



A FANTASY NOVEL

# A PATH OF POSSESSION

THE N-ERGY CYCLE – BOOK I

CHARLES BRASS

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## **A PATH OF POSSESSION: The N-ergy Cycle - Book I**

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A PATH OF  
POSSESSION

## PROLOGUE - A Bad Day Gets Worse

During the ride from her mentor's cottage to Celpik, Lake-Ellen decided she was not going back.

"I'm done." She patted Hickory's neck. "I promised Father I'd apprentice to Radishal-Wren for two harvests. This Eighthday of Secondweek of Thirdmonth marks the end of that obligation."

The morning she'd left home those twenty months ago she'd told her father, "*Having leaves on my back—when they bud—might make me a Lady of the Leaves, but it does not mean I have to work as one.*"

He had laughed. "*No, it does not, my dear Lake.*"

"I am an accountant," she added to her horse. Hickory's ears swiveled. "The honesty of numbers is my domain."

Tension within her unwound with those words.

"That is my Path."

More tension eased.

Still, niggling doubts remained. She suspected they'd always be there, as she progressed from budling to full-blown Lady of the Leaves.

She said again with certainty, "That is my Path."

In Celpik, Lake-Ellen left Hickory with a young stablehand in the horseyard across the street from Accountant Dellon Hither's house and office. "Give him water and a warm blanket. I won't be long." She dropped a fifty-pence coin into his palm.

"Yes, striss," the sleepy-eyed boy replied.

Hickory nickered.

Lake-Ellen patted his neck. "Oh, don't you worry. You'll have a nice warm stall soon enough." She slid her staff, Dandelion, from its holster on the side of her saddle, and turned to the street.

The last time she dropped by, her Path changed—and not for the better.

Now she was taking her rightful Path back.

*Fitting I start here.*

Her smile stretched wide. She wanted to dance in the mud-wet street. She couldn't recall ever feeling so... *free*. Except for maybe near the last harvest's Second Planting season, when the fierce itching in her back relented at long last and her buds appeared. When she matured from an itching to a budling.

Those buds would fall away in a week or two as the leaves beneath burst forth, making her a Lady of the Leaves like her mentor, Radishal-Wren Doory.

The quiet streets stretched off. She'd seen only a handful of other people since arriving. Oil lanterns brightened the few intersections. Candles glowed in windows. In the surrounding forest, sprites wandered about, their flickers of lifelight casting shifting shadows in the underbrush. Early spring warmth had melted most of the light snow of recent days. The weather would only improve as the sun rose within the hour, when she planned to be well on her way home.

Dellon deserved to hear the news first. He'd be excited for sure. And Sesi, if she was still around. She'd appreciate the news, too. She'd be graduating and heading off on her own soon. It was Thirdmonth, after all.

Adjusting her heavy cloak, Lake-Ellen approached the front door. Candles burned in the windows. Movement in the shadows beyond confirmed someone was up and about. Most likely Dellon, who preferred an early start on the day's obligations—a trait she shared.

She rapped her knuckles on the weathered wood.

A teenaged stranger opened the door. "May I help you?"

Lake-Ellen opened her mouth, but for a moment her words were stuck. "Who are you?" she asked. "Where's Leysesi-Tyle?"

"Striss Sesi?" His shoulders sagged. "She fell to a pox. About two harvests ago." He stood half a head taller than Lake-Ellen. Though broad in the shoulders, he looked quite thin beneath his simple tunic and pants. Chalk dust streaked his thighs, marking where he'd wiped his fingers. "I'm Onnard. Accountant Hither's apprentice."

"A pox?" Lake-Ellen's breath left her. Weakness shivered in her knees. She leaned on Dandelion. "Two harvests ago?"

"Middle of Fourthmonth. Means I won't graduate until the middle of Fourthmonth myself, of course, but—"

"Fourthmonth!" At the end of Secondmonth two harvests ago, she'd started her apprenticeship with Radishal-Wren, when she was still an itchling, the buds growing beneath her skin driving her crazy.

*If I hadn't—*

She gasped.

Onnard's apprenticeship would have been hers.

The weakness in her legs grew. Her grip on Dandelion tightened.

“You look familiar,” he said. “Do I know you?”

“No. I— I’ve been away for two harvests.” Though still weak and somewhat breathless, she forced herself to straighten. “Seur Hithers, is he available? I would like to see him.”

“He’s in his office.” Onnard sounded hesitant. “Is this business or..?”

She stiffened, shoulders squared. *It’s past.* Nothing now but to claim her future. Still, it stung, missing her chance at the Path she coveted and instead walking one she found... Well, it had one or two agreeable aspects.

She thumped Dandelion to the stone beneath her boots. “Tell him Lake-Ellen Redwood is here for a visit.”

Before departing, he invited her to wait in the foyer. She hung her cloak on one of several pegs jutting from the wall. He returned a moment later.

“This way, please.”

She remembered the way. Down the hall, turn left, second door there—

Dellon Hithers, wearing his burgundy and yellow robe of an Accountants Guild member, greeted her with a hug at the office door.

“My dear Lake-Ellen! What a pleasant surprise!”

Her smile bursting forth again, she gripped his upper arms. “It is good to see you, seur.”

“Oh, please, call me Dellon.” To Onnard, he said, “Bring warmed mead and biscuits.”

“Of course, seur.” He bowed and departed.

Dellon escorted her into his office. They stopped near the two chairs before his large desk, as usual piled high with papers, ledgers, books, and scrolls. More covered and filled the surrounding tables and shelves. An adding machine sat on its own small table. Chalkboards hung from the walls or rested on stands. The small wooden beads of a tallyboard gleamed in the chandelier’s candle light. A window, its curtains thrown back, gave a view of the shadows behind the house, brightened by an occasional passing sprite. It smelled like she remembered: warmth, the musk of polish, a slight mustiness from so many limp parchments, a haze of chalk...

“It was this chair, wasn’t it?” he asked, a hand on her shoulder. “I remember you sitting there, *squirring* so!” He laughed.

“Oh, yes, it itched.”

She shared in his amusement. Yes, two harvests ago, before her fourteenth celebration, she’d been sitting in this right-most chair. As he looked over the ledgers for the four businesses whose accounts and correspondence she managed, an odd itching flared to life in her back, below her neck, between her shoulders. She’d tried scratching herself against the chair. Then wondered what on the wood was soaking through her shirt, causing the itch. She’d reached back with first one hand, then the other, fingernails digging into her skin.

Nothing helped. And it worsened in the days that followed, spreading across her shoulders and down to her waist.

Two weeks later, Vack-Billener, Peepik’s apothecarist, sent for Striss Radishal-Wren on the chance *she* had an idea about Lake-Ellen’s torment.

After a single look, the older Lady of the Leaves declared, “*Well! Lake-Ellen, it appears you’re an itchling. Soon to be a Lady of the Leaves.*” She cackled. “*Looks like I have an apprentice.*”

Dellon waved. “Please, sit, sit. Or, if you would prefer the other chair?”

Lake-Ellen sat on the right-most chair as he circled his desk. She propped Dandelion against an armrest. “I’m not bothered taking this chair. It’s an unpleasant memory, but I’ve made worse since.”

He laced his fingers together on the desk. “So, yes, tell me, how goes your apprenticeship?”

“Unpleasant.”

They shared another laugh.

“Mucking about in the dirt doesn’t suit you?”

“I’m Ghesh.” She raised her hand, reminding him of her light green skin. But knowing him, he meant her inclination to sit and work numbers. “Mucking about in the dirt is in my blood. I don’t mind that at all. It’s the people.”

“Ah. Yes.”

“No matter where I am, numbers don’t lie. And no matter how you figure them, they always give you the truth.” She waved. “People, though...”



“Yes, you said that before.”

“When I took over my father’s books.” She smiled. “Six harvests ago. Remember? When I came to you that first time?”

“You were so nervous.” He shifted, crossing one knee over the other. “When you’re done with your apprenticeship, you can go elsewhere, to an estate that will appreciate a Lady of your talents. Yes?”

