

Chapter 5

The gates of Copperswuerth Manor parted before the bespattered Coleby carriage. Petresky had been ordered drive hard and fast and not spare the whip. Time was of the essence and Carolyn would suffer no further delays in Adrian's departure. Every moment they tarried deprived Malcolm that much the more of his younger brother and the judicious council he had to offer.

Carolyn was first to emerge. A detailed plan of action foremost in her mind, she hailed her footman and immediately sent the fellow running to fetch the entire household corps. Adrian and the maid, Anna, had scarcely managed the recumbent form of Mathew from the coach when servants began to arrive in answer to the summons. Carolyn issued instructions with an edgy, military demeanor. Her demands sent them running, clipped, succinct instructions falling from her lips, a specific task for each and every face. Sometimes but two words did she toss into the air, a servant's name followed by an item or catchword. Not one moment did she spare on clarification or repetition. Her lengthy stay under the auspices of her brother, Malcolm, had fostered a unique form of communication with the staff, a curious tongue indigenous exclusively to the halls of Copperswuerth Manor.

When the second wave arrived, Carolyn set them upon the carriage like vultures to pick a carcass clean. The baskets and panniers, quilts and sundries, were off-loaded and carried away at once. In half a breath the coach stood empty. She gave the word and Petresky drove his team for the stablehouse where a feeding and much-needed grooming awaited the matched chestnuts.

Adrian kept out of the traffic of running porters and scuttling maids. Strangely,

he felt he had stumbled upon a far, foreign kingdom. In this magical land his very own sister was worshipped as a deity, a divine monarch whose every whim and wish was carried out by a most willing court. For the moment he forgot the bitter details of why he had been drawn away from his own humble kingdom and indulged in the fantasy of his sister's supremacy.

Carolyn was too busy to notice her brother's amusement, flitting from one task to the next, seeing that every shoulder had more than its burden to bear. To him she bid a breathless request excusing her absence and swept up the grand steps of Copperswuerth Manor. Through the great portals she vanished, looking for more faces to assign further errands. Obediently Adrian held his place. He was alone hardly for a moment. Servants began returning almost at once, cheeks flushed, sides heaving, their chores complete. First they came in ones or twos, then their numbers doubled, and tripled, until dozens of smartly-dressed staffers milled and before the steps of Copperswuerth Manor. Adrian marveled, *All these people! All in service to my brother!* He had forgotten the lifestyle.

The murmur of servants hushed at the reappearance of their mistress. Wordlessly they arranged themselves and all that they carried in neat rows, but the lady of the house dashed past, for once having no time to indulge in formal inspection. Straight away she went to her brother. Her determined hand bore a narrow letter, crisply folded and sealed with a blot of red wax. The stamp of the family crest was plain upon it: Coleby. She presented it to Adrian with a breathless explanation:

"There it is! Give this to Malcolm. I have explained everything to him- a quick letter for his eyes only. I told him you are to serve as his council- nothing more. I made it a point to stress your reluctance to pursue anything beyond-"

She turned suddenly at the clatter of a wagon in the distance. Around the far

corner of the mansion came a rugged flatbed drawn by a pair of fresh, sturdy draft horses. The young stable hand, Olan, led the team at a quick walk up the gravel drive. Predictable as a whirlwind, Carolyn scuttled back to her people and the bedlam of activity began anew. The wagon was to be outfitted, but not before the lady vouchsafed each proffered item. Every room had been broken open to furnish Adrian's quest: the mansion guest rooms, the scullery, the cellars, the pantry- even the stablehouse. Pointing, coaxing, reprimanding, Carolyn drifted amidst the crowd swarming the little flatbed. She kept the flock hurrying, scurrying, milling like ants. With calculated intent contradictory instructions were issued. Purposely she kept the level of activity ever near utter confusion, never for a moment permitting idle calm. Under this ruse of mismanagement she had Adrian's possessions transferred sleight-of-hand. It was inconceivable to think anyone could have noticed the purloined spellbook in the bustling miasma. But it was there, she knew, now safely hidden beneath a pile of provisions in a sack so nondescript it hardly existed.

