

Chapter 4

A cold lunch was served in Adrian's tiny cottage: pheasant in a berry sauce, golden-crust ed mincemeat pie, and on the side wedges of bread thick with butter or jam. A light winewater accompanied. Reserved for dessert were decadent apple pastries and honey-sweetened puffs. The occasion was carried off with the aid of porcelain service and silver flatware brought all the way from Copperswuerth Manor. Expertly packed in the rear of the carriage, not a single piece had suffered the slightest damage. In one of the cozy chairs by the fire, Carolyn sat with a silver lap tray. Her maid, Anna, occupied the other chair. In his peculiar way, Adrian insisted the servant sit while her mistress ate. Carolyn was too hungry to argue the point. Let him stand, she silently grumbled. It is his way and it makes no matter to me. Plainly there are no protocols for polite society in the wilds.

Mathew roamed the floor. Their initial attempt at bringing him in from the garden had resulted in a fury of ear-splitting lungwork- the likes of which Adrian had never heard. (The birthing of livestock notwithstanding.) It was decided by unanimous vote that one pumpkin be harvested early for the sake of peace and quiet during their noontime repast. This explained the presence of the giant bulb squatting round and fat upon the earthen floor. Mathew circled tirelessly, testing it with his hand. An imperfection in the ground made the pumpkin of orange and green wobble. Tilting the gourd to one side and then the other was a fascinating game to the lad. Being a poet, Adrian immediately saw poignant imagery in those tiny hands, how they toppled the huge weight of the pumpkin without apparent effort. His own fate had been toppled by those same tiny hands, with even less effort.

"His majesty seems most content now," Adrian commented, arms folded across his chest.

"That'll do the trick, right O!" Petresky said from his corner of the sitting room.

Adrian squinted in the coachman's direction. "Why, Petresky- is it you? I had not noticed until I heard your voice. Goodness me! I did not think to check. Can it be you?"

Petresky came forward, his knobby hands picking at the edge of his cloak which he continued to wear inside the cottage. "Verily, Master Adrian, it is I." Though his words were directed at Adrian, his gaze lingered over the pheasant as it lay upon the serving platter. His crust of bread breakfast was a distant memory. Speaking softly so as not to drown out the rumbling of his stomach, he answered, "Yes, Master Adrian, 'tis the Petresky of old. A little sparser on top," he said, patting his balding pate. "And a little leaner in the middle." He tugged his belt expressively.

"So it is you!" Adrian beamed, and was at once lost in old memories. "Let me think... think... I remember you from Father's house. Yes, that is it. And I believe you were originally enlisted in Grandfather household before that!"

"I did, Master Adrian! A wonderful man- men. Both of them! They knew how to dine. Both his Lordships, they did- they did! Large, sumpt'us meals. Plenty for all to eat!" He cast another longing glance at the pheasant.

"Mmm..." Adrian rubbed his chin, eyes fixed upon the floor. "And I seem to remember a woman- oh, oh! What *was* her name? So long ago. Always in a tussle you two were! She was one of the cooks in Father's kitchen." He laughed, blushing slightly at distant boyhood recollections. "I can tell you she did not enjoy little boys in her kitchen! Oh no. Young, precocious boys skirting underfoot was the last bit of trouble

she needed on top of her other duties, I suppose. Oh, what was her name? "

"Bell," Petresky mumbled with a puckered face. Battle Axe Bell did not care much for older boys loitering about her kitchens either.

"Bell! Yes! That was the name. Now, where has she gotten to these days? Still working in Father's house, is she? It that it?"

Petresky frowned. With all his accumulated years, so many faces, so many anniversaries, it was difficult to recall every personal history. Doubly so on an empty stomach. "If memory serves, Master Adrian, she was done in by her trade. Cooked herself to death."

Adrian drew back. "I am sorry... what was that?"

"Poor woman," Carolyn mentioned absently. The silver crest of Copperswuerth flashed upon the handles of knife and fork as she worked them adroitly. "The old cook burned to death. Right there upon the flagstones of the hearth- up she went! Got too close and caught her skirt hems. Dreadful... dreadful..." Her delicate lips accepted a sliver of meat, pale white, stained with the maroon of berry sauce. "Malcolm mentioned the incident once. Last summer? Or autumn..."

"That is... terrible."

"Father, naturally, was furious."

"Furious? Furious?"

"Well, the smell you know. It got everywhere. A dreadful stench to hear tell. Half the house had to be upholstered again! And the draperies! Father was dreadfully upset."