Her hold on Dandelion tightened. She breathed deep, calming herself the way her fighting instructor had taught. “I don’t plan on completing my apprenticeship with Striss Doory. I intend to accept your offer of two harvests ago to become your next apprentice.”

His bushy eyebrows rose. He opened his mouth. A knock forestalled his reply.

“Mead and biscuits,” Onnard said.

“Oh, yes.” He waved his apprentice into the room. “Thank you.”

Onnard balanced the large plate on a corner of the desk and departed.

Lake-Ellen watched him go then turned back to Dellon. “I should’ve had his place here. It’s terrible about Striss Leysesi-Tyle. But her apprenticeship should’ve fallen to me.”

“Yes, yes.” He shifted again. “It would have been yours, but for...”

“My father asked for me to give Radishal-Wren two harvests. Learn what I could, give the Path a try.” She leaned forward. “It’s been two harvests. That Path is not for me.”

“But you’re a Lady of the Leaves. Such a rare gift. Certainly—”

“I am an accountant. Numbers are all I’ve thought about. All I want.” She settled back. “All I trust.”

Lips pursed, he frowned and shifted again.

She half-frowned. *He looks... Does he not want me as his apprentice? But...*

She’d been one of his most promising students. More than capable with the numbers, a light touch with her penmanship. Enthusiastic. Dedicated. Everything a mentor might want. When she was eleven, he warned her he could not take her on as a student until she celebrated her fourteenth. He preferred a sixteenth, when Guilds allowed mentors to take on a dedicated apprentice. Now she was only five days from her seventeenth celebration, on

03/03/03—Thirdday of Thirdweek of Thirdmonth.

Certainly, he wouldn't hesitate to accept her now.

She dug into her shirt pocket. "I have the sovrin. Three! One for my first harvest with Radishal-Wren, two for this harvest. Three next harvest, were I to continue." She stood and held them out. "Look. One more than I need." In her excitement, her palm trembled.

"Yes. Very... good." He gently closed her fingers into a fist. "Except..." He held her hand in both of his before leaning back. "Oh, bother."

"I'm ready, seur. I want this. I do." She lowered her fist to the desk. "I still remember what you've taught me. And as for my writing, why, I have ledgers full of notes. Radishal-Wren insisted I note *everything*. One ledger for each estate. We served as Harvest Masters for five estates. They're out in my saddlebags. I can get them for you if you like."

"No, no, that's all right. I'm quite confident you've maintained your skills—perhaps strengthened them."

When he didn't continue, she settled back into her chair, her fist tight around the coins. "But?"

"But it's that... Well, you were on your way to becoming a Lady of the Leaves. I assumed that... when you went off with your new mentor..." He waved at the surrounding papers and ledgers and books and scrolls. "I assumed you'd left this behind for a better life."

Her cheeks went cold. "I never gave up on this. Never a day went by—"

"Yes, yes, but... Well, I..." Again, he hesitated. "Oh, just say it, you fool! Yes. I've accepted a new apprentice."

"A new..." Of course. He wouldn't have waited. Why would he have waited?

"A very promising apprentice." He shifted again—a sign of his discomfort. The hesitation in his voice deepened as well.

She frowned. There was something else he did not wish to tell her.

He said, "She'll be starting in a few days. The end of the month. She'd be here now, but with Onnard's apprenticeship lasting into Fourthmonth because of Sesi's unfortunate—"

"Who?"

“Yes, yes, I’ll tell you, but you won’t like it.”

“Who?”

His gaze flickered toward Dandelion. “Promise you’ll keep your temper.”

“I promise.” She tightened her hold on her staff, then relaxed. She slid her three coins back into her shirt pocket to keep from throwing them. “Who?”

He told her, and he was right. She did not like it. At all.

\* \* \*

Lake-Ellen shouted at her mother, “You gave *my* apprenticeship to Creala-Call? Creala-Call, who can’t wake up properly in the morning?”

Rundie-Tull Redwood sat at the kitchen table, her gaze locked on the potato in her hand. She peeled it using a paring knife. The peels fell onto a cloth napkin. A small collection of skinned and unskinned potatoes rested in a pot to the side. “Your sister has matured a lot since you left, Lake. Ever since Father let her take over the books. She—”

“Since what?” Lake-Ellen leaned forward, palms flat on the table. “Father let her do *what*?”

Her mother’s gaze rose. “You will *not* take that tone with me, young striss.”

Straightening, Lake-Ellen breathed deep through her nose. *Should’ve brought Dandelion for support.* But she might have thumped its leaden root to the floor, which her mother *hated*. “Sorry. It’s just... I’m spinning. I was expecting...”

She let her words die in her throat. So far, only Dellon knew of her plan to end her current apprenticeship. But without the chance of an accountant’s apprenticeship, what other option did she have but to continue as a Lady of the Leaves-in-training? Work in Father’s kitchen again—*without* handling the books?

Those niggling doubts shuddered forth.

Her mother resumed peeling the potato. “She does so good with numbers, Lake. You’d be proud. She can do a lot of sums in her head, too. Sums, subtractions, multiplications. Even the easier divisions.”

“What about her letters? That’s as important.”

“Seur Hithers says her penmanship is passable, but will improve with time. She just needs to write more. I’m sure you remember your lessons.”

Yes, she’d struggled with her letters at first. And sometimes she needed to scratch out sums and subs, and forget about doing percentages in her head. But over the harvests, Dellon had praised her improved penmanship. He’d allowed her to finalize official correspondence he dictated for his business. No doubt her younger sister would receive the same benefit.

Her mother dropped the skinned potato into the pot and dug out the last unpeeled one. “This means so much to her. Yah, she’s failed all her other chores in the past. But she’s taken to this, Lake. And it’s taken to her. If you saw the way she embraces this chore... Her smiles remind me so much of how you took to it.”

She dropped the potato into the pot, wiped the knife on the cloth napkin beneath the peeled skins, then gathered the napkin’s corners. “Take this to the compost outside your father’s kitchen.”

Lake-Ellen accepted the napkin. “So you know, Dellon hinted he might allow me to take Creala-Call’s turn. If I was still so inclined. I have the sovrin.”

Her mother scowled. “You’ve three harvests with Striss Doory still, if I recall. You may have the leaves, but you’re not a trained Lady yet.”

Lake-Ellen squeezed the napkin. Water seeped from the cloth and wet her palms. “Trained enough, but I don’t have the leaves.”

“They’ve not budded yet?” Her mother straightened, eyebrows arched.

“Not a one.”

“Are they late?”

“Radishal-Wren isn’t concerned, seeing how long I spent as an itchling. She says I have more buds than any Lady she corresponds with. But she expects the first buds to split within the week.”

Rundie-Tull scowled. “You’ve three more harvests as her apprentice. I won’t have you leaving off less than half done. You’ll get nowhere.”

But a Lady would be welcome anywhere. Radishal-Wren herself rose to her current position as Harvest Master to the five large

estates north of the Pik Valley communities on three harvests' apprenticeship—or so she claimed. Lake-Ellen halfway thought she might have only had two. Not that it mattered. But she refrained from making that declaration. Affairs between her and her mother, on edge before, were strained enough.

“Father asked me to give her two harvests, to judge if serving as a Lady is to be my Path. Mother, I don't like it. Radishal-Wren smokes the red leaf all the time. She always has a skin of wine in her hand— It's repulsive. And the men on the estates... They're *so* vulgar.”

Her mother leaned forward, elbows on the table. “You've dealt with worse. Tough it out. After, go elsewhere. You have a chance no one in the family will ever have. Hoot, no one in the entire Pik Valley! You can earn more sovryn in one harvest than your father reaps in five. And he's more successful than most.”

“But what point is all that coin if I'm not happy reaping it?”

“Find pleasure in it. Your duties would be so extensive. Some aspect of it must bring you joy?”

