

The child was first.

Out of the corner of his eye, she was a slip of gold cloth covered in dirt. Sontar looked past the shop shelf he was perusing to the street. Her back was to him. Grimy fingers closed over a fallen doll. The charm he'd taken down to purchase was forgotten.

She was wearing that before.

The stray thought slipped past that morning's concerns—worries about recent uprisings and abuses in magic—and rested on the dark-headed girl. Doll in hand, she straightened to stare through the shop's glass at him.

Sontar's heart gave a turn. The wind ruffled her hair in a way that was all too familiar, loosening her brown braids to blow in free tangles.

Her name is—

An older woman stalked out of the meandering crowds to take the small one by the hand. She spoke the child's name, but it was as if his ears had closed off to wall it out. "Stop running off! Don't you realize how dangerous..."

He didn't need to see the mother's face when she took the girl away. He knew already what it looked like—a thin mouth, large eyes framed in dark lashes. There was a scar in the right corner of her lip. What from, he had no way of knowing--

Sontar shook his head. His mind was toying with the idea of what the woman could look like, nothing more. His schoolmates had always said his imagination was active, mostly to the detriment of those around him. Yet, reluctance dogged his steps to the counter, where he withdrew his coin to pay for his charm.

Surely, he only knew the girl's name because he'd heard it in passing on the way into the shop. He just hadn't noticed her before that moment. With his current distractions, all sorts of things were slipping through the cracks of his mind.

By the time he returned home, the strange sensation in the pit of his stomach had passed.

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Ava was fond of the roses she kept in their bedroom windowsill. When they were courting, it was his first gift to her, three of them wrapped in thin blue ribbon. In the two years since then, she'd made many trips to the market to purchase more.

That morning, one hung over the scalloped lip of the vase. A few stray petals had fallen across the sill, black at their edges. The rest stood tall and proud into the sunlight he found himself damning. Sontar turned away to burrow in the blankets.

There, the feeling found him again.

I just bought all three yesterday. They were fresh. How odd to have one die—

Next to him, Ava inhaled. "Is everything all right, dear?"

He realized then that he was clutching the pillow so tightly his knuckles were bloodless. When he turned, he would see the stray lock of hair she always complained about over her left eye, her nightgown a rumple from her disturbed rest.

He wasn't the only one troubled by the violent turns peoples' magic had taken lately. Word had come from the nearby city of Telvik that more mages would be needed in the city outskirts to prevent the hexes that had ravaged the larger cities from cursing any more people. Being one of a handful in a small town had its detriments.

Sontar turned.

"It's...nothing. Just the sunlight in my eyes." He brushed the lock of hair away. Ava turned onto her back to stretch, putting him in mind of a large cat.

"I'll make breakfast. Something quick this morning---."

"---since I'll need to head to the market." Pushing the covers away, he put his feet to the cold hardwood. *Porridge*. Not the thin gruel others made, but satisfying, topped with the fresh fruit Ava bought to liven up what was otherwise a dull meal.

A half-hour later, he stared down into his bowl. Fruit crowned his cereal, swirling in with the milk Ava had added just before serving it. He ate, chewing with more thought than was his usual custom.

A small body. Someone crying.

He all but dropped his spoon. Ava hadn't made porridge yesterday. He'd been late, drawn up into an unexpected crowd that flooded the shops. He'd been sure to go early to avoid it, missing his meal. His wife hadn't been pleased, but it was necessary.

He stared down at his trembling hand.

What day is it today? He thought they kept a calendar on the wall nearest to the kitchen table.

It was gone.

"Sontar." His name was tinged with an undercurrent of—concern? No, that wasn't quite it. If he didn't know better, it almost sounded as if Ava was sizing him up, evaluating him in ways he couldn't put a finger to. "Are you unwell? I should call someone if you're--."

"I'm well enough." He looked up at her from across the table, voice firm. "I should be going before it gets much later. You know how things are at the market if I dawdle."

