
Paper & Feathers
A Euphony of Seasons Tale
Sampler
Zephyr Thomas
Illustrations by Michelle Thomas

What readers are saying about Paper & Feathers:

"The writing is exquisite. The language used, the word-building, it's all intensely beautiful. My brain was filled with rich colors while I was reading. It was a joy to experience and imagine the different places and people who populated them." —Ginny Kochis

"I was continually struck by the world-building, which was done masterfully. There was a beauty and quiet deepness to the story… like a still pool with shafts of sunlight lazily penetrating deeper and deeper… yet not reaching the bottom. I will be thinking about this for a long time." —Todd Foxwood

"This story doesn't involve life-or-death stakes, but that didn't make me care any less for the characters and their problems and challenges. I felt immersed in this book's unique world and setting almost from the very beginning. The main characters were so charming and realistically created… The beginning of the story was altogether magical, and the themes built very well on each other, leading to a satisfying conclusion." —Mary Rose Kreger

"[The main character] was spectacular, the world was beautiful, and the themes were deep and touching...The writing style is comforting and lovely." —Zoyia Morell

"First and foremost, it is very unique. The world...especially with its various peoples, is unlike anything I've read." —Alcuin Fromm

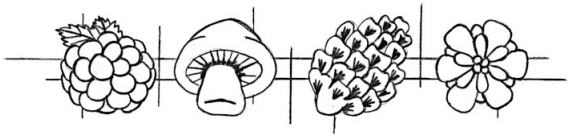
"I found the book to be delightful - the world was strange but beautiful, and the characters were convincing and compelling. The story had strong symbolism - elements reminded me of Flannery O'Connor and Edith Wharton, and it is clearly a work of literature. The story, in a sense, almost plays with the reader - most readers will be accustomed to fantasy stories of the adventure or mystery genre, and this book acknowledges that potential expectation by setting up problems and mysteries, only to draw the reader more truly into the life and spirit of the characters. The events in the characters' lives are truly only the setting, and the characters' internal struggles are the plot." —Jared Guertin

Preview Copy- The first four chapters of the novel
Version 4: Hardening Off

All text in this book was hand-written, and the artwork hand-drawn.
No generative AI was used for any aspect of the publication.

For my daughter,
and all of her questions about every single detail

Section 01



Red and yellow, brown and orange. A stream of dried leaves blew past the window to the cozy office, a breath of Autumn wind gone just as quickly as it had arrived. A moment of beauty, past, but certainly not lost.

A Lehvoki lady sat at her desk, her large yellow eyes watching out the sun-filled window. The light played across her short silver fur just so, causing her to resemble a gleaming statue cast from a brilliant metal. All about her was more beauty, evidence of both Artifice and Cultivation; the engravings of vines and flowers in the beams and posts of the walls, the polished sheen of the desk, several potted plants atop it. Not to mention the books, three walls of the room were packed shelves, row upon row of brilliant golden glyphs on lustrous leather.

None of these things were on her mind, however. The wonder and delicacy of the world could wait as soon as she resolved the problem which had been bothering her all morning. A whisper barely escaped her lips: "But why him?"

"Reya?" a deep gentleman's voice echoed in the room. "Is the conference still active?"

Reya pulled her eyes from the window and fixed them on the compass atop her desk. The circle of glass and metal connected people over distances, though her conversation partner was only on the floor below her. "My apologies, Curator Hyderi," she spoke toward it. "We were discussing accommodations for all of our guests?"

"Yes," the Curator's voice continued. "The team of Messengers is the traditional quartet, but I received a dispatch from the Central Branch that we will be expecting three more."

Reya's wide, curved ears twitched, mirroring her confusion. "Three more Messengers, or Archivists?"

"Defenders, actually. Trained security. If the hotel is lacking rooms, we can

attempt to put them up here at the Library with some of our storm cots."

"I will find them a suitable place to stay," Reya said, pulsing out commands on the terminal in front of her. "You can be certain of that."

"I know." The Curator chuckled, audible even through the pale of the transmission. "Speaking of Archivists, I gather that our primary guest has yet to arrive?"

"Indeed so." Reya switched the terminal view to another, rows of names and times. "The rail was scheduled to arrive at Zenith, but now will be here at Mid-Dusk."

The room was silent for a moment. "Delayed? What else could go awry…"

Reya hesitated. "I must ask, Curator, as my curiosity has been entirely unsatisfied lately. What manner of book is so important it requires three Defenders and a Fourth-Class Archivist?"

"I would that I could tell you." The Curator sighed. "The orders to secrecy come from an authority much higher than mine."

"I see," Reya said, attempting to sound assuaged despite her dissatisfaction.

"Thank you, Reya. I shall contact you again when I have more details."

"Or *if* you have more details?"

"Certainly. Good day."

"Good day," Reya said. Her compass went dark; she transferred it from the table to the pocket of her brown work dress.

She gazed out the window for a few more heartbeats, drumming the four fingers of her right hand against the desk. The mark of the Summer Herald was clearly visible against her light fur; each finger from the middle knuckle to the tip was very dark gray, nearly black in some lights.

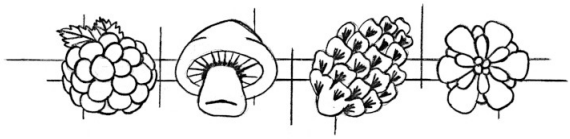
Reya turned back to the terminal on the desk, sending pulses of energy through her fingertip to select each command glyph in turn. While the official lodging form connected, she ran a finger along the edge of the rectangular device, where the wooden back panel met the glass front. Despite its age, she kept it for the sole reason that the grain of the wood closely matched the desk. The form was in order: three guests, two nights, billed to the Library's account. She nibbled at a cake of dried fruits and nuts, sipped from a jar of dark brown thavoa brew. Her long-haired tail nearly touched the floor as it whisked back and forth through the gap in the back of her chair.

After submitting the form, another sheet took its place, the last one she had

been viewing, and the one she had been pondering for some time. *Archivist Ahlden Creiori,* the dossier silently declared. *Fourth-Class. Lehvoki. Male. Home Branch: Als Solare.*

The phototype that accompanied the information depicted a face similar in shape to Reya's own, but with chestnut fur and a shorter black nose, sky-green eyes and leaf-shaped ears instead of rounded. The hairs on his chin were longer in the fashion of gentlemen, he wore a set of round-lensed spectacles.

"How fascinating." Reya said aloud, perhaps addressing the white Rya-Ehrda sitting on her desk, its thin triangular form similar to one of the papers stacked nearby. "Most authentications warrant a Second-Class Archivist, only rarely a Third. What under the sky would require them to send him?"



The very same Lehvoki gentleman sat perched upon a cushion, also underneath a large window, this one with an impressive view of the green sky and the fast-moving clouds. "I still fail to understand, Curator Bosna, how I was chosen for this particular assignment." He did not have to raise his voice over the quiet hum of the rail coaches sliding along the tracks, but did so regardless.

"Come now, Ahlden," came the voice from his compass: feminine, though raspy and quick. "You are entirely too modest. The assignment required a Fourth-Class Archivist, and you are the best I have!"

Ahlden's thin, furred tail twisted behind him in time with his agitation. "But such a sudden relocation? The manuscript I was working on, the Porek letters, the water damage may spread to the other pages."

"The chamber freezer will see to that," Bosna continued. "As I have said before, you can rest assured that all will be taken care of in your absence. I already have Emblis attending to the next item in the cache."

His green eyes went wide beneath his spectacles. "How is that meant to assure me?" He removed a black handkerchief from his vest to address the sweat gathering under the fur on his neck. "Emblis barely finished his apprenticeship."

"Therefore, he is more than capable of testing bindery marks and paper composition. Which is what you would be doing had you stayed. Instead, I find

you a job worthy of your prodigious talents, and I hear only complaints!"

