

HEARTLIGHT



Heartlight: Volume 1
A collection of short stories

Hearthlight

Volume 1

The Hearthlight Club

The Hearthlight Club is a bi-weekly club about telling stories. We have compiled some of our stories into this zine.

If you're interested you can find more information at hearthlightclub.com.

Acknowledgements

A big thank you to everybody who has attended the club so far and made this unusual project happen! In particular, I'd like to thank Ellen for her help in determining the artistic direction of the zine.

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As a rule, this club thinks that retelling stories and reusing ideas is great. Please feel free to reinterpret our stories. Nonetheless, please don't reproduce this zine without permission.

Contributors

Ciarán Mackay

Ciarán tells dream-like tales that transport the listener to fantastic lands. His enthusiasm for stories brought this club to life.



Edward Dunn

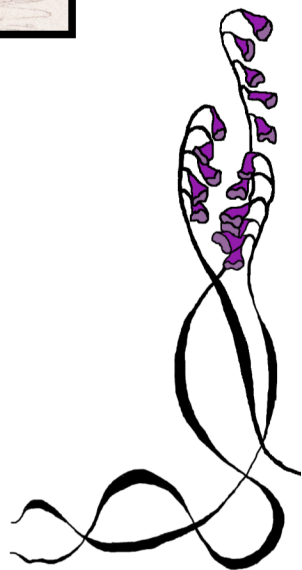
Ed has a talent for mixing the mythical into the mundane; drawing on the stylings of old folktales to reimagine the trials and tribulations of the modern day.

Matt Nuttall

Matt's considered imagery and concise writing has encouraged others to focus on the language as well as the tale, raising the quality of our work.



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Home

Edward Dunn

I remember the town where I grew up.

We lived where the forest met the fields and my youngest summers were spent along this margin, doing whatever a girl of that age could do to help the harvest. When the adults rested beneath a tree I would play Quick-stick with Yanya and Max, flitting through the dappled shade with boundless energy.

Too often, my mother would come and lead me, sulking, away from my friends. She'd lead me deep into the forest, away from the coppices and pollards to look for wild herbs. I'd retaliate by trying not to pay

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attention to what blackweed looked like, the taste of sage or the smell of honeysuckle but my mother's relentless efforts forced these facts into my mind.

On other days I'd sneak off to the stream with Max and Elena to play Hop-stone and after a long day, collapse and watch the water gurgle along. One day, when Yanya came too she lost her footing; slipping on wet moss and crashing awkwardly onto her leg. We carried her back beneath the cloud of our inevitable punishment.

My mother kept me in after that. Even when the others were heading out to get their first blood I was forced to sit in our hut, surrounded by dangling herbs and watch my mother's cauldron boil.

"It's not fair!" I'd say. I swear I spied sympathy in my father's face. He opened his mouth, but he closed it, letting my mother reply.

"I know you're missing out, but one day you're going to move to a new town and they're going to love you. You'll have the answers to their problems and you'll find that it was all worth it. Please, Lily; you

have to trust me."

When I was thirteen I joined my coven. My mother led me further than ever before, over stream and ridge beneath the canopy of the great forest until we came to a clearing. It was there that I met my sisters: Beth, Annah and Tara.

A boulder jutted from the earth at the periphery, acting as a shelter and the rays of the sun generously lit the centre where we sat and learnt. We made potions under the watch of our instructor, held hands to commune with the forest spirits and prepared poultices and salves. In the evenings our instructor climbed atop the rock and left us to our own devices. We experimented with strange brews, tried plants our mothers avoided; giggling as their effects set in, and it was there that in the shadows of dusk that I felt the soft press of lips.

All too soon it was at an end. We had learnt what we could. It was time to find a village to serve.

A great feast was laid out in my honour when I arrived and they were so happy to see me. There was so much work to be done. Horses were not listening, elders had aches that needed soothing. Still,

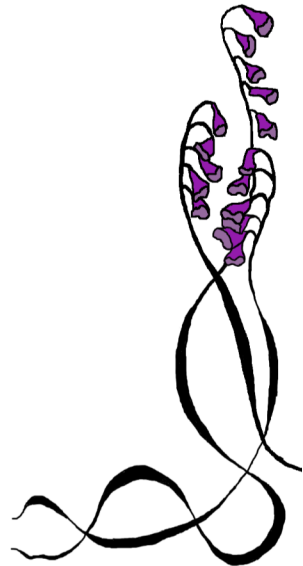
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there was a distance between us. I never was much good at Quick-stick, I never had much chance to play Hop-stone, I still had no first blood.

I had the answers to all of their problems. It had been worth it, but they did not love me.

I often wonder what happened to Max and Elena, whether Yanya's leg fully healed. I hope my sisters are happier than me. I hope that Tara stops when she sees my namesake in the stream. Sometimes when I prepare a salve I remember her whispered advice beneath the instructor's notice and my chest aches.

I hope she feels it too.



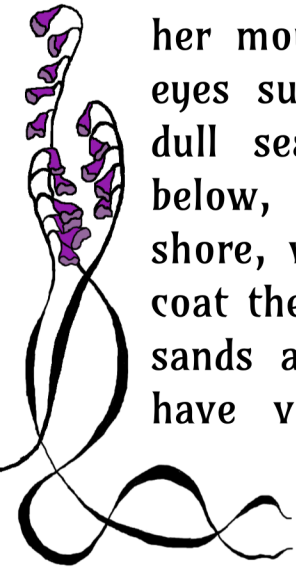
Promenade



Matt Nuttall

She sits alone on her bench.

