

REIGN OF WINTER



THE COCOA POT

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We ran down an aisle and an alleyway, cut through a stall selling painted boxes and other knickknacks, ran past a regiment of the Iron Guard relaxing around a tea stand's samovar, and came out onto a wide boulevard on the edge of Market Square. Winds funneled by the high buildings gusted down the round white cobbles, fluttering the backs of the tents and blasting snow in stinging bursts. The street was almost deserted except for a few young Jadwiga coming from a costume party and a gang of trolls leading a group of children in chains.

"Here!" cried the goblins. "Screamy rocket come from here!"

"Here!" cried one, reaching into the snow, so cold it flowed like sand. She held up a spent match.

I tossed her the promised hop-frog. She squealed in delight. "Let go of me!" Orlin cried.

Near the trolls, an old woman wearing a dark dress and a wicked-looking knife at her belt held my brother by the ear. "A foreign child!" she cackled. "All on his own. Will anyone notice if he goes missing, I wonder?"

"Just wait till my brother finds you!" Orlin threatened.

"But he's not here," the crone hissed. "All that's here is this stick." She shook a broken broom handle under his nose, "and it'll beat your hide black as your hair if you don't march with the other slaves!"

I was in fact "here," but neither the crone nor Orlin had noticed. The snow was beginning to swirl around them, making their ghostly faces appear and disappear in the whirling flakes.

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I believe I mentioned my brother's "metaphysical peculiarities." These tend to display most strongly when he is in distress.

"I'll beat you, you ugly hag!" Orlin reached for her stick, but she cackled and held it out of reach. I reached for a bomb. Then the broom wrenched itself out of her hand. The woman turned and the broom handle hit her in the forehead with a sharp *crack!*

Spectral snickers echoed from the shopfronts, seeming to issue from the cobbles themselves. The hag stood there, stunned. She glanced up the street to where the Iron Guards stood taking their tea, then back to Orlin, hovering a foot above the ground. His ear dripped blood onto the snowy cobbles.

Then her stick hit her in the face again. "Mercy!" she cried, falling to her knees. "Mercy, young master! How was I to know you were a witch child? Your hair is dark, and your accent foreign!"

The goblins laughed maliciously. "Guards! Tell guards!" "No," said a thin but authoritative voice. "Someone much worse has already heard."

One of the young Jadwiga stepped forward. With the turban on his head, the white monkey on his shoulder, and the extraordinarily besequined vest, harem pants, and curl-toed slippers, he could only be Abu-Fazim, the famous rug merchant from *The Tales of Katapesh*. But he said, "I am Poskarl Elvanna."

"And I am his cousin, Irynya Elvanna," said a maiden in the astoundingly befeathered gown. It had to be some modiste's conception of the Parrot Princess from the same tales. She had even accessorized it with a rainbow-colored parrot.

"I'm Olya Elvanna!" the parrot chortled. While I did not think it likely that a parrot was a member of Irrisen's royal family, this was undoubtedly Irynya's familiar, so it could claim what it liked.

The white monkey, which was wearing a tiny fez, chattered and waved an admonishing finger at the hag.

Somewhere in this, my brother calmed down. At least his feet now touched the cobbles. The broomstick still floated high in the air.

The trolls shuffled their huge feet and the line of shackled children looked on in mute horror. "This is a grave crime," Poskarl intoned. "How do you intend to make amends?"

"Mercy, good sire!" cried the woman. "I am but a poor crone! I possess little gold and these thralls are all spoken for save one. And she is but a worthless thing I was going to sell to the Bone Mill..."

"Could this creature serve as a whipping girl?" Poskarl mused, stroking his wispy beard.

"If—if the witch child would wish it..." The hag turned to Orlin, her eyes plaintive.

"You'll sell her to the Bone Mill if I don't?" My brother stood aghast. "What's a Bone Mill?"

"It is where those who serve no use in our ancestress's realm can serve some," Irynya explained.

The trolls licked their lips.

"Yes," Orlin said quickly. "Yes. She'll be my whipping girl. Now."

The hag gasped like a drowning woman. "Don't just stand there!" she snarled at the trolls. "Unchain her! Unchain her now!" The trolls hastened to comply.

