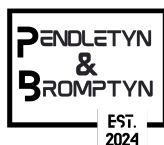


Input Girls Sample

A Gothic Sci-Fi Novel

Erzsebet Carmean



Pendletyn & Bromptyn

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Preface

“I wrote in this book those notable things which happened in my time, which I saw with my own eyes, or which I learned from people worthy of belief. **And in case things which should be remembered perish with time and vanish from the memory of those who are to come after us**, I, seeing so many evils and the whole world, as it were, placed within the grasp of the evil one, being myself as if among the dead, waiting for death to visit me, have put into writing truthfully all the things that I have heard. **And lest the writing should perish with the writer and the work fail with the laborer, I leave parchment to continue this work, if perchance any man survive** and any of the face of Adam escape this pestilence **and carry on the work which I have begun.**”

Added later, in another hand, “Here it seems that the author died.”

Village

Chapter 1

Seven lepers laughing, Eliza thinks. Beneath her, the river surges against boulders and the stray rot of a fallen tree as she thinks: six spindles shrieking, five fathers weeping, four fields fallowing. Woolens to wash await Eliza, while Eliza awaits her next thought, a thought which pleases her by being three trees taunting, two, two tombs tattling, one for her and one for me, walking harvest-wise across the bridge.

Eliza Waite, daughter of Elicot's sheriff Mischa Waite and his wife Griselda Magdeberg, sister of more siblings dead than alive, is aware of silence. The villagers working the vines nearest her have stopped singing and filling their baskets with grapes. Despite her mother's prayers and penances, Eliza remains a stubborn dropped stitch in the fabric of the community. It is not a lack of faith that isolates Eliza; she fevers for illumination and is certain she will have it. She says her Pater Noster, recites her Ave Maria and spends silent hours in communion with the holy dead. Eliza is a fond supplicant of Elicot's patron saint, Millicent, and not just on her own behalf. On the night of Leonie's wedding, Eliza knelt at the reliquary to pray for her sister's health and fertility. She brings flowers to the chapel, begging intercession for

the lame and the blind. There is none more anxious than Eliza to behold the relic on Feast Days and to kneel before the glorious, incorruptible paw of Saint Millicent. Eliza sins in her pride, to believe she is favored by Millicent; it is a sin she does not confess, not even to herself.

Eliza is aware of her alienation as she moves from row to row, seeking her father amongst the trellised, old-growth vines. The family mule nuzzles her as he emerges from one of the rows. Eliza picks up the lead; the animal flaps his ears but follows without complaint. It is easy to get a mule to love you, Eliza thinks. It is all in the vegetable leavings and apple cores. At the farthest row of vines, a girl younger than Eliza puts her hands on her narrow hips and says, "Well, does this mean you are finally handfasted?"

"If you refer to my mule, he is far more a man than any who would wed you," Eliza says. The girl's whined retort goes unheeded. Eliza sees her father at the edge of the hayfield. He is accompanied by her brothers, Hincmar and Mischason, as well as Leonie's husband, Osric. Eliza grips her basket more tightly and something of her mood transfers to the mule, who balks. As she coaxes the animal forward, she whispers, "Gentle Virgin, help me endure that braying red-faced Osric."

"What brings you from your mother's well-intentioned sermons?" Sheriff Mischa Waite asks her.

"I am to fetch grapes for verjuice."

Osric takes the mule's lead from Eliza. She releases her hold, but not before making it clear she is allowing him to take the lead, not freely giving it.

"The vinegar of verjuice goes well with your demeanor!" he laughs.

Sheriff Waite hugs his daughter. They are both aware that in the not-too-distant future, Eliza must be wed. She will pass out of her father's care into another home, a dowry paid to recompense this nebulous, and to Eliza, terrifying husband. There is an incongruity in the direction of this flow of money; should not the father be paid for the heirs by which the other man profits? This is Leonie's opinion. Eliza's opinion is that her sister is cleverer than Osric, and the dowry paid him should have gone tenfold to her.

Sheriff Waite steps back from Eliza. "Sit," he says. The men take seats on a nearby log. "You, too, Eliza. We are discussing law." There is no place on the log for her, and Eliza sits in the field's stubble.

"Yes," Osric says. "Let us show little Eliza how men rule. We can correct her errors."

Her father's gaze stifles Eliza's response, as well as Hincmar's laugh. Mischason smiles at Eliza, for which she is grateful. Neither of them will ever be called as a judge, Mischason because he is too kind and Eliza because she is not a man.

"The case today concerns a death," Sheriff Waite says. "Our goal is to determine the amount of wergeld due to the dead man's kin and, importantly, who should pay. Allow me to state the facts.

"In a town there is a well on a man's property. The well is of the expected construction, with a prop and lift counter-weighted by a stone to raise and lower the bucket. The property owner is a good Catholic, allowing the townspeople use of his well.

"On a fine day, much like this, a man idles next to the well. He is distracted; by what no one will ever know, for he is the victim. The perpetrator goes to draw water. This man is also distracted, for his wife

is ill and they fear the loss of the babe she carries. When the perpetrator lowers the bucket, the falling weight of the stone takes the victim to his maker.”

Eliza smiles a bit to see Mischason cross himself, knowing the ill-fated and imaginary victim will be in his prayers tonight.

Osric stares at Eliza. “It takes horror to bring such a sweet smile?” he asks.

“No,” she rejoins. “I smile in anticipation of your imminently worthy judgement.”

“Well, Osric,” the sheriff prompts, “how do you judge?”

“The perpetrator owes the balance of wergeld. He alone is responsible for the death.”

“I disagree,” Hincmar says. “It is also the fault of the landowner, for leaving his well open to ill-use.”

“Would you have the town lack water?” Sheriff Waite asks.

“That would be a sin,” Mischason says. “Charity is the heart of faith.”

“Where was the landowner during these events?” Eliza asks.

“The landowner was in church, kneeling in prayer,” the sheriff answers.

Hincmar stands. If ever one looked a sheriff, Eliza thinks, it is him. The sound of workers singing bawdy lyrics fills a brief silence. “It does not matter where the owner was at the time of the death,” he says. “He is responsible for the well and must pay a third of the wergeld. The remaining two-thirds are required from the man who is the direct cause of the death.”

“On what grounds do you divide the compensation thus?” the sheriff asks.

“The stone did not fall on its own, and if the landowner had been more discerning, neither man

would have been at the well, thus preventing the death,” Hincmar explains.

“Does this seem a reasonable judgement to you, Mischason?”

“No, Father. It is uncharitable to lay guilt at the landowner’s door. The pious man was in the chapel at the time of the accident. The entire wergeld falls to the perpetrator for his lack of attention.”

“Is your decision not tempered by the perpetrator’s fear for his wife?” Sheriff Waite asks.

Eliza itches her legs where the dry hay is irritating her. Hincmar has not returned to his seat on the log, and she takes his place. The mule follows her and annoys Osric by snuffling at his hair.

“A man must not hide behind his wife; it is weak,” Osric says, batting at the mule’s inquisitive muzzle.

“How rule you, Father?” Mischason asks.

“Eliza has not yet given her opinion,” Sheriff Waite says.

She starts at the sound of her name. “Mine?”

“Yes. I am interested to know your thoughts. As is Osric, given he knew you were in error before I stated the facts of the case.”

Osric clenches his teeth, his jaw tightening in a way Eliza hopes will break a tooth. A rabbit bursts into the clearing, sees the people, and stops. Hincmar kicks a stone in the rabbit’s direction. As it bounds away, Eliza begins to speak.

“Father, was the victim of average wisdom and sound intellect?”

“Yes.”

“Did the perpetrator have a complaint with the victim, a reason to wish him dead?”

“No.”

“And the landowner had no desire to harm the victim?”

“None,” the sheriff answers.

Eliza looks at the blue sky, thinking, then says, “It is my opinion that no one owes the full wergeld. A man is a creature of reason, and the victim was of sound mind. He knew the workings of a well. It would have served him to have applied his reason and stood out of the way of the well stone. He is not a cow, which may be expected to dumbly stand as water is drawn.”

“Pisse-mire!” Osric says. “Eliza would have the victim’s family get naught.”

“I did not say that.” Eliza feels Mischason put a hand on her wrist, reminding her to practice restraint. “You did not allow me to pronounce my judgement.”

“Well, get on with it,” Hincmar says. “We have work to do.”

“As do I. Father asked my opinion, and I will give it.”

“Go on, daughter.”