When at last her troops assembled upon the steps of the mansion, three neat rows of panting servants and wheezing retainers, the wagon groaned beneath the weight of supplies enough to outfit an expedition to the stars.

"Well...!" Carolyn cast her eyes quickly, point to point, her gaze a invisible net seeking to snare prey. "Where has he run? Well!" she sighed, vexed. "Well!"

Hitching up her skirts, she inspected the small wagon and the goods it carried. Her delicate, dragonfly hand darted to make minute corrections only her eye could see. "There should be everything you could possibly need on your journey," she said firmly. "Food and such. Blankets and carry sacks. Some lamps and flasks of oil for the night- do be careful not to bump things, A. Break a flask and the oil will get everywhere! It

isn't much of a carriage, but it will have to do."

"Well, then," Adrian said, tucking the letter into his shirt. "I suppose I must be on my way!" He paused to hug his sister warmly before climbing to the driver's board.

"Really, A," she admonished, reaching up and snatching away the reins. "You are the queerest brother sometimes! Your sense of humor..."

He flexed his empty fingers uncertainly. "I should be off. At once. It is nearly nightfall now-"

"Here he comes, at last! Late as usual!"

Around the far corner of the mansion stumbled the bedraggled figure of Petresky. Carolyn darted at once to intercept. Every servant spine upon the steps of Copperswuerth straightened, every shoulder squared as Lady Coleby prowled past- a hungry jungle cat. Her upbraid for tardiness echoed off the ivy-covered facade of the mansion house. Petresky flinched, his head nodding, bobbing, dodging the barrage of his mistress's rebuke. Carolyn's anger subsided almost immediately, sinking to a tone so low that none but the ears of the humbled coachman could hear. Her gestures swept back to indicate Adrian and the waiting wagon.

Clearing his throat, Adrian called loudly, "Honestly, Lyn, I do not need a coachman. Be sensible. Petresky can stay. This trip may take days- weeks! I am capable to drive myself."

"Nonsense!" his sister countered, coming forward. Petresky followed obediently three steps behind. "Nonsense!" she repeated with vim. "You must have a driver. You are a Coleby! Wagon or carriage, you *must* have a driver! Besides, who will return the wagon and steeds once you overtake Malcolm? Or would you just leave them there at the side of the road and ride off with your brother? There- you had not thought of that had

you?"

Adrian puckered his lips. No, he had not. Living in a secluded cottage without thought of possession or property, he had fallen out of the habit of such worries. "Well, I suppose the two of us shall make better time," he remarked as Petresky climbed to the buckboard. "We will share the duties of the road."

"I did not hear that from the mouth of a Coleby," Carolyn commented dryly.

"Master Adrian!" Petresky said with a rather uneasy grin. He situated his old bones on the driver's plank and politely assumed control of the reins.

"You must be off at once," Carolyn commanded in hopeful tones. "Go to Malcolm, Adrian. Go to him and see that he keeps safe. Gods be with you! Please write once you have found him. I await your word anxiously. Tell me all is well! Farewell now! Farewell! Off you go with the gods' blessings. Don't forget to write, Adrian. And Petresky, keep to your duty! Keep to your task- above all!"

The wagon started with a lurch and she waved them away into the growing twilight.

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Copperswuerth Manor receded. The rank and file of servants arranged tier upon tier was lost in the foggy gloom of day's end. Carolyn's farewells dwindled, diminished. The gates opened- and then closed with a heavy clang. The crunch of gravel broke into the low, sonorous rumble of cobblestones. The crooked, uneven streets of Stokeold fanned away in every direction imaginable, random fissures in a landscape of stone walls, brick houses, and clay rooftops.

And so it begins, Adrian thought to himself. The start of a long, unwelcome journey. Heaving a silent, inner sigh, he settled himself for the road ahead. The

hardwood of the buckboard beneath his backside would be the paragon of comfort in the days- weeks- to come.

