

Faith Mudge

FableCroft Sampler

Faith's astonishing, lyrical work has appeared in several Australian publications, but FableCroft Publishing had the distinct pleasure of being the first press to produce her work, in the gift book *To Spin a Darker Stair*. Her most recent work with FableCroft was in *One Small Step*, and she will also be published in the forthcoming anthology *Insert Title Here*.

We are delighted to see Faith shortlisted for the Best New Talent Ditmar Award, and offer this small sample of her wonderful writing.

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WINTER'S HEART

FAITH MUDGE

I'd come for a reason, although that was easy to forget now I was actually here.

The walls towered over my head, red brick pocked with last century's unsuccessful cannonfire and entangled in a web of lush summer-green vines. I smelled damp earth from the night's rain and sulphuric residue, like the dust of fireworks. Arched windows, some shuttered and some open, peered between strands of ivy and climbing rose. I saw a black sleeve trailing across a jutting sill and couldn't help wondering, a little pointlessly, if it belonged to him.

The sleeve disappeared. I reached up to knock at the brass-studded ebony doors, a good two feet taller at their peak than I was myself, and flinched back reflexively when one swung inward at my touch. For the residence of a man in such demand, it didn't seem very well protected. Perhaps reputation was guard dog enough. I drew up my skirts to step over the threshold, as though the thick dust on the other side of the doorstep might be impetus enough to ignite them. For all I knew, it might.

Suits of armour lined the musty hallway on both sides. Spikes jutted from their strangely shaped spines; the elongated helmets gaped jaws that did not look designed for a human head. Pushing through the unlocked doors at the other end of the hall, I found myself in an enormous circular chamber where diagonal stairways cut a wide wooden X between floor and ceiling. Light filtered from windows so high up I had to tilt my head back as far as it would go just to ascertain their existence. Green vines poured through their arched mouths to claim the inside of the fortress as they had done the outer walls.

There was no one in sight and nothing for me to do but choose a stair. Bearing in mind the telltale sleeve I had seen, I chose to go right. My footsteps echoed in the great empty chamber; when I laid my hand on the bannister, it came away grey with dust. If what I saw and felt was an enchantment only, the illusion of abandonment, I was in skilled hands indeed.

The upper gallery was at least inhabited, if the teetering stacks of cobwebbed books obscuring the walls and their civilisation of spiders could be counted as such. Here and there a door was visible enough to be opened, and none were locked, but neither were the rooms beyond occupied. The light filtering through their diamond-paned, dust-coated windows was waning from afternoon into evening when at last I found the owner of the black sleeve upon which I had placed such faith. I knew the moment I saw him that he was not who I had come to find.

For one thing, he was aged in his fifties at the oldest and therefore far too young. For another, he seemed to have been as oblivious to my presence as I had been to his. When I opened his door he jerked around in astonishment, dropping the slender blue-bound volume he had been reading. He dived immediately to retrieve it before straightening to look at me.

“How long have you been there?” he asked, brushing off the book and laying it down on the nearest lectern. There were at least five of these scattered about the room, some displaying open books, others piled up with loose maps and sketches. It was a scene of total disarray, not power at all. The man himself was tall and gangling, his bald skull ringed with woolly brown curls, his eyes a milky, mildly inquisitive blue. His black robe was too large for his thin frame and streaked with dusty handprints.

“I arrived an hour or more ago,” I said. There was a broad brocade chair heaped with more of the sorcerer’s interminable supply of books close at hand; I shifted the pile onto the floor and replaced them with myself, too tired to care about the inevitable cloud of dust. “Is the sorcerer Forsythian in residence? I have business with him.”

"Oh," said the black-robed man. "I thought you might be a student. They turn up every so often, you know, though it is terribly easy to miss them. Sometimes months go by before I realise they're here at all, but when we meet I do try to help. It's such an effort to get this far, and I have been here the longest, after all."

I frowned, sure I had misunderstood. "You are a student yourself?"

"I didn't think so," he said, "until I came here. I intended to challenge Forsythian to a sorcerer's duel — very melodramatic, I know — but when I arrived he was nowhere to be found. I stopped looking eventually and started reading instead. I've been here ever since."

"And how long has that been?"

"Around twenty years, I should think," he said brightly. "Oh, forgive me, I haven't introduced myself. My name is Alabast Tern." He held out a bony-knuckled hand. Ensnared in the surprisingly comfortable chair, I accepted it briefly.

"You may call me Meriel," I said. It was the first time I had spoken my name aloud since I was married and it sounded a little strange, exposed to the open air. "But you must have seen Forsythian since you came? He can't be dead."

It was a singularly stupid thing to say, since at any time any one can be dead. Just because the sorcerer had not lived long enough to answer my request did not mean he had to be alive. To my relief, however, Alabast was nodding.

"Eventually, yes, I did," he said. "In this very room, as it happens. I was reading a book of Galadean poetry aloud and stopped halfway through a rather fine ballad to tend the fire. When I returned for my book, he was there. He didn't like the way I was reciting and insisted on doing the rest of the ballad himself."

The man seemed inclined to wander from the point at hand. I tried to usher him back to the line of questioning I really wanted answered. "Where is he now?"

Alabast looked around vaguely, as though expecting to find the sorcerer folded up somewhere on a shelf. "I haven't the faintest idea," he said. "How long has it been, then? I'm afraid I lose track of time quite often. I'm sure he was here in the summer."

"It's summer now," I said patiently. I was glad I had elected to sit. It felt as though I might be asking questions for some time. "Do you think Forsythian is here?"

"Oh, bound to be, bound to be," Alabast assured me. He took up the little blue book he had been reading when I had interrupted him and thumbed through the gilt-edged pages for his place. "He never leaves the fortress, that I know of. He'll turn up when he wants to talk to you."

