. There was no way one of those faerie tale horrors could be real. Even if they were, how could she have gotten one of their bones? Her mind wandered, sprinted back to the antlers on the deer in the inn on her way back home, skipping back further to her own encounters in the twilight woods of Lorinwood and more recently, campus. She looked out her window, out to the woods on the horizon.

"Perhaps it's the faerie tale to assume horrors only exist in them, and not here, next to us."

Claire stood, and took the bone out from under her bed. She had heard her father go out, but she still placed it on her desk quietly. Moving her sketch to the side, she slowly unwrapped the bone, looking at the runes she remembered seeing in Alana's notes.

"Strength, control, command, regenerate, calm, peace, power," she whispered as she traced them with her gloved finger, still hovering an inch above them rather than touching the cursed artifact, or at least that's what it was in her mind. They seemed almost contradictory to her. Maybe that had been the problem. Maybe that was her problem. With the right runes the bone could prove perfect to bind her golem properly, maybe the extra power would stabilize it, to make up for the lack of her own magic being present in the creation process.

"I can't seriously be considering this." She shook her head at herself.

"Then again, so be it if this is what it takes." She put the bone back under her bed and went back to her sculpting work with a new gusto, this time leaving a space in the arm for the bone which had killed her roommate.

Firing - Chapter 7

For the first time in a while, Claire felt content. She felt like she was making real progress. She pinched the clay into cheeks and pulled a nose from the flat brick that she planned on sculpting into the head. She intended to model the golem after her father, at least in the face. He was going to be less detailed than the real thing of course, but the deep lough line on his forehead had to stay though. He'd had that for as long as she could remember.

Claire had enjoyed getting to see her father again, more so than she had anticipated. It wasn't like her to be sentimental, despite what her mother had evidently thought. At least Claire didn't think she was. Yet here she was looking forward to each meal with him. When he asked for her help in taking care of the wolf, she had mixed feelings though.

Her father didn't talk much over dinner, instead mostly watching the cattle range out the window darkened as it was by the setting sun. It wasn't until the sun had set and the table was cleared to play cards that he really talked.

"Hmph. I still can't get over it. I don't pretend to understand it, but you don't know how proud I am Claire. I never would have dreamed of you being able to go to such a place or learn such things, especially after how upset you were when you found out about the way of things. You come by it honestly though, given your mother and I." He sighed and winked at his daughter.

"It's only been a few months but it feels like it's been so much longer. I can't even remember the last time I had any homemade meal." She patted her stomach like her father did after each meal and was doing currently. "So, what do you want to play tonight?" She took the cards from the center of the table and began to shuffle them.

“I honestly don’t know. Kind of gotten used to solitaire of late. Seeing as you grabbed the cards, I’ll let you deal for once. In celebration of you being back, why don’t you surprise me?”

“Why not a few rounds of King’s Ransom?”

“Works for me.” His hands went behind his head with that and he leaned back in his chair. The wood clacked as it hit the log wall.

“How bad is it really though, that wolf you mentioned earlier? How many cows have they taken this time?” She began tossing cards between the two, watching the piles as a means of averting eye contact as best as possible.

“Well I guess some things do never change. For example, that poker face of yours is still as bad as when I first taught you to play. I’ll be fine. I may be getting older but I handled wolves on my own before I had you and a few after you left.”

“That isn’t what I asked Dad. Just because you can doesn’t mean you have to. I am here for two weeks, which might I add is the amount of time I have to finish my project. I can afford a couple of days to help you out with keeping the farm safe. Besides, I wouldn’t want to let my skills degrade.” Claire readjusted her hand and gave her father a quick smirk and a wink.

“Claire, I know I said I wanted you to focus on your work, but I lost two more cattle this morning. I suppose I could use your eyes. Mine don’t see so well in the twilight anymore. Think you can spare tomorrow to help your old man protect the farm?” He looked sheepish as he asked, hat in his hands, bald head gleaming in the candlelight. She liked that he was asking, that she could help, but hated seeing her father helpless in this way.

“Of course Dad, though I haven’t shot in awhile.”