She bit back her first thought. *If I could work alone...*

She considered the napkin in her hand. Potato peels. This was the lot of her mother's life. Her father's too. Her mother had been so excited when Radishal-Wren determined she was an itchling. Father too. Creala-Call. Everyone in Peepik!

Except her.

Now Creala-Call generated similar excitement. After all her earlier failures...

“It's not all bad,” she admitted. “I can feel already the n-ergy when I'm in the fields or the orchards. It's like a blush, except throughout my back.”

“And you don't have your leaves yet.” Her mother propped her chin on her palms. “I hear your disappointment. I think that's with Radishal-Wren, not with becoming a Lady. Please. Give it three more harvests. Earn this. Or at least...”

She waited, but her mother kept silent. “At least?”

Rundie-Tull pursed her lips, then exhaled. “At least wait two more harvests. Give Creala-Call the chance to complete her training. A chance, Lake. If she fails at this, well... Seur Hithers will look for a

new apprentice, yah?"

*Oh.* Lake-Ellen clenched her jaw. Her hold on the napkin tightened again. *Oh, blight and bracken!* "Dellon sought a new apprentice two harvests ago when Sesi fell to a pox. Did you know that?"

"Creala-Call brought the news when she met Onnard. By then..."

She scowled. Her sister had met Onnard? Been to Dellon's office? Of course. If he was checking her work, as he had Lake-Ellen's, he'd want her to bring her ledgers. *No wonder Onnard thought I looked familiar. Creala-Call has a lot of my face in hers.*

"Of course. Nothing to be done about that now. But tomorrow... Tomorrow is still open."

"Did Seur Hithers give you leave to take your sister's place?"

"He asked us to discuss this as a family. He'd take as apprentice whoever we decide."

"Your sister and your father will return around half-past the two o'clock bells. We can sit and talk then. I think you ought to at least hear their say, yah?"

She squeezed the napkin again. "All right. Radishal-Wren gave me five days' leave. We need not rush our decision."

"From what I understand, Seur Hithers will want a decision soon. He's asked Creala-Call to begin as her apprentice this next Firstday."

Lake-Ellen sighed. "I'll hear what Call and Father have to say."

"Thank you."

Her temper settled to a simmer, Lake-Ellen nodded. For that, she was thankful; how it had boiled over during her ride south from Celpik! *Creala-Call, an accountant of all things.* She hadn't kept her job at the washery despite Mother being there to help. Now, in two harvests, she'd earned Dellon's praise and consideration as his apprentice? When she was but fifteen celebrations old?

Well, Dellon had said he'd consider her at fourteen.

"I'm going to go calm myself." She waggled the wet napkin. "Drop this off, then head to the Heart."

"I'll send Creala-Call when she returns home. Would you like to stay and help with dinner?"

"I'd rather be by myself."

Her mother frowned, and her shoulders sagged. "Half-past two

then.”

Lake-Ellen walked from the kitchen.

“Wear your cloak,” her mother called. “I think a chill’s coming in.”

*Oh, there’s a chill, all right.* Again, she bit back her reply.

\* \* \*

Cloak loose over her shoulders, Dandelion in hand, Lake-Ellen strolled to the Heart of the Forest.

The enormous tree stood in a clearing south of Peepik, the branches supporting its vast canopy of vibrant green leaves stretching up and out, a half-dome of scaly gray bark forking to thinner and thinner tips. As usual, its leaves thrived through the winter. The scales around its wide trunk lay like overlapping plates on a suit of armor. They’d protected the tree well enough—rumor said it had lived two thousand harvests already and appeared hale enough to weather two thousand more.

Other rumors told of a devil slumbering deep within its rootbed, woven into its very fabric. She’d dismissed those when she first heard them, deeming them tales used to frighten children. *Behave or the devil will possess you!*

Devils did not exist. Sprites and demons, yes, since everyone had seen a sprite, and sprites cohered together made demons. A demon *could* possess some unfortunate soul in the wrong place at the wrong time. Rumored to be a coherence of demons, devils lived only in the *Books of Lore*, written at least two thousand harvests ago—from before the old Krykos Empire. So old, only a single scroll survived from that time. She had nothing to fear from the Heart of the Forest save for a branch falling on her head as she meditated.

The ten o’clock bells echoed from the village clockspire before she reached the clearing’s central hill, where the Heart’s tremendous network of roots left the grass-covered ground knobby and uneven. She stopped and looked back. Mid-day already?

As expected, the day had warmed. Despite the season being a mere four weeks old, the shade beneath the Heart lacked a chill. She removed her cloak and set it and Dandelion aside, then settled into her usual place several steps from the trunk, in the only smooth area around the tree.

Calmness eluded her. The day had started out so well. She'd felt certain of her Path, so sure she'd returned to the right one.

She paced her breathing and rested her palms on her thighs. Her swirling thoughts settled. The ache in her chest remained.

Give the chance she wanted more than anything to poor Creala-Call, who couldn't do but one thing right in her life so far, or take it for herself even though life as a Lady offered far greater potential?

She pursed her lips. Her muscles tightened. She struggled to relax. Her mother had been right, though—Radishal-Wren was the singular aspect of her training she found so repulsive. Not her duties.

Sure, some of them were boring and repetitive, but what occupation didn't have such aspects? Accounting did. Not only the numbers—some common correspondence she could write in her sleep still.

But could she stand another three harvests inhaling her mentor's vile red leaf smoke or the wash of her breath after she'd been in the skins? And her friends...

Maybe she'd let Lake-Ellen work more independently now. She'd hinted at such. Her absence would allow Lake-Ellen to set boundaries and assert what was acceptable to the vulgar estate managers and their lackeys. She'd learned how to handle such behavior working in her father's kitchen well enough.

Calm settled over her. Her breathing fell into a relaxed rhythm. She lost feeling in her limbs. The slight breeze warming her skin and teasing loose strands of her long hair seemed distant. The rustling of the leaves overhead faded away.

It stung, losing her Path. In her core, she was an accountant. Just as her father knew to bake his pine pepper seasonings, and her mother... well, she seemed happy enough at the washery.

And Creala-Call...

*Of all the Paths, why did she have to walk mine?*

At least Crea had found something. For all her failures before, with chores around the house, in Father's kitchen, at the washery... Her sister had kept her cheer, never got discouraged from trying, even when she hurt herself.

How the bracken had she stumbled into keeping the ledgers?

They'd shared a bedroom as children. Crea often asked to help



with her duties. *"Sure. But be mindful."* She'd checked the numbers, of course. And most times, they came out. *"Do you see what you did wrong here?"*

Creala-Call would study her mistake. *"I subtracted wrong. I can fix it."*

After his eldest daughter went off to apprentice as a Lady of the Leaves, their father might have worried about his books. *"May I try?"* Creala-Call probably offered. She knew how to read and write—she'd learned right alongside her older sister, taught first by Mother, then when Lake-Ellen turned eight, by one of the village elders. Oddly, those lessons were an early success Crea could claim as her own.

*"Sure, Calla-bun,"* her father might have replied.

Later that night, or perhaps the next morning, she'd have returned the ledgers. *"I did my best, Father. I think I did well. The sums all came out."*

Her Father would have looked, looked again, then had his assistant go over the numbers too. Maybe involved Dellon. He would have hired Dellon, an affordable expense. But if his youngest girl, his dear Calla-bun, could work the numbers correctly...

Lake-Ellen frowned.

*Can I stand in her way now?*

The question hurt.

Her Path forked. Every step down either would bring pain—at first, anyway. Was the question which Path would hurt less?

She'd lost her Path once already—and through no fault of her own.

Dare she surrender it by choice?

She clenched her jaw at having to *think* about doing so. Shoulders tightened. Hands fisted.

*"Lake-Ellen!"*

Her sister's shout reached her from a vast distance as a prickling sensation swept over her skin.

Goose bumps formed, and the fine hairs on the back of her neck rose with a tickle.