My right hand rested against the slight swelling of my stomach. I could feel the hollow inside my chest where fear should have been. "How long will that take?" I demanded. "I need to speak with him now."

"I'm sorry," Alabast said. He looked at me over the top of his book and smiled a little ruefully. "If he wants to see you, you will see him. If he doesn't want to see you, you never will. You're welcome to stay as long as you like, of course."

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I was there for the rest of the summer, and the autumn as well. It seemed Forsythian did not intend to see me, but I would not leave without seeing him. I had not come this far to go away again empty-handed.

Not all of the house was so dramatically unkempt as what I saw on that first day. As Alabast had said, there were other students here and there, if that they could be called, considering most had barely even seen the man they called master. I saw a young woman in jester's cast-offs scratching obscure runes in chalk on a courtyard floor, a silent matron with iron grey hair sitting frozen in a garden of broken statues, a boy no older than thirteen or fourteen juggling apples among the chimney stacks of an unreachable rooftop. Alabast was generally squirreled away somewhere with a book, but after half a year in the sorcerer's house I had seen nothing to indicate Forsythian himself even existed. He seemed more like a shared delusion than a real person.

And still I stayed. I had, in all truth, nowhere else left to go.

I ate in the kitchens, which I privately thought of as the dungeons, where there was never light but always something moderately edible, and slept in a room where there was a moth-eaten settee that did me well enough for a bed. The rest of each day I spent in a restless circuit of the house and its four enclosed courtyards in the increasingly remote hope that I might stumble upon Forsythian's hiding place. Why he would endure this charade if he were here, I couldn't imagine — if he could not or would not assist me, why not simply appear and send me on my way? It was his house, wasn't it? But wizards of every sort are bizarre creatures, I knew that already, and the stories of Forsythian painted him as stranger than most.

The symptoms of pregnancy progressed at the usual rate. I swelled like a waxing moon to an utterly impractical shape. The baby kicked restlessly inside my body and I tried to imagine holding it, like I half-remembered my mother holding me, but I couldn't. Imagination had never been my gift, least of all then.

I gave birth on the first day of winter, in a thankfully short labour, alone in my chamber. I could, I suppose, have called for help, but no one in this place could give me the help I really needed. Pain I could manage alone. I had endured worse for less reason.

The baby was a boy.

"Goodness," Alabast exclaimed when he saw me with my son for the first time, several days later. He leaned over the infant in my arms, fluttering his hands nervously in what I assumed was a congratulatory gesture. "When did this one arrive? Is he yours?" A suddenly hunted look crossed his face. "He's not Forsythian's?"

"I shouldn't think so," I said coldly, "given that I have never met the man."

Alabast petted the baby on the head like a puppy. "I see," he said penitently. "I did hope he might be accommodating for you, but I suppose he might not have noticed you're here. He does get distracted. You'll simply have to be patient."

"I don't have twenty years to spare, Master Tern."

"No, no, my dear, I only had to wait two. The rest were my own decision."

I made a kind of nest in my room from ancient blankets, thoroughly washed, and a moth-eaten green velvet skirt I'd found in amongst the mountains of books. While my son slept there I would sit on my makeshift bed and watch him. My fears had been well founded. I had seen mothers with their children, seen the adoring light in their exhausted eyes — even the fortress's cat, a stately white creature of indeterminate age, doted on her litters of kittens while they were small enough to need her. When I looked at my baby I felt nothing, nothing at all. I fed him and washed him out of duty. I knew I should care. I tried to will the love from my empty chest, but it would not come.

By the end of the first month of winter, I had come to the conclusion that I would never see the sorcerer. It was time to formulate a different solution. Leaving my son asleep in his nest of blankets, I went out into the nearest courtyard where a leafless apple tree was surrounded by a round wooden bench. Snow dusted my hair as I sat there, my cloak drawn close around my shoulders, my hands encased in soft grey gloves, the chill nevertheless sinking slowly through to my skin. I didn't mind the winter weather. Nothing in the world could be colder than me.

I was a wealthy woman. I could give my son a comfortable life, a luxurious home and good education. By my standards, that was all anyone could ask, but I couldn't give him love. Would that make the rest redundant? Would he be better off with some other woman who would treat him as a gift from the heavens, while all I could do was look at him nonplussed, unable to see the charm?

"Your baby is crying."

The voice came from behind me and I turned automatically to respond. There was no one there. Neither was the voice familiar, although it was entirely possible that another 'student' had arrived at some point and vanished into the depths of the house without my meeting him. I stood, brushing snow from my wine-dark skirts and neatly knotted hair.

"No, it's all right," the voice said. "Alabast has gone to him."

I twisted quickly back around. The words had seemed to come from directly behind me, at my shoulder almost, and still I could see no one. There was not enough snow on the ground to show footprints, but even so I was sure I would have heard something if someone had come so close.

"Who are you?" I said sharply. "Kindly show yourself."

"I'm not known for my kindness," said the voice. It was low-pitched and dry, with the trace of an unfamiliar accent. "Nor are you, I gather, your Majesty."

My hands fisted in my skirts. "*Show yourself.*"

"No," he said mildly. "You are very persistent, I will admit, but I don't think I trust you. What is it you want from me? And don't," he added, "please don't pretend you want nothing more than to see me. You can't imagine how tired I am of people pretending they've come just to see if I exist. No one comes to my house without reason. Usually something mercenary. Bags of gold that never empty, swords that never rust, things of that like."

"Forsythian," I whispered.

He gave a humourless laugh. "Who were you expecting?"