“I doubt that will be an issue. You’ve always been the best shot of the three of us.” He ran his hand along her mother’s rifle on her wall. “Besides, with her guiding your aim, how bad can you have gotten?”

She grinned. “You know I kind of missed going out with you and the dog anyways. No one really knows anything about this kind of stuff at school, so it’ll be nice to just go out again. Like I said, I want to see if I’ve lost any skill with the old rifle.” She leaned down to pet Ferdinand, a scruffy old thing with black fur long since faded into a soft gray. He placed his head in her palm.

“I’ve missed you Dad.”

“I’ve missed you too sweetie. But, I think this is game one.” He threw down his cards, and she groaned.

Firing - Chapter 8

They went later than she remembered; the sun was already up by the time they made it out of the house. They had packed lunch for the couple days along with the camping supplies. Her father had just finished the process of putting his boots on. He really seemed to have slowed down in her absence. In her mother's absence. They were going now though and that made her happy. She had always been fascinated by the forests of Lorinwood on the border. It was filled with wolves, mountain lions, and every dire variety of beast one could name, not to mention the shapeshifters, but the place had always held a certain majesty in her eyes. She had always found the lavender leaves and needles mixed with the traditional deep green of the firs to be breathtaking, and even though she had no magical abilities of her own, she could feel the thrum of it running through the trees. It was different from the alchemy she now practiced and from the kind the wizards higher up in the college had mastered, but it was still magic.

“What is it that needs to be put down today?”

“Just one wolf, I think. The cows that have been dying aren't enough to feed more than that.”

“Dire wolf?” Her excitement was not hidden well.

“Possibly, but I have my doubts. If so, it's a young one. It's only taken two so far. I'll only start to worry if we don't get it tonight.”

The farm edged on an evergreen and lilac forest, with only an acre or two between it and the livestock. It wasn't ideal, but it was what they had to work with since Claire's great grandfather and likely even before him. They set up camp, a pair of sleeping bags on the hill overlooking the pen and the forest. Ferdinand laid in Claire's lap, his black fur growing warm under the rising sun. Claire

watched her father in the field below as he meandered from cow to cow. As her father had put it once, “if those shapeshifting, moon worshipping freaks in the woods are willing to brand themselves in the rear to blend in I’m not really going to complain too much about a cow or two going missing. They’d have to be mighty starved to do such a thing.” The threat of a literal wolf in sheep’s clothing was something else her peers at college hadn’t really been able to understand. She laid down in the grass and Ferdinand moved just enough to lick her face.

An hour or two later her father came back up the hill, panting heavily. “They all got the brand. Like I thought, it’s probably just a regular wolf.”

“What, did you run up here? You look exhausted.” Sweat dripped from his nose onto his already wet shirt.

“I didn’t. I’m getting old Claire, don’t act surprised. My hips aren’t too keen on hills anymore. Sometimes I wonder if they ever were.” He shot her a breathy smile before sitting down. He was old, and she had always known that, but it seemed like he had aged twice as quickly while she was away.

Claire sat up, the dog rolling over onto her father instead. “Well screw you too Ferdinand. Are things still doable for you around the farm? I know I didn’t plan to come home over my breaks until now. But if you need me to, I can try to visit more often, help out where you need.” She chewed each word as they came out, knowing them to be the right sentiment but her heart wasn’t in them. It was nice to visit but she didn’t want to be bound to this place anymore than she had been when she was little. The dog snorted.

“Don’t be foolish. I’m fine. You just worry about yourself and your grades. Your father isn’t out or in the ground quite yet.”

Claire began playing with the grass at her feet instead of looking at her father. “Just don’t break yourself, alright?”

“I promise I won’t.” His eyes had gone soft like they always did when they were concerned.

Her mind wandered to the other soldiers she had seen in the city, destitute and hucking fish, directing young college students into alleyways. Her father was stronger than that. He had to be.

“I worry about you kiddo. Don’t let your work absorb you. It’s fine if you enjoy it and all but don’t become only that. I mean, I love what I do now. I don’t know how many friends you have or how close you were with your roommate, but if her death is bothering you, take a break from work. At least until you sort things out. There’s a reason they gave you so much time, no reason not to use it.” With that, he laid down in the grass and shut his eyes. “I think I’ll take a nap now if you would watch the fields for a bit.”

