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Elemental Ascension  
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# Elemental Ascension

E. RACHAEL HARDCASTLE



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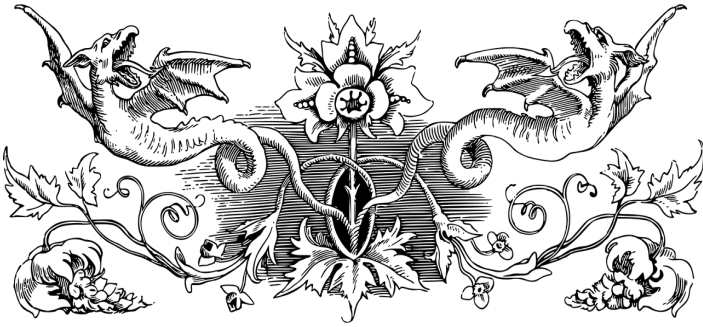




INTRODUCTION

THE BIRTH OF MAGIC





## Introduction: The Birth of Magic

**W**hen the Land was young, five Gods were born of the spirit realm Akasha to live and rule over Man. Their father, the God of Magic, instructed them to remain in Akasha and influence Man from afar, for if any were to perish at Man's hand, their collective magic would diminish and die.

His children watched Man for thousands of years but soon fell victim to curiosity. One by one, they descended to the Land as animals, playing games and tempting Man to do their bidding. To impress their father, each grew desperate to prove their power and influence was the greatest.

The eldest of the children, the God of the Land, was destructive and disrespectful. He delivered natural disasters interwoven with devastating storms, the scale of which the Land had never seen. He shook Man with mighty earthquakes, drowned them with enormous tidal waves, and burned their crops to dust. At their suffering, he laughed.

His sister, the God of the People, wished to counteract her brother's evil. She injected hope, leadership and community, encouraging Man to defend themselves against his brutality,

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despite their brother, the God of Universal Energy, seeing this as an act of defiance. He believed the strongest men should rule the Land as royalty, so he waged war on his siblings. Through his influence, Man became violent, greedy, and dishonest.

Even the logical influence of their fourth sibling, the God of Emotion, was not enough to extinguish Man's pain and suffering. So for many years, the Land was a cold, frail vacuum.

Until the fifth and final sibling, the God of the Senses, moved quietly between boundaries, listening to their hunger for war. Afraid of the repercussions, she asked her father to bestow magic upon the people so they could govern and protect themselves instead.

Angered by their meddling, he agreed, but in return demanded their magic for himself, weakening and imprisoning his children in Akasha, where they could no longer intervene in Man's affairs, but where they would be safe from Man's craving for revenge.

The God of Magic descended upon the Land, leaving behind five delicate Dragon eggs to represent his children's magic, which he sat atop a fire pit fuelled by his rage. He told Man to keep them safe and warm, for one day when they sensed a truly innocent soul, they would each birth wise, harmonious creatures that could erase the Gods' mistakes, bringing peace.

Before he returned to Akasha, he promised that for as long as the fire burned so the Dragons lived on, Man would never have reason to fear his children again—they would be forever imprisoned.

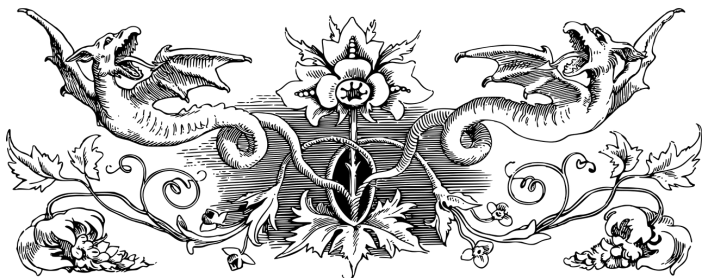
As four of the Dragons hatched and their magic flourished, spreading peace across the Land, those still worshipping the God of Universal Energy grew jealous of the beasts' status. They believed the creatures were an abomination. Soon, they began to hunt and kill the Dragons until eventually, the creatures and their offspring ceased to exist, leaving only their

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followers—the Dragonborn Guardsmen—to hide the fifth and final egg, and keep the fire and its magic from going out.

PROLOGUE  
KITE AND REVERIE





## Prologue: Kite and Reverie

**N**estled in a sunken stone cottage in the quaint little hamlet of Broad Wells, there lived a lowly Hydromancer named Kite and his young wife, Reverie.

