

Home was the one place that Aideen Murphy wanted to avoid. It wasn't just her parents, though hearing her father's smug proclamations and her mother's condescending platitudes caused Aideen to, once again, weigh the pros and cons of being a beggar in some unfamiliar city. No, those were lifelong afflictions which she had long since learned to ignore and pack away for her future therapist to deal with. It wasn't even the wound to her pride such a return caused.

Aideen Murphy didn't want to go home because once she was there, she would be forbidden from practicing necromancy unless she was wanted to find herself spit-roasted in the literal, unsexy sense of the term. But Aideen's wants were meaningless in the face of unemployment. As it turned out, unless you were rich, lucky, or some sort of genius, getting a job straight out of university was unlikely. Firms, the pinnacle of professional necromancy, were competitive, and while there was always a place among the mycelium of the Market, Aideen wasn't ready to give up on her beliefs just yet. That left gig work, research, or the undignified life of the local witch or warlock of some nameless town or impoverished corner in a city.

None of these meshed well with Aideen's sense of self or the narrative arc she'd planned for herself. So, a gap year became the solution. A little time at home to sort out her head was sure to produce a solution, or at least cure her of dreams of grander.

The arc of lightning cut through the night sky, searing a hole in its path. The smell of ozone perfumed the air and the tiny people of Meloria looked up to see the aching red scar up above. At the edges of this cauterized wound were jagged teeth, and a scarlet tongue flicked out from the opening. The people were enchanted at the sight of it, though the dread it inspired in them was deep and primal. They could not move; their bodies had been disconnected from their minds at the sight of it.

In the morning, they would forget about what they had seen, a new memory would plaster over the sight before them, the vision of a goddess, dark as the night, draped in the prismatic, swirling colors of Mercury. Her face, on this first night in Meloria, would be a kaleidoscopic dream, unfixed and changing on a whim. The few that were brave enough to approach this visitor from on high would be greeted with a kiss, a paltry payment for their minds, memories, and bodies.

Those few fools would not be remembered, but the goddess, who took the name Aoibheann, would be firmly fixed in the minds of the villagers. She would root deep into the community, a frightful and invasive species impossible to prune or uproot.

The carriage, the latest in steam powered technology, grinded and galloped its way into Meloria. The once cool metal of the horse welded and bolted together, glowed cherry red and steam streamed from its nostrils with a nauseating stench. Once it stopped, Aideen deemed a regular horse, of flesh and blood, a better rate. For all that people talked about less smell and less upkeep, Aideen was unsure that the innovations had made good on its claims. Twice they had to stop so that the steam engine in the horse could cool down, a process which took a handful of hours both times, so that now it was already well into Twilight in Aideen's middling town at the edge of Perido's jurisdiction. As for the smell, it was no better or worse than horse shit, only different and, in the end, the grinding gears and the bubbling, boiling belches within the steam horses' belly were concussive and had left Aideen with a thudding headache.

In some twisted way, Aideen was glad for the inefficiency of the steam horse, at least as it related to its loudness. Meloria was nothing special, most of the houses were wooden and historic, standing for hundreds of years against rain and the indifference of the different ownership of the area. The boards and stones had long been replaced, but the feeling remained, the flecks of blood and spit, the old bones, they sung their small songs in each crease and corner of the homes. The roads were laid with uneven bricks, the stone stairways that took one low gulleys of Meloria, where the cold and damp ruled, to the upper levels of

fecund moss and mushrooms and stumbling feet, were cut without skill. Some jutted forth, giving the town an overbite, and others were spaced improperly, giving it a gangly adolescence that it had never grown out of. But none of this prevented the residents from being a rowdy bunch. They drank and held festivals year-round, something that never made much sense to Aideen. Necromancers were cursed for their black arts, yet there was a never-ending procession of lesser deities and small saints to give thanks to.

To come at twilight, a time that was meant for quiet reflection, the hearth and home, and storytelling, was not the best time to come to Meloria if one had drums beating inside their head.

Still, there was Aideen's mother, the sight of whom caused her to wince reflexively. A portly woman in hand-me-down dresses (even her best clothes were thrifted on rare weekends she took a carriage into the city proper), Shelby Murphy was a woman without much in the way of subtlety. She drank to excess and oversold every story she told. These might be overlooked or written off as the qualities of a "bold woman" if not for a persnickety curse that had afflicted Shelby ever since she was a toddler.

In the way that some people are, for all the warmth and kindness that lie buried in Shelby's considerable bosom, she had been a clumsy child. Even now, she stomped and stamped about, and her shows of affection were crushing in an unfortunately literal sense. When a young Shelby had come across a fallen hatchling, she did the only decent thing she knew to do and scooped it up in her hands to take to her mom. This would have been all well and good, except that, afraid of losing the baby bird, Shelby had squeezed too tightly and asphyxiated the poor creature. Poor unlucky Shelby soon found herself the gossip of blue jays and robins alike, crows and blackbirds and ravens cawed her crime until they reached the ear of some sympathetic fairy. It wasn't long after that the curse was laid, an ancient piece of magic unbound by theory and law that made Shelby sound like a strangled bird. Indeed, Shelby was often mocked and called big bird by her peers, though she made sure to put a stop to that with her twin blunt instruments; her tongue and her fists.

Aideen cringed in anticipation, ready for the shrill sounds of her mother's voice, the scrapped, dragged, mangled wreck of her name on Shelby's lips, to cause a new bloom of pain behind her eyes. Aideen was so ready for this that she almost didn't hear the lyrical lilt her mother added to Aideen's name. There was a magic to her mother's voice that Aideen had never heard before, so lovely and loving, like a valve had turned and the pressure of all that tenderness could finally be released.

"Mom?" said Aideen, "What's happened to your voice?"

When Aideen said this her eyes went instinctively to her mother's throat. Her brow furrowed and her mouth turned and twisted, writhing in curiosity.

Shelby beamed, her face alight with the joy of the following answer, "Oh, Aideen, the curse was lifted. This is the voice I was born with, isn't it fantastic?"

As Shelby spoke, Aideen saw the subtle stitching of a spell. Her eyes, trained to spot the workings of magic, saw the art like a tapestry. There was a language to the knots, the weaving and stitching of a spell that Aideen could read. It was different for every necromancer, but this was the way Aideen saw it, the way her mind made sense of the ephemeral.

"Who did this?" asked Aideen, drawing closer to inspect her mother's throat, to watch as it quivered with a nervous swallow.

"It must be your time in that school that lets you see it," said Shelby, "everyone thought I had served my punishment, at first. But I kept saying, the fairies don't work like that. It was our local witch, Aoibheann, that broke the curse."

Aideen's mind was pulled in two directions at the same time which had the effect of turning her headache into a blinding pain that pulsed behind her eyes and left stars in its wake. She could not suppress the wince nor stop her hand from shooting up to cover her right eye, where the greater concentration of the pain lived.

“Oh, dear doe,” said Shelby, quick to wrap her arms around Aideen’s shoulders and press her into her body. “Let’s get you home. The fumes always make me sick too. I’ll get you a cup of coffee and some meat pies.”

There was no arguing with Shelby Murphy when it came to coffee and meat pies, so Aideen leaned into her mother and let her lead her home while her stomach churned with the nausea of conflicting emotions.

A week before Aideen returned home, while she was alternating between paralyzing depression, tears of frustration, and a strange manic anger over the lack of post-graduate job offers, Aoibheann was hard at work stitching herself into the history of Meloria. Towns like this had long been the being now known as Aoibheann’s favorite hunting grounds. Small and isolated with their close-knit faith. Sure, there may be some larger laws that bind a place like Meloria to some denser place and thereby place it under the purview of a greater deity. But what’s put to paper and what’s put to practice are incongruous and that meant that Aoibheann was free to stitch a little image of herself, to requisition a corner for her own design.

