

Ephmera:

The Silence of the Envious

“As creatures of thought, we presume that there can be an end to pain. We look for cures; we seek comforts; we structure our lives in predictable ways. But we should know, life isn't meant to be easy, and troubles are not meant to be exterminated from our lives entirely - only learned from, pondered upon, and eventually, grown beyond.”

As a boy, Azrael had briefly learned the ways of sky-reading from an old mercenary woman he'd traveled with after beginning his ill-fated quest. She'd told him: “The west's the one to watch, always; bad news from the west, if ever it should come.” She'd given him that mystic, roguish wink of the gypsy folk, and she'd went on - “Weather-prediction and fortune-telling are like arts, you know. The trick is to know what's coming, to make good luck out of bad – because there's a secret to all brands of fortune-telling.”

At her theatrical pause, Azrael had eagerly taken the bait - “Uh-huh? And what's that?”

“The truth is, bad luck is always just bad planning.” Observing the young boy's confused face, she'd grinned and flicked him on the nose - “Ah, don't be such a fool! There's no such thing as fate!”

A smack of wet cold on his face woke him. Groggily, Azrael craned his head skywards and saw a darkcotton blanket overhead. The clouds had been mere feathers that morning, but now inching from the horizon was a nebulous veil, nearly invisible but for its tinted color. Heavy rains were coming, and he was too injured, too tired, and too weak to survive a night out in a storm.

After nearly an hour of motionlessness, the young man was forced to move. Climbing to his feet, he faltered and nearly toppled over, but for a lucky catch against the wall. He ground an oath between his teeth, regathered himself, and tried again. This time, his legs took his weight. Standing and cursing his misfortune, he surveyed the surrounding village.

There'd been farms at the edge of the city, he recalled – he might sneak into one of those. But Azrael doubted that he could make it so far, teetering as he was just to take a few steps. He thought to break into someone's house, but unless they left the door open for him, such a feat was also beyond his power.

Mumbling crossly to himself, his eyes settled on a cart by the road. In his tired desperation, he was fully prepared to crawl under it and spend the night on the dirt – only to find upon his clumsy approach that the workmanship was too slipshod to shelter against anything smaller than a rainfall of apples.

Downcast, Azrael rested heavily on the cart's side. He'd burnt through his reserves since his run from Riviem, already his exertion had him shaking. It would be too easy to just sit himself down and let the weight of struggle drop, just to wait for the rains to wash him away....

The young man looked up again, straightening his shoulders and bolstering himself with encouraging promises. He'd get through the night. And tomorrow, he'd find someone that would buy what little equipment he had on him, and line his pockets with at least a few heads. From there, a warm

bed at the inn was just a few coins away – a hot, roaring fire, a thick and meaty stew, a soft mattress, all of that! It wasn't time to give up yet! *Keep looking*, his fleeting determination told him, unrelenting in the face of complaints and injury – *there has to be something, so keep looking!*

The solution clicked together. Across the yard of a nearby home stood an open-air woodshed. Under it, piles of split firewood stood on a platform raised a few inches above the ground, seasoning. The shingle-roofed structure wouldn't do him any good against cold, but if nothing else, Azrael was fairly certain that it wouldn't leak rain – water would cause the wood to swell, ruining its curing. It seemed full, but there had to be some little spot between the stacks of logs he could cram himself into!

His hazy vision picked up a few objects in the yard, but he only comprehended them insofar as to navigate around them. With shelter in sight at last, his tangled thoughts refused to process anything further. Azrael hobbled for the shed, skirting a low-lying bush and nearly falling over the short fenced property line.

He didn't make it far into the shabby yard before his plodding feet stumbled. His sense of balance was thrown astray, and Azrael tipped beyond the point of recovery. He managed only a pitiful swing of one arm, grabbing for *anything* to steady him. His hand found something, caught it, tried to support himself--

It was a wash basin, and Azrael was quick to discover that it was not well-built. Pressed under his weight, the poor wood standing the basin up broke.

Miraculously, Azrael avoided the most of the wash-water deluge, drenching mostly just one arm and spilling the rest to the ground. The tub itself struck his back as he went sprawling flat on his belly, as the flimsy planks that had failed to carry it scattered.

Out of the house bolted a youthful female with a dirty, lopsided bun. “Herald's Hands!” she snapped, taken by surprise. The skinny, unattractive girl took no time at all to spot the pitiful Azrael exhuming himself from the mess, who was groaning at his shoulder torn open anew. He looked up despairingly – damn it, he hadn't even made it to the woodshed, and already he was caught!

“What's goin' on out here?” she gawked, unmoving.