The woman dragged a girl forward, tugging back her hood. "Its parents called it 'Pyatinka.' They sold it for a bushel of moldy wheat."

Pyatinka was a pale strawberry blonde with large eyes a green so light they were almost gray. A few freckles dusted her cheeks.

"It doesn't speak, but it does cry. Sometimes."

"She's mine now," said Orlin.

"And so she is," said Poskarl smoothly, "but a slave-minder is little use without her goad." He looked pointedly toward the stick, still floating in the air, then at Orlin's new whipping girl. "Unless you care to make use of it first?"

Reluctantly, Orlin floated the stick back into the old woman's eager grasp. "Why would I?" he said coldly. "I've done nothing wrong."

Poskarl and his cousin laughed. The parrot and the monkey joined in, followed quickly by the goblins and the trolls—possibly even some of the children, though they no doubt would pay for that later.

I patted my brother's back. "Well done."

The crone and the trolls retreated with their charges as I extended my hand to the Jadwiga. "I am Norret Gantier of Galt. I believe you've already met my brother, Orlin."

Poskarl Elvanna laughed. "Well met." He pointedly ignored my hand. "Allow me to introduce my cousin's lovely friend, Valya Morgannan. Oh, and the big lout is Kyevgeny, her 'little' brother." He gestured to a huge man dressed in an equally huge white bearskin cloak with an owl-feathered mantle and beaked hood.

I am tall enough myself that it is rare for me to look up to see another man's eyes, let alone look him straight in the chest. He leaned down and his mittens enveloped my hand in a bone-crushing grip. "Welcome to Whitethrone."

His voice was unexpectedly light for such a large man, and I tried to place where I had heard the name *Morgannan* before. It was not *Elvanna*, the current dynasty—perhaps it was one of the other Jadwiga families who had ruled Irrisen in the years between Baba Yaga's centennial returns.

Valya moved forward in a Galtan walking gown of sprigged muslin, her feet in sandals, her ice-blond hair done up in a pre-Revolutionary band ornamented with artificial cherry blossoms and a stuffed song thrush. She appeared older than the others, though still somewhat

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younger than myself. I was uncertain what her costume portrayed, but she was certainly another witch, her attire far too slight for the season. It also matched the porcelain doll she bore in her arms, a fashion doll made in the form of a maiden. “And this is Madenya,” she introduced her doll, “and Koliadki,” she added with a touch to her headband.

The thrush twisted its head and peered at me upside down. Another familiar.

The monkey chattered angrily until Poskarl laughed. “And this is Lychee, the wise and learned, a great scholar among the snow monkeys of Minkai.”

I was reminded of the time the members of my regiment decided to name their weapons, until Citizen Cedrine put a stop to it.

Then the child beside Orlin spoke. “I am Tinka,” she said, and promptly fainted.

“She is bone-chilled,” said Kyevegeny, looking a bit cold himself. Even his monstrous costume or shamanic garb could not compete with witchcraft or alchemy or Galtan knitting and white-hot rage. “The wind here is too great for those without witchcraft. We’d best get her to somewhere warm unless you want to take her to the Bone Mill immediately.”

Poskarl chuckled. “Do you have any suggestions?”

“The Cocoa Pot is nearby.” Kyevegeny picked up the child easily. “Follow me.”

He loped off with great strides. Orlin ran after—half, I think, from the cold, half to keep track of his new ward.

Poskarl and Irynya looked bemused but seemed to have nothing better to do, and followed at a more sedate pace.

Valya linked arms with me and led me up the street. “Cocoa goes wonderfully with Merryhead cake.” She touched a bare finger to the red string on my bakery box, then added conspiratorially, “The Gray Cat bakes for the Royal Palace, so Poskarl should have no cause for complaint, though he always does.”

I didn’t know what to say, so of course said nothing.

The Cocoa Pot was a large white building edged with blue. Its signboard displayed a peculiar porcelain pot with the handle set at a ninety-degree angle to the spout, like a teapot crossed with a coffee pot.

More of these pots were in use inside. Galt’s wars had made imports unpredictable at best, and the chocolatiers’ art had

suffered accordingly, but Citizen Cedrine had nonetheless made certain I understood the bean’s properties and how to compose potions as bonbons in case I encountered a reliable source.