“The victim and perpetrator should both have exercised better forethought. I rule the perpetrator owes one-third of the wergeld. The third is for his part in the accident, which he could have prevented and probably would have prevented if he were not distraught. I agree with Osric that a man is not excused from guilt, even when his wife is in peril.”

“She agrees with me. God in heaven, it is a miracle!”

Sheriff Waite gives Osric a look that wipes the smirk from his son-in-law’s face. “Is that all, Eliza?”

“I rule the landowner is free from all payment. Not for his piety, as kind Mischason suggests, but for the well-being of the town. To hold him accountable for even a portion of the wergeld may result in him

refusing others access to the well. I cannot weigh the life of the victim above the thirst of his neighbors.”

The sheriff stares at Eliza. I’ve shocked him, she thinks.

“Well, Father? How say you?” Hincmar prods.

“I rule with Eliza. Her questions were direct and well-applied to the facts. Her division of wergeld is just, given that the two men were, as she said, ‘not cows.’ Moreso, I am gladdened by the consideration given the townspeople, as a fair law exists for the good of the community.”

Eliza claps and smiles. “Osrice, I thank you for your attempt to show me my errors. I hope you accept the lesson I’ve given you in exchange.” Osrice’s irritation is not overlooked by either Eliza or Mischason, who rises from his seat.

“We should return to work.” Mischason offers a hand to the embarrassed, threatening bulk of Osrice. “Let us not waste the bounty of the Lord’s Day.”

“Yes, we have heard quite enough female inanity,” Hincmar says.

“Gather your grapes, Eliza,” Sheriff Waite says. “Mother will be displeased to know I have kept you away from her hearth to practice law.”

“Yes, Father.”

Eliza stays seated a moment, pleased with her own quick mind. Why is it, she wonders, that Father’s intelligence skipped his sons to land in the useless ground of his daughters’ minds? It is another of Leonie’s opinions, and today, Eliza agrees.



Eliza carries her basket of grapes to the cemetery. The Waite family plot houses the mortal remains of four generations. Eliza does not question where the Waite family lived and died prior to Elicot; her curiosity, when it arises, is to wonder which of her dead kin are safe in Heaven and which are in Hell. On the way to the family plot, she stops at the grave of her father's mistress.

"Ingiltrude," Eliza says. "Mother does not suffer utterance of your name. I pray to the Virgin Mary for her to forgive you and cannot help but imagine the Holy Virgin nibbling at Mother's stubborn grudge!"

A blue jay hacks out his unenviable song. Eliza brushes twigs and dirt from the headstone.

"Mother sees you reflected in Jack's face, which saddens her. Despite this, she loves him as her own. Jack is a good boy, quiet during sermons and kind to animals."

Feeling the conversation at an end, Eliza goes to greet her siblings nestled in the hallowed ground. Although she can read the engraving on only one tombstone, she knows who rests where. Aeldred is in the most recent grave; he was a happy toddler, the ninth and last child born to Griselda. He drowned at three years, seven months and five days old. It was Leonie who found him tangled in the reeds. It was Eliza who heard his last words.

"See my little turtle, Zaza?" That is the last thing you said to me, Aeldred, remember?" Eliza kneels to kiss the little boy's tombstone. "In Heaven, I will look at your turtle as I should have here on Earth."

Speak well of me to the other angels, though I do not deserve it.”

Eliza passes by Valeria and Valentin, stillborn twins. She sets a grape on the grave of Marucious, dead of spotted fever at four years, six months and eight days. “I am sure you would have been my favorite older brother,” she says. “Please don’t tell Mischason.”

She reaches the tombstone she can read. It is here that she sets down her basket, sits on the cool moss and leans against her sister’s headstone.

“How fare you in Heaven today, Eliza the First? Would that we could trade places. Mother will not be happy when I arrive home late. She prays I marry as soon as Father can make a match, even if they pay a larger dowry to my husband than to Osrice. For the benefit of my soul, of course.” Eliza makes a frustrated sound. “Osrice is a bore. That our sister is forced to share a bed with him is proof that Hell exists. Don’t fret at me! I am only making an allegory, not blaspheming. This is why Mother loves you best of her Elizas; I am sharp-tongued, whereas you are silent.”



Eliza arrives home just as the Day Star rises. She watches the bright streak lifting its glory to the face of God. There are no other stars that behave like the Day Star, which both rises and sets in the east. Leonie has odd ideas about why this is. Two hours in the stocks cured her of those ideas, or so their mother thinks. Eliza knows differently. Leonie maintains her belief that the Day Star is man-made, like shoes, flails, and houses. Leonie’s profanation did not

abate when Eliza reminded her that the Day Star is in the tryptic at church and that church paintings show Heavenly truths. Her sister's rebuttal was that the paintings are man made, the pigments and the frames crafted by humans. In the tryptic, Christ wears a robe, Leonie said. Surely women wove the robes Christ wore when he was human, which precludes the cloth in the painting from representing a Heavenly truth. Is it not possible that man crafted the Day Star and painted it by the by, same as the robes on Christ? Eliza could not find a flaw in Leonie's argument, and for this murmured extra Ave Marias for a week. Were Leonie a son, she would be either sheriff or heretic. Eliza watches the Day Star until disappears.

"Eliza!" little Jack cries, his cheerful voice reminding her that actions, not thoughts, are what her mother expects.

"Did you miss me?"

"Yes, little mother!" He grabs at the grape basket. "Grapes!"

"They are a bit sour, so do not eat too many or your tummy will hurt," Eliza says.

Jack sits on the ground. He eats the grapes by lifting the bunch to his mouth to nibble one at a time. This is followed by the spitting of seeds to the accompaniment of much childish enjoyment.

"What kept you?" Griselda Waite is standing on the threshold of the house. Her arms are folded on her chest, and Eliza thinks, one mother remonstrating.

"The mule wandered away, and I brought him back to Father. I hurried to get the grapes, but then stopped to pay my respects at the cemetery."

"It is goodly to honor the dead, but godly to respect your mother's wishes."

Eliza looks at the ground. An inchworm is standing on its end, slender body swaying here and there. We are all seeking something we cannot find, she thinks.

"Stop spitting like a distempered goat, Jack." Griselda disappears inside the house, returning with a mortar, pestle and bucket. "Grind and squeeze the grapes. It does not matter if the seeds stay; this is for cleaning, not drinking."

Eliza sets the basket of grapes next to her brother. The little boy plucks a grape, stuffing it into his mouth and thinking himself sly.

"Spit it out, son," Griselda scolds. "You are to juice them, not eat them."

"You've just told him both to spit and *not* to spit," Eliza says.

"Your impish spirit pleases your father, God have mercy on him, but how it worries me." Griselda wipes her hands on her apron, turns, and enters the house. "Well, Eliza? Get in here. The flax does not draft itself."

Eliza takes a deep breath. It is at spinning that her mother is most inclined to moralize. Oh, she thinks, this will be a fiery sermon. Inside, she sits on the bench beneath the high, narrow window and picks up her distaff and spindle. Griselda is carding flax with sublime violence.

"This exemplum is well suited to a selfish girl who takes walks instead of returning home as requested." Griselda slaps a handful of flax onto her card and yanks it through the comb.

"I apologize for tarrying, dear Mother."

"Do not 'dear Mother' me."

"Yes, Mother."

Griselda yanks more fiber through the card. She wishes that is my soul, Eliza thinks. She wishes to weave me into an entirely different kind of girl.

“God created sheep, dogs, and wolves.” Griselda begins. “To each, he assigned a purpose. It is a purpose fitted to the nature of the beast. The wolf, inhabited as it is by selfishness and shameless hunger, is engulfed in the Devil’s work.”

“Did you expect God to create wolves simply to starve?” Eliza asks.

“I expect nothing of God. He expects much of us.”

“And yet it is selfish and shameless to eat. How is it that you can put leeks and chicken on our plates, given you are not a wolf?”

Gripping her bunch of fibers, Griselda turns to Eliza. “I love you, child. I’ve loved you since your first cry. Please, please listen and understand what I am trying to teach you.”

She and her mother look at one another; the only sounds are the soup boiling in the pot suspended over the hearth and the whirl of Eliza’s spindle. Griselda returns to carding. Eliza thinks, if I am the wolf, it is because God made me so.

“The dog is kin to the wolf.” Griselda says, returning to the exemplum. “Unlike the wolf, dogs are motivated purely by God’s love. There is no selfishness in a loyal hound. Saint Millicent proves this, thanks be to God.”

