

One

I do not know how long I remained outside the hovel. I stood lightly on cold sand and watched a star fall into oblivion. Then I waited for the rest of my life to begin, holding myself open to whatever would come. But nothing came except unsteady pulses of North Country sun and the sound of Isulde's scarefisher.

I felt nothing. I knew less. And then I crashed.

I know I crashed because my palms stung with the impact. And then the chill of the wet sand slammed and spread through my body. But it was hard knowing anything, except that I hurt, and that hurting meant I was alive.

I painfully pushed my palms against the packed sand, carefully lifting my body until I could sit, then stand, then find my way to sit again, resting on a rock. I wanted to think, but my thoughts were like scattered shadows. They softly sharpened and dispersed as I idly watched a water dragon moving on the lake's surface. Then the dragon submerged and the lake went still. That was all I knew. Until finally, out of the stillness, my thoughts returned in slow, slippery surges of self-awareness.

My first thought was that I died at dawn. Walworth, my one-time friend and the new King of Threle, had satisfied his sense of law and judgment by converting the hovel into a makeshift Threlan courtroom and finding me guilty of murdering his cousin, Lord Cathe. Which I suppose was fair. But you'd think Walworth would account his cousin's death as something of a favor to Threle, considering Cathe's own personal roster of treasonable acts. However, I had killed Cathe without bringing him to a proper trial and all that. And since Walworth has always been mad for proper trials, there we were.

Then, instead of killing me himself, he sentenced me to die from exposure to the North Country. Which I did, briefly, before Isulde tripped into the hovel and, for reasons I couldn't begin to parse, interfered by singing fairy songs that pulled my spirit back into my body.

So here I was.

My second thought was that, if I wasn't careful, I might sit on this North Country shore until I sickened and grew dead again, for I could feel the hollow Northern drag against my rising life force. In

remembering my death, my body told me the North Country was still bane, but told me instinctively, in the dream way a dying animal's hunger-ridden stomach still tells it to avoid a deadly herb. I knew that my death had dissipated my ban, the wizard-curse that insured I would die if I came here, because I now felt a strange blankness where my ban used to be. But feeling that blankness meant that I was still magically sensitive, just as feeling pain meant that I was still alive. And so I understood that even though my ban was gone, the Northern energies would sicken and kill me again, like any other magic user, if I stayed too long. But how long was too long was the gods' own guess.

You see, in some ways, the North Country has no time. In other ways, time makes occasional stops here, but it is always the sort of time that doesn't really happen and that you can't really know about. A wide, buzzing planet may send her image here to skim the sky and dimly mark what passes for seasons, or the seasons may sometimes curl round themselves in the semblance of the cycles you think you know, but mostly seasons just happen in different places, at random, whenever they feel like happening. Weeks speed and slow and chase each other by the tail for sport or spite. You'll sometimes sense hours or minutes, but only as spurious outlines of experience. Young ghosts fighting to be seen in a soft, blinking wind.

North Country time is all ghosts and semblance. You are to believe none of what passes for change. Besides, whatever you do notice is usually irrelevant to whatever is happening. Study the dawn and it vanishes like a bleak moony charm. Measure the hours and they laugh at you and disappear. Trace the sun and your skull freezes.

Which makes it damnably difficult to make plans.

It took an afternoon's forever to know my thoughts again. But as I kept encountering my bodily echoes as memory, I began to remember why I had come here, what I had told Walworth about that decision, and why, contrary to all the laws of magic, I was alive again.

I had come here to sacrifice myself for Gondal, the country that Emperor Roguehan had strategically made me king of shortly before I murdered him. Roguehan, who had mysteriously emerged out of the remote southwest kingdom of Furnesse and fought a protracted war with Threle for the aesthetic pleasure of watching the Threlan people, inspired by his propaganda, destroy themselves. He particularly enjoyed watching them kill each other. He found it exquisite when they burned their own towns.

But even though his alignment to evil infused his artistic tastes, Roguehan loved elvish beauty. So much so that he lusted after Arula, Gondal's oldest city, because it held the only elvish art remaining in the world. And so he needed a Gondish king to kill so he could embody Arula by taking the king's power. Which is where I came in.

I killed him with an elvish arrow as he stood, at my invitation, heart-struck before the unspeakable glory of an ancient elvish painting, after he failed to kill me and claim his prize.

But as to my sacrifice. Almost immediately after I killed Roguehan, Hecate, my goddess, commanded me in a divine vision to make a horrific choice. I was to either destroy Gondal, whose elvish beauty I also loved and whose power I embodied as king, or enter the North Country and die there in a state of eternal damnation. That was Her judgment on me for murdering two evil high priests. One of whom, ironically, was Walworth's cousin, Lord Cathe.

For reasons I still could not explain to myself, I chose eternal damnation, throwing my newly-acquired crown into the unwilling keeping of my friend Aeren, a lonely, sharp-tongued storyteller who had her own claims to the Gondish throne and little interest in asserting them. Then I resolutely rode here to die, expecting that my ban would kill me. Of course, I had no idea that Walworth was also riding here.

