



*The
Lightning
Tree*

Patrick Rothfuss

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Morning: The Narrow Road

Bast almost made it out the back door of the Waystone Inn.

He actually *had* made it outside, both feet were over the threshold and the door was almost entirely eased shut behind him before he heard his master's voice.

Bast paused, hand on the latch. He frowned at the door, hardly a handspan from being closed. He hadn't made any noise. He knew it. He was familiar with all the silent pieces of the inn, which

floorboards sighed beneath a foot, which windows stuck ...

The back door's hinges creaked sometimes, depending on their mood, but that was easy to work around. Bast shifted his grip on the latch, lifted up so that the door's weight didn't hang so heavy, then eased it slowly closed. No creak. The swinging door was softer than a sigh.

Bast stood upright and grinned. His face was sweet and sly and wild. He looked like a naughty child who had managed to steal the moon and eat it. His smile was like the last sliver of remaining moon, sharp and white and dangerous.

“Bast!” The call came again, louder this time. Nothing so crass as a shout, his master would never stoop to bellowing.

But when he wanted to be heard, his baritone would not be stopped by anything so insubstantial as an oaken door. His voice carried like a horn, and Bast felt his name tug at him like a hand around his heart.

Bast sighed, then opened the door lightly and strode back inside. He was dark, and tall, and lovely. When he walked he looked like he was dancing. “Yes, Reshi?” he called.

After a moment the innkeeper stepped into the kitchen; he wore a clean white apron and his hair was red. Other than that, he was painfully unremarkable. His face held the doughy placidness of bored innkeepers everywhere. Despite the early hour, he looked tired.

He handed Bast a leather book. “You almost forgot this,” he said without a hint

of sarcasm.

Bast took the book and made a show of looking surprised. “Oh! Thank you, Reshi!”

The innkeeper shrugged and his mouth made the shape of a smile. “No bother, Bast. While you’re out on your errands, would you mind picking up some eggs?”

Bast nodded, tucking the book under his arm. “Anything else?” he asked dutifully.

“Maybe some carrots too. I’m thinking we’ll do stew tonight. It’s Felling, so we’ll need to be ready for a crowd.” His mouth turned up slightly at one corner as he said this.

The innkeeper started to turn away, then stopped. “Oh. The Williams boy stopped by last night, looking for you. Didn’t leave any sort of message.” He raised an eyebrow at Bast. The look said more

than it said.

“I haven’t the slightest idea what he wants,” Bast said.

The innkeeper made a noncommittal noise and turned back toward the common room.

Before he’d taken three steps Bast was already out the door and running through the early-morning sunlight.

By the time Bast arrived, there were already two children waiting. They played on the huge greystone that lay half-fallen at the bottom of the hill, climbing up the tilting side of it, then jumping down into the tall grass.

Knowing they were watching, Bast took his time climbing the tiny hill. At the top stood what the children called the lightning tree, though these days it was

little more than a branchless trunk barely taller than a man. All the bark had long since fallen away, and the sun had bleached the wood as white as bone. All except the very top, where even after all these years the wood was charred a jagged black.

Bast touched the trunk with his fingertips and made a slow circuit of the tree. He went deasil, the same direction as the turning sun. The proper way for making. Then he turned and switched hands, making three slow circles widdershins. That turning was against the world. It was the way of breaking. Back and forth he went, as if the tree were a bobbin and he was winding and unwinding.

Finally he sat with his back against the tree and set the book on a nearby stone.

The sun shone on the gold gilt letters, *Celum Tinture*. Then he amused himself by tossing stones into the nearby stream that cut into the low slope of the hill opposite the greystone.

After a minute, a round little blond boy trudged up the hill. He was the baker's youngest son, Brann. He smelled of sweat and fresh bread and ... something else. Something out of place.

The boy's slow approach had an air of ritual about it. He crested the small hill and stood there for a moment quietly, the only noise coming from the other two children playing below.

Finally Bast turned to look the boy over. He was no more than eight or nine, well dressed, and plumper than most of the other town's children. He carried a wad of white cloth in his hand.

The boy swallowed nervously. “I need a lie.”

Bast nodded. “What sort of lie?”

The boy gingerly opened his hand, revealing the wad of cloth to be a makeshift bandage, spattered with bright red. It stuck to his hand slightly. Bast nodded; that was what he’d smelled before.

“I was playing with my mum’s knives,” Brann said.

Bast examined the cut. It ran shallow along the meat near the thumb. Nothing serious. “Hurt much?”

“Nothing like the birching I’ll get if she finds out I was messing with her knives.”

Bast nodded sympathetically. “You clean the knife and put it back?”

Brann nodded.

Bast tapped his lips thoughtfully. “You

thought you saw a big black rat. It scared you. You threw a knife at it and cut yourself. Yesterday one of the other children told you a story about rats chewing off soldier's ears and toes while they slept. It gave you nightmares.”

Brann gave a shudder. “Who told me the story?”

Bast shrugged. “Pick someone you don't like.”

The boy grinned viciously.

Bast began to tick off things on his fingers. “Get some blood on the knife before you throw it.” He pointed at the cloth the boy had wrapped his hand in. “Get rid of that, too. The blood is dry, obviously old. Can you work up a good cry?”

The boy shook his head, seeming a little embarrassed by the fact.

“Put some salt in your eyes. Get all snotty and teary before you run to them. Howl and blubber. Then when they’re asking you about your hand, tell your mum you’re sorry if you broke her knife.”

Brann listened, nodding slowly at first, then faster. He smiled. “That’s good.” He looked around nervously. “What do I owe you?”

“Any secrets?” Bast asked.

The baker’s boy thought for a minute. “Old Lant’s tugging the Widow Creel ...” he said hopefully.

Bast waved his hand. “For years. Everyone knows.” Bast rubbed his nose, then said, “Can you bring me two sweet buns later today?”

Brann nodded.

“That’s a good start,” Bast said. “What have you got in your pockets?”

The boy dug around and held up both his hands. He had two iron shims, a flat greenish stone, a bird skull, a tangle of string, and a bit of chalk.

Bast claimed the string. Then, careful not to touch the shims, he took the greenish stone between two fingers and arched an eyebrow at the boy.

After a moment's hesitation, the boy nodded.

Bast put the stone in his pocket.

“What if I get a birching anyway?” Brann asked.

Bast shrugged. “That’s your business. You wanted a lie. I gave you a good one. If you want me to get you out of trouble, that’s something else entirely.”

The baker’s boy looked disappointed, but he nodded and headed down the hill.

Next up the hill was a slightly older

boy in tattered homespun. One of the Alard boys, Kale. He had a split lip and a crust of blood around one nostril. He was as furious as only a boy of ten can be. His expression was a thunderstorm.

“I caught my brother kissing Gretta behind the old mill!” he said as soon as he crested the hill, not waiting for Bast to ask. “He knew I was sweet on her!”

Bast spread his hands helplessly, shrugging.

“Revenge,” the boy spat.

“Public revenge?” Bast asked. “Or secret revenge?”

The boy touched his split lip with his tongue. “Secret revenge,” he said in a low voice.

“How much revenge?” Bast asked.

The boy thought for a bit, then held up his hands about two feet apart. “This

much.”

“Hmmm,” Bast said. “How much on a scale from mouse to bull?”

The boy rubbed his nose for a while. “About a cat’s worth,” he said. “Maybe a dog’s worth. Not like Crazy Martin’s dog though. Like the Bentons’ dogs.”

Bast nodded and tilted his head back in a thoughtful way. “Okay,” he said. “Piss in his shoes.”

The boy looked skeptical. “That don’t sound like a whole dog’s worth of revenge.”

Bast shook his head. “You piss in a cup and hide it. Let it sit for a day or two. Then one night when he’s put his shoes by the fire, pour the piss on his shoes. Don’t make a puddle, just get them damp. In the morning they’ll be dry and probably won’t even smell too much ...”

“What’s the point?” the boy interrupted angrily. “That’s not a flea’s worth of revenge!”

Bast held up a pacifying hand. “When his feet get sweaty, he’ll start to smell like piss.” Bast said calmly. “If he steps in a puddle, he’ll smell like piss. When he walks in the snow, he’ll smell like piss. It will be hard for him to figure out exactly where it’s coming from, but everyone will know your brother is the one that reeks.” Bast grinned at the boy. “I’m guessing your Gretta isn’t going to want to kiss the boy who can’t stop peeing himself.”

Raw admiration spread across the young boy’s face like sunrise in the mountains. “That’s the most bastardly thing I’ve ever heard,” he said, awestruck.

Bast tried to look modest and failed.
“Have you got anything for me?”

“I found a wild beehive,” the boy said.

“That will do for a start,” Bast said.
“Where?”

“It’s off past the Orissons’. Past Littlecreek.” The boy squatted and drew a map in the dirt. “You see?”

Bast nodded. “Anything else?”

“Well ... I know where Crazy Martin keeps his still ...”

Bast raised his eyebrows at that.
“Really?”

The boy drew another map and gave some directions. Then he stood and dusted off his knees. “We square?”

Bast scuffed his foot in the dirt, destroying the map. “We’re square.”

The boy dusted off his knees, “I’ve got a message too. Rike wants to see you.”

Bast shook his head firmly. “He knows the rules. Tell him no.”

“I already told him,” the boy said with a comically exaggerated shrug. “But I’ll tell him again if I see him ...”

There were no more children waiting after Kale, so Bast tucked the leather book under his arm and went on a long, rambling stroll. He found some wild raspberries and ate them. He took a drink from the Ostlar’s well.

Eventually Bast climbed to the top of a nearby bluff where he gave a great stretch before tucking the leather-bound copy of *Celum Tinture* into a spreading hawthorn tree where a wide branch made a cozy nook against the trunk.

He looked up at the sky then, clear and bright. No clouds. Not much wind. Warm

but not hot. Hadn't rained for a solid span. It wasn't a market day. Hours before noon on Felling ...

Bast's brow furrowed a bit, as if performing some complex calculation. Then he nodded to himself.

Then Bast headed back down the bluff, past Old Lant's place and around the brambles that bordered the Alard farm. When he came to Littlecreek he cut some reeds and idly whittled at them with a small bright knife. Then brought the string out of his pocket and bound them together, fashioning a tidy set of shepherd's pipes.

He blew across the top of them and cocked his head to listen to their sweet discord. His bright knife trimmed some more, and he blew again. This time the tune was closer, which made the discord

far more grating.

Bast's knife flicked again, once, twice, thrice. Then he put it away and brought the pipes closer to his face. He breathed in through his nose, smelling the wet green of them. Then he licked the fresh-cut tops of the reeds, the flicker of his tongue a sudden, startling red.

Then he drew a breath and blew against the pipes. This time the sound was bright as moonlight, lively as a leaping fish, sweet as stolen fruit. Smiling, Bast headed off into the Bentons' back hills, and it wasn't long before he heard the low, mindless bleat of distant sheep.

A minute later, Bast came over the crest of a hill and saw two dozen fat, daft sheep cropping grass in the green valley below. It was shadowy here, and secluded. The lack of recent rain meant

the grazing was better here. The steep sides of the valley meant the sheep weren't prone to straying and didn't need much looking after.

A young woman sat in the shade of a spreading elm that overlooked the valley. She had taken off her shoes and bonnet. Her long, thick hair was the color of ripe wheat.

Bast began playing then. A dangerous tune. It was sweet and bright and slow and sly.

The shepherdess perked up at the sound of it, or so it seemed at first. She lifted her head, excited ... but no. She didn't look in his direction at all. She was merely climbing to her feet to have a stretch, rising high up onto her toes, hands twining over her head.

Still apparently unaware she was being

serenaded, the young woman picked up a nearby blanket, spread it beneath the tree, and sat back down. It was a little odd, as she'd been sitting there before without the blanket. Perhaps she'd just grown chilly.

Bast continued to play as he walked down the slope of the valley toward her. He did not hurry, and the music he made was sweet and playful and languorous all at once.

The shepherdess showed no sign of noticing the music or Bast himself. In fact she looked away from him, toward the far end of the little valley, as if curious what the sheep might be doing there. When she turned her head, it exposed the lovely line of her neck from her perfect shell-like ear, down to the gentle swell of breast that showed above her bodice.

Eyes intent on the young woman, Bast stepped on a loose stone and stumbled awkwardly down the hill. He blew one hard, squawking note, then dropped a few more from his song as he threw out one arm wildly to catch his balance.

The shepherdess laughed then, but she was pointedly looking at the other end of the valley. Perhaps the sheep had done something humorous. Yes. That was surely it. They could be funny animals at times.

Even so, one can only look at sheep for so long. She sighed and relaxed, leaning back against the sloping trunk of the tree. The motion accidentally pulled the hem of her skirt up slightly past her knee. Her calves were round and tan and covered with the lightest down of honey-colored hair.

Bast continued down the hill. His steps delicate and graceful. He looked like a stalking cat. He looked like he were dancing.

Apparently satisfied the sheep were safe, the shepherdess sighed again, closed her eyes, and lay her head against the trunk of the tree. Her face tilted up to catch the sun. She seemed about to sleep, but for all her sighing her breath seemed to be coming rather quickly. And when she shifted restlessly to make herself more comfortable, one hand fell in such a way that it accidentally drew the hem of her dress even farther up until it showed a pale expanse of thigh.