“Sure Dad. Come on Ferdinand.” Claire rose and the dog followed as she went for a walk along the road. “The sad part is even if she hadn’t disappeared, I still would be failing. I suppose I just got lucky, as terrible as that is.” The sun painted the ground green and purple as its light passed through the trees along the road. “Maybe I did need a little time away.”

When Claire was first allowed to hunt with her dad, she had been twelve, two years older than what he had wanted. Her mother hadn’t been too excited by the prospect, instead wanting her daughter to be more interested in the “proper things a lady should like.” That was the one thing Claire never could get over about her mother. She never really saw that they weren’t the same person, or even cut from the same cloth. Her mother’s cloth was definitely a tablecloth, but she had no idea what hers was. Her father’s would’ve been burlap. That much she was certain of. A sturdy but surprisingly soft burlap.

The first stars began to peek out to see if the sun had fully set when the wolf finally came in. It was as Claire had hoped, a dire wolf. Young, like her father had surmised. She could barely make out the spines in its fur in the failing twilight. It darted from the woods, then stopped and stalked around the edges of the fence.

“You see it?”

“Mhm, I do. Seems like Ferdinand’s sniffer has lost its edge though. I don’t think he even noticed it coming in.”

“I can’t really judge; I can barely see it in this darkness.”

“Really? I, you better give me the gun then.”

“Ok.”

“Ok.” She shouldered the rifle. She had one shot before it either ran off or more likely, came after the source of the shot. She didn’t know if she could reload faster than it could make it up the hill. Better not to find out. She swallowed, breathed, swallowed again. The wolf had backed up to charge over the fence. Breath in. Hold. Hold. It jumped. She fired. Its body rolled away from them just inside the fence and on instinct she began to reload the rifle while running down the hill, knife in hand as soon as that was done.

“I forgot how nice it was to have someone to do the running for me.” The dog only whined in response to the old man. When she reached the bottom of the hill the reload proved unnecessary, the blood pooling from its head into the grass confirming this. Claire sighed and let herself grin a little. At least one thing hadn’t changed at all about home. Or her.

When she rolled the body over to stab it in its heart anyways, just to be sure, she struggled against the spines, finding those on its head to be sticking into the ground. When her father arrived, he had a lantern in hand, the furthest reaches of the light revealing in his approach a set of curving antlers spiraling out of the wolf's skull amidst its naturally occurring spines. Claire scanned the edge of the forest where she thought the beast had emerged. There, in a beam of moonlight, flickered out a pair of pale orange discs beneath the lavender leaves.

They buried the body on the eastern end of the farm, closest to the forest the next morning. When Claire went and examined where it had emerged, she found two sets of tracks, one clawed like a wolf, as expected, the other a mix of wolverine claw and hoofed shoe seemingly belonging to a single stride.

Firing - Chapter 9

It rained over the next two days, but on the third, she was able to let her creation dry in the sun and the wind, a temporary scarecrow. She left it in the sun for three days to dry, given that she didn't have the proper equipment to harden it quickly. She was surprised that only one finger had fallen off during the drying process. Maybe she was getting better. Then again, it could also be that she just had fewer things to distract herself from her work out here. Ferdinand trotted alongside her when she left for the field with one of the vials. He growled as she unwrapped the bone, a line of silver fur rising along his spine where the white and black fur mixed.

"Don't worry boy, I made sure to inscribe only the most serene of runes onto this thing. I only need it to do basic commands for the exam. For example, this one just has orders to hug right now. Most people just make them mop or do dishes, but this should be similar enough to pass, right?" She took the otherworldly bone from the leather wrapping she had carried it in, slowly unfolding each layer and taking care not to touch it even with her glove, before embedding it in the arm she had left a place for it in, closing the brass plate back over it when that was done. She stepped back and smiled, waiting for the bone to bond with the clay as her roommate's notes had described and as she had seen in the basement at the college. She had placed a love rune in the golem's chest, just as before, just to be safe. It had to work one of these times.