Azrael was struck by realization: This was someone that was actually willing to speak with him. He wasn't nearly as persuasive as Drake, but he might be able to inspire some sympathy – and from there, who knew? “I, I'm sorry,” Azrael stammered, standing unsteadily, “I--”

“You poor man! Y'look like you'll tip o'er at a sudden gust!” The brunette exclaimed, rushing forward and steadying him with a hand. “Somethin' sure chewed ya up but good, di'n't it? C'mon, you need t'get inside,” she decided, supporting him under one arm.

Azrael was wobbling, but he could still walk; with the girl's assistance, he made it through the front door. Once within, he saw an older man hovering close nearby, presumably her father. Upon seeing Azrael being led by his eager daughter, the man's mouth tightened. “You go on upstairs, Bailey, I'll handle this,” the man told the girl, his eyes squinted and unwelcoming.

“*Da!* I see what ye're planning, and ye're horrible for even thinking it!” The girl's – Bailey's - voice mutated into a ear-rending squawk as she rounded on her sire. “It's not right to turn away a man

in need – isn't that what they tell us in study? If you ain't gonna follow it, yer a heathen! That what ye're gonna make us? Heathens?!" Her tirade grew louder and more shrewish with every word, until Azrael couldn't help but feel an odd bite of pity for the poor woodworker.

The gray-haired man accepted Bailey's lecture with a frown, rubbing behind an ear. "Aw, stones, this's just trouble."

"Trouble? *Trouble?* Y'think it's just 'trouble' to lend hand to a poor injured troubled needy soul, who's got nobody else t'count on? J'st listen t'yerself, Da!" The girl's audacity won out; her father lifted his hands in surrender and retreated to a worn chair. Unobstructed, Bailey walked Azrael further into the home, reassuring him sweetly, "Now c'mon, we've got a good bed for you. It ain't so far, just this way, now...." Azrael caught a hopeless stare from the woodcutter before he was led into a narrow hallway, out of sight from the discontented man.

The girl took him to a door at the end of the hall, which squealed as it opened. The small bedroom on the other side was sparsely decorated, but decently furnished. The centerpiece of the room was an austere bed with a woven straw mattress. It could have been made of broken glass for all Azrael cared - he nearly collapsed onto it. He fumbled to get his boots pulled off and the rest of him comfortably beneath the bed's quilt, but Bailey aided him until his head was laid back on the pillows, and he breathed easy at last.

Stacking his boots neatly by the wall, Bailey looked him over. "Yer bleedin' still," she noticed, exploring his shoulder gingerly with her fingers. A grim touch of foreboding creased her brow; then disappeared, and Bailey smiled. "You just settle there, and I'll be righ' back!" She left before he could manage a acknowledging nod.

He dozed off in the intervening minutes, but awoke when a loud squeak announced Bailey's return to the room. Pulling a stool next to his bedside, the girl sat and opened a wooden box on her lap. Exhaustion tried lulling him back to sleep; it could be nothing of importance that Bailey was threading a suturing needle, after all....

Oh. Suddenly alert, Azrael fought to sit up. "Do you know how--"

"Don't get yerself all riled up," she ordered him, "I know what'm doin'." Holding the needle between her lips, Bailey propped up some pillows behind Azrael, then pulled his tattered shirt from the wound. He couldn't find the energy to worry if the tool was clean – he just settled back and braced his jaw as she took her first stab.

No matter the care she took in the stitching, the process was inherently painful, shooting pain throughout his arm. The girl proved a deft hand though, working the point through with merciful swiftness. A dozen or so stitches later, she'd fully closed the gap. "You took that all pretty well," Bailey complimented him, tying off the last knot. Wiping the blood from his shoulder, she inspected the injury. "Well, it's still a mess, but least it oughta hold t'gether, prob'ly."

"... Thank you," Azrael answered sluggishly. His fatigue was seeping into every word and gesture he made – even politely trying to meet eyes with Bailey required enormous effort.

Bailey patted his hand and stood. "I'm gon' go and get some things. Y'look next t'dead; why don't you try'n get a bit of sleep, hm?"

“Y... yes,” he answered, not so much nodding as letting his head droop. Azrael scarcely realized he'd shut his eyes, his mind was locked so clearly around the picture of her quietly leaving the room – it was impossible to tell where the waking world left off, and dreams began.

An intense hunger manifested.. He stirred briefly, trying to doze off again, but the gnawing pain flared insistently. He snapped awake, then inhaled and stretched his back. “Nnnngh,” Azrael mumbled, working his mouth and turning his head. The world was unwilling to come into focus for him – he could hear sounds, rumbles outside, like wagon wheels over cobblestones – no, that wasn't right. Thunder, was the sound.