She is old. Thinning grey hair drapes unceremoniously against weathered skin, her mouth in a quiet frown as her tired eyes surveyed the scene before her. The dull sea laps gently against the beach below, waves crashing endlessly into the shore, while high above them grey clouds coat the sky from horizon to horizon. The sands are quiet; only a few hardy souls have ventured out, on one errand or

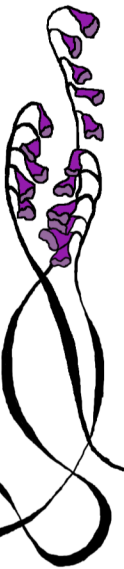


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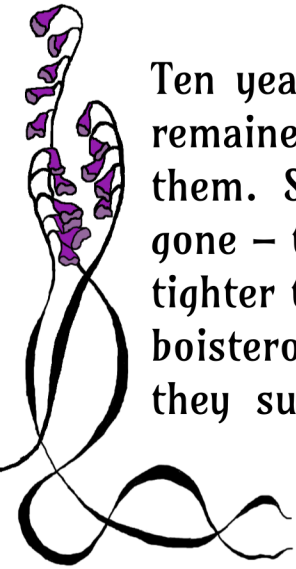


another. Two dog walkers' cross paths, huddled in scarfs and coats, nodding to one another in swift greeting. Further down, by the sealine, the laughter of two children echoes, still so young as to ignore the biting cold's warning to stay indoors. The pair of parents, now decidedly not so young, stand alongside, hopping impatiently from foot to foot as they exchange quiet platitudes. Their gaze fixes on the slowly setting winter sun above, wishing it's setting forward for a reasonable excuse to usher their offspring away from their frigid joy, back into the light and warmth of home.

Sixty years and six months prior, a different scene. The promenade was much changed – local stores lined the streets in place of the branded supermarkets, while ad-hoc stalls peddled sweet treats and games. A blue sky replaced the grey clouds, and high within it sat a blazing sun, warming the crowded beachgoers below.



The laughter of the children is here a cacophony, echoing up from the sand and the surf. But not all was changed. The bench remained, freshly painted on its perch above the shore, and on it lounged a girl. She was laughing, a response to some joke or nonsense pronounced by her new friends sat beside her. Her blonde curls sparkled in the sun; sunglasses framed her face; a light cotton dress draped off her shoulders, bought fresh from the city. She was free, the entrapment of her childhood in a failing backwater town a memory fast fading. Her future lay ahead, to be shared with this clique, as expansive as the shining sea before her.



Ten years ahead, the bench and the group remained, the girl still smiling among them. Some friends had come, some had gone – the clique was smaller now, but tied tighter than before. They were quieter, less boisterous, but held a soft confidence as they surveyed the sands before them. In

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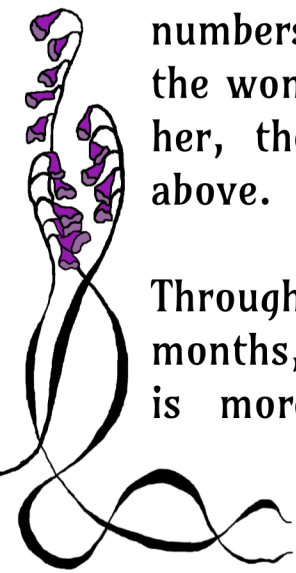
place of the wild naivety of teenagers, the subtler naivety of young men who believe they have already seen it all. As they talked of matters framed in high importance, they looked down on younger souls in larger groups laughing in the sea below, drinking in an odd cocktail of judgement and envy. The girl feels a tap on her leg, leans in as one of the men whispers only to her. She laughs at their private joke, and nods.

Ten years again, further changes abound. The group has fractured into pairs, still all close but now particularly close to one another. The girl is still young, still smiling, but tired today – as she rocks the pram before her gently, she longs secretly for home, even while laughing with the group at her husband's latest story. It is a shared sentiment, one that is evident by the slow reduction in the frequency of their meetings; once daily, now weekly, and in truth flagging from that. Their lives are fuller now, more complex – what used to



be easy has become hard and is getting harder. But they persevere, meeting on these sunny days, to share in what they have.

Thirty years pass, and time weathers all things. The bench is chipped and worn, the group sat upon it older and smaller in number; even the town itself is fading, eclipsed by the brighter and better shores that their children have now fled in search of. They meet often again now, as their world begins to shrink – they think less fondly of the new, recall past moments more. The love they share never fades, but with each passing year there are fewer numbers among them to share it; the day the woman arrives without the man beside her, the clouds blot out the bright sun above.



Through fifteen more years and six more months, her pilgrimage persists. The walk is more difficult now, the world less

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familiar, but it remains worthwhile to share a fond moment with a friend, laugh at one more shared discovery or embarrassment in the group. As time whittles them away, the group retracts inwards to support itself – raises a toast to each new empty space on their bench, and continues on in their memory.

Until one day, with a cold winter sun hidden by high grey clouds, and the laughter of naive children echoing up from the beach, she arrives to find her bench empty, and sits alone. Her thin grey hair blows gently in the cold wind, and a quiet frown on her face; but then, she breaks into a smile. To the children and parents on the beach, she is lonely, a sad old lady on the shore. But she knows better – ever alongside her, the ghosts of a lifetime sit, gazing outwards to the sea.



The Morrigan

A bag of meat



Edward Dunn

In the heat of summer, Conrad crouched with his older brother Frederick behind a log overlooking the great field. From side to side and even over the hedge into the far field a large number of men stood in the oats they ought to be harvesting.

Some dressed in strange metal suits and beheaded and disembowelled those who did not. Like a knife cutting the side of a steamed pudding a small force made a thin slit that widened to allow the interior to

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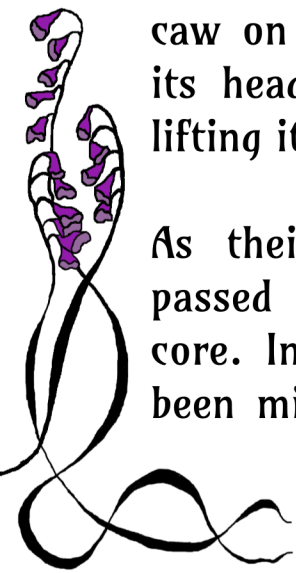
blossom forth. These strange people were like bags of meat and offal.