"You see Ferdy, Alana had only used these things on small clay constructs, so a larger one ought to make it out ok. At least that's what the math makes it out like and seeing as I didn't have any issues in that class it should be fine. Based on her notes, these just have too much energy for a rat to contain, living or otherwise, and given my issue is seemingly not enough energy, these issues should solve each other." The dog whined and walked in circles behind her, looking towards the house every so often.

Her attention was whipped back to the golem when Ferdinand barked at it again. It was moving, slowly, flakes of clay falling away as it jerked to life. The brass plate on the arm with the bone began to glow hot red, and the clay blackened outward from under it until the entire arm was shaded midnight charcoal. Its eye sockets filled a sickly green rather than with the soft, yellow light derived from the traditional crystals used in golem powering.

It had begun to move towards her when the dog barked.

I can't believe it, it's actually moving. It hasn't exploded or fallen apart yet. I can't believe it. It's actually moving better than those made by my classmates. There still seems to be a power issue in that arm, but it's holding! Claire began to jump in place.

Maybe Alana really did find a superior, alternative power source. It does need at least five minutes though I suppose. She looked at the wrapping the bone had been in and then waved to her father on the house porch where he had settled in to watch. She saw him dump out his pipe and begin to head towards her. The golem hugged her from behind while she was turned away.

“See Ferdy, it's just doing what it was programmed to do. A simple hug.” She could feel its grip growing tighter, her ribs coming under the pressure of its reinforced clay bones, and the heat of the arm becoming uncomfortable against her leather apron.

“Ok you can stop now my creation.” She kicked at it and tried to pull herself from its grasp with her one free arm. It kept hugging. She felt her ribs bend to the point of cracking under its grip. This was it. She closed her eyes, wriggling for freedom in its grasp to no avail. This was what she deserved, what Alana's death should have warned her of. It was foolish to think she could fix Alana's work, that she was smarter. She wasn't. She was no one. She couldn't even do magic. Yet, ironically, it was her magic creation that was killing her. This was something she could do now, even if it was the demon's bone animating it. No. This was her work, and it was work she intended to finish.

“Dad!” Her father quickened his pace, the dog running circles around the golem and nipping at its legs. Claire grasped at its face with her free hand and could feel the heat even through her treated gloves. Her father wasn’t going to make it to her. Not before her ribs broke through her lungs. She tried to dig the bone out of its arm from underneath with her free hand to no avail. So, she punched it in the face, in the shoulder, in the elbow hoping to dislodge something. Claire felt the clay flake away with each hit. She may have put the best runes she knew for keeping the thing together into its clay flesh, but no amount of them would make a sunbaked hunk of clay unbreakable. Claire closed her eyes, and accepted what would happen as she felt the arm and the love rune burn against her clothes as it fractured in the heat. No, this was her monster, and it needed to be dealt with by her.

She opened her eyes as she felt air return to her lungs. The golem loosened its grip on her and fell backwards, a shovel having sliced off the head, then the arm when that had failed. She heard a thump in the cornfield as she freed herself, the blackened arm having flown far in her father’s desperate digging. She watched as he leaned on the shovel after extracting it from her creation, panting heavily.

“Dad are you alright?”

“Are. You?” He panted three times between each word. Claire went over and helped him stand upright, hugging him in the process.

“Claire, what happened? What in the chained stars was that? Are you ok?”

“Dad, I don’t know. I don’t know. I programmed it to hug and nothing more. It was almost like it was trying to break my ribs.” She felt them to make sure they were all still there before turning to where she had heard the arm land.

“Damn, did you see where it launched to?” Her father and Ferdinand were dismantling the remains of the golem’s body. They didn’t know it was powerless now, or perhaps they didn’t care. She heard her father mumble something about not messing with his little girl. Claire started to head into the field, but turned and ran into the house, grabbing her mother’s rifle, her rifle now, and a knife before going into the field.

“Ferdinand you better have not been digging in the field again. Freaking dog. I love him but I hate his holes.”

The ground was still damp from when it had rained a few days prior, but a few corn stalks had begun to smoke by the time she found where the arm had landed. She cut the stalks and stamped them out, throwing them out of the field and towards the road where she could see it between her and the forest. The arm lay there, in a small crater of loose earth and dust and decaying corn fronds. When she knelt down, the bone was gone, the clay seemingly having been ripped open with claw rather than shovel. Next to it, in the dust from its impact, was a pair of wolverine and cloven prints.