Roguehan was fascinated by self-destruction in all its forms, and surely would have cheered my own foray into same had I let him live to know about it. Walworth, on the other hand, had merely respected it. "I would like to think I would have had the strength of heart to risk as much for Threle," he said before sentencing me to death by exposure to the North Country, in what was possibly the most redundant act of his reign, considering I was already dying from my ban to satisfy Hecate's judgment for killing Cathe.

Ironically, I *bad* once had the strength of heart to risk as much for Threle. That's sort of why we were here, and Walworth knew this better than anyone, although I still had no idea if he saw it that way. Before he became king, I had risked my life and more to gather evidence at Kursen Monastery to save him from being executed on a false treason charge that arose from his secret attempts to defend Threle. He rewarded me with abandonment to spiritual torture in that same monastery, where I rashly chose to become a priest of Hecate. If not for Hecate's judgment on my crimes against Her, I'd still be in Arula.

I also had no idea if Hecate had accepted my sacrifice; my choice to die in the North Country in place of destroying Gondal and its elvish art. Hecate was a goddess who destroyed through excessive order, who strangled lives through rigid application of oppressive law and pedantic scholarship. The North Country was pure chaos and therefore anathema to Her. Any attempt to communicate with Her from here would fail. The problem was, I did die. But then I didn't. And so it was possible that my sacrifice wasn't completed. But if she had accepted my sacrifice, I was now irrevocably damned to Her.

That meant I saved Gondal, but could now look forward to eternal torture upon my next death.

El, my master at Kursen, would have considered that justice. He happened to be the other high priest I murdered. He cheerfully dedicated his life to evil. I convinced him to commit suicide, to sacrifice himself to save Kursen Monastery by embracing goodness. I did this knowing it was pure torture for an evil high priest to wrench his spirit into an opposing alignment. And El, unlike me, loved evil. I felt sympathy as I watched him suffer.

As part of my monastic training, I had been forced to memorize the sort of punishments Mother Hecate could mete out to wayward priests. One of them came to me now, vivid as a waking dream.

I envisioned Hecate making me into a ball of flesh so I would sicken on myself as my long years in Her servitude had led me to sicken on meat. In this form, I felt myself endlessly dissipating in the lower belly of one of Her dogs, all of my senses heightened and howling. The dog kept digesting me in the dark of its stomach. I writhed as the acid seared me but I never dissolved. I kept believing that I would remain in that quivering form, suffering for eternity. And then for mercy, if that's the right word, evil old Mother Hecate removed me from Her dog and shaped me into my body again. She then, with a hellish maternal delight, squeezed all my long, low evil back into my terrifyingly open heart; dirty black ink forever staining an empty scroll. Then She flattened my body into the form of an old toad, which She slowly crushed in a volume of dead learning until the pages ran cold with my poison. And then I dried between the pages, the way a dead flower does, my wet toad-guts staining the paper and turning to powder. My only companion was the horror of knowing that my punishment was to be so undisturbed forever.

Even as the waking dream vanished, I could feel myself imprisoned in a slow rotting silence under the deadening North Country sun. The ball of endlessly-digested flesh and the eternally book-flattened toad were two of my best guesses for punishment. But there were no limits here. Hecate was capable of torturing well over anyone's best guess.

I pulled my robe around me and endured the memory of how closely I had come to eternal damnation, of how I had come within mere words of Hecate's torments before Isulde sang me back me into life. My failure to die—or to die for long—meant I both failed to sacrifice myself and failed to destroy Gondal.

I watched the hard waves dash and dance out of the strange lake and knew once more that I had to be careful not to sit here too long and die again.

If Hecate hadn't accepted my sacrifice, I would not be damned to Her, because the eternal damnation was contingent on self-sacrifice; that was the price for saving Gondal. But I might be helplessly bound to work Gondal's destruction, whether I willed to or no. I had no idea if Hecate still found me an acceptable priest, but I knew She didn't release Her clerics lightly. If Walworth and Isulde had somehow botched my sacrifice, then my true spiritual alignment, if I still had an alignment, was really anybody's guess. Including mine.

Ah well, no life should be without excitement.

I again considered Walworth and his motives. Walworth had prevented me from dying in the North Country, that is, before he coolly sentenced me to death there and just as coolly pronounced all debts paid when I unexpectedly returned to life, because from his perspective, my brief death paid for the murder of Cathe. Which was a decent thing for him to do, considering that he knew I had been a spy for Roguehan and that I had been planning to kill him and destroy his household. That was mostly Cathe's idea, but wreaking revenge on Walworth for having left me to suffer in Kursen had its charms at the time.

Not that Walworth's decency made sense, but, under the circumstances, if the King of Threle was pleased to prolong my life, I was more than pleased not to argue sense. And besides, we had once been friends. Although that hadn't been obvious for a few years. Not since I joined his cause as a youth, apprenticed with his wizard, Mirand, and pledged my loyalty to him and Threle.