The next day, while darkness was being expelled from the earth, Conrad headed out to the field to prepare for the harvest. The strange men had mostly left, but some lingered around, scattered amidst the trodden oats. It was much quieter today, making the air feel cold now that the energy that once made it thick had dispersed. The conversations of corvids occasionally cut through the cautious whispering of trees. It was a chatty day.

With a huff Conrad's father went up to one of the quiet men. "Grab his legs, they've damaged the oats enough, we can't be dragging them." Conrad did so, lifting the man's legs like a wheelbarrow; helping his father move the man out of the oats. Many people needed assistance leaving the oats and some even needed help scaring away crows that were biting them. The crows

cawed aggressively when you came near, but there was never any bite to accompany their bark.

Eventually, the whole family came out with their friends, ready to bring the oats in. Silently they surveyed the pile he'd helped his father to make. It was a big pile and something in Conrad felt proud, but he also felt like some of his feelings were yet to surface. As they pondered the pile the adults discussed the trampling of the oats and the size of the piles in their own fields. Whilst the others were wrapped up in conversation Conrad watched as a large corvid landed gracefully with a flap and a caw on the pile. It hopped around, tilting its head, before taking a choice bite and lifting its head to survey its surroundings.



As their gazes met the morning's chill passed through his skin and grasped his core. In this gaze, he found what he had been missing. When people told stories of

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The Morrigan he had always wondered how people knew that it was her, but now he knew. There was no doubt that it was She who stared into his eyes now, there was no need to explain or discover a truth that he already knew so deep inside. And what's more, Her eyes told him what he had so far failed to understand. The fact that he was a bag of meat. He was held together by the thinnest of skin and a determined crow could get in if only it got the chance.

“Right! Let's get what's left of the oats before we starve”. It was his father's voice and it took him back into the world, but it was a different world now. The scythe only needed the wielder to slip and his meat would escape. A turbulent force rose inside of him and he ran to the side of the field, stopping only when the force manifested as vomit, spattering the hedge. There were calls of concern, but not surprise and everyone turned back to their work. Conrad surveyed the harvest and saw that a

parallel effort was going on atop the pile. As he stared that other gaze rose curiously from that pile and stared back. She knew that he was a bag of meat and she was hoping that one day She could try and get in.

Many people slapped his back and told him he'd done well as they headed back in and life carried on. A small, restrained feast celebrated the harvest and the year sped towards Blotmonap, slaughter month. They slaughtered their sow, but this year Conrad tried to find other work to do when they cleaned and prepared the meat. He kept mistaking the offal and meat for his own.



"We'll need every bit of her." Conrad's father said "I was hoping we could have some piglets next year, but the Gods have denied me a good harvest."

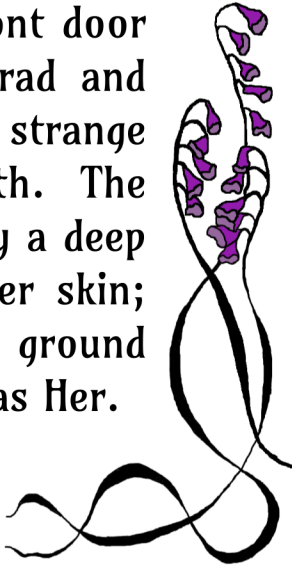
Avoiding the sow led Conrad out into the cold. Frost gripped every branch and

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clasped itself roughly around his hands as Conrad searched for good kindling. Whenever he raised his eyes from the ground he would see Her through his clouded breaths. She perched on branches and watched as he scurried around; trying to return home, out of sight of Her gaze.

As winter crawled on faces became gaunt and the fruits of the harvest thin, Conrad's mother deemed it time to make a steamed pudding from what was left of the sow. The smell of the pudding wafting through the cold-sealed house brought its own warmth and a little spirit of revelry, but it also brought a soft knock-knock on the door. As his father opened the front door a gush of cold splashed over Conrad and there, being invited inside, was a strange young lady clad in embroidered cloth. The fabric was black and the embroidery a deep red, making a stark contrast to her skin; snow-white like the blanketed ground beyond her. Conrad knew that it was Her.



As the door closed, Conrad's father invited Her to sit down at the table. As She seated Herself, Conrad secreted a knife from the table behind his back. Her eyes turned to him, just as they had on that first day and began to stare deep into his. Whilst making the table ready for this guest, his father enquired about who She was.

"My lady, by the manner of your dress, I worry that you will find disappointment at our humble table. We have but a pudding of odds and ends tonight. Where did you last dine?"



With a calm, but rasping voice She replied, "I came from a feast where the villein and lord did attend in dignity alike. At the behest of Duke Albrecht and Count Rudolf, a great spread was made."

Conrad's father tilted his head. "My Lady, I am confused, for only this summer Duke Albrecht fought Count Rudolf in this very

town"

The lady smiled "I bring you good news! The two lords are now at peace. I wander these lands and it is often my tongue that persuades errant lords to resolve their disputes."

Carrying the pudding, Conrad's mother set it down on the table. "Then we are privileged to find you here!" she said, seating herself and motioning for all to come and find a seat at the table.

"Ah" said the Morrigan "A bag of meat."

But Her eyes did not leave Conrad. As the pudding was cut into a warm smell that would have been irresistible washed over the table, but today it felt too familiar. His portion was placed before him and he could not shake the idea that it belonged inside his stomach, but it should never have left. His gaze flickered between his

portion and the eyes of the Morrigan, but Hers were steady and fixed. She devoured Her portion ravenously and savoured nothing. When She had finished She dragged the entire pudding over to her and dropped her cutlery. As Conrad's mother moved to protest his father raised an arm, shock and worry written on his face. With ripping and tearing She dug into the pudding with Her teeth, smearing gristle onto Her cheeks and letting Her raven-black hair fall forwards amidst the meat.

