

Dance of the Blood Moon

Ferris Argensis

Chapter 4

Alexis was given a room to stay in at my palace while we waited for our wedding. Her room would be down the hall from mine. I made the proper arrangements that it should be equipped with all the utilities a queen would require: a private library, an ample selection of formal jewel-studded dresses, and a private squad of maids.

While I brushed my fur for a second time I reflected on these last few days and felt thankful that the plague-scare in my city had finally come to an end. The sick had been dealt with, the healthy remained. Most of all I had acquired the Lady Alexis into my household so we could finally be together in matrimony. To celebrate the end of my city's turmoils I considered that the palace should hold a nightly feast leading to the wedding between myself and Alexis. Having no inspiration on what she might enjoy to eat I decided to visit her in her new room.

Before I entered through doors I heard the wood-snuffed laughter of girls from the other side. Pushing through I caught a glimpse of Alexis sitting on a stool, half-undressed while two maids stepped in front of her and another ran towards me to shut the door on my muzzle. "She's busy!" exclaimed the maid as I ducked back before the heavy doors crushed my face.

Embarrassed, I asked, "How long must I wait?"

The annoyed voice on the other side responded, "Ladies need their time. Give her a few minutes."

"How much is *a few*," I questioned again.

"An hour."

The hour passed unproductively, flitting around downstairs; bugging the cooks, stealing cherry tomatoes while they weren't looking. When I had exasperated their patience I returned upstairs to Alexis' room. I knocked and was finally granted access inside.

Pushing open the doors I peeked inside to find Alexis sprawled-out on the floor by herself. She was making popping noises with her mouth. I stepped inside and interrogated her, "What are you doing on the floor?"

The maids had redressed her in a sunset-orange strapless dress that showed-off the shoulders and neck, and the fur around her face was laced with tiny colorful flowers. She looked up lazily at me from the hardwood floor. "I'm tired," she responded.

"Please get up," I said to her, "It's rather un lady-like."

"I know, but I don't want to."

I offered her my hand, knelt down. "Take my hand."

She took it, sighed, "I don't want to..." and I pulled her to her feet. She helped herself to the stool in between the mirrors, dress-racks, and make-up kits.

"Long day?" I asked her.

She smiled. "I would've come here sooner, but I got a little lost."

"How?" I astounded.

She shrugged. "Just forgot where I was going. I asked a guard for help and he said I should go to the palace at the top of the hill. This is a palace? It's so girly-looking!"

The dignity of the conversation dropped severely from that point onward; Alexis found absurdity in my palace, and I'd defend it as beauty and art.

"I'm an artist," she interrupted.

"Oh now," I responded in disbelief, "Are you?"

She swiveled around on the stool to retrieve a satchel laid against the side of a vanity. She scavenged through bundles of pencils, bottles of paint, a stuffed doll, and offered to me a folded piece of yellowed paper. "Here you are."

It was a crude drawing of a tall brown deer in a blue robe, holding hands with a red and black raccoon (or so I could discern.) In between them was a half-sized scribble of brown and red marks. "Oh," Alexis shocked and pointed to the figure in blue, "I forgot the horns." She took the picture, a brown pencil from her bag, and scribbled antlers onto the blue figure, then re-presented it. "*Here* you are."

"So that's me, you. Who's your friend?"

"I-" she stammered, "What if we had a kid?"

Years from now I would treasure this moment. "What would we name him?"

"Can it be a *her*?"

"We'll see."

"How about 'Angel'?"

I thought about it, then offered, "How about Wisdom?"

"That's a boys name," she giggled.

"Actually," I offered, "Wisdom has always been presented as a lady in the books of philosophy. Wisdom is a good name."

She crossed her arms. "Well, the first one will be mine, and we'll name her Angel. The second one can be named whatever you want."

A pause followed, looking calmly into her determined eyes. "Alright, whatever I want. Why not Super-fly?"

She let out a shrill, stupendous laugh, then asked: "*Super Fly*?"

I changed subjects: "I never knew you wanted to be a mother before."

Her expression softened and she answered, "Well, that's what wives do, right?"

"Among other things," I said, "such as tucking you in at night, or cooking."

She frightened, "I don't know how to cook."

"And you'll never have to. I have all the most experienced cooks from around the world working to make sure we're well fed."

"So they'll make whatever I want?"

A pause. "I don't see why not." I grinned, then added, "Our kitchens are well stocked for any nee-" then Alexis interrupted with delight: "So I can get dumpling soup whenever I want?"

"S-sure... Anything."

She got up from the stool to stride right past me and through the doors, but I reached out and stopped her. "Hold on a moment, deary."

"We're missing out on dumplings, Ferris!" she zealously insisted.

"Are you" - I stammered - "Prepared to be a parent?"

She quickly responded, "I guess," and zipped around my arm for the doors. I was left there alone in her room. I picked up her crude drawing of our future family from the floor and slipped it into the mirror of the vanity.

Have mercy, I thought, I've made a mistake...

I noticed snowflakes falling outside my window for the first time this year. They were as big as thumbs, coming down in curtains. I left Alexis's room and prepared to head downstairs, all the while thinking to myself hopefully my gardeners have finished digging Holume's grave.

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Half of Holume's men were present at his funeral. He commanded one-hundred-forty in total, but only seventy were present, as the others were busy in the city. The funeral was being held in the shadow of my palace walls, just outside the hedge-maze that separated mine from the palace of my concubines. The snowflakes stuck to the stone patio and the railings, since the earth wasn't cold enough yet.

Holume's men stood in a perfect array of ten columns and seven rows, consuming half of my patio. Among their faces were alligators, panthers, lions, tigers, wolves, foxes, black bears, and even a massive snowbear from the greater north. They wore silver armor and stood as still as statues, found saluting their fallen chief since before I arrived. Their eyes were glazed over, and many of them shed tears down their cheek and let them fall upon their necks.