Curator Bosna spoke with frustration, but somehow concurrently flattered. Ahlden hardly looked appeased, tapping his center finger on the open book in his lap, synchronized with the tip of his tail. He looked out the window, frowning at a spot of dirt that marred the otherwise dazzling view.

"Alright," he said, "but what of the logistics for this expedition? I have never even heard of Yul Razarin. Will there be a hotel or do I need to lodge in a workroom? Shall I find suitable cuisine served, or will I be foraging in the woods for my meals? Could the book have been brought to the Central Branch instead?"

"One question at a time!" Bosna snorted. "The Agent Liaison at the branch has already booked your lodging. This is a perfectly suitable little town, hardly a collection of huts in the forest. And, the condition of the book is such that long-distance transportation is ill-advised. Yul Razarin is the closest branch with the suitable equipment to facilitate an authentication. Any further inquiries?"

"Only the one that you have yet to address, which is the title or nature of the volume."

"And that is the one you will have to wait to find out! Consider it a surprise." Ahlden could hear Bosna smiling, the devious grin that she used when something either wonderful or awful was about to happen.

"Surprises are hardly well suited for the nature of this profession—" Ahlden was interrupted by a sharp knock at the cabin door. "Apologies, Curator, it seems my attention is needed. I shall contact you about this later."

"Oh, please do! Good day, Ahlden." She ended the conference before he had an opportunity to reply.

Ahlden sighed, placing the ribbon in his book and closing it, pocketing his compass. He stood, brushing off his trousers and shirt sleeves to ensure he was presentable, adjusting the bronze-colored badge at his lapel: four eight-pointed stars arrayed below an open book. "Come in."

The door to the cabin slid aside and a Mannam lady entered, her smooth skin deeply tanned and the hair that grew from the top of her head the color of polished, silvery metal. She wore the standard rail attendant's uniform: gray jacket and skirt trimmed in red. To the cap at her brow was pinned a badge in the shape of a rail engine, three stars under the length of the machine. "Good day, Mister Creiori," she said, the Lanish lilt in her voice unmistakable. "I'm the head Stewardess for your coach, Miss Iedori. I thought to bring you supper directly."

She carried a woven basket in her five-fingered hands while she crossed the cabin, six paces between the door to the table near the window. "I apologize for your earlier confusion, so I do. I recall I informed my staff to make a meal true to a Mendial's diet requirements, but my words must've gotten lost somewhere in our speaking tube." She smiled with her ice-blue eyes as she set the basket down. "Perhaps they're in there still. I'll open a flap and hear 'a Lehvoki and a Mendial besides, if you please.'"

It took Ahlden a moment to realize he was expected to laugh. "Ah, that would be an odd occurrence indeed."

"So it would, but I've checked this one over thoroughly. Your food, I'm meaning. Only thing I haven't done is sample it myself, so I'll leave it to you." Miss Iedori removed the cover from the basket, folding the red cloth carefully over her arm. Ahlden admired the symmetric folds, the crisp lines. He stood there with his book in his hand, prepared to bid her farewell, but she wasn't ready yet. "I wanted to be certain you had enough time to eat before arrival in Yul Razarin, as well. What brings a gentleman of the Library out to such a place? Rather isolated, so it is. Not a very large branch, if I'm recalling right."

Ahlden wished he knew the proper answer for that question himself, but could offer her some response. "I have been requisitioned for the authentication of a manuscript," he stated, drawing himself up as high as he could, despite coming only to the stewardess' shoulder. "My primary work involves the verification of antique books and documents."

"Fascinating," she replied. "Anything I might be familiar with?"

He regarded her for a moment, attempting to judge what kinds of books she could be familiar with. "My most recent assignment was a copy of Tulion's *Roots of Civility*, one of the first printings."

"Oh yes, one of my favorites."

"How surprising," Ahlden observed, his ears pointed toward the lady. "It is hardly a commonly known text."

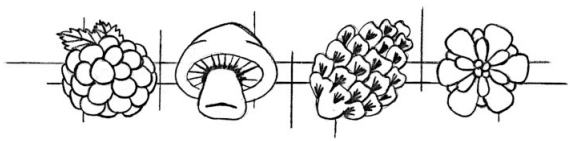
"Well, it is if you want to pass a Library Agent exam, which I did." Miss Iedori adjusted her cap, pushing it back to rest on the small, oval-shaped ears at the sides of her head. "Grew up hearing tale about famous Agent like Dero Starad. His story was ever in a bookshop back in Kilan. Thought after I came here, Library life was calling. But, rail life ended up calling louder, as can be seen."

Ahlden said nothing, simply observing this interesting person.

"Well," she said after a few heartbeats. "I'll be leaving you be, Mister Creiori. Enjoy your supper, then." She bid him farewell, touching all of her fingertips together and pointing them toward the floor, then making her way out of the cabin. Ahlden watched her go, envisioning a rail coach shunted onto another track, leaving the other line untraveled.

After the door slid shut, he peered into the basket. Several large leaves of lafille greens had been used to wrap up strips of grilled kospel fungus, short slices of raidle carrot, and some dried kuano berries. One of these rolls had been cut in half to allow him to inspect the contents. A plastene can was full of thumb-sized poscori tomatoes, a welcome surprise.

He recalled an article in a recent gazette, declaring that the warm early Autumn meant deliveries of fresh tomatoes were going out even then. Other articles in that edition formed in his mind, but he put them aside as he returned to his seat. Eating while reading was normally a difficult endeavor, made even more so with the potential shifts and bumps of the rail. He left the gilt-edged book he had been reading on the cushion, his thoughts and uncertainties providing plenty of material to ponder during his meal.



From the height of the Yul Razarin rail platform, one could partake in a spectacular view of the wide valley that stretched toward the unkempt wilderness of the west, usually verdant but now kissed red and gold by the touch of the Veiled Reaper. Leaves of similar colors covered most of the wide metal platform, gathered in the corners by the vigorous late afternoon breeze. Hia-Ehrda lazily rode the currents of air to and fro, small clouds of green vapor that wouldn't dissipate. Bri-Ehrda rustled along on the ground, resembling clods of dried leaves and similar stuff. Vil-Ehrda gleamed and shone in the brightest patches of sunlight.

Many of these Ehrda, and a few others, gathered around the silver-furred Lehvoki lady seated at one of the green wooden benches. While she still wore the same dress, she had attached numerous paper triangles to the fabric, tessellated rows of colors that complemented the various spirits that congregated nearby.

Reya was supposed to be responding to belated dispatches, not feeding Ehrda. But how could she deny the adorable little sprites? When one approached her, it glowed like a lantern before vanishing from sight. She sat up, adjusting her tail between the slats of the bench and pushing her hat up to see better. The fabric of her headpiece was a blue-green, supplemented with additional paper covering the brim.

A soft chirp emanated from her pocket; the literature Scholar vacationing in Holeovard had an additional question about extending his time there. Memories of that mountainous country flashed through her mind; the dry pine forests, the rocky terrain that required the rail lines to be built directly on the ground. It wasn't nearly as scenic a view as a rail trip here, but the food and the endlessly entertaining people compensated nicely.

A family of Strigider passed by her bench, talking loudly and excitedly about the family member they were due to unite with shortly. Reya couldn't help but observe them: the wide, pointed nose of the daughter had been clearly passed on from her nearby mother, as well as the light blue coloration of the fluffy feathers that covered her head and body. The eldest son must have taken after his father; the feathers that covered his short, triangular tail were much darker, almost green. All three of the children shared the same overall shape, wide shoulders narrowing to their thick legs, and had chosen pairs of matching sandals for their three-toed feet. The youngest daughter still had her downy juvenile feathers, the first hints of pinions visible on her wing-arms.