When She had finished, She had devoured the whole pudding and a great smile had spread across Her lips.



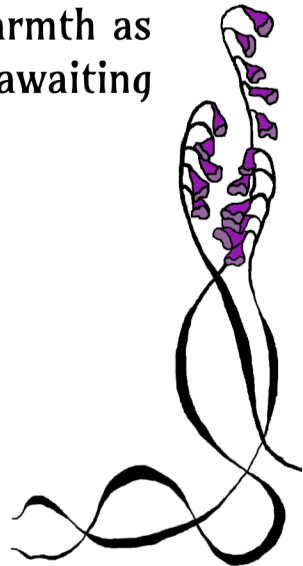
"I am thankful that you enjoyed our food my lady." ventured Conrad's father, but we have little to last us for the rest of the winter. "Are you able to spare us any coin so that we might buy something to get us through to spring?"

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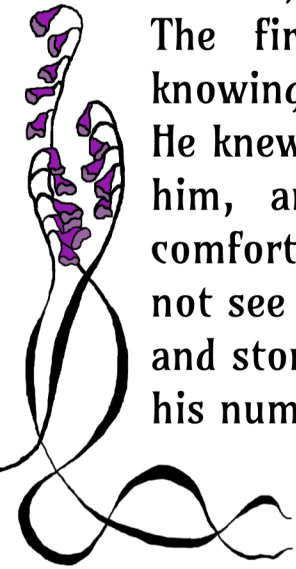
The Morrigan did not answer. Instead, She hopped, in raven form, onto the tabletop and headed toward Conrad's untouched plate. As his family recoiled in shock and despair Conrad brought the knife from behind his back and, as the tip pierced the Morrigan's skin, She popped. A wave of viscera cascaded off the table, flooding the house and gore shot through the air.

They were left with a heavy silence. Slowly, the house was cleaned and they did what they could to remove the rancid smell, but when they were finished there was nothing left. With the pudding gone, the family knew that this winter was all they had. They lay together for warmth as the cold and the hunger closed in, awaiting the Morrigan's return.



Metropolis

Matt Nuttall



The four travellers crested the hill, and saw the shining city before them. They stood in wonder, frozen by the splendour of man, and saw only dreams before them. The first man gazed upon the castle, knowing he would rise to power within it. He knew the people would love and support him, and he would live in riches and comfort within his high walls. But he could not see that pestilence cares not for wealth and stone, and that when it visited the city his number would not be spared.

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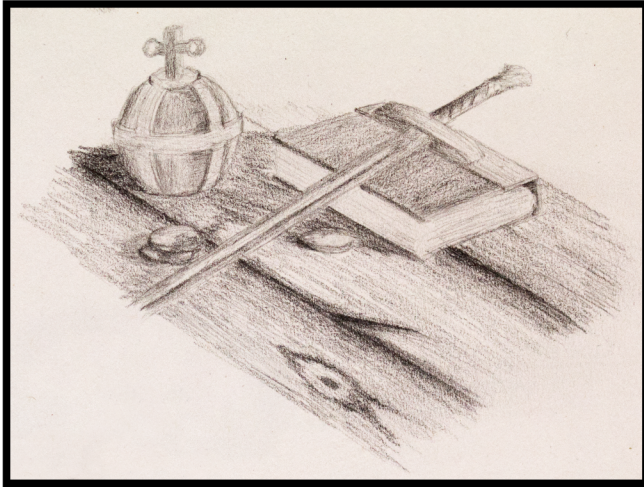
The second man watched the soldiers in their posts, marvelling at their might. He knew he would be welcomed into their midst, and lead them to great victories and conquests. But he was blind to how swiftly fortunes change, and how a single fated arrow from the lowliest peasant will lay even the most famed warrior low.

The third man saw the traders, and the gold changing hands. He knew his talents would thrive in this market, and his eyes gleamed gold in avarice. But he did not comprehend that one day poverty would come, that the people would beg for scraps of bread, and that on that day even his finest cloth would be worthless.

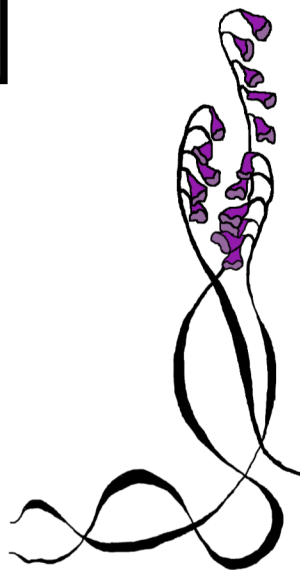
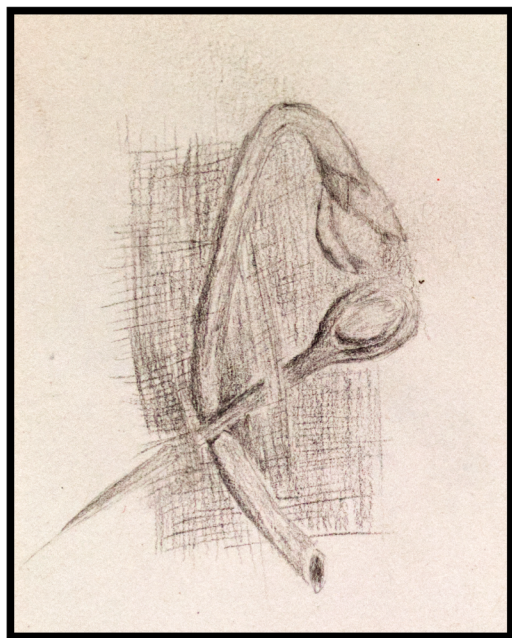
And last man saw the church, with its wise men within. He knew he would find a home in their number, absorbing the knowledge with their halls and growing wiser than any within this city. But he knew not that no man was wise enough to escape death, and that the reaper will arrive for the most learned man as much as the lowliest fool.