The frigid wind started to pick up.

I approached the table where Holume lay. His body was dressed in his ornamental armor, and his spear lay by his side. His armor had been shined and polished earlier, but the grey skies made it appear as though copper and old. Snowflakes collected in his lifeless cool fur.

Holume had no living family members. *No* - these men and women; these indomitable warriors, with sharp fangs that cut, claws that tear, and jaws that crush, all of whom who stood here today were his family.

There stood before them, small and almost invisible compared to her comrades, a woman opossum in polished golden armor of her own. By her side was a small stick with a straight-razor on the end that amounted to her spear of office. She was Holume's replacement, and stood at a third of my height.

The opossum saluted me when I approached her. I asked her, "Were you his apprentice?"

She nodded stiffly, then coldly exclaimed, "No, my lord."

"Really then?" I raised an eyebrow.

"I was his sister."

"I didn't know he had extended family."

She smiled and corrected me. "Chief Holumé used to say that family isn't defined by blood but by decision. He once said you were his father, just as I was his sister."

There was a nod of agreement. "I recall that," I said softly, then asked, "Are you prepared for this position?"

Holumé's men never took vows, but he taught that anything worth doing must be done passionately with a *yes* or a *no*. The lady opossum now in Holumé's position thought firmly on this, for even though she wore the armor and wielded a spear to show her office, she had entered into this position so soon that it was just now she found herself questioning if she were ready to do everything her teacher (and brother) had done before. Soon enough, she returned back to me with a strong look of determination. "I am," she said, "I'll protect this city with everything I have."

Gesturing to the militia behind her, I asked: "And are they ready to take your orders?"

She looked behind herself, registered the grizzle and power of her legion. They'd overheard and nodded lightly to confirm their loyalty. She looked back to me and answered, "Yes. They're ready."

"Then perhaps it's time everyone gave their respects." I stepped aside and let her give the signal to her comrades.

The seventy present started falling out one-by-one to form a line at Holumé's table. They removed their daggers from their sheathes, laid them by his side, and then returned to their formation. By the time all seventy had laid their daggers, all but Holumé's face could be seen as he'd been buried under a pile of shimmering steel. Then the lady opossum approached, kissed his forehead, whispered an apology, then faced her battalion to begin her speech.

"Last night," she began, "6 years of loyal service to our wonderful city of Ferristead, and service under our honorable lord Ferris Argensis, came to an end in a self-sacrifice for the good of all."

She went on, and while I listened to her speech, I noticed in the corner of my eye Alexis peeking up from behind a potted bush and trying not to be seen. I turned to her, gestured for her to come forward quietly. She approached with queer, careful steps, and

joined by my side. She leaned onto her tiptoes again to ask me while I bent down to listen, "Is this a funeral?"

"Yes," I whispered back.

"Who died?" she asked in addition.

"My best friend. He was the chief of our city guard, and one of my advisors."

Her expression ignited, where she exclaimed loudly, "Oh yeah! He came to our hou-" I quickly covered her mouth with my hand and *shushed* her. It was too late, unfortunately, and everyone on the patio was well aware of her blare, which was so outstanding that the opossum lady felt intruded upon and stopped her speech to stare glacially at Alexis.

"Sorry," I began warmly, "Accidents happen. Go on."

Alexis didn't like me covering her mouth and so she started licking my palm. I tore my hand away and wiped it off on my garments, then glared at her. "Control yourself," I muttered.

"So he was a doctor, right?"

"No," I explained, "He was the chief of the royal guard, like she said earlier."

"When did he die?"

There was a short pause. "About an hour before you arrived last night."

"That's sad."

"Very..."

Midway through the new chief's speech I noticed how tightly Alexis wrapped her arms into herself to keep warm. I opened up my heavy coat in the same way a hen opens its wings to gather its chicks closeby. Alexis ensconced herself against me and I shut the cloak on her. It was a tight fit, but it was warm and she appreciated still being able to see out through the hole between the buttons in the coat's chest.

At the end of the speech the snow was falling full-force. The gardeners returned and took up ropes on each side of Holume's table, but couldn't lift him off the ground for the immense weight of all the daggers. Two grizzly bears and a bison from the chief's troupe stepped into help, and by their own strength, lowered Holume's body, the daggers, all wrapped in the tablecloth, into the cold grave. When the troupe was supposed to disperse to return to their daily duties, many stayed to take up spades to help bury Holume. Alexis was well and bored by then so she crawled out from under my cloak and sprinted back inside. I

stayed out there long after, my face steadily going numb, to wait for a chance to speak with the gardeners.

I said to them, "My good men, when you have the chance, find some willing volunteers and start on some extra graves, just in case."

They nodded and replied, "Don't worry, mi'lord; we've already started on ten more."

My stomach started to twist sickly, and I smirked at them with soft eyes. "Oh. Good work."

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Later that noon, I and Alexis were sitting at the dining hall table, enjoying a meal of chicken soup, fresh bread, and white wine for myself while she drank apple-juice. She ate the soup heartily, as she was still frigid from the funeral.

"So, Alexis," I began, "Perhaps you'd like to know a little bit more about what you're getting yourself into."

Alexis glanced briefly at me and then lifted the bowl to her face to guzzle down the rest. She set it back down on the table, took a satisfied breath, then returned to me and asked, "What am I getting into?"

"Marriage, family, education... standing someplace in the universe... "

"Oh, I know what I'm doing." She waved over a waiter to bring her more soup.

"Do you what the details are?" I interrogated further, "Do you realize how much your net worth will suddenly be? Or that your name will achieve the caliber of royalty? Or how many people will want to hurt you for all of that?"