Someone was there, sitting on the little stool and fussing busily over some unspun wool. “Hey, good mornin'! Well, 'cept for the mornin' part,” Bailey greeted him, lowering the hand spindle. “Ya've only slept a little. Shouldn't y'get more rest?”

It took him a while to answer, turning his head over and peering at the girl drowsily. “You're... Bailey, right?” Azrael discerned slowly.

“That's m'name,” she replied cheerfully. “I'm s'prised that y'remember!” Azrael nodded distantly. Rolling his head to the side, he puzzled over the yellowish color of his injured shoulder before realizing that it had been bandaged while he'd slept.

“... So, y'haven't mentioned yer name?” Bailey cued him, bringing his wandering mind back to the conversation.

“Oh... I haven't...?” Azrael answered, still battling to wake up. He was reluctant to give his name out; he didn't need to leave any extra clues for be followed by. “Thomas,” he lied, “of Eastdale.”

The girl thought, then asked, “Where's that?”

“... East.” A wry smile tugged at his face. “In a dale.”

“Now, that'd make sense, w'dn't it?” She chuckled. “What a piece! Gosh, gotta be half the towns out there that y'can find like that, huh?”

“Probably this one, too?” Azrael questioned.

“What? Sturt, in a feld?” Bailey asked. “No, that's a recipe fer windin' up in the middle a'nowheres.”

Sturtfeld... it sounds vaguely familiar, he pondered. It was like something Azrael had read on a map once, but never heard of beyond that. *Good* – if he wasn't familiar with it, it probably had no connections to the Couriers.

“Somethin' the matter? Y'just sorta stopped talkin',” Bailey questioned.

Breaking his train of thought, Azrael tried to recall what they'd been discussing, but another grinding ache in his stomach interrupted. Smiling ruefully, he answered, “I was just thinking, I haven't eaten in a--”

“Oh!” she spoke over him. “Y'must be starvin', huh? I'll see if dinner's done yet. I'll bring ya somethin', so just you be patient!”

“Ah... well, I don't think I'm going anywhere,” he wearily replied, smiling his gratitude.

“Ohh, ya'd better not even think 'bout tryin' to get outta bed!” Bailey scolded teasingly. Azrael simplified his response to a small nod. Beaming, she promised him, “I'll be back in a quick lil' jiffy,” then nearly flew from the room.

Quite the interesting girl, he observed. And somewhat overwhelming; she had the sort of personality that forced itself over everything, leaving its unfortunate victims gasping for air in its wake. She and Drake would probably *hate* each other. Azrael smiled at the thought of such a meeting, but his mirth faded swiftly. Drake....

Was he the one? Someone had to have the hand that took Emiree's life. It seemed like it was probably Drake's; he'd been the one to possess the murder weapons, and the scene at the manor had a flair that reminded him of no one better.

But what then? Was he to begin questing for vengeance anew now, to wreak justice in the name of his dead lover? He'd learned one thing – the life of one assassin didn't matter anything. It hadn't done him much good for the cause of his father's honor; should it be any better for Emiree, who had begged him to turn from the disastrous course before?

The more he thought of her, the worse he felt; but he couldn't banish her from his mind. Without anything else to occupy him, he thought more and more of that night, and his carelessness, and his... *insolence!* He'd discounted going after the organization, knowing them too powerful – but in rejecting the pursuit, he'd also overlooked their threat. A fierce self-loathing flared; because of his short-sightedness....

His mind drifted off. Absently, Azrael twisted a drop of Emiree's chain between his fingers, whiling away the time until he heard footsteps approaching from the hall. Bailey entered, carrying a bowl of steaming broth and the butt-end of a rye loaf. “Ere ya go, Thomas; eat up!” she grinned.

Eating voraciously, Azrael was soon sopping the last few drops of stock with a tiny hunk of bread. When he finished the last satisfying bite, Bailey setting the dishes aside and clamored for him to tell her about his life in the city. Small concepts such as “how big's the cathedrals in the cities?” or “what fashions're all the gals wearin' these days?” entertained her endlessly. Azrael provided her with short, vague answers, but she just went *on* and *on!* Bailey was a nice girl, he came to decide— *nice*, but dull.

After indulging her for a time, Azrael decided he had to end the conversation. “I'm sorry, but....” he interrupted her during a particularly pointless anecdote of her neighbor's cat's recent litter. He exaggerated the heavy weariness in his voice with an apologetic yawn.