*How can I choose? Blight and bracken! That apprenticeship was mine.*

The prickling sensation intensified, rising from her neck to her chin, flushing down her back and around her front. Her cheeks and lips warmed and bloated with blood. The sensations like the wetness of heavy raindrops drenched her from top to bottom.

*What is happening?*

Her pulse quickened. The air crackled.

Growing stronger, the sensations swept down her waist and into her thighs. Hairs large and small across her body bristled. A tickle ran inside her nose. The air tasted metallic.

It all happened in a breath.

A breeze whipped the Heart of the Forest's leaves and tugged her hair. Loose folds of her sleeveless shirt flapped. The sensations ignited ripples of heat across her skin.

She curled her hands into fists.

*What is this?*

Her sister's distant cry came again. "Lake-Ellen, run away quick!"

Creala-Call sounded so far away. Which shouldn't be, as the Heart's clearing wasn't *that* large. A shout carried to the opposite side with ease. Crea knew how to shout.

Her mother said Crea and Father would return at half-past the two o'clock bells. A thump pulsed through her. Had she been sitting here for two hours already?

She jerked from her meditation and looked up. Past the leaves swashing back and forth, gray clouds boiled across the sky—a sky clear and blue when she'd first sat down.

They swirled with the latent energy of lightning and rain. In that instant the chilly winds, despite how they lashed the branches, felt too light to carry the clouds.

No. The storm frightened the wind into running ahead.

*The air's thickening.*

It coalesced on her cheeks and lips, in her mouth and nose, against her eyes—a heaviness condensing out of nothing. Though not possible, the clouds so far above *pushed* down on her.

*Get up! Move!*

The blades of grass around her crinkled. The rustling leaves grew quiet as the wind... stopped. Her hair lifted from her scalp. The crackle in the grass became a symphony of crickets from all around.

A sudden smell reminded her of—

“Lake-El—”

*Oh!*

Her gaze locked on a huge branch twisting from the trunk. It reached out for several yards, parallel to the ground. Many smaller branches poked from its sides.

A flash of brilliant blue-white light burst into existence.

The branch became a black smear, then exploded into splinters which plucked at her shirt. Her hair. Her flesh.

The brilliance filled her vision too fast for her to squeeze together her eyelids or turn her head.

Heat sudden and vast wicked the moisture from her mouth. The air in her lungs burned against the back of her throat.

A terrific force launched her from the ground.

She wondered, *Shouldn't this hurt?* before she spun into pain deep and mindless.

## 01 - A Final Hand of Castles

Lake-Ellen plucked her hand's fifth and final card from the round table's polished wood. She already had three diamond towers and a diamond cistern—one of the best combinations she'd ever held. This last card could mean a luxurious room and delicious meals for a long time... or homelessness and starvation.

*No matter what, I'm playing to the end.*

Lifting the card brought stabbing pains through her knuckles. She'd suffered them since the lightning strike two months ago.

The other three players kept their hands too, perhaps because this was the last of the journey. Their playing room off the third deck lounge grew quiet. They held cards close. No one shifted in their chairs. No more banter. A breeze through the windows cooled the stuffiness.

Their transport, a steam-powered paddle boat named the *Raisa Bell*, was positioning herself to dock. Noises once distant—gulls cawing, dockhands shouting, horses and herrings whinnying, a mammoth's sharp trumpet—now rose above the murmur of the crowd in the lounge. Beneath it all, the steady thumping of the boat's paddle at the long vessel's stern continued unabated.

She flipped her card. It took a moment for the sight of the fourth diamond tower to register. The tremble in her fingers grew. She didn't bother to hide it. Her fellow players couldn't use it as a tell—her hands had trembled the entire journey down the Bumpy Shallows River. Her father, who'd taught her how to play, would have been proud. *"Give them no advantage, my little Lake."*

The card stole her breath.

*Is this— It is, isn't it? What beats this?*

The winning hands splashed through her mind. Right after, a shiver shook her from shoulders to hips and goose bumps pimpled her arms under her brown linen shirt—sensations that struck every time she remembered something from before the lightning strike. It hit constantly at first as her memories unjumbled themselves. Not so much now with her recovery so far along, though still incomplete, to her annoyance.

Vack-Billener, Peepik's apothecarist, had warned she'd suffer these strange residual sensations. He'd been right about most ill

effects that followed a lightning strike. She thought after so many weeks she'd be used to it by now.

Nope.

Avery Shadd, the hand's dealer, said, "And the wager is to our lady of the fair green skin." As usual, laughter lurked behind his words.

The young junior estate manager, a mere harvest older in age, sat to her right. Spice Guildist Vess Lennix sat to his right, the carpenter Baylees next, then the Bohono priest, gray-skinned Kokumal, his back to the door. His acolyte sat on a stool beside the door. Her seat was closest to one wall. She'd picked it to help soothe the nagging sense she was being watched—another remnant of the lightning strike.

She looked up. Avery smiled. Early in the week-long ride down the Bumpy Shallows River from Lake Pristo, that smile had warmed her cheeks. Now, though, her face grew numb.

*What beats this?*

"Oh. Um, yes."

Vess Lennix chuckled. "She'll make it a grand one, given the way her cards are a'flutter more than usual." Tucked within his trimmed, salt-and-pepper mustache and beard, his lips offered the barest smile. The way his eyelids narrowed and his eyebrows leaned close reminded Lake-Ellen of a predator on the prowl. He claimed to be a spice guildist, had a robe with the Guild's colors, but from how he played, that might be his side job. He wore a white collarless shirt, sleeves rolled up, and a dark blue vest with pearl buttons. His robe, light gray with black trim and blue stripes at the shoulders, hung from a rack behind his chair. Gold bracelets encircled his wrists, and rings adorned his long fingers.

With expertise, he wrapped more pots than usual while sitting behind the largest stack of bills and coins.

At least she'd had the second-largest stack at the morning's start.

Most rested in the pile of bills and coins—rin, lida, kronns from the southern lands, and a bhath or two—at the table's center. After three rounds of betting, she estimated the pot held about twelve hundred rin—over a full sovvin already. Four players sticking through to a fifth card sometimes bloated a pot like that.

And she was gonna wrap it in!

Or lose all she had.

She tried to shake her doubts. *No, this one's mine.*

Still, she clenched her jaw. No doubt she'd given herself away to Vess.

*Oh, to beat him this one last time.*

"Um. Yes." She jammed the card into her hand—earning another sharp stab of pain—then pawed at her remaining bills and coins. "All of it. Here. Three hundred fifty rin." She shoved the bills to the edge of the pot, then dropped coins on top to keep the breeze from whirling them away. Only a few pence remained in her stack.

*There. All in.*

Her mother's reaction billowed like a storm cloud: "*That lightning bolt burned the sense from you, Lake-Ellen! You know better. If you lose, how will you even eat?*"

*But I have the winning hand. And that pot...*

Her father's voice echoed. *Risk. Reward big. Rin.*

If the others kept playing, there'd be at least two sovrin there. She wrapped that in, she'd live well for a long time.

"*Gambling all you have left on one throw. I raised you better,*" her mother countered.

*Maybe. But I will win. I think.*

"Well," Vess said in his slow drawl. "A big fat bet it is." He made a show of considering his hand then threw bills into the pile. "I'll see that."

"Feh. I'm out." Baylees dropped his cards, leaned back, and crossed his arms over his chest. "Doubt I have that much left, anyway."

Avery said, "Looks to be about thirty rin remaining in your meager stack." He smiled at Baylees's frown. "Well, it's thirty times enough to cover the dockmaster's fee. And finally, our revered friend."

Priest Kokumal, a curly-haired, bearded, gray-skinned Obosson, looked up from his cards. The hems of his sleeveless yellow robe rippled in the steady breeze playing through the room. A pewter amulet with a large ruby at its center bobbed against his hairless chest, both signs of his Bohono religion. His acolyte, in a plain,

somewhat-dirty white robe bound with a frayed rope belt, shifted on his wooden stool. Kokumal eyed Avery. "What is dun bet?"