The hooves of Petresky's team rang hollowly upon the stones. The wheels of the wagon rumbled, their axles creaking a merciless tune of discord. There were few pedestrians, and fewer carriages. A dreary mist blanketed the city, driving citizens of every station in-of-doors where the crackle of a hearth fought off the damp chill of a moonless, autumn eve. City streets passed in an endless landscape of gray, the colorless innards of an endless serpent, winding, twisting, rising, falling. Sound as well as sight was muted by the mist, lending a sense of false deafness to the ear.

"I must confess..." Adrian began clearly, partly to break and muffling silence, partly because he harbored a pang of guilt. "I must confess, I do appreciate your company, Petresky. Your presence on this trip is somewhat superfluous, you see. It would be a small matter to hire a soul to drive the team back to Stokeold once I have found my brother-"

"Sorry for the delay, Master Adrian!" the coachman said loudly, snapping the reins. "Beg your pardon, master. Poor me had to rush home a moment- to sup a little nour'shment for the soul!" He shifted his weight and felt for the reassuring bulge tucked in his belt. Full to the brim!

"I thoroughly understand," Adrian replied, thoroughly misunderstanding. "It must be rough, what with you driving my brother across the kingdom at any hour! Keeps you away from home days at a time, I suspect. It must be rough on her. She must be a very understanding woman."

"Quite so, Master Adrian. As you say. Quite so!" Petresky had no idea who this particular *she* could possibly be. (He had never met an understanding woman in his life.)

Nevertheless, he *did* know his place in the cosmic scheme of the universe, and therefore did not question the observations of his betters.

"Well, we shall have you back to her in no time!" Adrian settled himself on the bench, pulling up the collar of his cloak to keep the damp air off his ears. "She will have you home shortly. Still, it must be rough on her."

Petresky frowned. This was beginning to sound like a two-sided conversation.

"Mm?" Adrian prompted.

"Mm?" Petresky replied.

"Mmmm...?"

"Mmmm!"

"I said, nevertheless, it must be rough on her, Petresky."

"Rough on who, Master Adrian?"

"Why, your wife of course!"

"Oh!"

"Whom do you think I meant?"

"Why... why, my wife of course. Master Adrian!"

Adrian chuckled. Truly an odd fellow! "Petresky, if we are to be traveling companions, I think it only fair you address me as Adrian. I am not your master. I am no one's master. Except, perhaps my own. Although I sometimes wonder..."

"Oh! I could not do that, Master Adrian. I would be failing in my duties."

"Come now, Petresky, I insist. The notion is all very foolish. Here we are, just the two of us, sharing the same duties of the road. We are equals. Anyone can see that!"

"I would not wish to offend, Master Adri-"

"Petresky!"

The coachman flinched. Fidgeting with the reins, he negotiated the team down a narrow alleyway. Oh, how he missed simple life under Master Malcolm! Everything in a clear, blustering command. He did not need to have opinions. No one begged him to be called equal. Oh, the simple life! Oh! Simplicity. All this talk of opinions and equality- it had the hint of criminal to it. Hesitantly, Petresky wondered if Master Adrian knew *his* place in the cosmic scheme.

"Come now, Petresky, I do not mean to badger, but what is your concern? I should think it would be as natural as breathing."

Reluctantly, Petresky muttered, "If Master will not do, Master Adrian, perhaps I shall call you... sir?" He said this tentatively, having no faith, nor prior experience, in striking a compromise with his betters. "If equals are what you claim us to be?"

"Ah!" Adrian nodded. "I like the idea! Very good then, sir! Drive on, *sir!*"

"Very well, *sir!*"

Adrian smiled into the fog.

Petresky frowned into his collar.

* * *

Dusk deepened into night. The pervasive, nagging fog that shrouded Stokeold thickened. Shop fronts and homes became canyon walls rising high. Lamplight escaping the louvers of shuttered windows sent tiger-stripe bands of yellow and orange through the thick, fuzzy air.

Out of necessity Petresky slowed his team to a crawl.

The streets of Stokeold became a dreamscape, a catalyst for Adrian and his poet's eye. He felt rooted in place while the whole of the world floated past, dreamily, shrouded, obscured. Fragments of original verse began to take shape, coalesce, rising

from his unconscious mind. He let the notions float, developing to their own whim and accord. How would they present themselves, these unspoken verses inspired by such a gloomy, benighted city? Would they be the delicate refrains of a song, some flowery blossom poking forth to bloom sweet and fragrant? Hardly. Perhaps the strong words of epic verse, like the gnarled trunk of a stalwart oak? Nay, he chided himself. With all these shadows and lurking sounds, any verse born this night will be the blind snouts of worms poking from the dirt to sniff moist, fetid air.