I then considered Walworth and how little of himself and his motivations he ever revealed.

What business did Walworth, the self-proclaimed new King of Threle, have up here if Mirand really had defeated Roguehan by using the Wand of Surprises I had once unwittingly brought them to "reverse the order of things"? Those were Walworth's words, but what did they even mean? When I asked Walworth about that, he responded with a complicated, mysterious word game involving mystical power transfers between himself, his twin sister Caethne, Mirand, and the forces of history. "Defeat became victory," Walworth said, explaining that Mirand had wrenched the energy of Roguehan's victory and somehow shifted it to Walworth. And that hole in time, in the worlds, in the All—whatever cosmic mess Mirand had created with that desperate maneuver with the Wand of Surprises—was the strange bend and flow of time and elements that I experienced when I escaped from Walworth's castle.

In other words, Walworth cheated. He and Mirand created a Threlan victory where none existed by using magic to change history. Roguehan had won, and Mirand had trespassed on the gods' prerogative by re-arranging time.

So I wasn't the only one with potential problems with my deity. Mirand was now anathema to his goddess, Athena, and Walworth had admitted as much when he confessed that he "did not know if it should have been within our power to change history. It was an act for the gods, not us, and Mirand fears he lost Athena's favor through his action."

What could I say to it? I didn't have a run of sympathy on that score.

Curiously, Walworth didn't object or appear surprised when Isulde restored me to life. Instead, he indicated that he wanted me cleared of my crimes should I ever work for him. So something in my life was valuable to him.

I knew I could be a great asset to Walworth if I chose, despite our colorful past. For one thing, as a priest of Hecate, I knew all about evil. And I was beyond intimate with the uses of clerisy, although I had no intention of doing anything practical with Hecate's force for a while. I also had a fair deal of wizardry at my disposal, having learned much from Mirand. Also, I was fluent in three mundane languages and devastatingly proficient in several magical ones. The new king would be hard pressed to find another advisor with the same curious educational background and experience as myself. If I worked it right, I could probably command a fair sum.

But I refused his implied offer of work. I had once loved Threle as much anyone could, but Threle, or Walworth, had nearly destroyed me by leaving me in Kursen.

I then considered all that Walworth had transcribed during our trial. When he returned to Threle, my role in the destruction of the Threlan border town in the Duchy of Helas would be public knowledge. And not just the border town. It would also be known that I had caused the destruction of one of Roguehan's military camps in the recent war, which had also been located in Helas. Some Threlans might account that reasonable work because Roguehan was in the process of invading and destroying Threle. But I deliberately caused the deaths of hundreds of Helan soldiers, Threlan ex-patriots who had gone loyal to Roguehan out of anger with King Thoren, Threle's previous king, for executing their duke. And given that their duke was executed as a result of my exposing him as the real traitor at Walworth's treason trial, I decided that I could do better than return to Helas.

Also, because I had murdered Roguehan shortly before coming here, and had a hand in destroying his chief wizard, Zelar, I didn't care to try my fortune in Sunna, Sevalas, or any of the southwest kingdoms recently under Roguehan's influence.

Biding my time in a monastery, among other evil clerics, was not an option. Given that business of leading El to destroy himself by wrenching his evil to goodness, and my well-earned conviction for killing Cathe, I knew I needed to avoid my own kind. Whatever my current relationship was with Hecate, I was now a fair mark for other evil clerics.

That was a bit of charm to break into my expanding self-awareness. A horrible feeling like a tight cloud of panic accompanied this insight as I suddenly realized again how close to a horrible damnation I had come. I briefly wondered if Threle ever hired assassins. Seemed to me I might make a go in that line. Not everyone can destroy two evil high priests and live, or live again, as the case might be.

Something like a hermit crab made a jumpy movement in the distance. The lake was now a shuddery storm, the way North Country things suddenly turn into other things. I shivered and the lake was a lake again, snarling and gray and crashing bitter against the scarefisher's creaky weave.

I had been made King of Gondal and now the world and I were dark to each other. Perhaps that was some ancient elvish joke. I thought again of Roguehan, who tortured men for pleasure and died for love of elvish beauty. Hadn't he and the world also been dark to each other? And then of Walworth, who lived by reason's light, by Mirand's teachings. Was he any less dark? Hadn't he conspired with Mirand to torture the fabric of the world by changing history to his liking? Hadn't he been willing to damn the gods for love of Threle?

My thoughts were now starkly complete and stunningly useless. And for all I knew, so was I.

I walked slowly toward the hovel. I had no idea of what else to do. I knew I needed to return to the world, but I could not guess what that would mean, or even know how much time had passed there while I was in the North Country. Months? Years?

When I passed the scarefisher, he was weaving a bowl of water in his lap. I paused and watched. And then, without intending to, I drank. The water tasted clean.