Alexis thought about it for a moment. "Who would want to hurt me?" she asked.

"Thousands and thousands. You may not hear about it all the time, but people try and sneak into *this* palace every night so that they can steal something, or kidnap and ransom me for my fortune."

An eyebrow raised incredulously. "How rich are you?"

"The richest," I said amidst the fringe of panic, then took a breath to calm myself before resuming. "I am the chief owner of a practically endless fortune. If the _whole world_ ever needed someone to bid for it, I would outbid everybody, no contest."

"How did you get that money? Oh, soup!" and then started on the next bowl.

My soup had gotten cold by this point. "That's another story for another time," I said while fondling the soup's thin skin with my spoon.

In between blowing the soup on her spoon and slurping it down, she asks me, "Why is the other palace full of ladies?"

"Oh, them? They're my concubines. Kings have them."

"Are they like maids?"

I shook my head. "No, they're essentially wives," elaborating further: "I make sure they live like goddesses, and in return they add to my prestige."

"Clarice said you've... you know... " - she made an awkward pounding-gesture with her hands - "Did the *thing* with them."

The *thing*? "Yes, I've had sex with them, and they only have sex with me. That way they all have children of my bloodline. Good for them as well, as they're also hoping to have something that outlasts their age and their beauty."

Alexis's expression fell disturbingly and she glared back at her soup. "Ew," she muttered. A moment passed in silence, where I sat there with my hands in my lap, wishing I had gloves to keep them warm. Alexis then asked, "I can have candles for my room, right?"

"For you *room*?" I pondered, "You'll be sleeping with me."

"No," she said frightfully, "For when I get my own room in the palace."

"Alexis, honey, we'll sleep together like a normal couple." I left from my chair at the end of the table to take a seat by her. "Listen, you're the most important girl here. You're my favorite out of everybody in this whole palace - this *whole* city!"

She looked downtrodden. "You shouldn't play favorites."

I glared perplexedly at her, then asked, "How much has Clarice told you?"

She sighed, then said hopelessly, "Clarice said that once you were done with me, you were going to put me downstairs in a room beside hers. You put people on shelves and keep them like trophies, she said."

"She's lying," I bitterly corrected, then got up from the chair beside her in power-strides towards Clarice's room.

The doors to Clarice's room were wide-open with nurses and doctors shuffling in-and-out like clockwork. They had wet rags, bandages, medical tools, and boxes of smelly chemicals in their arms that they carried inside from a cart in the hall. I carefully stepped inside to find that Arthur's room had been quarantined by ropes and doctors in waxed leather

suits and masks. They politely forbid me from entering. I heard a wild roaring of painful anger nearing its way through the wooden doors, and soon enough Clarice was carefully escorted out by two other doctors.

"Let me see my baby!" she cruelly roared at them. Her claws dug into their hard-leather jackets, and at one point she even opened her jaws to bite one of their shoulders. The other doctors left their duties, put down their boxes, and helped restrain the wild mother.

In the midst of the flury I stood in the corner, and suddenly a hand fell on my shoulder. I shrieked, turned to see a doctor with a respirator. "Lord Argensis, you need to leave now," and he carefully guided me outside. I asked while being shoved through the double-doors, "What happened my son?" "The boy has the plague," he answered, and then shut the doors with me on the outside.

A moment later the doors re-opened and Clarice was forced out by five grown men and two women. Before she could make another frenzied leap at them they shut the doors and locked them, apologizing profusely through the wood that they were only doing their jobs. She pounded on the doors with all her might, but the solid-wood wouldn't break even for her northern grit. She eventually collapsed against the doorframe and wept. "Give me back my baby! Give him back! Arthur..."

She hadn't noticed me against the other wall behind her. "How bad is it?" I softly asked.

Her whole twisted around to face me, and her gaze fell upon me like arrows. There, a painful, steady minute passed between our glances, and the silence dragged on our nerves to feel like an eternity was passing. My expression softened, and I broke down, "He's my son, too."

"It's late," she confessed, "Arthur's lost most of his fur and... " - she almost broke into sobs again - "*He can't speak anymore!*"

"So soon?"

She shook her head woefully. "The plague takes children in less than half the time it does adults."

"About three days then?"

She sprung from the floor at me, grabbing me by the shoulders and tossing me sliding on my back down the hall's hardwood floor. "Go play with your new toy!" she hissed at me.

I picked myself off the floor, scowling at her. "What's your problem!" I demanded of her. "Do you think our boy would want to see his parents fighting like this?"

"He's not your son!" and she struck my jaw, sending me catching myself against the wall.

My pride was more damaged than my face, which I could feel had loosened a tooth. I looked back at her and scowled, "Does the idea of death make you bitter?"

Her fists curled for another strike. "Don't you dare- " Eyeliner bled into the fur above her cheeks.

"I love him, too," I said pastily as my cheek began to swell.

Her expression softened, and she looked rather exhausted, defeated. We stood face to face, toe to toe. Then I leaned-in and hugged her, which she returned, and she let out her sorrows. "Why aren't you crying?" she then asked.

"I just can't anymore," I whispered into her neck, "I've cried all I could for Holume, but I can still cry on the inside. I'm here for you."

"Get rid of her, Ferris," Clarice lamented, "She's just beautiful, nothing more." We held each other in our arms, cradling each other mutually.

"Somebody's going to have to take care of her... "

"She'll drive you crazy."

"What if that's what I want?"

There was a soft sigh, and she hugged tighter, "You're worth more than misery, my love."

I let go of her. "I'll find a way for us to see our son, soon."

"I'm willing to use Bluebed." She wiped a tear out of her eye with the palm of her hand.

"There has to be something less... painful."