I sank back onto the bench and fixed my eyes on a gargoyle overlooking the courtyard. If I had to talk, I would at least address myself to something I could see. It felt too ridiculous just staring blindly into space and hoping.

"I do want something from you," I said. "I — years ago, I lost something very valuable. I need it back."

"What might this thing be?" he asked disinterestedly. His voice sounded further away, as though he were already leaving.

I rested my cold-gloved fingers against my chest. "My heart," I said simply.

There was a sigh. "To whom? If it's unrequited love that ails you, queen, try smiling at him. With a face like yours it shouldn't be difficult to win who you want."

"You don't understand," I said. "I don't love anyone. *I have no heart.*"

Cold fingers pulled my chin suddenly sideways. I had the disorienting experience of staring into eyes I couldn't see. "What," said Forsythian, very quietly, "did you do?"

"I loved what I couldn't have," I said. "You think I am beautiful, sorcerer? Well, my father did too. Of all his jewels and possessions, he was proudest of me. When I was grown, he had me betrothed to a king with whom he had long desired allegiance. I didn't want to marry that man. Never mind why. Brides are good currency in this part of the world and the wedding was arranged regardless. What I wanted could never be mine. Knowing that, I resolved not to want anything. Don't judge me, sorcerer. I am not the first to make such a choice.

"There was a wizard within a day's ride of my father's castle — a necromancer, the courtiers used to call him. I went to him for help. Even he balked at what I asked, but as you say, I am persistent. I wore him down with pleading and promises. He agreed eventually. He took my heart from my chest, my broken bloody heart. He locked it away in a box within a box and hid it for me where no one else would ever find it.

"I was married the next day. The king took me like the trophy I was. We were married for five years before he died.

"You think I killed him, don't you? I didn't. Murder is a crime of passion and I had no passion left without my heart. He knew I didn't love him; he was afraid of me, I think. Most people are when they come to know me. His heart failed him in the end. Hearts do. It was only after he was gone I found that I was pregnant."

The snow had stopped. It was colder than ever.

"I do not love my child," I said, "and I should. I remember enough of who I used to be to know that. I need my heart back."

"Then ask your wizard."

"He died. People around me are prone to it."

"So when you say you have lost your heart," Forsythian said, "what you mean is ... you can't find it."

"I never thought I would need it again."

"You were wrong," said the sorcerer.

"Can you find it?" I asked. "I can pay you. I have gold, jewels—"

"I don't do things for gold," Forsythian said, as though the very idea of it offended him. "I do them because they are interesting enough to make the doing worth my while."

"Am I sufficiently interesting?"

He was silent for a long time. I had no way of knowing whether he was still there, but I remained, drawing on six months of patience. I had not waited so long to abandon my request now.

"You want to love your son," he said at last. "What if you can't?"

"With my heart—"

"Women with hearts that have never left their chests don't always love what's theirs. Perhaps you can't care about him now, but neither will you grow angry with him, or resentful. Hearts are dangerous. You knew that. What might you do with yours?" Forsythian's tone was cool, dispassionate. Heartless. "I could make you a new heart, I suppose. It is a thing I have done once before. But I can't say what that heart might make you desire once it was pressed into your chest. It might worship your son. It might loathe him. Which risk would you choose?"

I had not anticipated a choice. "I don't know."

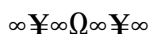
"Think on it," he said, and I knew that he was gone. The courtyard felt suddenly empty, when before it had been occupied. I stood stiffly, my legs numb from the cold, and went inside to find my son dandled in Alabast's arms, balanced on a pile of leather-bound tomes. The sorcerer's student looked up at my face with a crooked smile.

"You've met him, then," he guessed. "Could he tell you what you wanted?"

"No." I sat in the chair beside them and held my frozen hands to the fire. "Or if he could, he wouldn't."

"Don't fret," Alabast said, petting my shoulder awkwardly. It was the first time he had tried to touch me and the gesture was in itself a surprise — people were wary of me as a rule, though they didn't know why. "He knows you're here. He might change his mind."

"I think," I said, so softly he did not hear me, "he wants me to change mine."



It was Alabast who named my son.

Winter had unexpected effects — there were few fireplaces in the rambling fortress, so on cold nights everyone was likely to congregate where there was a good blaze. The night after my unsuccessful interview with the sorcerer, the motley assortment of his house guests assembled in the study Alabast had claimed as his own for an impromptu supper. The girl in jester's clothing appeared first, her hair a riot of red streaked darker here and there where it had been dampened with snow. She introduced herself as Cianda and folded her long limbs on the hearth, toasting pieces of cheese impaled on a silver letter opener. I left to feed and change the baby, and when I returned the stony matron was in a shadowy corner near the fireplace. She was so difficult to see that she might have been there all along and I would not have known. The boy arrived last, lugging a wicker basket of stale bread, which the jester girl toasted over the fire with the cheese.

No one was inclined to be talkative, but the atmosphere was quite convivial all the same. The boy perched on a low bookcase, cracking walnuts; Alabast read aloud a little poetry from his book of the moment and Cianda came to play with the baby, leaning her elbows against the back of my chair to dangle a beaded charm just out of his reach.

"What's his name?" she asked, without looking at me.

"I haven't named him yet," I said. It was an obvious thing to overlook, I suppose, but it hadn't seemed obvious before that moment. It was strange enough to draw even Alabast's attention from the spiky foreign script he had been reading.

"Are you waiting for a proper ceremony?" he enquired. "The bathing in wine and cedar water, the lighting of the nine candles? I didn't think anyone did that these days."

"I had not decided on a name."

Alabast nodded approvingly. "Ah, it's a serious business. I am a traditionalist, myself, I like the old names. What is your husband?"