It is hard to grin while playing shepherd's pipes. Somehow Bast managed it.

The sun was climbing the sky when Bast returned to the lightning tree, pleasantly sweaty and in a state of mild dishevel. There were no children waiting near the greystones this time, which suited him perfectly.

He did a quick circle of the tree again when he reached the top of the hill, once in each direction to ensure his small workings were still in place. Then he slumped down and at the foot of the tree and leaned against the trunk. Less than a minute later his eyes were closed and he was snoring slightly.

After the better part of an hour, the near-silent sound of footsteps roused him. He gave a great stretch and spied a thin boy with freckles and clothes that were slightly past the point where they might merely be called well-worn.

“Kostrel!” Bast said happily. “How’s the road to Tinuë?”

“Seems sunny enough to me today,” the boy said as he came to the top of the hill. “And I found a lovely secret by the roadside. Something I thought you might be interested in.”

“Ah,” Bast said. “Come have a seat then. What sort of secret did you stumble on?”

Kostrel sat cross-legged on the grass nearby. “I know where Emberlee takes her bath.”

Bast raised a half-interested eyebrow. “Is that so?”

Kostrel grinned. “You faker. Don’t pretend you don’t care.”

“Of course I care,” Bast said. “She’s the sixth prettiest girl in town, after all.”

“Sixth?” the boy said, indignant. “She’s

the second prettiest and you know it.”

“Perhaps fourth,” Bast conceded.
“After Ania.”

“Ania’s legs are skinny as a chicken’s,”
Kostrel observed calmly.

Bast smiled at the boy. “To each his own. But yes. I am interested. What would you like in trade? An answer, a favor, a secret?”

“I want a favor *and* information,” the boy said with a small smirk. His dark eyes were sharp in his lean face. “I want good answers to three questions. And it’s worth it. Because Emberlee is the third prettiest girl in town.”

Bast opened his mouth as if he were going to protest, then shrugged and smiled. “No favor. But I’ll give you three answers on a subject named beforehand,” he countered. “Any subject except that of

my employer, whose trust in me I cannot in good conscience betray.”

Kostrel nodded in agreement. “Three *full* answers,” he said. “With no equivocating or bullshittery.”

Bast nodded. “So long as the questions are focused and specific. No ‘*tell me everything you know about*’ nonsense.”

“That wouldn’t be a question,” Kostrel pointed out.

“Exactly,” Bast said. “And you agree not to tell anyone else where Emberlee is having her bullshittery Kostrel scowled at that, and Bast laughed. “You little cocker, you would have sold it twenty times, wouldn’t you?”

The boy shrugged easily, not denying it, and not embarrassed either. “It’s valuable information.”

Bast chuckled. “Three full, earnest

answers on a single subject with the understanding that I'm the only one you've told."

"You are," the boy said sullenly. "I came here first."

"And with the understanding that you won't tell Emberlee anyone knows." Kostrel looked so offended at this that Bast didn't bother waiting for him to agree. "And with the understanding that you won't show up yourself."

The dark-eyed boy spat a couple words that surprised Bast more than his earlier use of "equivocating."

"Fine," Kostrel growled. "But if you don't know the answer to my question, I get to ask another."

Bast thought about it for a moment, then nodded.

"And if I pick a subject you don't know

much about, I get to chose another.”

Another nod. “That’s fair.”

“And you loan me another book,” the boy said, his dark eyes glaring. “And a copper penny. And you have to describe her breasts to me.”

Bast threw back his head and laughed. “Done.”

They shook on the deal, the boy’s thin hand was delicate as a bird’s wing.

Bast leaned against the lightning tree, yawning and rubbing the back of his neck. “So. What’s your subject?”

Kostrel’s grim look lifted a little then, and he grinned excitedly. “I want to know about the Fae.”

It says a great deal that Bast finished his great yawp of a yawn as if nothing were the matter. It is quite hard to yawn and stretch when your belly feels like

you've swallowed a lump of bitter iron and your mouth has gone suddenly dry.

But Bast was something of a professional dissembler, so he yawned and stretched, and even went so far as to scratch himself under one arm lazily.

“Well?” the boy asked impatiently. “Do you know enough about them?”

“A fair amount,” Bast said, doing a much better job of looking modest this time. “More than most folk, I imagine.”

Kostrel leaned forward, his thin face intent. “I thought you might. You aren't from around here. You *know* things. You've seen what's really out there in the world.”

“Some of it,” Bast admitted. He looked up at the sun. “Ask your questions then. I have to be somewhere come noon.”

The boy nodded seriously, then looked

down at the grass in front of himself for a moment, thinking. “What are they like?”

Bast blinked for a moment, taken aback. Then he laughed helplessly and threw up his hands. “Merciful Tehlu. Do you have any idea how crazy that question is? They’re not like anything. They’re like themselves.”

Kostrel looked indignant. “Don’t you try to shim me!” he said, leveling a finger at Bast. “I said no bullshittery!”

“I’m not. Honest I’m not.” Bast raised his hands defensively. “It’s just an impossible question to answer is all. What would you say if I asked you what *people* were like? How could you answer that? There are so many kinds of people, and they’re all different.”

“So it’s a big question,” Kostrel said. “Give me a big answer.”

“It’s not just big,” Bast said. “It would fill a book.”

The boy gave a profoundly unsympathetic shrug.

Bast scowled. “It could be argued that your question is neither focused nor specific.”

Kostrel raised an eyebrow. “So we’re arguing now? I thought we were trading information? Fully and freely. If you asked me where Emberlee was going for her bath, and I said, ‘in a stream’ you’d feel like I’d measured you some pretty short corn, wouldn’t you?”

Bast sighed. “Fair enough. But if I told you every rumor and snippet I’d ever heard, this would take a span of days. Most of it would be useless, and some probably wouldn’t even be true because it’s just from stories that I’ve heard.”

Kostrel frowned, but before he could protest, Bast held up a hand. “Here’s what I’ll do. Despite the unfocused nature of your question, I’ll give you an answer that covers the rough shape of things and ...” Bast hesitated. “... one true secret on the subject. Okay?”

“Two secrets.” Kostrel said, his dark eyes glittering with excitement.

“Fair enough.” Bast took a deep breath. “When you say fae, you’re talking about anything that lives in the Fae. That includes a lot of things that are ... just creatures. Like animals. Here you have dogs and squirrels and bears. In the Fae, they have raum and dennerlings and ...”

“And trow?”

Bast nodded. “And trow. They’re real.”

“And dragons?”

Bast shook his head. “Not that I’ve ever

heard. Not anymore ...”

Kostrel looked disappointed. “What about the fair folk? Like faerie tinkers and such?” The boy narrowed his eyes. “Mind you, this isn’t a new question, merely an attempt to focus your ongoing answer.”

Bast laughed helplessly. “Lord and lady. *Ongoing*? Was your mother scared by an azzie when she was pregnant? Where do you get that kind of talk?

“I stay awake in church.” Kostrel shrugged. “And sometimes Abbe Leodin lets me read his books. What do they look like?”

“Like regular people,” Bast said.

“Like you and me?” the boy asked.

Bast fought back a smile. “Just like you or me. You wouldn’t hardly notice if they passed you on the street. But there are

others. Some of them are ... They're different. More powerful."

"Like Varsa never-dead?"

"Some," Bast conceded. "But some are powerful in other ways. Like the mayor is powerful. Or like a moneylender." Bast's expression went sour. "Many of those ... they're not good to be around. They like to trick people. Play with them. Hurt them."

Some of the excitement bled out of Kostrel at this. "They sound like demons."

Bast hesitated, then nodded a reluctant agreement. "Some are very much like demons," he admitted. "Or so close as it makes no difference."

"Are some of them like angels, too?" the boy asked.

"It's nice to think that," Bast said. "I

hope so.”

“Where do they come from?”

Bast cocked his head. “That’s your second question then?” he asked. “I’m guessing it must be, as it’s got nothing to do with what the Fae are *like* ...”

Kostrel grimaced, seeming a little embarrassed, though Bast couldn’t tell if he was ashamed he’d gotten carried away with his questions, or ashamed he’d been caught trying to get a free answer. “Sorry,” he said. “Is it true that a faerie can never lie?”

“Some can’t,” Bast said. “Some don’t like to. Some are happy to lie but wouldn’t ever go back on promise or break their word.” He shrugged. “Others lie quite well, and do so at every opportunity.”

Kostrel began to ask something else,

but Bast cleared his throat. “You have to admit,” he said. “That’s a pretty good answer. I even gave you a few free questions, to help with the focus of things, as it were.”

Kostrel gave a slightly sullen nod.

“Here’s your first secret.” Bast held up a single finger. “Most of the Fae don’t come to this world. They don’t like it. It rubs all rough against them, like wearing a burlap shirt. But when they do come, they like some places better than others. They like wild places. Secret places. Strange places. There are many types of fae, many courts and houses. And all of them are ruled according to their own desires ...”

Bast continued in a tone of soft conspiracy. “But something that appeals to all the fae are places with connections

to the raw, true things that shape the world. Places that are touched with fire and stone. Places that are close to water and air. When all four come together ...”

Bast paused to see if the boy would interject something here. But Kostrel’s face had lost the sharp cunning it had held before. He looked like a child again, mouth slightly agape, his eyes wide with wonder.

“Second secret,” Bast said. “The fae folk look nearly like we do, but not *exactly*. Most have something about them that makes them different. Their eyes. Their ears. The color of their hair or skin. Sometimes they’re taller than normal, or shorter, or stronger, or more beautiful.”

“Like Felurian”

“Yes, yes,” Bast said testily. “Like

Felurian. But any of the Fae who has the skill to travel here will have craft enough to hide those things.” He leaned back, nodding to himself. “That is a type of magic all the fair folk share.”

Bast threw the final comment out like a fisherman casting a lure.

Kostrel closed his mouth and swallowed hard. He didn’t fight the line. Didn’t even know that he’d been hooked. “What sort of magic can they do?”

Bast rolled his eyes dramatically. “Oh come now, that’s another whole book’s worth of question.”

“Well maybe you should just *write* a book then,” Kostrel said flatly. “Then you can lend it to me and kill two birds with one stone.”

The comment seemed to catch Bast off his stride. “Write a book?”

“That’s what people do when they know every damn thing, isn’t it?” Kostrel said sarcastically. “They write it down so they can show off.”

Bast looked thoughtful for a moment, then shook his head as if to clear it. “Okay. Here’s the bones of what I know. They don’t think of it as magic. They’d never use that term. They’ll talk of art or craft. They talk of seeming or shaping.”

He looked up at the sun and pursed his lips. “But if they were being frank, and they are rarely frank, mind you, they would tell you almost everything they do is either glammourie or grammarie. Glammourie is the art of making something seem. Grammarie is the craft of making something be.”

Bast rushed ahead before the boy could interrupt. “Glammourie is easier. They

can make a thing seem other than it is. They could make a white shirt seem like it was blue. Or a torn shirt seem like it was whole. Most of the folk have at least a scrap of this art. Enough to hide themselves from mortal eyes. If their hair was all of silver-white, their glammourie could make it look as black as night.”

Kostrel’s face was lost in wonder yet again. But it was not the gormless, gaping wonder of before. It was a thoughtful wonder. A clever wonder, curious and hungry. It was the sort of wonder that would steer a boy toward a question that started with a *how*.

Bast could see the shape of these things moving in the boy’s dark eyes. His damn clever eyes. Too clever by half. Soon those vague wonderings would start to crystallize into questions like “*How do*

they make their glammourie?" or even worse. *"How might a young boy break it?"*

And what then, with a question like that hanging in the air? Nothing good would come of it. To break a promise fairly made and lie outright was retrograde to his desire. Even worse to do it in this place. Far easier to tell the truth, then make sure something happened to the boy ...

But honestly, he liked the boy. He wasn't dull, or easy. He wasn't mean or low. He pushed back. He was funny and grim and hungry and more alive than any three other people in the town all put together. He was bright as broken glass and sharp enough to cut himself. And Bast too, apparently.

Bast rubbed his face. This never used

to happen. He had never been in conflict with his own desire before he came here. He hated it. It was so simply singular before. Want and have. See and take. Run and chase. Thirst and slake. And if he were thwarted in pursuit of his desire ... what of it? That was simply the way of things. The desire itself was still his, it was still pure.

It wasn't like that now. Now his desires grew complicated. They constantly conflicted with each other. He felt endlessly turned against himself. Nothing was simple anymore, he was pulled so many ways ...

“Bast?” Kostrel said, his head cocked to the side, concern plain on his face. “Are you okay?” he asked. “What’s the matter?”

Bast smiled an honest smile. He was a

curious boy. Of course. That was the way. That was the narrow road between desires. “I was just thinking. Grammarie is much harder to explain. I can’t say I understand it all that well myself.”

“Just do your best,” Kostrel said kindly. “Whatever you tell me will be more than I know.”

No, he couldn’t kill this boy. That would be too hard a thing.

“Grammarie is changing a thing,” Bast said, making an inarticulate gesture. “Making it into something different than what it is.”