Unlike her Seer neighbours, Reverie was a gracious, comely Human; one who, despite being without Alchemy, saw beauty and potential in the Land wherever she went. Ordinarily, her kind was unheard of in Broad Wells. Despite their divergence, most who crossed their path accepted and adored the couple.

What Reverie most relished was their time together at home, warm beside an evening fire, watching thousands of golden embers twinkle like fireflies. Whenever Kite caught the glow in her periwinkle eyes, he thought of their wedding day, proud he'd won her hand through his archery skills.

Each morning during her walk to the well, children would wave while skimming stones and running barefoot in the stream. Reverie imagined one day she might cradle a baby of her own; a daughter to whom she could teach the way of the Land, but it was not to be.

Unable to predict a birth in their future through his tea leaves, Kite soon feared losing Reverie to an interminable

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depression, so he sought the advice of Echelon: Shaman of the Deeds. Echelon was a blind, ill-tempered old Soothsayer, who made his living brewing unbalanced home remedies with plants from his marshlands. But, his unstable Alchemy was all Kite could afford.

In exchange for a single debt to be repaid in Reverie's fourth month of pregnancy, Echelon gave Kite a delicate onyx flower that grew amongst the swamp's wild rice and water-lilies. He told Kite the plant was a Necrosis, and if he boiled the petals in a soup for Reverie to drink that eve, the potion would heal her.

Kite left without asking what the debt entailed.

Time went by. Reverie awoke each day excited for motherhood, and on the first morning of the fourth month, she kissed Kite through his matted locks of silver hair and left him to sleep before her morning stroll. She fastened her boots and went outside to find hundreds of stale Necrosis petals on their doorstep, tumbling in the breeze.

As she reached down and caught one, her husband opened his grey eyes to blindness.

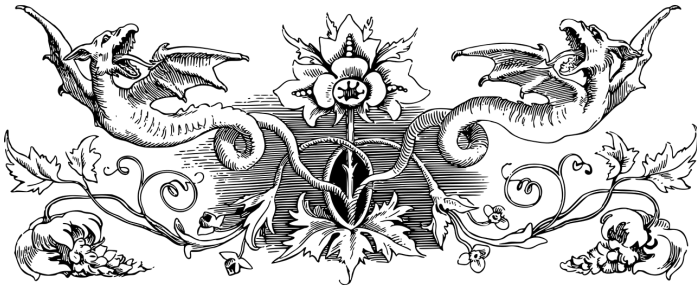
In exchange for Reverie's pregnancy, Echelon had stolen Kite's sight and made haste for the Gravelands—an active volcanic mountain range enclosed by brimstone and a blistering desert—where Kite and Reverie would never dare venture. Kite knew there was only one kind of Alchemist capable of healing one as poor as he. They would have to beg for the nearest Oracle's mercy.

That night, Reverie and Kite left Broad Wells to travel through the Sleeping Reeds Valley, heading for Blackheart Dock where, in a darkened corner of the Lawful Hand Tavern, they would find their drunken Oracle.



CHAPTER ONE

ASH THE ELEMENTAL



## Chapter One: Ash the Elemental

**B**etween curses and stumbles, Ash the Elemental browsed the Blackheart Dock marketplace for something to eat, occasionally rubbing his foggy head. He was beginning to feel queasy as he rummaged in a worn leather satchel to pay an elderly Soothsayer for some apples when a thief knocked him aside and lifted the sack of fruit at his feet.

“Stop that man!” someone shouted, but nobody in the vicinity pursued.

Ash glowered as the man fled downhill toward the shipyard with his breakfast. He wouldn't usually have risked his life to save a bag of apples, but the stall owner—a Soothsayer who had wide, tear-filled eyes and waxy skin—was alone, blind, and too frail to chase the man himself. They stood facing one another, shocked, until an odd sensation washed over Ash. He hadn't felt such deeply rooted anger on behalf of another's livelihood since returning from those ten long years in the criminal-infested Open Country, back when caring for naught was second nature. Ash only vouched for Ash these days. But, sighing, he ducked through the crowd anyway, leaving the stall owner to be comforted by his other customers.



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Two hundred feet ahead, Ash spotted a runner weaving through the mass of horses and peasants. As the marketplace was on a thin dirt track that snaked along a steep hill, Ash picked up uncontrollable speed. The only way he could stop now would be to trip and tumble, crash into the water, or catch the thief. If he did, all six feet of him, leather, weaponry, and muscle would flatten both the escapee and the fruit.

Ash dreaded any outcome. They would all further his pain—aggravate his pounding headache, tighten his aching limbs, and weaken his already deteriorating Elemental abilities.