A chime from the timetable screen brought her back into the moment. The bright glyphs inside the glass now read: Ilo Pazeralt—Incoming—Approaching. The circle around the name of the city went from orange to blue, people around the edges came closer to the fore.

Reya studied the scene, unable to help but break it down into its various minutiae. The arrival of a rail may not have been as momentous an occasion as the dedication of a new Sacellum or athaeneum, but it was important to someone.

She chuckled to herself. She was reporting again, seizing on a main thread, the emotional force that would stir up the sympathy of the listeners. Even though the vocaster transmitter was only in her mind, and her audience was just the few Ehrda that still gathered around her feet, it was still the calling she had enjoyed for so long. And, she supposed as humbly as she dared, what she had been rather good at.

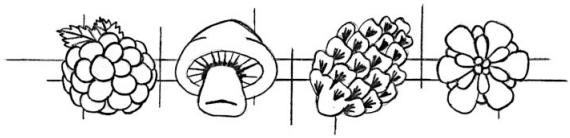
With a mechanical rhythm, the engine lurched its way forward, pulling each coach along until the rearmost was just at the end of the platform. The locomotive bore blue and black livery, undulating chassis lines which evoked the wind across the surface of a wide lake. Steam poured from each of the funnels, punctuated by the cyclical processes from within, small clouds rising toward the sky. Behind, like porahd chicks following their mother, the coaches were decorated in gold and brown. Several were walled entirely in glass while the others had individual windows.

A tall Veliagos Steward with prominent white ears hopped down and quickly jogged the length of the platform, his bushy tail swaying energetically. He ensured that everyone was a safe distance away, then raised his arm, a bronzed gage strapped to his wrist. A multi-colored bloom of light poured out from his palm, fueled by the various metas strapped to the back of his hand. At the signal, a portion of the side of each coach unfolded, flowers opening their petals, but rather than insects, shiny Del-Ehrda fell from the hinges and scattered about on the ground. Each ramp snapped into purpose and usefulness; the other Stewards and Stewardesses stepped down to welcome their passengers to their destination.

Reya wrapped her red embroidered mantelet tightly around her shoulders. The extra pressure was welcome, as only a few paces away, a young husband and wife were lamenting their inevitable parting. He vowed to send dispatches every day from his destination, while she assured him that the shop would be tended to fittingly. As the couple broke their last embrace, Reya had to turn away. The sight of the blue sash tied around the swell at the young lady's middle was too much.

She took a prolonged moment to shift her emotional frame, swapping old phototypes for newer, empty plates. As was fitting, since Ahlden Creiori had not been the one to leave her behind on a rail platform in the middle of the Autumn.

Section 02



Ahlden could feel the change in the rail's velocity before he heard the announcement from the speaking tube on the ceiling.

"Arrival at Yul Razarin station," Miss Iedori's voice issued forth. "All passenger for Yul Razarin, please be ready to debark. Any passenger for Sio Felahar, we'll be refueling and departing in twenty-one turn. Thank you kindly for riding Alcabast National Rail line, and we look forward to serving you again, so we do."

He made ready to debark while she spoke, starting with the remains of the exquisite supper, every napkin and can nestled back into the basket. He opened his trunk from where it lay on the floor, on the top was a soft leather jacket. This he donned, noticing a few slips of white paper peeking out of the sleeves. These he pulsed until they were back in their proper places, then he patted himself down to ensure every other piece was laying flat. Satisfied, he popped open the plastene container for his books and laid the one he had been reading alongside its fellows.

That was all he had really taken out of the luggage, so it was closed and latched a few moments later, the concentric pattern wheels of the lock randomly aligned. The horn on the engine sounded, a powerful din announcing their arrival to the entire countryside. Ahlden was examining himself in the mirror of the small personal lavatory, ensuring his spectacles were straight, his neck kerchief folded perfectly, and his badge spotless. Despite not knowing what he was about to be doing, he could still act the part of his station. His ensemble seemed to be missing something, though.

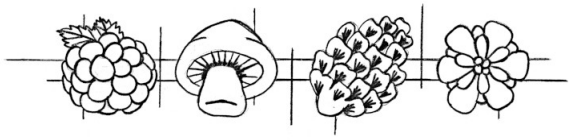
Ahlden cast about the small room for his hat; on the table, the cushion, behind the cushion, his ears moving in each direction before his eyes did. After a momentary panic that he had accidentally left it on the platform at Ilo Pazeralt, he spied it on the hook, by the door, the second most propitious place for it to be.

But rather far away, considering. He raised his right arm, sending a stream of Arc into his whole sleeve. A long chain of connected papers sprung forth from its wrist and wrapped around the brow of his hat. His prize caught, he recalled the chain, placing the hat atop his head and withdrawing all the paper back into his jacket. His level of comfort and readiness had increased fourfold, all with a simple piece of brown felt.

The papers had pushed a soft fiber bracelet out of his sleeve. As he tightened the cinch, he noticed one of the blue glass beads woven through had become deeply scratched. A disappointment, as he had not sharpened any of the sheets in his last folding, it must have happened earlier. He put his hand under his chin to better ponder, noticing his beard furs were in need of maintenance as well.

By now the platform was visible out the window, all manner of folk about their business: fur and feather, skin and scale. It brought to mind browsing through titles in a bookshop; there was a Veliagos lady bound in black fur, with a red hat for stitching; a Mannam gentleman with bright hair the color of wood shavings, his coat decorated like an illustrated cover; and a Lehvoki lady covered with silver fur like a foil title, wrapped with a very colorful dress, who looked so very much like…

What an interesting detail. By withdrawing his attention inward once again, he became aware of a strange pressure on his head. He reached up to adjust his hat, feeling at the brim and realizing it was actually on backwards. Letting out a sigh that his timesaving folding had cost him extra instead, he righted it, flattening out the hatband properly.



Reya stood watch on the platform, waiting for a gentleman who wasn't particularly mysterious, but whose arrival had plenty of mystery associated with it. Her compass displayed the assignment details: *Yul Razarin platform, Mid-Dusk, coach four*. With seven coaches total, that placed him…precisely in the middle.

After several passengers debarked, a chestnut-furred Lehvoki stepped into the waning sunlight, pulling down the brim of his hat to shield his eyes from the soft glare.

"Ahlden!" Reya called, waving her arm above her. He did not react, his attention simply on pulling his trunk behind him. Reya gathered up a handful of leaves, crumpling them into a tight ball. Holding this in her right hand, she focused for a moment, a plea to the patroness whose mark she bore with the dark fur there. Both the ball of leaves and her marked fingers glowed a dark red, and with a smirk, she tossed it above her head.

Ahlden had not heard her initial plea over the sound of the engine and the bustle of people, but the muted thunder-like crack and shower of golden sparks appearing over the crowd drew the gaze of all eyes and ears. The sparkling energy descended around her, bouncing off her hat and red mantelet. Reya didn't mind the attention by a sliver, and within heartbeats, nearly every soul's focus was back to their tasks.

"Good day, Reya," Ahlden said, rolling his heavy trunk behind him with no minor effort. "What a surprise to see you."

"Indeed it is," she said, a confident, wry smile on her face. "I must say, I was rather astonished to learn you were coming." Her tail swayed behind her, the longest hairs waving in the breeze. "The enigma that is this assignment has kept me beside myself since yesterday. What could it possibly be that has our superiors so troubled?"

Ahlden's ears turned down. "Ah. Then you know as little about these proceedings as I."

Reya didn't look disappointed, rather she became even more intrigued. "Neither would they tell you? This must be a serious business indeed."

"It must." Ahlden straightened again at the mention of business. "Well, there are a few sweeps of daylight yet. If you would kindly lead the way to the branch, I would like to at least get an initial impression of this mystery book."