“Like turning lead into gold?” Kostrel asked. “Is that how they make faerie gold?”

Bast made a point of smiling at the question. “Good guess, but that’s glammourie. It’s easy, but it doesn’t last.

That's why people who take faerie gold end up with pockets full of stones or acorns in the morning."

"Could they turn gravel into gold?" Kostrel asked. "If they really wanted to?"

"It's not that sort of change," Bast said, though he still smiled and nodded at the question. "That's too big. Grammarie is about ... shifting. It's about making something into more of what it already is."

Kostrel's face twisted with confusion.

Bast took a deep breath and let it out through his nose. "Let me try something else. What have you got in your pockets?"

Kostrel rummaged about and held out his hands. There was a brass button, a scrap of paper, a stub of pencil, a small

folding knife ... and a stone with a hole in it. Of course.

Bast slowly passed his hand over the collection of oddments, eventually stopping above the knife. It wasn't particularly fine or fancy, just a piece of smooth wood the size of a finger with a groove where a short, hinged blade was tucked away.

Bast picked it up delicately between two fingers and set it down on the ground between them. "What's this?"

Kostrel stuffed the rest of his belongings into his pocket. "It's my knife."

"That's it?" Bast asked.

The boy's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "What else could it be?"

Bast brought out his own knife. It was a little larger, and instead of wood, it was

carved from a piece of antler, polished and beautiful. Bast opened it, and the bright blade shone in the sun.

He laid his knife next to the boy's. "Would you trade your knife for mine?"

Kostrel eyed the knife jealously. But even so, there wasn't a hint of hesitation before he shook his head.

"Why not?"

"Because it's mine," the boy said, his face clouding over.

"Mine's better," Bast said matter-of-factly.

Kostrel reached out and picked up his knife, closing his hand around it possessively. His face was sullen as a storm. "My da gave me this," he said. "Before he took the king's coin and went to be a soldier and save us from the rebels." He looked up at Bast, as if

daring him to say a single word contrary to that.

Bast didn't look away from him, just nodded seriously. "So it's more than just a knife." he said. "It's special to you."

Still clutching the knife, Kostrel nodded, blinking rapidly.

"For you, it's the best knife."

Another nod.

"It's more important than other knives. And that's not just a *seeming*," Bast said. "It's something the knife *is*."

There was a flicker of understanding in Kostrel's eyes.

Bast nodded. "That's grammarie. Now imagine if someone could take a knife and make it be more of what a knife is. Make it into the best knife. Not just for them, but for *anyone*." Bast picked up his own knife and closed it. "If they were

really skilled, they could do it with something other than a knife. They could make a fire that was more of what a fire is. Hungrier. Hotter. Someone truly powerful could do even more. They could take a shadow ...” He trailed off gently, leaving an open space in the empty air.

Kostrel drew a breath and leapt to fill it with a question. “Like Felurian!” he said. “Is that what she did to make Kvothe’s shadow cloak?”

Bast nodded seriously, glad for the question, hating that it had to be *that* question. “It seems likely to me. What does a shadow do? It conceals, it protects. Kvothe’s cloak of shadows does the same, but more.”

Kostrel was nodding along in understanding, and Bast pushed on

quickly, eager to leave this particular subject behind. “Think of Felurian herself ...”

The boy grinned, he seemed to have no trouble doing that.

“A woman can be a thing of beauty,” Bast said slowly. “She can be a focus of desire. Felurian is that. Like the knife. The most beautiful. The focus of the most desire. For everyone ...” Bast let his statement trail off gently yet again.

Kostrel’s eyes were far away, obviously giving the matter his full deliberation. Bast gave him time for it, and after a moment another question bubbled out of the boy. “Couldn’t it be merely glammourie?” he asked.

“Ah,” said Bast, smiling. “But what is the difference between *being* beautiful and *seeming* beautiful?”

“Well ...” Kostrel stalled for a moment, then rallied. “One is real and the other isn’t.” He sounded certain, but it wasn’t reflected in his expression. “One would be fake. You could tell the difference, couldn’t you?”

Bast let the question sail by. It was close, but not quite. “What’s the difference between a shirt that *looks* white and a shirt that *is* white?” he countered.

“A woman isn’t the same as a shirt,” Kostrel said with vast disdain. “You’d know if you touched her. If she looked all soft and rosy like Emberlee, but her hair felt like a horse’s tail, you’d know it wasn’t real.”

“Glammourie isn’t just for fooling eyes,” Bast said. “It’s for everything. Faerie gold feels heavy. And a

glamoured pig would smell like roses when you kissed it.”

Kostrel reeled visibly at that. The shift from Emberlee to a glamoured pig obviously left him feeling more than slightly appalled. Bast waited a moment for him to recover.

“Wouldn’t it be harder to glamour a pig?” he asked at last.

“You’re clever,” Bast said encouragingly. “You’re exactly right. And glamouring a pretty girl to be *more* pretty wouldn’t be much work at all. It’s like putting icing on a cake.”

Kostrel rubbed his cheek thoughtfully. “Can you use glammourie and grammarie at the same time?”

Bast was more genuinely impressed this time. “That’s what I’ve heard.”

Kostrel nodded to himself. “That’s

what Felurian must do,” he said. “Like cream on icing on cake.”

“I think so,” Bast said. “The one I met ...” He stopped abruptly, his mouth snapped shut.

“You’ve met one of the Fae?”

Bast grinned like a beartrap. “Yes.”

This time Kostrel felt the hook and line both. But it was too late. “You bastard!”

“I am,” Bast admitted happily.

“You tricked me into asking that.”

“I did,” Bast said. “It was a question related to this subject, and I answered it fully and without equivocation.”

Kostrel got to his feet and stormed off, only to come back a moment later. “Give me my penny,” he demanded.

Bast reached into his pocket and pulled out a copper penny. “Where’s does Emberlee take her bath?”

Kostrel glowered furiously, then said, “Out past Oldstone bridge, up toward the hills about half a mile. There’s a little hollow with an elm tree.”

“And when?”

“After lunch on the Boggan farm. After she finishes the washing up and hangs the laundry.”

Bast tossed him the penny, still grinning like mad.

“I hope your dick falls off,” the boy said venomously before stomping back down the hill.

Bast couldn’t help but laugh. He tried to do it quietly to spare the boy’s feelings but didn’t meet with much success.

Kostrel turned at the bottom of the hill, and shouted, “And you still owe me a book!”

Bast stopped laughing then as

something jogged loose in his memory. He panicked for a moment when he realized *Celum Tinture* wasn't in its usual spot.

Then he remembered leaving the book in the tree on top of the bluff and relaxed. The clear sky showed no sign of rain. It was safe enough. Besides, it was nearly noon, perhaps a little past. So he turned and hurried down the hill, not wanting to be late.

Bast sprinted most of the way to the little dell, and by the time he arrived he was sweating like a hard-run horse. His shirt stuck to him unpleasantly, so as he walked down the sloping bank to the water, he pulled it off and used it to mop the sweat from his face.

A long, flat jut of stone pushed out into

Littlecreek there, forming one side of a calm pool where the stream turned back on itself. A stand of willow trees overhung the water, making it private and shady. The shoreline was overgrown with thick bushes, and the water was smooth and calm and clear.

Bare-chested, Bast walked out onto the rough jut of stone. Dressed, his face and hands made him look rather lean, but shirtless his wide shoulders were surprising, more what you might expect to see on a field hand, rather than a shiftless sort that did little more than lounge around an empty inn all day.

Once he was out of the shadow of the willows, Bast knelt to dunk his shirt in the pool. Then he wrung it over his head, shivering a bit at the chill of it. He rubbed his chest and arms briskly,

shaking drops of water from his face.

He set the shirt aside, grabbed the lip of stone at the edge of the pool, then took a deep breath and dunked his head. The motion made the muscles across his back and shoulders flex. A moment later he pulled his head out, gasping slightly and shaking water from his hair.

Bast stood then, slicking back his hair with both hands. Water streamed down his chest, making runnels in the dark hair, trailing down across the flat plane of his stomach.

He shook himself off a bit, then stepped over to dark niche made by a jagged shelf of overhanging rock. He felt around for a moment before pulling out a knob of butter-colored soap.

He knelt at the edge of the water again, dunking his shirt several times, then

scrubbing it with the soap. It took a while, as he had no washing board, and he obviously didn't want to chafe his shirt against the rough stones. He soaped and rinsed the shirt several times, wringing it out with his hands, making the muscles in his arms and shoulders tense and twine. He did a thorough job, though by the time he was finished, he was completely soaked and spattered with lather.

Bast spread his shirt out on a sunny stone to dry. He started to undo his pants, then stopped and tipped his head on one side, trying to jog loose water from his ear.

It might be because of the water in his ear that Bast didn't hear the excited twittering coming from the bushes that grew along the shore. A sound that could,

conceivably, be sparrows chattering among the branches. A flock of sparrows. Several flocks, perhaps.

And if Bast didn't see the bushes moving either? Or note that in among the hanging foliage of the willow branches there were colors normally not found in trees? Sometimes a pale pink, sometimes blushing red. Sometimes an ill-considered yellow or a cornflower blue. And while it's true that dresses might come in those colors ... well ... so did birds. Finches and jays. And besides, it was fairly common knowledge among the young women of the town that the dark young man who worked at the inn was woefully nearsighted.

The sparrows twittered in the bushes as Bast worked at the drawstring of his pants again. The knot apparently giving

him some trouble. He fumbled with it for a while, then grew frustrated and gave a great, catlike stretch, arms arching over his head, his body bending like a bow.

Finally he managed to work the knot loose and shuck free of his pants. He wore nothing underneath. He tossed them aside and from the willow came a squawk of the sort that could have come from a larger bird. A heron perhaps. Or a crow. And if a branch shook violently at the same time, well, perhaps a bird had leaned too far from its branch and nearly fell. It certainly stood to reason that some birds were more clumsy than others. And besides, at the time Bast was looking the other way.

Bast dove into the water then, splashing like a boy and gasping at the cold. After a few minutes he moved to a shallower

portion of the pool where the water rose to barely reach his narrow waist.

Beneath the water, a careful observer might note the young man's legs looked somewhat ... odd. But it was shady there, and everyone knows that water bends light strangely, making things look other than they are. And besides, birds are not the most careful of observers, especially when their attention is focused elsewhere.

An hour or so later, slightly damp and smelling of sweet honeysuckle soap, Bast climbed the bluff where he was fairly certain that he'd left his master's book. It was the third bluff he'd climbed in the last half hour.

When he reached the top, Bast relaxed at the sight of a hawthorn tree. Walking

closer, he saw it was the right tree, the nook right where he remembered. But the book was gone. A quick circle of the tree showed that it hadn't fallen to the ground.

Then the wind stirred and Bast saw something white. He felt a sudden chill, fearing it was a page torn free from the book. Few things angered his master like a mistreated book.

But no. Reaching up, Bast didn't feel paper. It was a smooth stretch of birch bark. He pulled it down and saw the letters crudely scratched into the side.

I ned ta tawk ta ewe. Ets
emportant.

Rike

Afternoon: Birds and Bees

With no idea of where he might find Rike, Bast made his way back to the lightning tree. He had just settled down in his usual place when a young girl came into the clearing.

She didn't stop at the greystone and instead trudged straight up the side of the hill. She was younger than the others, six or seven. she wore a bright blue dress and had deep purple ribbons twining through her carefully curled hair.

She had never come to the lightning tree before, but Bast had seen her. Even if he hadn't, he could have guessed by her fine clothes and the smell of rosewater that she was Viette, the mayor's youngest daughter.

She climbed the low hill slowly, carrying something furry in the crook of her arm. When she reached the top of the

hill she stood, slightly fidgety, but still waiting.

Bast eyed her quietly for a moment. “Do you know the rules?” he asked.

She stood, purple ribbons in her hair. She was obviously slightly scared, but her lower lip stuck out, defiant. She nodded.

“What are they?”

The young girl licked her lips and began to recite in a singsong voice. “No one taller than the stone.” She pointed to the fallen greystone at the foot of the hill. “Come to blacktree, come alone.” She put her finger to her lips, miming a shushing noise.

“Tell no—”

“Hold on,” Bast interrupted. “You say the last two lines while touching the tree.”

The girl blanched a bit at this but stepped forward and put her hand against the sun-bleached wood of the long-dead tree.

The girl cleared her throat again, then paused, her lips moving silently as she ran through the beginning of the poem until she found her place again. “Tell no adult what’s been said, lest the lightning strike you dead.”

When she spoke the last word, Viette gasped and jerked her hand back, as if something had burned or bitten her fingers. Her eyes went wide as she looked down at her fingertips and saw they were an untouched, healthy pink. Bast hid a smile behind his hand.

“Very well then,” Bast said. “You know the rules. I keep your secrets and you keep mine. I can answer questions or

help you solve a problem.” He sat down again, his back against the tree, bringing him to eye level with the girl. “What do you want?”

She held out the tiny puff of white fur she carried in the crook of her arm. It mewled. “Is this a magic kitten?” she asked.

Bast took the kitten in his hand and looked it over. It was a sleepy thing, almost entirely white. One eye was blue, the other green. “It is, actually,” he said, slightly surprised. “At least a little.” He handed it back.