“Out of my way!” he shouted, knocking innocent bystanders aside.

Adrenaline pumped and through thick, brown gloves, his fingers pulsed and tingled with sparks of Salamander magic. Beneath his matching doublet, his heart beat with passion.

Suddenly, Ash had to swerve around a small boy who had knelt to tie his laces. He ploughed through a cart of hay, leaving choking yellowish dust behind. Now forced off course, he propelled his body across an empty wooden stall. Before finding his target again, Ash stole a glance at his breeches, worried he had torn them, and feeling light-headed, he cursed at his graceless landing.

Critical gazes were following the pursuit. A group of shopkeepers shouted abuse at him when he dashed through their conversation. But at the base of the hill, supportive townsfolk were pointing and cheering. Ash followed their gestures and ran toward the Cerulean Grace, a rickety merchant ship about to depart. In the absence of a wooden ramp, he scrambled up the rope ladder and onto the deck. Stood in his way was a burly tradesman with dark chocolate skin, two heavily tattooed sleeves visible beneath his white cloth shirt, and a closely shaven head. He towered almost a full foot above Ash.

“Identification papers,” he demanded with his arms folded.

Ash peered around the man's wide frame in search of the thief. “I'm not a passenger.”

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“No permit, no passage.”

He took a single step forward, forcing Ash to take one back. It was then Ash spotted the thief, struggling to climb the mainsail with the sack of apples in one hand and his life in the other. Ash wondered how he had avoided being stopped by this mountain of muscle, or any of the other deckhands.

“Stop, thief!” Ash shouted and skirted around to give chase when the man turned his head.

The tradesman grabbed a boy with a mop and bucket of water by his collar and ordered him to fetch the Captain. Ash ignored them both and started to climb, careful to avoid catching his satchel or belt on the way up. He didn't want to lose his physical weapons; there were no open flames close by to fuel Ash's Elemental fire, so what little Salamander magic he could conjure would be useless in their absence. Steel was all he could rely on.

The thief kicked Ash away as he reached for his ankle and wriggled free. He wobbled and almost fell; his legs were shaky, his vision beginning to blur. It wasn't long before Ash lost his temper and drew a dagger from inside his boot. He slashed at the man's legs and cursed with each failed attempt until, at last, he pierced the leather.

The thief shrieked and tumbled, grabbing Ash on the way down. In what seemed like slow motion to them both, they plummeted through the quarterdeck into a tight, dimly lit room, casting an explosion of dust, splinters, and other debris up through the hole. The entire ship rumbled.

Although in agony, feeling dizzy and flustered from the impact, Ash managed to separate the wailing thief from the sack before drawing his longsword with one hand and punching the man in the jaw with the other. He flexed his gloved hand and swore, but continued to beat the man until he drew blood.

The Captain finally interfered. “Who are you and *what* are you doing on my ship?”

Recognising the Captain's voice, Ash turned his face from

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the sunlight. He warned the thief to stay down with the tip of his sword, then out of respect for the Captain and their history, he quickly sheathed it and picked up his dagger.

“Apologies, Captain Deerbolt,” Ash mumbled, then scooted past and made haste for the deck.

The Captain was a flushed, leather-clad young woman with long black hair and narrow hazel eyes. She dragged the injured thief on deck without aid and threw him forward, then gestured the handsome rogue be stopped whilst disembarking. The burly tradesman outstretched an arm across Ash's chest before he could reach the ladder.

“You put a hole in my ship,” she called out. “You owe me your name at least.”

Ash rolled his eyes and slowly turned to face Captain Deerbolt with a wide, cheeky grin across his lips that lifted his hazelnut eyes and brow.

“Why? Ten years later, I'm still waiting for yours.”

Her expression quickly changed from delirium to that of exhausted expectation, intermingled with surprise.

Ash dipped his shoulders and smirked. “Nice to see you again, Captain Deerbolt. You changed the name of your ship, I see. Bad luck to change the name of a ship.” He tutted.

She threw back her head and released an anticipative laugh. “*Well, well, well!* Ash the Elemental! I should have known—selfish and reckless as always. Desperate times, I'm afraid, but welcome back aboard the now Cerulean Grace, *Scoundrel.*”

*Haven't been called that in a while,* Ash thought.

He lifted the sack above his head and winked to acknowledge her memories of their time together—few of them (but the best of them, Ash remembered) were positive, despite never learning her given name. The entire crew's judgemental eyes were upon them until she snapped her fingers and barked an order. Without speaking, they continued about their business.