“Amen.”

“A dog is a guardian, a protector. This is his purpose. Sheep, however, are made for wool to clothe us against winter. The wolf, motivated by evil, would steal our sheep and have no distaste for our spring-thawed corpses.”

"It is good that we have surcoats and blankets aplenty." Eliza replies. Blessed be the wool of sheep dead two seasons ago. Blessed be the wool that I could stuff in my ears.

"Please, Eliza, that is the nonsense you *must* restrain."

"I am sorry."

"That is what pains me. Now, let me finish the allegory. The sheep are innocent, feeding on the grass sown by Him. Their placid, sinless nature entices the wolves. God, in his infinite wisdom and care, gave us dogs to guard the sheep. Do you understand?"

"It is well explained," Eliza says.

Griselda nods. "When the beasts perform the labors of their purpose, God protects them."

"Even the wolves?"

"Even they."

"It would be a blessing for the sheep for God to smite the wolves," Eliza says. "Then we would not need dogs, although that would be a pity."

"It is not the natural order of things to have sheep without wolves. It is His intent that we learn from evil how to be good." Griselda sits next to Eliza and lays the haft of carded flax on the bench. "Finish this before nightfall."

"Is my lesson complete?"

"You vex me, child."

"I vex myself." I should be like Leonie. She hides her light without extinguishing it, whereas I combust.

"How does the exemplum apply to you?" Griselda smiles softly, smoothing her hand over Eliza's cheek. Her look is pleading, and Eliza promises herself to give the answers her mother wants, even if they are not the truth.

"I have a God-given purpose."

“And?”

It is my purpose to be a dowry and die in my lying-in, she thinks but chooses to say, “It is my purpose to worship the Holy Trinity, to obey my father, and cherish my mother.”

“Good, sweet Eliza, good. We will train the wolf out of you. By the grace of the Virgin Mother, you will go as a lamb.”

An ewe, I will go as a heavy-uddered ewe. Eliza fumbles her distaff and, in reaching to retrieve it, knocks the haft of carded flax to the ground. It is tangled.

“You are the clumsiest girl! Now that needs to be brushed out.” Griselda rises from the bench and pauses.

Eliza stops gathering the dropped flax, arrested by the same noise that stilled Griselda: a panicked clucking and battering of wings. A hen? Eliza wonders. In the chimney? Her distaff and spindle join the fibers on the hard-packed dirt floor. Griselda doesn’t mention it because, just at that moment, a chicken falls out of the chimney and into the boiling pot. They rush to the hearth. The chicken gives one kick, one flap of a wing, and is still.

“Witchcraft!” Griselda whispers. She falls to her knees, dragging Eliza with her.

“Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women....”

Eliza mouths the words without hearing them, fascinated by the bizarre fate of the hen. “...of thy womb...” Worse, she feels a bubble of hilarity rising in her throat. “...now and at the hour of our death. Amen.” Eliza covers her face with her hands, hoping to look pious and hoping to hide her smile.

“Are you laughing?” Griselda genuflects. “I will not have you draw more witchery.”

“Do you want me to defeather our boiled guest?”

“I want you out of my sight. The kitchen garden needs fertilizing. Gather dung, daughter, and reflect on your immortal soul.”



Eliza pushes the wheelbarrow to the field where placid goats graze. The goats also shit, in their placid way, and she takes the spade out of the wheelbarrow. My immortal soul, she thinks. Having obeyed her mother's wishes, she sets the thought aside. The weather this past week was sunny, and dried goat pellets are plentiful. She shovels them into the barrow, crisscrossing the field at random in her search.

“Eliza!”

“Leonie,” Eliza calls back. She dumps another load of pellets in the barrow and watches her heavily pregnant sister approach. “Are you here for the delightful offal?”

“No. I am here to talk with my dearest elder sister.” She kisses Eliza on the cheek.

“Osrice is home from the vineyard?”

“Yes. I've left him with Hincmar and tankards of beer.”

“Your marriage saddens me.”

“It shouldn't.” Leonie holds one hand under her belly and awkwardly sits on a boulder. “I never understood the sacrifice of the Virgin Mary until I fell pregnant.”

“Is the baby kicking?”

“Constantly. He is a feisty little man.”

Eliza chucks the spade into her wheelbarrow. It lands with a thud and a pungent whiff of droppings. "It may be a daughter."

"Pray to God that he is not! A woman is born cursed."

"Thanks be to Eve, that wench."

The girls laugh. Leonie is sixteen years to my seventeen, yet she is much older in every way that counts. "I will be joining you in the curse before the last frost of the winter. Mother is anxious to see me tamed."

Leonie's smile disappears. "You must not agree to marry."

"Are you drunk, sister? 'My honored parents, I would prefer not to marry.' Can you imagine the apoplexy?"

"I do not jest."

"Where would you have me go? There isn't a patch of land in the village lacking a marriageable man eager to wed the sheriff's last daughter. Now that my bosoms have come in, that is."

Leonie puts one hand on each side of her distended belly. "The child certainly objects to my opinion. Ohh! He intends to dislodge a kidney."

Eliza settles herself by Leonie's legs, leaning against the chilly boulder. How quickly heat fades. A day of sun and eons of cold.

"If you marry, you will be wretched," Leonie says.

"As you are with Osric?"

"I am not always wretched. He loves me, after his fashion. I am well provided for and rarely does he raise a hand in anger."

"Then it is settled; I shall marry and pray that my husband does not beat me more than is reasonable."

Leonie makes an exasperated noise. "This is not a joke, Eliza! If you marry, none will be more dispirited than you. It will ruin you."

"I've heard quite a bit about the ruination of my soul today. Mother's exemplum about the sheep, dogs and wolves has me bloodthirsty and howling."

"Sheep, dogs and wolves? I got sheep, oxen and dogs."

"No wolf in your moral?"

"There was, but only at the edge of the forest. My sheepish self was safe so long as I did not stray from my dog. Where 'dog' is 'husband.' This was just after my handfasting to Osric."

"How did you learn to do it? To behave?"

"It is a simple matter of refraining from expressing the thoughts I have. I can do this because it is what must be done. I do not wish the same for you."

Eliza rests her head against her sister's knee. "I see no way out of marriage. If you could not find one —"

"Look at me."

Eliza lifts her head.

"If you wed, he will have you spin, break, strip, and beat flax. He will have you pull beets. He will have you bear children, suckle them, bury those that die too young. He will deplete you. Even if he is a kind man, he will not be able to help it. I do not want that to happen to you."

"I love you for that, sister; I do. Yet..."

"There is another village."

"And there are no men there to wed? Otherwise, I see no difference in Elicot and this village you've conjured, except that I would never see you."

"I've not conjured it."

"Are you faint?" Eliza puts the back of her hand to her sister's forehead. "Have you eaten?"

Leonie pushes Eliza's hand away. "I am not ill. I am desperate to free you."

"I don't see how you can."

"The other village is full of plump, healthy girls who speak of wonders."

"You frighten me."

"I doubt any of them have known hunger. Eliza, can you imagine a winter without fear?"

She stands and helps Leonie heave herself off the boulder. Rain clouds are gathering on the horizon.

"The weather is about to turn. Let me take you home."

"Yes. Osric will want his meal."

"Good." Eliza pushes her wheelbarrow in the direction of Leonie's house. "Promise to keep this madness between us, sister. You will tempt Osric's fists. Or the stocks."

"I tell you this in secrecy and out of mercy."

A flock of starlings alights from the fields. They wheel in wild coordination on the rising wind. Even they, she thinks, are worried.

"I overheard two girls talking about how one was cured of the plague," Leonie says.

"Now Jesus lives there? Saints in heaven, Leonie! Since you will not cease this babbling, tell me how to get there."

"Go East, where the Day Star rises and sets," Leonie whispers.



That night, Eliza lays on her mattress in the main room of the house. Soon, she will need to move it close to the fireplace in a futile attempt to fight the

cold. Jack is asleep next to her, curled up in the blankets like a caterpillar in a cocoon. What sort of man will you be? Eliza wonders. She tries to find a comfortable position without disturbing the little boy. Her parents are in the second room of the house; there, they sleep on a raised bed that will be inherited by Mischason, the eldest male heir. A beautiful quilt made by Griselda serves to partition the main room from the bridal bed. It looks lovely, but does nothing for privacy.

"Mischa, you must stop talking law with Eliza," she hears her mother say. "You encourage her. There are whispers she is strange, and if you continue, I fear those whispers will be her ruin."