"Unfortunately, that would be impossible." She tilted her head, raising one ear, while Ahlden unconsciously did the same. "The book is still in transit. The team of Messengers has yet to arrive, but should be here sometime tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," Ahlden muttered. Delay after delay. First Bosna's hurrying him to pack and leave in a single morning, then the mechanical issues in Ilo Pazeralt which required finding a new engine to pull the rail. He had even eaten before arrival to avoid wasting precious time on nourishment. His frustration was tempered by the fact that he finally had some detail to ponder: the book was valuable enough to require more than one Messenger to ensure its safe passage. "I

suppose that will have to suffice then."

Reya rocked back and forth on her sandaled feet. "In deference to your rigid schedule, however, I have saved you the trouble of finding accommodations for the night. I could take you to your hotel directly, if you are fatigued from your journey, unless you are interested in supper?"

His calculations as to precisely how fatigued he was were interrupted by a different set of reckonings. Few of his branch contacts offered to dine with him; he was simply given a list of the best vegetarian restaurants near the library and sent on his way. But, until today, none of his contacts had ever been Reya. He touched the side of his face, the beads on his bracelet shining dully in the light. "Yes, supper would be excellent."

"Wonderful." Reya tapped the brim of her hat. "Now, let us see about your luggage." She turned to gaze about the platform. "One of them ought to be around, they always are…" Her yellow eyes spotted an orange armband, and beckoned to the dark-furred Veliagos who bore it, this time with only her hands and voice.

"Good day Virahl," Reya said to the Messenger who ambled up on her long legs. "It looks as though you have an assistant today?" Accompanying the lady was a smaller version of herself, covered in the same sleek black fur, and clad in similar red clothing: pocketed vests and sturdy pants, tough sandals protecting the claws of their feet, round red hats between their tall ears. The knees of the younger were smeared with mud; their long black tails rested idly as they drew up, nearly touching the ground where they stood.

"Good day Miss Reya," Virahl replied, showing her sharp white teeth as she spoke. "Yes, Mother asked me to take him along this day so she could rest. The baby scarcely slept last night."

"She did!" Virahl's brother exclaimed loudly. "She simply cried and cried." His ears moved excitedly, affirming his sentiments.

"Oh dear," Reya said, chuckling.

Virahl looked upward, at the green of the sky, then back at Reya. "We were out of locura herb for the colic, so we—"

"We gathered some in the forest this morning!" her brother contributed. "Then we came up here to find an assignment."

"Ollon, Miss Reya's guest is waiting," Virahl admonished her sibling. Ahlden had been counting the beats roll off the clock, but he also recalled several nights

of his youth camped in the garden shed because of irritable infant siblings. He granted the pair this concession, simply nodding to show his acceptance.

Reya showed no irritation either, having been pulsing out commands on her compass. "Mister Creiori will be staying at the usual location, please." She reviewed the screen while speaking. "The rest of the details are consistent: time limit of two sweeps, deliver the article whole and undamaged, Missus Nida will be your witness, I just forwarded the contract to her as well, she will be at the desk."

Ollon was bouncing on his sandals in excitement. "What about the risk level?"

Reya and Virahl shared a knowing glance. "Well," Reya said, "luggage delivery is normally quite hazardous, especially with the amount of activity today." She gestured to the emptying platform. "But, since there will be *two* Messengers assigned to this duty, I believe we can safely consider the risk as one." Reya and Virahl both held out their compasses to one another, the Veliagos taking a step back as her arms were longer than the Lehvoki's. Each device emitted a pleasant tone and were both stowed away.

Ollon crossed his arms, drawing himself up to his full short height. "Understandable. Every First-Class license consists of small, simple assignments."

"I accept the contract," Virahl said, solemn. She held out a clawed hand for Ahlden's trunk. "Mister?"

Ahlden was always loath to let his belongings out of his sight, but was comforted by both of the stars on the bright Courier's badge pinned to Virahl's armband. "Thank you." He touched the brim of his hat to the lady and moved away from the luggage. The apprentice Messenger stepped forward instead, attempting to pick it up, but unsuccessfully.

"Stars! Mister, what have you got in here?"

"Only books," Ahlden said dryly.

"Well, I have been practicing an arm cambium!" Ollon announced proudly, though much too loud. He began to infuse his limbs with his inner Radia energy, but the only effect was his sister snatching up the suitcase with one hand instead.

"None of that, you remember what happened last time," Virahl said, then dropped her voice, "I would rather avoid carrying you home again…" She called over her shoulder: "Good day Miss Reya, Mister Creiori."

"Virahl!" Ollon used his Arc to react a burst of air that nearly took his sister's

hat off, then darted ahead before she could aim a retaliatory blast. Virahl chased her brother toward the main ramp, laughing all the while.

"Perhaps I should have made the risk a two?" Reya said, the corners of her mouth turned up. Ahlden attempted to look amused as well, but Reya's concerned look informed him that he simply appeared to be ill. "Shall we go, then?" Reya asked.

Ahlden returned to his usual focused expression. "Yes, please."

"Our journey will be short," Reya said, as she started off to the end of the platform, "otherwise I would have rented a modular. Or if it looked apt to rain again." She turned her yellow eyes upward to the few clouds, pleasantly light tan instead of threateningly dark brown.

Ahlden checked his sleeves and collar, to make sure all of his paper was safely tucked away. "Yes, sudden showers can be quite inconvenient, especially to us paper users."

At the edge of the station platform was a gated railing, and a long track descending to the distant ground. Reya stopped beside the churning mechanism, so Ahlden did as well. He pointed to her dress and hat. "How do you keep your supply dry when outdoors?"

"Oh, with this," Reya said happily. She reached her hands up underneath her mantelet to her collar. "I found it at an outfitter in Valdera, it is quite ingenious. There are buckles in here…" She worked her way around her neck and shoulders, and in moments, a cascade of red and white patterned fabric fell down around her knees, covering her dress entirely. Her mantelet had earned a higher class itself, now a full mantle.

"How interesting," Ahlden said.

"And I simply fold my hat sheets underneath…" She pushed a hand out from between the folds of her new cloak and pulsed her hat, pulling all the paper off with Arc and wrapping it around her arm into a colorful bracer. "There. Ready for the worst downpour."

By then, the moving rostrum had reached the top, and the gate swung open automatically. The few passengers headed up, yielded to those heading down. Among those descending was a Cervinaeus fellow with reddish horns, a round mouse-like Sartelie perched on his shoulder.

Once the riders were safely on the platform, the gate snapped closed and the machine began conveying them to the ground. Ahlden stood at the rear, clinging

to the railing with not only his hand, but a chain of paper from his sleeve for reassurance. He glanced down, but the floor of the rostrum was made from colored, transparent glass, only reinforcing his current elevation.

Instead, he settled on a point in space near the Cervinaeus, attempting not to gawk at the deep pits burned into the fellow's curling horns, or the fact that the tip of his right horn was missing entirely. This Preceptor was clearly no stranger to the rough wilds, from his disaffected expression down to the way he confidently shifted his weight on his hooves in synchrony with the gentle swaying of the platform.

The awkwardness of staring was somewhat alleviated by the ivory-colored rodent Sartelie on his shoulder leveling its beady gaze directly at Ahlden, swishing its plumed purple tail while its forelegs were across its chest in what could be consternation or possibly amusement, Ahlden always had trouble interpreting the mannerisms of the little spirit creatures.

The Cervinaeus kept his gaze on the horizon as he spoke aloud. "I know this is slow, but the alternative is dodging modulars down the other ramp." The Sartelie made no audible reply, only bristling its sparse hairs. "If you want to get there sooner, go ahead and fly down yourself." He gestured upward, to where someone of the feathered persuasion perched on the edge of the platform above, spreading their wings and alighting into the vast sky.