Some of the Captain's most loyal men had travelled with Ash previously from the Isle of Dragonborn to the Northern

Trading Post ten years ago, a trading point north of Blackheart Dock. Between it and the dock sat nothing but barren Open Country where Ash had been living since.

Deerbolt tucked away a stray lock of hair and watched Ash's nervous twitches. He shuffled and itched, occasionally shivering or shaking his head to erase the whistling in his ears. His condition had worsened since their voyage from Dragonborn; she and the crew who knew of him expected he'd be dead by now. It was obvious he didn't have long left.

Deerbolt's curiosity overcame her fury, and she demanded to see what he'd risked her ship for. As he was in no position to protest, the tradesman snatched the sack and emptied it for inspection.

Deerbolt leaned down. Her mouth fell agape. "All *this* for a sack of apples?"

She selected one and polished it on her thigh.

Ash grumbled. "They were *my* apples."

"*Were*," she repeated, then bit into the juicy red fruit. Between bites and breaths, she said, "Got... a... death... wish... *Scoundrel*?"

Before Deerbolt could offer the rest of the apples back, Ash spun on his heel and jumped over the side of the ship, vaulting into the air. He crashed beneath the surface and disappeared into the murky water. The crew rushed to see if he'd drowned, shouting and pointing at erupting bubbles and ripples sloshing against the side of the ship. After a few moments, Ash reappeared gasping for breath, and swam to shore, all the while beaming with delight.

"Foolish Elemental," said the tradesman. "He'll get himself killed."

Deerbolt shook her head in disbelief, stifling a grin. "Aye, he will, Sarronious, and soon." She waited until Ash had reached land before she shooed her crew back to work. "How soon can you fix my deck? Can she sail?"

"At least a day, Captain." Sarronious's eyes lowered and shifted between the open sack of apples and the unconscious

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thief Ash left behind. “Everything in its place,” he said. “Allow me to throw out the trash?”

“Aye,” she said. “Call the Constable and have him remove this filth from my deck.”



**B**esides returning empty-handed to a thwarted stall owner, Ash had no reason to perform the dreary, shameful walk back up the hill, but he did so. From head to toe, he was sodden; his dark brown hair was flat to his skull and his satchel dripped, leaving a trail from the dock to the stall. People were no longer cheering or smiling, but avoiding Ash like a savage plague.

*As it should be*, he thought.

In the marketplace, wriggling beneath a worn grey tunic, was the Soothsayer's beckoning finger. Ash squelched over and leant on the wooden table to empty his boots.

“Heard me coming, huh? I'm sorry about your apples,” he said, unable to meet the man's vacant stare.

“I hadn't expected you to return with them.”

Ash was taken aback. He slammed each boot down hard to squash his swollen feet back in, then bent to re-buckle them. “But you expected *me* to return?”

He tapped his head, though his gaze drifted past Ash and into the market square. “Aye, to discuss your future.”

Ash shrugged off what he assumed was an offer to tell his fortune. Peering from the man's pocket was a berry-coloured

silk cloth and wrapped within would be a deck of tatty-looking cards—the Soothsayer was a Cartomancer: a Tarot reader.

Ash wrung his hands and opened his satchel to pay for the lost fruit with a handful of clear jewels.

“I know my future,” he said, “and I deserve naught for my failure. Sorry I couldn't retrieve your apples. Please allow me to pay for them.”

The man reached for Ash's shoulder and halted him. At their touch, he was once again angry for the Soothsayer's loss. Replacing it, however slowly, was now an intense feeling of loyalty, trust and significance, like they were old friends—a feeling Ash hadn't experienced during those lonely years in Open Country.

Ash flinched. “So *that's* how you got me to retrieve your apples.” He rolled his narrowed eyes. “Made me feel sorry for you by touching me? I didn't know Cartomancers could use Psychometry. Sneaky.”

“Evidently, there is a lot you don't know. I didn't touch you, but—”

Ash laughed. “This ought to be good.”

“You can be forgiven, Ash. Your pain vanquished. Your honour restored.”

Unsettled, Ash pulled back further. “What, can you read minds too? How do you know my name? Redemption for my crime is impossible, so I wouldn't waste your gift on me.”

“I can offer other ways to validate my visions. Chiromancy? Hydromancy? Though, what use are palms and tea leaves when the cards do not lie?”

“Oh, you're an Oracle,” Ash replied.