Adrian bristled. Naturally Father would be upset. It made him sick, ashamed to think he was his father's son. The loss of a life, the terrible death of this woman who had

lived and died to serve the Coleby house, reduced to what? The inconvenience of new upholstery! New draperies! Adrian felt his blood boil. "If Father were not so stuck in the ways of what he calls social duty-!" With a forceful clearing of his throat, Adrian checked his outrage. As if in apology, he added, "Father always insisted the staff be so done up in proper uniform, every hour, night and day. All to impress- to impress! I think you will agree when I say such stringent dress code is both unwieldy and inappropriate for kitchen work-"

"But ol' Bell could baste a tasty pheasant- sure!" Petresky interjected. They seemed to be straying from what was really important here. "Though, I say, I've never had the op'tunity to compare it to the kitchen help in Lord Malcolm's service..." He left the sentence hanging, a gauntlet thrown down upon the culinary field of honor.

"Well," Adrian said, unwittingly taking up the challenge. "There seems to be enough to go around today. Perhaps you would care to judge the fare of Malcolm's board, cold as it may be? You as well," he added to the maid, Anna.

"Really Adrian!" his sister objected. Her stern gaze upon Petresky froze the old coachman in his tracks. "Feeding the servants pheasant! On golden plates as well, I suppose? Your sense of humor has become unfathomable here in the wilds." She dabbed at the corner of her mouth with a linen.

"I see no reason why not," Adrian remarked. "The meat may very well go foul during the ride back to Copperswuerth. No point in that, is there? Surely you do not intend to finish this feast with your dainty appetite?"

Carolyn objected again, a trace of annoyance in her words. "We mustn't cater to them, Adrian. What if they grew accustomed to such treatment? Where would that lead? They would expect pheasant and wine every eve."

"Lyn, a cold bite to eat will spoil no one's palate."

"Petresky- filch so much as a crumb of stuffing and I'll hitch the carriage to your shoulders and have you pull us back to Stokeold!"

(There's stuffing too?)

"Petresky! I mean it!"

"As you wish, milady."

"Lyn, come now. This is preposterous."

"Adrian, no. You do not realize what you are saying."

"No, I suppose I do not. Squabbling at left-overs."

Adrian! What would you have me say? That I cannot squander my food upon the servants because Malcolm's financial ruin has reduced my every meal to the single question: will this be the last? Yes, gods yes! Squabbling over table scraps like some pitiful beggarwoman! The shame of it all! "Adrian, please cease."

"Just a small taste, Lyn. See here- I have not touched the portion set out for me. That will do-"

"Petresky- back!"

"...milady..."

"Anna, mind Mathew does not wander."

"Lyn..."

"Adrian-!"

"I do not see why you should be so upset."

"Obviously, no you do not! We may as well have them choose the menu and feed them upon royal service. Next, I suppose you would want me to teach them their letters. Hmm? Read and write, and then what? Where will it end? Chaos!"

"Their letters?" Adrian shook his head with a befuddled grin. "Chaos? I think you are trying to change the subject. Please do not be evasi-"

Mathew shrieked.

The cry was accompanied by the clamor of a dozen books that came tumbling from an old, creaking bookcase. Tired of the pumpkin, the boy had wandered unnoticed to investigate the bright, shiny, metal spines of his uncle's private collection. Tugging with the incurable curiosity of youth, his little hands had removed that which ought not to have been touched. Like a keystone pulled from an arch, an avalanche of tomes and scrolls rained down upon his startled face.

"Mathew! Oh!" Carolyn nearly jumped out of her seat. The dishes upon her lap tray rattled. She made to get up and attend the lad, chastising him for his trouble making.

"He is fine," Adrian assured her, waved his sister back with a careless gesture. "No harm done."

He dropped to his knees next to the boy who sat piled to the waist in vellum and parchment rubble. Standing the lad upon his feet, Adrian confirmed no serious harm had befallen his pink flesh. "All well, young man? Good there? Very well!"

Adrian began to clear the mess. He chuckled as his nephew struggled to mimic his actions. "Oh, are you helping, too?" The tiny boy bent at the waist like a doddering old man. His small fingers reached for the jumble of covers and spines and pages at his feet. All that had so readily fallen earthward in one big rush, however, was not so fleet in returning to presupposed lofty heights. The ponderous tomes and large scrolls wrapped in their protective leather sheaths proved too unwieldy for his infantile grip. They flopped out of his hands like live, pages fluttering. The adults humored his trials and failures, taken by the cute, unquenchable expression of effort lined in his red face.

As suddenly as the incident had begun, it turned for the worse.

"Mathew- nooo!"

This time Carolyn did jump from her chair, lap tray clattering to the floor. Dishes and tea cups were kicked aside as running feet closed the distance between mother and son. Carolyn pulled the child close to her bosom, swatting away the book in his hand. "Mathew- oh! Did it- did it-?"

"Lady Carolyn?"

"Milady?"

"Lyn...?"