"Pity you never married, sir." Petresky broke their lull, his voice ringing like an axehead on stone. "Master Malcolm as well. And, of course, especially, Mistress Carolyn. If you don't mind me saying so. Sir."

Thoughts of poetry and verse fled, colorful birds taken to wing. Adrian did not begrudge the interruption. He was not the sort of artist prone to fit and tantrum when inspiration was jostled. Suitable verse, he maintained, would return to mind if it were important enough to be penned for posterity.

"Mmmm..." he assented. "One might say our particular branch of the Coleby family tree has been... mmm... stunted in its growth? Here we are, all three of us grown from children, still not a one wed or settled. But perhaps that is the way it should be. Malcolm is too busy for such things. You especially should know! He roves the kingdom nine months out of ten. Not much of a husband or father would he be. Some day he will take a wife. I have no doubt of that fact. But not today. Some day, some day he shall take a bride and father a child or two. It is not a question of scarcity. Many a coy, coquettish eye has been cast his way. It is all a matter of his choosing." He shrugged, hugging himself against the growing cold. "As for Carolyn-" He looked away absently at nothing in the gloom.

Sadness. Sadness mixed with tender pity. Carolyn's was a history long and deep and heavily scarred. "As for Carolyn..." He sighed without restraint. "Petresky... does she ever see him? I mean to say, does he ever pay call to Copperswuerth?"

Petresky cleared his throat. He shifted in his seat. The reins suddenly required a great deal of attention. He straightened out an imagined knot, muttering as he did so, "It wouldn't be a servant's place to know the particulars of his mistress's private life. Sir."

"I understand. Your discretion is above reproach, unquestionably so. I would never wish to hear anything Carolyn would not tell me herself. Still, there must be some common knowledge regarding the matter. And I *am* her brother, Petresky. I am concerned for her well-being. I am no gossip. Concern motivates my curiosity, that is all."

"Surely, sir, you must see, such a lowly servant- as I realize I am- I am not one to commonly be finding myself-

"Petresky!" Adrian said sharply. "Do not hedge!"

"Wellsir!" The old coachman straightened in his seat. "Well, sir! Never one to repeats as I hear tell in the kitchens a' times, I dunnot know of any occasion that he has ever set foot in Copperswuerth. Not so mush as rung the bell! Never once- not as to see her. Or the child he left her! Scoundrel!"

Adrian allowed the servant his bold opinion. Gloomily he muttered, "I am not surprised."

Make him love me, Adrian!

The plea came to his ears across years of memories. It had roots that stretched back to his reign as Court Mage, when he had been busy with affairs of the kingdom. Carolyn came to him amid tears of shame and rage. In his Wizard's Tower, crowned with

its climbing spire of crystal, brother granted sister private audience. He listened intently to her tale of love and passion and betrayal. The plea was heartbreaking. Forever, to his grave, its poignancy would tear at his heart with cold, uncaring talons:

"Make him love me, Adrian!" she wailed with the fervor of one damned for all eternity. Upon the fine carpets of his rooms, amid the opulence of silken tapestries and golden trappings, the proud Carolyn Coleby fell to the floor, succumbed to grief and agony and shame. She begged- oh how she begged!- at his slippered feet, choking on her own sobs.

"Make him love me, Adrian! Make him live those words- those *lies!*- he fed me. You have the power to do that! Cast a spell! Work your magic! Make him come home to me and the child I carry!"

But he was unfit to do the deed, noble as it may have been. He was no omnipotent judge to hand down verdict, no grim-visaged jailer to carry through due punishment. To abuse his powers and achieve such a personal end would be criminal. Immoral. He would be no better than the man Carolyn both loved and reviled with such torn ambivalence. No, he told her. He could not perform such a thing. He could not make a man love a woman. Such a feat was beyond the ability of Court Wizard. Of course this was not true. As a mage he had powers of illusion that could manage the act with ease. But instead he had fettered out this lie. A necessary falsehood, but a lie nonetheless. He had lied- lied to his own sister! He had *lied!*

"Kill him then!" she demanded. "Strike him down! A thunderbolt from the heavens! A plague- a blight upon his person!"