"She is painfully intelligent for a girl," Mischa says.

"She is a test sent from God, and I fear we are failing."

"I have asked several men to consider her for handfasting. It is not an easy proposition for them. She has grown quite lovely, even so, there is resistance."

"More the reason, my love, to help me cultivate her for marriage."

The bed creaks. A huffed breath blows out a candle. Outside, it begins to rain.

Institute

Chapter 2

Eliza has a headache, and her eyes refuse to focus. An unfamiliar sensation of movement disturbs her stomach. The last thing she recalls is drinking the vial of liquid that her father gave her. Holy Mary, Mother of God. Pray for us sinners now and in the hour of our death, Eliza thinks. Though I vomit in the shadow of the Valley of Death... She forces herself to focus on the three girls seated opposite her. Saint Millicent, what witches are these?

“She is awake.” This is said by a girl with golden curls framing her face and an improbably large amount of hair piled on top of her head.

“Dude, we thought you were dead,” says another girl, this one a redhead.

“You had some gnarly wounds on your wrists. Wenlock had to debride them and give you heavy-duty IV antibiotics,” the third girl says.

Eliza makes a point to ignore the third girl’s hair but fails. It is raven black, perfectly straight, and is parted down the middle. She is not wearing a dress, Eliza realizes.

“When are you from?” asks the redhead.

Hair, Eliza thinks stupidly.

"Yah, when are you from?" asks the girl who is not wearing a dress.

"Where am I?" Eliza asks. The room she is in sways, turns to the left, and Eliza puts out her hands to stop herself from falling over. She is seated on a bench, alone on her side of this movement.

"We're going to Bellumfort."

"Bellumfort?"

"The *Bellumfort Institute*," says the redhead. "Don't you know what the *Institute* is?"

I do not, Eliza thinks, touching one of her bandaged wrists in confusion.

"Leave her be," said the girl with curly hair. She presses her hand to her stomach, which is encased in a garment that tightens the bodice of her dress. "This carriage is making me ill."

The redhead and the girl wearing pants exchange a look. "We call this a van, not a carriage. It doesn't use horses to pull it."

"What moves it?"

The girl in pants says, "An engine. It's technology from the, what? Twentieth century? Based on your style, that's a century from your when. I mean, what year do you think it is?"

"It is the year of our Lord one-thousand eight hundred and sixty-four."

"Civil War!" the redhead says. "I'm from the 1990s, and the most I've seen is the advent of the commercial internet."

Eliza recognizes her own confusion in the expression of the girl with gold curls and an absurdly pinched waist. The room called "van" ceases to move. A door in the back swings open, letting in a wash of bright sunlight.

"Welcome to Bellumfort Institute, ladies!"

The redhead and the girl in pants hop out of the vehicle. Gold curls extends her hand to the man who spoke; he helps her down with a slight bow. Eliza does not move.

"Please, come out," he coaxes. "You are justifiably baffled, but if you'll come with me, I'll explain where and when you are."

What in the everlasting patience of God is happening? Eliza wonders.

"That's it," the man encourages, as Eliza gets out of the van. "The fresh air will be good for you."

A fifth girl exits another door of the van. Her dress has a dog sewn near the hem. Or perhaps it is a sheep?

The other new arrivals stand in a group, making it clear they don't intend to invite her. The girl with the cinched waist drapes a hand on the arm of the man who said he would explain. She is blinking up at him, trembling in the fashion of the kind of woman Eliza hopes never to become.

"Where am I?" Eliza demands.

"We told you on the way here and this dude with the fancy shoes just said it again." The redhead makes an elaborate show of rolling her eyes. "People from the Dark Ages are even dumber than I thought."

"Ladies, ladies! Let us be kind to the less technologically advanced, which, I must remind you, is everyone from the developmental communities. On this campus, we do not use pejorative terms for other epochs. 'Dark Ages' is unacceptable and historically inaccurate. Your name is Brittany Jensen, correct?"

Redheaded Brittany nods. A name to go with the hair! Eliza looks more closely at Brittany. What she mistook for a dress in the dim-lit van is something shorter. It exposes a long length of pale legs and feet clad in the heaviest boots Eliza has ever seen.

"I am Director Lowell Sixsmith. On behalf of all mankind, thank you for ensuring the reclamation of our shared history." He pauses to drink out of a cylindrical jug that opens and closes with a twist of the top. "You are the last of the EIUs, the graduating class, so to speak."

The girl with the cinched waist makes a distressed squeak. "Director Sixsmith, I feel faint. What do your words mean?"

"Ah, my apologies. Your name is Violet Marlsleigh, if I am not wrong."

"Miss Violet Marlsleigh, yes. My father owns the paper factory in Philadelphia. Perhaps you have met him in business?"

"I have not." Lowell pats the hand she rests in the crook of his elbow and says, "I doubt he is as charming as you, Miss Marlsleigh."

"Thank you, Director Sixsmith, forgive me for being flustered."

"Let me put your mind at ease. You are each a valued, vital part of the Institute's mission. As such, your well-being is my utmost concern."

The girl wearing the dog-sheep takes Lowell's other arm. "Please say I'm included in your concern."

Her sapphire eyes are a brilliant plea and, Eliza notices, her bosoms are unnaturally pointy.

"Of course, Miss Cindy Bergstrom. You are all in my care."

Not to be overlooked, the girl in the pants moves directly in front of Lowell. "I'm Pamela Claes, from the groovy sixties."

The director continues to spout meaningless words. Eliza looks around. The clearing where they stand is surrounded by immense brick buildings interrupted by a myriad of large windows. A distant

manor is surmounted by a dome, green with the verdigris of aged copper. The weather, at least, is familiar. Dry leaves chatter amongst themselves in a language only a little more baffling than the Director's.

A beautiful woman approaches the group.

"Ah, my bride!" Lowell exclaims. "Everyone, allow me to introduce Sarah Sixsmith, my wife and a former EIU."

"He's married. Of course," Brittany remarks to Cindy.

"Yes, *married*," Sarah says, with a look that is either resignation or irritation.

"Sarah is here to help you adjust to life on our fine campus, Miss Waite. The experience can be overwhelming for pre-Modern EIUs."

"Will you be home for dinner?" Sarah asks Lowell.

"I may be late, my darling. New girls, you see. I am to be the host of hosts." Lowell smiles at Violet. "You'll adjust more quickly than Eliza, but some shocks cannot be avoided. I'll help you through those."

"Oh, he will help you," Sarah says. "The Director is accommodating to a fault."

"I leave that to these girls to determine for themselves," Lowell snaps.

"What do people do for fun around here?" Pamela asks.

"Are there dances?" Violet asks.

"Are there men?" Brittany asks. "All I see are girls. Please tell me the Institute is coed."

"The EIUs are exclusively women."

"Why?" Eliza asks. "Why only women?"

Lowell Sixsmith raises his eyebrows. "The reports said you are inquisitive."

“What is the reason only women can be...” Eliza fumbles the acronym. “E-U...?”

“EIUs,” Cindy corrects.

“There is a scientific reason. However, like my wife, you are not of a time that can understand science. Your epoch, as generously stated by Le Goff, is 'more willing to take as its subject the exceptional, the *mirabilia*' than the repeatable, predictable objects of modern science. Where we have the scientific method, you have proof by miracle.

“Given you’re curious, I’ll *attempt* to accommodate your limited knowledge. The plainest explanation for the lack of male EIUs is two-fold. Boys develop their emotional intelligence an average of five to a preposterous ten years later than girls. The Institute has deadlines, chief of which is the increasing inhospitality of Earth to human life. An extra decade to develop boys into EIUs is undesirable. The second reason there are no male EIUs is that they were a distraction from the historical reclamation process. As your fellow arrivals have demonstrated, there is a propensity amongst nubile women to seek male attention. Given the corresponding male desire for nubile women, you can see the difficulty.”

Director Sixsmith likes that he can belittle me with words he knows I do not comprehend. Father would disabuse this man of his pomposity. Blessed Millicent, Leonie would run circles around this ass.

Since neither of them are here, Eliza presses the question for them. “Could you not bring wives and widows? They abound in Elicot and quite a few are no longer nubile.”

The director shakes his head and turns to his wife. “You and Eliza have much to discuss, so we’ll leave you to it. The rest of you ladies get the VIP tour.”

Eliza is alone with Sarah. They look at one another across the clarity of the late autumn sunlight. A flock of geese passes overhead, making a racket. Sarah takes Eliza's hand, leading her across the green.

