

## REIGN OF WINTER



# PORCELAIN STREET

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**A**n alchemist learns the use of drugs as part of his work with poisons. With most, deadliness depends on dosage.

I had grown complacent. Orlin has a unicorn's talent for detecting poisons, gained from an alicorn fragment I used in his resurrection, and I had come to rely on his warnings. A less than lethal dosage of a poison, however, would not register; otherwise, unicorns would be known for trampling foxgloves rather than skewering evil creatures.

Though I had never encountered it personally, I knew that dream spider venom could be used to brew "shiver," a potent narcotic and hallucinogen. Nobles imported this exotic vice to Galt, and even after the Revolution, nests of the monstrous arachnids had been found lairing in

forgotten archives. Powdermaster Davin had warned me that the webbing itself was psychotropic.

A theory was coming together. It was said that some Katapeshi storytellers used majoun, a drugged sweetmeat, to enhance their performances. Why couldn't an Irriseni storyteller do the same? A drop of shiver in the cocoa, a shadow puppet theater screened with the webbing, and Kyevgeny's frankly mellifluous voice, trained in the charms of Whitethrone and heir to his famous ancestress? He might not be a proper witch, but Kyevgeny had found more than a crumb of magic in the charm bags Poskarl accused him of plundering.

I had more than a crumb in my bag as well. Along with the alicorn fragments, I had found a greater treasure, the unicornskin glove of Duke Devore, with its inset a ruby

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possessing a number of virtues. The most pertinent was its ability to neutralize poison.

Of course, alcohol is a poison, and the inability to get drunk made for a less than merry Merrymead.

I swapped my left glove for the unicornskin one.

I felt the gem's familiar weight. Kyevegeny's theater lost its luster, the colors muting, changing from a window in time to a pretty but unremarkable toy. My theory of a mild hallucinogen was correct.

Or not, since if the unicorn's jewel had rid me of poisons, why was the being beside me still flickering back and forth from wolf to man?

I observed this phenomenon. As an alchemist, I had drunk more than my share of potions. It was to be expected that I might see things that might or might not be there.

I saw Rhodel lift the cocoa pot and pour a cup, then take my knife and cut a slice of cake. The man and the wolf both stared. It was clear that they were seeing something other than a pretty girl setting Merrymead cake before them.

"Whose witchery is this?" asked the man. The wolf said nothing.

"Orlin's," Irynya said brightly, gesturing to my brother. "He has a ghostly helper. Isn't that marvelous, especially for one so young?"

"Who's your friend, Kyevegeny?" his sister asked.

Kyevegeny sat up straight, no longer hunched behind his toy theater. He was an absolutely huge youth, and being lit from below by the table lamp should have made him look sinister, but in that moment he looked even younger than my brother.

Poskarl looked younger than Tinka and far more frightened. Lychee, his monkey, was even more expressive, his mouth open in a grimace of horror, his hands clutching Poskarl's turban and pulling it askew as he tried to hide behind it.

"You may call me Silvertooth, my dear." The man grinned, revealing that one of his front teeth had indeed been replaced with silver. The wolf snarled and his right fang was silver as well. "I am sorry if I interrupted your amusement, but I have business to discuss with your brother and his friend." He indicated Poskarl. "If you could find some errand to take you elsewhere, it would be well." He then glared at Orlin. "I do not care for cocoa, thank you."

I knew from Cedrine that chocolate was poisonous to dogs. Perhaps the same held true with all canids.

I also discovered the reason for my double vision. The lens that let me see Rhodel had fallen halfway across my eye during Kyevegeny's puppet show. Apparently its interaction with the shiver-laced cocoa allowed me to see a shapeshifter's true form.

I flipped it up. All I saw was a white-haired man in a wolfskin coat.

I dropped another lens. Silvertooth's silver tooth glinted jacinth, the color of Andoren poppies. Clearly magical.

He turned to me. "Might you also have business elsewhere?"

I flipped the lens up, looking into the eyes of a wolf in the head of a man.

I was the first to look away. "I, um, yes." I spotted Madenya clutched in Valya's arms. "I was meaning to purchase a doll. Tinka needs one. Do you know—"

"Porcelain Street," Irynya supplied quickly. "You buy dolls on Porcelain Street. We'll show you the way. The boys can meet us later."

Poskarl and Kyevegeny still looked stricken but nodded, to which Silvertooth said, "Splendid."

Rhodel boxed up the Merrymead cake, including Silvertooth's slice. She made a show of returning my knife past the wolfman's nose. He bared his teeth at me until I left with Orlin, Tinka, Valya, and Irynya.

"Fly, my pretty," Irynya told her parrot once we were outside the building. "Fetch us a sleigh."