She looked down into her own bowl, a frown wedging between her eyebrows. "I do." She spoke so softly he had to strain to hear her.

"I'll be back." He tried to sound reassuring as he cast for his coat and shoes.

He failed.

Long after he'd shut the front door behind him, he felt the weight of Ava's eyes upon him.

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The Wandering Dragon was well-known for its variety of charms. In the century since magic had come to the world, the Olories had made a name for themselves as its finest artisans, drawing a variety of people from all over the continent. The youngest great-granddaughter of the original proprietor was now the owner, but due to her frequent travels, her husband usually minded the storefront in her absence.

Today, Sontar took in every small detail about the place—the peeling paint on the front door, the slap of the store sign against the side of the building. The tinkle of the bell never sounded in full, the clapper stuck against something inside.

The interior smelled of dust and charm ingredients. Some of them were herbs he knew by heart, having picked them many times himself. Others were things he could never hope to touch in nature, not having the money required to travel.

"Morning." The young man leaning against the counter lifted his hand in greeting.

"Good morning, Arlen." Five shelves, three hemmed together against the far wall. Charms wrapped in paper behind glass, each with a tiny sign advertising their merits and prices. A few had warnings scrawled in red ink under that. Two shelves closer to him, those containing the charms better suited to the students that milled in from the nearby university.

It seemed like everyone had a frown for him that day. "Is something the matter? You don't seem like yourself."

Sontar waved a distracted hand. "Just work getting to me. I'm looking for a banishing enhancer. These damn hexes people are bandying about..."

Arlen nodded knowingly. "Scary times, aren't they? Mayor Morvaris closed the ports the other day. The High Houses are in lockdown. They're still negotiating about what we should do with the new magic that's coming down from the Outside."

"Yes." He didn't look at the other man on his way over to the shelf. The glass box he picked up was cool in his palms. "Ridiculous, what they're trying to do."

"Mm, try telling some of them that." Arlen propped his chin in his hands. "Making problems for the sake of it, some of them. They think if they make enough strife, people will want to carve a straight line

meant for everyone to follow until the world ends.” He made a derisive sound. “They’re calling it a matter of people determining their own destiny versus having a pre-determined fate.”

“They say that the problems we cause with magic in this world will be inherited by another when this one ends, so we need to maintain caution.” He gave the box another twist for a better look at the trapped charm. “I can see the need for that.”

“I wish we could get rid of it altogether.” Arlen propped his chin in his hands. “I wonder what problems we inherited from the last world that had our magic.”

“We would all die if magic went away tomorrow.” Sontar gave him a disapproving look. “Souls destroyed and all, since it’s all tied together. We’re trying to study that very thing in the universities. In fact, there are reams of literature from when a group of professors who lived in the First Age...” He trailed away.

Something hurtled past the window.

A slip of gold.

The child.

She cried out when the doll met packed earth. A dirt-caked hand reached to pick it up. Wind, braids. Free-flowing streams of hair like pieces of midnight—

Her name is--

“Lora!” The woman, taking the child’s free hand. “Stop running off! Don’t you realize how dangerous...”

The box threatened to slip from his hand.

His reaction didn’t escape Arlen’s notice. “Mr. Liabella? Is everything all right?”

His eyes remained on the child as the mother struggled to corral her back to waiting family. Sontar turned for the counter, hand automatically closing over the coins in the bottom of his pocket.

“I’m...fine. Distracted.” He dropped the gold on the counter. Arlen slid it down into his palm to count it.

“Here, I owe you the difference,” he started. “Mr. Liabella, don’t you need your--?”

“Keep it.” The sun burst into his eyes, dazzling him for a moment. The bell sounded behind him. The shop door closed.

The woman in the street, distracted by the click of the door, turned away from her tantruming offspring to glance up at him.

The scar on her lip was paler than the surrounding skin, slightly puckered.

Sontar didn’t remember going home.

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Two.

