

# **The Fortunes of Courles Manor**

## **A Smuthunter Novella**

### **Prologue:**

“Oh fuck me!”

Rusty arrowheads and jagged obsidian axes clacked and clanked along the weather broken cobblestones and the low wall that once separated the street from the old botanical garden.

Nathanial ran even harder, his soft-soled boots slapped loud and flat on the ground, “Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me.”

A sling stone whipped through the air, whipped by the side of his face, and tore an eye socket sized chunk of moldering plaster from the wall.

Goblins.

Goblins couldn't aim for shit, but with enough of them all aiming in roughly the same direction, it didn't matter.

For a brief, intoxicatingly stupefied moment, Nathanial thought about dropping the dry goods sack that was tucked under his arm. It was thick, double layered burlap, and filled with the lost pittances of the murdered and desperate.

There'd be no gold or silver inside it, and certainly no gems or jewels, but goblins fed on petty bandits, and petty bandits fed on anyone they could until they were 'copper rich', then they'd cross over out of the Ruins and into Copper Town to spend their fortunes.

That was when the goblins would get them. They'd watch the bandits, and the incompetent adventurers who did their best to work and live in the Ruins, treasure hunting, or robbing, and they'd strike those poor souls when they were on their way out.

This heavy, ungainly parcel of coins and cheap trinkets was enough to make any bandit 'copper rich' two to three times over. It had been hard earned by Nathanial, and it would barely...

His world exploded into a bouquet of jagged, sharp pain, sharp pain that had followed after a white-hot splotch of blinding pain that erupted from the center of his forehead.

Nathanial's ears were ringing and he felt a wave of nausea curdle in his stomach. Sweat and blood were one crawling drape of liquid trickling down his face, and by some small fortune the ground hadn't done him any harm when he hit it.

“Gods, Eels, stealing from Goblins now? Good thing me and mine were near by, I'd hate to see you end up cooked in one of those giant brass pots of theirs.”

Goblins cooked the people they killed, then they ate them and fed them to their giant rat dogs.

Through bleary eyes, Nathanial looked up at his assailant and saw a long polished piece of dark wood pointed down at his face. It was smooth and lacquered, twice as thick as a broom handle, and stamped with a crimson butterfly of Nathanial's own blood.

He'd already recognized the voice.

Tobin was smiling down at him, his long, dirty, lank, white blonde hair plastered to his face, a mouth half full of crooked, snarling teeth displayed in a leer so lecherous one would think the gang leader took sexual pleasure from what he'd just done.

Nathanial tasted the sour tinge of bile and the promise of vomit, but it was much less concerning than Tobin's spidery fingers clasp around the bag and pulling the pitiful fortune away from him.

"Tough luck, you not being up on your dues huh Eels? Coulda stopped all of this unfortunate business from happening at all." He whistled, and the sound of callous violence that Nathanial didn't realize he'd been hearing came to a stop.

The ringing in his head kept on going though.

"Well, I'd say I'll see you in town, but you know, gotta keep your head down, some folk aren't as merciful as me."

And, that was it.

All the planning, mapping the route out, all the sneaking, and then all the running, and being so close to the edge of the township proper, all of it beaten at the end of a stick.

Tobin and his gang were gone, but Nathanial couldn't find his legs to stand.

He was still bleeding, still on the verge of throwing up, and his head was humming with pain. If what that lanky shit said was true, Copper Town was off limits to him now, but it'd been off limits to him for months already. The question was if it was even more "off-limits" than it had been.

With a slowness brought on by the sickening pain of his head wound, Nathanial finally found himself upright, and with half closed eyes he made his way to the fresh pile of goblin corpses that Tobin's gang had made in their passing.

There wasn't much there to loot, a handful of mismatched coins, a few pieces of jewelry, some bangles and piercings he had to cut free, and a couple of daggers that were in surprisingly good shape.

He could sell or trade most of it...

For a bad meal and a bottle of even worse wine, but that was life when you owed the Thieves Guild your dues. That was life when you had to live on the outskirts of the poorest section of Four Towns.

Long ago the towns had been separate villages, gathered around the river valley that spilled down to the coast and rubbed up against the forest. For a time these villages provided foodstuffs and supplies like stone and timber to the fortress city of Mourn, but when the city fell into ruin after the Catastrophe of Fates, many of its survivors flocked to these smaller settlements.

Mourn was worn down by time and weather, and forces unknown, until it became a sprawling ruin, the Ruins, one that brushed up against the edge of the new-sprawling civilization and the forest. The Ruins itself was the fourth town, with Copper, Silver, and Gold making up the other three; each one's name indicating its class and cost of living.

What had once been the fortress city's moat had been dug out and dragged long ago, redirected for irrigation use, and used as a demarcation line between it and Copper Town.

Not wanting to push his luck, Nathaniel found himself slinking into one of the piss hole inns he'd been hopping from. This one, the General's Trawl, was run by an old military surgeon turned shaky handed drunk, and one of the few people Nathanial actually liked, or was able to trust.

As he walked through the door, nothing more than a piece of old canvas that was hung between two dilapidated columns, the inn's owner Thaddeus looked up at him then shook his head.

"Plans go wrong there Eels?" The former surgeon had put on the kind of weight that only drunks seemed to manage. His body was paunchy and bloated in discordant ways, his nose was a maze of burst

capillaries, and there was a ghost of a shudder in his hands even though he smelled of drink, sweat, and the drink he'd sweated out into his old, battered tunic and apron.

Before Nathaniel could say a word, the bald old drunkard forced him down onto a low stool and started examining the wound. "You'll need stitches if you want this to close quickly. You feeling sick? Bright lights bothering you?"

Nathaniel nodded to the man.

"Looks like you got rattled pretty good. You smelling anything funny? Shit yourself? Feel like there's water in your ears?"

He shook his head.

"Good, good, Probably won't die in your sleep then. Anyway, put what you got on the counter, we'll sort out what I can give you for it. Any memory loss?"

Nathaniel shook his head again.

"Any memory loss?"

The bleeding Treasure Hunter laughed, "Fuck you Thaddeus."

"There's a good lad, I've got some clean water in cask in the back room, wash yourself up, wrap your head, then go get me more water."

The surgeon turned bar keep was manhandling him into the back as some of the drunks in room scowled his way and mumbled to themselves. They were formerly hard men one and all, the kind of battered drunks that Thaddeus had a soft spot for and related to in the most profound of ways.

Nathaniel found himself alone in the back room, and despite the instructions he was given, started digging around for more practical supplies. Thaddeus had herbs, and bandages tucked away behind a bag of beans, and strong liquor in a clay jug under a blanket on the top shelf of a closet. All of it mixed together was something like proper medical care.

He wasn't a hard man, he'd never been and that was why he wasn't afraid of becoming the refuse in the inn's hall. He winced and bit his lip as he cleaned his wound. He groaned and muttered obscenities under his breath as he took the chewed up poultice of leaves and rubbed it into his gash, and then coughed and sputtered before taking a long drink of water after taking a swing of the liquor.

Nathaniel wasn't a hard man, but he was tough enough when it counted, quick on his feet, and quick witted when he wasn't sick with pain. After returning everything he hadn't supposed to have gotten into back to where it belonged, he wrapped his cloak around him, shut his eyes, and fell asleep inside the closet.

## **Chapter 1: Desperate Ordeals**

Eels.

They'd been running from the Mercenary Guard, Gold Town's private army that only served that one-quarter of the Towns, when it had happened. The rest of his crew had broken off here and there along the way, but Nathaniel couldn't shake his tail, worse, they were gaining on him.

He couldn't bolt into Silver Town, they'd just follow. He could run out into the wilderness, but it was too far away and he was too slow for that. The only thing to do was jump into the canal.

A canal filled with eels, eels being the euphemism everyone used for shit.

When he washed up in Copper Town, where all of Gold Town's waste tended to go, someone shouted

out, "Looks like Nathaniel's been swimming with the eels."

After that, combined with his run of terrible luck, the name stuck.

Eees.

Shits.

Nathaniel really had become shit at his job though, he just wished no one else would remind him of that fact. Failure was one thing when it was just yours to live with, but when it became your name, that was something else.

When he woke up, blood had soaked through his bandage, but not a lot, and he didn't want to change it for fear of disrupting the clot.

The closet door was open and Thaddeus was standing over him, "Where's my water?"

"It's in cask, hardly touched." The nausea had subsided, the pain had dimmed, and the light didn't hurt his eyes or confuse him anymore. "How long have I been back here?"

Thaddeus tapped the side of the water cask and nodded with the thick plonk his finger made against it, "About three hours, been busy out front. How you feeling?"

"Like shit." He stood up and stepped out of the closet, "What will you give me for those trinkets?"

"Coins are in a sack, here," the barkeep threw a small sack to Nathaniel, "and I threw in a couple more apiece for the daggers. Those earrings and bangles still have some flesh and blood on them, I can sell those off to the guard, not what I'd get for an ear, but I got a guy. We'll call it a couple days credit, since I like you so much."

It was fair.

It was too fair. "Who came looking for me?"

Thaddeus nodded, "No one, but some of the drunks left a bit after you came in, playing that they weren't leaving for a reason. I got a feeling things are only going to get worse for you unless they get better quick."

With a wry, resigned sigh Nathaniel shook his head, "How the fuck is that supposed to happen with that parasite Tobin and his crew hounding me on everything I do."

"You know." The old drunk cum surgeon's voice had lost its joking timbre.

"Gods no." Nathaniel knew. He knew because Thaddeus had been saying it for the better part of a year, ever since it all fell apart.

"You're in the hole with some bad folk, and no one's going to help you but you. I'm not, Chandra's sure as shit not, and you know where you stand with Tobin now. You got no friends that can help, and the friends you had that could have helped, they're not your friends anymore."

That was true.

That was what happened when you blew a score so big your entire crew could retire. Well retire, or enter a respectable trade, or live like a king for a month. That was what happened when your girl left you, not for another man, but to escape the stink of failure on you, and stuck to working with the man who you were certain would one day kill you.

Kill you, probably for no reason other than to watch you die, or because that was the natural conclusion of his debts and Tobin's taste for violence.

"I've watched a lot of healthier men die of infections from wounds less than yours. Only way to cut the

rot out is to find your courage, bite down, and face death straight on.”

What Thaddeus was saying would have been more profound if he didn’t say it about almost literally everything, and if he wasn’t talking about a legend... a legend that killed people.

“It’s not real, you know that right.” The Manor in The Woods, Courles Manor, The Witches Abode, the Flower of Death, all names for a legend in the woods, another legend next to a city with enough ruined legends to occupy any child’s or would be hero’s imagination.

“It may not be a house full of witches, but it’s a something, and enough people have died out there in that something that there’s got to be a dragon’s nest full of treasure out there by now.” The warm, drunk, enthusiasm had returned to Thaddeus’s voice.

He was right.

“Damn it, damn the fucking gods, you’re right.” Nathaniel was angry, angry and resigned to dying in the woods at the hands of who knows what, instead of being knifed or clubbed to death in the street by a man he used to call friend.

## **Chapter 2: The Manor Tower**

Well, it was a manor after all.

Somewhere under the vines, and the flowers, there was clearly the frame of an old stone manor house, complete with a tower coming up out of the roof, a wide low stable, and an elegant garden around a wide decorative well and fountain.

Or at least something like all of those things, but tumbled down, or cocooned in greenery.

From his perch on the hill, looking down into the valley as the sun started to set, Nathaniel saw that the forest’s roots had broken, up turned, and otherwise dismantled what had once been a splendid stone path. A stream that had once been cultivated to run beside it had come into a life of its own, and in so doing, eroded portions of the trail.

To his eyes, it was like a piece of the Ruins had been thrown out into the woods; an island of punished hubris in a sea of sweet and fragrant green.

All around him the forest was dark and heavy, and he’d had to skirt the edges of town, then pay out what little coin he could spare to be guided deeper into the wood and set on the right path. This place was known of by certain folk, not for any great detail, but only as a whisper of caution.

The trees had been like walls, branches woven together into screens and canopies, each one thicker, darker, and larger than the one before, until Nathaniel had found himself walking through a tomb of dark loam and stillness. It was peaceful until it became nerve racking. It was quiet until every bird and beast became an echo of unease.

Then, he caught that sweet scent, the soft tendril of something calming, something hopeful. It was the perfume of witchcraft, and he knew it. He knew it, and he didn’t care, because whatever it was to know magic was different than it was to deny it. Besides, like all soft charms, its greatest power was obscurity not consistency.

Nathaniel knew it, and while he wasn’t fighting its enthralling call, just by knowing, he was defending himself from the uncanny dangers that usually lay beyond the threshold of such beguiling allure. Were he to

become puzzled by the scent, his mind would become a maze of distraction as his thoughts wandered, until unaware and disoriented, he would find himself precisely where the scent was supposed to leave him.

He felt its pull down into the valley, and his eye followed a passage of bright blooms, all out of season, with each color brighter and richer than the next. If ever he'd seen a trap both more devious and obvious, Nathaniel couldn't recall it.

The front door would not be his ingress, now he just needed to find a way around the edge of the place that would provide the most cover.

It was hard to tell where prying eyes may lie, and he had a concern that the plants may be a trap, or sentient, or some threat of another kind. But as he skulked under the shade and behind the cover he could find, Nathaniel reconciled the truth that if the plants were alive then they would have sensed him already.