“Ah! Y'must be wiped out,” she observed sympathetically. “And here I'm keepin' ya up, aren't I? I'll let ya be.” Smiling, she collected the dishes and left the room, calling over her shoulder, “Get some good sleep, Thomas!”

Worn down, Azrael sank back into his pillows. For the first time for a long while, he looked out the window at night and saw, not the flickering lights from city lampposts, but a complete darkness under thick clouds. The calm of a village on a rainy night was a soothing memory, and despite his injuries, he slept easily.

The rainstorm was thriving still the next morning. Awakening, Azrael found Bailey at his bedside. She greeted him exuberantly and began chattering away until breakfast-time, when she sprinted off and quickly returned with a plate of toasted grain bread smeared with preserves. While he ate, Bailey returned to talking.

Listening to her, Azrael suspected that it was more than generosity that had convinced her to take him in. Bailey had an insatiable need for attention, and he'd become a captive audience. He sighed, picking at his meal while the girl tittered to herself and babbled happily onward.

When he professed to be tired, Bailey left him for a time, but she soon returned to the room, again with her hand spindle, and resumed working at his bedside. She kept her silence, becoming a pleasant companion for a time until he slept.

Later that day, when he awoke again, she presented him with some fresh clothing – cheap and handmade, but whole. “I'd made 'em for someone a bit bigger'n you are, but they ought to fit, more or less,” she assured him, presenting the woolen bundle.

“Are you sure?” he asked, accepting the clothes only at her assured nod. Once Bailey had left the room, he dressed, working carefully so as not to aggravate his scabbing injuries. Quickly, Azrael found that the long-sleeved shirt was several inches too long, and the trousers had to be belted just to stay up.

“Oh, whoops – might not fit so good after all, huh?” Bailey chuckled, returning. “Ah, maybe my da'll have something that fits better...”

Azrael thought of the woodcutter's displeased reception and shook his head. “No, these are just fine,” he assured her. “Thank you, Bailey.”

The rest of the night passed without incident, and the greater part of the following morning as well.

Azrael awoke in the late afternoon after a long nap, feeling more revitalized than he'd been since coming to Sturtfeld. After one and a half days abed, Azrael was itching to stretch his legs – somewhat literally, he'd begun to suspect that the sour mattress was infested by fleas. He thought he might offer his labor to Bailey's father, as much as his injuries could allow. After the scene he'd caused in entering the woodcutter's home, it was the very least he could do. If they had a coat he could borrow, he might even go and repair the washbasin he'd broken.

Actually following through on his intentions proved problematic. When Azrael sat up, rubbing at his eyes and riding out a flash of vertigo, his sudden motion drew Bailey's attention. “Y'shouldn't be gettin' up,” she admonished him instantly, lowering her knitting and frowning.

“I need to stretch my legs,” he explained. The girl studied him intently. When she didn't verbally reply, he began searching around the bedside for his boots, rubbing the back of his neck.

The needles of her yarnwork clicked together as Bailey set them aside. “Yer too hurt still. Stay in bed.”

Disregarding her advice, he kept examining the area at his bedside, assuring her, “I’m fine.” Azrael finally located the boots at the far wall by the fireplace; Bailey must have moved them there sometime during his stay. Putting his hand on the headboard, Azrael stood, feeling for the first time the strength of his recovering body, and found it still lacking.

Aggravated, Bailey crossed in front of him. “Ain’t you listenin’? Y’gotta rest, still!” she insisted, pushing him back toward the bed. Azrael sat abruptly down at her shove, caught off-guard by the skinny girl’s power – *her power, or my weakness?*

Bailey seemed just as surprised as him, but there was something else on her face as she bit at her bottom lip; a misplaced curiosity, he thought. Her smile tilted to the right. “It’s just good sense....”

Something about how she said it, mixed with his own awkwardness at having been overpowered, gave rise to an embarrassing warmth over his face. “It’s good sense, I suppose,” Azrael acquiesced, made uncomfortable by the girl’s unusual expression. “However....”

His softness was an opening, which Bailey took. Within the space of a second, she’d gotten one knee bent on the bed, nearly straddling his legs. “*It is* good sense,” she told him, reaching to push at him again. Her fingers barely touched him - he was already leaning back to avoid it.

It had never occurred to him that she might move forward to pursue him. Suddenly she was propped over him, her hand heavy on his arm. Every breath was on his face now, and her eyes were inescapable, searching his blank face up and down. Playing with a smile, she hummed a purr - “Wouldn’t ya rather I kept you comp’ny here, anyway?” Her fingertips ran up his arm and pressed against his good shoulder, waiting for invitation to go further.