"Dead," I said briefly, before realising what he meant. "His name was Joram, but I don't want my son named after him."

"Sage is a nice name," Cianda said, and flushed when I looked at her.

"Onyx," said the walnut-cracking boy from his eyrie. "His eyes are so dark."

"Calabry," suggested Alabast. "Farrant, perhaps. Or Torren."

"What does that mean?" I asked. "The last one."

"It means 'white bough'. No particular relevance there, I will admit."

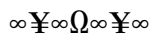
"I like it," I said. "That is all the meaning it needs to have."

Cianda lifted the baby from my arms. Kneeling beside the fire, she laid him down on the warm hearthstones. She took a discarded walnut shell and laid it hollow side up on his forehead, like a small boat, into which she dropped a crumb of bread and a corner of yellowed paper. We watched her without speaking, sensing ritual even though we didn't understand what it meant. Torren flailed irritably and Cianda took the walnut boat away, floating it in a shallow bowl of ink. Flames were reflected in the dark liquid, fleetingly bright. For a long moment Cianda kneeled, watching the reflections dance, then she sighed and rocked back on her heels.

"He's too young," she said, obscurely.

"A seer," Alabast whispered to me. "She sees the future in reflections."

This entire evening had felt dreamlike, unreal, with me playing along as a woman who celebrated her baby like she should. Watching Cianda, however, I was gripped with a sudden conviction. It was not alarm. I could not feel anything so strong. All I knew was that if I looked into that ink, I would see my reflection. My shadow over Torren's boat.



"You decided, then."

I had been looking for the sorcerer all day, prowling along galleries and stairways, always circling back to the courtyard where

I had heard his voice in the hope he might once again be there. He was not. By evening I had given up and returned inside to the empty study, rocking the fretful baby mechanically while I stared into the embers. At the sound of Forsythian's voice, I half turned before remembering it was no use and made myself look back at the fire.

"Yes," I said.

"He's quite pretty, your son." Something soft brushed across my cheek and Torren suddenly stopped crying, staring wide-eyed into space. He snatched at something I couldn't see and the sorcerer laughed softly. "I'd forgotten how peculiar babies are."

"I want to love him," I said quietly. "I try. And all I have is emptiness."

Forsythian sighed. "Very well," he said. "You'd best come with me, then."

I stood quickly, looking around for a clue. "How?" I demanded. "How can I follow you when I don't know where you are?" There was only silence. "Forsythian?" I called. "Are you there?"

In my haste I had unsettled the strata of books around my chair. They tumbled to the ground, sending papers floating through the air like ink-pattered snowflakes, and when one page drifted to the ground it landed on a foot that had not been there before. I looked up.

The sorcerer looked back at me.

I thought at first he wore a feathered cloak. Wizards often do, at least in stories. It was only when he moved, a restless shuffle of his feet, that I realised the fall of feathers down both sides of his body were in fact wings; great dark wings where his arms should have been. His hair was the same black, a wild crown of it that spiked and streaked across his tawny eyes. His chest was bare despite the cold, almost gaunt in its thinness, his legs encased in tattered grey and his feet bootless. He looked feral.

"You can stop staring now," he said.

"You were supposed to be old," I said. It sounded more critical than I had intended, as though he had failed a personal test.

"I am," he said, without inflection, and left the room without waiting to see if I was behind. His wings trailed their feathered tips

in the dust, but his bare feet left no prints. I gathered Torren more securely against my chest and followed.

I had spent two and a half seasons in this place, searching its many rooms and passages, but I had never before seen the door Forsythian opened. Had the stacks of books concealed it all this time, or had it simply not been there until the sorcerer wanted it to be? Inside was a short flight of steps into a large tower room, which overlooked the apple tree courtyard from an unlatched window on one side and the forest road on which I had arrived from the other. The arrangement should not have been architecturally possible and bothered me more than it should.

There was a fireplace here, left unlit. It seemed Forsythian did not feel the cold. A long, scarred artisan's workbench was positioned underneath the courtyard window, scattered with open books and unrolled maps, brightly coloured bottles and squat beeswax candles in small glass bowls. In the midst of it all was a large clay dish of ink.

"I will need blood," Forsythian said.

I nodded, laying Torren down on a nearby chair and crossed the feather-scattered floor to the bench. There was an ivory handled lady's hunting knife laid out beside the bowl of ink. "Where do I cut?" I asked practically.

Forsythian's eyebrows might have risen then, although it was difficult to tell beneath his crows-nest of hair. "I'll do it," he said, and raised a wing. Fingers emerged from the feathers like a hand pushed from a sleeve, but the grimace of pain on the sorcerer's face told me it was nowhere near as easy. He snatched the knife from my hand and slit a line at the base of my earlobe. His thin cold fingers thrust my head downward so that the welling blood dripped into the ink, and then it wasn't fingers holding me there, but the awkward pressure of a wing.

"Remember your heart," he whispered in my bleeding ear. "What did you love? What hurt so badly you couldn't bear its weight any longer?"

Logically enough, I started with small things. The tart sweetness of the first apples of the year. Blankets warmed by the fire in my

childhood bedroom, scented with sprigs of dried lavender to help me sleep. But small pleasures, I knew instinctively, would not be enough. I remembered my mother's face as she was lain out for her funeral, waxen pale and unapproachably beautiful, as though she had already metamorphosised into her own stone memorial. My first love, clear blue eyes and a teasing smile that would turn as quickly to a scowl or a kiss. It had been I who left him and he'd tried so hard to hide his tears. I remembered the face I had chosen instead, lit gold with lantern light in an autumn night. Seeing it wax pale the day my betrothal to the king was announced and we had looked at one another, desperate to forget, knowing I never would.