"Adrian! A- is that- is that *it*?" Clutching her son protectively, Carolyn pointed a shaky finger. The discarded tome lay face up atop the messy pile of books. Purple illustrations covered creamy pages. A spidery text written in red ink bordered the intricate diagrams, a dancing, incomprehensible thread of characters. It hurt the eye to look too long upon them.

"Merely a book, Lyn. That is all." Adrian picked up the tome and closed it without ceremony. "It will not bite, or burn, the curious fingers of nephews."

"Adrian! Adrian!" she repeated in dismay. Trembling, she inspected her son's hands for signs of harm. Mathew squawked, uncomfortable with his mother's frantic state. "Shouldn't that thing be locked away or- or something?"

"Merely a book-"

"But it's dangerous! All those spells of power and persuasion!"

"A book," he said patiently. "It means nothing to anyone. Only I am able to decipher the script."

"But the powers! Such powers-"

"There are no powers in this book," he insisted. "No more than in any other." Several thoughts flashed across his brow. Whatever content they carried, however, he kept them to himself behind a weary sigh of resignation. "If it shall make you more at ease, I will set it aside." He reached up and slid the large tome into the bedloft. "There we are." He brushed his hands and knelt once again to the task of restocking his bookshelves.

Jittery, Carolyn stammered, "I- I do not understand, A. If you no longer work in magic, why would you keep such a thing around? To tempt you so?"

Her brother shrugged, intent upon his task. "Sentiment, I suppose. There are many years of study and diligence between those covers. It *was* a substantial period in my life, one I can no more forget than I can deny. Some would say that book marks the pinnacle of my achievements. Though..." He shrugged again, somewhat sadly. "Though I would disagree. As for temptation, of that there is none. Have no fear for me on that accord! Whenever I forget why I have come out here, to live alone, to ponder, I open that book and read a little. It all comes back to me why, why I gave it up. A few pages, sometimes only a few lines, and I remember why I left it behind. All of it."

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They were gathered at the carriage, busy with the chore of loading it for the return journey. One after another, the food panniers and baskets of dishware were carefully packed and stowed. Petresky did all the lifting and toting. The maid, Anna, with her practical common sense, corrected the coachman in his carelessness whenever the stowed goods might be in danger of damage. Primly, she made the old man redo the packing until everything was to her satisfaction. To the side, Adrian waited patiently with his baggage in hand: a bedroll of blankets tied with an old belt, his heaviest cloak

thrown over one arm, a few sacks stuffed with whatnots he thought might prove useful on his impending journey. He knew the search for his brother would take him north where winter had its frozen claws deep into the lands. All his warmest clothes were packed, as well as a second pair of high boots, specially oiled against the cold and wet. Carolyn was speaking to him, the dozing form of her son balanced upon her hip.

"...and the mason will see to the mending of the stucco. I know a thatcher, he will be sent out to inspect your roof. And I think Copperswuerth can spare a pair of field hands to finish your harvesting." Carolyn wrinkled her nose, inspecting an imaginary list of details that needed attention. Adrian's absence left a number of loose strings that she felt responsible for, and rightly so. "Two field hands will have your rye harvested in short order. And... and I think that will cover it!" She looked to her brother for approval, nodding peremptorily at the thoroughness of her plans.

"You have thought of everything," he admitted.

His bland reply brought a guilty expression to her face. Suddenly she pictured him not as her brother, but as someone else; a stranger, a soldier off to war; a vagrant clutching what few belongings he had without so much as a friend in the world. Only then did she recall Adrian had never been one for traveling.

Carolyn chimed: "It must be a wonderful sight, the Dragon's Spine this time of year! With all that snow on those jagged peaks- ah! What a spectacle to behold. Visual poetry, A. Poetry! Simply... poetic! I'll bet you'll find yourself plenty of poetic inspiration for your... poetry!" She blushed, shamefacedly, and shifted Mathew on her hip to divert attention from her burning brow. The slumbering boy blubbered contentedly in the drowsy aftereffects of a full meal.

"We shall see," Adrian muttered with barely a smile.

Petresky finished his duties at the boot of the carriage and backed away. Adrian saw his chance and began storing his things in the rear cabinet of the coach.

"Now," Carolyn muttered aloud thoughtfully, tilting her head and speaking more to herself than anyone. "Have I forgotten anything...?"

"You seem to have covered everything, Lyn."

"Oh!" she laughed queerly. "My coat! I nearly forgot! Here I am, managing the chores and duties of your farm, and I'm forgetting my own head!"

"Petresky will fetch it for you," Adrian offered, stepping aside to seek out the coachman. The old man was already shuffling back to the cottage for a final once-over, forgotten baskets and dropped items. He raised his voice, calling, "Petres- !"