The first stage was the easiest and the messiest. The mind of a human was a complicated thing. Aoibheann had no technical knowledge of the thing, she could not pinpoint the different sections of the brain and define their roles, not even in a broad sense. It was only through her years of experience preying on this most delicious of creatures, that Aoibheann came to understand that people could hold contradictory pieces of evidence in their minds at the same time. This, Aoibheann reasoned, was the same mechanism of thought that allowed for humans to believe in and power their Gods, despite the lack of material improvement these beliefs and customs got them. So, despite Aoibheann’s skill, preparation, and experience, there were always a few people that had to be disposed of early on and that meant pulling them from the tapestry somehow.

Meloria had, thus far, been a particular challenge. The beliefs that the people here had had metastasized into something harsh and reactionary. Magic and all its associates were treated with a particular distrust. Finding the core of that, the first stitch that comprised the history of Meloria, was not particularly easy. In Aoibheann’s experience the twisted knots of hate and distrust were not the work of an amateur. The patterns were ugly, tangled, and nonsensical, but that did not mean it did not require a deft hand to guide toward it.

Aoibheann had not been able to totally undo the knot, but she did not particularly wish to either. It would be easier to exist as “one of the good ones” in a place like Meloria. Rewriting more than that and, for all intents and purposes, you had a new town. Aoibheann had no particular problem with this as such, but there were other things, beings who took great offense when certain fabrics were altered too much. Aoibheann had no wish to start a fight when, at the end of the day, she was killing time (as much as one beyond such constructs as time, space, dimension, and so on can, in the proverbial sense, kill it).

When Aoibheann had finished stitching herself into the history of Meloria, a knock came at her door. The first of what she hoped would be many customers. It was an elderly woman whose eyes were the color of buttermilk. Aoibheann mouth quivered. She had not known the desperation of her hunger until now.

“Agatha Miller, welcome. Come, take a seat, and tell me what ails you,” Aoibheann said, gesturing toward the chaise lounge at the corner of the room, tucked between dusty old tomes and dusty brass pots with twigs and feathers jutting out of them. Agatha had to duck around the bundles of herbs hanging from low rafters threaded through with cobwebs.

“Well, I’ll have you know. My husband, he can’t do a damned thing in bed anymore,” said Agatha.

Aoibheann stifled a giggle. She was under no illusion that the elderly did not fuck, but it never ceased, even for a being like Aoibheann, to shock the sensibilities to hear such proclamations spoken aloud.

“This is a tragedy,” said the being from behind the stars.

“You’re telling me,” said Agatha, eyes bulging and watering, voice quivering ever so slightly. “My husband before Flan, he was always wanting to sow the fields, but he spilled his seed quick and clumsy. I always hated sleeping with that man. For the longest time, I would curse the gods that all the pleasure in the bedroom belonged to men.”

“A tale all too common, I’m afraid,” said Aoibheann. She barely paid attention to the stories that Agatha was losing herself in now. She didn’t need the details of her first tumbles with Flan, a man she met in the thirtieth year of her last marriage. A man who, by all accounts, was a lout and philanderer with quick, clever hands, an artist’s eye, and sharp wit. He was a perfect match for a disgruntled, dissatisfied Agatha. He opened her up, gently, uncurling the edge of repression, picking at the corners and then, with terrible hunger, tearing it to bits while she egged him and edged him forward.

They were not discreet in their affair, but neither person’s partner had the power to stop them. Flan’s previous wife had long given up on a happy or functional marriage, and simply waited for him to leave or for one of them to die. It was a relief to her when she, at the age of sixty, was wooed by a lovely woman twenty years her junior. They retreated to the city together and were never heard from again. Aoibheann hoped that they were still alive and still as enthralled with one another as they had been then.

Agatha’s husband was not so lucky. He was not a terrible man, but nor was he exceptional. He was average in every way, and he died an average death, his heart giving out in the night. He went peacefully from this world, a little sad that the woman next to him, who had birthed and mothered their three children had never, in all their time together, developed fondness enough for him to be loyal.

This latter fact would provide the perfect meal for Aoibheann. There were plenty of parts of a life to nibble on, and the longer one lived, the more storied, the more triumphs and regrets, the more rapturous the meal. It wasn’t the guilt itself that Aoibheann wanted, such emotions had an acrid taste, like vegetables burnt to ash. No, it was the wall around those feelings that she wanted, the layers upon layers of justification, of pretending. That sweet, sticky, succulent taste of falsity was the deepest flavor that humans had to offer.

Aoibheann plucked a few herbs from the wire hanging above Agatha’s head. She found a dusty old mortar and pestle and placed the herbs within. She ground them with rock salt and oil and a splash of purple liquid that smelled earthy and sweet (a concoction that combined beet juice, leeches out with long soaking, and a concentrate of mushroom powder dissolved and mixed in) that never failed to satisfy the narrative about what provincial witchcraft looked like. As she bottled the foul potion, Aoibheann infused a bit of magic into it. Somewhere, out of sight, deep down where no one could hear, a voice cried out as an arm withered, constricting, turning wrinkled, black, and useless.

One had to keep stock, for the lean times, after all.

“This ought to take care of your husband for you,” said Aoibheann, “restore a little of that old vitality you’ve been missing.”

“Thank you,” said Agatha. She took the potion and, hands wrapped around the fragile, dusty glass, her expression changed. A storm cloud passed over threatening rain and thunder. Agatha attempted to smile, but it was a polluted thing.

The old woman fumbled in cloth bag at her side. She produced a few tarnished coins and gave them to Aoibheann, who took them with gratitude.

“You really should charge more, you know,” said Agatha.

“I charge what people can afford, Agatha. What you pay is plenty for me,” said Aoibheann.

“Bah. You deserve more for all the good you do. But thank you.” Agath looked as though she wanted to say more. Another shift in features, another spell of discomfort that wreaked havoc on Agatha’s old heart. But whatever extra guilt might be playing across her face, a shadow of whatever killer stalks her inside her mind, it is too late to escape or change. Or so Agatha believed as she left, feeling nauseous with her potion clutched close, a prophylactic for the misery she was all too aware she’d caused.

Aoibheann, satisfied, waited for the next customer of the day.

Aideen’s home skirted the edges of her little village. It was a squat, earthy home, made from the various gifts of the earth and the refuse of the other villagers. Growing up, a wild and wondering child that she’d been, it was a place of both pride and power. She remembered, looking at the house, unchanged over the years, making the creeping vines bloom strange flowers at the cost of mother’s marigolds. The night sky had been so vast, so clear (something that, due to the encroaching industrialization existed only in memory now) that when she ran through dew drenched fields, into the shadow thick thickets and umber stitched shrubbery, she could still see so clearly that torch and witch light alike were unnecessary.

Closing her eyes as she walked the cobblestone path, craggy, uneven, treacherous, Aideen could feel the death pulse of her childhood pets. The freshest and most perverted, little dot sent a pang of sorrow and regret shooting through her heart. Aideen had never gotten over that first fumbling failure.

“Your father is very excited to see you,” said Shelby.

Aideen doubted this. In all the years she lived under that roof, on her ever-scanter holiday visits, her father, Jack Murphy, had never seemed excited to see his daughter. Jack was a proper materialist. He believed only in what he could touch with his hands, bemoaned the effete labor of necromancy and the arcane in general. He might not have towed the line with the rest of his compatriots, believing in the rumors about necromancers and cursing them for their foul arts, but his disrespect was more impactful for its consideration and its difference.

“You know, he asks after you all the time.”