Azrael felt his pulse quicken, and his breath catch in his chest. Responsive to her touch, he felt a shiver running down the back of his neck and all through his body - but his heart felt like a stiff lump in his chest, and he couldn’t have pulled further back against his pillows if he tried. *Answer, find an answer--* damn it, why wasn’t his brain working! Unable to think of anything eloquent or cohesive or tactful, he gathered his breath and babbled out whatever words would come into his mind.

“Not to sound ungracious,” Azrael rushed, suppressing a rising panic as he imagined the thousands of ways this proposition could go wrong, was *already* so wrong, could only get worse – *imagine if her father came in, right now!* “But I’m not... not interested?”

The rising note at the end had been a mistake, he decided. He watched Bailey’s face slacken at insult, then scrunch with anger. She bent her mouth into a scowl, straightening to her knees and thrusting her hands on her hips. “Are ya, or are ya not?” She demanded. “Y’don’t seem awfully sure of yerself, and I’d rather get an answer than a wonder!”

The vehemence in her voice was astounding. For all that she lacked, she made up with sheer pushiness and force of personality. Propping himself up on his shoulder, he struggled to find a definitive answer and dredged up the unwilling words, “I’ve a fiance already.”

The village girl paused. Azrael looked at his hands, feeling the sorrowful coolness of the golden chain around his wrist. He closing his eyes briefly, pushing away a renewed sense of loss. *It was only half a lie, really*, he told himself; Emiree being dead didn't mean he didn't owe her his devotion. *More now than ever, if anything....*

“... Y'look pretty funny for someone that's got a love they're thinkin' of,” Bailey noted in a snide, sniffling tone. The young man jerked his chin up, racing for an explanation. She didn't seem to want one; grouchily retreating to the foot of his bed, the brunette seated herself on the mattress corner and started running her fingers through her hair. “Well, then, tell me all 'bout this girl of yers. She must be somethin' pretty special, eh? From the city, I bet.”

Azrael swallowed against a rising discomfort and sorrow. “Yes, from the city.”

“One of the pretty ones, then,” Bailey imagined, discovering a knot with her fingers and wrenching through it mercilessly. “Fellas always like the pretty city girls. They're not always the type to settle down with, though, if y'get what I mean.” Her eyes dragged toward him, and he fought again to keep a mournful pang from disturbing his face.

“There are girls like that,” Azrael answered, pacing his words evenly. His delivery was flat and mechanical, evading his complex of emotions. They could only be masked for so long, though, slipping out in an unexpected pause as he concluded, “Em... isn't, though.”

Her cheeks dimpled with a smile. “Ahh, a'course, she's special and pretty and perfect, is'at the way it is?” Bailey averted her gaze again. “So, what's she look like?”

“... Beautiful,” Azrael answered, unable to keep the misery from his voice. He felt his throat tightening as unbidden thoughts rushed to his mind, Memories and images and idealizations, smiles, frowns, pouts; and then there were the moments that expressed nothing at all, just unintended serenity in silence. All of them, so beloved- and now, so sorely missed. His throat was dry and sticky, but he tried to finish his answer all the same. “Always beautiful. She's... always....” Azrael silenced himself.

“Yeah, that's right then? Sounds like what I'd figure,” Bailey answered off-handedly. Standing with an aggravated sigh, the girl gathered what dignity she could find, smiled to hide her humiliation, and commented, “How lucky for you.”

She hurried to separate from him after that. In her absence, Azrael was poignantly alone, and arrested by a welling bleakness. He remained in bed the rest of the evening, but it would be a long time before he found peace enough to sleep.

On the third morning, everything outside the window was soaked with dew. There was still a light mist of rain, but Azrael knew that it would not last long. News from Riviem wouldn't be delayed any longer. He would have make tonight his last night in Sturtfeld.

Bailey was absent from his bedside. He didn't see her until breakfast, when she greeted him as cheerfully as ever, offered him a tray of food, and began commenting happily on how quickly it seemed he was recovering. “Why, I bet ye'll be back on your feet any day now!” she blithely cheered him.

He replied cautiously, forcing a small smile to his face. “Yes, well... I heal fast. Always have.” Not fast enough for his shoulder, aching constantly and held together only by the grace of thread. But

he was greatly recovered from the rest of his injuries, at least - more than most men could have claimed.

“Really? That's sure lucky, ain't it?” Bailey smiled. “Just so long's you don't take that as an excuse to get int' any worse trouble!”