But that, too, had been impossible. Court Wizards are no more above the King's Law than the basest of serfs. He could not kill, murder. Not for personal vendetta.

In the end Carolyn settled for a compromise, a revenge of sorts that did not run against the grain of Adrian's honor. During her fits of depression, loneliness, she came to him in his tower for late night meetings. Together they would sit, brother by sister, before the distorted face of a crystal ball, or over the depths of a mystical pool of black oil, and in it he would conjure the image of her lover. Such scrying in no way affected the man. Unfortunately, even this innocent endeavor came to shake with unanticipated repercussions.

Together they would watch his face in the glass, in the oil, the lover's, the father of her child-to-be. Invariably he would be in a local tavern carrying on with women-many women of all sort and station. Watching unobserved, Carolyn witnessed the folly of her own naiveté, her own willingness to believe the words of adoration that fell from his lips; the same words that would fall, night after night, into the delicate ear of whosoever happened to settle upon his knee. Some nights she would sob openly, cursing her own stupidity. Others nights she would shed silent tears, dry tears as she came to call them for they burned her eyes like fire. Countless innocents fell to his coaxing, villainous words. Victims. Would they, too, follow the same path to ruin she had so willingly trod? Unknowingly?

Eventually these evenings became to painful for Adrian to bear. He could not watch his sister torment herself in such a way. Torture over one mistake, a mistake that could not be undone- a mistake anyone might have made in her place. She had fallen prey to words of flattery, believed dubious promises. Blinded by love, or what she perceived to be love, she had succumbed to passion.

Through his ways, Adrian began to curb the spells, slurring their effects, hazing the magical visions to vague images. Some nights, having uncanny premonitions of his

own, or seeing his sister was already in a dispirited mood, he would purposely miscast the enchantments and let them fall into ruin. Excuses to explain the failures were easily invented: cosmic misalignments of the stars, of the moon, calendar days... Again, more *lies!* To his own family! How frequent they would become later, as his days in the Wizard's Tower drew to an end. Lies would fall from his lips almost daily. How frequently, and how easily spoken!

Adrian came out of her reverie with a wince. The muscles in his face hurt, so intense was his frown. Beside him the coachman had been carrying on for quite some time, and in great detail.

"...to think he lives only on the other side of Stokeold! Not even a' once stopping in to see his own son. Abomin'ble!"

"Indeed," Adrian commented.

"Of course, should he ring at the gate, the Master would have his head on the spot! Rightly so!"

"Well, I do not know about that..."

"And the way they say he carries on with the women! Scandalous! The kitchen is rife with talk! Disgraceful! Loose, shameless women!"

"Petresky."

"Brazen, lawless women. Every last one of 'em-!"

"Petresky!"

"Excepting- of course!- Mistress Carolyn! Sir!"

"I think that will be enough, Petresky."

"Very good, sir."

The coachman sank in his seat.

Adrian drummed his fingers on the railing.

Another lapse of silence ensued. The iron shoes of the team rang like hammers to anvil at every step. Striving to clear the mood, Adrian spoke out upon the first thought that struck him.

"Petresky-"

"Sorry sir."

"Petresky, I do not remember this route to lead out of the Stokeold. Not directly at least."

"Ummm. 'Tis a more... assured travel."

"Assured?"

"Mmm, sir." The old coachman thought a moment, chewing his lower lip. "Much of the city is in a ruin. The flood of last spring washed away much roads as they lay. Some as yet to be repaired, sir. A terrible ride it can be, some of the times. This route is muchly assured."

"Ah." Adrian smacked his lips. Something about these streets was... A long-slumbering beast at the back of his mind stirred. Familiar... He squinted into the gloom. If it were not for the dark and the fog surely he could make a connection.