They stood together, these four men, the shining city before them; their future glories reflected back at them, their future failings lost within the hidden shadows of its streets.



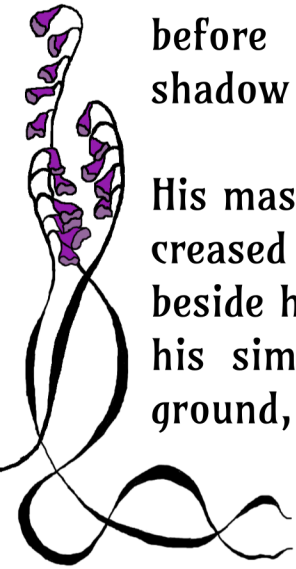
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The Wizen's Fear

Ciarán Mackay

Cub stood upon a threshold of new spring grass. The setting sun warm at his back, but his soft skin grew pink and bumpy in the face of the cold winds of the greylands before him, and the black city whose shadow stretched across it.



His master Leshi, lean as a wolf but heavily creased like an old tree plopped down beside him. His long grey beard flowed over his simple robes and bare legs onto the ground, a sign of his esteem as a Wizen.

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His large bushy eyebrows, which along with his beard obscured much of his bony face, furrowed in concentration as he stuffed his pipe, ready for a long night.

"Before you lies your final test, Cub. The City of Yen, as it was once known when it was considered the greatest city of this or any age. But 'The City of Fellowship' as it were, fell as it became 'The City of the Four'. They sought greater power than can be found in the heights of men; to hold dominion over all things, to break the balance of powers that govern Aurór. Now it is Strygow, 'The City of Corpses'. Something dark wrought its way through their avarice and vanity and they lost their way. And so too have many who have come since its fall. You must enter there, come to understand them, collect their vestiges and take them to the Tower. There you shall make a choice. Now, it is almost sunset and you should enter the city before nightfall. No point dilly-dallying, off you

go." He said with an impatient puff of his pipe.

Cub had often found himself at odds with his master. Leshi spent most of his time in contemplative silence, which unnerved him. He only spoke to announce bed times, food and teachings in the ways of the Wizen; whether it be in the identifying herbs and their medicinal uses; different types of fauna or animals, reciting oral histories of countless civilisations or the philosophies of balance and their application in the use of symbols or words of power. If one was not able to immediately prove themselves a Wizen of preternatural talents beyond that of even the longest beards, the habitually soft and quiet Old Stump would quickly grow blustering and cruel in his admonishments of talent wasted on stupid boys like Cub. And it was with this surge of indignation that Cub almost crossed the threshold - but not before spotting a flower he almost crushed underfoot; long-

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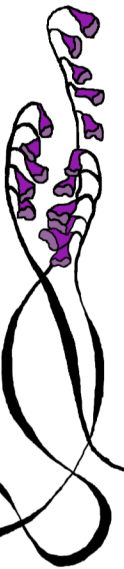
-petaled and drooping slightly, it was a delicate white flower that radiated with a gentle blue light.



"Ah" said Leshi, with what was presumed to be a smirk under his grand moustache "An Elderlain, or perhaps better known as 'The Tears of Callah'. Their flowering is taken as the first signs of spring. The Elves of the Mountain call them 'Drassel' - meaning 'renewal' or 'safe passage through the change'. They are also sought as a good luck charm to ward off evil spirits, for they glow brightest in the places shadows gather."

At that Leshi jumped up with the unusual vigor of a man much younger, and took the flower from Cub's hand. Cub almost protested, having already grown annoyed with his lecturing, but stayed silent as his master pinned the moonflower to his cloak.

May the Elderlain protect you in the darkest



pits of that damned city. I know you'll make the right choice, my dear Cub."

Cub was silenced by that. He had never heard such kind words from his master. It instilled in him warmth, but also the cold touch of fear; the very same that blew over him as he looked out at the large shadow-city. But one thing has carried him over that threshold; he didn't want to disappoint Leshi.

He walked through a vale of grey-grass and trees, until the earth grew black and barren; sown with lance, arrow, shield and sword; the battlements were sunk and strewn with bone-filled armour.

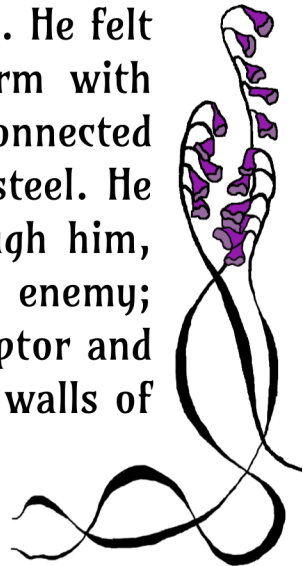
Banners of almost every kingdom he could name, and more he'd never heard of, were scattered amongst them; tattered and obscured by blood and mud. As he neared

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the walls of the city, he was met with a hulking mound of corpses; a glowing red banner upon its crest, a fane of battle. The banner had a bird of prey, its wings spread and talons bared, rays of red shone behind it, reaching down towards its doomed quarry. Faint whispers called him to climb the mountain of death, and at the top he found a gnarled black sword, rusted with blood.