“Yeah? To see if I’ve failed yet? Or come to my senses about all the ‘nonsense’ I’m involved in?” Aideen said, her words dipped in years of resentment and seasoned with the impossible to ignore realization that, while she’d graduated, she had failed at achieving the one thing that might have proved her father and mother wrong.

“Aideen, that’s unfair. Jack just wants what’s best for you,” said Shelby. She was opening the door now. They had been standing there for a few minutes. Shelby knew her daughter, knew the well of enmity ran deep and that it was best to get the overflow out of the way now. More than anything, Shelby wanted to return to the halcyon days of Aideen’s youth. When the green-eyed girl would stare wide at her parents with love unblemished by failed imprinting’s, harsh words, and unjust accusations. Whatever time Shelby had, time she was acutely aware was trickling away like sand in an hourglass, she wanted to spend with her family in a state resembling the bygone past.

“If you say so, mom,” said Aideen, giving up the way a teenager might, one foot in a door better left close, ready to fling it open and start rummaging through things meant to be packed away to gather dust.

“I do say so. Now come on. I’m sure your dad is wondering why we are standing out here, just chatting away the daylight.”

Inside, Aideen was struck by the tension between the unrelenting sameness of everything and the catastrophic difference her years at university had made. Yes, here was the unmoving mess of letters her mother received from old friends who had moved. One could pluck a letter from there and find it dated from anytime ranging from last week to four or five years ago. There was the aged oak table, still ringing by cups not placed on coasters, dotted black by hot pots and pans that were too hot. The spice rack, too (if one could be so generous to call a rack containing salt, room temperature butter, dried herbs, and dust a “spice rack,”) maintained its state of disuse.

The walls were the first to draw Aideen’s attention. They had been baby blue her whole life and now, suddenly, shockingly, there were marigold orange. Further, these same walls, which had never been burdened with framed photos, artworks, or anything else that might show the personality of the house's inhabitants, were decorated, almost cluttered. It wasn’t anything scandalous or radical, simple thrift-shop prints of idyllic life and mom-core ceramics.

Even old Jack Murphy had carved out a bit of the house for himself. Woodcarvings, handwrought (as evidenced by the calloused claws Aideen’s father sported in place of human hands) dotted the corners of the home. They were skillful renditions of bears and boars, birds in flight and, touchingly, a family that was painted (the only painted item among the carvings) drive the point home harder that this was how Jack saw his family. Indeed, even Aideen, for all her resentment, could not help but soften at the sight. The cheeks of her mother and her were carved with such tender care. It was a testament to Jack’s skill and the depths of his love that he had made soft and supple something as hard and coarse as wood.

“Hey there, bumble bee,” said Jack. He glanced up with one emerald eye, his wrinkled brow edging down and that damned smile that Aideen’s mother claimed won her over, plastered on his face. He was fiddling with a bit of wood, carving it into an abstract shape, curving his knife down toward his thumb with the precise amount of force to shape the piece without biting into his own flesh.

“Hiya, dad,” said Aideen.

Truth be told. Aideen wanted to like her dad. The part of her that remembered thinking of him as a superhero was unable to let go of that vision. When she went running into the surrounding fields and forests to chase and be chased by the fair folk (for they did love to play games with children. The fact that Aideen indulged in this play and that Jack Murphy never seemed to be concerned, despite his wife’s affliction, had been an ongoing argument between the two her entire childhood) it was her dad that escorted her home. Up on one shoulder, dirt and blood warring over the limited space that comprised her face and knees and palms and elbows, and torn clothes, they would go. She would regal him with the talk of the forest, the games she had played, and the tricks she had played.

Later, as she came into her adolescence, Aideen’s father would realize that the tallest of his daughter's tales were less exaggerated than he had assumed. The ensuing guilt that followed as Aideen’s interest in and talent for necromancy became clear had been the hammer that drove the wedge between them. Both were aware of that, as well as the absurdity of it.

Being aware did little to pry the wedge free and repair the split, however.

“Are you glad to be all finished up with school?” asked Jack, trying for a neutral question.

“I don’t know that I’ve had time for it to sink in yet. I keep thinking, oh god, I need to study for this. I need to practice that; I have an exam or a practical coming up!” replied Aideen.

“Yeah, that’ll happen. When I retired—” Jack began as Shelby cut in, “You didn’t retire. You work for yourself.”

“Well, it is the same idea, isn’t it?” said Jack.

“Hardly. You stepped back, but it isn’t like you’re not still involved in your business. Other people do all the hard work now, is all.”

“Running a business is hard work, I’ll have you know,” rebutted Jack.

“Oh, I can tell by looking at you,” said Aideen, “you look dog tired, and I think I even see a few new grey hairs coming in as we speak.”

Shelby snorted with laughter at that, and Jack gave a wry smile, his signature when he didn’t have anything to respond with. For a moment, Shelby and Aideen shared in the same dream; that things could be simple, easy, and warm here in this house.

“All I’m asking,” said Jack, a blunted edge to his words, “is what your plans are now that you’ve graduated. You didn’t get in a firm like you thought, whatever. But you need a plan, Aideen.”

“Yes, I know, dad. What I’m saying is that I don’t want to fucking talk about that at dinner, now do I? Are you daft, deaf, or dumb?” Aideen snarled. Next to her, Shelby held her head in her hands, overwhelmed by the too familiar scene.

It had begun with what Jack saw as a simple question. Namely, what firm had scooped up his daughter. He meant it in all sincerity, Shelby knew. For the last few days, he had done nothing but talk about her, daydreaming about his daughter’s name and the order it would appear in above her own necromantic firm. Jack Murphy’s objections to the profession of necromancy did not trump the pride he felt when he thought of his daughter.

How could he have known that Aideen hadn’t succeeded in even securing an internship? Shelby supposed that she could have told him, might have prepared her husband, couched him on what topics to avoid. Hindsight was the universal curse of the human condition insofar as Shelby was concerned.

“Jack, look, let it go, please?” said Shelby, head still in her hands.

“I don’t see why I have to let anything go,” said Jack, not sparing his wife a glance. “I’m just trying to make sure our daughter can take care of herself. She’s an adult now, the world isn’t so kind when you’re an adult, your mistakes are etched in.”

Aideen did see her mother, deflated, and defeated. It broke her heart and took the fire from her belly.

“My plan, if you must know,” said Aideen, each word coming out like chewed up gristle, “is to reach out to local witches and independent necromancers. Get some experience while I try and get my foot in the door at a firm. I wanted to start that after having a chill visit with you both, but I can see that that was unrealistic of me.”

At the exact moment that Jack was planning to open his mouth and lay into Aideen for her “bad attitude,” Shelby was struck with sudden inspiration. It hit her like a boulder, rolling down a hill and gaining momentum so that when she spoke her enthusiasm was enough to flatten any potential objections.

“Oh, oh, OH!” she shouted, waving her hands, “If those are your true and pure intentions, darling, then why don’t I introduce you to our own local witch? She’s fantastic, as you can tell from her work on me.”

Aideen was brought up short at this suggestion from her mother. Competing ideas and impulses duked it out in Aideen’s head, reviving the corpse of her headache into a decayed, bitter migraine. The first thing Aideen thought was that this would be good for her. She didn’t expect, especially with her mom escorting her into the witch’s hut, that she would land the job. But a bit of practice at selling herself now that she was on the market wouldn’t hurt. The second was that she had exactly no memory of this witch, no mention in any of the correspondence she’d had with her parents over the years. Aideen couldn’t recall hearing or seeing anything about this witch on her visits home either. All logic, then, bent toward this

person being a new fixture in Meloria and yet there was something that didn't sit right with Aideen about this line of thought.

"Mom, did you say when this witch set up shop here?" asked Aideen.