Wisps danced around the prints, flickering in and out of perception between them, the edge of the cornfield, along the road, and towards the entrance to the woods. Looking to the forest in the onsetting twilight, she saw burning the same two orange discs from the night prior, and the night her mother had died.

“You find it sweetie? What is that in the woods?” Her father had followed her, shovel in hand, into the corn. Ferdinand’s hair had yet to settle, but now his tail was between his legs as he picked up the scent of the creature in the forest.

“I think whatever that is found what I was looking for first. Stay here Dad. You’ve already done enough for me today.” She began to walk towards the forest.

“Honey, where are you going? I don’t think you should go after that whatever it is. These tracks are... worrying. I’ve only ever heard stories of tracks like these. There are some things you just don’t mess with.” He grabbed her arm as he spoke, a firm, but reassuring grip wholly unlike that of her golem.

She wrenched her arm free of his grip.

“I’ve already tampered with things I shouldn’t have today, and now whatever that thing is has taken it. I don’t want to think about what it might want with it, so I need to go get it.”

“What are you talking about Claire?” Her father tripped behind her through the corn as she strode towards her second end of the day.

“I didn’t use a crystal to power that golem Dad. I used the thing that killed my roommate. Look, I’ll explain if I come back, and I don’t think I can involve you anymore than I already have.” She stopped and turned to face her father.

“I need to do this. I promise I’ll come back. I’m not a little girl anymore.” She gripped the rifle as she said this, mentally comparing her father’s grip to her mother carrying her out of the woods that day.

“Alright sweetie. I’ll be right here when you get back. Just don’t... I can’t lose you both, not yet.”

“I know Dad.” Claire turned back to her objective, continuing on into the underbrush of the forest.

As she crossed the threshold, a moonbeam trickled down through the canopy, landing on the bone, nestled in a bed of smoldering leaves. The eyes were nowhere to be seen. When she reached for it however, a set of claws clamped down over it and dragged it into the darkness, a growl not unlike chalk pitched and scraped across slate echoing low and deep in her mind. A muzzle cloaked in long strands of white fur poked out of the shadows, the orange eyes once again floating in the darkness.

Claire raised her gun and took a step back. The eyes faded again, and the moonlight began to fade. Lowering her gun, she called out to the creature.

“Wait.” She spoke low, and the moonlight halted, the eyes turning back towards her. “I know you and you know me.”

The discs reappeared, focusing on her, turning from orange to the same hue as the moon of Faern above.

Claire resisted the urge to bring the gun back to her shoulder. “What could one such as you want with the bone?” The moonlight expanded to encompass them both as she spoke, revealing a creature with a wolf’s head crowned in antlers that mirrored those of the elk in the tavern and the dire wolf she had shot earlier, only the left side had been snapped off and not regrown fully. Strands of white hair cloaked its body beyond its muzzle, its eyes peering out from behind a veil of fur. The only other features visible were its claws which stretched jagged and long from under its skirt of fur and its tail, which curved upwards in white like that of a skunk.

The creature tilted its head, playing with something under its claw, flexing the eerie fingers along the bone as if holding off crushing it into the dust.

“I don't want it anymore.” She spoke tersely, unsure of what to make of what was happening.

The beast seemed to pause at this, moving its claws off of the bone and taking a step back from it, all but its face retreating into shadow. Echoing behind it she heard the various calls of wolves, bears, and deer ripple throughout the leaves.

“I can't let it roam free any longer.” Claire looked the creature over, sure of who she was speaking to now. Even with that surety, in the face of something beyond mortal ken, she raised her gun. It was her monster, and she was going to kill it.

The beast cackled the cough of a dog who sniffed something that tickled their nose, and in that cackle she saw its teeth line up in row upon row like soldiers forming ranks before a charge.

Claire stared at the beast for a while, hunched, claw raised now over the bone, prepared to strike earth towards her.

“Fine. We shall see who is faster.” Claire tucked the gun further into her shoulder, and stared down the sights. The moon seemed to blink, a shadow passing under and through. She fired.