It was a life or death matter, and that solved his need for brash choices.

The scent grew stronger, more pressing, more intoxicating, and hunched behind a toppled pillar, not ten strides from the tower-side of the manor, Nathaniel felt a physical urge tugging at him, pulling at him to follow his nose.

"This is how you die. Sure Nathaniel, this is why they call you Eels, follow the smell, do the stupid thing." He was muttering to himself as he reached a hand out to test the thick latticework of ropelike vines along the side of the tower.

The vines didn't snap to life and snare him, and almost as good, they didn't budge under his weight as he started his climb. There was an open window, or at least a cave-like opening in the side of the top of the tower, and if he could sneak inside there maybe he could find something valuable without having to investigate anywhere else.

The higher he climbed, the more the alluring scent started to fade, replaced by something else. It was a freshness in the air, a clear, clean scent, like coming out of a dungeon or a crypt. As he reached the opening, the low summer sun cast its light into the tower.

With no purchase from which to look before he leapt, Nathaniel entered into the chamber and landed in a low crouch. If he'd been the kind of treasure hunter to go armed, this was when he would have brandished his sword. But not being that type, instead he mentally committed to turning around and jumping out the window if danger was already waiting for him.

The closest thing he carried to a weapon was a fairly hefty single edged long knife with a small, serrated section used for sawing through rope. His thinking had always been that if he got in a fight he'd lose, so why do or carry anything that would push him in that direction. The blade was sharp, very sharp in fact, and sturdy too, but the only flesh it had ever cut from bone was for meals, and not from the living.

The room at the top of the tower contained neither roasted meat, nor foes, but by its look, it at one time housed a truly deadly enemy: a young woman of considerable means.

While the walls were covered in flowering vines, and the floor was carpeted in dried leaves and wilted petals, the furniture, the full sized mirror, and the remains of the canopied bed were all the trappings of a proper lady's chamber. The bed, like the room, like the manor, was covered in vines and flowers, so much so that the plants had created new curtains all around it.

Yes, this was once an elegant lady's chamber, but why it would be in the top of a tower was beyond Nathaniel's understanding.

Still, not being one to overlook a good change of fortune, he set to investigating the chamber in hopes for a quick, profitable, and painless departure.

The wooden drawers of the dressers were warped, and opening them would make too much noise. The two doors in the chamber, one that had to be a closet and one that had to lead into an antechamber, were indistinguishable and it was too risky to open them for fear of what may be lurking on the other side. So, that left trying to dig through leaves, petals, and dust.

With a soft step, and a soft touch, Nathaniel made his way around the room. All traces of fabric or cloth were long since ruined, eaten by moths or simply worn down by time and the encroaching elements. Atop the canopy of the bed, just close enough to the edge to be seen, there was even a bird's nest, and aside from him, that was the only sign of life this room seemed to have seen in centuries.

Using his sense of touch more than his eyes, his fingers ran over the tops of the dressers, chests, and cabinets in the room, and his slow, methodical patience was rewarded. Five golden coins from a time even before the Empire's rise and fall were his reward.

He slid them into a pouch at his belt and made for the window when he heard something behind him. It sounded like a gasp coming from within the curtain of vines that surrounded the bed.

Nathaniel told himself to just head out the window then run back to town, but something stopped him. There was a sudden, irresistible sense of warmth and happiness that seemed to fill the room, something compelling that teased at Nathaniel's mind and reminded him...

### **Chapter 3: The Bluest Flower**

He'd turned around, realizing too late that what had struck him was the same scent that seemed to linger outside the manor, and found a single blue eye, the same rich deep blue as the flower petals that adorned the room.

He heard another noise; this time a gasp, and that eye fell backwards grew even wider, and strangely inviting.

"I'm sorry to disturb your slumber, I'll be on my way now..."

Nathaniel had, upon seeing the shock in that one eye, started to back away towards the window.

"No," a young woman's voice floated out from the behind the vines, "you mustn't leave yet."

"I'm truly sorry, but I've taken what I've come for and you see..."

The vines parted, and a scared, but beautiful face was staring out at him. It was delicate, smooth, and round. And those impossibly blue eyes stood out against the girl's deep green skin, as did her long hair and the very large flower petals that rose upwards and covered most of the lower half of her body, all of which were the same shade of blue.

"You don't want to leave me," her voice was small, quiet, timid, but her words clung to him as surely as the sweet, intoxicating scent in the air. "You may think you do, but you know you mustn't, not until you tell me why you've come here."

"I mean you no harm, I promise you. I came for treasure and I've taken what I've found, all that I needed... more really, and I hate to be a thief, but I didn't know anyone was living here, and I promise you, you'll not see me again, now..."

"Wait," her arms, which had been folded across her chest and covered in white petal-like gloves opened,

“if it’s only treasure you seek, I can give you more.”

Nathanial found himself stunned yet again, this time by the sight of her very large, very perky breasts. They swayed as she shifted, and he found himself distracted by her nudity as surly as her mention of more treasure piqued his curiosity.

“I’m certain you would, but I’ve the sense that you’re more dangerous than you’re letting on. I didn’t come here to harm you, and I’m only taking a few coins that look like they’ve been buried under leaves for hundreds of years. I’d love more, but I don’t want it.”

She seemed to shift in that moment, like a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. “You would just leave? With nothing more, nothing less?”

Her hands came back to rest at the tops of her breasts, “But what of the next time, would you come back then? With allies, and fire, and wizards to roust us from... to roust me, I mean, to roust me from my home?”

“I would not do that. I’m far too poor for wizards, and far too much a coward to risk a second moment of good fortune. No, I promise you, whatever you are, I’ve no desire to come back to this place.”

He said these words and meant them, but...

But maybe it was her manner; maybe it was her beauty, or maybe just the intoxicating aroma that was growing stronger with ever passing moment, maybe he would want to return if only to see her.

“Men’s desires are fickle things burglar.” She was looking at him, looking through him, and her words were not kind.

“As w whole, they are, but this one man’s desires are more honest than his trade. And while I’d linger in your beauty longer...”

She blushed as his words came to a stammering end.

“That is to say, you’re a lovely...”

Her eyes, hard etched with worries and fears as they were, softened while Nathanial’s tongue betrayed his desires just as surely as his eyes had begun to.

“If I thought it safe to pay you a proper visit I would, but... But legends and what little good sense I have tells me this is a dangerous place, too dangerous a place for me to have come to in the first place.”

Sweat had soaked into his bandage and stung the still present gash in his forehead. His hands felt uneasy, alive with the nervous need to do something, preferably grasp on to an overgrown vine and climb down it, and staring at this mysterious flower girl, this green skinned plant woman, Nathanial also realized those hands wanted to touch her.

“You have no idea burglar, but heed me well, keep the coins you’ve scrounged in payment for forgetting this place, and forgetting me. But before you go, may I have your gaze just one moment longer?”

Her voice did not sound as timid as it had, nor as doubting. No, if anything, it sounded inviting, soft and sweet as the scent in the air, “If you’re to forget me, I’d have you at least remember me a moment longer.”

Nathanial felt a soft intoxicating heat coming from her, and he watched as her white gloved hands cupped her breasts as he realized he’d started to take deeper and slower breaths.

“Of all the men I’ve met, you’re neither mean, nor crass, and I sense a goodness in you more honest than your trade. Look upon me, and keep this adventure as a pleasant dream.”

Her words had taken on a sing-sing cadence, and for a moment, just a moment, Nathanial felt himself



becoming truly and deeply enthralled by the mysterious blue haired, blue eyed, plant girl.

Then, the moment ended. It sounded like more sweet, soothing words were to follow, but she caught her breath before speaking again.

“Be gone, and go quickly.” Her words were sharp now, commanding and anxious, “go as quickly as you can.”

#### **Chapter 4: New Troubles**

It was only when he was halfway down the tower, once again breathing in the clean summer air, that he recognized the fear that had made its way into her voice.

It was also then that Nathaniel noticed the vines beginning to shift and twist above and below him. It was still too high to drop from, but the massive vine he’d been using as a rope had remained still, so he started to climb down as fast as he could.

Flowers started to twist about, like they were watching him, and as he was almost halfway down, the greenery parted in front of him, and he was pulled into the tower by way of an unseen window and a sudden torrent of wrapping and grasping plants.

A loud, startled, and extended “Oh shit” escaped his lips as all of this happened.

Then, the plants released their grasp, and Nathaniel once more found himself inhaling the pungent sweetness of the place, and this time it washed over him with such intoxicating deliciousness he let out a whimper while he climbed to his feet.

He didn’t understand that the adrenalin, much like the arousal the flower girl upstairs inspired, made the drug move through his bloodstream all the faster.

“I hope you didn’t use such language with my sister, she’s far too delicate for such vulgarity. But let me look at you stranger.”

Golden sunlight beamed into the room from behind him, and unlike the room above, this part of the tower was joined to the body of the manor, and seemed to be more of a landing than any type of chamber.

Nathaniel’s assailant however, was much more than the creature he’d met above.

She too was green skinned, with white gloves that reached her elbows, and she too seemed consumed by, or her lower half was made of a flower, but even that was so much more than the other.

Her hair, and eyes were all a deep, lustrous violent, while her petals were a soft pink rose, and while their faces had a similar roundness, the creature before him bore no sign of fear, but instead a gentle curiosity and something like concern.

It was hard for Nathaniel to notice though, as this creature’s torso seemed to be nothing more than two massive breasts, at least at first sight. They were gargantuan, swollen, and did not seem bound by their considerable weight or by gravity.

“I was as,” Nathaniel’s hand slid down to where he kept his knife tucked behind his back only to discover it was gone, “polite as possible. You’ll excuse my shock, I was only just leaving.”

“But you couldn’t be polite as possible, calling on my dear sister uninvited and unannounced. She is my charge, and dear to me, and someone as handsome and charming as you, well, whatever would they say of her honor. You were alone with her in her bedchambers, and that sort of scandal is hardly well mannered is it? ”

The buxom flower girly spoke with such earnest concern and such gravity that Nathaniel's only clue to her irreverence was the smirk on her face. "Nor would it be polite to come into my home and not introduce yourself to the mistress of the manor. I am Lilyana Courles, and you would be? A bandit? A philanderer? A robber? Am I off the mark sweet stranger? And tell me, could you be truly polite, not even introducing yourself to me?"

As she moved closer to him, the air felt thick with her scent, and the cloying sweetness that was starting to fog over his brain began to feel like a blanket of warmth wrapping around him.

Where was his knife? It had stayed in place through harder, longer, and more violent falls. It would have had to have been... Nathaniel hid his frown, then blinked at the pressing weight of this woman's voice; her words felt as heavy on his mind as her breasts were on his eyes.

He almost couldn't fit the thought of the sister upstairs having somehow lifted it from him while in the presence of this one's breasts and hearing her invasive, overwhelmingly charming voice.

"Nathaniel is my name. I've of no station to have a last name, or a family name. I am a treasure hunter." He scooted himself back from her, and as he did, the light in the room dimmed. Vines, like prison bars, descended across what had once been a window.

She laughed and gave him a knowing look, "Which is to say?"

"A robber," there was no point in denying it, or arguing with this monster girl who, he realized, could have choked the life out of him or could have possibly even torn him asunder with her plants. "A robber of monster lairs and of ruins, not of homes and houses."

That was a lie, but a believable one, one he liked to pretend was true, one he tried to will into truth as often as possible.

"Yet, you are in my home, taking from me and my family, and while we are not slobbering beasts, we are neither wholly human, so I forgive your assumptions. But you are a robber still, and an ill used one too."

She smiled, and her gloved fingers brushed the hair away from his bandage. "Tell me, did you suffer this wound in coming to hunt my sweet sister's fairest and finest treasure?"

Her touch came so slowly, so gently that it reminded him of the way he would quiet a dog. Her voice was in the same low tone, the same soothing, friendly tenor, and as her gloved fingers touched him, it was all softness.

The fear that had been humming in his body had slowed, quieted, and become muted by his own deep, calming breaths. He wasn't panicking now, but his mind wasn't clear.

"No, and I knew nothing of your family, nor would I seek to take such a treasure." Without his knife he couldn't cut a way out, but maybe his charms would let him contort his way through this creature's net.

"Oh," she made a face of theatrical sincerity, "do you insult my sister's beauty, is she not fine enough for your discerning eye? What baser thing could tempt you into this old shack?"

It was polite to laugh at your host's humor, and honestly she was considerably funnier than he'd ever expected any sort of monster to be. "No, I'd come only for some scant treasures to settle pressing debts, and I'd hoped to avoid all such dangers that surround the legend of this place."

Honesty in this regard felt like it would serve him better, and as he spoke, she placed another hand on his face and held him still. His head swam, his thoughts barely above the golden warm depths of pleasure that were washing over him with every breath, and as often as he reminded himself that it was her scent hard at

work on him, he answered himself that it felt good to see her smile, to keep her happy, if only to preserve his safety.

“Dangerous indeed, but tell me, what trouble must you be in to come to us in such a state? And while it was considerably rude of you to sneak in like a common thief, and take whatever pittance you’ve found for why else would you be fleeing so quickly, I’ll not stand by a guest in my home, invited or not, going unattended when they’ve suffered such physical harm.”