Lake-Ellen strained to understand him. She'd never heard a western tongue before. *What's the bet? Was that what he asked?*

She spoke with an accent of her own, but she'd only had to repeat herself twice during the journey. He got asked to repeat himself at least once an hour.

"Appears someone else has a good hand as well," Vess muttered.

"Three hundred fifty rin," Avery said.

Kokumal scowled at Vess as he counted from his stack of bills. "I keep play."

The acolyte, his gray skin a shade darker than Kokumal's, bobbed his head, unable to contain his excitement. He'd cost his elder a few pots. No doubt Vess and Avery picked up on the tell early on, too.

Lucky for him, the old priest never glanced back at his acolyte.

A cacophony, heavier now, floated through the windows. Wagons clattering across wooden planks added to the din. Waves slapped the piers, the harbor's rock walls. Closer in, the *Raisa Bell's* captain bellowed orders to his crew. Boots tromped across the main deck. Whistle blasts pierced the air.

She wrinkled her nose as dockside smells blew into the room.  
*Ew!*

Avery smiled again, wider. The corner of his eyes crinkled.

The *Raisa Bell's* direction shifted as she slowed. Her paddles slapped the river at a more gentle cadence, then quieted further.

Through the open door, passengers filed from the spacious lounge. Some muttered about checking their cabins again, or the line to meet the dockmasters.

"Bets are in," Avery said. "Pot's big and fat. Shall we show?"

Vess raised a finger. "Before rushing back to our dreary, mundane lives, perhaps we make this last hand more... interesting." He leaned forward, his gaze on Lake-Ellen. "See who's really brave here."

Lake-Ellen pursed her lips. Her arms tensed and for a moment her trembling fingers settled. *Dreary, mundane lives. If only I had even that.*

Vess Lennix had his spice guild. Avery was a junior estate

manager for his father's orchards and vineyards. Baylees worked as a carpenter and was on his way to a large project. Priest Kokumal had his religion, for all the good that was. Even the acolyte had his Path.

She had... nothing. Not even a home to return to.

She'd find something in Myrono, with her uncle's help. Opportunities abounded in such a large city. Her father believed she'd find her Path. But worry plagued her. Doubt left her awake long into the night—well, doubt and her odd, half-remembered dreams.

She'd find something. Of course, if she'd never strayed from her previous Path...

"What did you have in mind, seur?" She studied him, certain this was one of his few tells, this casual attitude of his. It arose when he had a winning hand.

Kokumal's attention returned to his cards, which he kept close to his chest. Behind him, his acolyte continued to smile and bob his head.

Also signs of a strong hand.

*Why am I worried? I have the winning hand.*

*Risk, her father chided. Reward, yes. But risk.*

She bit her tongue.

Vess reached into a vest pocket. "This is what I had in mind." He dropped a stack of coins near the pot's edge. "Five sovrin. Let's see who's brave enough to stay." His gaze flicked to the granite-skinned priest before returning. "If either of you is willing."

The priest grunted. A flush darkened his cheeks and crawled down the loose flesh of his neck, below his beard. He licked his lips.

Baylees whistled. "Glad I folded."

Lake-Ellen's breath escaped in a hiss. *Blight and bracken! Five sovrin?*

Her imagined mother crossed her arms. "*Warned you. Now where are you? Dare you risk what's yours that's worth five sovrin?*"

*But I can refuse. The betting's closed. I can say no, just play the pot. Can't I?*

*Rin good, her father, the voice of her conscience, whispered. More rin better.*



As she debated, the Bohono priest laid his cards down, then lifted the amulet's chain over his head. "Dis worth five sovrin, easy." The ruby's many facets threw red glints in the mid-day sun.

The acolyte jumped from his stool. "Priest Koku—"

"Sit!" Kokumal shouted. "Be still!"

The acolyte seemed about to reach out, but settled back onto his stool. His face darkened. He grabbed hold of the flat wooden seat between his thighs with one hand, pinched the edges of his robe together with the other. "Revered one, please—"

"Be still." Kokumal looked at Avery and Vess. Particularly Vess.

They both leaned forward, focused on the sparkling jewel at the amulet's center. She hadn't paid the amulet much thought while it bounced against the old priest's chest. Now, as it flashed in the sunlight, its glorious red depths drew her in.

Vess scrutinized the amulet. "From the Bohon Sanctuary?"

Kokumal sat straighter. "You recognize dun quality."

"Oh, yes. I've traveled to your fine state once or twice in my time."

"I am pleased." He laid the amulet in the pot. "I remain in dun game."

Avery laughed. "That's a foolishly brave risk."

"Easily worth five sovrin," Vess said. He folded his hand into a single stack, then drummed fingertips on the tabletop.

They turned to Lake-Ellen.

Kokumal's actions had given her time to settle. *That decides it, I guess.* Not that she'd had much choice, given how much she'd already wagered.

Only one item in her possession worth five sovrin. She'd regret losing it, but... The risk was justified.

Fingers shaking, she unfastened a pair of her shirt's middle buttons, then reached inside. "If any of you know us Ghesh, you know this is worth at least five sovrin." She found the inner pocket along her right flank quick enough, but fumbled to grip the small book tucked within. Stabbing pains fired through her knuckles. "Blight and bracken!"

Avery smiled. Eyebrows raised, Vess cocked his head. Priest Kokumal scowled. The acolyte remained worried.

Finally, she got a hold and withdrew her prize. "My seedbook."

"Ah!" Vess leaned forward. "How full?"

She thumbed open the lock then lifted the protective leather cover. Hand-written notes filled the first few pages, printed in her meticulous penmanship. The remaining pages had folded pockets containing her collection of seeds. "I've only three empty pockets near the end."

"Anything interesting?"

"Rare herbs, peppers found only in Ohrnos, and a quick-growing fern with healing sap. And the usual assortment of useful plants." She closed and locked the book. "I guarantee all the seeds."

She laid her prize on the pot.

"What's dis see'book?" the priest grumbled.

Vess rubbed his palms. "A valuable commodity, my revered Obosson. Worth five sovrin." He smiled, as though pleased he'd forced her to risk her treasure. "A trove of rare plants, peppers, medicinal herbs. Every aspiring Gresh carries one. It represents much of her life's work. Quite a risk you're taking, striss."

She smiled back. "It's no risk."

Priest Kokumal eyed the seedbook, scowled at Lake-Ellen, then turned to Vess. "Is worth five sovrin?"

"Not right away, mind you. The seeds must be planted and nurtured. But if properly cared for, they will deliver treasure for many harvests. Well worth over five sovrin. At the very least, its resale value should net you six or seven sovrin, if you don't care to grow the garden's bounty."

"Eh. Fine. I shall sell it and collect dun reward."

Behind him, the acolyte relaxed, maybe assuaged by Kokumal's confidence. Color darkened his cheeks. His head bobbed again.

"So, the betting is closed." Avery clapped. "Time to reveal your hands. This is going to be fun."

The *Raisa Bell* shifted direction again, slipping sideways as she turned to port. The docks crept close, the paddle boat settling in bow-first.

Vess spread his cards. "Three ruby towers, two ruby cisterns."

"A triple spread, all the same suite," Avery said. "Very strong. I think we have a winner."

“One of my finest.” Vess smiled at Lake-Ellen.

She kept still, waiting to see the priest’s hand before relaxing or collapsing.

*I have to believe...*

Avery nodded to Kokumal. “And you, revered friend?”

The Obosson’s white teeth peeked out from behind his bushy beard. The acolyte bounced on his stool, also grinning. Kokumal flipped his cards as a single stack, then spread them out near the pot’s edge. “Three onyx towers, a ruby tower, and a ruby trebuchet.”

“Hurion’s dark ash!” Vess slapped the table.

Avery and Baylees said, “Wow!” and laughed.

“We have a new winner!” Avery shouted.

Lake-Ellen closed her eyes.

*Risk*, her father whispered. *Reward. Good.*

When she looked again, Kokumal had stood and was reaching for the pot.