She nodded seriously. “I want to call her Princess Icing Bun.”

Bast simply stared at her, nonplussed. “Okay.”

The girl scowled at him. “I don’t know if she’s a girl or a boy!”

“Oh,” Bast said. He held out his hand, took the kitten, then petted it and handed it back. “It’s a girl.”

The mayor’s daughter narrowed her eyes at him. “Are you fibbing?”

Bast blinked at the girl, then laughed. “Why would you believe me the first time and not the second?” he asked.

“I could *tell* she was a magic kitten,” Viette said, rolling her eyes in exasperation. “I just wanted to make sure. But she’s not wearing a dress. She doesn’t have any ribbons or bows. How can you tell if she’s a girl?”

Bast opened his mouth. Then closed it again. This was not some farmer’s child. She had a governess and a whole closetful of clothes. She didn’t spend her time around sheep and pigs and goats. She’d never seen a lamb born. She had

an older sister, but no brothers ...

He hesitated; he'd rather not lie. Not here. But he hadn't promised to answer her question, hadn't made any sort of agreement at all with her. That made things easier. A great deal easier than having an angry mayor visit the Waystone, demanding to know why his daughter suddenly knew the word "penis."

"I tickle the kitten's tummy," Bast said easily. "And if it winks at me, I know it's a girl."

This satisfied Viette, and she nodded gravely. "How can I get my father to let me keep it?"

"You've already asked him nicely?"

She nodded. "Daddy hates cats."

"Begged and cried?"

Nod.

“Screamed and thrown a fit?”

She rolled her eyes and gave an exasperated sigh. “I’ve *tried* all that, or I wouldn’t be here.”

Bast thought for a moment. “Okay. First, you have to get some food that will keep good for a couple days. Biscuits. Sausage. Apples. Hide it in your room where nobody will find it. Not even your governess. Not even the maid. Do you have a place like that?”

The little girl nodded.

“Then go ask your daddy one more time. Be gentle and polite. If he still says no, don’t be angry. Just tell him that you love the kitten. Say if you can’t have her, you’re afraid you’ll be so sad you’ll die.”

“He’ll still say no,” the little girl said.

Bast shrugged. “Probably. Here’s the

second part. Tonight, pick at your dinner. Don't eat it. Not even the dessert." The little girl started to say something, but Bast held up a hand. "If anyone asks you, just say you're not hungry. Don't mention the kitten. When you're alone in your room tonight, eat some of the food you've hidden."

The little girl looked thoughtful.

Bast continued. "Tomorrow, don't get out of bed. Say you're too tired. Don't eat your breakfast. Don't eat your lunch. You can drink a little water, but just sips. Just lie in bed. When they ask what's the matter—"

She brightened. "I say I want my kitten!"

Bast shook his head, his expression grim. "No. That will spoil it. Just say you're tired. If they leave you alone, you

can eat, but be careful. If they catch you, you'll never get your kitten."

The girl was listening intently now, her brow furrowed in concentration.

"By dinner they'll be worried. They'll offer you more food. Your favorites. Keep saying you're not hungry. You're just tired. Just lie there. Don't talk. Do that all day long."

"Can I get up to pee?"

Bast nodded. "But remember to act tired. No playing. The next day, they'll be scared. They'll bring in a doctor. They'll try to feed you broth. They'll try everything. At some point your father will be there, and he'll ask you what's the matter."

Bast grinned at her. "That's when you start to cry. No howling. Don't blubber. Just tears. Just lie there and cry. Then say

you miss your kitten so much. You miss your kitten so much you don't want to be alive anymore.”

The little girl thought about it for a long minute, petting her kitten absentmindedly with one hand. Finally she nodded, “Okay.” She turned to go.

“Hold on now!” Bast said quickly. “I gave you what you wanted. You owe me now.”

The little girl turned around, her expression an odd mix of surprise and anxious embarrassment. “I didn't bring any money,” she said, not meeting his eye.

“Not money,” Bast said. “I gave you two answers and a way to get your kitten. You owe me three things. You pay with gifts and favors. You pay in secrets ...”

She thought for a moment. “Daddy

hides his strongbox key inside the mantel clock.”

Bast nodded approvingly. “That’s one.”

The little girl looked up into the sky, still petting her kitten. “I saw mama kissing the maid once.”

Bast raised an eyebrow at that. “That’s two ...”

The girl put her finger in her ear and wiggled it. “That’s all, I think.”

“How about a favor, then?” Bast said. “I need you to fetch me two dozen daisies with long stems. And a blue ribbon. And two armfuls of gemlings.”

Viette’s face puckered in confusion. “What’s a gemling?”

“Flowers,” Bast said, looking puzzled himself. “Maybe you call them balsams? They grow wild all over around here,” he said, making a wide gesture with both

hands.

“Do you mean geraniums?” she asked.

Bast shook his head. “No. They’ve got loose petals, and they’re about this big.” he made a circle with his thumb and middle finger. “They’re yellow and orange and red ...”

The girl stared at him blankly.

“Widow Creel keeps them in her window box,” Bast continued. “When you touch the seedpods, they pop ...”

Viette’s face lit up. “Oh! You mean *touch-me-nots*,” she said, her tone more than slightly patronizing. “I can bring you a bunch of those. That’s *easy*.” She turned to run down the hill.

Bast called out before she’d taken six steps. “Wait!” When she spun around, he asked her. “What do you say if somebody asks you who you’re picking flowers

for?”

She rolled her eyes again. “I tell them it’s none of their tuppung business,” she said. “Because my daddy is the mayor.”

After Viette left, a high whistle made Bast look down the hill toward the greystone. There were no children waiting there.

The whistle came again, and Bast stood, stretching long and hard. It would have surprised most of the young women in town how easily he spotted the figure standing in the shadow of the trees at the edge of the clearing nearly two hundred feet away.

Bast sauntered down the hill, across the grassy field, and into the shadow of the trees. There was an older boy there with smudgy face and a pug nose. He was

perhaps twelve and his shirt and pants were both too small for him, showing too much dirty wrist at the cuff and bare ankle below. He was barefoot and had a slightly sour smell about him.

“Rike.” Bast’s voice held none of the friendly, bantering tone he’d used with the town’s other children. “How’s the road to Tinuë?”

“It’s a long damn way,” the boy said bitterly, not meeting Bast’s eye. “We live in the ass of nowhere.”

“I see you have my book,” Bast said.

The boy held it out. “I wann’t tryin’ to steal it,” he muttered quickly. “I just needed to talk to you.”

Bast took the book silently.

“I didn’t break the rules,” the boy said. “I didn’t even come into the clearing. But I need help. I’ll pay for it.”

“You lied to me, Rike,” Bast said, his voice grim.

“And din’t I pay for that?” the boy demanded angrily, looking up for the first time. “Din’t I pay for it ten times over? Ent my life shit enough without having more shit piled on top of it?”

“And it’s all beside the point because you’re too old now,” Bast said flatly.

“I aren’t either!” the boy stomped a foot. Then struggled and took a deep breath, visibly forcing his temper back under control. “Tam is older’n me and he can still come to the tree! I’m just taller’n him!”

“Those are the rules,” Bast said.

“It’s a shite rule!” the boy shouted, his hands making angry fists. “And you’re a shite little bastard who deserves more of the belt than he gets!”

There was a silence then, broken only by the boy's ragged breathing. Rike's eyes were on the ground, fists clenched at his sides, he was shaking.

Bast's eyes narrowed ever so slightly.

The boy's voice was rough. "Just one," Rike said. "Just one favor just this once. It's a big one. But I'll pay. I'll pay triple."

Bast drew a deep breath and let it out as a sigh. "Rike, I—"

"Please, Bast?" He was still shaking, but Bast realized the boy's voice wasn't angry anymore. "Please?" Eyes still on the ground, he took a hesitant step forward. "Just ... please?" His hand reached out and just hung there aimlessly, as if he didn't know what to do with it. Finally he caught hold of Bast's shirtsleeve and tugged it once, feebly,

before letting his hand fall back to his side.

“I just can’t fix this on my own.” Rike looked up, eyes full of tears. His face was twisted in a knot of anger and fear. A boy too young to keep from crying, but still old enough so that he couldn’t help but hate himself for doing it.

“I need you to get rid of my da,” he said in a broken voice. “I can’t figure a way. I could stick him while he’s asleep, but my ma would find out. He drinks and hits at her. And she cries all the time and then he hits her more.”

Rike was looking at the ground again, the words pouring out of him in a gush. “I could get him when he’s drunk somewhere, but he’s so big. I couldn’t move him. They’d find the body and then the azzie would get me. I couldn’t look

my ma in the eye then. Not if she knew. I can't think what that would do to her, if she knew I was the sort of person that would kill his own da."

He looked up then, his face furious, eyes red with weeping. "I would though. I'd kill him. You just got to tell me how."

There was a moment of quiet.

"Okay," Bast said.

They went down to the stream where they could have a drink and Rike could wash his face and collect himself a little bit. When the boy's face was cleaner, Bast noted not all the smudginess was dirt. It was easy to make the mistake, as the summer sun had tanned him a rich nut brown. Even after he was clean it was hard to tell they were the faint remains of bruises.

But rumor or no, Bast's eyes were sharp. Cheek and jaw. A darkness all around one skinny wrist. And when he bent to take a drink from the stream, Bast glimpsed the boy's back ...

"So," Bast said as they sat beside the stream. "What exactly do you want? Do you want to kill him, or do you just want to have him gone?"

"If he was just gone, I'd never sleep again for worry he'd come slouching back." Rike said, then was quiet for a bit. "He went gone two span once." He gave a faint smile. "That was a good time, just me and my ma. It was like my birthday every day when I woke up and he wasn't there. I never knew my ma could sing ..."

The boy went quiet again. "I thought he'd fallen somewhere drunk and finally broke his neck. But he'd just traded off a

year of furs for drinking money. He'd just been in his trapping shack, all stupor-drunk for half a month, not hardly more than a mile away."

The boy shook his head, more firmly this time. "No, if he goes, he won't stay away."

"I can figure out the how," Bast said. "That's what I do. But you need to tell me what you really want."

Rike sat for a long while, jaw clenching and unclenching. "Gone," he said at last. The word seemed to catch in his throat. "So long as he stays gone forever. If you can really do it."

"I can do it," Bast said.

Rike looked at his hands for a long time. "Gone then. I'd kill him. But that sort of thing ent right. I don't want to be that sort of man. A fellow shouldn't ought

to kill his da.”

“I could do it for you,” Bast said easily.

Rike sat for a while, then shook his head. “It’s the same thing, innit? Either way it’s me. And if it were me, it would be more honest if I did it with my hands rather than do it with my mouth.”

Bast nodded. “Right then. Gone forever.”

“And soon,” Rike said.

Bast sighed and looked up at the sun. He already had things to do today. The turning wheels of his desire did not come grinding to a halt because some farmer drank too much. Emberlee would be taking her bath soon. He was supposed to get carrots ...

He didn’t owe the boy a thing, either. Quite the opposite. The boy had lied to him. Broken his promise. And while Bast

had settled that account so firmly that no other child in town would ever dream of crossing him like that again ... it was still galling to remember. The thought of helping him now, despite that, it was quite the opposite of his desire.

“It *has* to be soon,” Rike said. “He’s getting worse. I can run off, but ma can’t. And little Bip can’t neither. And ...”

“Fine, fine ...” Bast cut him off, waving his hands. “Soon.”

Rike swallowed. “What’s this going to cost me?” he asked, anxious.

“A lot,” Bast said grimly. “We’re not talking about ribbons and buttons here. Think how much you want this. Think how big it is.” He met the boy’s eye and didn’t look away. “Three times that is what you owe me. Plus some for soon.” He stared hard at the boy. “Think hard on

that.”

Rike was a little pale now, but he nodded without looking away. “You can have what you like of mine,” he said. “But nothin’ of ma’s. She ent got much that my da hasn’t already drank away.”

“We’ll work it out,” Bast said. “But it’ll be nothing of hers. I promise.”

Rike took a deep breath, then gave a sharp nod. “Okay. Where do we start?”

Bast pointed at the stream. “Find a river stone with a hole in it and bring it to me.”

Rike gave Bast an odd look. “Yeh want a faerie stone?”

“Faerie stone,” Bast said with such scathing mockery that Rike flushed with embarrassment. “You’re too old for that nonsense.” Bast gave the boy a look. “Do you want my help or not?” he asked.

“I do,” Rike said in a small voice.

“Then I want a river stone.” Bast pointed back at the stream. “You have to be the one to find it,” he said. “It can’t be anyone else. And you need to find it dry on the shore.”

Rike nodded.

“Right then.” Bast clapped his hands twice. “Off you go.”

Rike left and Bast returned to the lightning tree. No children were waiting to talk to him, so he idled the time away. He skipped stones in the nearby stream and flipped through *Celum Tinture*, glancing at some of the illustrations. Calcification. Titration. Sublimation.

Brann, happily unbirched with one hand bandaged, brought him two sweet buns wrapped in a white handkerchief. Bast

ate the first and set the second aside.