When the moon returned its gaze on them, Claire saw what she already felt, the hot air spewing forth from the beast's maw, the teeth glimmering in that pit's darkness before her eyes and around the back of her head.

Yet, even in its decaying breath, she could smell something familiar, like sulfur and flesh evaporating. The beast gagged, and released her head, turning its own to where the bone lay. Together, they saw it evaporating into a black smoke that was sucked into the earth and far deeper below. The moon blinked again, and when the light returned, the creature was gone. Claire's knees turned to jelly and she barely kept herself from falling to her knees. In the dark, she heard the retinue of wild, shapeless predators moving away from her.

Her father had fallen asleep against the shovel, standing still by the corn field, Ferdinand wrapped around his feet. She put her hand on his shoulder, making sure the first thing he would see when he awoke was her face in the fading light.

"I'm back Dad."

"So you are." He yawned as he righted himself. "All in one piece I see."

"I am, yes."

"Did you recover what you were looking for?"

"No, but that isn't a problem anymore. It was destroyed."

"But what was it? I didn't see a typical crystal like you used in your mouse."

"It was something that belonged to my roommate actually. I took it in hopes it would help me create a stable golem. It did in a way, but I was foolish to try using it. Some things are better left alone."

Claire sighed and adjusted the rifle over her shoulder. "I'm sorry Dad. I was beyond stupid. I'm not sure how much I can trust it, but according to her, it was a demon bone. I didn't believe her notes at first, but I knew what I was doing. I should have at least."

"A demon bone? Where would she have even found such a thing? And then to think it would be a good idea to use such an evil to power one of your golems? I don't pretend to understand what it is that you are learning, but I can guarantee that is a bad idea missy. What were you thinking?"

"I was scared Dad! I was scared I wouldn't be able to make something that lasted. I still am." Claire could barely look at her father. Not because of shame, but because she could never look at him when he was crying.

"I think she found it in the Ziggurat to the west, when the college had an expedition there last summer."

Her father shook his head, the tears wicking off his face in the late fall cool. When Claire looked up, he had rivulets of mud cut into the dust on his face from his day's work.

"Such places shouldn't be messed with. I should've put two and two together. That story even made it all the way out here, though no one thought to believe it. A live demon. In a religious history site no less. Such a thing shouldn't exist in this world. And here I had a bit of a dead one on my farm. Promise me Claire that you won't try to use it again. Give to the college or the government I don't know but don't carry such things around. If the Church still had any presence in Chlorthyr I would say to give it to them. Then again if they were still here, they never would've allowed anyone near the Ziggurat in the first place."

“Dad, it's gone, destroyed in the woods. Also you can't tell me you believe in that stuff?”

“Claire, I believe in three things, good, evil, and mankind. And it has done a lot of good and goes back as far as mankind. For me, it makes no sense not to believe the myths and legends. Especially given the evil I have just seen with my own eyes plaguing my own child. So please promise that you will seal that thing back up and leave them sealed until they depart from you. And look at me when you say it. I promise I'm done crying.”

His eyes were not wet, nor were they cold. Just stern. Concerned. “I promise Dad. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.”

“It's ok my Claire. It's ok. I don't know how these things work really but I dismantled the body just in case. Sorry if you could have reused it.”

“Yeah you might be right. Usually it would've been useless but I don't know with this.” She was the one crying now.

“Ok.”

“Ok.” The dog barked at the still golem as they passed it going back towards the house. Her father had his arm around her shoulders as they walked back and she stared at where she had dropped the bone's wrappings, the scorch marks left along its insides. She was surprised the runes had lasted as long as they did. But if her father was right, she wouldn't need such a thing to pass. Maybe her runework had saved her, held the thing back. That didn't matter though. She was home and now, she knew she had everything she needed to succeed next time.