He instinctively reached out for it and to his surprise, it cut him with ease. It was sharper than any virgin blade or one honed by a master craftsman. From it, he heard ringing cries of excitement and fear, of merry chanting and hoarse screams. He felt a thousand men at his back, warm with blood and fury. A crimson chain connected them, a brotherhood of bone and steel. He felt the power of many flow through him, as well as their rage against the enemy; the heretic, the stranger, the disruptor and the defiler. Within and without the walls of



Strygow, they would be repelled from his city and with this blade he would have the power to do it, to set his will against all who differed. He seethed with adrenaline and fury, his thoughts drowned out by war songs and thunderous footfalls, clashing steel and burning banners a thousandfold. All were rendered silent by rushing wind and the sound of tearing flesh and splitting bone as Cub breathed his final breath. He felt the surging pain of an arrow pierce his heart and the warmth of the bonds of his blood brothers fell to nothing as the icy embrace of death rushed through him like a cutpurse. He was alone now. His red sight fell back onto the grey abyss, the fields of men became an orchard of shattered steel and bone once again. He kneaded his chest but found no wound, only the veiled memory of pain. He picked up the sword and moved on.

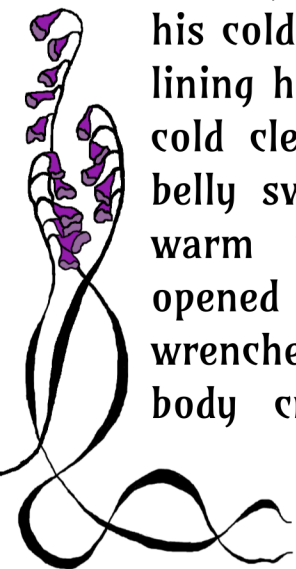
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Past the stone walls slick with decay, he entered into a long stretch of wood, stone and slate. Buildings far taller and grander than any he'd ever seen, even in their decrepit state. Tattered tarps and silks of varied colours were strewn over broken stalls and cobblestone, denoting a place of pleasure and wonder, now made mute in the shadow of entropy. He felt himself drawn towards a great house at the end of this merchant mile; a grand exchange hall, glowing gold. The voices came again, this time the roaring chants of competition, haggling and consumption. Cub felt himself crushed between invisible rushing masses of people heavy with gold and copper, furs and trinkets. Though the voices and bodies circled his senses like vultures, he could see a long table ahead of him; a beautiful strong oak, the lacquer danced along with the torchlight it reflected, the chairs stitched with colours and patterns of ornate heraldry. They looked far comfier than the mossy stones and hard dirt that

made his legs numb and back ache. At the very end sat a fulcrum scale with a gold bird raised high, the other side of the scale was filled with saltwater. He heard weeping and toil flow out of the pool and as he stared into it, he heard whispers of a secret cache beneath the stones; furs to keep him warm, wine to keep him merry and gold that would allow him to walk this world high upon the shoulders of all others.



The voices guided Cub to a lone door beneath the grandest chair at the head of the table, he felt himself drawn to open it; already feeling the warmth of the furs on his cold back, the heavy weight of the gold lining his pockets, his chest filled with the cold clean air of a mountain manor, his belly swollen with rich food and his bed warm with many companions. As he opened it feverishly, he felt himself wrenched back by some invisible force; his body crushed under foot by hundreds,



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thousands as the voices all cried out in panic, frustration and envy. He saw the small passage begin to stretch and heave, cracking under the weight of their overwhelming want. The hall shuddered and creaked and for a moment all grew quiet. A single gold coin shot out of the hole, its clanking echoing in the desolate hall, then another and another as the ground began to rumble. Cub instinctually scrambled to his feet but watched horrified as a horde of gold and flesh burst forth like a geyser. Cub bolted for the door, his pace only slowed by the sudden shots of pain as the precious metals impacted against his quivering legs and back. He could feel the oncoming wave, coming to consume him the way it had all those others.

He briefly looked behind to see the horde had reached the ceiling, filling every nook, battering and shattering the support beams and the stone walls. Just as Cub could feel

the cold weight of metal and death at his heels, he jolted forward with all his strength and broke through the door. He covered his body to protect from the oncoming rubble and metal, but he was met with only the silent cold air. The golden gleam of the exchange hall faded, all that remained was the black oily visage. He looked down to see the fulcrum in hand. A moment of relief was immediately soured by a nervous thought; he could not remember grabbing the fulcrum, and something deep told him he had not. He closed his fist around the statue and moved on.





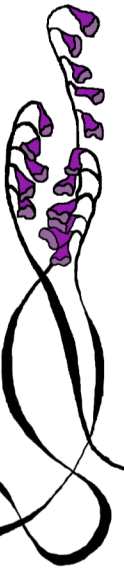
As Cub walked further into the city, he felt the air grow even colder, now the shaking of his bones had reached his teeth. His threadbare cloak did little to bring him warmth, he crossed his arms and began rubbing for a small amount of comfort, a

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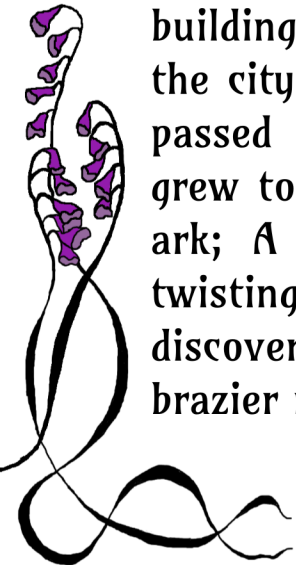
desperate misery overtaking him. Further and further he walked down streets that had become repetitive, the awe and fear their horrid grand visages inspired falling away, he desperately searched for some form of life or anything to end the maddening monotony.

His silent pleas were answered by a radiant warmth that first reached his cheeks and feet. The sound of dancing flame followed and as he looked upon the great fire in the distance, a squeak of relief escaped him and ran towards it with glee. It was only as he got close did wariness return to him as he saw the fires were not burning with wood, but with books. Hundreds of books and scrolls. Above this funeral pyre, he noticed the grand temple overshadowing it. Great rounded domes of gold crowned columns of white stone, glowing with the same warmth as the flame. At its centre was a rose glass with the pattern of a bird flying towards the sun. Its wings stretched



upward.