Her voice had become as cloying as her scent, and as she looked into his eyes, Nathaniel felt held, captured, almost by the gaze and the grip of her concerned, maternal tone and the emphasis she put on his wound. “Tell me what has brought you here, tell me what has given purpose to a wounded man, and a man wise enough to avoid such danger, such clearly legendary danger?”

Nathaniel felt her voice embracing him, holding him as surely as her hands held his face, and he felt soft in that moment, soft and slow, sleepy in her voice, as her presence started to smother him in kindness.

“I owe my guild money, and my... my enemy will use it as an excuse to embarrass me, and to torture and kill me. Slowly, painfully, after taking everything away from me, even the hope of getting back on my feet.”

His head had fallen forward, his cheek was resting on one massive breast as she stroked his head.

It didn’t feel like what had actually occurred, that she had pulled him closer.

No, it felt as though the strength in his body was slipping, that the fear, no, the terror that had kept him moving at a run for months on end had vanished and that he was finally, truly safe.

He felt like warm water had filled his veins, “That won’t happen now. Just listen to my voice my guest, let my hospitality comfort you. You are safe here, away from all else, away from danger. You’ve longed, for so very long, to be safe, and cared for haven’t you? You poor poor man, you brave soul, listen to the sound of my voice now, only my voice and rest your head on my breast, so soft, so inviting to the skin as to the eye, lose yourself in my breasts now.”

All of the failures that had brought him to this point drained out of him as the musical, comforting and nurturing tone of her words continued to cast its spell. His arms closed around her waist, hugging her back, grateful for her kindness, and as he felt himself slowly sinking into her, the image of her breasts was still on his mind as his head rested on her chest.

He nuzzled up to her softness, drunk on her scent, and he thought of himself falling between her breasts, smothered by them, lost in her cleavage.

“You’ve needed to be cared for, so alone, in so much danger. You’ve needed a reward for your tenacity, your courage, and you’ve found it. What did you find in my sister’s room, besides her beauty, Nathaniel?”

“Five old golden coins, enough to save my life.” It felt so good to say that out loud, to be in a place where his victory accounted for something, where his efforts weren’t for naught.

“Then your quest is over,” she cooed into his ear, “rest now and let me tend to you. Let me treat your wound and care for your needs.”

It was too hard to move. His body had given up, released from the tension in its muscles that kept him sharp and quick, ready to bolt, like a deer that knew it was being stalked.

“Let your heavy eyes stay closed and dream of my breasts, dream of my softness and be still, so very still now, like your muscles have fallen asleep while your mind half dreams of the sound of my voice. You’ve come the distance, too near the nothing, half way to oblivion in everything sweet and soft now.”

Her words clouded the parts of his mind that could see through the fog of her scent and the softness of her touch. In the garbled, confused moment that her voice was invoking, Nathaniel missed the moment where she peeled his bandage away, but felt a sharp point of pain as the skin tore slightly.

His eyes opened, and he let go of his grasp around her waist, but everything was still slow, tranquil, and sedated. He looked at her, and saw on one fingertip of her white glove a small dab of what looked very much like honey.

“Be still, so still now Nathaniel, still and silent, and heavy with a body of sleep and a mind at peace. Rest in my voice, and place your head back on my breast. I am a pillow for your weariness, and warmth against your cold fears, come into my arms, and let me be a salve for your wounds, of flesh and spirit. Breathe me in again and again, and fall away into my care.”

Her words were a tangle of blows against his resolve, or his resolve became entangled in her words, smothering his thoughts as surely as her cleavage enthralled his eyes and captured his dreamy, weary mind. It was impossible to feel strong, to feel able and sharp, not when she finally offered him what he needed, not when he had finally done what was so long seemingly out of his reach.

“Who are you?” Back and forth he rocked on legs that were turning to jelly with every breath.

He wanted to say, ‘It was rude of me not to ask’, but those words were too far away, and took a strength he didn’t feel he had.

“Why Nathaniel, I’ve told you, I am the Mistress of the Manor, and so,” with one hand she pulled his head back to her breasts, and with the other, smeared the sticky substance on her finger across the freshly bleeding wound on his forehead, “you may simply call me Mistress. Do you understand?”

“Yes Mistress.” A new warmth spread through his body, one from the inside out, one that started in his loins and surged to the top of his head and the tips of his toes.

“I’ve given you a very special medicine my sweet, but you need more. You’ll find it very much to your liking, I promise you.” Nathaniel felt a dull, pleasant ache starting to form in his testicles. “It is in my nature to care for you, come, partake of my medicine and let me heal you.”

Nathaniel’s body felt a current of life slicing through the heaviness, but as she stroked his cheek and shifted herself, he felt pliable in her grasp, like it was easier to be moved than to move himself, and as one, large, pert nipple was pressed to his lips, he began to suck without a word from her.

It was like drinking sunlight and warmth, and it tasted like honey. His lips and tongue tingled as the wound on his forehead had, and as he drank her down, his cock stiffened with an impossible speed.

He was putty in her gloved hands, and as she slid one such hand to the fastenings on his trousers, Nathaniel’s hips bucked up in desperate anticipation. Though he was unaware of it, his cock was already leaking precum, already ready to erupt with the slightest focused stimulation.

“How long, sweet Nathaniel, how long since a woman has touched you? You needn’t answer your Mistress, only know that I do this out of love for you, out of care for my guest, my sweet, delicious visitor. Share with me, nourish me with your appreciation as my medicine soothes all your aches and hurts.”

“Forget for me now, forget all else,” something warm and soft, something tight closed around his cock. It felt like a woman, but as it bobbed up and down on him faster and faster, and as he started to cum it only grew warmer, wetter, and tighter.

“Lose all that was, lose yourself in me, give me your name, give me your dreams, give all of yourself to me, to my voice, feed me as I fill you with light, and love, and warmth.” He shuddered again as a second, more powerful and heavier orgasm erupted through his body.

The pleasure sparked his hands to life, grabbing, and squeezing at her massive breasts, both hands on the one he suckled from, as though he were trying for more of what was inside.

“Mistress knows what you need, you need to provide for me, to sustain me, to care for me as I’ve cared for you. Give of yourself, drain yourself as you suckle at my affections. Be nothing now, free from all but me, free to give all of yourself to me, for me, inside me.”

Nathanial did not see the protuberance at the end of the vine that sprung from the base of her flower and swallowed his cock. His eyes were closed and he was lost in the lilting, encouraging music of her voice, and the drugs she plied him with to make him so docile and susceptible to her will.

As his essence pumped into the vine, if flowed into her, satisfying her hunger, and her desire, turning her words into cooing sounds of ecstasy and satisfaction. Soon, his hands were too weak to grasp, his body too tired to suck, and that was when she released her succubus flower from him.

He awoke again, only briefly, as she attached another sucker to his cock, one that was within a man-sized flower that closed like a pod around him. It would not drain him, it would only keep him stimulated, cultivating a larger load for next time, while keeping him docile and compliant, comatose in this dungeon of flora.

Nathanial’s eyes had closed when his purple haired Mistress told him to sleep, and just as he was unaware of what was befalling him, so too was he unaware of what was soon to come.

## **Chapter 5: Dreams**

Chandra’s arms were around his neck, her lithe body pressed against his, “After tonight, we can do anything, go anywhere, become anyone. No more sneaking, no more robbing and no more fighting Nathanial, we can become anything we want.”

He kissed her, and ran his hands over the short spikey stubble of her shaved head. She had yellow hair when she let it go, but kept it shaved for practicality, “You’re the only fighter here, and all I want is to be your husband.”

She giggled and slid her hand between his legs, “I know what you are, I know what you want.”

In the past, in other dreams, this moment would end with him running along the water soaked gangplank. He would feel his feet moving in long, perfect strides, off the Ghost Ship, onto the raft. He would feel the weight of the box, in his arms, and he would adjust for it, knowing his balance was perfect, just as he’d practiced it on even more slick, even more narrow beams.

He would step from the plank onto the flotilla, then he would take three short strides to their boat while Tobin and Garick followed, ready to cut the lines, and dump the plank.

He would feel Chandra’s hungry kiss on his lips and the wet, embrace of her womanhood spill into the cold saltwater and stinging blood of failure.

His last warm moment would fall into bone chilling dread as he fell into the ocean, the metal chest roughly the size of a large loaf of bread and filled with coins, falling out of his arms, down into the depths as his head hit the side of their ship.

He would feel the water pulling at him, drowning him as surely as it swallowed his dreams, and then he would awaken to the sour reality of his life. His life as a failure, his life as Eels.

After the Ghost Ship came the attempt on the traveling museum of antiquities, a plan that should have worked, but that fell as hard as he did on that raft in the ocean. Fleeing from the mercenaries that seemed to have been expecting him, hoping that the crossbow bolts that had torn Garick to pieces, wouldn't be finding his back, or any other part of him as his friends.

He hoped to any god that would listen that Chandra wouldn't meet the same fate. It was his fault she was still working, his fault she was still serving as muscle, and though she hadn't so much as kissed him since he ruined the Ghost Ship job, his love for her was more than that. That was why he'd slowed his pace, that was why he'd drawn hers and Tobin's pursuers to his trail.

That was why he didn't mind the nickname, not at first.

It was when he couldn't get in on any other jobs, when rumors about him being cursed with the failure's stench, when the rumors about how he'd lost a step, lost his hands, lost his nerve, lost his luck, and lost anything else that had made him an excellent treasure hunter, that the shame started to eat at him.

Then the need to eat started eating at what he'd had left, which wasn't much.

It had cost money to put together those last two jobs, and when they didn't pay off, he was left unable to scrounge together his guild dues. As a criminal, or at least as an extralegal treasure hunter, he needed to pay in for protection and security, he needed to pay in to not be an outsider, to not be an enemy of the guild.

It had cost money to put together those last two jobs; they were supposed to have been investments. It had cost him his nest egg, his cushion, his lifeline, and those losses were part and parcel with losing Chandra.

He didn't blame her.

He couldn't.

She was a street fighter, battle tested, battle hardened, and denied of any sort of sympathy in her professional life. Why would she have stayed with someone that cost her the only way out any of them had ever seen? Why would she come back to him for a third failing?

It was the same for Tobin. He was shark, a bully, someone who smelled blood and smelled weakness, someone who couldn't help himself when he did. Though in his darkest heart Nathaniel wondered if Tobin had been behind all his disasters, the lanky brute had stood to lose as much as any of them with the Ghost Ship.

Unless... unless his jealousy for Chandra truly was enough for him to lose out on what else he had to gain.

Chandra.

Her strong hands held his shoulders, her hips pushed up into him as he pushed down. Her kiss was hungry, her sweat smelled sweat to him, and it wasn't ending. The dream wasn't becoming a nightmare, it was only going on and on, one sweet moment without beginning or end. This was a torturous heaven, a delightful and willing suffering that Nathaniel would gladly endure for whatever eternity would make the rest of his life.

He was with her, his lover, his hope... nothing that happened after that last sweet night had happened, the future was still to come, and they were together, forever embraced in this moment of...

## **Chapter 6: The Escape**

Light.

White, bright, irresistible light scrubbed the image of Chandra from his mind, and washed the sense of her from his body.

“Be still, be quiet, listen, you’re in grave danger and you must be careful.”

Nathanial’s eyes opened to the sight of the blue haired flower girl.

His eyes widened in horror as she held his knife up in her hand.

“No, be still, I’m freeing you. Look at me, don’t close your eyes, don’t sink into it, be with me and..” Her hands were down by his cock, his very hard cock, and the knife slid through something, and he felt a twinge of longing as she did, as something wilted around his shaft that she pulled away.

“Pull up your trousers, and remain silent. You’re in one of her pods, well, our pods, but I despise them. I despise it all. My sister Lilyana captured you. I thought she would, I didn’t know for certain, that’s why I stole your knife. Had she found it on you, she would have thrown it down the old well, down where anything and everything that could cut through the vines, the pods, or our skin goes.”

“Pods?” Gods, he was thirsty and dizzy, and weak.

“Yes, pods. We can feed off of your essence, your seed, it sustains us, and the pods stir it inside you, like a stew long cooked.” She smiled down at him as Nathanial’s face twisted into a weary and puzzled stare.

“Before we were this, we were sisters. I was Dahlia then, that is my name still, and I remember stew, and having legs, and life outside of the manor. This is why you must flee. If Lilyana sees you again, you’ll be easy prey for her, and I cannot stop her. If my other sister finds you, in this state, you’ll be destroyed before you realize you’ve been beguiled yet again.”

“I’m so weak Dahlia, so thirsty. I can’t hardly move, let alone stand, or flee.” It was true. He’d tried to prop himself up more, tried to find the strength to move, but he was drained, truly drained.

“I know. I know, and I’m sorry. I can help you though.” She produced a small, crystal bottle, roughly as wide across as his palm. “Drink half of this now.”

There was a moment of awkward realization between the two of them as he stayed slumped against the pod.

“Here,” she uncorked the bottle and poured it into his mouth, it was water, cool, clean, and sweet in every way. “Now, listen, you must trust me.”

With her free hand, she pinched one of her nipples until a small drop of golden honey-like liquid pooled on her fingertip. “It will invigorate you, and I will help you focus that energy. It affects your body in one very specific way, but it affects the mind too, and I can guide the mind and restore your strength, at least long enough for you to escape. You must trust me.”

She held out her fingertip to him, and he kissed the sweet fluid off her fingertip. Immediately he felt an ache that hummed into a blissful, silent moan of release. His still rigid cock, filled with memories of that last night with his former lover, erupted in a sticky mess inside his trousers.