My reflection melted in the still ink, ripples of light drifting into a new shape. There was a lake, an island, a stone chest shrouded by five years of encroaching thorns.

The weight on my neck was withdrawn and I staggered stiffly backward.

"Is that where it is?" I asked. Torren was crying behind me. The sound was distracting. I put my thumb in his mouth to quiet him and he sucked the salt from my skin, small teeth biting fretfully. If the sound of his distress had not interfered with my thoughts, I wondered if I would have gone to him at all. It was hard to manage a conscience with only the phantom of remembered emotions to guide me.

Forsythian had his back to me, bending his head so low over the dish that when he looked up his hair dripped black as though his own colours were leaching away. There was ink on his lips and his eyes were half-closed, unfocused. I said his name and he looked at me as if he could not imagine who I was, or why I was there. It was as though he had gone somewhere else, become someone else. I knew I should be afraid then. I backed towards the door and was almost there when I remembered Torren, still swaddled on the chair only a few feet from the empty-eyed wizard, and I knew I should go back. I stopped where I stood in a moment's indecision.

And Forsythian blinked. He recognised me. The moment of danger passed.

"Come on, then," he said, flinging open the window.

I stared. "What do you mean?"

"The lake," he said. "Do you want to find the lake or not?"

"What has that to do with the window?"

In response, he spread his wings. His thin nose narrowed further, hooked, darkened to a wickedly sharp beak. The whites of his tawny eyes were swallowed by predatory yellow. Feathers sprouted from the bare skin of his chest, until I was not looking at a man any more, but a bird — a bird large enough to carry me on its back.

"My son," I began.

The bird tossed its head impatiently. A feather flew into the air and trailed downwards onto Torren's face, into his open mouth. He went instantly limp in my arms, the warm weight of deep sleep. The feather had disintegrated on his tongue like ash. It did not seem hygienic or responsible, and the duty I had built to replace my conscience warned me of the wrongness of what I was about to do. Babies should not be left untended. I should go to Alabast or Cianda, but there was no time.

I laid the sleeping baby between the broad arms of the chair and climbed onto the sorcerer's back.

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I thought I would die on that flight. Somehow, I survived it.

It was still dark when we reached the lake, the grey-edged dark of the hours before dawn. Forsythian alighted on the stone arch of a ruined pavilion, which trembled beneath his weight, and allowed me to climb down before transforming back into a man. For a moment I thought he would stumble off the arch and I spread my arms to catch him. It was not fear for him that motivated me, but the knowledge he was the only way I would ever leave this island. But he did not fall. Regaining his balance, he swung himself down into a crouch on the overgrown ground beneath, and gestured silently.

The stone chest was at the centre of the pavilion. It looked to me like the coffin of a person so unloved their grave had been entirely forgotten, left to the briars and snow.

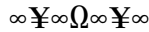
I looked to Forsythian for instruction. He simply nodded again towards the chest, his assistance apparently at an end. The cold still air sank quickly through my layers of wool and linen, snow and mud darkening the hem of my skirt as I crossed the pavilion. Having left my gloves behind in the hurry to depart, I wrapped my hand in the already soiled cloth to sweep the lid of the chest clear. Thorns bit through the pitiful protection, dripping blood a stark red against grey stone and white snow. I braced my hands against the icy lid and pushed with all my strength.

It slid backward, unresisting, and fell to the ground with an echoing crack of splitting stone. Inside the opened tomb was a box. I remembered very little of my visit to the necromancer, but the box I knew. Small and silver, encrusted with diamonds. It had been a wedding present, of all ironies, given what I had asked him to put inside. I had worn the key to its ornate lock on a ribbon around my neck for more than half a year, in hope. My fingers shook as they lifted it from beneath my bodice, letting the tiny silver key fall into my palm.

I knelt on the frozen ground, barely noticing the cold, and placed the box before me. After all that I had done to be here, I felt now like a puppet, going through the predestined motions of another's decision. The key turned in the lock. Bloodless fingers opened the box and reached inside.

I felt something as light and fragile as a captive bird between my hands. In the dim grey gloom of impending sunrise, it looked like a vast ruby and was almost as cold. I knew then something was wrong, terribly wrong. My hands tightened their hold instinctively. And the heart I held, poor broken thing, crumbled away to dust.

It was as if the puppet's strings had been cut. I fell. Crumpled sideways in the snow, I felt my blood turn stagnant, freezing in my veins. Something dark crossed my vision and I was lifted on soft black wings, my head lolling backwards to stare blankly into the burning sunrise, my mouth open, shaping words I couldn't say. The hollow in my heartless chest widened into a cavern and engulfed me completely.



Hearts are heavy. They ache and fracture. They fail.

They forget.

Meriel opened her eyes on a moth-eaten settee that was both familiar and unfamiliar, something she had seen in a dream. She wore a white linen chemise that was stained with dry mud; a green woollen dress lay draped over the blankets at her feet and it too was stained with mud, and blood. Her hands lay atop the covers on either side of her body, scratched and sore, but intact.

She watched the winter sunlight pattern the walls as though it might write out what it was she couldn't remember. Her chest ached, a slow throb like a bruise. Then she heard the crying and sat up quickly. In a nest of blankets in the chair beside her was a baby — *her* baby. Without thinking she threw back the covers and stepped out of bed to take Torren into her arms. He grabbed at her loose hair with tiny flailing fingers and Meriel laughed, dropping a kiss onto his downy dark head.

"You're going to drive me mad," she predicted.