She approached the door to her room again. "Will you suffer with me?"

There was a pause for thought, then I answered through a swelling jaw: "Yes, I will."

As soon as I knocked on the door it opened back and a doctor appeared. He shocked-back at Clarice, then saw me beside her and asked, "Would you like something."

"I want to see my son," said the mother wolf. I added, "Please."

The owl in the doctor robes, notably shorter than both of us, steadily stepped back to let us through.

Our son, Arthur, was laying on a white-sheeted bed beside his crib. His eyes were pasty-red, his tongue lolled out the side of his mouth, but his chest still rose with each exhausted, struggling breath. In one arm there was a velum-tube where blood flowed out into a bucket on the floor, and in the right arm was another tube that was connected to a suspended bottle of blood.

"What are you doing to my boy?" I gasped. Clarice ran forward and grabbed the squirming child into her arms. She wouldn't let go even as the doctors frightened and urged her. "I'm willing," she responded to them all, referencing to the Bluebed-scrubbing that must follow after.

One doctor explained to me, "We're trying a new procedure, my lord. See the tubes?" He pointed at Arthur's limp arms. "Pure blood goes in on one end. Bad blood goes out the other end. We'll end the procedure once our tests start coming back negative."

"You mean when the blood stops crusting, right?"

"Precisely."

Clarice held her child for the last few moments that he would be with us on earth. She stroked the fur on his head, which came off cleanly with each stroke of her palm. Arthur squirmed in her arms like a worm - just like the man on that one road weeks ago. Meanwhile, his mother whispered apologies into his ear: "I'm sorry, I'm so, so, sorry..." Though Clarice tried her sincerest to make contact with her child, the boy appeared lost in his own world, speaking in senseless moans and *bah's*.

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I stayed with them for as long as I could, but for fear of my other children and their mothers I left and ventured towards the second palace where they all lived. It was directly behind my palace, which required one to travel through the gardens in order to reach it. Bundled in my coat, I marched through the rising inches of snow, passing ten freshly dug graves. As I reached the opposite end of the gardens I encountered fifteen of my concubines who left their palace's doors to stop me from approaching any further.

The ones who didn't have suitable coat of fur for the winter were bundled in ones I'd purchased for them at one time or another. They look disheveled, however, in their hair, their lack of makeup, and their somber expressions.

"You have to go now, Ferris," Dorothy, a hyena, told me.

"Arthur's not doing well... how is everyone in the palace?"

Another smiled sweetly and shook her head while saying, "We all have it."

My heart sank into my stomach. "What?" I begged of them, "You have the plague?"

Dorothy held out her bandaged finger towards me. "We're all positive."

"Ludacris!" I marched towards them in fury, demanding an answer, "Then why are you so calm? What about a miserable, horrid death looks so approachable to you?" They remained where they were as I approached. "Why are you so relaxed?"

A sixteenth woman stepped out from behind them, telling me: "They've accepted their deaths." She wore a dark-purple robe with a large hood that cast a shade over her face as that it couldn't be seen; yet, a feline tail followed behind her. Its tip flicked back-and-forth.

I didn't recognize her as a maiden or a concubine. "What have you done to them?" I demanded.

"They're quite sober now, Argensis," she mused as she took up the front. "I've introduced a new perspective to your fair concubines."

"They really have it," I moped, "Do they?"

The mistress in purple pulled back her hood to reveal a cat's bald-patched head, whose blood-eyes pierced through the snowfall. "I gave it to them."

I groped around my robes to feel for my dagger, for which to swiftly plunge into the wench's neck, but there was not one on my person. "Curse you!" I called in mounting fury.

She cocked her head to the side and pitifully smiled at me. "Everything that breathes fears death, dear Argensis. But, what has no fear of death is truly superior."

"Rocks don't fear death!" I fell to my knees and searched for a rock through the snow. Found one the size of an ostrich egg.

"Yet the rocks last forever," she rebutted, "Don't you find it strange how anything worth remembering is always carved in stone?"

I rose to my feet, threw the stone and struck the feline. It hit her forehead and dropped her to the ground. My concubines watched quietly. Her forehead was dented-in and bleeding. I found another stone within the snow and approached her. "You've made my concubines delusional, cursed them to an agonizing death, now you tell me that *you're* superior because they don't care anymore?" I raised the stone in my hand to strike again.

She leaned out from the snow, wiped the blood from her eyes. "Finish me off, rich man."

"What is your name?" I hissed through my teeth.

"It doesn't matter."

The rock in my hands fell softly into the snow. "Yes it does!" Once again, I found myself able to cry. "Your life matters - everybody's life matters!"

The hyena named Dorothy neared to me - almost put her hand on my shoulder to comfort me, but reclined. "It's okay, Ferris. Life happens, then it's gone."

I shocked back from them all in terror, nearly tripping backwards over a hedge. "You've lost your minds... " I frightened. Then to the feline, "You're one of the Voidgazers, aren't you?"

A few of the concubines stepped to the mistress's side to assist her back on to her feet. She felt around the bump on her head, then replied, "You're correct, Argensis."

"I want you out off my property."

She smiled and curtsied to me. "As you wish, my lord."

A tigress protested, "But what about your teachings, my lady?"

The feline threw over her hood again and consoled them, "Voidgazing is watching the night sky. Never forget that we're just dust in space; nothing will stop you then." She walked out from the gardens, away from the palace, found a small hole in the fence behind some bushes and departed from there.

There was a long silence between myself and the concubines. Then I spoke, "At least let me see my children, just one last time."

They parted from me for back indoors. "They'll be leaving soon, lord Ferris."

"Your own flesh and blood... " I plead.

Dorothy stated apathetically: "It happens."