He woke to a milky dawn trying to pry its way through his bedroom curtains. The vase in the window was filled to the brim with water.

Two roses bowed together in death. One black petal rested on the floor, while another sat on the sill itself. The last living rose sought the feeble sun.

He turned against the heat of his wife's body. Her nightgown was the same as he recalled. The same lock of hair fell over her eye. Her left eye. Her stretch, down to the way she opened her fingers, was identical.

The thought of breakfast made him feel ill.

Blueberries and milk. The porridge sat heavy in his stomach.

The woman hadn't wept long. There was no reason to.

No calendar. Of course. Yet if it was there, if he could see it, what he suspected--

This time, the spoon did clatter from his hand, meeting the table in a chime of metal.

Ava glanced up from her meal. "Sontar?"

There was no mistaking that tone now. "I'm fine, Ava. I—I've just noticed the time, that's all. If I'm much later, the market will be full. I'm out of banishment enhancing charms."

Her eyes felt the same. The material of his favorite coat, once a comfort, felt like a smothering skin. His shoes were prisons. The way to the town proper was a blur his addled head couldn't distinguish from a dream.

The same bell, the same shelves. He was certain he'd seen each minute detail the same way before, down to the last cobweb.

He tried to keep his chat with Arlen to a minimum. He knew the box he took into his hand as well as he knew his own name, down to the chip in the corner from where someone had likely been careless with it before.

The view outside the window loomed. Across the way, there was a restaurant, next to that another shop where caught souls were rendered to have their memories distilled into usable information before being released again.

Gold. The child, the doll, the woman. All reeled across his eyes as he paid. Once more, he refused his change. The light hurt him.

The figure crossing the street kept pressed into the crowd she was among. The child screamed—something about her dolly having lost an eye that she needed to find before she allowed her mother to take her back to where her auntie was waiting. The throng of crossing people stepped closer.

The woman noticed him first. The eyes that met his were fathomless.

Sontar tried to move forward, to speak. His lips refused to part. His mind refused to engage.

Instead, somehow, he went home.

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The last rose was wilting.

This time, he didn't need light to see that. He knew it, knew it the same way he knew the way Ava would wake, the way he knew his porridge would go to his aching stomach like a mouthful of gravel. His coat was the skin of a dead man wrapped around his own. His shoes were made of iron that smashed against his toes. His name in Ava's mouth fell to ashes. He heard her as if from underwater.

His way to the market was a scene from a story that felt as if it happened to another man. On the shelf furthest from the shop door, a spider was trapping a fly in its web, turning it over and over, applying more sticky threads to keep its meal in place.

His own threatened to come up. Scolding Arlen for wishing magic away was a mechanical chore. The girl would be by in a moment.

Gold.

Yes, there she was. The doll disturbed the soil when its stuffed body struck. Her fingers reminded him of matchsticks. So thin, so fragile, just as easy to break.

The sound of the money he dropped onto the counter may as well have been a scream. His ears throbbed with the conversations others had around him. The shop bell tolled death while the sun threatened to raise burns across his uncovered skin. The wind raked at his hair, the girl's hair, the hair of the turning mother with her scarred lip.

The crowd came. The figure in the middle was his focus. Something in the way she moved, something she reached for. The girl protested her mother's efforts to remove her. Dolly needed her eye.

This time, he remained close to the mother and child. When the crowd drew close, he could feel the magic others couldn't. Unlike the common person, Sontar was trained. He knew what magical danger, even the most subtle types, felt like. The woman in the crowd used powerful concealing magic, but she wasn't careful enough.

Even so, the magic that radiated out from her released hex was enough to take him from his feet. Cries of pain and fear blended together into a long moan. The protective wards around Arlen's shop would save him from the worst of the damage, but others were not so fortunate.

The last scream he heard before the world closed to him belonged to Ava.

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“He’s waking.”

“Is he?”