The silence around the table was a terrible thing. Fragile as spun sugar. Jack and Shelby looked at Aideen for somewhere between a minute and an eternity.

"Bumble bee," said Shelby, so gentle, like she was trying not to startle a hare, "she's always been here."



Aoibheann couldn't say that she was expecting this. Before her, standing resolute in her home, unimpressed by the decorations, the symbols made to convey her role in the community, was Shelby Black's daughter, the mother in tow. Aoibheann remembered Shelby, she had been the most interesting case that the people of Meloria had offered up so far. A delicious cruelty had been done to the woman, an intricate curse that had taken some time to disassemble. The stitch work had been expertly crafted, the sort of thing that no ordinary witch or even seasoned necromancer could easily remove without some sort of metaphysical scar. Frankly, it was enough of a challenge for Aoibheann that it almost satisfied her needs. As such, all she did was pluck fond memories of her child, nothing that would raise any eyebrows, first babbled words, crawling, first steps. Little thorns that would dig in a bit but would never draw any blood.

In its own way it made sense that someone with so interesting a case would bring in a fascinating individual. While Aideen looked at Aoibheann, looked around at her room, she did not examine the dried herbs, the dusty furniture, the simmering black pots. She sniffed the air, but rather than be put off or overwhelmed by the earthy, mildew thick stench that comingled with pungent mint and eucalyptus, she absorbed details with a calculated neutrality. Aoibheann could track it, the minute movements that Aideen made, her eyes lingering, narrowing, the slight parting of beautiful, plump lips. The way her throat moved at a swallow or mumbled word.

Yes. There were two points of interest for Aoibheann when she looked upon Aideen Murphy. The first was the threat she posed as a clearly educated necromancer. The second was the beauty she possessed. Of these two points of interest, the latter was the most dangerous in Aoibheann's mind. She could lose herself in the forest of Aideen's eyes and her mind tipped toward the lascivious when she traced the figure of the young woman before her.

"My daughter is a recent graduate of a very prestigious necromancy university," began Shelby, or so Aoibheann assumed. Truth be told, there was a wind-up that she had entirely missed, fascinated as she was by the eagle-eyed creature.

"Mother," Aideen interrupted, "there is only *one* university one graduates from in the world of necromancy. Please, let me introduce myself." This was all said with impressive finality. Shelby, properly embarrassed and struck by a feeling of guilt she could not help but feel was preemptive, receded to the back so that her daughter could take the lead.

"I'm Aideen Murphy. I would, first and foremost like to thank you for removing the curse placed on my mother. The joy you've brought her cannot be repaid," said Aideen.

"I was only doing my job here in Meloria," said Aoibheann.

"Right, of course. A fantastic job it was, too. When I was at school, I did a bit of my own research on mom's curse. I even spoke with a few professors that specialized in breaking fae curses. I wasn't able to turn up anything that wouldn't have had some terrible side-effects. Yet, here you are, able to fix the unfixable."

"You are taking an awful long walk to simply say, 'wow, Aoibheann, you sure are incredible,' you know," said Aoibheann, a languid, amused smile on her face.

Looking at her like this, it strikes Aideen not for the first time that the woman in front of her is stunning. She is a figure carved from the heavens, hair white as clouds on a sunny day, skin the color of chestnuts, and dark eyes that one could fall into. She is tall and lithe whereas Aideen is stout and muscular.

"That's because I am taking an awful long walk to say that what you did, by all measures of current theory in necromancy, shouldn't be possible," said Aideen. The accusation was clear enough in her tone, but Aoibheann chose to ignore it.

"Sounds like the same thing to me."

Aideen scoffed at this and so Aoibheann added, “If you wish for me to teach you the impossible, you need only ask.”

The reasons for studying and practicing necromancy are as varied as snowflakes. Some come to the profession with lofty ideas about what the world could be like, others seek only a path to wealth and fame. Still more are attracted to the idea of becoming a lich and the near immortality it offers. The world opens in strange and surprising ways once one can manipulate the flow of life and death and so the paths toward happiness, power, revolution, art and even cooking change, become infinite. Yet, one quality can be found in each prospective candidate for the study.

A thirst for knowledge. A hunger for the forbidden.

The reputation of necromancers has long been smeared by the gore-stained hands diving into entrails and dirt, reaching toward and sculpting stars and heaven alike. No matter the stories they tell themselves or others, a necromancer is primarily fueled by a desire to possess the ineffable, shape the strange, and monopolize the rare.

“Would you really?” asked Aideen, her voice barely above a whisper, throat dry as autumn leaves in the sun.

Aoibheann smiled. “Of course. Come back tomorrow for lunch and you can show me what you can do. I always like to meet prospective students where they are at.”

The next afternoon, the deal was struck over an assortment of food and lovely herbal tea. Aileen and Aoibheann talked like old friends as they both gobbled up cucumber sandwiches, slices of cured meats and wedges of cheeses. They ate dried fruits and nuts, crunched upon raw vegetables, and worked out the details of their arrangement. Throughout it, Aileen felt her wariness of Aoibheann diminish. It wasn't that she ignored the strangeness around the woman, nor that she had to. Aoibheann was not, as it turned out, interested in a game of cat and mouse.

"Tell me, what do you suspect I am?" she'd asked after pleasantries were disposed of.

"I'm unsure. I know you aren't a necromancer. When I look at you, there isn't the outline of life or death that marks most things. Even a lich has a faint trace of life, a delayed trail that decays more slowly than the others, at least so long as they are flesh."

"So that rules out any body hopping then," Aoibheann probed, delighted at the gestures and gesticulations that Aileen made as she explained and worked through her theories.

"It does indeed. I don't know a name for what you are, to be honest. My area of study didn't include beings from behind the curtain," said Aileen.

"If you are assuming that I come from that place, you'd be wrong, though I can't blame you for coming to that conclusion," said Aoibheann. Rather than withdraw, Aileen was drawn in closer, leaning forward by fractions, eyes darting, searching for some clue that she didn't have the tools to uncover or the knowledge to understand.

Aileen looked upon Aoibheann like a puzzle. Like something that she could unlock if she were clever enough and this, to Aoibheann, was enticing. Aoibheann had to bat away all the ways that she would allow Aileen to be clever with her, if her young apprentice were to take a step forward, reach out, and grab hold of her.

"What did you study, by the way?" asked Aoibheann, tactically cutting Aileen off from speaking her next question. She could not do with her student asking something so boring as "what are you, then?"

"Ah, erm," began Aileen, "I took applied pernicious and benevolent necromancy with a focus in stitch theory and contract law. I thought I would be working at a firm when I got out."

"Oh yes, the epitome of the necromantic profession of the day. I recall a time when necromancers were not civil servants, though I suppose such a time was bloodier for you humans overall. Babies dashed against rocks at the slightest sign of defect, women and children sold off to make money for some dissatisfied patriarch. This set-up is likely better, if boring."

Filing away the hint at Aoibheann's age for a later discussion, Aileen said, "It's the best way to acquire resources for enrichment and to learn more advanced skills. Plus, it is a lucrative world. In the last one hundred years, ninety percent of all lich's were partners at a firm."

"Hmm," said Aoibheann, picking the sides of her nails, uninterested in Aileen's clear fawning over the world of bureaucratic magic. "Tell me about stitch theory."

A glint in Aileen's eye told Aoibheann what was coming next. The politeness and the ease of their conversation was only a mask. Throughout it, Aoibheann was aware that, while the power tipped toward her, it was only a matter of time before they struck on a question that Aileen would snatch up and hold hostage. That desire to know burned white-hot in Aileen's eyes and the excitement from the gas that this admission of interest that omitted a level of ignorance on Aoibheann's part, was perfect.