I left for my own palace, where I then paced furiously up and down the hallways, trying to conceive of a way that would allow me to enter my concubine's Palace of Death without losing my own life as well. Obviously I could dress myself in silver armor, but what about being able to hold my child's head against my chest and letting it hear my heartbeat? If I went plainly, any time spent beyond hugging the first child would doom me as the plague would quickly enter my body, so then no amount of Bluebed scrubblings would save me then. A blood-transfusion is out of the question, as I don't even know if I'd survive it - they've been tried before and half the time their patients die from allergic reactions.

Having run out of ideas I retreated to my bedroom for a moment of rest. Sitting at my vanity, looking into the mirror, I laid my head against it and breathed out. The emotional toll had done damage to my body and so I was aching throughout. I felt numb inside, for as much I

tried to display proper emotions in these times of death I found myself *burnt-out*, misfiring like damp gunpowder.

I picked my head off the vanity's desk to see my face in the mirror - I'd accidentally laid my cheek against a polishing kit, so now my cheek glimmered like bronze. Presently, inspiration struck: what if I powdered myself in enough silver to have essentially armored myself against the plague while still being able to have physical contact with my children? I knew I had enough silver coins in the lockbox atop my hearth for which to pulverize; all I had to do was bring it to the smith in the gardens and I would be hugging my children tonight.

When the coating had been completed and applied it was almost nightfall. I looked at myself in my bedroom mirror, and feeling quite silly. I glimmering all over, like one of the giant silver statues that stood in the fourier. *I twinkled*. It'd been ground so smooth that it was comfortable to wear. My biological worth had skyrocketed from this application. For the time-being I was virtually immune to the plague. Hopefully nobody noticed me on the way to the other palace. For good measure I threw on another robe and a scarf to cover my face; bundled-up for winter! that's what I assured myself to tell them if they asked.

My concubine's palace had been designed architecturally like an apartment complex of elegant 3,000sqft lofts. There was enough room for the women, their children, their protectors, and their servants. Before entering I ducked under a rope and sign with a skull and painted on it. Inside, many of the women looked fine, having not gone yet into balding, but the rest had crossed into that stage, losing fur and scales all over (it's an ugly, painful sight for a serpent to lose their scales), and furthermore, some, who had never been good at fighting off colds and flu, had already gone into their loss of coherency. Remarkably, however, those who were in good enough condition made sure that the palace remained clean-looking, and that everyone was taken care of. I approached into the first door on my right - checked the plaque on the door - entered Juliana's room.

For who of my children were left, they were in the poorest of physical condition. Though they babbled as fools, their eyes were bloodshot, and they were as bald as pups, yet they still recognized their father by his antlers. When I took off my scarf and coat, they stammered to express a grin, proving that perhaps their minds weren't totally separated from the outside world yet. I knelt down and hugged my sons, my daughters, and later their mothers. For the rest of the evening I found myself being crowded around by my wives with my dying offspring cradled in their arms. One such child, a young fawn with eyes like mine, was given into my arms by his mother. Unlike the rest of his siblings, he hadn't lost his mind just yet, and croaked for me: "Daddy... "

He cried into my shoulder, getting glitter on his face and told me while rubbing tears in his eyes, "I'm scared."

"I'm scared, too," I returned, then held him close to myself again. "Daddy's here. Be strong for daddy, okay?"

The fawn, oddly enough, did not show registry of my queer appearance, but just so treated me as though I were the most beautiful person in this room. His mother argued with the other mothers over just how long his turn should be with me, and so I planned to make these last words brief.

"Tell me your name," I asked of him.

"Mark," he grobbled.

"That's right," I encouraged him, "You're Mark Argensis, and you mean the world to me. I don't know what I'd do if you left me, but remember these words: I love you more than words can describe. I love all of you so, so very much."

Mark smiled for the first time since I saw him that night, told me, "Okay," and was taken back by his mother. Another child was placed in my arms; the night went on. I hugged and cradled well over forty children as the sun set - infants, toddlers, youths, and preteens (who sat in my lap.) Almost all of them at this point had been reduced to invalids, which aroused my endless outpour of pity - so much so that I discovered how much my heart could writhe in such a way for so long; I thought surely when this was all over my heart would finally surrender to ribbons. My empathy endured, and so I left that palace of death by myself.

There was well-over a foot of snow that I trudged through on my way back the central palace. I was very thankful that I over-dressed for the cold like I had. I planned on taking a good, long shower when I secured myself indoors. I hoped that this cursed glitter would be easy to scrub off.

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Having finished my long shower, I enter into the fourier en route for the kitchen when I was approached by a messenger. Beads of sweat dripped from his forehead while he panted vigorously. A swollen satchel shifted by his side. He addressed me: "My lord!" and proceeded, "Terrible news - it's about"

Terrible news! What a world.

I burst into a frantic yell to cut him off: "No! No - let me guess! We're being invaded, right? And as warfare they're catapulting the bodies of their dead over our walls?" He wanted to correct me but I lashed at him again, "Better yet: the circle of life is so horribly obtuse at this point that the sudden extinction of feral mammals has allowed the insect populations to _explode!_ and now carpet-swarms of ants are burrowing their way under my walls and attacking every living thing in the streets." I was seething at the end of my rant; my mind was finished with grieving and now could only offer fury as a substitute.

The presently timid messenger squawked at me, "It's the plague.... "

"What about the *plague*?" I loomed over him like a cliff staring down.

He whispered something at me.

"Louder, man!"

"It's taken over your city!" he cried, then cowered away as he offered me the scroll.