Heads bent together, the two senior healers stood over the mage’s hospital bed. He was fairly young, ensuring that the worst of the physical wounds the hex opened across his body would heal soon enough.

The fashion in which it affected his magic was another matter.

“Mr. Liabella?” The elder of the two leaned closer to raise his voice. “Can you hear us? I’m Healer Quinfiel. You’re in Telvik. Mr. Liabella?”

The eyes that shifted to him reminded the healer of glass marbles. “Can you hear us?” he repeated, quieter.

Sontar took a moment to remember how speech functioned. “Yes. I...” He licked lips that flaked under the effort. “How is the little girl from the market? The one in Ebla? I remember the woman in the market released her hex, and...”

“She’ll pull through. Her mother as well. That charm you had saved a lot of people.” Quinfiel smiled down at him.

Sontar’s brows knit. “Ava, my wife, she was there as well. I’d forgotten something, lots of things, actually, and she was there. I don’t know how she found me. I must have spent an hour in Arlen’s shop looking at things. How long have I been unconscious?”

“Nearly four days.” It was the other healer, a younger woman, that chimed in. “The woman that hexed everyone was taken in. They’re asking her questions now.”

“My wife?” Sontar turned his head. His neck felt raw where it met his shoulders.

Glances were exchanged.

“The effects of the hex on her were more severe.” Quinfiel’s nose twitched. “We weren’t able to save her, but she did donate her soul’s energy to you in order to save you.”

Sontar’s jaw tightened. “I’m going to need some time alone. Please.”

“Are you sure that’s---”

He interjected before she could pity him. “Yes. Thank you.”

Quinfiel shook his head. "Leave him be, Shey. He's well enough not to need constant monitoring. We'll see you tonight, Mr. Liabella."

Together, they departed.

Above his head, Sontar watched the last of his wife's precious soul drain from a containment unit into his own. He could feel his flesh rallying with each glowing drop it took.

Living a day over and over again. The glow of the lights above his head were harsh. He shut his eyes.

Other thoughts drained in, one after another.

I wonder what lead up to that moment in the marketplace. If I'd done a few things differently, could it have been avoided? If everyone had done something differently, would it have happened at all?

Day wore into evening. By the time the sun lent its light to the moon, the last of Ava's soul was gone.

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Three days later, he was permitted to go home.

The first thing Sontar did was take the vase down from the window, before he put away his belongings, before he greeted any of his and Ava's old friends who came by to pay their condolences.

He ate. He talked to his visitors. He eventually rejoined the world at large.

His eyes opened to new sights. He began to keep a journal, one he would write in every night. Sontar expanded his study of magic into new avenues to keep his mind at ease.

Several months after Ava's death, he sat to record the events of the day. His clothing felt loose, falling away. He hadn't eaten. He was almost never hungry these days. His thoughts had changed regarding many things.

It was time to take a new path, and he intended to take his first strides.

Reliving a day. His hand had trouble keeping the pen steady. He bore down on it. A splotch of ink spread across the page, strangely-colored blood. *More than once, with small changes each time. That was what I dreamed.*

He continued to scrawl. *Would it be possible to go to the seat of magic in the Outside and change the course of magic? Magic is a tool. People tend to limit it with their minds, their imaginations. Perhaps too, it's limited by the First Mage, the one who went to the Outside and joined her body to the source of magic, parceling it out to us like hungry children.*

There, he stopped. Other ideas capered in his head, but they were poorly formed. If a man could relive a day in his mind, make slight differences to alter the outcome—

Could he relive whole swatches of history from their beginning, knowing what originally happened, then re-suit them to his liking? Can the people within those histories become unknowing pawns, as long as it's for a better outcome?

Sontar stumbled up from his chair. The healers warned him fevers related to his hex would be common for a few months. He picked his way back to the bedroom he never slept in anymore.

The vase remained in the window sill.

Sontar went to sit on the bed, facing the window, and contemplated the glass prison.

All the roses inside had long since died.