Later she put on the green dress and gathered up the few things left scattered about the room that she recognised as her own. Wrapping Torren securely in a shawl, she left the strange, cluttered room in which she'd woken and went through the quiet corridors of the even stranger house. She could not quite remember how she had come to be here and it seemed the best thing she could do was leave. She thought once, as she passed through a canyon of unshelved books, that she saw a hem of black robe disappearing between the stacks, but when she reached the same point she could see no one there and no door through which they might have disappeared.

"Come on, Torren," she said. "Let's go home."

Only she took a wrong turning. The wrong set of steps, a mistake anyone could make. Instead of reaching the road outside, she found herself in a courtyard, where a bare-branched apple tree stretched bony fingers towards the pale winter sky and impossible red apples lay on the paving stones around its roots.

Meriel's heart leapt. She caught her breath and dropped to her knees, clutching Torren against her chest, reaching out to take an apple into her gloved hand.

"It was the best I could do."

She twisted around at the voice, familiar and not familiar, but knew even as she did that she wouldn't see him. "Forsythian," she whispered, remembering.

"Apples and blood," he said. "I've never made a heart so quickly before. I refuse to be held responsible if you find it loving all the wrong things." He paused for a long moment. "Though it seems someone has already found their place in it."

Meriel looked at Torren, small and red-faced and hers. "Yes," she said quietly. "Thank you, Forsythian."

"If you want to leave," he said, "it's the other stair you want."

He didn't say goodbye. Meriel stayed in the courtyard for a few minutes, waiting, then eventually went back inside and found her way to the right passage, where golden-spined suits of armour stared open-mouthed. She let herself out and stood on the top steps, looking at the road. It led away through the forest to towns and castles and people she had once used to love.

She lifted her foot to step down. Her chest contracted painfully.

She looked up and saw black trailing from a window. It might have been a sleeve, or a wing. It didn't matter. Cradling her sleeping son in her arms, Meriel turned around and stepped back through the open doors into the house, her home, where her heart was.

And when the soldiers later came in search of the queen and her son, all they could see where the sorcerer's fortress should have been was an apple tree and a laughing crow.

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ORACLE'S TOWER

FAITH MUDGE

It stands at the heart of the forest, a grey tower pointing towards the skies, a stone finger raised in warning. The vines that once grew around its walls are withered and dead. The only life that clings to this place are the ravens which swoop and caw around the solitary window at the top of the tower, their mourning cries carrying on the sighing wind. This tower is my prison. The prison of the Oracle.

Listen. There is little time left to me. Listen to my story.

I was a wanderer, in my youth, and I wandered far, across every map I could find and off the edges into strange seas and stranger lands, where everything that I had believed was real became unreal. As I wandered, I learned things not told of in any book or scroll. I learned the tongues of bird and beast, the way to charm restless waters, how to shape the world around me to my will. I learned the dance of fire and the voice of the trees. My form shifted like clouds blown across the sky, melding, changing, reforming. I was powerful — so powerful! — but not as powerful as I wished myself to be.

So I travelled on, to places where the name of my native shore had never even been heard. In a land where the sun shone all day and night and the people spoke with their hands, I heard a tale that excited my curiosity. The story told of an orchard at the end of the world where the fruit the trees bore had magical powers. Whoever ate of the red tree would be granted beauty incomparable. Whoever ate of the blue tree would be granted vision unknowable. And whoever ate of the white tree would be granted power over all who saw and heard them. I desired those fruits more than anything I had known before, and I resolved to find them.

It took me years of searching and all the knowledge I had accumulated in my long travels, but find them I did. The three trees

of legend grew in a place where one world met another, under the light of two suns and two moons, where the earth was split in two by a line of white fire. In that place, gazing through the crack between worlds, I looked into time itself. What marvels I saw! What wonders — what horrors. It was as if until that moment I had been blind and now I saw clearly. The future lay before me in all its terror and majesty, beyond my comprehension, beyond what I could even bear to witness. After my many years amassing knowledge, I saw how little I truly knew, and reeled from it, stunned, almost senseless.

My eyes, newly opened, fell on the trees themselves at this moment and I was filled with the deepest longing of my life. Theirs was a wonder to rival all others I had seen, a beauty that woke within me a desperate hunger the like of which cannot be described by any word in any tongue spoken upon the face of this world. But I was stronger now than my desires, and I took from those trees but one fruit each. Holding them safely in my arms, I left the orchard at the ends of the earth, determining that I would taste my bounty only when I set foot once more upon the soil of my birthland.

The voyage was long and hard. When at last I reached my native shores, I took the first of the fruits and cut them open, lifting the sweet dripping flesh to my lips to taste its juices. The scent alone was intoxicating. But before a single bite had touched my tongue, my sight cleared. I saw the future as surely as I saw the sky above me. Within these fruits lay power united, unlimited, unimaginable. To give in to that heady perfume, to taste those glistening juices, was to be corrupted. To use that power ... the world would fall.

Appalled, I cast down the fruit I held, my hunger turning to revulsion. I buried the three fruits deep beneath the earth where they could not tempt the unwary, then lay down to sleep, believing that the danger I had brought with me was now negated. But it was not so. When I woke in the morning, my horrified eyes fell upon three shoots rising from the ground where I had buried the fruits. Power is not easily thwarted.

Fury possessed me. I tore up the shoots! I crushed them with my feet and with my knife slashed them into a thousand pieces. But the more I cut them down, the sooner they returned and the faster they grew. From shoots they became saplings, and from saplings, strong

young trees. Despairing, I realised that my efforts to destroy them would come to nothing, so I built a high wall of stone around them and a cottage within those walls. There I stayed to guard the world from the horror I had unleashed.