As Cub passed by the fire and towards the large open doors of the temple, he could hear the low hum of a collective chant. The sound emanated all throughout the grand marble nave as he entered. Rows and rows of long pews filled the hall, each filled with the stagnant, fear-stricken righteous. He could not see them, but he could feel them and as he moved further beyond the tapestries and ornate sculptures. Their voices filled him with warmth and wonder; a sense of community, purpose and trust in an all-guiding love carried him through the halls and he saw it all with new eyes; the building itself a miracle of their actions, the city a testament to their power. As he passed the chancel, the haunting voices grew to operatic pitches as he entered the ark; A vast library spiraling upwards in twisting passages of endless knowledge to discover. Hanging at its centre was a grand brazier made of several circular bands with



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metallic waves encircling to represent the sun, and at its basin a large bird of prey, the light emanating through the details of its feathers and open beak.

The voices ceased rising and began to coalesce around a writing desk directly beneath the brazier. On top of it was a large tome, its cover reflecting the image of the rose glass. He opened it, the pages were made of fine vellum, embroidered by ornate artistry and rich paint. Cub tried to read the pages but they were written in a nonsense language, one he assumed was so ancient it was beyond even Leshi's knowledge. But as the voices around him began to reach new heights their strange chanting made newfound sense to him as they sang of knowledge found and lost, strange tongues and stranger thoughts cut out and the hunt for divine power to fuel divine purpose. Cub reached up to cover his ears as the voices reached a crescendo on a final lament, repeated over and over; "the

secrets of this world lie not in this world." Each time the phrase repeated, a torch went out above, punctuated by the sound of rope snapping taught against a heavy weight. The cracking sound grew louder and louder as the room dimmed until finally the grand brazier itself was snuffed out, the ringing crack so deafening it silenced the phantom chorus.

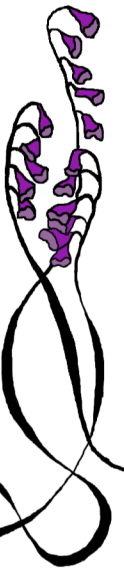
Cub cursed himself for his fear, his whole body shaking. But finally he looked up to find he couldn't see the basin anymore; it was lost beneath the hanging corpses of dozens, if not hundreds of monks, others dangled from the torches spiraling downward. His shaking hand squeezed the page of vellum he had been attempting to read and it fell away to dust between his finger tips. He looked down to find the book was old and rotten, covered in a thick layer of dust that matched the rest of the now disheveled library. He gently closed and picked up the large tome, walking out

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into the nave. The precious fetishes were missing, the pews upturned and broken, the rose glass was shattered; and smeared in blood above the doors he'd first entered through read "The Secrets Of This World Lie Not In This World". He squeezed the tome tighter to his chest and moved on.

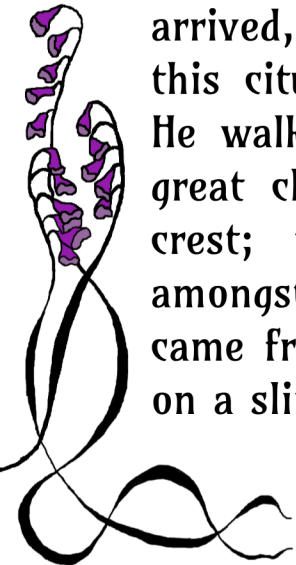
Cub wandered lost, no longer searching for light or life in the umbra streets. He carried with him the sword, which cut his leg and ankle as it swayed loosely in his belt, the fulcrum secured on the other side, the saltwater soaking his cold body more and seeping into the cuts; and the rotten tome heavy in his tired arms, the metal binding chafed against his soft skin. He did not wish to go on, did not wish to be haunted anymore. He wished to escape, he wished to join them; he would not be so alone then. He thought of his master Leshi, a distant shadow of a person now in this place. Why would he bring him here? Why



would they let this once great city rot? It was great once, why not again!? So much wasted when they could rebuild! It was at that moment a beacon shone over him, like a lone light on a stormy sea. Above him a column of emanating blue-white light filled his cold bones with warmth again. He looked down at his Elderlain and back at the Ivory Tower. It was a guiding light for him. He mustered what little strength was left to him and dragged himself towards it.



He climbed the steps, the tower so tall yet the journey felt so short. He heard the voices again but they were kind, lively and hopeful; all for the new king that had arrived, one who carried the vestiges of this city, this kingdom, this world anew. He walked through the throne room, the great chair glowed with a symbol at its crest; that of the bird, finally flying amongst the sun. The light shining upon it came from the opposite side of the room; on a slim outstretched veranda overlooking

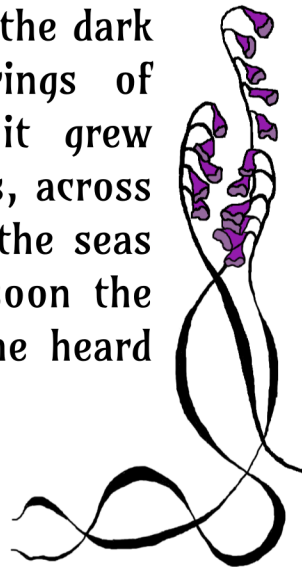


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the city, glinting in the endless night, a crown rested upon a pedestal. Made of white-silver, the crown was adorned with the image of wings encircling a precious stone that glowed with starlight.

As Cub reached out for the crown he could hear the whispers, feel the eyes of the people of this city on him; his people, their voices rising in adulation. He couldn't help but wonder if this was the choice Leshi had spoken of; to lead these people out of darkness. To understand what drove them here so he could better guide them as the Wizen King of Strygow.