Ahlden moved his attention beyond, to what he could see of the settlement where he would be spending the next day. They were just now clearing the tops of the massive girako pines, still bastions of green among their yellowing neighbors. Unseen birds trilled among the branches, keeping a melody with the quiet hum of the conveyor. Even from there, one could see the blur of scurrying ground rodents, collecting fallen nuts and cones, awaiting the coming of the Rimed Heart and her freezing airs. All among them, brown Bri-Ehrda massed in the trees, doing their own kind of collection.

"Is that the Library, there?" Ahlden asked of Reya. She looked to where his free hand pointed to a green brick building, a line of windows crowning the upper level.

"Indeed it is," she replied. "What made you think so?"

"Regulations require all branch buildings to be made from stone or metal, in case of fire." Ahlden paused. "Also, it is at least two stories, providing the requisite space for workrooms and other offices."

"Perfectly true," Reya said, smirking. "Actually, you can see most of the town from here." Moving her hands under her mantle, she divided the fold in front and pushed the halves of fabric over her narrow shoulders. She brushed her paper vambrace over the rest of her skirt, papers peeling off and swirling about in a wave around her arm. She quickly folded it all into a long, multi-colored rod, to better direct attention with.

"There is the main market row," she indicated a wide avenue full of wooden stalls and metal modulars, "and our council building," a red stone structure with a tall parapet, "and the Sacellum," a glowing edifice of brilliant white stone and golden metal, "and the Grove is…there, I believe," a dense forested area near the edge of the horizon.

"You know how to find your way," Ahlden said.

"Of course, that is most of my job," Reya replied, ceasing to point and simply holding the paper rod in her hands. "It always has been." A breeze stole across the rostrum. Reya closed her eyes to take it in, the wind caressing her ears. "This is such a lovely place."

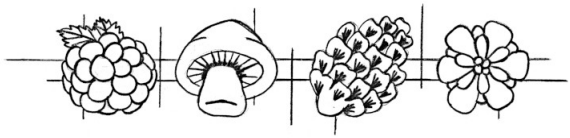
Ahlden looked out at the vista of green and gold, brown and orange. "It is certainly that. I was unfamiliar with Yul Razarin before receiving the assignment orders."

Reya smiled. "Well, then all the better for you to enjoy the country airs rather than the drone of the city." She unfolded the rod back onto her dress, leaving her outer garment open as a cape. "So, I have a wonderful restaurant in mind. They serve Holeoveric cuisine, but only vegetable-based. Perfectly suitable for our kind. I suspect you will enjoy it."

"I likely will," Ahlden replied, the movement of the conveyor making his stomach feel less conducive to a meal after all. Mercifully, they were only staves away from the end, and he bore these last few moments patiently.

With a gentle sigh, the rostrum reached the ground. The gate swung open, the other passengers left to their own ends. Ahlden attempted to follow before realizing he was still fastened to the railing.

Section 03



Just a few paces from the steps up to the rostrum, Reya waited underneath a gnarled jiado tree, the branches laden with waxy orange fruits. A wooden barrel had been left nearby to receive any fallen fruits that were suitable to consume; propped against the trunk were several gathering poles if a hungry passerby had forgotten theirs at home.

Ahlden had untangled himself from the railing and carefully walked up to where she stood, doing his best to hide his dismay at having to walk across the smoothed dirt pathway. He hadn't yet stepped on any errant pebbles, but one could be just nearby, lurking.

Reya waited patiently as he braved the treacherous crossing. She gestured to the tree with her marked hand when he was closer. "How about a pre-supper morsel?"

Ahlden looked dolefully at the deep orange produce. "Thank you, but I will decline. Those are far too bitter for my palate."

"I agree," Reya said, turning from their little waypoint. "I can only stand them when they have been boiled into oblivion with eight measures of honey. But then, I would rather just eat the honey."

Ahlden had nothing to say in response to this honest appraisal.

"Anyhow, we are just headed here." She walked casually in the direction she pointed.

The buildings in this sector of the town were mostly short, to coexist with the towering rail platform nearby. A few restaurants and drinkeries promised various refreshments to those leaving or arriving on the rail; large open doors and windows advertised freshly stewed meats, vegetable pies, and fruit wines. Reya passed each of these by. Every so often she pointed out some civic feature or landmark, but was otherwise quiet. This allowed Ahlden better space to examine

his surroundings, just as he preferred.

The first multiple-storeyed building they passed appeared to be a communal apartment dwelling from the multitude of windows along its front, all decorated with differently colored hangings and lamps. This was not the primary distinguishing feature of the edifice, however. On the largest wall facing the street, an enormous mural had been painted, far more detailed than the stripes and shapes of color on the surrounding dwellings.

A tall tree was vividly depicted at the center of a quartered circle. In the left quadrant, a young Strigider lass of green feather picked vibrant, blooming flowers, under tree branches heavy with white blossoms. Above her, a strapping orange-furred Lehvoki fellow gathered the fruits of the same tree, the leaves now full and lush to protect the red, juicy prizes. Behind his perch in the branches, dark imposing thunderclouds gathered. The upper right line separated green leaves from brown, many of which fell down around a wizened Mannam lady, hair the color of the brownish mushrooms that sprouted all about her feet. She supported herself with a cane that could have been made from a branch of the tree that she ruminated under. Below, among a reverse canopy of tree roots, an elderly scaled fellow lay curled in sleep, encircled by an oval of shiny ice that largely resembled an egg.

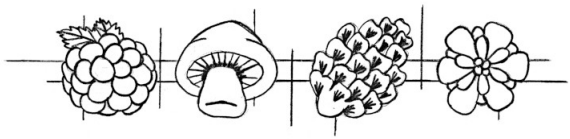
Reya looked up at the painting as she passed, admiring the brilliant colors and the details of the various people's forms. Ahlden noticed an error: one blossom in the left section extended its petals into the adjacent zone. But he resolved to say nothing.

Farther from the rail platform, the avenue met with a larger street, a transportation artery for the town large enough to permit two modulars traveling on opposing headings, with smaller lanes for pedestrians against the fronts of the buildings. Ahlden stepped onto the mercifully paved ground with gratitude. Reya turned to check on her guest and seemed about to say something when her compass brought attention to itself.

Ahlden's own attention was drawn to the far vehicle lane, where a wagon laden with freshly cut timber was pulled by a pair of sleek venig mules. Their pace was much more relaxed compared to the shiny green modular that rolled up behind, steam venting from the sides of the machine as it slowed. The Pilot made no attempt to pass the animal-powered conveyance, instead he waved to the passenger, a Lehvoki lady with white and brown fur who clambered over the load

to have a conversation in the center of the road.

The planting beds that buttressed each of the walking and conveyance lanes lacked the variety of colorful flowers visible in two of the Seasons, having been given over to the green scapes of manophi garlic and losoil onions, the bluish waxy sprouts of unev greens alongside. Reya sent her dispatch reply, then glanced at her skirt and mantle, satisfied she could be a source of color in every Season.



Ahlden could smell the restaurant long before he could see it; he knew at once why Reya hadn't stopped at the establishments in the rail area. The olfactory guidance was also welcome, for if he hadn't been following a local, he might have missed the cozy eatery altogether.

It occupied one corner of a building, nestled beside a shop that sold crafted glass, and below several rows of tenements. A collection of smooth wooden tables and chairs were arrayed around the wide door, out of which came the most redolent aroma of food. Attached to the wall were the riggings for large canopies to shield diners from precipitation, but in this fine weather, the lilac canvases were rolled up.

"Here we are," Reya announced, choosing a waist-high table with chairs, near a lone Mannam fellow with a wide hat. A rose-colored Car-Ehrda had been idling on the burnished tabletop, but vanished as they approached.

"What an exquisite scent," Ahlden said, as he positioned his tail in the gap of his chair.

Only moments after they had seated themselves and removed their hats, a jovial Cervinaeus approached, his hooves echoing across the patio space with every step. "Good evening to Lady Reya," he said in a deep, inviting voice, standing up tall to better display the six-pointed antlers on either side of his head. "And, to the guest of Lady Reya."