My breath held still in my lungs as I read. The messenger hadn't exaggerated: After we'd worked so hard to isolate the infected, our efforts inadvertently spread the plague everywhere throughout the city. The message made clear that while the first wave of victims were isolated and died at their appropriate times, the oils in their furs, feathers, and scales, were *smear*ed across the whole of the city. As of yet there are no related deaths from the plague, however, there is already widespread balding, and several hundred children have already been hospitalized for debilitating headaches and speech-loss.

I steadily crushed the letter between my trembling, writhing hands, until it was compacted to the size of a tomato. My eyes gazed, unfocused; my whole mind was turning to grey. My breath twitched like grass in the wind. My eye and wrists spasmed. The messenger cowered in the corner, curled-up for a volcanic eruption.

The mountain-top blew its lid off.

"AAAUGHH!" I stomped and incoherently roared around the fourier like a rabid dog. Teeth flared, the paper was shredded in my hands and sprayed like confetti across the polished onyx floors. I never knew I had such a malevolent force stuck inside of my heart's heart, which just so lusted for blood and the tearing of sinew.

Why couldn't something nice happen for once? I wondered hopelessly to myself as I raised a porcelain bust of myself above my head to smash to particles across the floors. Suddenly, two furry arms wrapped themselves around my waist, and I felt a face press itself against the small of my back.

"You're really scary when you're angry, Ferris..." Alexis lamented to me as I froze in place.

"Alexis," I muttered between licking my lips, "Please go away."

"No," she said with an audible smile, "You need big hug."

"Alexis-"

"You're gunna get through this, and you're going to save the city. You're the best person in the world, and I know you can do it. You just have to believe in yourself."

I set down the bust back on its pedestal and turned to face her. I knelt down on both knees so that we could see eye-to-eye. I took her hands in mine. "Alexis," I confessed defeatedly, "There's nothing I can do. Everybody has it now."

Her eyes met with mine "There'll be survivors... maybe one of them will find the cure."

"You really think so?" I asked of her, "Why?"

"Well," she began, "Because they're great, cool people. And they're really smart. Like... uhm.. " She thought deeply for a moment, "Obi knows just how long to cook pots, and he's really good with his hands... and Shelly (Obi's wife) has this cool powder she uses to make soups that make your stomach aches go away, but she said it's also useful for killing insects but it doesn't hurt us... And... " Another deep process of thought - "They're all smart, I think... They'll find a way."

"What if they only have a week?" I thought that I'd cornered hope her then.

But: "There's a whole lot of them (actually several thousands) down there," she explained, "If they all work together and try everything, I know they'll find a way to get better." Then she leaned forward and hugged me again, kissing me on the cheek before nestling her face into my neck. I returned the hug, then stood up from her.

Turning to the messenger; "Thank you giving me this," I said. My exhaustion expressed itself as I yawned in his direction and said while rubbing my tired eyes, "Go tell that opossum lady about this - the new chief of guard."

"Chief Dolmen?" asked the messenger.

I turned away with a toss of my wrist, "Sure, her," then headed for the upward stairs.

The messenger pleaded, "She'll need a sign of your authority-"

I tossed him the signet ring from my thumb; he caught it in both hands, gawked at it, then asked: "When would you like this back?"

"Whenever."

As I took the railing I overheard the *clatter* of plate-armor and turned to catch Chief Dolmen and seven armed guards sprinting into the fourier for me. "My lord!" she briefed, "I need you to come with me!"

"I already know about the plague, chief."

"The palace is being invaded en masse, now please follow me to the safety room." She took my hand and dragged me around the corner. Her guards had already rounded-up the messenger and Alexis. I followed with a new burst of focus, determination.

While we walked through the lower hallways of my palace I told her, "Have your men kill anyone who enters through these gates. Have your men rally back into the palace then burn down the main bridge. They're enforced to use polearms; no physical contact is allowed. Burn the blood off the blades whenever they get the chance.

The chief returned, "Most of that has already been done. We've already demolished the bridge, but we have forty who have chosen to help settle the riots in the city." We progressed down a stone stairwell and into cavernous darkness. Memories returned of this portion of the palace's construction. There were secret rooms and cubbies everywhere down here in case of such an attack.

We arrived at the caverns beneath the palace's third basement. We huddled in the light of our torches for warmth and vision. Almost all of the palace staff had been gathered into the open caverns beneath my palace while the able-and-willing were given spears of their own to help defend the palace grounds. The chief pressed her palm against a camouflaged plate carved from the rock wall, which from her press, *clicked* and unlocked something nearby. She stepped aside and pushed a section of concealed rock open like a door, then ushered us into a man-made room of damp brick-floors, ceilings, and walls, where crates of food were huddled in the corners and mats for sleeping were laid on the floors.

Once we were all in I counted our faces. Clarice, Alexis, several waiters and maids, chefs, janitors, and the concubines and their children that lived in my palace were present there with me. There were only two torches to go around.

"There's enough supplies in there for a month," Chief Dolmen explained, "Our defense should only take an hour or two. Olf will keep you company." An armored husky with black eyes ducked his head to step inside with us.

"Goodbye," I responded, and the door, by its own weight, swung back shut.

"Ferris - " began Alexis, "I'm scared of the dark... "

*

The following Saturday was spent looking over my shoulder and listening to the windows and floorboards. I wouldn't dare look out my windows for the command of my city, for even at the excessive height of my palace, I still feared the possibility of an eagle-eye'd archer out to take my life. Instead, I watched from a distance, viewing the smoke that rose from my city as it burned all around.

That city which burned below had my name written on its walls. During its initial construction I was so enraptured by its beautiful stone corridors and redwood lodges that I told myself it would all last for a thousand years. When all the empires of the world were finally consumed by infertility or war, Ferristead's great walls and civilized people would remain to reap the harvest fields. When the fires of the end-times had finished cleansing the

earth, Ferristead's might walls would still stand, and on the first morn of the new era, my people would open the doors to teach the land to live again.