Viette brought armloads of flowers and a fine blue ribbon. Bast wove the daisies into a crown, threading the ribbon through the stems.

Then, looking up at the sun, he saw that it was nearly time, Bast removed his shirt and filled it with the wealth of yellow and red touch-me-nots Viette had brought him. He added the handkerchief and crown, then fetched a stick and made a bundle so he could carry the lot more easily.

He headed out past the Oldstone bridge, then up toward the hills and around a bluff until he found the place Kostrel had described. It was cleverly hidden away, and the stream curved and eddied into a lovely little pool perfect for a private bath.

Bast sat behind some bushes, and after nearly half an hour of waiting he had fallen into a doze. The sharp crackle of a twig and a scrap of an idle song roused him, and he peered down to see a young woman making her careful way down the steep hillside to the water's edge.

Moving silently, Bast scurried upstream, carrying his bundle. Two minutes later he was kneeling on the grassy waterside with the pile of flowers beside him.

He picked up a yellow blossom and breathed on it gently. As his breath brushed the petals, its color faded and changed into a delicate blue. He dropped it and the current carried it slowly downstream.

Bast gathered up a handful of posies, red and orange, and breathed on them

again. They too shifted and changed until they were a pale and vibrant blue. He scattered them onto the surface of the stream. He did this twice more until there were no flowers left.

Then, picking up the handkerchief and daisy crown, he sprinted back downstream to the cozy little hollow with the elm. He'd moved quickly enough that Emberlee was just coming to the edge of the water.

Softly, silently, he crept up to the spreading elm. Even with one hand carrying the handkerchief and crown, he went up the side as nimbly as a squirrel.

Bast lay along a low branch, sheltered by leaves, breathing fast but not hard. Emberlee was removing her stockings and setting them carefully on a nearby hedge. Her hair was a burnished golden

red, falling in lazy curls. Her face was sweet and round, a lovely shade of pale and pink.

Bast grinned as he watched her look around, first left, then right. Then she began to unlace her bodice. Her dress was a pale cornflower blue, edged with yellow, and when she spread it on the hedge, it flared and splayed out like the wing of a great bird. Perhaps some fantastic combination of a finch and a jay.

Dressed only in her white shift, Emberlee looked around again: left, then right. Then she shimmied free of it, a fascinating motion. She tossed the shift aside and stood there, naked as the moon. Her creamy skin was amazing with freckle. Her hips wide and lovely. The tips of her breasts were brushed with the

palest of pink.

She scampered into the water. Making a series of small, dismayed cries at the chill of it. They were, on consideration, not really similar to a raven's at all. Though they could, perhaps, be slightly like a heron's.

Emberlee washed herself a bit, splashing and shivering. She soaped herself, dunked her head in the river, and came up gasping. Wet, her hair became the color of ripe cherries.

It was then that the first of the blue touch-me-nots arrived, drifting on the water. She glanced at it curiously as it floated by and began to lather soap into her hair.

More flowers followed. They came downstream and made circles around her, caught in the slow eddy of the pool.

She looked at them, amazed. Then sieved a double handful from the water and brought them to her face, drawing a deep breath to smell them.

She laughed delightedly and dunked under the surface, coming up in the middle of the flowers, the water sluiced her pale skin, running over her naked breasts. Blossoms clung to her, as if reluctant to let go.

That was when Bast fell out of the tree.

There was a brief, mad scrabbling of fingers against bark, a bit of a yelp, then he hit the ground like a sack of suet. He lay on his back in the grass and let out a low, miserable groan.

He heard a splashing, and then Emberlee appeared above him. She held her white shift in front of her. Bast looked up from where he lay in the tall

grass.

He'd been lucky to land on that patch of springy turf, cushioned with tall, green grass. A few feet to one side, and he'd have broken himself against the rocks. Five feet the other way and he would have been wallowing in mud.

Emberlee knelt beside him, her skin pale, her hair dark. One posy clung to her neck—it was the same color as her eyes, a pale and vibrant blue.

“Oh,” Bast said happily as he gazed up at her. His eyes were slightly dazed. “You’re so much lovelier than I’d imagined.”

He lifted a hand as if to brush her cheek, only to find it holding the crown and knotted handkerchief. “Ahh,” he said, remembering. “I’ve brought you some daisies too. And a sweet bun.”

“Thank you,” she said, taking the daisy crown with both hands. She had to let go of her shift to do this. It fell lightly to the grass.

Bast blinked, momentarily at a loss for words.

Emberlee tilted her head to look at the crown; the ribbon was a striking cornflower blue, but it was nothing near as lovely as her eyes. She lifted it with both hands and settled it proudly on her head. Her arms still raised, she drew a slow breath.

Bast’s eyes slipped from her crown.

She smiled at him indulgently.

Bast drew a breath to speak, then stopped and drew another through his nose. Honeysuckle.

“Did you steal my soap?” he asked incredulously.

Emberlee laughed and kissed him.

A good while later, Bast took the long way back to the lightning tree, making a wide loop up into the hills north of town. Things were rockier up that way, no ground flat enough to plant, the terrain too treacherous for grazing.

Even with the boy's directions, it took Bast a while to find Martin's still. He had to give the crazy old bastard credit though. Between the brambles, rockslides, and fallen trees, there wasn't a chance he would have stumbled onto it accidentally, tucked back into a shallow cave in a scrubby little box valley.

The still wasn't some slipshod contraption bunged together out of old pots and twisted wire, either. It was a work of art. There were barrels and

basins and great spirals of copper tube. A great copper kettle twice the size of a washbin, and a smolder-stove for warming it. A wooden trough ran all along the ceiling, and only after following it outside did Bast realize Martin collected rainwater and brought it inside to fill his cooling barrels.

Looking it over, Bast had the sudden urge to flip through *Celum Tinture* and learn what all the different pieces of the still were called, what they were for. Only then did he realize he'd left the book back at the lightning tree.

So instead Bast rooted around until he found a box filled with a mad miscellany of containers: two dozen bottles of all sorts, clay jugs, old canning jars ... A dozen of them were full. None of them were labeled in any way.

Bast lifted out a tall bottle that had obviously once held wine. He pulled the cork, sniffed it gingerly, then took a careful sip. His face bloomed into a sunrise of delight. He'd half expected turpentine, but this was ... well ... he wasn't sure entirely. He took another drink. There was something of apples about it, and ... barley?

Bast took a third drink, grinning. Whatever you care to call it, it was lovely. Smooth and strong and just a little sweet. Martin might mad as a badger, but he clearly knew his liquor.

It was better than an hour before Bast made it back to the lightning tree. Rike hadn't returned, but *Celum Tinture* was sitting there unharmed. For the first time he could remember, he was glad to see

the book. He flipped it open to the chapter on distillation and read for half an hour, nodding to himself at various points. It was called a condensate coil. He'd thought it looked important.

Eventually he closed the book and sighed. There were a few clouds rolling in, and no good could come of leaving the book unattended again. His luck wouldn't last forever, and he shuddered to think what would happen if the wind tumbled the book into the grass and tore the pages. If there was a sudden rain ...

So Bast wandered back to the Waystone Inn and slipped silently through the back door. Stepping carefully, he opened a cupboard and tucked the book inside. He made his silent way halfway back to the door before he heard footsteps behind him.

“Ah, Bast,” the innkeeper said. “Have you brought the carrots?”

Bast froze, caught awkwardly midsneak. He straightened up and brushed self-consciously at his clothes. “I ... I haven’t quite got round to that yet, Reshi.”

The innkeeper gave a deep sigh. “I don’t ask a ...” He stopped and sniffed, then eyed the dark-haired man narrowly. “Are you drunk, Bast?”

Bast looked affronted. “Reshi!”

The innkeeper rolled his eyes. “Fine then, have you been drinking?”

“I’ve been *investigating*,” Bast said, emphasizing the word. “Did you know Crazy Martin runs a still?”

“I didn’t,” the innkeeper said, his tone making it clear he didn’t find this information to be particularly thrilling.

“And Martin isn’t crazy. He just has a handful of unfortunately strong affect compulsions. And a touch of tabard madness from when he was a soldier.”

“Well, yes ...” Bast said slowly. “I know, because he set his dog on me and when I climbed a tree to get away, he tried to chop the tree down. But also, aside from those things, he’s crazy too, Reshi. Really, really crazy.”

“Bast.” The innkeeper gave him a chiding look.

“I’m not saying he’s bad, Reshi. I’m not even saying I don’t like him. But trust me. I know crazy. His head isn’t put together like a normal person’s.”

The innkeeper gave an agreeable if slightly impatient nod. “Noted.”

Bast opened his mouth, then looked slightly confused. “What were we talking

about?”

“Your advanced state of investigation,” the innkeeper said, glancing out the window. “Despite the fact that it is barely three bells.”

“Ah. Right!” Bast said excitedly. “I know Martin’s been running a tab for the better part of a year now. And I know you’ve had trouble settling up because he doesn’t have any money.”

“He doesn’t *use* money,” the innkeeper corrected gently.

“Same difference, Reshi,” Bast sighed. “And it doesn’t change the fact that we don’t need another sack of barley. The pantry is choking on barley. But since he runs a still ...”

The innkeeper was already shaking his head. “No, Bast,” he said. “I won’t go poisoning my customers with hillwine.

You have no idea what ends up in that stuff ...”

“But I *do* know, Reshi,” Bast said plaintively. “Ethel acetates and methans. And tinleach. There’s none of that.”

The innkeeper blinked, obviously taken aback. “Did ... Have you actually been reading *Celum Tinture*?”

“I did, Reshi.” Bast beamed. “For the betterment of my education and my desire to not poison folk. I tasted some, Reshi, and I can say with some authority that Martin is not making hillwine. It’s lovely stuff. It’s halfway to Rhis, and that’s not something I say lightly.”

The innkeeper stroked his upper lip thoughtfully. “Where did you get some to taste?” he asked.

“I traded for it,” Bast said, easily skirting the edges of the truth. “I was

thinking,” Bast continued. “Not only would it give Martin a chance to settle his tab. But it would help us get some new stock in. That’s harder, the roads as bad as they are ...”

The innkeeper held up both hands helplessly. “I’m already convinced, Bast.”

Bast grinned happily.

“Honestly, I would have done it merely to celebrate you reading your lesson for once. But it will be nice for Martin, too. It will give him an excuse to come by more often. It will be good for him.”

Bast’s smile faded a bit.

If the innkeeper noticed, he didn’t comment on it. “I’ll send a boy round to Martin’s and ask him to come by with a couple bottles.”

“Get five or six,” Bast said. “It’s

getting cold at night. Winter's coming."

The innkeeper smiled. "I'm sure Martin will be flattered."

Bast paled at that. "By all the gorse *no*, Reshi," he said, waving his hands in front of himself and taking a step backwards. "Don't tell him I'll be drinking it. He hates me."

The innkeeper hid a smile behind his hand.

"It's not funny, Reshi," Bast said angrily. "He throws rocks at me."

"Not for months," the innkeeper pointed out. "Martin has been perfectly cordial to you the last several times he's stopped by for a visit."

"Because there aren't any rocks inside the inn," Bast said.

"Be fair, Bast," the innkeeper continued. "He's been civil for almost a

year. Polite even. Remember he apologized to you two months back? Have you heard of Martin ever apologizing to anyone else in town? Ever?"

"No," Bast said sulkily.

The innkeeper nodded. "That's a big gesture for him. He's turning a new leaf."

"I know," Bast muttered, moving toward the back door. "But if he's here when I get home tonight, I'm eating dinner in the kitchen."

Rike caught up with Bast before he even made it to the clearing, let alone the lightning tree.

"I've got it," the boy said, holding up his hand triumphantly. The entire lower half of his body was dripping wet.

"What, already?" Bast asked.

The boy nodded and flourished the stone between two fingers. It was flat and smooth and round, slightly bigger than a copper penny. "What now?"

Bast stroked his chin for a moment, as if trying to remember. "Now we need a needle. But it has to be borrowed from a house where no men live."

Rike looked thoughtful for a moment, then brightened. "I can get one from Aunt Sellie!"

Bast fought the urge to curse. He'd forgotten about Sellie. "That will do ..." he said, reluctantly, "but it will work best if the needle comes from a house with a lot of women living in it. The more women the better."

Rike looked up for another moment. "Widow Creel then. She's got a daughter."

“She’s got a boy, too.” Bast pointed out. “A house where no men *or boys* live.”

“But where a lot of girls live ...” Rike said. He had to think about it for a long while. “Old Nan don’t like me none,” he said. “But I reckon she’d give me a pin.”

“A needle,” Bast stressed. “And you have to borrow it. You can’t steal it or buy it. She has to lend it to you.”

Bast had half expected the boy to grouse about the particulars, about the fact that Old Nan lived all the way off on the other side of town, about as far west as you could go and still be considered part of the town. It would take him half an hour to get there, and even then, Old Nan might not be home.

But Rike didn’t so much as sigh. He just nodded seriously, turned, and took off at

a sprint, bare feet flying.

Bast continued to the lightning tree, but when he came to the clearing he saw an entire tangle of children playing on the greystone, doubtless waiting for him. Four of them.