Firing - Chapter 10

It was cloudy when Claire tried again two days later. She had used the oven with her dad's help to dry her new pieces a little more professionally this time, so even if it began to rain it wouldn't be an issue. She looked into her creation's face as she pitted a place in its forehead for the crystal. It glowed warmly as she put it in. Nothing had changed inscription-wise from the last one to this. It was still meant to hug. Its eyes glowed yellow as the crystal bound itself, rivulets of energy running through each of the clay body's joints, like seamless tattoos etched into its clay skin. Its arms wrapped around her, as firm as her father's but much colder. It placed one hand on the back of her head and made as much of a smile as a clay face can before releasing her. Ferdinand wagged his tail next to her, and looking back over her shoulder, her father was smoking a pipe on the porch. This was all she needed.

Claire spoke a command, and the golem walked over to the porch with her.

"Everything go as planned Claire?"

"Yeah, it did, oddly. Dad, I can't take him back with me, and I can get another crystal from the college if I ask. I'll need a bigger one for next year with more complex creations anyhow. I want you to keep this one, to help around the farm. It isn't very complex, but even programmed as it is it'll be great for loading and unloading the cart and hauling things around."

He just smiled at her. "I suppose I could use the hand, if that's what you want. Just send the word if you need the crystal back though, he'll still be here with or without anything in him."

"Ok."

"Ok."

Claire had the golem move against the side of the house on the porch before taking the crystal out of the golem's head, twirling it in her palm. "Before I let you have this though, there is one other project I need to finish with it."

"Do what you need to do Claire. I'll be here when you're done. Just stay safe."

"I will Dad, now at least." She winked at him before ducking inside.

Once inside, Claire reached into her bag and pulled out her mouse, setting it on the birch table in her room.

"Strength, control, command, regenerate, calm, peace, power." Claire wiped the old runes clean and etched the new ones taken from Alana's work and refined in her successful golem into the belly of her original mouse. She had attached a new pair of legs the night before, but had been unwilling to try them until she got the golem right overall.

"In the contradiction lies creation." Lastly, she inscribed the rune for love between peace and power, as a mediating factor between their contradiction, before placing the crystal in its place.

Taking a step back, she watched as its eyes lit up and its nose twitched across the surface of the desk. It scampered around the desk as best it could, but without its hind legs doing much of the work. She put her hand down to it, letting it scamper into her palm, only its back legs caught on the edge of her hand. She went to push under its feet to help it get its rear end into her hand, only when she touched the feet, it jerked them away in surprise. Once in her hand, it spun around to see it was just her finger, before settling into her hand as it usually did.

Claire just stared at it, unsure if it had worked or not. She scratched its nose, and the lights in its eyes flickered as if it were opening them after a nap. She placed it on the table, dropping it a few inches to see what it would do. It landed with an inconclusive thump. She closed her eyes and held

her breath in disappointment. It had worked on the golem, so why wasn't it working here? Maybe her early work was unsalvageable.

Suddenly, she felt a weight in her hand, and when she opened her eyes, the mouse had sprung into it, and was sitting up on its hind legs. She took the crystal out of the mouse and with care put the latter back in her things. She watched the crystal pulse for a few beats before grabbing her bags and leaving the room with it in her palm. When she got outside, her father was already in the wagon with the horse bridled and ready to go.

"Ready sweetie? Got all of your schematics and clothes?"

"Of course."

"I figured we could take Ferdinand with us this time. You think he'd like that?"

On cue, Ferdinand's head popped out of the back of the wagon between them, his eyes begging her consent for his company.

"Of course he can come." She chuckled as she put his face between her hands.

"Before we go though Dad, I need to give you this. Promise me you'll use it." She had him hold out his hand, placing the crystal carefully within it.

"I promise."

"Ok then, let's head out."

With that, her father gently snapped the reigns and the horse lurched forward, slowly picking up pace in the early morning light. She scratched Ferdinand's head as they crested the hill behind the

farm, back towards the college, towards her final exam. Watching the farm and forest fade behind them though, she knew she had already passed the tests that mattered.

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Aaron Thibodeau was born in Bangor, Maine on December 7, 1998. He was raised in West Enfield, Maine and graduated from Penobscot Valley High School as Valedictorian in 2017. He attended Colby College and graduated in 2021 with a Bachelor's degree in English with a Concentration in Creative Writing. After obtaining his degree, Aaron will continue to a PhD program in English and Creative Writing with the aim of teaching at the post-secondary level. Aaron is a candidate for the Master of English degree from the University of Maine in May 2024.