"Are you tired from the journey? Do you need to piss?"

"Both, in truth."

"You'll be amazed at the privy chamber. It is one invention I would miss were I to return to my... *our* time."

"What is your village named?"

"Antietam."

"Do you visit Antietam often?"

"There is no one left to visit. The crops failed, and a plague descended on the town. I was dying when they brought me here."

"How long have you been here?" Eliza asks.

"Five winters, four summers."

Sarah stops and points at a magnolia tree. "You can use this as a signpost. The dorm you live in, Virginia Hall, is just beyond it."

Virginia, like the other buildings, is improbably large. Eliza follows Sarah onto the porch, where a two-wheeled contraption leans against the building. It is not a wheelbarrow; there is nowhere to load the dung.

Before she can ask about it, Sarah opens the door and leads her into a vaulted room. Clusters of chairs and low tables are scattered around the large space like cows in a pasture. There is an unlit fireplace on one side of the room. A girl sits on a ledge under a window, staring at them. A round item mounted on the wall rhythmically ticks.

"This is the parlor," Sarah says. "Girls gather here sometimes."

“To weave? Or quilt?”

“Neither generally. They play cards. And complain. You’ll never hear such whining about unimportant things as are mewled in the parlor.”

Eliza touches the back of one of the sofas. “I have never seen a bench as luxurious as this, nor so many in one room.”

“Westmoreland was crowded with girls when I arrived.” Sarah gestures at the array of seating. “Even here, there were not enough seats for everyone.”

“They married and moved to their husband’s home?”

Sarah laughs. It lacks even a hint of mirth. “No, few marry, although many wish to.”

Eliza stops poking at the sofa. “Where did they go? Back to their villages?”

“They can’t; most of the developmental communities died like Antietam.”

“Then where have they gone?”

Instead of answering, Sarah points to a door at the side of the room. They walk across a wooden floor that strikes Eliza as an extravagant waste when hard-packed dirt is just fine. She bumps into Sarah, startled into looking up.

An ornate, gold-gilt frame, easily the span of her outstretched arms, hangs on the wall. There is a moment where Eliza thinks she is looking at a living person; the detail is more realistic than anything she has ever seen on Elicot. She falls to her knees and crosses herself. She feels Sarah next to her, but she is not kneeling in prayer.

Sarah hiss-whispers, “Stand up.”

“Another of you, Sarah?” the girl on the windowsill teases.

“Mrs. Sixsmith to you, Sum.”

"You Middle Ages gals are just the strangest. No one makes us laugh harder, *Mrs. Sixsmith*."

"Eliza, *get up*."

Confused but on her feet, Eliza asks, "Is that girl not Catholic? Are you not?"

"Of course, I am. I'll explain, but not here."

Sarah pulls Eliza down a hall lined with identical doors and into a stairwell. When the door between the hall and the stairwell slams shut, Sarah releases Eliza. "Doing what you did back there will make life unbearable."

"What I did was kneel before the image of Our Savior, Jesus Christ."

"That is not Jesus Christ."

"Your church must have paintings, or at least a crucifix!" Eliza's headache reasserts itself. "Do you not recognize His image in that painting?"

"It's not that simple."

"Why did you not at least genuflect?"

"Because that is *not* Jesus Christ. That is Adam Teryan, founder of the Bellumfort Institute. There are books here that show the Savior's true face. Teryan is a demon and put his face in our churches."

Eliza swallows; her throat clicks. A lie in the church? Hadn't Leonie said something about the Day Star in the tryptic?

"We won't sort everything at once. What we need to do is get you to your room and change your clothes. The less you remind them of when you are, the better."

Eliza follows Sarah up multiple staircases. At each landing, there is a window. When they reach the third landing, Eliza gasps, "Is it on fire?"

Sarah looks outside. "Oh," she says. "No, that's the setting sun reflected on the glass windows. Ball Hall is

where the developmental community advisors used to live. It's empty now."

"The glass here multiplies like fleas in the linen," Eliza murmurs.

The glass is not important, yet it is all she can grasp amid the buzzing in her mind. She bumps into Sarah, who is stopped in front of one of the identical doors on the third floor. "My mother is right, I am clumsy," and why, why am I unable to stop croaking inanities?

"This is the privy. It is called 'bathroom' or 'restroom.'"

Inside, white basins line one wall, surmounted by silvery glass. Stalls line the opposite side of the room, and beyond that are narrow rooms, each with a thin blanket pushed to the side of the entryway. Sarah pushes open the first stall.

"This is a toilet."

Eliza goes into the narrow space and looks at the gleaming white chair with a hole in the seat. "There's water in it."

"Yes. That is part of the experience. Go ahead; I'll turn my back."

The seat is cold. For a moment, Eliza fears nothing will happen. At the first loud stream, she sighs with relief.

"Where is the straw?" Eliza asks.

"Look to your left. That roll is toilet paper. Use it like straw."

"Are you certain? The material is soft and fine."

"Try it."

"That *is* nicer than straw."

"And when your monthly bleed comes, tell me and I'll reveal the blessing of tampons."

Eliza lowers her clothing to exit the stall.

"You need to flush it."

“What?”

“Watch.” Sarah puts one dainty foot on a lever attached to the toilet. A tremendous noise, a rush of water, then a trickle refilling the bowl. “That is how the chamber pot empties. Works for shit the same way.”

There are no words, Eliza thinks.

“Next, wash your hands. It prevents the spread of distempers.” She turns a knob, and more water is conjured. Eliza steps to the basin and gapes. There is a girl in the glass.

“That’s me?”

“Yes, and clearer than any still pond.”

Eliza considers her reflection. Her eyes are a mesmerizing hazel, shaded more gold than green in the artificial light. I look like Father, although my chin and nose are more delicate.

“When you want to bathe, you use the rooms in the back. Those are showers. It is a waterfall, but you control the temperature. One knob is warm, the other is cold. Soap and shampoo should be in your room with a towel and bath shoes.”

“No one goes to the river?”

“There is no river on Bellumfort.” She takes Eliza by the hand, tugs a bit before she moves from the mirror. “Come on,” Sarah says.

They go back into the main hall, turn right.

“Can you read Arabic numerals?” Sarah asks.

Eliza shakes her head.

“This is your room number.” Sarah traces the gold numbers fastened to the door. “The first number is three and represents the floor you live on. Remember: we went into the building by the magnolia, crossed the lobby and came up three sets of stairs, which makes this the third floor.”

"The next is a one and the last a nine. When asked, you say that you live in Virginia Hall, room three-nineteen."

"Will someone ask?" Saints in heaven, what is this compulsion to speak? At least in Elicot, I said intelligent things.

"Maybe not, but you should know your address. Which is?"

"Virginia Hall, three-nineteen."

"Good," Sarah replies. She takes a key out of her pocket and passes it to Eliza. "You'll want to lock the door, even when you're inside."

The key is cool, metallic, and absurdly tiny. Keys on the village are bulky, long as her hand and wielded only by Sheriff Waite. Don't think about the keys, she thinks, don't think about the cell.

The lock slides free with a small click. Eliza pushes open the door, behind which there is a single room, roughly the same size as the Waite house. The fertility of glass at the Institute is unassailable; even this room has a window. Eliza finds herself gaping and closes her mouth. Sarah coaxes her to the center of the room. The room does not face the sunset, and the light is dim. Despite this, Eliza sees everything in a rush, a feeling like jumping from somewhere very high and not knowing what lies below.

"A bedstead!" she exclaims.

"Yes! I was praising God when I saw a raised bed in my room. Come, try it."

Eliza and Sarah sit on the bed, Sarah bouncing on it a bit. Eliza does the same, and in a moment, hears herself laughing. "What miraculous straw stuffs this bed?"

"It is not straw, but it is one of the many wonders of Bellumfort. There are *some* compensations for the

wenches you will encounter.” Sarah picks up a folded pile of cloth. “These are the linens, of course. There is an odd one called a ‘fitted sheet,’ that one stretches over the mattress. The others are the standard variety. The bedspread is over next to you, on the pillow. If this room is like the rest, there should be an extra blanket in the closet.”

Eliza runs her hands across the smooth fabric. “The spinsters here are talented. I don’t feel a single lump.”

“Amazing, isn’t it? Were you talented with the distaff?”

“To my mother’s displeasure, no. My thread never drew as fine as it should.”

“I was quite good, if that isn’t overly prideful of me to say. I miss it.”