I did not know whether the Hidden Gardens were amazingly abundant or if it was the result of Irrisen’s eon-long trading alliances and stockpiles, but there was no shortage of cocoa on display. Blue-haired gnomes wearing crimson felt caps tended the machinery, the roasters, the winnowers, the granite millstone and conching rollers, and the coal-powered furnaces that fueled the devices. The air was warm and deliciously perfumed with cocoa.

A brass-edged glass wall separated the chocolate-making side from the shop and parlor. Tables and sofas clustered around several fireplaces and potbellied iron stoves with cheerful isinglass windows.

Kyevegeny had placed Tinka on a fur rug before one of these and removed her mittens, and was now rubbing her tiny hands between his own huge paws. His owl-beaked hood was back, revealing a beardless youth, his hair gold rather than platinum. His eyes were the same striking lapis blue as those of the other Jadwiga.

“Back at the palace, we have wood fires,” Poskarl sniffed.

“They have wood fires here too.” Valya pointed to neat stacks of firewood and a slate listing prices for each type. I polished my monocle, wondering whether condensation had added a few decimal places. It had not.

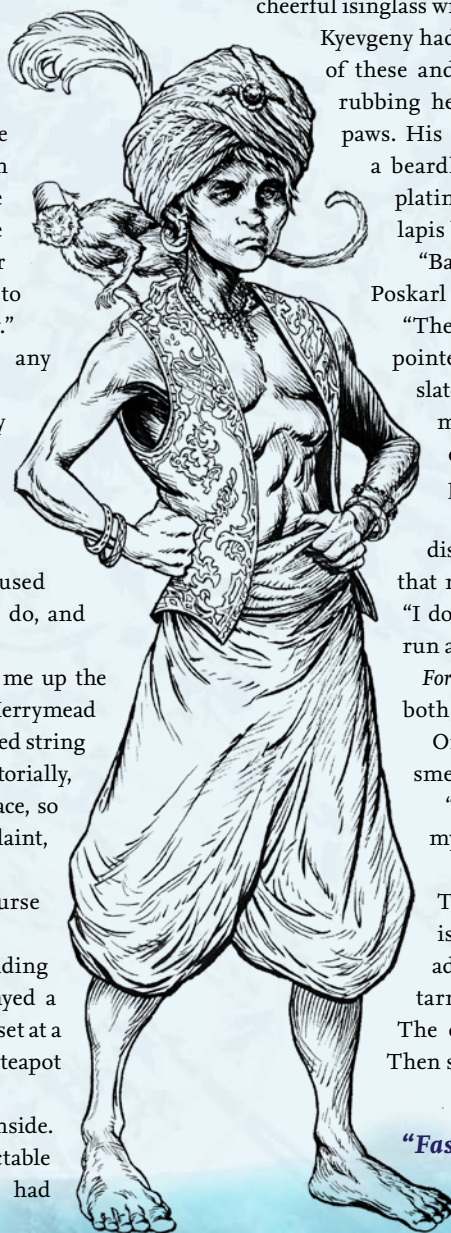
Poskarl held his nose in the air, disdainfully regarding the coffered ceiling that resembled an inverted chocolate mold. “I do not recall this as an establishment to run a tab.”

For you, Irynya mouthed to Valya, and both girls giggled.

Orlin stood before me. “Where are your smelling salts?”

“Here.” I removed a vinaigrette from my bandolier. “Let me administer them.”

I knelt down and uncorked the vial. The active ingredient of sal volatile is spirits of hartshorn, but I had adulterated this with camphor and tarragon vinegar. It had the desired effect. The child promptly inhaled, then sat up. Then she began to weep.



“Fashion is always about rebellion, but the stilyagi may take it too far.”

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"Why are you crying?" asked Orlin.

"You're a witch. You're going to beat me..."

Orlin looked shocked, then grim. "No," he said. "No one is ever going to beat you again." He picked up a sliver of wood from one of the stacks and pushed it through one of the iron stove's air intakes. "As this burns, so may the hag's stick burn."

The twig blazed alight on the other side of the isinglass.

I was impressed, and so were the Jadwiga. I doubted Orlin had the power to actually effect such a curse, but he had been learning the principles of sympathetic magic from observing Dr. Orontius, and his conventions were sound.