Ah, but just the opposite, I recognized as I succumbed to approach the window and look-out upon my city, while the world falls asleep, my city burns. Now all who shall inherit this city shall be the feral rabbits and bluebirds - nay, not even the rabbits and bluebirds shall inherit it. But the spiders and moths, perhaps...

The doors to my bedroom were pushed open and Chief Dolmen stepped through. "Forty-five" she declared to me.

I turned from the window. "Pardon?"

"That's the amount of child bodies we claimed from the concubine's palace."

"What of the adults?" I asked breathlessly.

"None yet."

"Of course." I returned to the window to take a seat in a cushioned chair, but nearly missed and fell against the floor from a sudden exhaustion.

Dolmen ran to my side. "My lord?"

"I'm fine," I said, "Just... tired." Then, rubbing my forehead, I asked, "What about my son?"

"Your son?"

"Arthur. Clarice's offspring."

She turned back for the door in a sprint. "I'll find that out now."

"Never mind!" I commanded, "I'll go see for myself."

When I arrived at Clarice's room and opened the door, I saw her kneeling over the foot of her bed, weeping into her arms while Arthur's, fragile, cold body lay there under a pure-white sheet.

The wedding, I realized then, had been canceled, and instead we would have a funeral.

Come Sunday, the snow had stopped falling, but whatever graves had been dug previously had been filled in. Instead of a burial, we would have a cremation. I ordered that to make room for the funeral pyres the gardeners should tear down my hedge-maze and all of my bushes. The trees outside were too swollen with ice to be harvested and used for pyre wood, and so I ordered that the surplus firewood from my concubine's palace should

substitute. When all was said and done it was high-noon, and my gardens looked as though there had been a battle just a few minutes ago.

Forty concubines were present at the funeral session, including Clarice, who stood apart from the rest and wept for Arthur alone. Arthur, by my order, would get to be buried and have a tombstone, which was more than what could be said for my other children. The other children who perished, I decreed, would get a monument to their loss.

The gardeners said that whatever we planned to say would have to be said soon, or else the dirt for Arthur's grave would freeze and he'd have to be cremated like the rest. Clarice, in dismal condition for heartbreak, fell to her knees and cried just one last time, "Why you? My precious, boy!"

I stood beside Clarice at our son's casket, observing his mother grieve over him. As I watched, I discovered in myself beyond the tears, the anger, there was cool thirst for redemption. When Clarice finished and stepped aside, I approached the casket, opened the lid, and peered within. His body lay there bitterly cold, where around daisy petals scattered at his sides. Someone had slipped a thornless rose between his hands that lay on his chest. I shut my eyes and said what came to my heart:

*I won't let the ground drink merrily of your tears,
I won't let the wind scatter your ashes to the hills,
And I won't let Death sleep with both eyes closed.
You're my son,
And I'll carry your memory with me wherever I go.
My sunlit morn,
How will I find my way home without your light?*

Then I closed the lid of his casket and they lowered him into the ground. The gardeners took turns with shovel-fulls of dirt from a pile and starting filling up the grave. I and Clarice stood nearby and watched. I drew close to her and put an arm over her back, and she in return drew close to me. Across the garden, the concubines retreated for the porch of their palace to watch as the other gardeners began igniting the pyres.

I said sternly into her left ear as we watched our son's grave steadily fill in, "I'm going to avenge him, someday."

There was a revenge-filled confidence in her reply: "Let me join you."

"Of course."

Alexis approached from behind and appeared at my left side. She was dressed perhaps too warm for the cold, so much so that her additional layers caused her to waddle like someone in a full-body cast. She was using socks for gloves. We could only see her eyes

from deep inside her layers of masks. It was all I needed to see that she wanted to share in our mourning. I opened up the other arm and let her waddle in to take her by my side.

"I never got to meet any of them," Alexis said.

"They would've liked you," answered Clarice.

*

The world was ending; I could feel it in the air later that night. The whole land and even my city had hushed its candles and fires, yet the stars were absent. Overhead in the clear night sky appeared an unanticipated farmers moon of such a vibrant red, unlike any farmers moon that had ever been recorded. No one in my palace noticed it rise, but that as the sun descended so did the moon phase-in with the dusk. It was red as though swollen with fresh blood, and hung there in the sky.

There was an odd quiet radiating from the hushed lights of my city. The fires had been put out, the riots subdued, and the invaders killed-off or warded away. Dolmen had done her job well, and she and her men took pride in that fact, reporting directly to me all that'd been accomplished under her watch, with all the confidence a small woman could muster. Tonight and for as long as it would take for order to be reestablished in my city, Dolmen would always be in the same room as me, and her guards would continually circle my palace's grounds on the wait for more intruders.

Alexis's wedding would have to wait for another day, I told her. She understood, but she frowned disappointedly. Clarice had finally warmed up to Alexis, so that she could tolerate to be in the same room as her. She was still morose from the funeral, and in her own dimmed quiet and occasional sip of wine she mourned. We shared between us wisened glances that my relationship with Alexis would remain within the confines of patron and child.

A weird, unheard cord hung in the air around that night, putting a hidden clause behind our every promise and aspiration: only once the blood moon goes for good.

We were in the livingroom, sitting on the couches and watching the fire when we heard the panicked cries coming from outside in the gardens. Guards from all around outside, throughout the palace halls, shouted, "We're under attack!" We knew to run for the saferooms, where halfway to them Dolmen, and the last of the concubines intercepted us. We joined together into a single party with Dolmen leading the way, and we ventured beyond the cellars. Alexis, for fright of the darkness, clung to my side once the cellar door shut behind us.

"How many?" I asked as we rushed down stone stairs in the torch-lit dark.