“Miss it? I am always glad to be quit of my spindle.”

Sarah gets up from the bed. She opens a drawer in the dresser. It sits next to a small table, with a wooden chair tucked under it. “These are your clothes. Pants, shirt, sweatshirt. This is a bra.” She holds up a white contraption.

“What is it for?”

“It lifts your girls.”

“My ... girls are still pert; I’ve not borne any children.”

“You may want to try it anyway.”

“And you’re wearing one now?”

“Yes.”

“You do have an enviable form.”

Sarah cups her breasts in her hands. “I am blessed. Oh, there should be a coat and shoes in the closet. And these are socks.” She picks up a ball of fabric that unrolls into two tubes that are sewn closed at one end. “They make shoes more comfortable.”

“Must I wear all of this?”

"You'll want to. The girls here are cruel. My advice is to stay quiet and be as inconspicuous as possible."

Quiet and inconspicuous? Me? A door slams somewhere in the hall.

"Mrs. Sixsmith—"

"Sarah."

"Sarah. Why are all the girls here young? I did not understand your husband's explanation."

"When we are young, our emotions billow in storms."

"How old were you when you arrived?"

"Sixteen."

"And your storms have passed?"

"No, but they are less potent than the Institute requires." Sarah looks around the room as she speaks. "With the waning of emotion comes a familiarity with things not of our time. An EIU out of her time no longer has value to the mission. Lowell calls it 'a depreciation of verisimilitude' when what he means is that what we see here starts to show up in the simulations of our epochs. Can you imagine the bathroom appearing out of nowhere in your village?"

"Witchcraft," Eliza whispers, rubbing at the bandages on her wrist.

"It ruins the experience for people on New Norfolk and nothing is more important to the Institute and Lowell than excellent experiences for those colonists."

"I don't understand any of this."

"I know." After a moment, Sarah asks, "Will you miss your family?"

"Some of them, yes. My sister Leonie and little Jack, my father's bastard."

"You'll have to tell me all about them, and then we'll be friends."

“I am not good at friendship, but I would like to learn.”



The last thing Sarah shows Eliza is the light switch. It controls the illumination of an orb mounted on the ceiling. When Sarah leaves, Eliza spends a childish amount of time turning the light on, off, on, off. She settles for off, in concession to her headache. A vast weariness overtakes her. She kneels at the bedstead.

“Our Father, who art in Heaven, protect my immortal soul from sin. Send my father forgiveness for what he had to do. Shed your grace on my sister and my mother. Although it says little of me, I begrudgingly ask you to send blessings to Osric. I am trying, my blessed Millicent, trying to forgive Cassian and even Bartholomew, but oh, it is beyond me, so long as these bruises and cuts ache, while the memory of drowning is fresh. I am weak, too weak in faith to pardon them. Mother Mary, blessed be the fruit of your womb, may you fill me with meekness and humility.”

Eliza lies on the bed and pulls the covers over herself. A sickening realization fills her, as panicky and quick as a flock of purple marlins at nightfall. I lost the basket; I lost the angel Father carved for me.

Village

Chapter 3

Eliza follows her mother and father into the church, Jack's tiny hand in hers. Cassian Quinn stands by the Waite's pew. Eliza dips her fingers into the font, makes the sign of the cross on Jack and repeats the process on herself. The holy water is frigid with righteousness and perfection. She kneels on the flagstones, her genuflection mimicked by Jack. They stand to follow Mischa and Griselda through air scented with the austere, familiar scent of musty pine and spice.

"Sheriff and Mrs. Waite," Cassian says. "Thank you for the honor of allowing me a seat with your family."

"It is lovely to see you, Cassian. I hear you added a room to your home. What a fine, large space that must be."

Eliza feels a flurry of unease at seeing her mother's hopeful smile.

"How fares your harvest?" Griselda asks.

"Plentiful, by God's grace."

"Isn't that wonderful, Eliza?"

Eliza is surprised to hear her name. "Yes?" she says. I knew it would happen, but I did not know it would happen now.

The sheriff shakes Cassian's hand. "You look hale."

“Though I have no woman to feed me, is what you mean?”

Both men consider Eliza. The bell rings and the procession exits the sacristy. Thank God, Eliza thinks. She is less grateful when her mother positions her to stand next to Cassian, who looks at her like a man pleased with a new mule. The candle bearers pass the Waite’s pew, stepping soundlessly as angels. Next is the deacon, a gaunt man whose trembling arms hold the ornate Gospel Book just below his rheumy eyes. Father Demarco, hands empty and folded, is the last to arrive at the sanctuary.

The faint shushing of fabric accompanies the congregation’s genuflection.

“The Lord be with you,” Father Demarco calls.

“And with your spirit,” the flock responds.

Eliza lets the holiness of the Mass envelop her, standing for prayer and singing in a pure, youthful voice. Her sole distraction is the uncomfortable pressure of Cassian’s sleeve, brushing against her more than seems reasonable. During the long sermon, Eliza contemplates the holy tryptic. It stands in front of the Waite pew, unfolded in a glory of veneration.

The central panel is the crucifixion of Christ, his head turned from the proffered sour wine. Soldiers cast lots to determine who gets Christ’s clothing. They are oblivious to the blood and holy water dribbling down His side. Three women weep; they are out of proportion to the rise of the mountain behind them; they are giantesses. Surmounting the scene are the sun, the moon, and, brighter than either, the Day Star. Eliza focuses on Christ’s serene expression. Where is your anger? Eliza questions. Sunday by Sunday she asks and receives no answer. I am angry; I am furious! She knows the impropriety of these feelings;

she knows Christ suffers for her immortal soul. Can I not be both grateful for the miracle and angry at the injustice? Who can look upon the crucifixion and lack fury? I would pull the moon from the sky were I those giantesses and crush the soldiers slowly and with joy. I would take Christ from the cross and kiss his smooth brow, gaze into his unearthly gray eyes and accept my punishment for perverting God's plan. When I go to Hell, Eliza thinks, I will burn brighter than the Day Star.

A hymn begins, and Eliza stands to sing. She is crying and her words are clogged with snot. When it is over, she sinks back to the pew, exhausted with her Savior's pain. Cassian places a handkerchief in Eliza's lap, but she does not use it. Let him see me blotched and covered in my own mess. Let him know the depth of my worship inspires emotion I will never expend on a man. No marriage will supplant Jesus Christ. It is fair that Cassian realizes this before his choice is irrevocable.

Eliza forces herself to focus on the left panel of the tryptic. This shows Judas committing suicide. He hangs from a tree. His stomach is distended. Worms spill from his robes, and his eyes are missing, devoured by the carrion eaters circling eternally over the traitor's corpse. A wolf with horns creeps from a cave lit by hellfire. No one came for Christ, Eliza thinks, yet worms, vultures, and Satan come for Judas.

The last panel of the tryptic is the death dance. There are four figures in it: two skeletons, a bishop, and a young woman. The leader of the troupe is a skeleton with a scythe resting at a jaunty angle on his collarbone. This skeleton's head is turned backwards, encouraging the bishop's hesitant steps towards the

center panel of the tryptic where Christ suffers. Tears stream down the bishop's chubby cheeks to stain his vestments. The second skeleton holds the bishop's wrist in a bony hand. This cheeky skeleton, with his grinning, toothless smile, offers his other arm to the girl. She raises a demure hand, rejecting the offer. No, thank you kindly, but I do not need your handkerchief, your extra room, or your plentiful harvest.

Father Demarco lifts the host in his right hand, the chalice in his left. "Behold the Lamb of God."

A church of voices replies, "Lord, I am not worthy."

Father consumes the Body of the Lord. He lifts the chalice and drinks the Precious Blood. Next, the ancient deacon takes his communion. One by one, parishioners kneel to receive on the tongue and partake of the blood. Eliza's heart beats faster; from here she can see the bejeweled reliquary housing the blessed paw of Saint Millicent. Her color rises with faithful wrath. The injustice of man to saints, the cruel treatment of Christ, the timidity of the bishop following the skeleton to his judgement roil Eliza's heart. It is a distraction from the realization that Cassian's lips will brush the chalice where hers rested, that they will share a kiss tasting of Christ's sacrifice.



Outside the church, people exchange pleasantries. Eliza turns to Cassian and tries to give his handkerchief back. "It is as clean as when you dropped it in my lap."

"Please keep it. Consider it a token of my admiration."

"Admiration?"