It explained the man's wider skill set. Hopeful, he allowed the Oracle to examine every crease of his palm. He was silent. After several minutes, the old man confirmed there was no mistake—the sun was setting on Ash's poor luck. He fished the cards from his pocket and unravelled them carefully. Ash cleared a space on the table for the Oracle's cloth to lay, then

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as his frail hand fanned the cards in a semi-circle, Ash selected one at random, remembering exactly what to do from his last encounter with a Cartomancer. First came the signifier card—one Ash connected with.

Before Ash could turn the card over, the Oracle identified it. As he dug deep into his abilities, the old man's dominant hand twitched, and his eyelids flickered as he studied the information flooding through his sixth sense.

*“The Fool.”*

And it was. Upon the smooth surface, an artist's depiction of a foolish Alchemist hung from a delicate branch atop a cliff, balancing on a crumbling rock whilst holding a precious stone. It was shiny and round, but otherwise plain and colourless like the Land's currency. Despite his surroundings and predicament, *the Fool* was laughing.

“Your signifier. This card represents innocence. Card zero of the major arcana: a blank slate. Many believe *the Fool* to be reckless, but he is blissfully ignorant, awaiting the turmoil of life to stimulate him.”

Ash's voice quivered when he replied because he resonated with *the Fool*. His gut grumbled with untrusting, suspicious butterflies.

“Tell me more.”

The Oracle calmly said, “You are free, but you have been on the run, hated by two groups, who hate one another. You could risk the life you have now for a new beginning, though you are unsure it is possible. Yet, you will do so anyway. The truth dangles precariously. Why? I wonder. You already hold the answers, but are careless with them.”

He admitted reluctantly, “You're correct that I have nothing to lose now—anything I can do to fix my plight is worth a try. So I take the odd task here and there. I don't think I have been foolish, necessarily.”

*“The Fool is the card before the cards,”* he replied.

Ash selected a second card from the deck and flipped it, startled by the image of another major arcana card, which he

knew to represent life events.

*The Chariot.*

Remaining silent to test the blind Oracle's authenticity, Ash awaited an explanation.

“Ahead of you, there are two paths, pulled by horses as is represented here.” The Oracle tapped the sketch with a crooked nail, sensing the card's meaning without needing to see the image. “The black horse leads you on a dangerous adventure and the white horse to a continuation of your current existence. Each road has its perils. You are to be held accountable not only for actions you take that affect *your* life, but for what happens to others because of your decisions.”

Ash was unresponsive and deep in thought.

He added, “*The Chariot* represents determination and travel. You will embark upon an important quest.”

He brushed *the Fool* aside and placed *the Chariot*, Ash's first official card, in the centre of the cloth. The determined driver of the carriage glowered, connecting with Ash's short-sighted soul.

Around them in the marketplace, passers-by gave the working Oracle a wide berth. They scowled at him as they actively avoided the stall's perimeter. Ash pulled another card, beginning to trust his wisdom.

“*The Hanged Man* crosses your path,” the Oracle immediately added. “Your world is inverted at the moment. You are hanging around, wasting time. You are wanted, too, Ash the Elemental, and could move on, but are waiting for a sign.”

He planted the card horizontally, facing up across *the Chariot* to signify this temporarily blocking his call to adventure.

Ash replied in a whisper, “I have been waiting for ten harrowing years.”

“What interrupts—no, *prevents*—your voyage is your reluctance to surrender. Trepidation curses the opportunity for a glorious victory—you are apprehensive of the ultimate



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sacrifice and this shall delay your decision to allow the black or the white horse to take the reins. Do you remain upside down, or risk seeing the world in a new light?”

Ash knotted his fingers as he admitted aloud that trepidation was not his curse. *His* curse led to jitters for a future he was persuaded he'd never see. He had only allowed his discomfort to progress because he thought he deserved it; his world had been upside down for so long, and this was his reality now. For ten years he'd seen his face on wanted posters, and Ash was convinced nothing could undo the Land's hatred of him.

“You cannot prevent the outcome, only walk your chosen path to its end and trust in...”

The Oracle pulled Ash's next card for him, interrupting any thoughts or questions he pondered, and placed it to the left of the others.

“...*Justice.*”

“A card I pulled back when they *hanged* me—*Justice* is in my past,” Ash told the man. He swallowed hard. “Ideally, before I leave the Land, justice is what I want again. But there is none in my future for those who wronged me. Justice for *my* mistakes is still ongoing, and I feel the punishment no longer fits the crime.”