She raised a hand. “Seur, that’s a magnificent hand. However...”

Just as he had done, she laid her hand down as a single stack, then nudged each card aside. Any stabbing from her knuckles went unfelt.

Kokumal froze. His eyes widened with each diamond castle revealed.

“Four diamond towers and a diamond cistern.” She forced herself to breathe slow and even. Her shoulders and hips shivered, and goose bumps rose across her arms. *Ah, yes.* She remembered this—the thrill of winning.

No one moved until Kokumal fell back onto his seat.

“Sprites and demons take me,” Vess whispered. He stood, palms flat on the table. “I’ve only seen that once before. And I dealt it.” He glanced at Avery, who, mouth agape, looked just as stunned.

“Never. A pure diamond castle. If I hadn’t seen it myself...”

Baylees released a “*Whuh!*”

Priest Kokumal placed his hands flat near his cards. His cheeks darkened, the light gray splotching with streaks of black. The acolyte’s face flushed lighter, turning more to the priest’s shade. His eyes grew wide.

No doubt the green shades across her own face showed a similar

change in color. Blood warmed her cheeks. Her goose bumps sprouted bumps of their own.

"Well. Congratulations." Vess sounded out of breath. He gestured. "Wrap it in. Wrap it in."

She stretched her arms over the pot and drew the bills and coins toward her. Several slipped through her fingertips, but she caught Vess's wager and the amulet.

Kokumal jerked, then bolted to his feet. Cheeks flushed, he looked dizzied. Then he clenched his jaw and narrowed his eyelids.

She froze. As did the others.

She'd left Dandelion in her cabin. With so many people around, it had seemed safe to do so.

The priest glared at her, at his amulet, back at her, then stomped from the lounge.

His acolyte jumped to his feet. Moaning, he gathered what remained of the priest's stake. He muttered, "saster," as he rushed after his revered leader.

*Disaster?* She scoffed. *Spare me. After the spring I've had...*

"Need help tucking that away?" Avery asked her as he collected his cards.

She shook her head. "I think I want to enjoy this."

Vess said, "Better hurry. It's not wise to keep the dockmasters waiting." He pocketed his surviving bills and coins and unrolled his sleeves. Beside him, Baylees rose, grabbed his rin and orange Builders Guild robe, and nodded.

"Seurs, striss, it was a pleasure." Bayless saluted.

"Take care," Vess replied.

"Stay well," Avery said.

"A pleasure, yes," Lake-Ellen said. "Good luck with your project."

The carpenter departed.

She tucked her seedbook back into her pocket, re-fastened her shirt's buttons, then lifted the amulet. "Magnificent."

"Isn't it, though?" Avery stepped close to look as well.

Vess donned his robe, then bowed. "I shall treasure our days together, good folk. Thank you for the opportunity to entertain and be entertained."

Avery returned the bow. "It was a pleasure, seur guildist."

“Take care, Vess. I hope to see you again sometime.”

“After you settle in Myrono, pay me a visit,” he said. “Just find the Spice Guildhouse down the road from the Government House.”

“When I have the time, I promise, seur.”

“I look forward to that. And you...” He turned to Avery. “Stay out of trouble.” With that, he left.

The *Raisa Bell* shuddered as she docked.

“What did he mean by that?” Lake-Ellen asked.

Avery shrugged. “Broken barrels if I know.”

“Hmm.” She sat and organized the various bills and their denominations. Her fingers moved with practiced precision despite the pain.

“You look like you’ve handled money before,” Avery said.

“I might have. A rin or two.” The bills tidied, she stacked the coins.

He wrapped a thin cord around the deck then dropped it into a pant pocket. “May I remain your escort to the market, or do you intend to splurge on a fancy cab ride all the way to your uncle’s house?”

Between all the lida, krons, bhath, and rin—especially the rin—the pot totaled over seven sovrin. Most of that came from Vess’s wager. She’d have to appraise the amulet to learn its true worth. But if Vess believed it was worth five sovrin...

She’d more than doubled her horde.

The urge to slap the table in glee swept through her. She tamped it down.

For the first time since leaving home, a true calm settled over her.

*I’m going to be fine.*

Uncertain of what she’d do, she trusted a Path would reveal itself. Maybe even the right Path.

“I would welcome that, kind seur. I just need to fetch my belongings from my cabin.” She folded down the waist of her skirt to reveal her purse belt. She grabbed the leather and spun her coin purse around from the small of her back. Pain stabbing, she stuffed her winnings inside, bills in the rear pockets, coins in the slots matched to their sizes. Last, she found a spot for the amulet.

Avery whistled. “Look at you. If I didn’t know better, I’d say you’re an accountant.”

She froze. “You *don’t* know better.” It erupted before she could stop herself. Cheeks warming, she turned toward him. “Sorry. I shouldn’t be so rude.”

He raised his hands and smiled. “Didn’t mean to offend, my dear striss.”

She zippered the purse, then spun it to the small of her back again. “You didn’t. It’s just... My Path was that of an accountant, but things...” She fumbled with her skirt.

“Forget it. Let’s grab your stuff and get on shore. I know this nice little stand in the market that sells the best—”

A man at the doorway cleared his throat. “Pardons, seur, but there’s a bit of an issue.”

Lake-Ellen looked up as she finished folding her skirt over her belt. The man in the doorway looked familiar.

“Yes, Fetches?” Avery asked.

The name dinged. *Oh, yes.* Avery’s cargo chief or something. Old, graying, walking with a limp. “*But he knows his stuff,*” Avery told her. “*I’d be lost without him.*”

“Trouble with the dockhands. Perhaps if you could...”

“Right.” Avery looked at her. “Listen, get your stuff, then wait for me on the dock. Just hold that staff of yours like you mean business and look real angry.”

She laughed. “Go. I’ll be fine.”

And in her ebullience, she believed it.

## 02 - A Fight in the Cabin

Still smiling, Lake-Ellen descended to her cabin on the *Bell's* second deck. She refused to let the bristling on the back of her neck ruin her mood. The perception of being watched had bothered her since the lightning strike, becoming worse since she left Peepik.

While in his care, she spoke of it to Vack-Billener, her hometown's apothecarist.

*"From what I've read, lightning strikes cause peculiar residual effects in the body for those who survive. Paranoia might be one of those."* He'd shrugged. *"You may have to get used to it."*

*"How does one ever get used to that?"* Lake-Ellen asked. She never received a satisfactory answer. But she got used to the savage itching caused by her growing buds before they broke through her skin. Maybe with her neck hairs, once enough time passed...

A few of her fellow travelers were retrieving the last of their belongings or setting cases outside their cabin doors for porters to transport dockside. Colored tags hung from the handles. Carpets and tapestries muffled most sounds.

She unlocked and opened her cabin door—the effort earning her lances of pain—then paused a step inside.

Heavy burgundy curtains hanging from a bronze rod near the ceiling divided the space. The front half contained a writing table with a candelabra, chairs, and shelves for her clothing and shoes. A sleeping area with a bed, fluffy pillows, and a bedside table filled the back half. She had no trouble falling asleep her first night on board and slept well each night since—save for the occasions when odd dreams jolted her awake. Or that night of the loud, angry thunderstorm. But she returned to sleep peacefully enough.

Save for the chair, bolts held everything down. A chain attached to one of the chair's legs prevented it from traveling too far from the desk.

A wide window, its matching burgundy curtains tied back, allowed in the mid-day sun.

All around, polished wood gleamed. Tapestries hung on the walls depicting forests and mountain lakes in vivid blues, greens, golds, and reds. Crystal sconces housed small candles. Small bushes in planters boasted thick, ivy-like green leaves.

A door near the bed's footboard opened to the privy, which had hot and cold running water like a wash house. The large tub, roomy enough for her to stretch out, invited deep, soaking baths every night save one.