Dahlia licked her lips and let out a sad little gasp, but Nathanial didn’t notice it. His eyes were closed as his body quivered, “How does that help me?”

“Open your eyes Nathanial, open your eyes and find yourself staring at me. Your body is in a state of calm, your mind is clear after release, you feel weak, you feel soft and open, and as you drink this water, you will feel refreshed, restored, drink now.”

His eyes opened and he looked upon her smiling face as she gave him the last of the water. “It is only

water, as my voice is only words, but words can change a mind as surely as water can quench a thirst. Look upon me, look upon my breasts, watch them and feel the way your body responds to me, the way it grows in strength and need, listen and watch, become aware of the potent effect of my nectar, the way it strengthens your lust and stirs your blood. Watch my breasts and absorb my words as you would water. Watch them now as they sway before your eyes.”

Nathanial felt a heat inside himself, like the ineffectual desire to fuck after having too much to drink, and he would not have allowed himself to be lulled into the swaying patter of her words had she not slid his knife back into its sheath and secured it there as she spoke.

“Your mind has been lost in dreams and traps, like a mirror facing a mirror, your mind has gone inwards over and over, like the roundness of my breasts, circles without end, always showing you more, always wanting more, the way our nectar drives the body to give as we take, but as I give my words to you, your mind drinks them in as your eyes do my beauty, my breasts, soft, warm, safe, it is safe to listen, to lose yourself in the mirror of my voice, telling you your desires as they show you your wants.”

Nathanial’s mind was wandering now, from breast to breast and word to word, and Dahlia’s voice was becoming a maze of contradictions, “As much as you have been lulled into staying, your only want is to leave, to flee, to go from this false home to real safety, where danger lies in the curve of my breast, temptation promises true happiness in my voice, and words upon words are abound in your eyes, as you listen to the sight of me now, seeing and hearing all that I speak, enspelled by nothing, by the sight of words. Listen as you stare, and become only what you see and hear now.”

He felt distant, but content, confused but certain, more focused than he had ever been in his life, and more relaxed than he could ever have been simply left to himself, “Your lust is only strength and passion, a fire that flames inside you, as one thing but another, and fire consumes, fire must be fed. Feed your lust into the flame of life, look upon my breasts and feel their seductive spell pulsing first between your legs, and then, feel that passion become your strength now. Nourish your body and mind with the desire I give you, taste not the need to release, to nourish me, but feel it now nourishing yourself. The fullness of my breasts becomes the fullness of your strength, single minded, ready to stand, to act to follow, to carry you home, away, to entrap you in your rightful freedom.”

Her hands cupped and squeezed her pert, large breasts, small compared to her sisters but massive compared to any human woman’s he had seen, and much like a dancer follows the music, or a puppet moves to its own strings, her breasts made him rise to his feet, and filled Nathanial with a sense of strength and purpose that...

## **Chapter 7: Coins**

“Eels, there’s a good lad, come in, come in quick. You look like shit.”

Thaddeus had his pudgy arm under Nathanial as soon as he stepped through the curtain into the bar.

“I... I don’t, I... water...” His mind was a blur. The last thing he remembered was Tobin hitting him in the face with that stupid fucking pole he carried around.

“You look terrible.” The old drunk smelled of sweet drink, and sour breath, and ushered him into the back room of the empty bar. It was just after dawn, and the world was quiet, as quiet as this part of Four Towns ever got.



“Did you do it? Did you make it to the Manor?” A plaster mug of tepid water was placed in Nathaniel’s scraped and dirty hands.

He didn’t answer, he just drank, he drank with a thirst unknown to him, and need that was beyond reason.

“Do,” he gasped out a breath, “do what?”

“Find any treasure. Survive the Manor. Did you do anything?” Thaddeus’s words made no sense to him, but something unknown, some phantom recollection told Nathaniel to check his hidden inner pouch.

“I,” he was as shocked as the bar keep at the sight of ten golden coins in his hand. “I suppose I...”

Fingers moved through dust and leaves, through time and history, searching where his eyes would find nothing. There were five coins on the dresser... only five... and now...

“You alright lad, you look, well you look touched.” The drink that Thaddeus poured him now was not water, though it was clear. “Sip this slow, slow till it’s all gone.”

The alcohol burnt his throat and stung his nose, but the sharp tactile sensation of the drink brought him back to the moment. “Looks like I found something, but I don’t know where, and I don’t know how.”

“Could be when you got hit in the head the other day it was worse than we thought. Could be you saw something that frightened the memory from you. Could be you got magic’ed into this state, but you ask me, looks like it doesn’t matter much if this is the end result, huh?” The former surgeon gave Nathaniel a clap on the back before pouring him more water.

“I suppose you’re right. And I suppose I owe you a bit, so I hate to ask but...”

“You’ve got the coin, you’ve got to go settle up, but you think Tobin, or someone else’ll be circling you.”

He nodded.

“Way I see it, you’ve said out loud that you’re on guild business, so for the sake of our fine institution I’ll put an escort together for you to settle your scores. You know, for one of those coins.”

Nathaniel slid over two, “Thank you. Now, you mind if I take a nap in your closet?”

“This is why you’re in the shape you’re in, too kind, too giving, and too predictable. Doing the same thing all over again.”

Nathaniel filled his cup again, dragged himself into the closet, pulled down a stale loaf of bread, and before he had three bites, was out cold, dreaming of a blue haired, green skinned girl’s large, bouncing breasts.

## **Chapter 7: Settling Accounts**

“You have to understand my hesitation Nathaniel, you’ve gone from nothing to handing me gold. Am I to expect you didn’t break any of the bylaws to get me this?” The Guild Master sat on a high backed chair, dressed in a thick shirt of course fabric, the top of his head covered in a brown skullcap, his weathered face, craggy with more experience than age, was all but expressionless.

Except for his eyes, which were narrow, near black in their shade of brown, and sharp with wary curiosity.

“No, I, well sir, I feel if I tell you where I made my score you’d think I was lying to you.” Nathaniel’s relationship with the Guild Master had always been a pleasant one, as friendly as it could be when one of them didn’t know the other’s name.

“Try me.” The Guild Master’s mask of impassive judgment broke into genuine amusement.

"I snuck into Courles Manor and I, um, I sort of scrounged a few coins before I guess, I guess you'd say, before I ran away?" Nathaniel's shrug was subconscious, a reflection of his own memories feeling so unsure of what had befallen him there.

"You're a fucking liar Eels," Tobin had been there, in the back of the room, "where'd you get the fucking gold!"

The Guild Master held up his hand but did not break his gaze from Nathaniel, "Were you asking me what you did? Or are you not sure you believe it yourself?"

Nathaniel felt Tobin staring a bloody hole in the back of his head, "My memory's been a little fuzzy since someone hit me in the face with a stick."

It was true, but not so much in this context.

"Bullshit! Who gave you the gold you fucking..." He could almost smell Tobin's breath, could almost feel the heat of his hate, like they were standing in front of each other.

"Tobin, please, these coins are old, they're collector's items as much as they're money. If anyone had lost anything from their collection, I'd have heard of it, and if some outside agency were operating here and trading with such exotic fare, they'd be known to me as well. So, unless you have a real challenge to your guild brother, I'll ask you to hold your tongue. Or, you could leave."

The Guild Master's smile had become sharp, losing all trace of amusement, and as he'd addressed Tobin, the man did not look away from Nathaniel, who didn't feel much better when the door slammed shut.

"I know what he's been up to, preying on you as he has. I invited him here for this meeting in case, well, in case you turned out to be less than honest in your intentions, or your stories. But here we are, welcome back to the fold."

The sense of relief Nathaniel had hoped to feel in this moment wasn't there, "Thank you. I, uh..." and the sense of dread that was there instead made what he was about to say all the more difficult and terrifying, "I'm still trying to get out of the life, to earn enough to move on."

The Guild Master nodded, passive, listening.

"And I think I have a score. I want to go back to the manor, I found ten gold laying around, and I made it out alive." Like his quip about being hit with a stick and having memory problems, what he'd just said wasn't entirely true either.

"That's far, far outside our territory, and I'm not approving you taking any other members out, but," the older man's voice became a touch warmer and less measured, "I will miss you when you fail and die out in the woods, or succeed and go back to cobbling, or masonry, or whatever it was you did."

"Weaver, I was a waver," it was why his fingers were so nimble, and why he was so good at seeing the big picture. "And I don't need bodies, I'd never ask; I know I wouldn't be able to trust anyone who went with me either. I was just, well, I'd like to use the library, if that..."

The Guild Master's laughter was sharper than Tobin's anger had been, "It's a guild resource, you don't have to ask me. Gods Nathaniel, maybe you're so squirrely because you were hit in the head, and not just a half shitty liar."

The laughter stopped as Nathaniel realized he was sweating,

"Whatever you're not telling me, as long as it won't put my guild in danger, is your fucking business, your foolish, desperate business, do you understand me?"

Nathanial nodded.

"You're a great hand with a lot of hard work, and you've made more enemies than you realize, because you don't understand jealousy. You're safer in guild territory, but watch you back, because hate can lead a man to abandon his senses and throw his world away, do you understand me?"

Again he nodded, "Tobin's going to try and kill me?"

The Guild Master said nothing; the meeting and the reconciliation were over.

## Chapter 8: Tales

*The Alraune, or Flora Fatale, or Demi Dryad, has the female form of a woman from approximately the waist... Okay this was looking promising... capable of releasing an irresistible scent that clouds the mind, and a nectar secreted from the breasts, or the mouth that causes the male to become more virile and to overproduce... That also sounded right... control over natural plant life... feeds on essence, also draws nourishment from the sun and the soil... this was what they were... able to move along vines and root systems in their lairs, with all semblance of legs being purely to fool the eye of human prey... also called the 'Succubus Flower' used to harness male sexual fluids... some are skilled in the mystical arts...*

The artist's renderings in The Book of Beasts weren't too close to what he'd seen, not for these things or any of the other monsters he'd caught a glimpse of here and there, but there weren't far away either. He put down the manual of monsters, it having been the third bestiary he'd thumbed through, and turned his attention to the local lore.

One tome mentioned Courles Manor as the sight of a brutal slaughter during the Days of Blood when the Empire fell and Four Towns truly regained its independence, but even that book described it as a haunted place, long free of human residence, and swallowed up by the forest in its words *...more akin to the lost towns and hamlets of the Elder Woods to the west, consumed by the Queens of the Forest and the enchanting lure of their Siren Blooms, known in the old language as Alraune ...*

This led to him reading about the forest, and how it once stretched from coasts to coast, and only after the Catastrophe of Fates, which led to the rise of the Empire, were large swaths of the Elder Woods cleared to make way for new roads and towns. The forest was attacked, the book said, as though it were a wicked enemy, and much as the mystic arts of nature were seen as the enemy, so too was the forest itself.

That, in turn, led Nathanial to look into the history of natural magic, but the only texts he discovered were scribed in the time of the Empire, where all magic save their ridged academia was seen as evil and forbidden.

As he flipped through page after page of tight, narrow script in one such book, one that seemed to be from the time of Catastrophe based on what little he'd gleaned, one word caught his eye:

Courles.

*A family of oath breakers, practiced in the base and evil arts of lunar, vitae, and earthen arcana, the patron of the family was found guilty of treasons acts, as was the matron. The three daughters were, when their manor and surrounding hamlet and lands were set to the torch, unaccounted for.*

*The manor, being of stone, and surpassingly well constructed, repelled the flame to a great degree, though the same cannot be said for those who sought to defend it. Under rigorous interrogation, those prisoners who claimed loyalty to the family swore oaths that the sisters had vanished by means of their accursed arts, having*

*become one with the forest.*

*Further investigation of the manor and its grounds were deemed too risky, when one party of soldiers was lost within the woods to forces unknown, this being the time of the Goblins and their rise in arms and numbers from the underground and the sea...*

As had been the case for most of his life, reading had only left him more baffled than before he'd begun, and though he'd been at for several days, it wasn't a waste.

Before they became flower girls, they'd been a rich and landed family, nobility or of noble lineage, who'd been ousted at the rise of the Empire. More than a few operations into the ruins that he'd heard of were based on just such stories.

Sometimes it was to find a family sword, or a secret spell book of secrets, but usually it was just...

He bumped into someone as he walked out of the library, and instantly his guts turned to ice water, and he jumped backwards.

"Ho there friends, sorry about that." The man speaking to him was most decidedly not Tobin or one of his gang. He was taller than Nathaniel, and thicker too across the shoulders and the neck. The man also walked armed, and not just with a dagger, but with a long sword at his hip, and armor under his plain brown tunic.

"It's uh, quite alright, sorry." Nathaniel made to leave, but stopped himself, "who are you?"

He didn't know this man, and the guild's library was not open to the public.

The stranger's smile was fixed, and that made Nathaniel feel even more uncomfortable. It wasn't the smile of an idiot, or of a bully, it was one of confidence, that promised easy violence if needed, "My name's Daro, and I've permission from who I'm assuming is your Guild Master to search and acquire a few texts here. You're walking out, I'm walking in, I bet you know a bit more about what I need and where I should look than I, eh?"

The man clapped him on the shoulder, then produced a few silver pieces in his other hand, "I'm in a fuck of a hurry to be honest, you're the only person I've seen in this part of town that I haven't had to consider chopping in half."