Ash scowled at the cards on the stall and then at his shaking fingers—none of this was news, but his cards so far were reminding Ash to look within. He'd avoided contemplating his future for so long. But now the curse wiggled through his veins and sent each digit into spasm. His future reading was two cards away, but he already predicted he'd pull another major arcana card there... *Death.*

Frustrated, he shook his wrists and reached for another card. The Oracle slapped at him.

“No more.” He gathered the cards to tidy the stall.

“That's it? All you've given me is the state I'm in now, and where I once was. It's a potential problem and an outcome I've longed for since my life went to hell! I have six cards left to

pull; I know how this works!”

“No. More. Cards.”

Ash protested, but the Oracle wrapped the cards and tucked them back in his pocket.

“We are out of time.”

“But, you can’t—”

“In three days you will meet a young Human woman at the Lawful Hand Tavern,” the man said. He gestured at the far side of the market square, despite being unable to see it. “She needs help, so get her safely to Dragonborn. The fate of magic, and the future these cards speak of, rests in their hands.”

Ash's eyes widened at this order. “*Dragonborn?*” He shook his head, sending droplets of sea water flying from his hair. “You're an Oracle, you ought to know I'm banished, cursed, and assumed dead! I'll be killed for treason if I return to the Isle. You have the wrong Elemental, my friend.”

The old man swayed as black Necrosis petals scattered across his mind's eye; flashbacks of hopelessness and torment overwhelmed him. If he told Ash of the mystery woman's pregnancy or the young man's recent blindness, he'd deem the quest impossible, flee Blackheart Dock, and turn his back on the girl as he had with the rest of the Land's inhabitants.

Ultimately, Ash would die. But, he would let Ash discover his options in three days.

The Oracle blinked away many more disturbing images of the Shaman's cruelty and steadied his balance against Ash's frame.

“My gifts make me weary,” he said, “but there is no mistake. You can resolve this endless struggle for power and control across the Land. The fate of magic has been foretold. When you follow the black horse, you, Ash the Elemental, are at my prediction's centre.”

Ash's eyes were wide and fearsome. “I don't—*cannot*—believe in ancient stories. It's too late for me to be following black horses and going on adventures.”

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“Then follow the white horse.”

Ash felt instant remorse for the altercation. “Look, I’m sorry but I can’t.”

“You are a *good* man with a strong heart,” the Oracle said.

He tapped Ash’s arm and directed his gaze to a cloaked figure carrying his sack of apples, moving at a fair pace through the marketplace. She lowered her black hood. Ash rolled his eyes and turned from the Oracle, stunned by his abilities.

“You’re following me, Deerbolt. Don’t you have a ship to sail or a thief to imprison?”

“Aye, but I have plenty of strong men to do my bidding.” She winked. “As we’re a day behind schedule now, I have some time on my hands. Can’t think why.” She paused as if to change her mind, then deposited the sack at his feet. “You don’t deserve these, but they are not yours to waste.”

The Captain nodded to acknowledge the Oracle’s presence, who smiled despite being unable to appreciate her beauty. She flicked up the hood, then disappeared without a word more.

“*Humans* for you!”

With a sharp tone to his voice, the Oracle corrected him. “Captain Deerbolt is a *Velocal*.”

“To be a *Velocal* she would have to be experienced in the laws of Alchemy or have suffered severely at the hands of an Alchemist,” Ash countered. “In sailing, she is a fast-learning genius. But in magic? No. Why would you have me escort one to Dragonborn on a quest to be beheaded or something equally... *final*?” Ash gulped.

“I will look past your discriminatory views and lack of charm when I repeat you are a good man,” the Oracle said, bending to collect the sack. He offered it to Ash and chortled. “I can predict your future, Ash the Elemental, but I cannot walk it for you. I withheld your reading because I knew we would be interrupted, but also because you cannot yet be trusted to do the right thing. The Equos departs for Land’s Edge tomorrow eve. Believe you are capable, though you do

not have long. To make it to Dragonborn in time, follow the black horse and book your passage. Use these apples, if they would help.”

“No, no,” he grumbled, “Deerbolt's ship is the Cerulean Grace now—she changed its name from the Equos, which means...” Ash laughed and shook his head. “It means '*the Steed*'.”

The Soothsayer shooed Ash away. “Hurry now, pest. Be on your way. It appears this black horse waits for no one.”

Ash took two apples from the sack and bit into one. Then he returned the rest to the Oracle. “You're wrong about me,” he said through a juicy mouthful, stowing the other apple in his satchel for later. “Lucky for you—and this mystery Human woman—I have nothing left to do around here but wait to die, anyway.” He grinned and set off walking. “My *chariot* awaits.”