"Oh, no need!" Carolyn said instantly, thwarting her brother's intent. Deftly she pushed her sleeping son upon him. "You just stay here and mind Adrian for me-" She blushed at her mistake and quickly corrected herself. "I meant Mathew. I meant to say Mathew." Leaving her child in the arms of her brother, she hitched up her skirts and scuttled for the cottage before Adrian could protest. "I won't be but a moment! Anna! Anna, attend my brother!"

Anchored by the weight of the child, Adrian could not object. Mathew squirmed, threatening to wake. With the assistance of the maid, the two of them managed to settle his plump form inside carriage amid a profusion of blankets. So expertly done, the transfer brought scarcely a sigh of discontent from the lad.

Meanwhile, at the door of the cottage, Carolyn nearly collided with her coachman.

"Your coat, Mistress," Petresky said cleverly, emerging with the final basket of Copperswuerth service. He lifted the wicker pannier so she could see the neatly folded

bundle atop it. "I overhead-"

"Back!" she hissed, the rustle of her skirts as loud as her voice. "Inside, Petresky! Back- back- back!"

The bewildered coachman gave ground like a whipped dog. Carolyn followed him inside, quickly shutting the door. She was breathless. Her wild eyes scanned the tiny sitting room.

"Mistress...?" Petresky prompted her, raising the basket again to show he carried the coat. There was no need to search it out. "I have it here, milady."

Carolyn walked past him, briskly, as if he did not exist. "There..." she rasped, eyes fixed upon the ladder to the bedloft. Raising her skirts, she moved to climb the first few rungs. Such uncourtly means of ascension, however, gave her more difficulty than imagined. Doggedly she struggled to master her footing on the slats of worn wood. Reaching the top at last, she stretched out pale arm and- gingerly, oh so gingerly!- drew her brother's spell book from its hiding place.

"Madame!" Petresky gasped, shocked. "Uh, I mean- milady!"

With her prize won, Carolyn lowered herself down the ladder. Once again upon solid ground, she immediately held the tome as far away from her person as possible, both arms outstretched and quaking. "Petresky..." she hissed.

The old coachman swallowed uneasily.

"Petresky!"

Butterflies in his stomach, the coachman set his basket upon one of the sitting chairs and, with obvious regret and reluctance, came to the assistance of his mistress. She thrust the sorcerer's tome at him and he accepted it with a cowardly moan. Where Carolyn had been loathe to handle the item, Petresky was doubly so, visibly shaken. To

his superstitious mind it burned to the touch.

"I- I left it behind-" Carolyn spoke in a broken, rasping voice, confessing her terrible crime. "My- my coat! I left it behind... I meant to-" She grabbed the coat and threw it over the book. "No no-!" she nearly cried, arranging the folds to cover the corners of etched brass. "It's too big- too big! He'll notice it under there! No-!" Her voice cracked in a precursor of hysteria. Nervous teeth bit at a costly manicure.

"...milady..." Petresky uttered a pitiful moan, back bent, knees knocking. Carolyn neither heard nor saw. Desperately she cast about for some way to smuggle the book from her brother's cottage.

"The basket!" she cried, rushing to it and throwing back its lid. A jumble of dishware and utensils filled it to full. "The tome- it will fit- it must!" Her voice was raised to a terrible pitch, pinched by the shame and danger of her desperation. In a moment guilt and fear would swell beyond the reign of her willpower. She would be reduced to some unknown, unthinkable state. Like a flock of feeding birds, her slim white hands reached into the basket and withdrew cups and plates and saucers and forks and knives and platters...! She set them upon the other sitting chair in a heaping pile of porcelain and silver that clacked like the bones of an unearthed sin.

"...milady...!"

"There! Petresky- there!" Her whisper was nearly a shriek. She jumped back, keeping her distance from the tome. "Petresky- there! In the basket!"

On wooden legs the coachman staggered to the basket and set the terrible burden inside. He whimpered as the topfold would not close to cover it shut.

"It will have to do- oh!" Carolyn wailed, cutting herself short. The voice of her brother sounded over the drum of her pulse. He was calling her name, coming closer.

Closer! "He mustn't know! He mustn't see-! Quickly, Petresky! It will have to do. Take up the basket and store it in the back of the carriage so he will not see!"

Darting for the door, Carolyn snatched up her coat and burst from the cottage. "I have it here!" she cried, catching her brother's arm and spinning him around. "Sorry, sorry!" she apologized in rapid fashion.

"Lyn", he asked dubiously. "You are flushed- are you well?"

"Oh-!" She looped her arm in his and turned in the direction of the carriage. "Ohhh.... perhaps the pheasant has spoiled! I feel... a little weak. See me to the carriage, A? I may swoon."

"Of course," he said, supporting her weight with his arm. "Everything will be fine."

"Of course," she repeated with a reassuring pat on his arm. "Everything will work out fine... just fine."

In their wake emerged Petresky, looking more bent than ever. The basket he carried bore the weight of the world.