Racks held towels and smaller washing cloths. Each morning, Lake-Ellen wiped herself down with those, in front of a waist-high basin, across from the tub and with a mirror mounted above it and small niches holding soaps and perfumes to either side. In the corner, a toilet, also with running water, carried away her wastes.

*Such luxury!*

She'd compare every place she stayed from now on to this cabin.

Right before she left home, her father told her, *"The trip from Lake Pristo to Deltan will be the longest leg of your journey. Vack-Billener traveled to his parents' place in Deltan a few months ago. He says a private cabin on one of the paddle boats is almost a necessity."* He shoved an envelope into her hands. *"Use this on a cabin as far forward from the paddle wheel as you can. Take those days to rest up. Get to my brother's house as refreshed as you might."*

She'd hugged him tight. *"Thank you, Father. And when I arrive in Myrono, I'll make you proud. You'll see."*

*"That's my Lake."*

Lake-Ellen's eyes watered. "No. No crying now," she told herself. "You've cried enough."

Those first days had been the hardest. She'd cried herself to sleep every night. But after the initial leg of the journey, when she reached Kaypik on Lake Ohrnos's southwest shore, she steeled herself. The Pik Valley Council banished her for a minimum of five harvests, a decision supported by the countysee'er. No sense in crying about it any longer.

*Banished.* All because of the minuscule chance the lightning strike had blasted the rumored devil slumbering within the Heart of the Forest into her body. How else, the Council determined, had Lake-Ellen survived? The devil wouldn't let its new host perish.

She glowered. Maybe because she was young and healthy and the lightning struck the great tree first, burning her with only a glancing blow?

Herders and horsemen had given testimony about animals



spooked for no reason, and people from all over the Pik Valley community brought complaints of odd dreams in the weeks that followed. And the fires... Everyone knew those possessed by demons started fires as a matter of course. Would the same not hold true for one possessed by a devil?

*Superstitious fools.* She scoffed. When she returned in five harvests, she'd show them how utterly ridiculous they were to cast out their next Lady of the Leaves.

Assuming she ever became a Lady...

She crouched before her backpack, stuffed full of all she could carry from home. Earlier, after her morning wipe-down, she'd packed her possessions, then headed off to breakfast and the last bout of Castles. Her heavy travel cloak, draped over her pack, looked undisturbed. Still, she shoved it aside and examined the pack's many clasps, her efforts earning more bites of pain from her knuckles. All appeared well.

Satisfied, she hefted it over her shoulders, wormed her arms through the straps, then bounced on her toes to settle things. She grabbed the waist straps behind her hips and buckled them tight together over her belly. The pack hung low but more off her hips than her shoulders, the way she preferred. She pulled her hair up and to the side to free it.

Over both, she slung her cloak. She fixed the clasps in front to their widest, then reached over her shoulders to adjust the hood. Once she started down the road from Deltan to Myrono, she would raise the hood, to soothe the sensation of being watched.

Her final and most-prized possession after her seedbook leaned against the wall near the bathroom door. Dandelion had once been her grandfather's staff. He'd gifted her the weapon when she turned eight, when she grew mature and tall enough to train—the same harvest her education intensified, making for long days. The staff measured five-and-a-half feet, a nudge taller than her, and was both lightweight and strong like ironwood. Notches chipped in by sword and dagger told of battles past. In places, blood stained the wood. At some point her grandfather had drilled tiny holes in one end and filled them with lead to give that end unexpected heft. In her harvests of training, Lake-Ellen had learned how to deliver nasty,

crippling blows.

The staff even looked like a dandelion. Its top, or flower end, bore a yellow cast. The bark along the middle two-thirds was darker and somewhat green. The heavy end—the root—was deep brown. Just like a dandelion—save for the soaked-in smears of blood.

She'd stained the wood with blood in her only fight against a pair of yardhands who tried to rob her.

She tapped her old friend's root twice on the wooden floor. *Whump whump.*

"Ready for one last day of travel?" She thumped the floor once more.

The hairs on the back of her neck bristled, more than she'd felt before.

Then a clearing of the throat came from the door.

She spun around. Despite the pain, she gripped Dandelion tight in both hands as she fell into a defensive stance, right leg a half-step forward of the left. Her backpack, tight against her, nudged her off balance as her cloak's hems swirled around her sides and ankles.

Priest Kokumal, still in his sleeveless yellow robe but with a thick leather belt around his waist now, stood a pair of steps into her cabin. A step behind him, his acolyte closed the door.

Lake-Ellen grimaced. She'd left the door wide open.

"Please." Kokumal held his right palm out and up. "My am'let." His left hand rested on the hilt of the sheathed dagger hanging from his belt, its blade half as long as her forearm. The acolyte wore a thinner belt, the leather worn and cracked, and a sheathed shorter blade.

"What?" Lake-Ellen frowned. "You want your amulet?"

"Please."

"Just give it to you?"

"Please."

Warmth spread through her. Her heart skipped into a rapid tempo as her throat dried. She swallowed and worked her tongue along the roof of her mouth.

The advice of Denner-Bark, her instructor, rose from the back of her mind. *"The best way to win a fight is to not fight. But if you must, intend to give no quarter."*

Up and down her body, her muscles tensed. She forced herself to stay loose. *Mustn't waste energy coiling up too soon.*

She said, "No. Get out of my room. Leave me be."

"I cannot do that. Return my am'let. Please."

She slowed her breathing and made sure of her grip on Dandelion. With each beat of her heart the fierce pain grew more distant. She adjusted her stance to center her balance.

"It'll cost you five sovrin," she said. "I'm sure it's worth more, but that was the price to play."

The acolyte said, "We haven't fifty rin among us." His cheeks shaded to a lighter gray than before.

Lake-Ellen glanced at him, then back at the much older priest.

Kokumal scowled at the acolyte, then returned his gaze to Lake-Ellen.

She said, "Then you shouldn't have risked it."

"I had spectations of winning," Kokumal replied.

"So did Vess. So did I."

"Please, it is a badge of office," the acolyte said. "Priest Kokumal was foolish to risk it. But we must have it back."

"Five sovrin. I can hold it until you gather that together." Lake-Ellen adjusted her grip again, one hand at a time. It hurt, but less than before.

"I must have it back before we d'embark," the priest said. "Now. Please."

Dandelion's worn bumps against her palms reassured her, but dull aches claimed her fingers. She pursed her lips. The priest would not take no for an answer.

The warmth throughout her body deepened. They expected her to just give it back? She eyed their daggers. The heat in her intensified.

She readied herself for them to take it from her by force.

But did they know what they were doing? Kokumal had stepped sideways, staying close to the wall to her right. But being left-handed, he should've moved to where his acolyte stood. As the more experienced one—if he was—he should use his acolyte to distract her while he moved in to either wound or kill.

*Would you do that, priest?*

As for the acolyte, he didn't look ready for bloodshed.

She braved a step forward to the center of the room, near the dividing curtain, Dandelion certain in her grip. "Sorry. Five sovrin. That was the wager."

"We cannot affor' dat price," Kokumal said. His left hand moved to the dagger's leather-wrapped hilt. But he kept the weapon sheathed. The acolyte held still. A bead of sweat trickled down his temple.

"That was the price to play, and you played," Lake-Ellen said. She could diffuse the situation, give him the amulet. But... she'd won it fair. She'd need the rin. And, well, she liked the color. "I risked my seedbook. Would you have given that back?"

"Please," the acolyte said. He nudged the door with his knee. The lock engaged with a click.

Kokumal leaned forward. "Don' be a fool, girl. I must have my am'let. I don' wish to hurt you."

She repositioned Dandelion to put the root closer to Kokumal. "I'm the fool? Who's the fool who believed his god would bless him with the winning hand?" She eyed his knees. "Who's the fool who even believes in gods, anyway? Maybe your god is punishing you for risking your amulet."

The acolyte gasped.

Priest Kokumal bristled, rising to his full height and baring his teeth. "You do *not* speak of my god with such insolence! Now put down dun stick and surrender my am'let!"

"Surrender five sovrin first."