Watching them from the shadow of the trees at the edge of the clearing, Bast hesitated, then glanced up at the sun before slipping back into the woods. He had other fish to fry.

The Williams farm wasn't a farm in any proper sense. Not for decades. The fields had gone fallow so long ago that they were barely recognizable as such, spotted with brambles and sapling trees. The tall barn had fallen into disrepair and half the roof gaped open to the sky.

Walking up the long path through the

fields, Bast turned a corner and saw Rike's house. It told a different story than the barn. It was small but tidy. The shingles needed some repair, but other than that, it looked well loved and tended-to. Yellow curtains were blowing out the kitchen window, and there was flower box spilling over with fox fiddle and marigold.

There was a pen with a trio of goats on one side of the house, and a large well-tended garden on the other. It was fenced thickly with lashed-together sticks, but Bast could see straight lines of flourishing greenery inside. Carrots. He still needed carrots.

Craning his neck a bit, Bast saw several large, square boxes behind the house. He took a few more steps to the side and eyed them before he realized

they were beehives.

Just then there was a great storm of barking and two great black, floppy-eared dogs came bounding from the house toward Bast, baying for all they were worth. When they came close enough, Bast got down on one knee and wrestled with them playfully, scratching their ears and the ruff of their necks.

After a few minutes of this, Bast continued to the house, the dogs weaving back and forth in front of him before they spotted some sort of animal and tore off into the underbrush. He knocked politely at the front door, though after all the barking his presence could hardly be a surprise.

The door opened a couple inches, and for a moment all Bast could see was a slender slice of darkness. Then the door

opened a little wider, revealing Rike's mother. She was tall, and her curling brown hair was springing loose from the braid that hung down her back.

She swung the door fully open, holding a tiny, half-naked baby in the curve of her arm. Its round face was pressed into her breast and it was sucking busily, making small grunting noises.

Glancing down, Bast smiled warmly.

The woman looked fondly down at her child, then favored Bast with a tired smile. "Hello Bast, what can I do for you?"

"Ah. Well," he said awkwardly, pulling his gaze up to meet her eye. "I was wondering, ma'am. That is, Mrs. Williams—"

"Nettie is fine, Bast," she said indulgently. More than a few of the

townfolk considered Bast somewhat simple in the head, a fact that Bast didn't mind in the least.

"Nettie," Bast said, smiling his most ingratiating smile.

There was a pause, and she leaned against the doorframe. A little girl peeked out from around the woman's faded blue skirt, nothing more than a pair of serious dark eyes.

Bast smiled at the girl, who disappeared back behind her mother.

Nettie looked at Bast expectantly. Finally she prompted. "You were wondering ..."

"Oh, yes." Bast said. "I was wondering if your husband happened to be about."

"I'm afraid not," she said. "Jessom's off checking his traps."

"Ah," Bast said, disappointed. "Will he

be back anytime soon? I'd be happy to wait ...”

She shook her head, “I'm sorry. He'll do his lines then spend the night skinning and drying up in his shack.” She nodded vaguely toward the northern hills.

“Ah,” Bast said again.

Nestled snugly in her mother's arm, the baby drew a deep breath, then sighed it out blissfully, going quiet and limp. Nettie looked down, then up at Bast, holding a finger to her lips.

Bast nodded and stepped back from the doorway, watching as Nettie stepped inside, deftly detached the sleeping baby from her nipple with her free hand, then carefully tucked the child into a small wooden cradle on the floor. The dark-eyed girl emerged from behind her mother and went to peer down at the

baby.

“Call me if she starts to fuss,” Nettie said softly. The little girl nodded seriously, sat down on a nearby chair, and began to gently rock the cradle with her foot.

Nettie stepped outside, closing the door behind her. She walked the few steps necessary to join Bast, rearranging her bodice unself-consciously. In the sunlight Bast noticed her high cheekbones and generous mouth. Even so, she was more tired than pretty, her dark eyes heavy with worry.

The tall woman crossed her arms over her chest. “What’s the trouble then?” she asked wearily.

Bast looked confused. “No trouble,” he said. “I was wondering if your husband had any work.”

Nettie uncrossed her arms, looking surprised. “Oh.”

“There isn’t much for me to do at the inn,” Bast said a little sheepishly. “I thought your husband might need an extra hand.”

Nettie looked around, eyes brushing over the old barn. Her mouth tugging down at the corners. “He traps and hunts for the most part these days,” she said. “Keeps him busy, but not so much that he’d need help, I imagine.” She looked back to Bast. “At least he’s never made mention of wanting any.”

“How about yourself?” Bast asked, giving his most charming smile. “Is there anything around the place you could use a hand with?”

Nettie smiled at Bast indulgently. It was only a small smile, but it stripped ten

years and half a world of worry off her face, making her practically shine with loveliness. “There isn’t much to do,” she said apologetically. “Only three goats, and my boy minds them.”

“Firewood?” Bast asked. “I’m not afraid to work up a sweat. And it has to be hard getting by with your gentleman gone for days on end ...” He grinned at her hopefully.

“And we just haven’t got the money for help, I’m afraid.” Nettie said.

“I just want some carrots,” Bast said.

Nettie looked at him for a minute, then burst out laughing. “Carrots,” she said, rubbing at her face. “How many carrots?”

“Maybe ... six?” Bast asked, not sounding very sure of his answer at all.

She laughed again, shaking her head a

little. “Okay. You can split some wood.” She pointed to the chopping block that stood in back of the house. “I’ll come get you when you’ve done six carrots’ worth.”

Bast set to work eagerly, and soon the yard was full of the crisp, healthy sound of splitting wood. The sun was still strong in the sky, and after just a few minutes Bast was covered in a sheen of sweat. He carelessly peeled away his shirt and hung it on the nearby garden fence.

There was something different about the way he split the wood. Nothing dramatic. In fact he split wood the same way everyone did: you set the log upright, you swing the axe, you split the wood. There isn’t much room to extemporize.

But still, there was a difference in the

way he did it. When he set the log upright, he moved intently. Then he would stand for a tiny moment, perfectly still. Then came the swing. It was a fluid thing. The placement of his feet, the play of the long muscles in his arms ...

There was nothing exaggerated. Nothing like a flourish. Even so, when he brought the axe up and over in a perfect arc, there was a grace to it. The sharp cough the wood made as it split, the sudden way the halves went tumbling to the ground. He made it all look somehow ... well ... *dashing*.

He worked a hard half hour, at which time Nettie came out of the house, carrying a glass of water and a handful of fat carrots with the loose greens still attached. "I'm sure that's at least six carrots' worth of work," she said,

smiling at him.

Bast took the glass of water, drank half of it, then bent over and poured the rest over his head. He shook himself off a bit, then stood back up, his dark hair curling and clinging to his face. “Are you sure there’s nothing else you could use a hand with?” he asked, giving her an easy grin. His eyes were dark and smiling and bluer than the sky.

Nettie shook her head. Her hair was out of her braid now, and when she looked down, the loose curls of it fell partly across her face. “I can’t think of anything,” she said.

“I’m a dab hand with honey, too,” Bast said, hoisting the axe to rest against his naked shoulder.

She looked a little puzzled at that until Bast nodded toward the wooden hives

scattered through the overgrown field. “Oh,” she said, as if remembering a half-forgotten dream. “I used to do candles and honey. But we lost a few hives to that bad winter three years back. Then one to nits. Then there was that wet spring and three more went down with the chalk before we even knew.” She shrugged. “Early this summer we sold one to the Hestles so we’d have money for the levy ...”

She shook her head again, as if she’d been daydreaming. She shrugged and turned back to look at Bast. “Do you know about bees?”

“A fair bit,” Bast said softly. “They aren’t hard to handle. They just need patience and gentleness.” He casually swung the axe so it stuck in the nearby stump. “They’re the same as everything

else, really. They just want to know they're safe.”

Nettie was looking out at the field, nodding along with Bast's words unconsciously. “There's only the two left,” she said. “Enough for a few candles. A little honey. Not much. Hardly worth the bother, really.”

“Oh come now,” Bast said gently. “A little sweetness is all any of us have sometimes. It's always worth it. Even if it takes some work.”

Nettie turned to look at him. She met his eyes now. Not speaking, but not looking away either. Her eyes were like an open door.

Bast smiled, gentle and patient, his voice was warm and sweet as honey. He held out his hand. “Come with me,” he said. “I have something to show you.”

The sun was starting to sink toward the western trees by the time Bast returned to the lightning tree. He was limping slightly, and he had dirt in his hair, but he seemed to be in good spirits.

There were two children at the bottom of the hill, sitting on the greystone and swinging their feet as if it were a huge stone bench. Bast didn't even have time to sit down before they came up the hill together.

It was Wilk, a serious boy of ten with shaggy blond hair. At his side was his little sister Pem, half his age with three times the mouth.

The boy nodded at Bast as he came to the top of the hill, then he looked down. "You hurt your hand," he said.

Bast looked down at his hand and was surprised to see a few dark streaks of

blood dripping down the side of it. He brought out his handkerchief and daubed at it.

“What happened?” little Pem asked him.

“I was attacked by a bear,” he lied nonchalantly.

The boy nodded, giving no indication of whether or not he believed it was true. “I need a riddle that will stump Tessa,” the boy said. “A good one.”

“You smell like granda,” Pem chirruped as she came up to stand beside her brother.

Wilk ignored her. Bast did the same.

“Okay,” said Bast. “I need a favor, I’ll trade you. A favor for a riddle.”

“You smell like granda when he’s been at his medicine,” Pem clarified.

“It has to be a good one though,” Wilk

stressed. “A stumper.”

“Show me something that’s never been seen before and will never be seen again,” Bast said.

“Hmmm ...” Wilk said, looking thoughtful.

“Granda says he feels loads better with his medicine,” Pem said, louder, plainly irritated at being ignored. “But Mum says it’s not medicine. She says he’s on the bottle. And granda says he feels loads better so it’s medicine by dammit.” She looked back and forth between Bast and Wilk, as if daring them to scold her.

Neither of them did. She looked a little crestfallen.

“That is a good one,” Wilk admitted at last. “What’s the answer?”

Bast gave a slow grin. “What will you trade me for it?”

Wilk cocked his head on one side, “I already said. A favor.”

“I traded you the riddle for a favor,” Bast said easily. “But now you’re asking for the answer ...”

Wilk looked confused for half a moment, then his face went red and angry. He drew a deep breath as if he were going to shout. Then seemed to think better of it and stormed down the hill, stomping his feet.

His sister watched him go, then turned back to Bast. “Your shirt is ripped,” she said disapprovingly. “And you’ve got grass stains on your pants. Your mam is going to give you a hiding.”

“No she won’t,” Bast said smugly. “Because I’m all grown, and I can do whatever I want with my pants. I could light them on fire and I wouldn’t get in

any trouble at all.”

The little girl stared at him with smoldering envy.

Wilk stomped back up the hill. “Fine,” he said sullenly.

“My favor first,” Bast said. He handed the boy a small bottle with a cork in the top. “I need you to fill this up with water that’s been caught midair.”

“What?” Wilk said.

“Naturally falling water,” Bast said. “You can’t dip it out of a barrel or a stream. You have to catch it while it’s still in the air.”

“Water falls out of a pump when you pump it ...” Wilk said without any real hope in his voice.

“*Naturally* falling water,” Bast said again, stressing the first word. “It’s no good if someone just stands on a chair

and pours it out of a bucket.”

“What do you need it for?” Pem asked in her little piping voice.

“What will you trade me for the answer to that question?” Bast said.

The little girl went pale and slapped one hand across her mouth.

“It might not rain for *days*,” Wilk said.

Pem gave a gusty sigh. “It doesn’t have to be rain,” his sister said, her voice dripping with condescension. “You could just go to the waterfall by Littlecliff and fill the bottle there.”

Wilk blinked.

Bast grinned at her. “You’re a clever girl.”

She rolled her eyes, “Everybody says that ...”

Bast brought out something from his pocket and held it. It was a green

cornhusk wrapped around a daub of sticky honeycomb. The little girl's eyes lit up when she saw it.

“I also need twenty-one perfect acorns,” he said. “No holes, with all their little hats intact. If you gather them for me over by the waterfall, I'll give you this.”

She nodded eagerly. Then both she and her brother hurried down the hill.

Bast went back down to the pool by the spreading willow and took another bath. It wasn't his usual bathing time, so there were no birds waiting, and as a result the bath was much more matter-of-fact than before.

He quickly rinsed himself clean of sweat and honey and he daubed a bit at his clothes too, scrubbing to get rid of the

grass stains and the smell of whiskey. The cold water stung the cuts on his knuckles a bit, but they were nothing serious and would mend well enough on their own.

Naked and dripping, he pulled himself from the pool and found a dark rock, hot from the long day of sun. He draped his clothes over it and let them bake dry while he shook his hair dry and stripped the water from his arms and chest with his hands.

Then he made his way back to the lightning tree, picked a long piece of grass to chew on, and almost immediately fell asleep in the golden afternoon sunlight.

Evening: Lessons

Hours later, the evening shadows stretched to cover Bast, and he shivered himself awake.