"Stitch theory is kind of my baby. I don't think I can just tell you about it without getting something in return," said Aileen.

"Oh, you developed a theory and still managed to get passed on for a job in a firm? I can only imagine that the competition must have been quiet something." Aoibheann said this as she examined the last wedge of brie on the platter. She munched it while she let Aileen sit with this statement, fully aware that she was picking a fresh scab, fully aware that it would spill blood.

“Are you trying to get me to say that my theory is a useless pet project or that I am a subpar necromancer because, despite contributing to the field I was unable to secure a position?” asked Aileen, anger coating her words like poison.

“Not at all. I am merely remarking upon your situation. It seems to me you are doing a lot of projection,” this said with all the viciousness implied in a needle. A thin, easy prick that, done right, will draw out only what is desired.

Aileen smiled, “You might be right. It is a sore spot. But I don’t need to prove myself to you.”

“You do if you want to know how I helped your mother. Or why everyone in this backwater little village of yours seems to remember my being here for as long as they can recall,” said Aoibheann, adding a bit of bait to the hook.

This was all true, Aileen knew. If she wanted to know it would be better to play the game that Aoibheann had set out for her. A bit of flattery, surprise, and awe at the things she was capable of, and whatever information she asked of Aileen and voila! An easy enough task for her to complete, considering how easy it was to flatter a creature like Aoibheann, and how simple it was to be in awe of what she was capable of. But Aileen took the concept of being a brat as far as she could. She would not trip over herself for Aoibheann, no matter how easy she made it, with her promise of knowledge and power and her lovely eyes.

“Well, the other side of this is that I could report you. I don’t know exactly what you’ve done here, but I’m sure an oddity like you would attract the attention of academic eyes, if you’re unlucky,” said Aileen. She folded her arms and leaned back in her chair.

“Who’s to say I don’t remove you from the fabric of this little community, hmm? Perhaps you died young or never returned from university? Perhaps you got the job you wanted and never bothered to come home,” when Aoibheann said this the shadows grew thick around her, the sunlight snuffed out like a candle so that stinking smoke was all that marked its ever having been there.

A parlor trick, a bit of theater.

Aileen was not one to be outdone or intimidated. She took her index and thumb and pressed them together. In the air she weaved a pattern, a faint trail of power, a cascade of flickering embers, momentarily engraved the spell in the air. When she was done, the darkness that Aoibheann had summed began to come away, bits of it falling away in irregular shapes as if snipped away.

Light broke through and filled the room with white-hot intensity for a few eye-slicing moments.

“Tell me this, Ms. Monster,” said Aileen, “have you ever wondered what it would be like to be taken apart while you are awake? To watch and feel as bits of you were cut into, split open, and pieces removed? No? Keep fucking around and you’ll find out.”

Two things occurred to Aoibheann at this threat. The first is that this little welp would be a simple enough thing to teach some respect to. That is to say that, with the correct application of skill, Aoibheann, it would be an easy enough thing to sew Aileen’s mouth shut. It is an incontrovertible fact that desires are thwarted by an inability to express or conquer, but the particular agony of being unable to scream, to partake in that most primal of human emotions, the feeling that precedes even lust, is its own hell. Aoibheann could, if she so desired, keep Aileen’s mind intact too. Suturing the splits and stapling the fractures in her sanity to make sure that even madness is a false promise, a safety that never comes.

But, again, Aoibheann’s interest in Aileen saved the girl. The way she had dismantled the darkness was nothing spectacular by itself. There were a thousand ways to banish shadows summed by the necromantic arts, but the specifics of Aileen’s spell were fascinating. She had clipped the darkness, shearing through it like fabric.

Could she...?

“How about this. You tell me about this stitch theory you have, and I’ll tell you how I made it so that everyone in Meloria thinks I’ve always been here,” said Aoibheann.

“Just like that?” asked Aideen, skeptical.

“Just like that.”

Then, with terrible finality, Aideen extended her hand and spoke the four words that drive fear into the heart of even the most seasoned necromancer’s. “We have a deal.”

Aoibheann grabbed the outstretched hand and planted a kiss on it, light and warm as the afternoon sun. The air between them shimmered and the foundations of reality went askew for a few moments, everything cocked at a sideways angle. Power gathered at the point of the kiss, searing an impression of Aoibheann’s soft lips onto the back of Aideen’s hands. It was no more painful than hot wax dripping onto flesh, a faint pleasure to the stinging burn, and it was pale, like childhood scar. Yet there the covenant was made, and the pair were bound together.

The night fell upon Meloria like a plague. Throughout the village, the street rats and barflies, the prostitutes (healthy in number as even in a community so rural and insular, that oldest profession remained strong) and the night-vendors all shivered. The summer heat, only slightly lessened by the lack of sun, did nothing to dispel the cold that settled into them all. It was like a shard of ice had lodged itself in their chests, each breath splintering the fragile crystal, shredding them up, and spreading the deadly cold bit by bit. Even the fae, regardless of court, found sanctuary in toadstools, birdhouses, storm drains, on the backs of stray cats, and in the hollows of rotting trees.

The sleeping fared worse. Above their heads the moon wept, and the stars trembled and this fear in the heavens was reflected in their subconscious. In fits of fever and inescapable fear, they thrashed as they were wrung through the grinder of the inexplicable. How to describe the dissolving of the self? Of an awareness that parts of you are being taken, the seams of your mind strained, ready to split and let spill all the things that comprise you. Bursts of light followed by interminable bouts of darkness, a kaleidoscope of shifting colors, all punctuated by horrified screams. Do they come from the poor mouths of the afflicted? If they do, are those mouths where they ought to be? If any were brave enough, those few fathers, creeping through the halls of their homes at night, trying to be subtle in their indiscretions, of those children who love the night and wait for its coming throughout the arduous day, they would have been driven mad by the answer.

For her part, Aoibheann was in awe at the beauty of Aideen's work. When Aideen reached up toward the heavens, hands held as though sewing some piece of cloth, she weaved the stars, lining them up and positioning them into patterns pleasing to her eyes. Of course, the actual stars were unaffected, even Aoibheann could not affect the celestial realm directly. But the power Aideen weaved into the stars, the line she drew between constellations, remaking them as she so desired, did something marvelous. The silvery light that shone down from this small section of sky had been polluted so that those who bathed in it were afflicted with some curse.

On its own, the spell would have done little. For an individual, this kind of magic would result in little more than a stomachache, maybe some vomiting. But the constant rays of light from the stars and the moon alike amplified the effect. Waking or sleeping, the suffering would be great.

This demonstration made Aoibheann hungry in a way she had not known for hundreds of years. Sure, she had taken lovers of every gender. Pleasure was pleasure, after all. But she had not been drawn to another, not found it worth the effort to solve the puzzle of a person's heart in so long that now, watching as pinpricks of blood showed and then streamed down Aideen's arms, neck, legs, cheeks, and soaked through her clothes, Aoibheann felt powerless.

When Aideen looked at her, smiling wildly, soaked in her own blood, and pale as the starlight she played with, Aoibheann could take no more. Without thinking, she bridged the gap between the two of them. She wrapped her arms around Aideen and kissed her. Her tongue, possessed with its own desires, followed the innumerable blood trails to their source and Aoibheann's mouth slowly filled with the sticky, iron laced taste of Aideen.

When she pulled back, Aideen's eyes were still wild and wide and yes hungry. She sank into Aoibheann and as clothes were discarded and ecstasy mounted, the world became a collage of spaces and sensations, colors, and patterns, that dazzled Aideen (when her eyes were not rolling into the back of her head, when her toes were not curling in). The last vestiges of thought not preoccupied with the softness of Aoibheann and the surgical precision of her touch filed these sights and alien feelings away under "ask later."