There was an exchange of looks, then at last Irynya said to Poskarl, "Well, you *wanted* firewood."

"That I did," Poskarl laughed. "And now I want cocoa. And some of that cake he's carrying."

I smiled. "I'm certain that can be arranged."

"I'll get the cocoa," offered Kyeveny.

"And I," said Valya, "will show you something a little bird told me."

"Oh?" said Poskarl, feigning boredom but betraying interest.

She turned to Orlin. "Would you like me to mend that cut on your ear?"

My brother looked to me. He knew I could brew an infusion that could heal it, but he also knew our mission. "What would it cost me?"

She laughed. "What would you offer?"

Orlin considered, then reached into Madame Eglantine's knitting bag and withdrew a pair of stockings. "Knitting for knitting? You knit my flesh, I give you some fine Galtan hosiery?"

Valya's pupils widened at the sight of Madame Eglantine's stockings. "You have a bargain." Holding her doll in the crook of one arm, she reached into her reticule with her free hand and took out a white lace handkerchief. It looked like a giant snowflake. She moistened it with spit, then reached out to Orlin's ear while her thrush clung to her band's cherry blossoms and softly chirped in hers. She nodded, then recited,

*"Baba Yaga's faithful wolfhound
Saw the blood upon the snowfall,
Saw her pup had torn his dewclaw.
Lovingly she licked her houndlet
Smooth and clean as winter's snowfall.
Blood to blood and bone to bone,
Joint to joint, let all be joined."*

As she spoke the charm, the blood disappeared and Orlin's wound with it. Even the blood on Orlin's shoulder vanished, leaving it as clean and unblemished as Valya's snowflake handkerchief.

Orlin presented her with the stockings.

"I would like to learn that charm," said Irynya.

"So would I," said Olya, her parrot.

Poskarl huffed haughtily, but his eyes betrayed him, as did his monkey. Lychee punched him in the shoulder and chattered angrily while pointing to Valya and her thrush.

Kyeveny had returned with the cocoa and had also seated Tinka and poured her the first cup. I placed the bakery box on the table and cut the string.

Being Galtan, my first instinct was to divide the cake equally—but being Galtan, I had also seen a starveling child wolf her food till she choked or gorge till she vomited. I cut a modest slice and placed it on a plate for Tinka. The plates were snowy porcelain in the shape of snowflakes, but with an opalescent overglaze Powdermaster Davin had taught me was known as "Winter's Kiss"—as much of a mystery as Irrisen's formula for porcelain itself.

A blizzard of smaller snowflakes made up Tinka's cup, which she took hesitantly, then sipped slowly. As she did, I saw a small blue mark on the bottom. Cobalt glaze, four tiny curved brush strokes. Taken together they gave the impression of interlaced mammoth tusks or a buttressed tower or a stylized M.

The child put down her cup, her upper lip darkened with cocoa, but appeared too fearful to ask for more no matter how desperately she might want it.

I pushed the slice of honeycake toward her, picking up another plate as I did and stealing a glance at the bottom. An ivory tower... Did the "M" stand for "Mistress"?

"Admiring the porcelain marks?" Irynya inquired.

"Um... yes," I admitted. "I'm trying to remember if I've seen this sigil before."

"Pay it no mind." She waved dismissively. "It's just the seal of some old dynasty from the early days of the empire, of no power or consequence in the modern age. I doubt anyone even knows who they are now, much less cares."

"Oh stop it, Irynya," Valya said, giggling. "You're utterly terrible."

"I know," Irynya tossed her head, making the rainbow-colored feathers of her fascinador dance, "but I'm an Elvanna. It's expected." She looked at me pointedly. "And you are certainly a Galtan, serving a thrall before those of royal blood." She paused and added, "Don't worry. I find it deliciously scandalous."

"We are *stilyagi*," Poskarl explained. "We do not follow Whitethrone's arbiters of fashion, and we admire the customs of foreign lands. Some customs." He smiled, displaying teeth that were exceedingly white. "I would still like a piece of cake."

I nodded and cut a generous slice. I doubted Poskarl had gone hungry a day in his life.

He accepted it with a nod and passed it on to Irynya. "For you, my dear cousin."