He sat up, rubbing his face and looking around blearily. The sun was just beginning to brush the tops of the western trees. Wilk and Pem hadn't returned, but that was hardly a surprise. He ate the piece of honeycomb he'd promised Pem, licking his fingers slowly. Then he chewed the wax idly and watched a pair of hawks turn lazy circles in the sky.

Eventually he heard a whistle from the trees. He got to his feet and stretched, his body bending like a bow. Then he sprinted down the hill ... except, in the fading light it didn't quite look like a sprint.

If he were a boy of ten, it would have looked like skipping. But he was no boy.

If he were a goat, it would have looked like he were prancing. But he was no goat. A man headed down the hill that quickly, it would have looked like he were running.

But there was something odd about Bast's motion in the fading light. Something hard to describe. He almost looked like he were ... what? Frolicking? Dancing?

Small matter. Suffice to say that he quickly made his way to the edge of the clearing where Rike stood in the growing dark beneath the trees.

"I've got it," the boy said triumphantly, he held up his hand, but the needle was invisible in the dark.

"You borrowed it?" Bast asked. "Not traded or bargained for it?"

Rike nodded.

“Okay,” Bast said. “Follow me.”

The two of them walked over to the greystone, Rike following wordlessly when Bast climbed up one side of the half-fallen stone. The sunlight was still strong there, and both of them had plenty of space to stand on the broad back of the tilted greystone. Rike looked around anxiously, as if worried someone might see him.

“Let’s see the stone,” Bast said.

Rike dug into his pocket and held it out to Bast.

Bast pulled his hand back suddenly, as if the boy had tried to hand him a glowing coal. “Don’t be stupid,” he snapped. “It’s not for me. The charm is only going to work for one person. Do you want that to be me?”

The boy brought his hand back and eyed

the stone. “What do you mean one person?”

“It’s the way of charms,” Bast said. “They only work for one person at a time.” Seeing the boy’s confusion written plainly on his face, Bast sighed. “You know how some girls make come-hither charms, hoping to catch a boy’s eye?”

Rike nodded, blushing a little.

“This is the opposite,” Bast said. “It’s a go-thither charm. You’re going to prick your finger, get a drop of your blood on it, and that will seal it. It will make things go away.”

Rike looked down at the stone. “What sort of things?” he said.

“Anything that wants to hurt you,” Bast said easily. “You can just keep it in your pocket, or you can get a piece of cord—”

“It will make my da leave?” Rike

interrupted.

Bast frowned. “That’s what I said. You’re his blood. So it will push him away more strongly than anything else. You’ll probably want to hang it around your neck so—”

“What about a bear?” Rike asked, looking at the stone thoughtfully. “Would it make a bear leave me alone?”

Bast made a back-and-forth motion with his hand. “Wild things are different,” he said. “They’re possessed of pure desire. They don’t want to *hurt* you. They usually want food, or safety. A bear would—”

“Can I give it to my mum?” Rike interrupted again, looking up at Bast. His dark eyes serious.

“... want to protect its terr ... What?” Bast stumbled to a halt.

“My mum should have it,” Rike said. “What if I was off away with the charm and my da came back?”

“He’s going farther away than that,” Bast said, his voice thick with certainty. “It’s not like he’ll be hiding around the corner at the smithy ...”

Rike’s face was set now, his pug nose making him seem all the more stubborn. He shook his head. “She should have it. She’s important. She has to take care of Tess and little Bip.”

“It will work just fine—”

“It’s got to be for HER!” Rike shouted, his hand making a fist around the stone. “You said it could be for one person, so you make it be for her!”

Bast scowled at the boy darkly. “I don’t like your tone,” he said grimly. “You asked me to make your da go away. And

that's what I'm doing ...”

“But what if it's not enough?” Rike's face was red.

“It will be,” Bast said, absentmindedly rubbing his thumb across the knuckles of his hand. “He'll go far away. You have my word—”

“NO!” Rike said, his face going red and angry. “What if sending *him* isn't enough? What if I grow up like my da? I get so ...” His voice choked off, and his eyes started to leak tears. “I'm not good. I know it. I know better than anyone. Like you said. I got his blood in me. She needs to be safe from me. If I grow up twisted up and bad, she needs the charm to ... she needs something to make me go a—”

Rike clenched his teeth, unable to continue.

Bast reached out and took hold of the

boy's shoulder. He was stiff and rigid as a plank of wood, but Bast gathered him in and put his arms around his shoulders. Gently, because he had seen the boy's back. They stood there for a long moment, Rike stiff and tight as a bowstring, trembling like a sail tight against the wind.

“Rike,” Bast said softly. “You’re a good boy. Do you know that?”

The boy bent then, sagged against Bast and seemed like he would break himself apart with sobbing. His face was pressed into Bast's stomach and he said something, but it was muffled and disjointed. Bast made a soft crooning sound of the sort you'd use to calm a horse or soothe a hive of restless bees.

The storm passed, and Rike stepped quickly away and scrubbed at his face

roughly with his sleeve. The sky was just starting to tinge red with sunset.

“Right,” Bast said. “It’s time. We’ll make it for your mother. You’ll have to give it to her. River stone works best if it’s given as a gift.”

Rike nodded, not looking up. “What if she won’t wear it?” he asked quietly.

Bast blinked, confused. “She’ll wear it because you gave it to her,” he said.

“What if she doesn’t?” he asked.

Bast opened his mouth, then hesitated and closed it again. He looked up and saw the first of twilight’s stars emerge. He looked down at the boy. He sighed. He wasn’t good at this.

So much was so easy. Glamour was second nature. It was just making folk see what they wanted to see. Fooling folk was simple as singing. Tricking folk and

telling lies, it was like breathing.

But this? Convincing someone of the truth that they were too twisted to see? How could you even begin?

It was baffling. These creatures. They were fraught and frayed in their desire. A snake would never poison itself, but these folk made an art of it. They wrapped themselves in fears and wept at being blind. It was infuriating. It was enough to break a heart.

So Bast took the easy way. “It’s part of the magic,” he lied. “When you give it to her, you have to tell her that you made it for her because you love her.”

The boy looked uncomfortable, as if he were trying to swallow a stone.

“It’s essential for the magic,” Bast said firmly. “And then, if you want to make the magic stronger, you need to tell her

every day. Once in the morning and once at night.”

The boy nodded, a determined look on his face. “Okay. I can do that.”

“Right then,” Bast said. “Sit down here. Prick your finger.”

Rike did just that. He jabbed his stubby finger and let a bead of blood well up then fall onto the stone.

“Good,” Bast said, sitting down across from the boy. “Now give me the needle.”

Rike handed over the needle. “But you said it just needed—”

“Don’t tell me what I said,” Bast grouched. “Hold the stone flat so that the hole faces up.”

Rike did.

“Hold it steady,” Bast said, and pricked his own finger. A slow bead of blood grew. “Don’t move.”

Rike braced the stone with his other hand.

Bast turned his finger, and the drop of blood hung in the air for a moment before falling straight through the hole to strike the greystone underneath.

There was no sound. No stirring in the air. No distant thunder. If anything, it seemed there was a half second of perfect brick-heavy silence in the air. But it was probably nothing more than a brief pause in the wind.

“Is that it?” Rike asked after a moment, clearly expecting something more.

“Yup,” Bast said, licking the blood from his finger with a red, red tongue. Then he worked his mouth a little and spat out the wax he had been chewing. He rolled it between his fingers and handed it to the boy. “Rub this into the

stone, then take it to the top of the highest hill you can find. Stay there until the last of the sunset fades, and then give to her tonight.”

Rike’s eyes darted around the horizon, looking for a good hill. Then he leapt from the stone and sprinted off.

Bast was halfway back to the Waystone Inn when he realized he had no idea where his carrots were.

When Bast came in the back door, he could smell bread and beer and simmering stew. Looking around the kitchen he saw crumbs on the breadboard and the lid was off the kettle. Dinner had already been served.

Stepping softly, he peered through the door into the common room. The usual

folk sat hunched at the bar, there was Old Cob and Graham, scraping their bowls. The smith's prentice was running bread along the inside of his bowl, then stuffing it into his mouth a piece at time. Jake spread butter on the last slice of bread, and Shep knocked his empty mug politely against the bar, the hollow sound a question in itself.

Bast bustled through the doorway with a fresh bowl of stew for the smith's prentice as the innkeeper poured Shep more beer. Collecting the empty bowl, Bast disappeared back into the kitchen, then he came back with another loaf of bread half-sliced and steaming.

“Guess what I caught wind of today?” Old Cob said with the grin of a man who knew he had the freshest news at the table.

“What’s that?” The boy asked around half a mouthful of stew.

Cob reached out and took the heel of the bread, a right he claimed as the oldest person there, despite the fact that he wasn’t actually the oldest, and the fact that nobody else much cared for the heel. Bast suspected he took it because he was proud he still had so many teeth left.

Cob grinned. “Guess,” he said to the boy, then slowly slathered his bread with butter and took a big bite.

“I reckon it’s something about Jessom Williams,” Jake said blithely.

Old Cob glared at him, his mouth full of bread and butter.

“What I heard,” Jake drawled slowly, smiling as Old Cob tried furiously chew his mouth clear, “was that Jessom was out running his traplines and he got

jumped by a cougar. Then while he was legging it away, he lost track of himself and went right over Littlecliff. Busted himself up something fierce.”

Old Cob finally managed to swallow. “You’re thick as a post, Jacob Walker. That ain’t what happened at all. He fell off Littlecliff, but there weren’t a cougar. Cougar ain’t going to attack a full-grown man.”

“It will if he’s all smelling of blood,” Jake insisted. “Which Jessom was, on account of the fact that he was baggin’ up all his game.”

There was a muttering of agreement at this, which obviously irritated Old Cob. “It weren’t a cougar,” he insisted. “He was drunk off his feet. That’s what I heard. Stumbling-lost drunk. That’s the only sense of it. ’Cause Littlecliff ent

nowhere near his trapline. Unless you think a cougar chased him for almost a mile ...”

Old Cob sat back in his chair then, smug as a judge. Everyone knew Jessom was a bit of a drinker. And while Littlecliff wasn't really a mile from the Williams's land, it was too far to be chased by a cougar.

Jake glared venomously at Old Cob, but before he could say anything Graham chimed in. “I heard it was drink too. A couple kids found him while they were playing by the falls. They thought he was dead, and ran to fetch the constable. But he was just head-struck and drunk as a lord. There was all manner of broken glass too. He was cut him up some.”

Old Cob threw his hands up in the air. “Well ain't that wonderful!” he said,

scowling back and forth between Graham and Jake. "Any other parts of my story you'd like to tell afore I'm finished?"

Graham looked taken aback. "I thought you were—"

"I wasn't finished," Cob said, as if talking to a simpleton. "I was reelin' it out slow. I swear. What you folk don't know about tellin' stories would fit into a book."

A tense silence settled among the friends.

"I got some news too," the smith's prentice said almost shyly. He sat slightly hunched at the bar, as if embarrassed at being a head taller than everyone else and twice as broad across the shoulders. "If'n nobody else has heard it, that is."

Shep spoke up. "Go on, boy. You don't

have to ask. Those two just been gnawing on each other for years. They don't mean anything by it."

"Well I was doing shoes," the prentice said, "when Crazy Martin came in." The boy shook his head in amazement and took a long drink of beer. "I ain't only seen him a few times in town, and I forgot how big he is. I don't have to look up to see him. But I still think he's biggern me. And today he looked even bigger still 'cause he was furious. He was spittin' nails. I swear. He looked like someone had tied two angry bulls together and made them wear a shirt!" The boy laughed the easy laugh of someone who's had a little more beer than he's used to.

There was a pause. "What's the news then?" Shep said gently, giving him a

nudge.

“Oh!” the smith’s prentice said. “He came asking Master Ferris if he had enough copper to mend a big kettle.” The prentice spread his long arms out wide, one hand almost smacking Shep in the face.

“Apparently someone found Martin’s still.” The smith’s prentice leaned forward, wobbling slightly, and said in hushed voice. “Stole a bunch of his drink and wrecked up the place a bit.”

The boy leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms proudly across his chest, confident of a story well told.

But there was none of the buzz that normally accompanied a piece of good gossip. He took another drink of beer, and slowly began to look confused.

“Tehlu anyway,” Graham said, his face

gone pale. "Martin'll kill him."

"What?" the prentice said. "Who?"

"Jessom, you tit," Jake snapped. He tried to cuff the boy on the back of his head and had to settle for his shoulder instead. "The fellow who got skunk drunk in the middle of the day and fell off a cliff carrying a bunch of bottles?"

"I thought it was a cougar," Old Cob said spitefully.

"He'll wish it was ten cougars when Martin gets him," Jake said grimly.

"What?" The smith's prentice laughed. "Crazy Martin? He's addled, sure, but he ain't *mean*. A couple span ago he cornered me and talked bollocks about barley for two hours." He laughed again. "About how it was healthful. How wheat would ruin a man. How money was dirty. How it chained you to the earth or some

nonsense.”

The prentice dropped his voice and hunched his shoulders a bit, widening his eyes and doing a passable Crazy Martin impression. “*You know?*” he said, making his voice rough and darting his eyes around. “*Yeah. You know. You hear what I’m sayin’?*”

The prentice laughed again, rocking back on his stool. He had obviously had a little more beer than was good for him. “People think they have to be afraid of big folk, but they don’t. I’ve never hit a man in my life.”