Aideen was nestled into Aoibheann's arms. Her lover snored gently next to her, and Aideen's body was still alight with the numerous ways that Aoibheann had had her way.

Things had gotten real fucking weird.

It was like a floodgate had broken between the two. They fed each other bits of themselves, traded for knowledge and eldritch incantations. Aideen elucidated on her stitch theory, showing her how she could sew two different things together or create patterns to exert her will. She showed Aoibheann all this, working herself to a bloody mess that, each time, Aoibheann cleaned with her tongue and refilled with her own vitality.

The woman was tireless.

Aoibheann would then tell Aideen about her own powers. She would demonstrate the power she held, drawing it from the depleting source of energy locked in her cellar. To anyone who saw what Aoibheann did it would be marvelous, but for Aideen it was like a dream. All the pride that Aideen took in her theory and in putting it into practice, snipping and snitching, crumbled to dust. Aoibheann's own magic was an evolution of hers, a perfected version. Aideen's work was sloppy, the word of a toddler to be hung upon the fridge and paraded by adults. She felt embarrassed, or would have, if not for the open-mouthed gawking of Aoibheann whenever she worked her spells.

Was it because she, Aideen, was a human and yet she had somehow managed to approximate this otherworldly being's power? A part of Aideen's heart could not be convinced that this was not the case, yet, looking upon Aoibheann for any sign, positive or not, the majority of her was assured that her master and (heart fluttering at the bravery of the thought) lover was not merely amused by her fumbling. No, Aoibheann watched her with rapt attention, enthralled by her work, despite how sloppy it was.

Eventually, Aideen wormed her way out of the dead-weight cuddles that Aoibheann had pinned her down with. Her head was swimming with impossibilities, and it felt like her skull was too small to keep all of this information inside. Indeed, the seams of her skull felt like they were ready to explode. Occipital and temporal bowing out, frontal and parietal separating from each other, the contents of her head ready to come spilling out or evaporate. It didn't help that when Aideen had remarked upon Aoibheann's sophistication, the way her magic mirrored her own, her necromancy a finalized version of Aideen's rough draft. "You're incredible," said Aideen, stars in her eyes. In the space that she and Aoibheann had crafted, a patchwork, an exploration of each other almost as intimate as what they did between weaving spells. Currently, the pair were laying on their backs looking at the stars as fractals and the rolling colors of an impossible night sky. Aideen was sweaty and Aoibheann was tracing circles around her nipples, moving from one to the other every three to five rotations.

"Thank you, darling. I'm already aware, but it is sweet of you to say nonetheless," replied Aoibheann, a good-natured smile on her lips.

"You don't understand. Yes, you are gorgeous, yes, your touch is electrifying, but right now I'm talking about your necromancy," said Aideen. She sat up and Aoibheann followed suite, giving Aideen a bit of distance. When she was like this, Aoibheann had learned, it was best to allow her the space to speak and gesture, to think and express.

"I am also aware of this. Do you have a point, or are you going to circle around the same compliments?" Aoibheann prodded. Another thing she had picked up quickly about Aideen. A bit of bullying was often required to keep her on track.

"Necromancy is unique for each necromancer. The way it is envisioned and expressed varies from person to person. The sheer number of people who study it means that there is some overlap, but the filter of human perception, the fact of subjectivity, means that even these similarities vary wildly," said Aideen.

“Is that so?” asked Aoibheann.

“Yes. The way a necromancer envisions their power is like a snowflake. There were others in school who had a similar view. But I’m the only one who walked away with the title Seamstress. So, imagine my surprise coming across you, Aoi.”

Understanding struck Aoibheann. Aideen was amazed not just because of her skill, not simply because her technique was similar to hers, but because it *was* hers.

“I see. I suppose it should help you then, to think of me not as a twin but as the ideal version of your theory,” said Aoibheann.

“Excuse me?”

“There is a world in which concepts exist as themselves. It is the same place from which the gods spring forth. There are lesser creatures, and stranger too. I’m one, and this pains me to admit, lesser beings.”

“I repeat. Excuse me?”

Aoibheann sighed, “Don’t be dense, darling. It doesn’t look good on you. I *am* your conception of necromancy. You stitch theory? I embody it by merely existing.”

“Did I birth you, then?” asked Aideen.

Aoibheann laughed, “No, not at all. But I can call you mommy anyway if you’d like.”

Aideen blushed at that, blushed again at the memory of the conversation. But, blushing as she was, there was something Aideen needed to do. It had nagged at her since she first witnessed Aoibheann’s extension of her theory. She had been so narrow in her understanding of her own theory, so unimaginative in the application of her own necromancy and now, now.

And now Aideen saw the world as a tapestry. It was sewn and stitched together, the fibers the histories of everything, from a single person to a city, a mountain, the seas, the heavens, and earth. It was impossibly large and always it was being added to, a messy collective, a patchwork, at once stunning in its complexity and offensive in its amateurish composition.

Aideen put several yards of distance between herself and Aoibheann. There was so much she didn’t understand yet, so much that she could only infer, only guess at. But Aideen had seen Aoibheann fold the stars into each other, take time and fray its edges, clipping away the ends like bits of fabric that had been snagged on something and now, protruding, needed clipped.

It was time, now, for Aideen to do what any necromancer would do with new knowledge and thus new power. Sure, there were questions about Aoibheann, about her nature and why she’d come to Meloria. She was certain that there were horrors there to uncover, but that was the nature of her trade. Power did not come to the righteous and one’s name was not weaved into history without a willingness to accept and imitate the monstrous.

Aideen sucked in breath to steady the nerves. She breathed the air, felt the living things that wriggled in the ground, the mycelium of the market and of the world fungus alike, the two things which connected all things. She sank her consciousness, dipping it down into the flow of birth, death, and absorption. The three-step process of life and of necromancy alike, the linear flow of life.

Without shame, with practice and as much delicacy as she could manage, Aideen perverted that flow by folding the process. Turing the flow to a circle, a feedback loop. She drew power from everything she could in the ground, supplementing her own with ants and worms and sleeping cicadas. Aideen had never been comfortable with using herself as a power source, she’d never been as crazy as classmates like Emma had been.

Maybe that was why she’d been passed over by all the firms she’d applied to her.



Well, if that was the case, then it was time to get real fucking crazy.

Aideen imagined the tapestry, the one that Aoibheann had manipulated so expertly in front of her. She could not hold the whole of its majesty in her head, the limitations of a mortal mind could not be overcome, even with ambition. But this was already accounted for. Aideen focused on the details of a particular instance, manipulating the cloth, folding it end over end, careful not to bunch it up—yet—as she isolated the place she most cared about.

She saw it in the fibers, her disappointment as each position was gobbled up by the worthy and unworthy alike. This, Aideen decided, was an unacceptable picture. A wholly unpleasant pattern, aesthetically askew, and downright ugly.

Aideen mapped out what a simple change would do. If she switched the material, made it so that the fibers of her life were where they shouldn't be (according to this foul, woolen section) then she wouldn't be here in this moment any longer. Would the knowledge, Aideen wondered, stay with her? Would the memory of Aoibheann's touch remain forever engraved upon her flesh?

Better to play it safe. There was no reason that Aideen couldn't have her cake and eat it too. She reached out, bunched the sections where she returned home, and brought them down to the place where her life had veered off the correct course. It was as simple as shears running through fabric, what came next. As simple, terrible, and violent as that. Aideen stitched these disparate parts together, all bloody and raw, and marveled at the design, her design, and felt the exhilaration of her divine act.