Tawny fur covered his burly frame, it seemed he had been a laborer or hauler before pursuing his current profession. A green apron protected his shirt and trousers from the perils of the kitchen, as well as providing easy access to various cooking implements in the pockets.

"Good evening, Yurahn," Reya replied.

"Yes, good evening," Ahlden added.

Reya continued. "Mister Creiori has just arrived from Als Solare for an assignment."

"Ah, your home, it is Als Solare?" Yurahn asked. After clearing his throat: "Welcome, good fellow, to my dining establishment. I hope your stay will be enjoyable." He grinned, his large, limp ears moving proudly. "The talking, that is how it is done there, no?"

Reya applauded, tapping her pointing fingers together repeatedly, silver against gray. "Impressive! Your Alcabasian is much more natural."

"Thanks, I give them to you," he said, giving a small bow, mindful to not put his antlers in the faces of his guests. "The book, it is teaching me greatly. So, the bowls, you will be wanting two?" he said, returning to business. "Anything for the drinks?"

"I will have thavoa brew, the usual way please," Reya requested.

"Of course, yes. The cream, and a stick of the kantil spice. And for Sir Creiori?"

"Laria flower tea, please. Without honey."

"Of course. And, the worry, do not have it," Yurahn said, indicating Ahlden's exposed bracelet. "The food, I can make it to your Mendial needs. I put in no ukagi milk, or any other type. The cheese, I will leave it out of the top. Lady Reya, you will be wanting some, no? This batch, it is good."

"Actually, in honor of my guest, I shall eat as the Hallowed King decrees as well." She smiled at Ahlden.

"Good, it can be done. So, your thavoa, should I leave out the cream also?"

"Yes, please."

"The understanding, I have it all," Yurahn said, "shortly will I return!" He repaired back to the kitchen, using his antlers to part the curtain. Affixed to the wall by the door was a license plaque: three stars beneath a simmering pot.

Ahlden arched an eyebrow. "You hardly need to inconvenience yourself on my behalf."

Reya just swept her tail slowly behind her. "Oh, I welcome the change. I can eat the cheese here anytime, but how often can I share a meal with you?"

"I suppose that is true…" He touched his chin furs thoughtfully.

Reya held her mantle in her lap, rolling and buckling it back up. "In fact, how

long has it been since we last dined together?"

"At least two Summers, if I remember rightly."

"Indeed, how the Seasons have escaped us?" They were deep in the past, up on the fifth floor of a building full of books, dinnertime meetings discussing the latest news and gossip. She glanced at Ahlden's bracelet, a definite confirmation that Seasons pass quickly. "So, congratulations on your betrothal."

"Thank you," he said automatically. "I appreciate your regards."

"And how quickly will the wonderful day arrive?"

His ears sank, but he maintained his neutral expression. "We are still in the process of coordinating details. We have yet to confirm a date."

"I see." This was intriguing, but she deferred. "I wish you both well, then." She extended her arms in front of her, right hand atop her left. "May the Auspicious Spark leave a trinket in your path. May you hear the clarion of the Harmonious Tangler."

Ahlden raised his bowed head when she finished. "Thank you for your petitions."

Reya finished adjusting her garment just as Yurahn arrived, holding a wooden tray. She turned and draped the mantelet over her chair, then repositioned to take the proffered refreshment.

"There it is, Sir Creiori, hot and nice, no? And yes, the more plain thavoa brew for you, Lady Reya. The frying, it is almost done."

"Thank you, Yurahn," Reya said, taking the jar, gripping it easily by the textured glass.

Ahlden simply nodded, watching the laria blossom float on the top of his own similar vessel.

"Excuse me, Sir?" Another patron obtained Yurahn's attention before he disappeared again. "This biscuit is cold…"

"The apologies, I give them to you." Yurahn gathered the offending baked good up in a towel, wrapping it between his hands. In a few heartbeats, he returned a steaming, Arc-warmed pastry to a happy customer.

Reya sipped her warm thavoa, the consistency of the pulverized and brewed beans so much heartier than when prepared to the local custom. A spoonful of amida syrup brought out the sweetness of the dried, curled bark she stirred the drink with. It was nearly Dusk and she would likely have trouble eventually getting to sleep, but she did have chores when she returned home. These musings

were scored by a minstrel farther down the street, whistling on a bullone flute. The sweet melodies generated as many donations to his token as bell-shaped Tes-Ehrda floating around him.

Ahlden noticed the minstrel as well, while the pages of his thoughts flipped from memories to speculations. The lady across from him did not appear to be married herself, nor betrothed. Among the various ornaments that hung from her ears, none were set with a polished prysidia stone. The bracelet that encircled her wrist was either metal or plastene, not braided storja fiber, neither was a similar cord around her waist. As her dress was sleeveless, it could be seen that the only sacred Cartyrea emblazoned on her fur belonged to the Summer Herald, on her fingertips. All of this came as some surprise, as he remembered the chatter among the ladies in the office about her intentions with a land Sciencer or some fellow. But then, two Summers had passed, and much could transpire in such an age. He glanced at his bracelet, uncertain of how many more Autumns he would wear it.

It had been a longer silence than most people considered to be not awkward, so he spoke up: "And how are you enjoying this country life?"

She sighed as she turned his way, taking in a breath of such life before continuing. "Oh yes, it is lovely. I must say that the city came to be too much for me. The constant lights, the sound of all the modulars," she gestured back and forth with her decorated hand. "When I heard of this branch opening, I saw it as a wonderful opportunity. I sold my apartment on Canopy Layer and found a lovely cottage with space for a decent garden. I had planned for having to board with another lady or two, but with the costs here, I have a home all to myself."

That certainly addressed his postulations. He judged any further inquiry to be imprudent, so instead he took a sip of his cooler tea. The sweet tang of the laria flower was able to shine through without the unneeded honey. "That must be convenient," he said. "And aside from hosting visiting Agents, are you still employed in the same capacity?"

Reya smiled, her yellow eyes soft with contentment. "It is really a function of my primary role, if you consider it. As the Library Agent Liaison for Western Alcabast, I assist anyone with their entitlements and compensation, but what better way to perform that duty than meeting with Agents directly? You can only learn so much about someone through a conference, or reading over their dossier. Whenever an Agent arrives for any business, or even if they are simply on their way elsewhere, I will make them as welcome as possible."

She set her jar on the table, plucking off a triangle of blue paper and twirling it around her fingers, while keeping it flat and straight. "And how goes your own work, Ahlden? Are the books still treating you respectfully?"

"Indeed." He adjusted his jacket cuffs, smoothing down the fur there. "There is always work to be done, regardless of the Season. Especially now, with the Dellon cache to process."

"Oh yes, that news reached even here," Reya said. "A hidden library, tucked inside an abandoned manse near the Aesil border. Riddles and traps and automaton guardians…" She clasped her hands in front of her chest with the potential thrill.

"And five hundred and twelve unknown books, without counting the artwork and other items," Ahlden grumbled, his brow furrowed. "Even with the Archivists we transferred from other branches, it will take an entire Season to finish it all. Or longer, if we must continue to share space with the Museum Agents."

Reya laughed gently. "Or there could be a fire tonight and it could all be lost, just as quickly as it was found. And what would you have then but memories?"

"Perhaps," Ahlden said. "Regardless, progress is all but halted until the assignment here is—"

"The food, it is here!" Yurahn called from behind, bearing two gourd bowls full of steaming vegetables, fragrant with garlic and herbs. "May it please your tongue," he said, before receiving his thanks and retiring once again.

Ahlden took in an aromatic breath, then looked across the table to Reya, who held her hands in front of her, crossed. "Guests first," she said.

He nodded, then closed his eyes, extending his arms and pointing his open palms to the ground. "Hallowed Lord," he began, "it is from your bounty that we partake in this meal. May the harvest always continue to be fruitful." He relaxed his arms while Reya extended hers.