She made excuse to leave after that, and gave him little company for the rest of the day. He only saw her at lunch – although Azrael thought more than once that he heard footsteps approaching the door to his room, then turn away. It hadn't been his intention to embarrass Bailey, even if the girl had been pushy. He couldn't help wondering if there'd been some better way he could have turned aside her attentions. But there was no help for it now; besides, Bailey didn't seem like the sort to be fazed long by rejection, so he shouldn't let it worry him.

Reclining in his bed and watching the afternoon light beginning to fade, Azrael had heard the door open while he thought these things. Turning his head, he resolved to apologize to the girl – only to be surprised by her father instead, carrying a large armful of wood.

“... Uh!” he exclaimed dumbly, sitting up more properly to address the man. The woodcutter's face seemed grim – *did he found out about last night? But nothing happened, I swear it!*

The woodcutter waved him down, signaling for him to relax. Silently, the man went and began to stack the wood by the fireplace – the stockpiled fuel had been growing low, Azrael noted. Bailey must have said something to her father about it. That was all.

Azrael settled back marginally, watching the man. When it seemed clear that the woodcutter had no interest in speaking with him, or even fully acknowledging Azrael presence under his roof, the injured man let his attention drift back to the window. There was a small street within his view, and on it, a bull pulled a large cart along.

“Merchant.” Azrael swiveled his head around. The woodcutter had finished stacking the wood, and was now observing the window alongside him. “Prob'ly comin' through Deleain, headin' west to sell in Vellais.” There was an unmistakable scorn.

Studying the woodcutter, Azrael commented, “You saw the war, didn't you?”

“Aye, that I did,” the man answered. “Too old for you, though, wasn't it?” He nodded respectfully, and the woodcutter snorted. “I was infantry for seven years of it. Spent four months hidin' in the countryside when they'd broke up our unit. Worked in a resistance group right here in Sturtfeld during occupation.” His eye fell to Azrael again. “What 'bout your daddy? He fought?”

“He did,” Azrael replied firmly.

“One of the winners, I'm guessin'.” The man's upper lip curled. “You're a Southie, ain't ya? Got the look, y'know... the nose for it, and the accent.” When Azrael said nothing, the woodcutter looked off toward the window, where the merchant was making his slow progress through the town. “Lot of people got high stations after the war. All of them were the winners. Us folk that were in the thick of it for the Vel occupation, you know what we got? We got *condemned*. They said we deserted; doesn't matter what we did to protect our villages, we sitting at our post while the forts got razed, we were traitors. Took years before anyone would even admit to bein' a soldier. And who do you think sacrificed

more? The people who bled seven years for this land, or the Southies that got a lucky hit in at the end?"

The only thing Azrael could do was to keep quiet; anything he said would inevitably wind of scapegoating him. The woodcutter observed his silence for a short while, then snarled and stomped out of the room

Thank the Kingdom he doesn't know about Bailey last night, Azrael sighed, and settled himself back to watch the lengthening shadows of early evening.

Hours passed; the shadows turned into a dark omnipresence, thickening as time went on, broken only by a few dim stars poking through the thin canopy of clouds. As the clock crawled past midnight, Azrael quietly pushed away his bedding, twisting to sit up at the edge of his bed. His body ached from spending so long abed, but a few quick stretches of his arms over his head alleviated it. It was time to leave this place – or it would be, once he'd made a few small preparations.

The blanket was the first thing he needed – not the heavy quilt that had kept him so comfortable, but the thin layer atop it, a knitted and ratty piece of gray wool. It was cheap and easily replaceable, but for Azrael, it would be invaluable warmth out on the road. Folding it in half, then half again, he tucked the square under his arm and stood. He made his way carefully to the door, lifting the wooden knob as he pushed it open to keep the hinges from squealing.

Stepping out of the bedroom, he walked near to the wall, where the boards were the least likely to groan under his weight. The thick, rumbling snores of the woodcutter could be heard as he silently passed a doorway in the hall. They were undisturbed as Azrael came to the open archway leading from the hall to the house's common room, illuminated by a low fire. A peek ascertained that the room was uninhabited; walking more boldly, Azrael breezed through the main room and right to the kitchen.

Opening the cabinet doors quietly, he began rummaging the food stores. Even if he wasn't precisely cleaning the family's cupboard, taking from a household that had seen after him in his time of need was inherently despicable, and he knew it. Pulling their bread from the cabinet, Azrael ripped free a huge hunk, replacing what guilty little he didn't need. His dissatisfied conscience clung tenaciously as he selected the scrawniest-looking of nectarines from a basket on the counter, rubbing a bit of broken leaf off its skin before he wrapped it and the hunk of bread in the blanket he'd taken. *If I have to be a thief, at least I won't be a greedy one*, he assured himself nobly.