Nathaniel let out a sigh, he could relate. "What are you looking for?"

"Anything and everything on Succubi."

Nathaniel laughed, "You know, I know just where to look."

Perhaps being close to a good natured and heavily armed warrior would keep him safe for the next few hours.

## **Chapter 9: Back to the Manor**

'Douse your mask in watered down wine and don't rub your eyes' had been Daro's advice for dealing with plant monsters.

The man had traveled many places, and was even something of an accidental hero on occasion, and Nathaniel's hope was that what worked against sentient mushrooms would also against Alraune pollen.

Nathaniel hadn't been forthcoming about why he was asking, and he didn't tell anyone where he was planning on going, not even Thaddeus. Instead, over several days after visiting the library, he gathered supplies, then slipped off into the woods at first light.

Now that he knew roughly where he was going, he no longer needed a guide, and while his memory had

been muddled, the more he thought about Dahlia, the more he found himself obsessing over her, the sharper and more clear his mind became.

It seemed counter to what she'd wanted, he could almost hear her voice, telling him to lose his way back to her as he made his way home, but her beauty, and her kindness to him had become a beacon in the confused fog that was his time at the manor. And now, knowing that, maybe she and her sisters had been done a great wrong long ago, perhaps if he could reach her, to speak with her again, he could make a peace with them, perhaps find a way to help them.

Or see if he could appeal to them for their kindness.

Provided they didn't drain him like a ripe fruit squeezed for juice.

These were romantic notions to be sure, noble and foolish gestures that Nathaniel knew were certainly enhanced by his experiences with the two sisters he'd met, but barring uncharacteristic gallantry on his part, if he was careful and more quick to act, then, he might be able to gather more treasure, maybe even the great and mighty 'enough to retire on' score and then be done with all of it.

It was stupid.

It was dangerous.

It was still necessary, because the Guild Master had told him Tobin was going to murder him, given enough time, confirming something he already knew deep down in his gut.

So, as he came to the edges of the clearing where the manor stood, he retrieved his mask from his pack, and a bladder of watered down red wine.

The air had already become sweet, and it was effecting him faster than it had before. Little glimpses of memory were flashing in his mind, and his body felt its effects too. The dull ache of arousal was starting to form in him, and he did everything he could to ignore it.

The mask wasn't much, it was just cloth and fasteners, nothing more than what any common bandit would wear, but it was the best he could manage. He'd tried out an alchemist's hood, but he couldn't breathe at all in it, and the goggles made it impossible to see anything that wasn't straight in front of him.

So, this was it.

In addition to his knife, he'd also brought a few clay balls of acid that were good for throwing, and less good for smashing against something. The acid would eat through flesh, but was more potent against plant life, which was why he'd selected them, not to throw at anyone, but to use in case the vines came after him again.

There were other things in his pack as well, mostly more practical tools of the trade. A wire saw, lock picks, a small vial of oil, and a small packet of bakers flour; each were valuable for a multitude of uses. So too were the candle, the very sharp scissors, and the small flint and steel lighting device that he always kept in there.

Anything else, like the alchemist's hood, would only slow him down.

Nathaniel's skin was tingling as he made his way to the tree line and looked out at the tower. The entrance he'd used before was there, plain as day, but he didn't trust it, he didn't trust Lilyana, the one who'd captured him, not to expect him or anyone to see such an easy path and take it.

This time, as he made his way closer, he skirted the tree line towards the grown over fountain, and saw something he'd missed before. There was a small, tumbled down awning, like the roof of a porch, and under its remains was a cellar door.

The book said that the creatures took sustenance from the soil, but also that they needed sunlight. Though he didn't know what the book was supposing and what it actually knew, he knew flowers didn't bloom where the sun didn't shine, so it seemed worth the incredibly foolish risk.

With ginger steps, he crossed the short distance from the woods to the manor, and his eyes watched the grass and the brush the way one watched a snake that was about to strike.

After a brief glance about himself, he knelt down and tried the door, not daring to breathe, trying to will the old hinges to be silent. For the most part, they were, and opened with only a hint of a creak and a shudder.

Nathanial couldn't smell anything through his mask, but as he stepped down onto the stone steps, he felt the air around him change.

It was damp down there, humid, and the floor under foot was covered in loam. It was also not terribly dark, as lines of sunlight flittered in through holes in the walls and the ceiling above.

Near the room's other doorway, there were chests, and cabinets against the far wall, including one that had once been for wine, but there was no trace of any bottles. With the greatest of care, Nathanial reached back and closed the door behind him, all before making his way down the stairs to cross the room.

He would have gone for the chests had he not seen what was in the next room. There, in the middle of the floor, one that was crisscrossed in thick green vines, was a pool of crystal blue water about three strides wide, and from what he could see through the doorway, the walls were covered in tapestries that hadn't fared any better than those in the tower, but unlike those walls, this room also seemed adorned with golden candle holders.

If none of the sisters were in the room he could move, grab them off the wall and run. Yes he wanted to see Dahlia again, to speak to her, to try and befriend her perhaps, but what he wanted even more was to leave his life behind, get on a boat and just start over again.

There was a lot of gold on those walls, and he made his way to the edge of the doorway. The room was darker, but the still waters of the pool emanated their own soft light, as though each drop within held a little touch of the sun's glow. The room was empty, and so he stepped inside and made for the first candlestick.

Then he stopped.

The reflection in the pool was him, but it wasn't his reflection. He was seeing himself through the eye of someone that was...

## **Chapter 10: The Middle Sister**

"Hello human, welcome to my chambers, it's been too long since I've had a guest." From some collapsed in corner of the ceiling came a flower pod of pale violet, lowered by vines thick as a warrior's calf, and rising up from the center of the flower was what Nathanial assumed was the third sister.

Her hair was red, almost a pastel red in places, and up in pigtails, bound with deep purple roses as ribbons, and while her breasts were not as massive as the one who had enslaved him, they were larger than those of the one he'd been so drawn to.

Like her sisters, her arms were covered in white gloves, but her skin was a more pale green, and her red eyes flickered as though they couldn't decide what shade they wanted to be. And as they danced and shimmered, glowing with the invitation to take a closer look, something moved at Nathanial's side, and the spell was broken.

"I'm sorry to sneak in like this, but having met your sister, I was trying to avoid her. I don't think I made the most polite exit last time." He knew there were vines under the earth behind him, he'd felt them moving as soon as he'd seen one of the ones under his feet start to rise up.

Maybe he could run back, maybe he could run forward, and maybe, just maybe this time, without being affected by their pollen, he could work his way out of it, just as long as he didn't look into this one's eyes.

Sorcery as common as that was easy to avoid with a little bit of common sense.

"Oh, it's you. You've made quite an impression on this house, and both of my sisters had much to say about you. Sweet Dahlia took quite a tongue lashing for your sake. Lilyana said you were quite the... now you'll have to excuse me... you were quite the taste."

Nathanial watched her shoulders and her chest, but not too closely.

"I'm afraid I wasn't ready to take up permanent residence here, not matter how long or short my stay would have been." Maybe, just maybe he could whip an acid ball into her face if push came to shove, but he hoped it wouldn't.

"I can't say I blame you, it's hard being here with both of them. One's so overbearing, and the other's so miserable and boring. All these years and she still hasn't managed to grow up. But, I suppose you've come back for more treasure?"

Whatever the situation was, she wasn't making any overt moves towards him, and that was becoming unnerving in its own wholly terrifying way. "Would you believe I've come back for that yes, but also out of friendship?"

"I would," the middle sister, because clearly that's what she was, let out a derisive chuckle. "But you'll not find the friendship you seek with my little sister. She's neither as sweet and merciful as she wants herself to be, nor would she permit you any real affection. She saved you, but only because she fancies herself tender, though there is less humanity remaining in her than either of us."

"I see. Well, if that's true then, I suppose I could implore you to let me depart, and not tell your older sister I'm about?" This one's words were so candid they had become menacing.

"I could, but you would wound me in leaving me so, without a proper introduction, or a chance to consider for myself if we couldn't become fast friends. My name Camellia Courles, and you must be Nathanial the Thief."

When she spoke his name, the air around her shimmered as her eyes did, and he felt a pressure in his chest that stole his ability to move. The feeling faded with the same immediacy it had come, but the sensation after the fact felt even worse than the moment.

"Do you know what the worst part of living here is Nathanial? Maybe you do since you're the lowborn criminal type that ends up in dungeons. It's that nothing changes. My sisters are the same, these grounds are the same, and the fools that wander into our lair, to be drained, and broken, or sent back to their lands with all of their thoughts ripped from their heads, replaced with stories of treasure to entice the next batch of fools, truthfully, they're all the same too. And while it's been so very long since I've had legs to walk about on, I remember life, I remember the vibrant excitement of the world outside, and it's all the worse since I've learned how to spy upon it with my pool."

Camellia had moved closer to him now, and reached out her hand to him, "The other two refuse to come down here to observe what I can do, and no matter how often I used to ask them if they wanted to study and

practice our old arts, they always refuse. Dahlia's too busy being blue, and Lilyana's too busy chiding her, and then wasting her time arranging flowers and trying to teach birds to sing proper songs."

"Don't be a coward Nathaniel, I just showed you a taste of what I can do with a glance, or with a few words, and unlike one sister who would coddle you into an empty husk, or the other one who would sadly, and desperately drain the life from you with a long kiss full of guilt and self pity, I don't toy about. If I wanted you, I'd have you by now."

That wasn't reassuring in the least, but he took her hand anyway.

"You're a thief I know, but you call yourself a treasure hunter, why?"

"Because I don't like to steal from the living, or take from those who need it, or should have it. I try and be respectful in my crimes." They were at the edge of the pool now.

"So you're a high minded lout, I can respect that. Are you any good at what you do?" The scorn in her voice didn't seem as menacing anymore; it had become more conversational, more curious.

"I was. I've had a run of bad luck, and well, I've tried to rob this place twice to no avail." If she was tired of the sameness of her life here, maybe entertaining her would serve as his means of escape.

"I see. You're also not very bright, you know. You barely made it out of here with your life, and you came back for what? To try and court my sister while harvesting our spare coin? You must know, I should hope you'd know, just saying that out loud almost makes me pity you."

"As I said, I've had a run of bad luck. And said aloud, yes, I do sound like a dolt. I've been feeling like one for a while." She was crueler than any blow from Tobin, but he had the sense that she wanted something. "That aside, what do you want me to steal for you?"

"Oh ho, he's not such a fool after all. Look into the pool and I'll show you."

They were still holding hands, and with her free one, she waved it over the water and it began to change color and shape, swirling to life before his eyes.

"This is the Amulet of the Three Unseen Moons, it is an ancient relic from... from my time as a human. It is full of secrets lost to the wizards, as they've lost the teachings to use it, and know not what it is and what it does. A man in your lands owns it, and I desire it. You will bring this to me."

The pool's swirling images showed him where it was, what it looked like, and even the face of the man who owned it. He wasn't rich enough to be protected from the Thieves Guild, and he lived in the wrong part of Gold Town to be a person of relevant importance. He was just someone with some money, and that made him a fair target.

It was amazing to him the way his mind absorbed all it saw, and reconciled all of the information it was given. He was starting to plan how to do this job, a seemingly easy one at that... then his wits caught up to her spell.

"And then, when I bring it back to you, you'll?" He let go of her hand, stepped away from her, and from the pool. In doing so, he made a point to look past her. He was finally in a position of some leverage.

"Well, what would you like me to do Nathaniel? You seemed to have liked my sisters in certain ways, while they deceived you, but what of me? What of honest, neglected, middle daughter Camellia? Never sought, and never craved? What would you like of me Nathaniel, besides your life?"

"That's what I'm afraid of. I know how useful I am, and where that use ends, it's part of the world I live in. Why would I risk my life for you, only to forfeit it once I bring you your prize?"



Maybe this would help him negotiate himself into a better position, maybe...

"Because despite yourself," her voice dropped into a lower, softer tone, "you truly want to help me."

She moved closer to him and once more took his hand. As her hand touched his, Nathaniel felt a force in his chest, much like what he'd felt when she spoke his name the first time, only this time it was pulling at him.

It made his cock stiffen so fast his head swam.

He was losing something to her, something she was draining from him, and in his temporarily shocked state, Camellia reached out and ripped the mask from his face, then pressed her hand against his cheek and stunned him once again.

His hips rocked and he felt an orgasm building from deep inside. It felt more than physical, it felt like a part of him was aching to be taken by her.

The draining, pulling sensation made him gasp, and as he did, he inhaled the now sweet tasting, seductively fragrantly air. Nathaniel's head spun faster as he staggered backwards, only to look up at her and see her blowing something out of her hand and towards his face.

The world swam as he inhaled a potent dose of her pheromone laced pollen, and it hit him as hard as any of her other tricks had. He came, his whole body came.

Then, everything became quiet, and warm, and soft, and he took a step towards her, even before the voice of his free will, still strong and still present, stopped him. She'd one what the book had said, she'd started to feed on his essence, and knowing that, knowing what she was, gave him some resolve.

"You know, Nathaniel, my sisters are both too much. They've always been too much for anyone, and I'm always overlooked. Even though I'm just like in the story books." Camellia's voice stayed in that same soft register, and she'd moved her hands to her breasts.