"The Veiled Reaper harvests the fruit ripened by the Vibrant Storm. May we always remember what came before, to better guide us where we are Destined to go." Thus blessed, each penitent took up the two-tined fork from their bowl, and the meal properly began.

Ahlden perused his dish, uncovering the personal styling the Chef had added to the traditional recipe. Diced molcha potato, fried until hard and golden to prevent infiltration from the rich broth that half-filled the container. Tiny keria cabbages, chopped and roasted with herbs, alongside miniature magoria fungus

caps, no doubt gathered fresh in this propitious Season. After one bite of dipped biscuit, the flaky texture indeed pleasing his tongue, he had no regrets about agreeing to come.

Reya's meal was composed identically, but she speared each item in turn, a collection of vegetables and fungi on her fork, testing every flavor at once, the full symphony of ingredients. Although she noticed the absence of a certain melody. "Hm, without cheese it could certainly stand for more salt." She cast about their table, then the surrounding ones. "There is usually a cellar here…ah, there it is." She pointed nearby and made to stand up and fetch it.

"If I may," Ahlden requested, and Reya sat back down. He raised his sleeve and folded out a paper chain, crossing tables and the spaces between them, wrapping the end around the glass jar. This attracted the attention of the neighboring patrons, who regarded it with amusement, as well as Reya, who examined his Arc technique carefully; the manner by which he guided the delicate pulses with his fingers, clenching his own hand as the paper wrapped tighter around its target, how each individual sheet slid over those it touched as he dragged it to the edge of the table. Ahlden raised his arm to compensate for the gap between tables, the chain pulling taut from the extra matter attached to it.

"Why thank you," Reya said after he had carefully placed it next to her. She shook the bottle vigorously before applying the seasoning, while he replaced the paper in his jacket sleeves. "Yes, much better. How is yours, then?"

"Simply wonderful. It has been an age since I enjoyed a traditional Holeoveric meal."

Reya watched as her biscuit soaked up the hearty broth. "I will admit I sometimes eat here more often than I do at home."

Ahlden swallowed a bite of grilled mushroom. "Were I to live in this town, I fear I would never eat at home."

"Would that be something to avoid?"

He examined the chunk of potato on his fork. It would be suitable for the remainder of his bachelorhood, until meals at home needed to be planned for two. But that also assumed his beloved would actually want to cook a meal at all…

Ahlden pondered for a few moments before realizing it was his turn to respond. Reya didn't seem to mind the prolonged silence, but he still said "Perhaps…" just to make it official. He gazed out through his spectacles at the street, an excellent place to study while ruminating.

This was familiar to Reya; she would declare something extravagant, he would stare out the window for a while in thought. An odd sensation came to her, the old life she had left in the city and the new one here were converging for a time, through a simple meal with an old acquaintance.

A compass sounded, the tone of a bell rather than the trill of a bird, so Ahlden attended to it. He attempted to keep his stoic composure while replying to the dispatch, but evidently enough of his emotions were reflected in his face and ears, since Reya asked if everything was alright when he was finished.

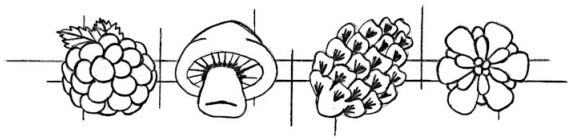
"Yes, all is well. That was my eldest brother. We have been in discussion about our uncle's funeral proceedings."

"Oh my," Reya set down her fork to clasp her hands, her marked fingers covering the others. "I pray the Stray Wanderer will guide him to a safe rest."

"He is like to be resting already, he was one hundred and thirty, certainly a full journey on this side of the Cycle." Ahlden leaned back in his chair. "He had a fairly sizeable estate, and of course the family wants me to take charge of all the books. I remind them I have plenty of books already, but they are insistent. I suppose I will have to accept a parlor full of crates for a time."

Reya was quiet a moment, then heralded another prolonged silence by saying: "Perhaps…"

Section 04



As the eventide sun hid itself below the horizon, the meal likewise concluded. Dusky Zoh-Ehrda appeared, assuming the duties of the bright Vil. Ahlden tidied up, setting the bowls and utensils in a large bin by the café door. Yurahn came out with a token, a black disk that Reya passed an identical device over to pay for the food.

"That was the Library account, just a moment," she said, replacing the token with her compass. "And this is from me." She transferred additional funds.

Yurahn smiled widely. "The thanks, to you as always, Lady Reya."

Ahlden approached, offering his compass likewise. "Indeed, the meal was spectacular."

"I would give you nothing less, Sir Creiori," Yurahn replied before bidding them a final farewell.

"My, it is late already," Reya said, donning her mantelet once more. "Fortunately, your hotel is quite near." She replaced her hat, tilting it back between her ears to see better in the waning light.

"I am glad for it," Ahlden said, setting the familiar weight of his own hat upon his head.

The avenue connecting the café and the hotel was solely for pedestrians, tightly joined green stone paving the way, each hexagon nearly resembling glass in its polished sheen. Without any modulars to make space for, those out for an evening stroll were able to walk close together; both sides of the flow of traffic within easy greeting distance. Reya did this very thing, saying hello to a Veliagos lady with fluffy patterned fur, and later a Strigider fellow pulling a hand cart laden with boxes.

A pair of children scrambled past the pair; a Mannam lad with hair the color of fresh snow, accompanied by a young Jushava sliding along on her foot-tail, the mane of crimson hair down her spine already quite long. Each carried tall poles many times their height, touching them to the various street lanterns attached to

the sides of buildings and freestanding pillars. They were practiced in their task, needing barely a heartbeat of contact to set the pale orbs pouring out a brilliant white light, and giving the Vil-Ehrda a place to congregate and wait out the night. Evidently the youngsters had a friendly wager; they called out a number after each illumination, and raced ahead to the next lantern before their opponent could claim it.

The chill in the air prompted Ahlden to button his jacket, and Reya to gather her garment closer about her. He walked with his hands behind his back, four fingers locked together. Reya strode along airily, waving to someone across the lane that Ahlden could not see.

His tail curled up. "You seem to know a few of the people here."

"Perhaps so," Reya said, though she didn't sound as pleased as he thought she might at such a compliment. "Perhaps I should have a license in making acquaintances. A secondary skill from those many Seasons doing interviews for the journal." She stood straight, only slightly taller. "Alcabast correspondent Reya Tulebade, bringing you the peoples of the world."

Ahlden looked up to the tops of the nearby buildings, lights on in many of the windows. "I had an opportunity to listen to one of your interviews on the vocaster some time ago. It was fascinating."

Reya was aware that many people had heard her interviews, at least two thousand and forty-eight per broadcast, but it was always a pearl of joy when she had one right in front of her. Memories of that age came back as clouds sailing across the horizon. "Really?" She clasped her hands together. "By any chance do you remember which?"

"Yes, it was with a Messenger who had spent Seasons tracking down a rare manuscript, only to find it bought up by another adventurous collector at every turn. It sounded rather like a novel than a report. One of my colleagues had recommended I listen to it. We had yet to meet, actually."

"Yes, I do believe I recall that particular day…" She gazed at the road tiles while they continued walking. "A Pratava fellow, if memory serves. He was quite difficult to locate, always riding off to somewhere in that great black modular of his." Though she spoke with fondness for such memories, her tail was not as animated as it had been turns ago.

"Do you ever wish to return to the media?"

"Oh, I am quite comfortable where I am," she answered at once. "It was an

enjoyable career, but only one portion of my Skein. Traveling is a delightful hobby, but I grew tired of having to rush off some place without being able to stay and savor where I was." She laughed again. "Besides, my Journalers license has certainly expired, I would need to become certified once more."

"Have you been able to do much traveling as of late?"