Everyone just stared at him. Their eyes were deadly earnest.

“Martin killed one of Ensal’s dogs for growling at him,” Shep said. “Right in the middle of market. Threw a shovel like it was a spear. Then gave it a

kicking.”

“Nearly killed that last priest,” Graham said. “The one before Abbe Leodin. Nobody knows why. Fellow went up to Martin’s house. That evening Martin brought him to town in a wheelbarrow and left him in front of the church.” He looked at the smith’s prentice. “That was before your time though. Makes sense you wouldn’t know.”

“Punched a tinker once,” Jake said.

“*Punched a tinker?*” the innkeeper burst out, incredulous.

“Reshi,” Bast said gently. “Martin is fucking *crazy*.”

Jake nodded. “Even the levy man doesn’t go up to Martin’s place.”

Cob looked like he was going to call Jake out again, then decided to take a gentler tone. “Well yes,” he said. “True

enough. But that's 'cause Martin pulled his full rail in the king's army. Eight years."

"And came back mad as a frothing dog," Shep said.

Old Cob was already off his stool and halfway to the door. "Enough talk. We got to let Jessom know. If he can get out of town until Martin cools down a bit ..."

"So ... when he's dead?" Jake said sharply. "Remember when he threw a horse through the window of the old inn because the barman wouldn't give him another beer?"

"A *tinker*?" the innkeeper repeated, sounding no less shocked than before.

Silence descended at the sound of footsteps on the landing. Everyone eyed the door and went still as stone, except

for Bast, who slowly edged toward the doorway to the kitchen.

Everyone breathed a huge sigh of relief when the door opened to reveal the tall, slim shape of Carter. He closed the door behind him, not noticing the tension in the room. "Guess who's standing a round of bottle whiskey for everyone tonight?" he called out cheerfully, then stopped where he stood, confused by the roomful of grim expressions.

Old Cob started to walk to the door again, motioning for his friend to follow. "Come on Carter, we'll explain on the way. We've got to find Jessom double quick."

"You'll have a long ride to find him," Carter said. "I drove him all the way to Baden this afternoon."

Everyone in the room seemed to relax,

“That’s why you’re so late,” Graham said, his voice thick with relief. He slumped back onto his stool and tapped the bar hard with a knuckle. Bast drew him another beer.

Carter frowned. “Not so late as all that,” he groused. “I’d like to see you make it all the way to Baden and back in this time, that’s more’n forty miles ...”

Old Cob put a hand on the man’s shoulder. “Nah. It ain’t like that,” he said, steering his friend toward the bar. “We were just a little spooked. You probably saved that damn fool’s Jessom’s life by getting him out of town.” He squinted at him. “Though I’ve told you you shouldn’t be out on the road by yourself these days ...”

The innkeeper fetched Carter a bowl while Bast went outside to tend to his

horse. While he ate, his friends told him the day's gossip in dribs and drabs.

“Well that explains it,” Carter said. “Jessom showed up reeking like a rummy and looking like he'd been beat by twelve different demons. Paid me to drive him to the Iron Hall, and he took the king's coin right there.” Carter took a drink of beer. “Then paid me to take him to Baden straight off. Didn't want to stop off at his house for his clothes or anything.”

“Not much need for that,” Shep said. “They'll dress and feed him in the king's army.”

Graham let out a huge sigh. “That was a near miss. Can you imagine what would happen if the azzie came for Martin?”

Everyone was silent for a moment, imagining the trouble that would come if

an officer of the Crown's Law was assaulted here in town.

The smith's prentice looked around at him, "What about Jessom's family?" he asked, plainly worried. "Will Martin come after them?"

The men at the bar shook their head in concert. "Martin is crazy," Old Cob said. "But he's not that sort. Not to go after a woman or her wee ones."

"I heard he punched the tinker because he was making some advances on young Jenna," Graham said.

"There's truth to that," Old Cob said softly. "I saw it."

Everyone in the room turned to look at him, surprised. They'd known Cob all their lives and had heard all his stories. Even the most boring of them had been trotted out three or four times over the

long years. The thought that he might have held something back was ... well ... it was almost unthinkable.

“He was getting all handsy with young Jenna,” Cob said, not looking up from his beer. “And she was younger still back then, mind you.” He paused for a moment, then sighed. “But I was still old, and ... well ... I knew that tinker would give me a hiding if I tried to stop him. I could see that plain enough on his face.” The old man sighed. “I ain’t proud of that.”

Cob looked up with a vicious little grin. “Then Martin came round the corner,” he said. “This was off behind the old Cooper’s place, remember? And Martin looked at the fellow, and at Jenna, who wasn’t crying or nothing, but she obviously wasn’t happy either. And the

tinker has hold of her wrist ...”

Cob shook his head. “When he hit him. It was like a hammer hitting a ham. Knocked him right out into the street. Ten feet, give or take. Then Martin eyed Jenna, who was crying just a bit then. More surprised than anything. And Martin stuck the boot in him. Just once. Not as hard as he could, either. I could tell he was just settling up accounts in his head. Like he was a moneylender shimmying up one side of his scale.”

“That fellow wasn’t any kind of proper tinker,” Jake said. “I remember him.”

“And I heard things about that priest,” Graham added.

A few of the others nodded wordlessly.

“What if Jessom comes back?” the smith’s prentice asked. “I heard some folk get drunk and take the coin, then turn

all cowardly and jump the rail when they sober up.”

Everyone seemed to consider that. It wasn't a hard thought for any of them. A band of the king's guard had come through town only last month and posted a notice, announcing a reward for deserters.

“Tehlu anyway,” Shep said grimly into his nearly empty mug. “Wouldn't that be a great royal pissier of a mess?”

“Jessom's not coming back,” Bast said dismissively. His voice had such a note of certainty that everyone turned to eye him curiously.

Bast tore off a piece of bread and put it in his mouth before he realized he was the center of attention. He swallowed awkwardly and made a broad gesture with both hands. “What?” he asked them,

laughing. “Would you come back, knowing Martin was waiting?”

There was a chorus of negative grunts and shaken heads.

“You have to be a special kind of stupid to wreck up Martin’s still,” Old Cob said.

“Maybe eight years will be enough for Martin to cool down a bit,” Shep said.

“Not likely,” Jake said.

Later, after the customers were gone, Bast and the innkeeper sat down in the kitchen, making their own dinner from the remainder of the stew and half a loaf of bread.

“So what did you learn today, Bast?” the innkeeper asked.

Bast grinned widely. “Today, Reshi, I found out where Emberlee takes her

bath!”

The innkeeper cocked his head thoughtfully. “Emberlee? The Alards’ daughter?”

“Emberlee Ashton!” Bast threw his arms up into the air and made an exasperated noise. “She’s only the third prettiest girl in twenty miles, Reshi!”

“Ah,” the innkeeper said, an honest smile flickering across his face for the first time that day. “You’ll have to point her out to me.”

Bast grinned. “I’ll take you there tomorrow,” he said eagerly. “I don’t know if she takes a bath every day, but it’s worth the gamble. She’s sweet as cream and broad of beam.” His smile grew to wicked proportions. “She’s a milkmaid, Reshi,” he said the last with heavy emphasis. “A *milkmaid*.”

The innkeeper shook his head, even as his own smile spread helplessly across his face. Finally he broke into a chuckle and held up his hand. “You can point her out to me sometime when she has her clothes on,” he said pointedly. “That will do nicely.”

Bast gave a disapproving sigh. “It would do you a world of good to get out a bit, Reshi.”

The innkeeper shrugged. “It’s possible,” he said as he poked idly at his stew.

They ate in silence for a long while. Bast tried to think of something to say.

“I did get the carrots, Reshi,” Bast said as he finished his stew and ladled the rest of it out of the kettle.

“Better late than never, I suppose,” the innkeeper said his voice was listless and

grey. “We’ll use them tomorrow.”

Bast shifted in his seat, embarrassed. “I’m afraid I lost them afterwards,” he said sheepishly.

This wrung another tired smile from the innkeeper. “Don’t worry yourself over it, Bast.” His eyes narrowed then, focusing on hand that held Bast’s spoon. “What happened to your hand?”

Bast looked down at the knuckles of his right hand, they weren’t bloody anymore, but they were skinned rather badly.

“I fell out of a tree,” Bast said. Not lying, but not answering the question, either. It was better not to lie outright. Even weary and dull, his master was not an easy man to fool.

“You should be more careful, Bast,” the innkeeper said, prodding listlessly at his food. “And with as little as there is to do

around here, it would be nice if you spent a little more time on your studies.”

“I learned loads of things today, Reshi,” Bast protested.

The innkeeper sat up, looking more attentive. “Really?” he said. “Impress me then.”

Bast thought for a moment. “Nettie Williams found a wild hive of bees today,” he said. “And she managed to catch the queen ...”

George R. R. Martin

Hugo, Nebula, and World Fantasy Award-winner George R. R. Martin, New York Times bestselling author of the landmark A Song of Ice and Fire fantasy series, has been called “the American Tolkien.”

Born in Bayonne, New Jersey, George R. R. Martin made his first sale in 1971, and soon established himself as one of the most popular SF writers of the seventies.

He quickly became a mainstay of the Ben Bova Analog with stories such as “With Morning Comes Mistfall,” “And Seven Times Never Kill Man,” “The Second Kind of Loneliness,” “The Storms of Windhaven” (in collaboration with Lisa Tuttle, and later expanded by them into the novel Windhaven), “Override,” and others, although he also sold to Amazing, Fantastic, Galaxy, Orbit, and other markets. One of his Analog stories, the striking novella “A Song for Lya,” won him his first Hugo

Award, in 1974.

By the end of the seventies, he had reached the height of his influence as a science-fiction writer and was producing his best work in that category with stories such as the famous “Sandkings,” his best-known story, which won both the Nebula and the Hugo in 1980 (he’d later win another Nebula in 1985 for his story “Portraits of His Children”), “The Way of Cross and Dragon,” which won a Hugo Award in the same year

(making Martin the first author ever to receive two Hugo Awards for fiction in the same year, "Bitterblooms," "The Stone City," "Starlady," and others. These stories would be collected in Sandkings, one of the strongest collections of the period. By now, he had mostly moved away from Analog although he would have a long sequence of stories about the droll interstellar adventures of Havalend Tuf (later collected in Tuf Voyaging) running throughout the eighties in the

Stanley Schmidt Analog, as well as a few strong individual pieces such as the novella “Nightflyers”—most of his major work of the late seventies and early eighties, though, would appear in Omni. The late seventies and the eighties also saw the publication of his memorable novel Dying of the Light, his only solo SF novel, while his stories were collected in A Song for Lya, Sandkings, Songs of Stars and Shadows, Songs the Dead Men Sing, Nightflyers, and Portraits of His Children. By the beginning of the eighties,

he'd moved away from SF and into the horror genre, publishing the big horror novel Fevre Dream, and winning the Bram Stoker Award for his horror story "The Pear-Shaped Man" and the World Fantasy Award for his werewolf novella "The Skin Trade." By the end of that decade, though, the crash of the horror market and the commercial failure of his ambitious horror novel Armageddon Rag had driven him out of the print world and to a successful career in

television instead, where for more than a decade he worked as story editor or producer on such shows as new Twilight Zone and Beauty and the Beast.

After years away, Martin made a triumphant return to the print world in 1996 with the publication in 1996 of the immensely successful fantasy novel A Game of Thrones, the start of his Song of Ice and Fire sequence. A freestanding novella taken from that work, "Blood of the Dragon," won Martin

another Hugo Award in 1997. Further books in the Song of Ice and Fire series —A Clash of Kings, A Storm of Swords, A Feast for Crows, and A Dance with Dragons—have made it one of the most popular, acclaimed, and bestselling series in all of modern fantasy. Recently, the books were made into an HBO TV series, Game of Thrones, which has become one of the most popular and acclaimed shows on television, and made Martin a recognizable figure well outside of the usual genre

boundaries, even inspiring a satirical version of him on Saturday Night Live. Martin's most recent books are the latest book in the Ice and Fire series, A Dance With Dragons, a massive two-volume retrospective collection spanning the entire spectrum of his career, Dreamsongs, a novella collection, Starlady and Fast-Friend, a novel written in collaboration with Gardner Dozois and Daniel Abraham, Hunter's Run, and, as editor, several anthologies edited in collaboration with Gardner

Dozois, including Warriors, Songs of the Dying Earth, Songs of Love and Death, Down These Strange Streets, and Dangerous Women, as well as several new volumes in his long-running Wild Cards anthology series, Wild Cards: Busted Flush and Wild Cards: Inside Straight. In 2012, Martin was given the Life Achievement Award by the World Fantasy Convention. A World of Ice and Fire, a comprehensive history of Westeros and the lands beyond, will be released in fall of 2014.

Here he takes us to the turbulent land of Westeros, home to his Ice and Fire series, for the story of that swashbuckling rogue Daemon Targaryen, the Prince who never became a King—although his ambition to become one would plunge the entire world into war.