"You'll never taste Dahlia's nectar, not more than those few drops she gave you, and Lilyana's is too sweet and too overbearing just like her, but you wanted them both, not realizing that I'm the one that's just right for you, just like that little gift I gave you now. I'm so much more, you want to taste me, even though I'm not your first choice, and you feel guilty about that. Poor, rude, guilty Nathaniel, come and be polite, come and have a taste of me, so I can make you feel even more pleasure."

"No, you're not, you're not going to take me." He blinked, and blinked, and thought he was walking backwards, but realized he'd slipped into a daydream while standing still. Now one hand was going towards his knife, and the other to his acid balls, but it was hard to tell if his mind had stayed clear and present, or had fallen back into daydreams.

It was her turn to blink at him, and this time he couldn't help but take in the scintillating shades of red. "I'm not going to take from you, you poor fool, I'm offering myself to you, look at me, look at what I'm doing."

Her hands were under her breasts, lifting them slightly, and with every necessary breath that Nathaniel took, he was becoming more intoxicated by her, and more distant from the realities of his body's responses. He'd thought he'd drawn his tools several times, but the truth was, he'd started to watch her breasts, just as he had her sisters', and when that thought came around, he decided to look away from her again.

But now, all he could do was stare as Camellia's very large breasts, ones too big for a human woman's, but not yet the size of Lilyana's. He stared as she rolled and massaged them. "Come to me, remember how good she tasted, I'm the better, the softer, my sweetness is what you desire, look at me, Dahlia told me how she transfixed you, and my breasts are even larger than hers, but not too big not like Liyana's, no, my breasts

are just right for you, just the right size for your eyes to see them, and only them now, see what you want, see what you desire.”

She pinched a nipple and a few drops of nectar stuck to her finger, “You loved their tastes, not knowing what you were missing, remember. You can come and taste, come and have as much as you crave, you know I need you for more than your seed, you know I need you for more than your essence, just like you need to taste me for more than my own commands, you need to taste me because you want me so. You want me Nathaniel, you want to come and suckle on my breasts, to cherish me in ways my sisters would deny you, to show your friendship to one who won’t consume you.”

Memory became a cruel mistress in that moment, as her lilting voice beckoned him to recall the pleasures that had been forced upon him, ones his body and mind bent to, and came to crave in those moments. He felt the lingering glow of the orgasm she’d just caused in him, and Nathaniel spiraled further into her trap.

His arm moved, only it was away from his knife and not closer, and when it did, it sent a jolt through him, like when the body spasms while falling asleep.

“This is no friendship,” the words were heavy in his mouth, swollen and misshapen on his tongue, but he meant them. He also meant to look away from her chest, but his eyes were less obedient than his voice.

“And you would come to steal from my family, while offering your comradery, so perhaps you shouldn’t trust your own mind to rightness thief, and instead, trust in the treasures before you, sweet and warm, awaiting your lips and your touch, tempting you more than gold, promising more than jewels, watch what you truly desire, and remember the bliss of what those lesser creatures tasted of. Remember the blissful gift of pleasure I’ve already shared with you.”

His thoughts were so soft now that a strong breeze would have twisted them in the same way she bent the images in her scrying pool, and once more, her words returned the cloying memories of sweetness and pleasure to him.

She was close now, and his eyes were down, lost in the valley of her cleavage. He was dazed, drugged, and overwhelmed by the weight of her voice. Nathaniel didn’t realize it, but where her sisters had entranced him, she had merely distracted him, and hid the words of power she was using to compel him.

It was magic disguised as seduction disguised as a different kind of magic, aided by her practice in cultivating powerful doses of her pheromone pollen, and when she stuck her finger in his mouth, he sucked the nectar off of it readily enough.

Light and heat exploded in his body, and Nathaniel let out a whimper as she gently led him back to the pool and turned him to face it. “Look into the waters and listen now Nathaniel, listen to what you must do for me.”

He watched himself in the water, his lips sucking on Camellia’s massive tits, her fingers in his hair, a happy smile on his face. There was gold all around him, bags of coins for him to take wherever he pleased, and as he watched the image of her, he saw that she was a human again, beautiful, buxom, and impossibly stunning, fucking him on a heap of coins.

His cock throbbed in his breaches , cumming again at her command.

He could feel this pleasure all the time, he would feel this pleasure all the time.

All Nathaniel had to do was bring her the amulet.

## Chapter 11: Tobin

The sun was sinking past its noonday pinnacle when Nathaniel finally emerged from the cellar of that old, run down manor. In all the time that Tobin sat in the shadows and the brush staring at that plant covered dilapidated heap, not once did he see a ghost, or a fiend, or any other gruesome danger. Instead, what he saw was a shitty old building with a lot of bad stories; the kind of hideout he would pick if he were trying to avoid detection.

The one good side of sitting out in the wild all day, after following Eels out here, just like he'd followed that son of a bitch everywhere else since he got back, was that it was a nice summer day and it smelled kind of nice too.

Eels was an idiot, an actual idiot.

For one thing, as a career criminal he lacked a few basic skills. One, which had served Tobin well the past few days, was his inability to spot a tail. The other, which had served Tobin even longer, was Eels' belief in his ability to get out of things.

If he couldn't run away, he'd try and talk his way out. If he couldn't talk his way out, he'd try harder to run, and all that idiocy came from trust. Eels wanted to trust people, he wanted to see the situation as better than it was, and that was because he was an idiot and a fool.

Tobin could close on him now, though the fool's pace had quickened considerably. He could close on his old partner, find out the truth, and then slit his throat out in the middle of nowhere. But that was short-term thinking, and short-term thinking hadn't served Tobin so well as of late.

Besides, the Guild Master had made it clear, if the fool stepped out of line or broke the rules of the guild he was fair game, otherwise he wasn't to be harmed, with the very clear implication that this expectation extended to outside of Four Towns as well.

So, Tobin had followed him into the woods, just like he'd followed him to the library, and to the shops, and back to that shack Thaddeus ran. Tobin had watched Eels' rendezvous with that swordsman, and he'd watched the two of them leave the library together, share drinks and a meal, then go their separate ways.

He hadn't tried to get too close, because he wasn't an idiot, but there was something in the works with the two of them. Eels was working with outside forces, and that guy, who'd somehow been given permission to go into the library, was his connection.

Tobin had never been inside that building, mainly because he didn't know how to read.

It was hard work matching Eels' pace now. He hadn't slowed down, he hadn't stopped, whatever he was involved in had lit a fire in that idiot that Tobin had never seen before.

When they finally reached the edge of the city, Tobin followed him back to Thaddeus' place. From there, Tobin set a watch on the building, while he took a nap in one of the vacant structures across the way.

Early in the evening it was Chandra who woke him.

"Is he still there?" Tobin's eyes opened, and his mind snapped into its single-minded focus.

"No, he's gone a few blocks down, buying more supplies. What did he do, what'd you learn?" Chandra was covered in a short black cloak; her blonde hair was shaved down to its customary stubble. She was lithe, lean, and everything she did was fast. It was a speed that came from being smooth, and that smoothness came from slow, methodical practice.

“He went back into the woods, back to that manor, then after a good few hours he hauled his ass back here. You see what he was buying?”

“Buckets said he’d gotten a good length of rope, and some new gloves,” she was interrupted by a knock on the door.

“He’s on the move, he’s got his gear bag and it looks like he’s heading to Gold Town, Lug’s on his trail.” Buckets had stepped into the small room, and threw Tobin a thick belt wrapped around a short, broad saber.

Chandra shook her head, ‘What’s that for?’

“He’s going to go do a job for his new friends, so we’re going to go take care of his friends and give him a surprise when he gets there.”

He watched Chandra nodding along. She wasn’t the sympathetic type, but the most cold-blooded of killers could still be bound by the past, “That going to be a problem for you?”

“Fuck him, I’ll do it myself if it comes up.” She spat towards the corner of the room.

“Oh, it’ll fucking come up.”

## **Chapter 12: One By One**

None of them were woodsmen of any sort, especially not in the dark, but it wasn’t hard to find a guide to take them close enough for Tobin to walk them the rest of the way. There’d been some hushed conversation between the guide and Tobin at the start when it turned out the woodsman had also led Eels out to the same place.

It was dark in the woods, and little moonlight made it through the canopy. Every noise sounded more pronounced, and while they were largely practiced at being quiet and working in similar conditions, it was not the same.

They had settled on using one torch, because that was what any lookouts would be expecting, and as Chandra carried it and walked a few paces ahead, Tobin and his other four henchmen ghosted behind her, following her lead.

Buckets was the first to notice the sweet scent that had started to waft through the air, and his step started to slow a touch, becoming more leisurely and careless as he followed along.

Crain, Tobin’s third in command fell back to try and speed him on, but when he asked the big man what the problem was, he just said it was such a nice night to be out, then asked if Crain smelled it too.

They both stood there a moment, considering the sweetness in the air, and the way the shadows didn’t seem so ominous anymore. Ahead of them, it looked like Pierce, and Walt had both also lost a step or two as well, while Chandra and the torch moved further and further away.

Tobin had fallen back to Bucket and Crain and was prodding them along, whispering harsh and vulgar instructions, and found himself having to do the same with the other two, who they were overtaking.

Finally, they caught up to Chandra at the edge of the woods, her torch planted in the ground behind a tree.

“The fuck is wrong with all of you?” Her whisper was sharp as her sword.

“These fuckwits are too busy enjoying the pleasant scent of the forest. Get your shit together, we’ve got work to do.” Each of the others started to regain their wits at that, but Chandra’s shoulders seemed to slump as she let out a little sigh.

"It does smell nice out here Tobin. I've been breathing in burning tallow until now. It's not our fault your nose is all broken." She leaned against a tree like the others had, and it looked to Tobin like she was enjoying the moment.

"Well that's all well and good, but we've got hard work ahead of us. There's no knowing how many folk might be in there, so we split up, move silent, and," he pulled his thumb across his throat, "draw the red on everyone we find."

Putting hands to weapon hilts, they nodded, and as one, the six of them moved through the night to surround the manor and force their way in.

Crain was gone.

One moment he was standing behind Tobin in the hall, and the next, he was just gone. As soon as they'd walked in through a hole in the wall, Crain had whispered about being dizzy, but he'd had a stupid look on his face as he said it, and it seemed like the bloodthirsty brigand was in danger of wandering off like a child or a poorly trained dog.

Tobin thought he could feel a tangible pull on his lieutenant earlier, or that the foundation of the manor was sinking, but he had kept on, following his gut, willfully denying the inclination to go the other direction.

Then Crain was just gone.

The air around Chandra grew heavy, and she heard Pierce cry behind her. It was a sound that became a whimper in the time it took her to wheel about, sword at the ready. Something in the darkness had swallowed him up, and she could barely make out his shape.

But the scintillating red eyes in the dark stood out clear as stars.

The breath she took to steady herself was one of undeniable sweetness, and the foggy, detached sensation she'd been feeling became overwhelming. She took another breath as those eyes seemed to grow larger, warmer, red upon red, dancing like fire in the darkness.

A vine started to snake around her leg, and her blade struck at it, then she was running. Running blind, running fast, but not far. The more she moved, the more dreamy and disoriented she became, and it began to feel like trying to run in a dream. Her steps were unsure, her hands felt weak, like trying to hold her sword was too much, and as she found herself at the top of a flight of stairs, Chandra couldn't tell if she was running up them or down them.

As she turned, Chandra ran face first into the warm softness of two massive breasts, and then felt strong hands wrap around her, "There there my sweet, I have you now."

She struggled for air as her face was cradled in that massive cleavage, and every breath she took left her more intoxicated than the last. Her head was spinning, her body was going limp, her sword fell from her hands, and the last words she remembered hearing were, "It's alright, everything is alright now."

Unknown to her, Chandra's face broke into a wide smile upon hearing that, and she fell into a daydream that no words could describe.

"Pierce? Buckets? Chandra? Crain, where are you?"

Walt had stumbled on the edge of a pool of water in the middle of a room in the basement, but he

hadn't remembered coming down any stairs, and he didn't know why, but once he'd gotten down there, he realized he needed to go back up.

He shouted his friends' names again, and had no idea how or when he'd gotten separated from Buckets, but as he made his way down the hall he'd found himself in, he tripped over something else.

It wasn't the lip of a pool this time, it was Pierce's body.

Vines shot from the darkness and wrapped around his arms and legs, then pulled him down the hall into the pitch black, and then into a room filled with moonlight.

The buxom form of a beautiful red headed young woman looked as though it was half raised from a large flower, and as Walt stared at her, taking short, panicked breaths, he realized this was where he'd wanted to be.

"Breathe of me, and breathe deep stranger, welcome to my home. One of your friends sought to deny me, and another fled. You'll not be so cruel will you? You'll not deny me what I wish will you?"

The vines pulled him closer to her, and she knelt down over his face, the nipple of one large breast dangling above his lips. "Kiss it, suck it, and show me you'll oblige me now."

She pinched her nipple, and spray of sticky honey-like nectar shot into his lips, and into his mouth. It took no more than that one taste for Walt to do what she had asked of him.

He did not see the body of Buckets in the corner, drained to nothingness, just like the corpse he'd tripped on in the hall, and he did not know that soon he would be joining them, only by a much more pleasurable road.