Around my cottage I made a garden. In growing healing herbs I found renewed purpose, even contentment, in this life. I had spent so many years gathering knowledge like a miser hoarding gold; to share it was a new experience and to my surprise, a pleasurable one. A small hamlet existed close to the place I had made my home — in exchange for my plants and wisdom, they provided me with the goods I needed for living. But I never permitted anyone within my walls, and I never told a living soul of the fruits, for no one could be trusted; not even myself.

Just outside the hamlet, close to the forest, there lived a woodcutter and his wife. They were a handsome couple and arrogant in their youth, disdainfully patronising to the crotchety old woman they believed me to be. I knew that they longed for a baby and I offered my knowledge to the young wife, giving her herbs from my garden. In time she fell pregnant. I received no thanks from the delighted couple, who forgot my aid and advice the moment they discovered the happy news. I, likewise, forgot them. I should have known better.

One night I was woken by a sound from my garden. Taking my staff, I went to check my fruit trees, and discovered the woodcutter climbing down from their boughs, a filled basket in his arms. The trees bent and swayed to aid his progress; their treacherous wooden fingers had stretched to reach over the wall, beckoning, inviting the invader, whispering softly on a windless night.

My anger knew no bounds. The form I had worn for the years I had lived in this place fell from me and the woodcutter saw my true aspect. He fell to his knees.

“Have mercy upon me!” he begged. “My wife was passing your walls when the first fruit dropped at her feet. She could not resist it. The next day she came again, and the day after that, seeking more fruits — and they fell from the branches over the wall as if in answer to her prayers. But now she longs for more, it is all she speaks of day and night, and I cannot deny her!”

I tore the basket from him and forced him to return with me to the cottage where he lived. His wife stood waiting for him by the window. With one glance I could see that the fruits had had no effect on her at all. I could not understand it. Then she appeared in the doorway, and I saw the truth of it. The power of the fruit had been concentrated entirely on the baby she carried within her.

I did what must be done. I was powerful — I could be terrifying. The woodcutter and his wife must have believed me a demon or djinn, some terrible being casting a curse upon them. My voice was dark and deep and dreadful as I told them I would spare their lives only if they paid for the fruit in full. They promised anything, anything at all. I told them I would take my prize in a se'nnight's time. Then I returned to my garden, to deal with the damage.

For all I knew of their danger, I realised the fruits had still enchanted me. True, the trees were powerful, but I had despaired of their destruction too easily. Now I bent my full powers to the task. A fire the like of which had never been seen before roared through my garden that night, hot enough to turn the stone walls to glass, razing every living thing within to ashes and burning those very ashes to dust. When the task was done I was wearied beyond belief, but the trees were gone. With what little strength I had remaining, I shifted my shape to that of a raven and perched on the roof of the woodcutter's house to rest and keep watch.

Seven days passed. On the seventh night the woman went into labour, and gave birth to a baby girl. The child came into the world not crying or screaming, but smiling, and she was as beautiful as the song of an angel. Her head was already covered in a soft golden down and her eyes were wide, wide blue. Her parents were smitten. And I, watching from the roof, glimpsed the future.

Swooping down, I took the form of an old woman once more and strode into the house. The mother shrank back from me, clutching her baby; the father moved to stand protective in front of them. They guessed at once what the price of the fruits would be, what I intended to claim. The woodcutter attempted to fight me — I threw him to the ground. The woman tried to run from me — I stilled her with a flick of my hand. Then I took the baby from her frozen arms. It looked up at me calmly and patiently, with a deep knowing that

belonged to no true child, and I was filled with dread. There was no doubt in my mind. The baby must die.

Wings of feather and flesh unfurled from my back, breaking through the skin and flaring wide to meet wall and ceiling. I flew that night across the stars until I came to a lake, deep and still in the heart of an enormous forest, and over it I held the sleeping newborn child. But just as I loosened my grip, preparing to drop my bundle into the dark waters, its eyes opened and it began to wail, a high lost miserable wail.

Where is my mother, that sound seemed to cry. Where is my warm bed and sweet milk? What is this dark, miserable place and who, who are you?

The face that had been porcelain smooth was now screwed up and red with crying. The hair was tufty and sticky with sweat. Looking at the child I held, I saw only a small baby girl far from her home and parents, and I found that I could not harm her. Surely the effects of the fruit could not justify the slaughter of an innocent baby?

Instead, I sang to the bedrock of the lake and wrought from it a high, thin tower of stone. Into the tower I flew with the baby in my arms, and fashioned inside it a room where we could live. Then I changed her wrappings, fed her lakewater transformed into milk, and rocked her to sleep in my arms.

Perhaps, I thought, this girl's future may be changed. With my wisdom and power, perhaps I can give her a different path.

The tower had no doors or stairs and only a single window at the top. I summoned vines to grow over the stone walls, bearing grapes and pears and plums for us to eat, but I whispered thorns onto their smooth sides so they could not offer an escape when the child was old enough to think of it. And here, in utter isolation, I raised the baby I had stolen. I named her Rezuel.

She was beautiful. I must and will say it. She was lovelier than anything and anyone I had seen in all my long years of travelling. Her hair was a richer gold than the dying sun in all its glory, and softer than the finest silk. Her eyes could have been little circles cut from the sky, bluer than blue, and her voice ... her voice brought every kind of bird from the forest to our window when she sang, to wonder at her.

From leaves and water I wrought garments for her; from stones, pretty jewellery; from twigs, a comb for her hair, and I loved to look at her. She, in her turn, was a delightful baby and a yet more delightful child. Whatever I asked of her, she hurried to comply. I was filled with hope. Each night as I combed out her long hair — already the length of her ankles and growing every day — I was sure that I had done right. No dark phantasmic visions could justify the taking of such a beautiful life.