Cassian is about to reply when Griselda approaches. "It is a pleasant day for a stroll. Please join us, Cassian. The sheriff and I will walk at a suitable distance behind you and Eliza."

"I promised Jack that I would walk him home the long way, to look at the scarecrow dressed as an archer," Eliza lies.

"Your father and I can manage Jack."

"Thank you, Mrs. Waite." Cassian offers his arm to Eliza.

Griselda nods at her, and Eliza puts a hand on the proffered elbow. She tries not to resist when Cassian pulls her close to his side. If he were toothless, she thinks, we could masquerade as the third panel of the tryptic.

"Shall we?" he asks.

Eliza swallows, nods. Shall we what? she wonders. Pretend that I want to be here?

"You have become lovely over the past year, if you do not mind my saying so."

"I do mind it."

Cassian laughs. "You have spirit."

"I am sad for my husband, then." Eliza sees Osric helping Leonie and her improbable belly into their mule cart. "I apologize for leaving you to walk alone, but Leonie looks pale."

"Please stay; I want to tell you the sort of husband I will be."

"How is that any of my affair?"

Cassian places a hand over Eliza's, the one lying limp in the crook of his arm. She feels his warmth.

"Have you not guessed?" he asks.

"I do not want to play this game."

"It is not a game, Eliza Waite. I intend to win your affection."

"And I intend to refuse handfasting."

"Your father is eager to see you married."

Osric's cart clatters past, and Eliza meets Leonie's stricken gaze.

"It takes a brave man to propose matrimony to you. You must realize that."

Cassian pulls her closer to his side.

"It is a *foolhardy* man who takes an unwilling wife."

"Ah. It is a foolish woman who rejects an offer without hearing the terms. Do you agree?"

"Say what you must, Mr. Cassian."

"My land is the best in the village. My sow is fat and my chickens good layers. You will have meat every night."

"Every except Friday," she corrects him.

He frowns. "I am not a heathen. Of course, we will abstain on Fridays."

"You did say 'every night,' sir."

"I believe you knew what I meant and are being difficult."

Eliza looks over her shoulder. Her parents are far enough behind that they cannot hear her conversation. Griselda makes a shooing motion, and Eliza turns her attention back to Cassian.

"I am not difficult," she says.

"My oxen are young," he replies.

"I am precise."

"As am I, when need be."

They pass the field where Leonie begged Eliza not to marry. A mockingbird is perched on the boulder where they sat, singing broken songs. When it is clear Eliza has no intention of replying, Cassian resumes listing his possessions.

"I have two goblets and a brass candlestick, yours to shine." Cassian picks up a brilliant red maple leaf,

twirling it between his fingers before continuing in a lowered voice. "I have a feather mattress on the bedstead, yours to warm."

Eliza blushes. "Were I to accept, could I have a dog?"

"Yes, of course."

"And a gold ring?"

"Two, if it pleases you."

"What else?"

"Beautiful children, with my gold hair and your hazel eyes." He passes the maple leaf to Eliza. "Is all of that so terrible?"

Eliza holds the leaf up to the sun, scrutinizing the veins branching from the stem.

"I will be a kind husband. Unlike most men, I value your intelligence."

"My intelligence? This is our longest conversation, and I've said nothing bright at all. You court me because I am the sheriff's daughter."

"True, part of my desire is that you are well-placed. You are also lovely."

"I'm terrible at spinning."

"Now I must retract my offer." Cassian smiles at her.

Eliza hears herself laugh. What am I doing, she wonders? Who is this girl, laughing with my voice?

"We've reached your house far too quickly," he says.

"Thank you for seeing me here safely, Mr. Quinn."

"Please call me Cassian. If not now, then when you become Mrs. Quinn."

Eliza watches him until he reaches a bend in the road. She twirls the dying leaf in her fingers before dropping it underfoot.



Griselda hums as she and Eliza shape dough into flat ovals. They are made of wheat flour in honor of Sunday, flavored with fresh minced spices and garlic. Jack turns a roast on the spit. Behind them, the table is set with pewter plates. Rosemary sprigs and autumn flowers fill a jug at the center of the table.

"What do you think of Mr. Quinn?" Griselda asks Eliza.

"He is polite."

"He has a strong singing voice. You harmonized well with him." Griselda looks at her daughter, who is poking at a lump of dough. "Did he say anything pleasing to you?"

"He has a brass candlestick and longs to own a dog."

"A dog?"

"Oh, yes. And two gold rings to wear as he sips from his goblet."

Griselda wipes her hands on her apron. "Jack, please go get apples from the root cellar."

"Can Little Mother come with me?"

"No, Eliza remains here."

Jack gives a half-hearted turn to the spit. The coals hiss under the fresh patter of grease. "The cellar is dark."

"Ask Father to go with you."

Jack bounds to the door, calling for Mischa. When he is outside, Griselda says, "Cassian is a good choice for husband. You know that."

"I do not want a husband."

"Are you frightened of the matrimonial bed?"

"Mother!"

"It is normal for a virgin to be timid."

Eliza shakes her head. "It is... I am afraid of falling pregnant."

"The baby is a soul who flies to you at night."

"Why do I need a husband if the baby will fly to me at night?"

"The soul needs a body, does it not?" Griselda rearranges the rosemary and flowers. "Cassian will know you as Adam knew Eve. It is painful at first, but it does not have to be degrading."

Eliza places the dough onto the hot coals before covering them with more embers. The warming bread releases the pungent, wilderness scent of roasting garlic. She tops the ash cakes with more coals because that is how you make them, but also because then she does not have to look at her mother.

"Where is he with those apples?" Griselda asks.

"Watch the bread while I find the boy. Cheese and honey, too; I'll fetch those."

Eliza turns the meat on the spit. There is a kinship between us, she thinks. I, too, will be trussed and consumed. She sits back on her heels to stare at the thatched roof and exposed beams. When I am married, I will look at a different ceiling. I will be the one deciding to have cheese on Sunday. I will be the one burning the ash cakes!

"Why is it smoky?" Jack asks.

Eliza shoves the least burned ash cakes on the top of the stack.

"Where is your mind?" Griselda asks.

"I was distracted."

"You are in a perpetual state of distraction." Griselda shakes her head, turning one cake to examine the other side. A blackened crust covers what is surely

a hard center of overdone bread. "You will have this one. And Jack must suffer the other ruined cake."

"There are three," Jack says.

"The third will go to the chickens."

"Should I start more?" Eliza asks.

"Do you think I want to explain to your father why he is eating a piece of charcoal?"

Eliza stands up from her crouch. She stomps her left foot on the stone hearth. "My penance, if it pleases you. I have pins and needles in my foot."

"What pleases me is bread suitable for people, not fowl."

"Yes, Mother."

"Cut the apples. I'll finish the bread for almsgiving."

"For the blind men?" Jack asks.

Griselda nods.

"Can I go with Little Mother?"

"No." Griselda passes him a basket. "Gather eggs, if you can find any."

Jack pouts. "But I want to see the blind men, too."

"The blind men want to see you, but it is not God's will that we all get what we want."

When Jack goes to do his chores, the women work in silence. Griselda peels the rind from the cheese, putting the shavings in a sack to flavor winter soup. Eliza cuts apples, which release a floral, faintly vanilla scent. Later they'll be topped with honey and nutmeg; for now, Eliza squeezes a lemon over them to prevent browning.

Griselda bundles three ash cakes into a cloth along with a generous hunk of cheese. She hands them to Eliza. "Notice that these are not burned."

"You do not need to harp."

"Mind your tone, young lady." Griselda shoos fruit-drunk flies from the bowl of apples. "Pray upon

your marriage proposal. And be back no later than when the sun is even with the hayfield treetops.”

“I’ll pass your prayers on to the blind men.”

“Good girl.”

Eliza steps out into the late afternoon sunlight. The mule stands forlorn sentry in the yard. He looks at her with dark eyes, as different from Cassian’s sapphire eyes as my ash cakes are compared to mother’s. She feeds him apple cores, scratching the spot between his ears. He follows her down the road a bit, nosing at the parcel of food.

Eliza pats him on the neck, saying, “Stay here, friend.”

He responds with a hissing stream of piss, then ambles back to the yard.



Eliza finds the three blind men seated outside their hut. It is a sad dwelling, small and with giant chinks in the wattle and daub. Someone gave them a chicken; it roasts over an open fire. The men are drinking ale and sniffing the air.

“Eliza Waite, is it?”

“Yes, Ethelred.”

“You’ve been using lemon,” George says.