## **Chapter 12: The Amulet**

"Where the fuck..." Nathaniel was holding an amulet, a circular platinum ring on a chain, mounted around a clear white gem of some unknown kind. He was going to say "am I", but as he looked into the center of the jewel, his memory cleared and he knew exactly where he was.

He also knew why he was there.

Without wanting to lose a step on his escape, he put the amulet on, then took a deep steadying breath, and focused on the moment.

Then, after he followed his escape route out of the mansion he'd broken into, he ran. Nathaniel ran as fast as he could for as long as he could until he found himself outside of Thaddeus' bar.

The old drunk was deep into his evening ritual intoxication when Nathaniel got there. "Oh look at you boy, you're still alive? Tobin's crew not get you in the woods?"

Sweating, tired, and unsettled by what his day had become, Nathaniel wiped his brow with his sleeve and looked at the disgraced surgeon, "What?"

"Tobin took his crew into the woods after you, the whole gang, including that, whose-her-face, that girl you used to have around. Why'd she stop coming around with you anyhow, I liked her?" His words had been punctuated by hiccups and a few laughing, wheezing, coughs. It was vey early for Thaddeus to be this drunk.

"Thaddeus, I'm taking some food."

Nathaniel made his way into the back, wolfed down some dried sausage and bread, then took a deep drink of water and sorted through his bag. Everything he'd taken with him that morning was still there, and...

He could see perfectly in the dim light of the back room, just as he'd seen clearly in the early dark of

the evening.

Well, that was one of the amulet's powers, and it also freed him of Camellia's hold over him, so that was encouraging as well. Now, he had to go back to the manor, in the dark of the night, to, he didn't know exactly, but he had to go and do something.

So, Nathaniel ran out the door, stole a horse from a stable on the edge of Silver Town, and took the forest road as far as he could. He'd stolen a lantern as well, and that had helped the horse more than it had him. When he reached the point where he had to leave the road, he turned the horse back towards Four Towns, slapped its ass, and hoped for the best.

For the horse, and for himself.

### **Chapter 13: Into Dangers, Known and Unknown**

The air was clean.

He was close enough to the manor now where it should have been sweet, teasing him with euphoria, even with his mask on. He should have felt the pheromones sinking into his skin, and around his eyes, but he felt nothing, nothing save the fear that was pooling in his guts and making his limbs tingle.

He'd be too late, he knew it, but too late for what?

Would the manor be filled with his human enemies, their blades sticky with plant sap, or blood, or whatever flowed through the Alruane?

Or, would he find his old gang at the mercy of the sisters, drained, imprisoned in pods, milked to a slow and oblivious end?

Whatever it was, whatever it could be that he was walking into, he had no idea what he'd hoped to accomplish, or what he could do at all.

Walking through the night, seeing things as clear as day, he reached the tree line and looked to the tower, then to the open front door, and finally to the open cellar door that led to Camellia's underground chambers.

There was a chance, if Tobin's crew had been successful, that the sisters were dead and that they'd be both pillaging the place, and likely keeping a look out for him.

If the sisters were alive, he had no idea where they'd be, or what they would be doing, all he knew was that it would be foolish to bring Camellia the amulet, and it would be just as foolish to try and walk across the open ground assuming no one was watching or him.

So, as he did the first time, Nathaniel slipped from cover to cover, and...

"You rat fuck shit fuck, I'll fucking kill you!"

Tobin ran at him from behind a broken wall near the fountain.

"Limp fucked, shit monger fuck!" He was wild with rage, snarling, with only a broken piece of his stick in his hand, and a large empty sheath flapping against the side of his leg. His clothes were torn, and his chest was scratched all over with thin shallow lines.

Tobin's eyes were glassy and bloodshot, spittle was streaming down his lower lip, and he tried to use the remnant of stick like a knife, aiming the jagged broken end down between Nathaniel's neck and collarbone.

He was sloppy though, off balance, not his usual murderously effective self, and instead, he bowled into Nathaniel and they both fell to the grass.

Tobin was on top of him now, and the point of his stick was moving closer to Nathaniel's eye slower than it should have been. It was because the thief had managed to get his hand around Tobin's wrist.

"Die Eels, you die, you die here, you die." Nathaniel looked up in wonder at the face of his one time partner in crime, and couldn't tell if he was seeing Tobin as he truly was, or Tobin stripped of everything that made him human, or if he was seeing something else entirely.

His would be killer's free hand came down on Nathaniel's cheek once, then twice, and on that second time, Nathaniel heard something break. Though consumed with madness, Tobin's weight shifted and he fell back slightly; the pinky finger on his punching hand was mangled, pointing out sideways in the wrong direction.

The weight of the encroaching sharpened stick lessened for a moment as well, and in that split second, Nathaniel reached into his bag, got a hold of something, and smashed Tobin in the face with it.

There was a crack, then a hiss, and both men screamed in pain.

Bits of shattered clay fell from the remains of the glove on Nathaniel's hand. Acid burned through it and stung his fingers as Tobin howled like an animal, already back on his feet, grabbing at his face and snarling.

The glove had saved his hand, but the pain had been sharp and unexpected.

There were no words between them anymore, and when Nathaniel saw the damage the orb had done, with Tobin's eye half dissolved and his cheek a dripping, bloody mess, he knew there would be nothing more to say. His knife was in his hand as Tobin charged at him again, the long fingers of his empty hands stretched out like claws.

All Nathaniel had to do was stick...

He couldn't do it.

His hand punched out towards Tobin's face and would have had no effect had it not glanced off the acid burn. Tobin dropped to his knees, but his hands were still out, reaching, not for his neck now...

But for the amulet.

With more hate, and more malice than he'd ever felt before, Nathaniel hit Tobin on the top of his head with the pommel of his knife.

Then he did it again.

And again, and again, and again.

And again, until Tobin was on his hands and knees, bleeding from the head, wheezing and slobbering.

"Are you watching?" Nathaniel yelled as he kicked Tobin in the ribs, "You won't get it. He won't bring it to you, and you know you can't take it from me."

He kicked Tobin again, even harder, "He can't take it from me either, I know you're watching I know you're see this."

Tobin stopped moving. He didn't die, he was still breathing, his body just became still, and then curled up into the fetal position.

"What have you done?" Dahlia's voice was small, shocked, and very close to him.

Nathaniel turned and saw the blue haired sister there, her body was wet from head to toe.

"He was trying to kill me, trying to take this to your sister." Nathaniel was panting now; the adrenaline was starting to wear off. "Your sister made me steal it."

Dahlia's face was pale with horror, "And did she make you bring these monsters with you? To come and



try to kill us all again, like before? I should have left you in that pod to die.”

“Dahlia,” her fear and her scorn felt like sickness in his guts, “no, they, I don’t know why they were here, I think they were after me.”

“I hid in the well, in the water, in case there was fire while my sisters protected us. You made them do it, you brought them here, you’re one of them, like the ones that made us become these things, that killed our family.”

She was quiet for a moment, and his chest was heaving for breath as he tried to find something to say.

“But you can make it right, I’ll show you.”

A thick vine wrapped around Tobin’s leg and started to pull his whimper body to her. Nathaniel watched in something that quickly became horror, as Dahlia started to chant and run her fingers over his burnt face.

His skin was changing under her touch, turning to something like tree bark, and when he started to thrash around and howl in a pain that was more profound than any Nathaniel had ever heard, Dahlia forced his head to her breast to suckle at her nipple while more vines restrained him as more skin started to turn to bark.

“Give me the amulet and I can make sure no one ever hurts us again. Give me the amulet and I can make everything simple for you, and all of your kind, just like I am for this one.”

More vines started to rise around her, like the tentacles of a sea creature.

“I can force my sister to let me use her mirror, then I can work my magic over all of your town, all of its people, an army to keep us safe. Don’t you want that for me, don’t you want me to be safe Nathaniel?”

The fear he had seen in her shifted to a manic enthusiasm, and he saw a day dreamer’s distance in her eyes as she envisioned everything she said, “Give it to me, please. It can be your dowry, or a gift in courting me.”

The vines were withering about, as anxious as her voice had become.

“No. By the gods no.”

Vines started to whip out towards him from every direction, but they fell against some unseen force and curled away.

The creature that had been Tobin was still sucking at her tit, but Nathaniel wasn’t watching anymore, he was running.

“They’re not all dead you know, not yet, not the girl. Lilyana wouldn’t let me have all of them.”

Camellia was there, in the moonlight, and she’d waved a hand behind her, back towards Dahlia, who was laughing, and yelling, telling him to come back, telling him that if he loved her at all, he would.

A wall of thorns rose behind him where she gestured.

“You, no, you stay away from me.” Nathaniel’s knife was still in his hand, and he was reaching for another orb of acid. She on the other hand, was laughing at him.

“Looooooooook into my eyes Nathaniel... what do you see now?” Her voice was just as soft and just as cruel as when she’d overpowered him earlier than very day.

Her eyes were flat, red, pretty, but no different than any other eyes.

“I can’t do anything to you, I had no idea the amulet would break my hold just by touching it. I got lucky when these fools wandered into my home, but you handled all of that well enough. The amulet protects you

from the powers our bodies give us, and from the magic we used to practice. Though I guess from what just happened, sweet, sad Dahlia's been keeping up with her studies in secret."

Camellia laughed.

"She's a fool though. The amulet would have served her plans, which are much worse than mine, but she can't bear the thought of leaving this place. With that little bauble I could have my legs back, and then Nathaniel, then I would have just walked away from my horrible sisters and been free to..."

"Drain the life out of men wherever you go?" Without her powers to use on him, Camellia was just a busty girl stuck in a flower petal.

"You say that like it's a bad thing. The men I drain enjoy it. Well they mostly do. A few of your friends died rather uncomfortably as I just sucked their souls out, so be glad I didn't do the same to you. Anyhow, that human girl you fancy so much is upstairs with my sister, imprisoned, and if you want to save her from Lilyana's nefarious ends, you should move quickly."

"You're not, you're not as bad as I thought you were." He was looking at her sideways, trying to make sense of what was really going on in this manor, and with this girls who seemed as miserable as they were terrible.

"No," Camellia laughed and it was certainly at him and not with him, "I am. But unlike the other two, I'm direct. It's from being the middle child you know, five centuries of life as a plant monsters, and we're stuck where we were, just as human as the moment we ceased to be human at all."

"I'm going to go calm my little sister down, and keep her wood man from trying to crush your skull. Unless, you'd like to, well, give me the amulet and we can both go our separate ways?"

Nathaniel shook his head, and with that, Camellia's vine tentacles started pulling her away from him.

### **Chapter 13: The Mistress of the House**

For the very first time, Nathaniel walked through the front door of Courles Manor. The atrium was like the rest of the manor, covered in vines and the ravages of time. Twin staircases led to an upper level, and he didn't have to go far to see what, or who he was looking for.

"Ah, burglar, you've returned to us," Lilyana's gargantuan breasts rested on the railing and she smiled at him like he was an old friend. "What brings you to us this evening? Are you here to murder and pillage like the others?"

"I'm not. I've come to try and clean up their mess, I'd hoped to try and stop them since they came here for me, or because they thought you were other men like them, and not, well, yourselves." Nathaniel moved closer to the stairwell on his right, her left.

"Well, good intentions count for very little in this world," she sighed and her breasts heaved ever so slightly as she did, "but I appreciate them. Though you've seen the carnage your first visit this day has caused, both for yourself, and for all of us. I suppose you've come to realize you should have stayed away?"

"I was no less desperate for my safety and well being this morning than I am now Lilyana. And now that it seems I've some shield against your family's wiles, what's stopping me from walking room to room until the wealth I need is mine? It would count nothing to the three of you, stranded here, forever in the sight of your regrettable tragedy." He took a few steps up the stairs towards her.

"You're too cruel." She brought the back of her hand to her forehead and scoffed, causing her

voluminous chest to jiggle; her feigned offense reminded him of Camellia's cruelty.

"And you were going to leave me to die in a giant flower, drained of my life essence, thought you and your ilk can survive as any other plant can." He climbed a few more steps, and for the first time in a very long time, felt like a man of means and worth.

"Do you say as much to men who eat meat, when grains and plants would also do? Save your indignities and tell me why you're still in my home." She moved closer to his approach, and brought her hands to the tops of her breasts, fingers folded together as her arms pressed against their massive size.

"Your sister says not all of your attackers are dead." He had reached the top of the stairs, but didn't take another step closer.

"Two remain, yes, but they're mine, and you'll not take them out of here like any loose coins or trinkets. Not, unless you have something to offer. Something perhaps, as beautiful as the woman I have, who truly, I don't quite know what to do with. It would feel wrong to drain her life energies, and I already refused Camellia the pleasure. I could keep her here, I suppose, as a friend for Dahlia, but who knows what my poor sister would do after a time. You've seen some of her secrets, and I think you'd rather her be fed to Camellia wouldn't you?"

Her hands moved in lazy, illuminating flourishes, switching from hand to hand, and when one was not moving it was resting on her breasts. "You needn't answer, I'll take you to them, and then we can talk more of our shared circumstances."

Her voice had become lighter, nervous in its own way, and Nathaniel kept both a wary eye, and a wary distance from her as she led him down the upper level's hall.

"Before I returned here, I discovered a little about your family, and what you've become. For what it's worth Lilyana, I'm sorry you had to live through such a thing." He kept well behind her, and as he walked, he noticed that the endless hanging vines, that decorated everything moved away from him as they would move with the breeze.