For Aoibheann, the disturbance of Aileen's change was impossible to ignore. She felt it in her body, her bones rattling, her head throbbing, and her blood going cold. This was the kind of change that she sought to avoid, a grand statement, a reimagining of the nature of reality. So many feelings raged inside Aoibheann when she awoke. She was trapped somewhere between a fascination at the gull, the confidence, and the bat-shit audacity it took for Aileen to do what she did. It was good work for having only witnessed the technique. On the other end was dread. This change would not go unnoticed.

Aoibheann folded space so that she was next to Aileen. The latter jumped at the sudden appearance of her lover, but the smile on Aileen's lips never faded, it reached her star touched eyes, set them alight with pride and joy. They said, "look, look, look what I can do."

"The only excuse for what you've done that I'll accept at this moment is that I fucked you stupid and you are suffering from post-coital foolishness," said Aoibheann. This made the smile crumble and the light dull in Aileen's eyes.

"I don't understand," said Aileen, her voice so small and childlike that it tugged at Aoibheann's heart. Of course she didn't understand. She was fresh from university, a place where ideas, no matter how frightening and bloody, no matter how blasphemous, were meant to be explored. Her power was a toy, something to experiment with, to hammer and toss around to dent. The problem was that her power had a direct impact upon the world.

"We will call this a teachable moment," said Aoibheann, "If we manage to survive, that is."

Aileen opened her mouth to speak, but as she did there came a shaking of the world. Up above, in the sky, with its swirling colors, where a ghostly imprint of that tapestry laid, a crack formed. From this single crack came dozens and then hundreds of others, spreading out across the sky like a spiderweb. An apt image as what lurked behind those cracks pushed through with black, spindly legs. A spider.

Aileen shrieked and Aoibheann said, "Seamstress, meet Weaver," and then, snatching hold of her arm, Aoibheann folded the fabric of the world, layering it once, twice, thrice, so as to create distance between them and the monster invading the world. She did not stop at this either, but kept folding and rethreading, plucking at the stitching of reality so that time and distance became increasingly malleable. As she went along Aoibheann darned the holes she created, burning through the last of her power source back home quickly.

The pair followed the threads of the living and the dying, the innumerable stories that are entailed in such things blurred into meaningless sounds and images. Aoibheann kept this pace for what felt like hours, each jump, each shift, caused Aileen's stomach to lurch. It was all too fast. She could not think, she could hardly breathe, the only sure sensation was the wet, slick feeling of Aoibheann's hand around her arms and all the pain such a sensation represented.

At long last the pair stopped. Aoibheann was bloody and panting, a sight which, in any other context would have made Aileen weak. Currently, she felt like sobbing, an urge she stifled.

"Okay, so. I'm sure you are wondering what the hell that was," panted Aoibheann.

"You must be psychic," Aileen managed.

"Like I said, I come from a place of possibilities. Where all potentials are made manifest and, if you are lucky, made fleshy like yours truly. But, in the same way that I am the ideal form of your conception of necromancy, of all conceptions like yours, there are ideal forms of things like order," said Aoibheann.

"Was that what we say there? The spider?" asked Aileen.

“It was indeed. See, I’ve been around for a bit, and this isn’t my first rodeo down here with you mortal beings. I take a form like this one, satisfy myself until the flesh gives out, and return to the world of possibilities. One thing you learn when you’ve been around as long as I have is not to fuck with the narrative order of life.”

Understanding smacked Aideen like a brick, “Fuck. I’m so sorry, Aoibheann.”

“Apology accepted. Now, I need you to pivot fast out of self-recriminations. We don’t have long before our pursuer gets to us, and I don’t have the strength to go back on the run.”

“You called it Weaver before. What exactly does it do?” asked Aideen, stuffing shame away for later.

“They occupy a space like the police here. The tapestry, as you may know, is the entire story of all human, non-human, and otherworldly interactions. What we see as a giant cloth, they see as a book with infinite pages.”

“Well, if all we’ve done mess up a page, why don’t we go back and clean it up? That’s within our abilities,” suggested Aideen.

“It isn’t that simple. See, if either of us get anywhere near that space, we’ll be gobbled up like flies. Those fuckers spread their webs throughout the area of incident. The slightest vibration and that’s that, wrapped up and sucked dry and not in the fun way.”

“With our spells we can mask our presence and misdirect,” said Aideen.

“They’ll know. Everyone makes a particular vibration. They’ll know yours and mine as soon as we brush against their web. Not only that, but they are also building outward. No matter where we go, they’ll be laying a trap. As long as we exist in some capacity, they’ll find us,” said Aoibheann.

“So, we’re fucked. No lube, bite the pillow, I am coming in dry, fucked?”

“Come now. You are a necromancer, aren’t you? Life and death aren’t the only things you traffic in.”

“We make a deal with them?”

“We make a deal with them,” Aoibheann confirmed, a dreadful, toothy smile splitting their face like cracked skin.

Raising the dead or spreading rot and disease (or, more commonly, a combination of both) was the least of the reasons that necromancers were so distrusted and disliked. Yes, referring to lewd acts with bones and moth-eaten corpses was the standard way that the practitioners were derided, but the truth was that the use of magically binding contracts was the biggest sore spot. Already it was a uniter of people, rich and poor, young, and old, that signing specific agreements was a lousy requirement to get through life. Singing papers that attest to certain behaviors on and off a job, promises to make payments, agreements to keep silent for as long as you drew breath, sucked the fun out of life but, so long as they were mundane, they were suggestions. The law could pursue you and you could lose your freedom, but being clever enough meant that you had a chance to avoid all of that.

The kinds of contracts that necromancers drew up, the sort of deals they made, were the infernal kind. There was no clever way out. The number of humans who had worked out a loophole in a magically binding contract could be counted on one hand. These deals were so difficult to get out of that even necromancers were hesitant to make them.

Still, death was worse, at least as far as Aideen was aware. A bad deal might rob her of her freedom in some way, but it wouldn't be the end. There was still so much that Aideen wished to experience that she was willing to risk a great deal. Besides that, this was her fault. Hubris was the eternal downfall of humankind.

The thing that Aideen and Aoibheann needed to make their deal with was a thief. It was odd for Aideen to think of a thing as a thief, but Aoibheann had insisted that what they sought was just that and to refer to it otherwise would be rude.

"How is a thief supposed to help us?" asked Aideen.

"Because a thief can add intrigue and drama. Think about the components it brings to a story. Will they pull off the heist? Will their lover/partner betray them? The twists and turns make the story interesting," Aoibheann "explained."

Aideen did not see her partner's point for two reasons. Firstly, what the hell was she even talking about? Aideen understood that the tapestry she saw, and this endless book were the same thing. The idea of any work of art is to tell some story. That story may be like smoke, ephemeral, impossible to hold, and it may be your typical beginning, middle, and end type of tale, but a story was still present. Fine, all good. But did the introduction of another character really mean that things would become more interesting? Somehow, she doubted it. The second was that, insofar as Aideen was concerned, she was a damn thief! Had she not stolen the destiny robber from her? What about her subversion of fate lacked drama?

The pair moved between the folds of the tapestry, somewhere between the physical and the world of ideas where Aoibheann came from. Nothing was stable here. Aideen saw things that she knew, familiar structures—, homes, schools, places of worship—that flitted between stable staples of human architecture from the last thousand years and fuzzy fabric, frayed and undecided. It was an empty place, despite the shifting structures. Aideen saw no one, heard no voices or birdsongs.

Time was not real here. It felt like years and seconds alternatively. Neither Aideen nor Aoibheann spoke a word as they travelled. Simply, they held hands, fingers interlacing, tracing small, brief circles in the palms of one another's hands. They continued walking through this shifting and unfinished land, until they came, finally, to a squat glass structure which gobbled up light and was impossible to see inside of.