“To keep the apples from browning,” Eliza replies.

“We’re having them with dinner.”

“As good a time as any,” Partridge says.

The men are blind in different ways. A film of flesh covers Ethelred’s eyeless sockets. George’s eyes are white marbles. Partridge has eyes that look normal yet perceive nothing beyond the difference between light and dark.

"The Sheriff and Mrs. Waite send their prayers for your health. I've brought you bread and cheese."

"Do you not pray for us yourself?" Ethelred asks.

"Likely as much as you pray for me."

George guffaws. "Eth is out of sorts because Partridge spilled the buttermilk Mr. Quinn brought."

Cassian is suddenly everywhere, Eliza thinks.

"Your father is in dowry negotiations with him."

Partridge says. He sits with his head hanging at the odd angle of one who has no reason to gaze about him. "Do you have all of your teeth?"

"Yes."

"Good, good," Partridge nods.

"That means you'll be fit for birthing," Ethelred says. It is an unnecessary explanation, given sullenly for Eliza's tart reply to his question about the prayers.

"Babes don't come out of the mother's mouth,"

Partridge says.

Ethelred frowns. "I know that. Don't fret at me."

George pats a barrel seat near him. "Please, sit with us a bit. You amuse me."

"You are in the minority, then. My mother is far from amused."

"Your sister is with child?"

"Yes, Partridge. It is her first."

"Good, good."

"Osric thinks so," Eliza says.

The men take another draught of ale. Eliza sits on the barrel seat. As she traces patterns in the dirt with the toe of her shoe, she asks, "Why are you named Partridge?"

"I hatched blind as a bird from an egg. Why are you named Eliza?"

"The first Eliza died."

"Did your mother have all of her teeth?"

"She still does."

"She was a fine-looking girl, your mother," George says. "I can recall her face from before the cloudiness descended."

Eliza tries to imagine her mother youthful as she or Leonie are now. It is always a shock to realize your parents were once young because it is a shock to realize you will be old. Old and apparently toothless.

"Do you look forward to your marriage?" Ethelred asks.

"Will you still visit of a Sunday afternoon when you are Mrs. Quinn?" Partridge asks.

"I have no plans for a wedding, nor do I know I shall be Mrs. Quinn."

George opens the parcel Eliza brought. He feels the bread and cheese with the tips of his fingers. It reminds Eliza of kittens searching for a nipple, which in turn reminds her of Leonie's body, swollen with child and overgrown heavers.

Partridge claps his hands. "Story! It is that time of light."

"Whose turn is it to tell today?" Eliza asks.

These men have spun stories for her on innumerable fair-weather Sundays. When it rains, and especially when it is cold, there are no stories. It is good, good that the weather is mild today. I swear, God, I did not mean to mock Partridge in my mind by repeating 'good, good,' although I've just done it again.

"It is my turn," George says. "I will tell you the wonders and horrors of the Dancing Sickness. This story comes from my father; may he rest in peace."

"Amen," everyone says.

"It started with one girl at church during the Eucharist. She was a tiny thing, not much more than a

decade on this world. Her mother whispered to her to stop fidgeting. The child did not stop. She grew more agitated, swinging her arms and jumping in time to a song only she heard. The people closest to her felt awe. 'She is inspired by the Holy Spirit,' they repeated, one to another. She and the priest, well! It was a bizarre reel those two danced. He performed the rites as she jigged and jogged, right there in His House. When the priest completed his communion, the little mite stood still. She did not remember having danced. This was a sore disappointment to those folk who longed to hear what the Holy Spirit feels like.

"Some days later, another girl convulsed. No one thought to connect one with the other. This second girl was of marriageable age and not in church when it came upon her. She was not the sort of Little Mother to jump wildly in the fields, grimacing and flailing her arms when no flax lay at her feet. Her brother led her home. She kept at the ghost-flailing all through the town; it is said she did not cease her movement until the following Sunday, when the priest took communion.

"The next day, several girls left their mother's hearth, agitated as fillies in the presence of a stallion. They pulled grotesque faces, hopped, skipped. Even shouted unseemly words. Pleading mothers tried to lead them home. They would not be led. Some diabolical passion brought them all to the church, where they continued their frenzy. By good fortune, the sheriff of that time was nearby. Barred the door against the girls, he did.

"Now and again, a dancer fainted with exhaustion. Nervous mothers and fathers carried their daughters home, only to have them awake and begin to dance.

To and fro the women went, dancing to the church, carried to their beds. Eventually, the girls were left to rest in the green.

"Is the contagion God's punishment, the village wondered? Perhaps, the midwife suggested, the women ate queer mushrooms."

"I remember those," Partridge interrupts. "As a lad, we ate them to have visions. Even me, lame eyes and all! Must have taken too many because there are none left."

"Many mushrooms and plants have disappeared," Ethelred says. "I do not know Elicot's sins, but God is reclaiming his gifts, one by one."

"What do you mean?" Eliza asks.

"There was such varied birdsong when I was young, many I've not heard in all your days on this world, Eliza."

"The berries, too," Partridge says, chin sunk to his chest.

"The forest fell ill with weevils and blight. I could still see then," George says. "I crossed myself, I did, whenever I saw those dead trees."

"I have never encountered them." Eliza says.

"Oh, you have," Ethelred says.

Noticing Eliza's confusion, George explains, "We cut them down and used the wood to build the bridge."

"You used rotten wood to build the bridge?" Eliza shakes her head. "That was not a well-thought decision."

"It holds," Ethelred grumbles.

"Yes, but for how long?" Eliza asks.

A crow caws. The wind shifts, and Eliza leans towards the fire. She wonders if her father knows that the bridge is faulty.

"I sorrow for your children, for no telling what will be left," George says.

"When I was a child, the Day Star rose and set weekly," Ethelred says.

George turns his non-gaze towards Ethelred's voice. "My grandfather vouched it was daily. Time and God turned it fitful."

Eliza frowns. "The Day Star *is* less frequent than it was when I was young."

"Yes, yes," Partridge nods.

Ethelred turns the chicken over the fire.

George continues the story. "Like the child and the Little Mother, the dancers stopped when the Priest took Sunday communion. The midwife's theory of queer mushrooms went by the wayside. It was the devil.

"You can be sure men watched their women with fear. Women prayed to be spared. A week passed, then a second, and no one danced.

Then came the third week. Women left food to burn. Girls dropped their distaffs. Even the stalwart midwife danced. Elicot, oh, no one knew how to stop the women from baring their breasts and screaming profanities. Then the sickness afflicted them with yet another agony."

"What?" Partridge asks.

"Their guts filled with gas, and the entire village echoed with farts."

Eliza laughs. "God forgive me, but that is not how I expected the story to go!"

"I have it from my father this is true."

"He would not make a joke?" Eliza asks.

It is George's turn to laugh. "My father? Joke?"

"I can vouchsafe," says Ethelred. "His father was an immense bore."

“Was this the last attack of the dancing sickness?” Eliza asks.

“No,” George replies. “All summer it tormented the village. No prayers or candles at the altar moved Him to mercy. Husbands and fathers organized a watch to prevent mortal injury to the women. They worried about the harvest. Without the women and with menfolk shepherding mad daughters...” He shrugs. “Around this time, women took to wearing strips of linen around their stomachs, tied with a stick at the back. When exhaustion felled them, a watcher would twirl the stick to tighten the belt. You can imagine the effect. The most beautiful women, letting rip malefaction!”

“I should not laugh, but, saints in Heaven!” Eliza says.

“What stopped the Dancing Sickness?” Partridge asks.

“Only God and Saint Millicent know,” George replies. “It stopped as suddenly as it started, never to return.”

Eliza’s giggles subside into hiccups. What if I could not stop dancing? Me, abandoning a brass candlestick to dance out the door and work up a gut of stink!

Ethelred takes the chicken from the fire. “I will have to think hard to find a story to top that one, George.”

“I want to hear this one again next week,” Partridge says.

“I am not sure I can withstand this much laughter a second time!” Eliza wipes her eyes, not even noticing it is Cassian’s handkerchief she pulled from her leather pouch. The men’s sad hut hides itself in the coming twilight. “I must go,” Eliza says. “If I am late to

Sunday dinner, Mother will withhold my apples and honey.”

“Fly, child,” George says.

“May the good Lord guard your soul,” Ethelred says. He nods his eyeless head in her direction. “Please thank the sheriff and your mother for the food.”

“I will. Goodbye, Patridge.”

“Saints be with you, little Eliza.”

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