Rezuel could not leave the tower. She often begged me to take her with me when I left, in winged form, through the window, but I always refused. My fears were quite different now to what they had been. The world could be in no danger from the little girl, but in her unthinking innocence she could be in terrible danger from the world. Savage beasts; poisonous plants; the deep lake that had already almost claimed her. In the tower she was safe.

One day, when she was nine years old, I had flown out to pick for her the wild berries she had asked for the previous night. It was midday when I returned. She was waiting for me at the window, her arms spread wide, as though to embrace me as I entered. But as I flew into the room, my wings were caught and my body tangled inside the gleaming fibres of a golden net.

“Now you are the one who is caught,” Rezuel cooed over my prone form, bending her lovely face close to the net. Its knots around me were nothing compared to the pain of my disillusioned heart as I saw my beautiful ward for what she was for the first time since I had brought her to the lake. The dark future I had seen at her birth was no phantasm; I had not changed her path.

I shifted my form to a beast with many spikes, cutting through the net of golden hair, then took my own shape and stood. Rezuel backed away from me, explanations tumbling from her lips — it had been a game, she promised me, and had I waited she would have set me free. How could she harm me, her dearest protector, who had loved and watched over her all these years? I longed to believe her sweet, innocent words, but the enchantment she had held over my senses all these years was broken. What she had intended to do with me, I was unsure — I could no longer tell what dwelt in her mind. Of course her first demand would have been for her freedom, but I

knew there was no limitation on what else she might desire to have, or be, or do.

So I closed my ears to her weeping and flew from the tower to decide what had best be done.

She should have died on the night of her birth, had I not weakened at the last moment — but it was too late for such self-flagellation. Could I kill her now? I, who had been mother and father and sole friend to her from infancy? I knew I could not. A prisoner she must remain all her life, and I must be her guard. I summoned a flock of ravens to roost upon the tower so even when I was absent Reziel would be watched. And I waited for the years to pass and set us both free with the gift of death. When the time came, my sorcery would die with me. The tower would crack and the lake would claim Reziel as it should have done long ago.

Even knowing what she was, I could not stay away from her entirely, though I no longer dared to fly through the window for fear of another trap. Instead, I would sail a boat across the lake to the foot of the tower and call to her. If she wished to see me, she would wrap her hair around a hook by the window and release her long braid down the side of the tower. It was now long enough and thick enough for me to climb — a rope strong enough to support me, but which she could never use herself, for I had left no knife or scissors within the room for her to use against me. Her charms were danger enough. She would sit with me and talk, sometimes laughing and playful, other times solemn and sad, but always asking the same question.

Will you take me down? Will you let me come with you, and live with you, outside of this tower?

It cost me sorely to refuse her, but refuse her I did, and in climbing down again I would tell myself that this was the last time I would visit the tower, the last time I would be tempted by Reziel's voice. But my resolve would not last. Her singing would carry across the lake and my heart, my stupid stubborn heart, would melt like ice beneath the sun.

For seven years, this pattern held, until the day I heard her screaming.

I was in the boat and across the lake before I knew what I was

doing. Her long braid was waiting for me; I climbed it. As my fingers reached the sill, Rezuel's screams stopped, and I saw three things very clearly.

One, the body of one of my watch-ravens lying in the corner, its neck snapped.

Two, the braid that had been severed with the raven's sharp beak, tied to its hook.

The third — Rezuel standing at the window, her hair shorn roughly at the neck but still as lovely as ever, her smiling face tilted down to me and her hands reaching out towards my face.

They were full of thorns.

She put out my eyes. Blinded, I was helpless, and she dragged my aged, weakened body into the tower. Then she climbed down the braided rope dangling from the window, down to my boat, and once at the foot of the tower she set fire to the braid so that I could not follow her. By the time I hobbled to the window and called to my ravens, she was beyond their reach, and beyond mine.

I tried to fly, to follow her, but the forms I took were as old and decrepit and blind as my own true shape. In the years Rezuel had been growing tall and strong, I had faded to a shadow of my old power, never realising that it was happening — but she had. She was beautiful, and she was ingenious, and she was powerful.

And there was no one on this earth now who could stop her.

I stood at the window and through my ruined eyes saw the future once more. I saw Rezuel's lovely hair blowing in the wind and a horseman reining in wonder as he glimpsed her from afar. I saw her ride with him to the King's city and abandon him there with a shattered heart. I saw her ascend the steps of the palace and walk unhindered into the King's hall, enchanting his guards to powerlessness with a single smile from her flawless lips. The king would be instantly smitten, lost the moment he met her eyes. I saw him strangle his own wife on Rezuel's command — I saw the wedding held in his hall, the day Rezuel became his queen. The people of his kingdom would fall to their knees in worship of her beauty. They would vow to live for her, to die for her, to fight for her to the last man and the last breath...

And how those vows would be fulfilled.

Tears mingled with the blood streaming down my face, but there was no release from the visions of a future I had brought about by my own delusion. I saw Rezuél wage her war, reaching out her delicate hand to take whatever she so chose, no matter the cost. I saw whole armies fall to her while she stood apart, untouched by the blood spilled in her name. I saw her rule her world.

And I saw the arrow that could end it all. A single arrow, carved from the wood of three fruit trees at the end of the world, with the strength to fell power itself.

I saw it pierce her heart.

The hand that draws the bow is not my own; I must wait for the one who will hear me and learn the secret even Rezuél does not know, the secret of her death. It is a desperate chance, but I cling to it. I will die here, captive in the prison I made, alone in the heart of the forest, surrounded by my ravens. They alone have heard my final prophecy. They cry it to the keening wind — my warning, my story, the last words of the Oracle.

Listen. Listen to them.

There is hope.

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