"The Glass House. What a lonely little monument," said Aoibheann.

"What's it a monument to?" asked Aideen.

"That's too long a story. Remind me to tell it to you later," said Aoibheann.

The couple went inside after that. The door to the Glass House, a seamless section that took them some time to locate, was unlocked. Some trick of light obscured the inside, even as light streamed in and the smell of burning lamp oil—unctuous and acrid—worked in tandem.

“Once we cross the threshold here, we are committed,” said Aoibheann.

“You say that like there is another choice,” said Aideen as she brushed past Aoibheann and entered the Glass House.

Aideen was overwhelmed. She had never seen such opulence. Jewels in haphazard piles caught the flickering light of the oil lamps and created a dazzling show of light and color. Gold and silver comingled throughout. The floor was a chimera of fine rugs, and the walls were adorned with a dozen different styles and times periods of paintings from all over the world.

It was several rooms large, uncannily bigger than its outside led Aideen to believe. From a room far from the entrance, a voice called out, “Aideen Murphy. I was hoping you’d come to see me.”

It was the voice of a man. Aideen knew that this was her senses force sense onto the nonsensical. Accented and higher pitched, the vowels were sharp things and the consonants a suggestion. Aideen did not move after being called out to by a man she did not know. She was not in the habit of approaching men when they called to her. It wasn’t until Aoibheann squeezed her hand and lightly tugged her forward that she went forward, passing through rooms of wonder and conquest. The walls sung songs; the floors composed as her feet slid across it. The whole of the glass house was designed to sing the praises of its master, the thief who hoarded his heart’s desire.

The thief was a scrawny wretch. Fully grown to be sure, but stunted, a combination of malnutrition and neglect. Everything about the thief was an injustice and, were it not for the cocksure smile and the abundance of wealth that surrounded this manifestation, Aideen would have felt sorry for them.

I wouldn’t have expected you to take *his* form,” said Aoibheann.

The thief shrugged, “He is the most ambitious of my children. It is only too bad that, by nature of his work, his name is known to so few.”

Aideen’s mind was buzzing with questions. Were they not being actively pursued, were Aoibheann not so pale, almost translucent at this stage, she might have taken the time to ask a few. Right now, however, she had to be prudent.

“I have two questions for you, Thief,” Aideen proclaimed with confidence. Aoibheann smirked. Though they had only just met, this was the most attractive thing about Aideen. She was voracious, her desires ruled her, and that hunger kept her moving forward, even if it moved her against the grain.

“Only two, Aideen Murphy?”

“Had I the time to ask every question I have, I would. As it stands, that isn’t the case, as I’m sure you know. So, two will do. First, I need the abridged version of what you are and for the love of all the gods, don’t say you’re just like Aoibheann. That’s not an answer, that’s a deflection.”

“I would never deprive one of my own an answer to a sincere question. Besides, I’m nothing like Aoibheann. I am much more powerful and much, much, *much* older. I am a big G God. One of the oldest, truly top three. I sprang into existence the first time a child took another’s toy and lied, got stronger the greater the theft and the ambition.”

*Holy Shit.*

“I cannot tell you how many more questions that’s created for me,” said Aideen. The Thief shrugged, a favorite gesture, it seemed.

“So as to keep you from falling into temptation, I’ll step in. Thief, we need your help,” said Aoibheann.

The Thief smiled and circled them like a shark does its wounded, bleeding prey. “Oh, sure. Easy. Or at least, it can be.”

Aideen felt relieved, a premature gesture. “See, I like to make deals as much as necromancers do. Aideen, you really caught my eye. Using that power of yours to rob someone of their fate and stitch yourself in? That’s ballsy, and you did it without any thought of anyone but yourself. You thought you’d keep Aoibheann too. That’s the sort of thing I love to see.”

“Thank you?” Aideen said, unsure and uneasy.

“Here’s my proposition for you. I’ll help you fix this mess. We can patch up the hole, return what you stole. But, by doing this, you’ll be losing your necromancy.”

The air went out of the room then. Aideen felt like she couldn’t breathe. She was not naive enough to think this was a joke or a bluff and she did not know if any other options existed. What she did know was that there wasn’t time to find out.

“How do we do this?” asked Aideen. Her voice sounded distant and hollow.

The Thief smiled. “I have a key. I’ll reach into your heart and take it, your desires, and the tools. The two ingredients you needed to make your theft possible.”

“I’ll need some assurance that you won’t take anything else. And I want...” Aideen trailed off, glancing toward Aoibheann. Her wants were what put them in this position, was it wise to continue to put her desires forward?

“What do you want, Aideen Murphy?” asked the Thief. His voice was smooth, rich like dark chocolate, a total reversal of the voice he’d adopted when Aideen and Aoibheann had first come upon him.

“I want to be with Aoibheann still, if she’ll still have me.”

It wasn’t just what she’d done to put them in this position, it was the cost. Aideen was still fascinated with Aoibheann, her power, her beauty, and her knowledge, but would she still want a powerless Aideen?

“There are a hundred more talented necromancers than you,” said Aoibheann, “if all I wanted you for was that I wouldn’t have wanted you at all.”

Aideen pouted despite the relief she felt.

“Right then,” said the Thief, “I’m agreeable to this. So, shall we?”

Aideen nodded and the next thing she knew, the Thief’s hand was in her chest, blood pooling and dripping down. She felt faint at the sight of it, her vision blurred. She felt cold too, and, for a moment, Aideen thought she would die. But, despite the pain and the coldness, she could feel her heart beating, blood still flowed through her, life coursing strong and true. Aideen could not help herself; a few wet giggles escaped her lips.

The Thief shoved deeper into her chest and pulled Aideen closer. Into her ear, he whispered, “You should know by now. Thievery results from a lack. The less you have, the more you desire. Show me, Aideen Murphy, what you will do with this, a true lack.”

After that, everything was black and warm.

The streets were slick with late afternoon rain. Aideen's feet slapped against the cobblestone. Historical districts were the worst to work, but the payout was the best. Besides, she needed to patch things up with Aoibheann after their argument in the morning and a necklace of screaming pearls, souls locked into them, would be a fantastic way to do it.

There were several ways that Aideen could have done this, but this trick was her favorite. The bored wife of a local noble was a fun snack. Oh, the benefits of dating a conceptual force in the flesh. The sex was over worldly (literally), but they were also too old to get caught up in the pettiness of jealousy.

The window was open, the cream curtains billowing out. So much for pelting it with pebbles. Aideen hummed a tune, and, within a few moments, a face peaked over. The woman, her skin as soft as silk and the color of milk, was wearing little more than the very necklace Aideen had come for.

Truth was, Aideen wanted in the library this noble kept stocked. Allegedly, he was involved in the rare and forbidden trade of texts. These were Aideen's favorite targets. Her ability to work necromancy may be gone (for now, as Aideen was sure she would find a way to take back her powers) but her understanding of the art remained. She had no interest in developing her old theory or a new one, but she did have an interest in money and in knowledge. The former provided a comfortable life of travel, new clients for her girlfriend to feed upon, and novel places for Aideen to explore. The latter let her circle the outside of the world of necromancers. She had to be careful now. If they found out that she had no power, that she'd traded it away. If they found out why, well, that threat she used on Aoibheann months ago would come true for both.

There was so much she'd taken for granted when life and death were here's to control. Aideen's eyes were fresh now and, because of that, she was sure she could discover truths about necromancy that the practitioners of the art were blind too. Indeed. Aideen would have it all, the power, the fame, the wealth, and the knowledge of even the most ancient necromancer. She only had to keep chasing her desires.

Speaking of which.

There was one just a few dozen feet from the street floor, waiting for her to take a taste of. The lofty ideals could wait until later.