She took it then passed it to Valya. "For you, my valued companion."

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Valya smiled and nodded, then signaled to Kyevegeny, who brought a tray from the lower shelf of the teacart he had wheeled over. On it was a miniature cocoa service, including the peculiar miniature pot. She proceeded to cut tidbits from her larger piece, placing them on plates and serving them in turn to Irynya's parrot, Poskarl's monkey, her thrush, and finally her doll, Madenya, which she had seated upon her bag, making it look like a hassock. "Where is your helper?" Valya asked Orlin.

"My what?"

"Your familiar," Poskarl said. "We've seen you work witchcraft. You're not like poor Kyevegeny there, picking lint out of charm bags in hopes of finding even a crumb of magic."

"Indeed," agreed Irynya. "Surely you must have a toad or hedgehog hidden in one of your pockets."

"Oh, my spirit guide," Orlin said. "Rhodel's used to serving herself. She's Galtan, too."

On cue, my knife levitated, Rhodel cutting herself a slice, followed by the cocoa pot levitating and pouring her a cup as well. The spare chair next to Tinka pulled out.

The little girl's eyes went wide, and then, when nothing horrid occurred, looked hungrily at the cake. Rhodel slid her portion over.

She then proceeded to play hostess, serving Irynya, Poskarl, Kyevegeny, Orlin, and finally myself.

"So," Irynya said to me, "we saw you use that revivifying phial to wake the child. Where is *your* helper?"

"I don't have one yet," I admitted, "though I've been thinking of making a homunculus." Four sets of lapis-blue eyes gave me mystified looks, so I explained, "It's a familiar made out of various materials—mostly mandrake root."

"Oh, a mandragora!" Irynya exclaimed. "We have an aunt who has one of those."

"Nasty creature," said Poskarl. "Spawned from demonblood from what I heard."

Irynya raised an eyebrow and took a sip of cocoa. "Are we talking about the mandragora or Aunt Lubov?"

Poskarl grinned. "You tell me."

Irynya took a diplomatic sip of cocoa instead.

Kyevegeny asked, "So you can farm mandragoras?"

"That's theoretically possible, but a homunculus is created in a laboratory. It's an alchemical process."

He leaned forward intently. "You know alchemy?"

"Some. I make perfumes and fireworks. Would you like to see my samples?"

"Didn't you have that dreadful Revolution?" said Irynya. "I heard that Galt once had truly fine perfumes, but since?" She rolled her eyes. "The fashion at court is for the perfumes of Tian Xia anyway."

"I thought you stilyagi set your own fashion," said Orlin.

"In town, yes. At court? Well..." She waved her fingers and gazed upward.

"Our grandmother once had some Galtan perfume," Kyevegeny mentioned. "She might be interested."

Poskarl rolled his eyes. "Your grandmother..."

This was not going as well as I liked. "Well," I said, making conversation, "did you at least have a pleasant costume ball?"

"Costume ball?" echoed Poskarl.

"For Merrymead. You're dressed as Abu-Fazim, the carpet seller, yes?"

Poskarl's pale cheeks turned pink, then bright red, then almost purple. Irynya burst out laughing. "I told you, cousin! I told you! The turban was simply too much!"

Poskarl fumed, then turned to me, demanding, "Very well, then. But what does she look like?"

"The Parrot Princess from *The Tales of Katapesh*?" I hazarded.

Irynya looked shocked, and then began to laugh, as did her parrot.

Valya arched a pale eyebrow at her friend and took a dainty sip of cocoa. "Next time you will allow me to design for you rather than patronize the Frosthall's wardrobe mistress." She paused, then inquired of me, "What did you think I was dressed as?"

"An elegant lady from before the Revolution?"

"Oh pooh," she pouted, "I knew those fashion plates were outmoded."

"This is why we find foreigners refreshing," Irynya laughed, then paused, daintily raising a napkin to her lips. A moment later, she removed a sliver of gold, then wiped the last poppy seed free and unfurled it. "The Fan of Flirtation! I shall be lucky in love!"

I toasted her with my mug of cocoa, then took a sip. Rich and creamy, it tasted of calcium, the mineral found in everything from eggshells to limestone.