And he truly believed it; right up until he retreated from the kitchen. He noticed the bottle of brandy left carelessly by a chair by the fireplace. Azrael thought immediately of its taste, secondly of its utility, and forced his mind to keep to the latter. It was justifiable, if still unpleasant – he was likely to have use for it. And he certainly wouldn't let it go to waste if he wound up not needing it, so why not take it?

His mind made, Azrael tucked the woodcutter's mostly-full bottle into the wrap with his other supplies and surveyed the room one last time. A rough leather jacket hung on the wall was the last thing he would take – *the very last thing, I promise!* - and then, he was out the door.

Someone had seen to repairing the broken wash basin, he noticed – it had to have been the woodcutter, of course. Perhaps someday, he'd find some way to repay these people for the trouble he'd caused. It was unlikely, but the thought comforted him as he took to the road leading away from Sturtfeld.

The night's chill was eager to make off with his body heat as he stole away. A shiver was already working over his skin, and he threaded his arms through the jacket sleeves as he walked. Although he grew tired quickly after leaving the village, that wasn't to say that he was without strength.

As Azrael came to the first crossing path on the road outside the village, a strange feeling overwhelmed him. His footsteps grew leaden and heavy, and he tripped once before realizing the change. An implacable melancholy descended like a sudden fog on an open sea. Not knowing what had come over him, he slowed his footsteps, then stopped; gingerly touching his head with his fingers, Azrael gasped and wondered. Something... in his mind, like a hidden pool in a deep cave, boiling and hissing and steaming; waiting for... for....

Then it struck him full-force, and in its face, he could question nothing. His mind shut down, enveloped with a screaming sound, inescapable, deafening! Inside his head, seizing him with a violent despair. The air was stale, thick, frozen and dead; breathing it was like sucking an iced smog. Bewildered, he struggled to think rationally through the smothering depression; *what was happening?*

The ground, he realized suddenly, had turned a bleached white. Not just the ground; trees and rocks and stone, and even his own hands. It was like a torrent of whiteness had fallen over everything. Something was wrong with his eyes, surely – he blinked, trying to force the world to right itself. It didn't, and he tried again. It still didn't. He began to panic, his breath fluttering in his chest, and he tried again – the world flushed instead red, so bright it was painful to the eyes --

And then it was gone. His head cleared; the oppressive atmosphere vanished, colors righted themselves. The only coolness he felt was the metal of the thin chain around his wrist, and the soft breeze fanning his face.

Blinking, Azrael was absorbed by a lingering tremble in his hands. He inhaled slowly, stretching out his fingers, then curling them up, then spreading them again; the shakiness remained in them. Breaking out of his shock, Azrael swung his gaze around wildly, skyward and earthward and all directions between, searching for explanation – cause! *Reason!*

Azrael's attention was drawn to the road from where he'd just come. A figure was running up the road from the way he'd come, waving a hand at him. No one from Sturtfeld could be following him with good news. He turned to face the follower, ready for conflict – but quickly realized, things were much much worse than if it had been an angry woodcutter chasing him down.

“... Bailey?”

Sure enough, it was the brown-haired girl, dressed in her grubby warmest as she hurried to catch up. “Herald's Hands, I started thinkin' I'd never get caught up with you!” She gasped as she trotted the last steps to meet him, clutching at a stitch in her side. “Oooh, owww....”

A lump surged into Azrael's throat – likely compromised of the missing pit in his stomach. He waited for the girl to recover, not out of chivalry, but because he couldn't find any words. As she drew herself up, he burst out incredulously - “What in the King's good name are you doing here?!”

“Lookin' after you,” she smiled endearingly, “of course.” And while he disbelievingly processed these words, Bailey displayed a small sack in front of her like a child showing off their sweets,

explaining, "I brang m'own food, see?"

Staring, Azrael didn't know what to tell her. He'd had the idea that this girl was a little off in the head, but to these extents? Who could have imagined! Finally, he found his answer: "Go home, Bailey," he ordered her, as menacingly as he could manage.

But if she does go home, how long will it be before she tells someone which road I've taken – like someone from Riviem...? The thought froze him before he could further rebuke her. If he kept the girl with him, she'd be a nuisance, not to mention an ongoing threat to his anonymity. But she was an even more immediate danger if she returned to Sturtfeld!

Azrael was between a rock and a hard place. And what was even worse was that, somehow, Bailey seemed to *know* it. She was smug, and she wasn't intimidated by his glare in the least. "Oh, stop bein' so silly," the girl answered him sweetly, "ye're not in any shape t'be walkin' around on your own."