"And you're wondering how we became what we are." She didn't turn to respond to him, and instead kept moving down the hall. "Our father was a collector of rare goods, and a broker of valuable items. Most of what he owned of worth was stolen from us when persecution of our kind first began. But many of his most prized treasures seemed like nothing to those that set upon his business and his ship. He had Alraune pods that hadn't quickened."

At this point she stopped and turned to face him, "When the wizards came with the mob to kill us, burn our home, and wipe our history and ways from all of history, we used our own life essences to quicken the pods, which we buried beneath the cellar in the dirt, and as our loyal servants fought and died trying to defend this place, and to give us enough time to complete our ritual, we remained hidden under the ground, until we had become wholly our new selves, blossoming into what we have come to be."

There was pride, cunning, and grief on her face and in her words, then she smiled, "I've never told another soul that story. But here we are."

She waved her arm, and the greenery that hung from what he thought was a wall gave way to a very large room, one that he did know. In the room were eight large flowers, like roses that were closed, and each one was different, vibrant shade of pink or red.

Lilyana's hands fell to her breasts as she addressed Nathaniel, "What to you want with these two? Do

you want them at all? Especially as they'd come here to kill you? I've heard all you've said to all of my sisters, the plants hear, and they speak to me. The other two share this gift, as they share the ability to command them, but neither cares much about listening to anyone or anything, except themselves."

They'd come to the point of negotiation, and her voice had become more genial, "But, they mean something to me. I love them dearly, and I sacrificed my chance to escape and run off with my betrothed to stay and help protect them. They mean something to me. These two," she waved to a pink and a red pod next to each other in the backmost corner of the room, "mean little to you, or, they should mean less to you than they do."

"So I'm to leave them to die here, with you? You've threatened one of their fates with something worse than that, and I think you know more of my mind, and her mind as well as any who you would imprison and drain." His knife was still in his hand, and Tobin's blood had dried on the handle and on his own acid burnt skin. "So, free them, and we can part."

"When you say them," she moved waved her arm again, this time with a greater flourish that made the mass of her breasts shift as the red pod opened, "you mean her. We'll negotiate for her fate, the other is mine, and too spent already to be saved."

Chandra stood there, naked, clean as though she'd been bathed, and with a gentle smile on her hard, angular face. Her eyes did not open, her body did not move, save for the rise and fall of her small pert breasts with every deep breath she took.

"When I saw her as ill treated by your world as she was, I wished to show her some small kindness, and being so overwhelmed with my presence, she welcomed the chance to be bathed, and cherished in this small way. I've only been kind to her, I've only helped her as I would help my sisters."

There was some strange, odd alchemy of being both self-satisfied, and pleading in her words, and Nathaniel wondered if she was as confused about what to do here as he was.

"That was kind of you. Now, let me take her back, give her over to me. Wake her from this sleep, from what charms hold her, and let us never cross paths again."

"I will do as you ask, though in return I would ask something of you. I would not dare ask the amulet of you, as it would only bring ruin to my home. It would have no use to me, my sisters would both vie for it, and our endless bickering would become worse, and perhaps more desperate, dare I say, violent. And, I know you would never give it to me while in my clutches, for fear of falling back under my spell. So rest assured, I'll not ask that of you, but only that we may speak a little longer. It's been so long since I've had company I can address in this way."

It was Nathaniel's turn to laugh, "This is some final gambit to ensnare me isn't it? Both times before, I've come here, I've obliged when I should have resisted, and I've played your games when I ought to have fought. What trick is it now? Some other magic, some other tool, do you have some weapon hidden in here to poison me with? You've nothing to say that I want to hear."

Those words had come like a yawn, the natural end of his exhaustion at the day, and at the stresses of the last week of his life. "Please, just let her go."

There was a long moment of silence, as they looked at each other, and with another dramatic flourish of her hand, and another jiggle of those breasts that truly did make up most of her torso, the flower pod closed.

"Not," she sighed and folded her hands over her breasts, "until I've said my piece."

Nathanael sheathed his knife, took out his bladder and had a drink of the water.

What hadn't he seen?

Nothing that compared to her breasts, nothing so appealing, not even the images in Camellia's pool.

"What are you thinking now, what's straining behind your eyes, denying you the enjoyment of just such a soothing sight, well earned, lusted for, as once before, and so now as you stare at them, desiring them simply, safe from my intoxication, shielded from my seductive scent, free to stare and see nothing else now, not even the amulet, and where would it be here, not nearly as fetching as my breasts, but it could look beautiful on another, could it not Nathaniel?"

"Nathaniel?" She said his name again.

He blinked, and found himself looking up at her smiling face, "this day's taken a toll on you, but perhaps you can answer me this. As someone whose eyes find they cannot stray long from my breasts, even now, ripe and full of the sweetness that so makes your cock so mighty and your balls so full, while other breasts would not seem as lovely as mine, not as large, not as compelling, smothering of all else, even thoughts, what could you imagine your amulet looking like, on perhaps other breasts, ripe and full, complementing them, each to the other."

He had no idea what she was saying, or asking, and while Camellia had tempted him, had teased him, and had drained him and coaxed more than one release from him, he was still uncomfortably aroused by Lilyana.

His body had soaked up the pheromones of the sisters all morning and into the afternoon, and now he was being spoken to softly, delicately by the massive forces of nature that were her breasts.

He knew she was his enemy, that she was beyond cunning, or so he assumed, but the length of his day was crippling his ability to think, or was it her breasts that were too heavy for him to lift from his mind.

"Nathaniel, would you look away from my chest for just a moment, and see something I would want you to think on, of my breasts, think of my breasts as you listen and look upon something I want you to see, seeing only my breasts in your mind as your eyes follow my voice here."

The pod that held Chandra opened again, and she stood there still, but her eyes were open now, and they were yellow, bright yellow as a dandelion, though they didn't seem to see him, or anything. But that was not the only change, her hair had grown, long and thick, down to her shoulders, now the same color as her eyes.

"Your friend Chandra, look at her breasts now, they were nothing a moment ago, but look now, see how they would compliment the amulet? How they would compliment and compel any eye that was not bound and bewitched by my breasts, as you are now? Look, they swell more and more by the moment, and perhaps if she does not wear the amulet soon, it would be a loss on her, between them too."

Chandra's breasts were growing, swelling up, becoming as full as Dahlia's before his eyes, though in his mind Nathaniel had fallen into an endless, exhausted loop of thinking of Lilyana's breasts, sucking on them, tasting her nectar, and cumming over and over again, having been beguiled by her voice and the gentle jiggling motion of her breasts.

It was as though he existed in two moments at once. One, where he never left her arms, never escaped, and never came back, and the other being this moment, watching in confused, passive, disoriented, exhaustion, as his former lover mutated before his eyes, changing slowly into a flower monster.

"You could offer her a compliment to her beauty, and surely all women desire such a thing, and you

could save her, stop her from what you know in your heart that I've done to her. You could free her from my breasts are in your mind, you could free her from, think not of thought but only my breasts, you could save her, only you can save her with the amulet now, and make her almost as lovely as me, surely more lovely than sad and wicked Dahalia, who was once such a fine creature in your mind, but now she is lost to your memory, remembering my breasts as you know what you must do, you know you must save her before she becomes wholly as my wicked sisters are."

"The amulet, it stops your power." He took a few defiant, confused steps forward, thrashing against her, certain that he knew what she'd just told him, not because she told him, but because he knew what he had to do to save her.

"But then she would be free, and you would not have the amulet here and neither would I? Is that what you want, my breasts, you want my breasts, for her to be free?"

Every time Lilyana mentioned her chest, Nathaniel's mind curled up on itself, snuggling up to their image thought he wasn't looking at her, and every time this happened, the loop became smaller, tighter, like a collar being fitted around his mind.

"I can't let you do this to her," he took the amulet off and placed it around her neck.

"No, you can't, and you've saved her, now come to me, come to me Nathaniel, come to me now." He felt dizzy as the potent sweetness of her pheromones wafted into his nose.

"No," he surprised himself with his answer, "No. You'll not have me again."

"Oh my poor Nathaniel, you can deny me all you wish, but with every breath your mind is lost in my breasts already, with every breath you're already bound by the sight of them as your body denies you denial, with every breath you're becoming more intoxicated with my confusing, overwhelming scent. Aren't you so lost now Nathaniel? Already enthralled. Aren't you so tired, don't you truly desire to come to me, to cum for me again?"

He was staring at Lilyana now, watching her hands massaging her tits, pinching her nipples until her nectar started to drip out, nectar she started to trace around her areolas. "Say no as much as you want, but you're too tired to fight, too weak to resist the weight of my breasts any longer, come to me, come to where you truly belong now."

Nathaniel shook his head, "No, you'll not have me."

"You've said that to me already, but you only lie to yourself."

He felt so dizzy, and bone weary, and worst of all, there was a nagging, confused part of his mind, one that was lost in the way she'd beguiled him this time, unable to make sense of what she'd done.

"And if you're resisting me, then why are you coming closer now, why are you walking into my embrace?" She held out her arms, "Come to me Nathaniel, step by step, come into my embrace, your work is done, you've saved her, you've denied me the amulet, and you're no longer denying your desires at all. Desire me, succumb to my breasts, breathe me in and let go of this very long day."

Nathaniel wasn't walking towards her, she was gliding to him, but her scent had left him disoriented, and having been enthralled by her, simply and plainly put into a deep trance through no greater magic than her words and the size of her breasts, one that spoke to all of his desires, and filled his head with suggestions that separately he agreed with one by one, not seeing the way they were connected, and then programmed with a trigger to continue to disorient and arouse him by disassociating him with the moment by reminding him of

the past, there was no longer an organized place for his mind to work from.

"Come to me Nathaniel, step by step, come back to me now, let me make everything else disappear, just as my breasts become the only thing you see, let pleasure become all you feel." He stood in one place, dazed, rocking back and forth, trying to reconcile not moving with her getting closer, missing the obviousness of what was happening.

When he felt her touch on the back of his neck, pushing his head down towards her massive breasts, everything she said became true. He'd lost again, he'd fallen into her trap again, he'd never truly left her embrace.

Nathaniel kissed, and licked, and sucked on her nipples, and she stroked his head, wordlessly holding him as his body responded to her secretions. When he was sucking harder, squeezing at her tits more vigorously, moaning as his body turned to lead, as beaten by the day as his mind was by her games.

Her succubus flower bloomed, and she unfastened his breaches. Nathaniel's cock was dripping, stiff and hard almost beyond its capacity, and she savored it, and the taste of his essence as he erupted into her, and for her, cumming harder and harder the more of her nectar he drank down.

She loved it, and she'd needed it, and Lilyana wanted to keep him with her just like this for as long as he would last. Then, she wouldn't put him in the pod, she would care for him, and tease him, tempting him with her delicate sweetness, and the care she used to show when she was human.

She would make sure her sisters would never touch him again, never deny her his sweetness, and his mindless slavery.

But that wasn't what was best for the family, that wasn't what was even best for her. As the oldest, she had to think of the others before herself, and fortunately this poor girl had given her the best solution.

It was time.

"Chandra my sweet thing, come to me now. Come my hungry darling, come and feast on your thoughtful and kind hearted savior."

Chandra walked to Lilyana as her flower released Nathaniel's cock.

Chandra was no sister, but she was an Alraune, now, turned by the Mistress of the Manor.

Now, amulet would give her the appearance of a human in skin color, and would give any of her kind that wore it legs, but it would not change her proportions, what her body secreted, thought it would give her power over when and where she would. Nor would it change what she needed to survive.

"Take him inside you, drain him, consume him, and his essence will give you the power to claim many more, to make you whole and ready to leave this place and make your own way."

Naked, Chandra slid down onto Nathaniel's cock. Her lower half was that of a woman when she wore the amulet, and in the part of Chandra's mind that was and would always be her, she remembered all of the times she'd had him like this before.

Her hips barely shifted, and he shot into her again and again and again.

Memories of how he saw her, of how he felt about her, of their good times were flooding into her with his cum, and she saw herself as he did.

Then, she stopped herself and climbed off of him.

"He loves you, doesn't he?" Lilyana placed a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"Yes."



“Good, it was as I hoped. Now Listen to me...”

## **Epilogue**

Anders and his companions kept their cloaks tight about them as they moved through the forest, heavy rain falling in thick drops that punched through the canopy. They had to be close now, according to the bar tender, the manor was supposed to be only a few hours out of town, and they'd left the road where he'd told them to.

The Ruins had gotten too dangerous.

More people were disappearing there than ever before, lured away as the stories went, by an irresistible scent that the companions of those lost souls would often catch a fading hint of.

It wasn't just that either, the goblins had changed their ways. They they were organized now, and often times when someone or some party would fall into whatever the scent was, it was from being corralled by goblin hoards into places there was only one other way out of.

Treasure hunting in the Ruins was just not worth is, but according to the bar tender, this place had riches that were waiting to be plucked. It was, he said, where he got the money to buy this bar in Silver Town and leave his old life in the Thieves Guild behind.

It wasn't great and ambitions thoughts of becoming rich or at least well off that filled the heads of Andre's party as they plunged into the manor by its front door, but the even greater ambition of escaping what had become a merciless and cold winter rain.

One by one they walked through the front gates of the vine covered manor, and while it was chilly inside, it offered protection from the wind and the rain... and, it smelled nicer in here than it should... sweeter...