Reya tapped the side of her snout. "Oh yes, every Season, even if only up to Sio Felahar for a hike through the mountains. Since my work is mostly correspondence, I can take a terminal with me and use my hotel room as an office."

"Interesting…" he said.

She looked over at Ahlden. "When I was reviewing your dossier for this assignment, I noticed you had a great deal of sabbatical time accrued. As the Agent Liaison, the well-being of everyone employed by the Library is of concern to me. When did you last take a sabbatical?"

"Well, I secured leave for my uncle's funeral ceremony…"

Reya tilted her head. "Leave for a ceremony is hardly a sabbatical. Why, if this book is delayed further, you could even have a day trip here. There are plenty of diversions just outside of town. The cider orchards can be reached in only a sweep or so by modular, and I can recommend a Pilot who could take you."

Recreation was scarcely on his mind during an assignment. "If the time presents itself, I might consider it…"

A brusque clanking noise preceded a large automaton lumbering toward them on four legs, storage compartments lining its sides. The hard edges of green and black were a stark contrast to the idyllic evening, amplified by the group of armed individuals following or leading it, each with matching mantles pinned with a Constable's badge.

"Oh dear," Reya said. "There must have been another sighting."

Ahlden regarded the gleaming hand cannons and muskets carried by the crew. "Is such a force really needed here?"

"Unfortunately, as of late." She sighed. "Every octave or so, the gazette reports an animal theft at one of the outlying homesteads. Missing porahd fowl, dead jukine goats, the like. It seems unable to be stopped."

Ahlden's ears returned forward, from where they had been monitoring the posse. "That seems the work of a lychorious, to be remedied by a Hunter rather than by lawkeepers."

"I was of that belief as well, until I read of the Arc-broken locks on the gates and the deliberately covered tracks in the woods."

Ahlden ruminated on this as they continued, past a large public lawn near the lane. A group of Strigider and Veliagos youths were kicking around a stitched hide ball, looking to extend their amusement in the final turns of the day. When the ball passed between the two sticks that served as a target, one of the Strigider raised his gage and reacted a loud blare, the green and gray Metas on his wrist gleaming in the evening light.

Reya recognized Ollon, the apprentice Messenger, calling out a greeting to him as they drew near. Thus distracted, the lad missed the ball sailing his way, and with such a speed that the kicker had likely been practicing a leg cambium themselves.

The ball headed directly at Ahlden and Reya, but bounced to harmless rest at their feet. Ahlden was surprised; he had been so focused on the architecture of a nearby tenement that he had yet to notice the game at all. One of the young people made to retrieve it, but Reya signaled him to wait.

Ollon called out behind his comrades: "Miss Reya, throw some sparks for us!"

Reya looked positively amused. She reached down and picked up the ball with her right hand. "With this?" she called, to a round of groans and guffaws. With bright eyes, she tapped her forehead and deposited the ball at her feet. One hand went to her skirt and the other to her hat, streaming Arc energy into both and folding the combined sources of paper into a long-handled hammer. She held her hand over the head for a moment, then drew the colorful club over her shoulder, expertly striking the ball with the glowing red end. A resonant boom accompanied the ball flying back to the children on a trail of yellow and orange sparks, made especially dramatic in the twilight.

The youngsters cheered as Reya waved and unfolded the tool into its components, fewer sheets from half the head having been converted into sparkling energy. Ahlden stepped up to her. "Is landmallets another of your hobbies?"

Reya turned toward him, the delight on her face evaporating with the lowering of her ears. "Why do you ask?"

"That folding was closely within regulation specifics, and your swing too certain to be entirely spontaneous."

Her eyes and ears showed conflicting emotions: amusement at being thusly analyzed mingling with unpleasant memories. "More of a casual diversion, if

anything," she said, turning swiftly to go. She prayed the distance between her and the lawn would increase the emotional distance to the last game she had played there, on his final visit.

Ivory Phi-Ehrda rolled around the empty sections of the lane on their thin edges, crossing back and forth when they were not underfoot. Reya stopped before an elegant wooden building, the walls covered in vines. A warm yellow light shone from the large windows, making a comforting sight in the rapidly deepening darkness.

"Well," Reya said, "this is the conclusion of today. I shall call on you tomorrow morning. Let me give you my compass point."

She held out her device, and Ahlden positioned his own above it. After a heartbeat, both emitted a soft tone indicating that the connection was complete.

"Thank you," Ahlden said, the finality of the evening settling on him. "My time here has been pleasant thus far."

"I am glad to hear it. If you are in need of anything, please inform me."

"I shall. Good night, Reya." He held his hand over his heart, fingers formed in a circle.

"Good night, Ahlden," she returned, making the same gesture. "May you find a mushroom on your pillow," she said, smirking, then turned to the lane that led to her cottage. He remained in the street a while longer, making it seem as though he was just watching her leave, her colorful dress and mantelet distinctive in the dim light. In actuality, he was preparing himself for the inevitable interactions with the hotel staff before he would be able to get to his room.

His naturally roving gaze went upward, to where the stars were making their entrances onto the stage of the sky. They were numerous, scattered like brilliant grains of sand on a cosmic beach, while the trio of moons shone happily in their disparate positions. He had only ever seen phototypes of such splendor. Confronted with the immensity of the cosmos as it was, the very inspiration for the old exclamation, he expected to feel some manner of emotion, some stirring in his core, some connection to the vast, immortal suns arrayed before him. Instead, he felt rather cold, and went inside the hotel to warm up.

The room he had been assigned was indeed cozy, about half the size of his cabin on the rail. The walls and floor were cut from a polished wood, the ceiling a layer of brown bark. Scents of trees and the forest were pervasive, and he half expected to see brown Lin-Ehrda scurrying about. As promised, his trunk was waiting for him at the foot of the bed made with deep purple linens. He checked the locks to ensure they had not been tampered with, a shiny Kij-Ehrda sitting nearby as if to arbitrate any disputes.

Ahlden dressed in his bedclothes, a brown linen tunic that covered his knees, a similar cap that covered his ears. While removing his shoes and ensuring his foot pads were clean, he activated his compass and paged through his recent dispatches. The foremost item on the stack was from her, as he had configured it.

Hello dearest. I have been praying for your safe journeys. I feel your absence keenly, with more intensity than usual. But, the peristol plant bloomed this morning, as if to console me. My thoughts are of you, my prayers are for you. I await your reply.

He read it over again, imagining her quiet voice, the way her ears moved when she spoke, the fact that she would still be awake to read his reply, even at this late of a sweep.

Hello darling. I arrived safely in Yul Razarin at Mid-Dusk today. How delightful to hear that the peristol is so vital. Perhaps we chose a better cutting this time. I long for your presence as well, and am always grateful that we can remain connected regardless of distance. If time permits, I would enjoy having a conference with you tomorrow. This supposedly urgent assignment has been delayed, so if nothing is required of me, I will find the time. I should return the day after, but you know how other things come up.

After signing and sending his response, he felt an odd ache which took him a moment to identify. He usually missed her when he was away, but this felt different, more keen and less abstract. It was something like a fruit that had sat forgotten on a bush, and had just now been discovered. The earlier discussion about betrothal had stirred up the still waters surrounding that life event, but that was a conversation too important to have over a dispatch, or even through a

conference.

Ahlden said his nightly prayers to the Hallowed King before placing his spectacles on the bedside table and pulsing off the lamp. He settled into the comfortable bed; it felt like foam topped with down, simple yet luxurious, though he felt a lump that irritated his side and required him to roll over several times to get comfortable, wrapping the thick blanket around him tighter as he did. But sleep soon came, and with it, the promise of a new day.

What happens next?
Will Ahlden finish the assignment on time?
Will he find a mushroom on his pillow?

Find out the answers to these questions and many more,
in the full version of Paper & Feathers,
available at the ZMT Bookstore