With a growl, Kokumal drew his blade. Lake-Ellen braced herself. If he insisted on a fight, by thorns, she'd fight.

She could shout for help. But her cabin had thick walls—she'd seldom heard a noise from outside her room, either in the passageway or the cabins to either side. The passageway beyond was also built for quiet, with the carpets and curtains muffling most sounds. She'd be wasting her breath.

Kokumal stepped toward her and swung his blade at her face. Lake-Ellen stepped toward him. She turned aside his slash with Dandelion's flower then slammed its root down on his forward foot. The strap of his sandal split, as did the dark gray skin beneath. Just

as fast, she drew back, raising Dandelion's root. Kokumal's next step turned into a stagger. Lake-Ellen smashed Dandelion against his left fist, driving it hard against the wall.

Fingers snapped. The priest screamed. His dagger fell from his grasp.

Lake-Ellen darted away as his knees gave. Blood dribbled from his hand. She whirled toward the acolyte.

The boy's raised eyebrows and wide eyes revealed his complete surprise. She swung Dandelion's root down across her body as she approached. He jerked his dagger free and swung it up, perhaps expecting her to strike his face. Its small blade flashed in the sunlight streaming through the window.

Beneath his frantic swing, Lake-Ellen slammed Dandelion's root against the side of his knee. The skin popped. His eyes opened wider, his lips puckered into an "O" and he gurgled as he toppled back against the door.

Her body moving all on its own, Lake-Ellen pulled Dandelion back then drove its root into the acolyte's stomach. As he doubled over, his breath leaving with a *whroosh*, he tried to grab her weapon. She jerked Dandelion free, retreated a step, and a quick thump between his shoulders sent him sprawling. His dagger clattered across the wooden floor.

She skipped back so he couldn't grab her ankles—not that he showed any inclination to do so—then pivoted back toward the old priest. Kokumal grabbed his dagger with his right hand. Jaw still clenched, Lake-Ellen didn't wait for him to rise. Two quick steps, and she lashed at his shoulder. Dandelion's root connected with a solid *thuck* to his upper arm. The priest cried and dropped his dagger again. He reeled back into a crouch and slammed against the side wall, using nearby shelves to keep from tumbling to the floor.

To make sure he stayed down, Lake-Ellen smashed Dandelion below his left knee. Again, blood spattered. Once more, Kokumal cried out. But instead of falling like she expected, he lunged for her, throwing himself off the wall behind him with all the strength of his good leg. His cry of pain turned to a guttural growl.

Lake-Ellen danced away, bringing Dandelion horizontal across her body. Kokumal touched his bloody fingers to the edge of her

cloak before his nose impacted her staff.

At the same moment, Lake-Ellen threw all her strength into shoving Dandelion forward.

Kokumal's head twisted hard. Blood spurted from the smashed meat of his nose. His hand slipped from her cloak. He dropped to the floor and landed with a wet slap, his chin bouncing hard.

Blood puddled beneath his face.

Breathing fast, her heart beating a furious tempo, Lake-Ellen stood still for a moment to catch her breath. Then she widened her stance and brought Dandelion's root low where she might use it to smack another shoulder or face. Pain from her clenched jaw rose above the heat burning in her hands.

*Oh!*

When neither assailant moved, she relaxed her jaw. A deep breath through her open but still dry mouth helped ease the tension in her chest.

"Oh!"

Her cry sounded loud in the silence. But it emerged as a whimper.

The acolyte, moaning, tried to rise on one elbow. "Please," he said, his voice weak. "Stop."

Kokumal remained motionless and silent.

Lake-Ellen turned her gaze back to the acolyte. "No," she growled. Another burst of warmth surged through her. Her grip on Dandelion tightened. "No, you don't get to come in here, threaten me, then beg for mercy."

Before she could stop herself, Dandelion's root snapped out.

The blow broke the acolyte's forearm with a dull, sickening *cruk!*

He screamed and fell back to the floor. He curled into a ball, clutching his arm. "Aiy! Aiy! Please!"

Lake-Ellen lifted Dandelion again, ready to silence him.

*No.* Her father's voice rose from the back of her mind. *Enough. Leave.*

The heat throughout her body dissipated.

Jaw clenched again, she forced her cheeks and neck to relax. Then the muscles in her arms. Finally, her grip on Dandelion. The burning in her knuckles subsided.

Through it all, Kokumal remained motionless.

“Stop. Please,” the acolyte gasped between breaths. “Please.”

*Leave*, her father said again.

*Yes. Go.*

Lake-Ellen stepped to the door, careful to avoid the blood. She grabbed the latch. The acolyte’s ankles prevented her from opening the door. She placed the bottom of her boot against his thighs. “Move.”

“Aiy!” He wormed away.

Lake-Ellen opened the door wide enough to slip into the passageway, then closed it behind her. Another breath and the remaining heat inside her evaporated. Her heart still raced, and her throat stayed dry. But the amulet remained in her possession.

Had they really expected her to surrender it?

The sound of a squeaky wheel floated down the hall. She turned. At the passageway’s far end, a pair of porters moved luggage by the cabin doors onto the cart between them. They organized the luggage by their colored tags.

They’d reach her soon enough. *I should tell them...*

But the thought drifted away.

*“You must be careful, Lake-Ellen,”* her father had warned. *“Tell no one about your banishment. Say nothing of the devil. That’s just the talk that’ll earn you trouble.”*

She was defending herself. *They attacked her.*

Still, if the authorities got involved, no telling what questions they might ask. Where their suspicions might lead. Sure, Avery was still around. He would support her claims of winning the amulet clean and fair. He wouldn’t appreciate her getting him involved, though—he had enough problems of his own.

Kokumal’s face flashed across her thoughts—the light gray pallor of his cheeks and neck. How the old priest remained silent and still after he fell.

She replayed the moment his face struck Dandelion. How the impact smashed his nose, how her thrust twisted his head back. The way his chin bounced when he landed.

The recollection froze her.

No doubt there’d be questions.

*What should I...*

*Leave*, her conscience demanded. *Go.*

“Yes, go.”

Lake-Ellen glided down the passageway toward the nearest stairs. She bent her head low. Maybe the porters hadn't noticed her. Her light green skin. Which cabin she'd come from. They looked pretty intent on their duties.

“Go,” she repeated in a lower voice.

As she descended to the main deck, the hairs on the back of her neck bristled. But only a mere tickle—so light she might not have even noticed had the fight not left her so riled up. She resisted the urge to glance over her shoulder.

*No one's watching. Just... go.*

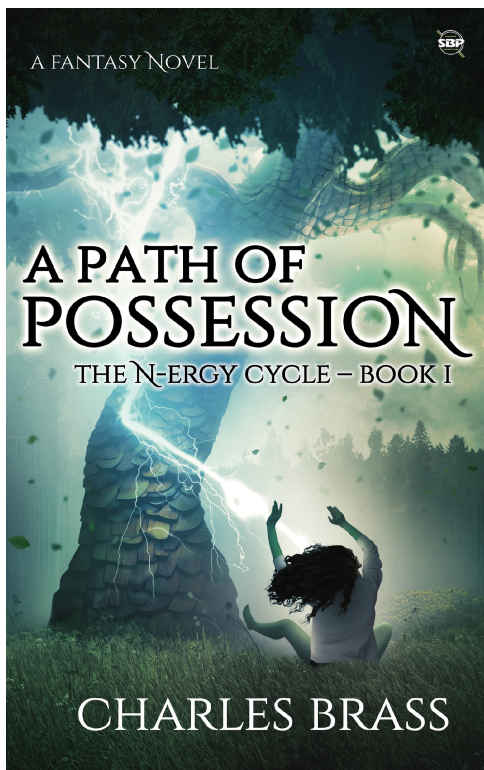
At the first deck, another thought occurred to her. His Bohono god must not have wanted him to have that amulet. She wished she could return to her cabin to tell him that.

So stupid to believe in gods.

Or devils.



Continue the Adventure...



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