He looked out at his new freehold, the dark misshapen city below became rings of gleaming civilisation again and it grew beyond the bounds of the greylands, across the forests and the mountains to the seas and lands beyond his sight. And soon the myriad of voices grew less until he heard only Four whispering to him:



Bare the Talon of the many slain
Stand high upon the Weighted fane
Speak the Words wise men deign
Let us Take the world again

He felt the rhythm of their words take over his body, his mind growing distant; he stood outside himself, his form dangling above the city. He could see them now, the Four. The ruinous powers that wrought this city's doom; The Warrior, The Merchant, The Scholar and The King. Their eyes cast in shadow but for a small glint like wolves on the hunt. Their mouths did not move despite their words and their skin hard like porcelain, contorted into horrifying visages. Each of them placed a pale hand on top of his own, lowering the crown towards his head.

Cub screamed but he could not feel his voice in his throat. He reached out for his body, but he was slipping further and further into the city as the crown fell. He

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called out for Leshi, who was so far away. He called out for his father who was in lands unknown. He cried out for his mother who was in lands estranged. He began to feel himself be consumed by the shadow-city. He would join them and become a shade himself. All that would remain is the want for something fanciful, something stolen, something unfulfilled. All he would know is soured envy as he would entrap new strangers to his damned fate.

He had failed Leshi.

In his final moments he thought of that Old Stump. The man he thought irritating and hateful. He wished to hear his silence again, to hear the scratching of his long beard as he was lost in thought; to see his pale face turn deep red as a cherry as he berated him. But most of all he thought of Leshi's kindness in their final meeting:

May the Elderlain protect you in the darkest pits of that dreaded city. I know you'll make the right choice, my dear Cub.

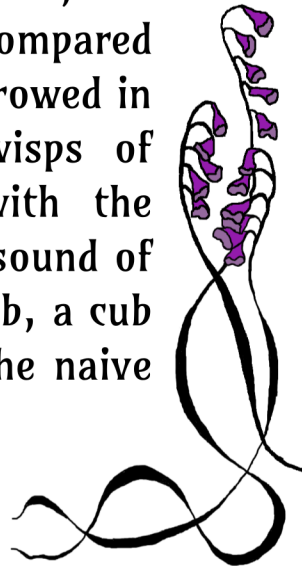
Cub's eyes shot open and he looked down at his cloak, the Elderlain shone brighter than he'd ever seen it, brighter than the Tower or the Crown. He pulled it from his cloak and raised it towards his body, towards the Four. They stumbled back and shrieked an unearthly howl of pain. The shadows shrouding their visage fled in the light of the moonflower and their porcelain bodies shattered into dust. Their whispers stopped and he felt the cold numbness recede as he filled his limbs, his heart and his mind once again. Stumbling backwards and falling. He dropped the crown, only when it clinked across the stone did he look at it; now it was a crown of black iron, the wings were of bone and the jewel a sickly bright green hue. He could hear the whispers of the Four call out to him again

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and with a swift kick, the crown fell over the precipice to the hungry shadows below. He collected himself and stood, gathering the other vestiges of the Four; he took them in for a moment, each a relic of the basest urges of men; the ones that are innate and would destroy us without balance, without thought or feeling for others and the world that surrounds them. And with that thought, he had them follow their master into the abyss below. It would not satisfy them. Dreams never do.

Leshi sat cross-legged upon the earth, the moons offering it little warmth compared to the sun, his bushy eyebrows furrowed in deep contemplation. The small wisps of smoke from his pipe mingled with the morning dew. He perked up at the sound of rustling grass. Before him stood Cub, a cub no longer. His eyes looked tired, the naive



hope of youth dry around them like dreams turned to sleep-sand, but what replaced it was a fiercer notion; of someone who stood at the precipice of darkness and found light within himself; true hope. Leshi let out a small breath and smiled, deepening the fissures of his face. He stood high above the boy, yet they stood on equal footing for the first time. Cub's fierce eyes suddenly filled with tears and before Leshi could say anything he shot forth and wrapped his arms around his thin waist. Leshi thought to chastise the boy for this breaking in the pattern of their arrangement, but the joy of his return overtook him and they embraced deeply.

Both men picked up their traveling attire and their staves and walked away from the shade-sodden city. Cub looked back at it for a moment and stopped. Leshi stopped a moment after and raised a bushy eyebrow at the lad.

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"Sorry Master, there's something I have to do."

With long, quick strides, Cub walked across the threshold once more without hesitation. He looked back to determine if he was far enough in and pulled out the Elderlain. He reached down and dug into the black earth, gently planting the gleaming flower amongst the grey-grass. As Cub finished his work he was startled by a most unfamiliar sound; it was a throaty laugh coming from the direction of his master, who stood with his hands on his hips smiling wider than he'd ever seen him, he could even see his crooked yellow teeth. Sheepishly, Cub walked over with a small rosy smile in return and picked up his walking staff. He took one look back at the little light shining brightly in the darkness and set forth.

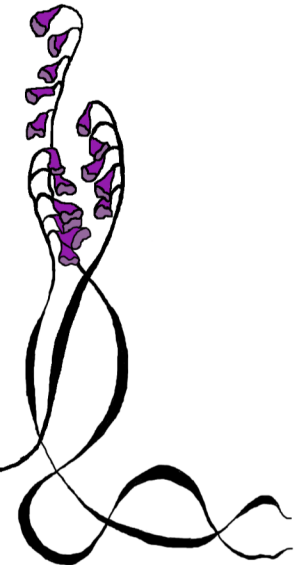
"Where are we off to now, Master?"

"We are in search of your new name. The Cub has been left amongst the grass, don't you think?"

"I do hope it was the green grass, Master."

Leshi huffed at this. Looking over with a small smile beneath his large beard.

"Oh I believe it was."



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