"I found one, too," said Tinka softly. "I was never taught the witch marks, but I know what this must say." She placed a tiny charm on the tablecloth, a whip made from a length of gold braid. "I must give this to my master, for I am a whipping child now."

"Nonsense," Poskarl admonished. "That is the Whip of Vengeance. It is terribly unlucky to give away a Merrymead trinket. You must set that whip on one who has wronged you." He smirked at Orlin. "Looks like you may not want to beat her for a while."

"I wasn't planning to," my brother said drily.

"You wear it until you need it." Irynya showed off her bracelet, one of its charms a tiny fan, its scurrilous inscription now furled.

"I have no jewelry," said the child.

"Pick up your bauble," said Kyevegeny.

She did as she was bidden. He picked up the red string from the bakery, threaded it through the loop at the base, and tied it around her wrist. He examined the trinket. "If

anyone wrongs you, throw this and say, "The wasp stings until she is satisfied."

The child mouthed the words but did not say them aloud.

Different words were being said in my head. It took me a moment to realize the voice was inside my mouth: "Norret, I shall be attending 'Kostchtchie the Deathless' next Fireday. Meet me on the Frosthall steps afterward. Use this talisman to reply if needed. Orontius."

I reached for my napkin and discreetly spat the Merrymead token out into it. Orontius had apparently had ulterior motives in giving me the cake.

"Did you say something?" asked Poskarl.

"I think he said, 'Kostchtchie the Deathless,'" said Irynya. "Does anyone have tickets? Poskarl traded ours."

"Grandmother has her box," Valya said. "Sometimes she favors us."

Irynya snorted. "Your grandmother reads the harrow for her dolls."

Valya covered her doll's ears. "Don't listen to her, Madenya."

Poskarl glanced to Kyevegeny. "At least you had the sense to leave that foolish little barbarian doll at home." His monkey nodded in agreement and sipped its cocoa.

"Klaufi isn't foolish!" Kyevegeny protested.

Poskarl was about to respond when he glanced my way. "Ah! You've found the Bee-Eater!" He pointed to the bird-shaped charm in my napkin.

Irynya laughed like her parrot. "It's a year of malicious gossip for you unless you buy the next cake!"

"Who's 'Kostchtchie the Deathless'?" asked Orlin.

"A foolish barbarian," said Poskarl.

"The patron spirit of frost giants," said Irynya.

"A demon who eats bad children..." whispered Tinka.

"All true," Kyevegeny agreed. "Would you like to hear the tale?"

"Please," said Irynya. "Your shows are always amusing."

Kyevegeny was an exceptionally large man with a voluminous cloak. I should not have been surprised when he reached in and produced a Clever Nella theater.

The proscenium arch, while painted paper, looked like sculpted ice. The curtain, instead of red velvet, was iridescent silk.

And then it was not. Kyevegeny had just freshened our cocoa, dimmed the fishy-smelling table lamp, and moved it behind the toy theater when the silk changed to red velvet. The curtains parted, revealing a screen of silk, shimmering like frost on a windowpane, and moving shadows that shifted, becoming real. A window into the past.

As we watched, the shadows told the story of Kostchtchie, an Ulfen man forced by his father to murder his mother and sisters, and who then murdered his father in turn. From there, he became a terrible warlord, becoming so powerful that he eventually challenged Baba Yaga herself, demanding the secret of immortality. The Witch-Queen

agreed, but not in the way he expected, twisting his form into that of a hideous giant and hiding the last fragments of his soul away in a magical torc. Shamed, Kostchtchie fled to the Abyss and became the patron of frost giants. From there, he plots against Irrisen, hoping to recover the torc containing his former soul so that he might reverse his condition.

"An interesting tale," interrupted a voice, "and an intriguing method of presentation. A screen made from the silk of dream spiders? How novel. And moral. Most people, when they obtain such a substance, brew it into a valuable drug. But of course, you wouldn't know anything about that."

I turned. Beside me sat a wolf with blue eyes and silver-white fur. Then he was a man with the same colors. Then a wolf. Then a man. Back and forth, one after another, like the pages of two different flipbooks interleaved.

I looked down at my cocoa and realized I had been drugged.



"Tinka understands well the cruelty underlying Irrisen's brittle charm."