"The rest of them," she responded, reaching the base, stepping aside for the rest of us to land.

"Like, five-hundred?"

"Something over that, yes. This way!" We took a familiar left-turn and continued downwards.

Between breathes I asked, "Are the concubines from the palace guarded?"

"They refused it," she said.

Amidst stepping over sacks of potatoes and jogging down short flights of stairs into the wine cellar, I begged, "Why are the citizens doing this?"

"I think it's the moon," Dolmen offered, "They're going to loot whatever they can get before society collapses for good."

I told her, "Dolmen, we're going to have to leave the city for a while, do you understand?"

I could tell she was coming to terms with her own ability to protect us. "You remember the secret exit, correct?"

"Yes," I said, "I do. It's at the back of the saferoom."

We took another left, scrambling like mice through a maze. We returned to the rock-face, where once again she pressed the hidden button that caused a door to appear in the wall. Dolmen asked all of us, "Where will you go?"

"Wherever the plague isn't. To the Empire."

She stepped inside with us and took to leading us to of the safe-room.

Clarice spoke up, "Will we ever come back?"

I was about to answer when Dolmen responded to her, "Come back in a month. The plague should burn itself out by then."

Alexis asked her, "What if there's no one left?"

"We can rebuild," I answered Alexis.

"What if they die?" Alexis then asked, speaking of the guards and Dolmen.

Dolmen stopped at the hallway's dead end and pressed the palm of her hand against a brick in the wall. The brick slide back with her efforts and the whole of the wall slowly grinded back, then slid aside on rollers within the door itself. It opened up to moist darkness and dirt floors. A frigid breeze rushed through and bit our cheeks. She finally said, "I'll have served you all honorably," and as she said that, she looked into each of our eyes as though answering to each of us directly: Ferris, Alexis, Clarice, and the concubines; six of us in total. She stepped to

the side, lit an extra torch for us to take on our journey. We passed by her, taking careful steps over the ridge separating the stone floors from the chilled dusty dirt beyond. I was the last to step through.

She said, "There's an abandoned shack just outside the cave. You're going to go inside and dig a cart out of the roof shingles. We prepared it for you yesterday. It'll have everything you need to survive for a few weeks, if you eat conservatively."

"Is there Bluebed inside?" I asked worrisomely.

She nodded, "Enough for all of you."

Somberly, I asked, "What's your *first* name?"

"Mirror," she responded, then pressed another stone in the wall and the door shut. The light from her torch was cut out from us, and it was just my torch.

Alexis called to me from the dark, "Where do we go from here?"

"Just follow the path, and watch your step."

Our journey through the tunnel was an achingly quiet and slow one. The passage was too narrow for anyone to walk side-by-side, and so I walked in front with the torch. Alexis held on to my robes from behind, the concubines followed after, and Clarice trailed in the back. The whole of our journey, I wished Clarice were behind me.

We exited it through a covering of pine-branches that lead us to the the other side of the hill that my palace was on. The blood-red moon cast a ruby glare over the snowy forestside. I looked behind myself up at the top of the hill, which from this side was more like a mountain with a cliff, and at the top I saw the tallest spires of my palace reaching up to the wine-red sky. The distant echoes of battle-field cries scattered through the distant sky from my palace ground. A figure was thrown face-first from the highest window of the tallest spire, and being silhouetted against a red-night sky, I could see the shapes and saw that it was a she-bear - one of my concubines. The figure fell frightfully and quickly, and as her form fell beyond my perspective of the hill-top, she was gone.

In that moment watching the woman I once impersonally referred to as a *concubine*, my heart changed and I realized that the most precious things in my life all had a heartbeat, two parents, and a first name. I turned then to follow after the last of my loves, for they had gone after the shack without me in the night's red glow.

We found the log shack, which was powdered in snow with a collapsed roof, two fallen walls, and a front-door hanging on its hinges. The five of them, Clarice, Alexis, the three concubines, were well into tearing off the fallen roof, which Mirror Dolmen had reported to be hiding a cart of supplies. I set the torch on a nearby table in the open shack and helped pull away wreckage. Alexis was small and tossed aside each single individually. The concubines,

who accounted for as Antoinette (Tony for short), a Gecko; Ruce, a leopard; and Stenny, an antelope with a face naturally painted with the stripes of the distant savannas, worked together to pull a cross-beam out from under heavy thatching. Clarice noticed their plight and shoed them away, took the crossbeam herself, and vigorously removed it in a steady tugging. They were so compacted together that I couldn't find a place to help, so I just held the torch and watched.

Just as Mirror Dolmen had told us in the safe-room, we eventually uncovered a two-wheel wooden wagon. Its bed carried several wooden crates with various labels on the sides to distinguish between food, water, blankets, and Bluebed. There were also two bundled leather tents tied to the top with rope.

I looked above at the hill-top where my palace was and noticed pillars of smoke rising into the skies. Though hidden directly, the red glow of blazing fires from the palace itself illuminated the smoke-trails.

"We have to go," I said to them. Clarice took the poles in the front with which to pull the cart, and I pushed from the back. Alexis tried pushing, but found that the cart was just too small to join in without making it awkward, and trailed beside us with the others. A compass we'd found with the camping supplies in the wagon told us to head east, towards the coast. The full red moon guided our paths once the torch burned-out later that night. Alexis ended up sitting in the driver's seat of the wagon, curling-up in a blanket, and falling asleep sometime past midnight. For her size she didn't weigh a lot - we all assumed she was mostly *floof*. We walked, pushing, pulling, throughout the entire night, and were the only ones straying about; not a single wild creature called, and as for ourselves, we had too much on our hearts to feel like speaking. We didn't set up camp until sunrise, but it was hard to sleep even then.

End of Chapter 4



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