Petresky's over-loud voice clanged again, unexpectedly. "Master Malcolm I can understand." Eyes and hands straight ahead like a dog on the hunt, he added to his cryptic beginning, "He is the roamer, as he calls himself. So I can see him. But you, sir? 'Tis a shame, truly."

Fearing he had dozed, Adrian said quickly, "For the life of me, Petresky, I cannot trace your train of thought. What is a shame?"

"You a' marrying, sir."

Adrian laughed in good humor. "I see no shame in it." He laughed again. "You do not realize how difficult it is to convince a woman to take my hand, to live out her days in the woods at my cottage! I am only a poet-!"

"No, sir," the coachman interrupted. "I mean when you was the King's Wizard, sir. I should think any woman would be pleased as punch to take up residence in the palace, what with the king and queen, and all that page'ntry. To raise one's son and daughters along side princes and princesses?"

"Ah... well..." Adrian glanced away. "Ah!" he started, and then stopped, flustered. He assumed the role of inquisitor, determined to keep their discussion flowing under his hand, away from the deep waters of his past.

"Well, Petresky, you seem most keen upon the idea of marriage tonight! At least insofar as tying off the Coleby brood. Are you saying, then, being a long-time husband yourself, you condone the institution of matrimony?"

"...sir...?"

"Marriage, Petresky. I am asking if you favor it. Does it suit you? Does it agree with you?"

"Oh, sir, I'm the one that does all the agreeing, sir. She tells me what I thinks, and I agrees."

"Petresky! Really!"

"Sir!"

"You are simply incorrigible!"

"Thank you, sir! Kind of you to say so. Does take more than a spit o' courage to contend with the misses as I do."

"No no no...!" Adrian laughed. "That is not what I meant." He smiled at the

futility of explanation. "Petresky, you have been married- gods, how many years now? You were married before I was born. And you have no children? Or am I misremebering?"

"No sir. You remember correctly so."

"I do not mean to pry, mind, but, mmm... is there... a... reason...?"

Petresky did not flinch an eye. "A reason, sir? For no children? There's quite the reason- simply one really. It's me, sir. Me. I'm cowardly and low, sir. Terrified really."

"Ah, now, Petresky. Everyone is anxious about fatherhood. But that is inadequate excuse for not raising a family. Avoiding children because you fear being a father is merely hiding from the-

"Oh, no sir!" Petresky corrected. "Being a papa does not fear me- no, sir. It's the wife, you see. I'm terrible afraid of the wife! Terrifies poor me!"

"*Petresky!*"

"'Tis true, sir! A formid'ble woman, that one. Ever seen her shell walnuts? *Bare-fisted!* 'Tis a sight painful enough to unnerve any man. Truly! Mm! Just the same, sir, 'tis a shame you never married. Sir."

"So you keep mentioning," Adrian noted with suspicion. "To hear you speak, though, perhaps my predicament is not so far in the negative, all in all. Being unattached, that is to say."

"Oh no, sir," the coachman objected. "Pray dunnot judge marriage by Petresky's poor example. It won't do to judge from the outside, I always says. You have to be on the inside to know all there is to know. There's lots you'll never see standing on the outside. And you'll never know if it is for you. Or not. Like standing outside a prison

and wondering to yourself 'Hmmm, how does it go on in there anyways?' But you'll never know until you're on the inside. As I say."

Once again the coachman tickled a laugh from Adrian. "Prison? Are you comparing marriage to prison?"

"Oh, I'm sure I'm not the first. Sir. You never know, though. Prison suits some just fine. You've a bed to call your own. A roof overhead that dunnot need repairs every spring. A hot meal every day..."

"But you don't have your freedom, Petresky."

After a moment's reflection, the coachman shrugged, "Convicts don't have their freedom either."

"I was talking about the convicts!"

"Oh."

"Petresky, I cannot fathom you sometimes. You have confounded me! Here, once and for all, let us have the truth from you. Now, being the coachman for my brother, you are often on the road. You are away from home for days- weeks!- sometimes. Now, I ask you, honestly, do you ever *miss* your wife, Petresky?"

"Oh sir! I miss her as often as possible!"

Adrian dropped his head in mute resignation.