"You're not following me because you want to look after me," Azrael flatly accused.

Bailey gasped, striking both hands over her wounded heart. "What? Now, that's not so fair, is't?" As though it would be enough convince him, she was enacting blatant theatrics; her eyebrows swept up, her eyes filled with threatening glimmers, and the corners of her mouth drew inward. She spoke whiningly, pressing her lips together or else pouting at pauses - "Y'worry me! Yer all hurt-like, y'shouldn't even be walkin' and here you are, runnin' off! Mebbe I wanna see to it that you don't go makin' a widow outta that girl of yers 'fore y'get married proper, eh? That ain't wrong, is't?"

Azrael didn't know if it he should be amazed or disbelieving at her pleading, but was strongly irritated either way. "Don't give me false pretenses."

"False pr'tenses, huh? Somethin' like how somebody beggin' for shelter doin' it just so they can steal and run off, mebbe?" Bailey suggested with a thin smile, vanishing her injured act.

Azrael felt his mouth twist, desiring to sneer at the impudent tagalong, but forced a flat-lined stare as he replied, "Something like that, yes."

Now he was getting under *her* skin. "Yer a real piece'a work, ain't ya?" She snapped, glaring at him through scrunched eyes.

"Oh, sure, a magnificent one," Azrael rolled his eyes. At least he could take comfort in knowing that he could annoy Bailey just as much as she could him.

She responded by punching his shoulder, and his amusement vanished. His *left* shoulder, of course – it had to be the *left* shoulder! With a strangled shout, Azrael crumpled over the limb with an injured hiss, grabbing at the stabbing pain. A deadly glare fought past the pained contortions of his face, and he choked out, "Watch it!"

"Y'deserved it," she informed him with a sniff, unrepentant.

"I *deserved* it? For what?!" he yelled. One stray comment couldn't have merited such a response!

“Fer bein' a jerk.” Bailey frowned deeply. “And an ingrate. 'Specially, y'deserved it fer being an ingrate.” Azrael didn't know how to answer that, so he remained silent. He couldn't debate the accusation; he *had* been treating her thanklessly, and very purposefully so. Satisfied to have made her point, Bailey shifted back and scouted about. “Well'n,” she said, “where're we headed, 'xactly?”

Rubbing at his throbbing arm, the young man regarded his unwelcome company. “If I'm such an ingrate, why do you still want to accompany me?” Azrael inquired cautiously.

Bailey paused, and thought seriously before answering. “Mebbe 'cuz... you were right,” she replied with slow care, “and I wasn't just comin' along to be lookin' after ya.” The moment was somehow freeing for her; an exhilarated light entered her eyes, and she took a deep, proud breath before settling her hands on her hips. “So which way're we goin'? This way, toward Deleain?”

Sighing, Azrael refused to answer. Bailey seemed to take that for confirmation and began walking, forcing him to follow. “You still haven't told me *why* you're coming along,” he persisted.

Without hesitation, she quipped, “An' you still haven't told me why ya get so sad talkin' 'bout that girl of yers, but I'm not snoopin' in yer business, am I?”

Azrael's jaw set against a rise of outrage, drawing his face thin and harsh. But slowly, he nodded his acceptance of her terms. He did not relish his company, and less the fact that he couldn't wrench an explanation of her behavior from her – but he'd bear it while he had to, and part paths once he didn't. Satisfied, Bailey kept pace beside him.

They walked for several minutes in this state of tense camaraderie – Azrael already planning how soon he could split ways, Bailey happily oblivious. Then, the inevitable disaster befell them; a thought struck Bailey, and she began talking.

“D'you think that bugs got thoughts? Like people do?” The girl puckered her face. “Euugh, that'd be creepy, wouldn't it! I couldn't imagine what sorta awful things bugs'd think 'bout!”

Azrael didn't answer, but his input wasn't needed. Bailey was fully capable of carrying on a conversation with a brick wall if she had to. He had only to suffer through it. Grimacing, he fiddled through his filched supplies, finding the neck of the brandy bottle and fishing it out. Telling himself *it's just a few days, I can put up with Bailey for just a few more days*, Azrael worked the stubborn cork out of the bottle's mouth, then brought it up for a swig.

“Ey,” Bailey cut off from her trail of bug-related observations, “isn't that my da's?”

His lips hovering at the bottle, Azrael glanced at the pilfered drink. Struggling to find a polite explanation, he took a swig and replied in the only way he could:

“Believe me, I'm going to need it a lot more than him.”