Olya took wing, a burst of color against the snow. Irynya turned to Valya. "What was that about?"

"We don't want to know, but we need to anyway." She reached up to her hairpiece, taking Koliadki onto her finger. "Hurry, little one," she whispered. "Tell grandmother everything."

The thrush bobbed its tiny head and fluttered off across the rooftops.

A minute of awkward silence was broken by Olya's screeching: "There is my mistress, Irynya Elvanna, great-granddaughter of our glorious queen! Serve her well, Varki man, and you shall be rewarded from the palace purse!"

Below the fluttering parrot tromped a team of reindeer pulling a sleigh driven by a dark-haired man wearing a blue tunic trimmed with red and yellow ribbons. His feet were shod in reindeer-hide moccasins. He assisted Irynya first, then Valya and me, giving us seats in the back, then placed Orlin and Tinka with himself in the driver's box.

Olya attempted to perch on a reindeer's antlers, but the deer kept tossing their heads. "Porcelain Street!"

The driver shook his reins and the reindeer pulled the sleigh at a merry clip. We passed other wintry conveyances drawn by reindeer, horses, and dogs. A mammoth pulled a sled carrying a giant.

We came into a snow-filled plaza. Trolls were shoveling while goblins used long-handled rakes to pull snow off roofs.

Orlin turned to face us. "Where does all the snow go?"

"Some goes into the lake, some into the hot springs," Irynya explained.

"What about the snow outside the city?"

"A word of advice," Irynya cautioned. "Those who ask too many questions have their skulls used to repair the Bone Road, the street where we first met." She smiled wickedly. "It leads from the city gates to the palace barbican, is often widened, and is the one street in Whitethrone always kept well swept."

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“Those were skulls?” Orlin said, followed quickly by, “That’s not a question!”

“Indeed,” said Irynya, “it is not.” She laughed then. “But here I am acting too much a member of the royal family. A stilyagi should *like* impudent questions. Ask me your most impudent and I shall answer as best I can.”

Orlin thrust out his lower lip, thinking. “So if it’s always winter in Irrisen, do you still have Crystalhue?”

“A most impudent question!” Irynya’s parrot cackle echoed in the cold air. “Yes, winter rules eternal in Irrisen, yet time still passes, and we still have holidays. It is now Merrymead. In other lands, I hear they mourn the return of soggy springtime. In Whitethrone, we celebrate the first of the caravans from Tian Xia.” She chuckled. “As for



*“Just because a wolf wears a human’s shape doesn’t make it civilized.”*

Crystalhue—we have few Shelynites here, but it’s still a time for proposals and courtships.”

Valya grinned slyly. “I think Irynya’s looking forward to this next one in particular.”

Irynya flushed bright pink, and I turned from whatever scandal was brewing in their aristocratic circle in order to observe the impressive sights passing us by.

To our right, out of great blocks of snow, rose a huge ice sculpture shaped somewhat like Kyevegeny—if he were bearded, wielding a giant ax, and taller than a frost giant.

Goblins clambered up the sculpture with knives clenched in their teeth, carrying trussed sheep. A large crowd looked on.

Orlin and I are used to the sight of blood on snow. But unlike the goblins’ butchery or what I had witnessed and perpetrated on the battlefield, the guillotine is a humane and scientific instrument. Tinka did not need such sights. “Do not look,” I called out. She dutifully hid her eyes.

“Indeed,” agreed Irynya. “Sheep? What is the Frosthall coming to, that it needs to advertise its plays so?”

“Kostchtchie the Mutton Butcher,” joked Valya.

“Kostchtchie the Mutton Monger,” Irynya jested back. Her friend fell into a fit of giggles at the ribald pun. “Porcelain Street, driver,” the ice princess instructed. “No need to tarry.”

I noted the steps where Dr. Orontius wished us to meet him next Firesday, memorizing the façades of neighboring structures.

Our sleigh left the plaza, but not before the sheep began to scream.

We proceeded down a wide boulevard edged with the businesses one finds adjacent to theaters—restaurants, taverns, fashionable modistes—and turned right onto a street so calculatedly picturesque the effect could only have been achieved with witchcraft. Even the snow seemed manicured.

Covered walkways with elegantly turned posts and balusters joined shop porticos into a grand promenade on both sides of the street. Shoppers could stroll in their finest clothes unsullied by snow or soot. A precise tracing of hoarfrost ran around the edges of the windowpanes that, rather than obscuring the wares within, framed them to best advantage.

One small shop specialized in mugs and steins. A group of richly dressed dwarves eyed them covetously. A larger shop’s windows boasted full porcelain services in an assortment of patterns, from the tasteful snowflake ware used at the Cocoa Pot to baroque holiday sets, such as an elaborate tessellated pattern of interlocked bees, wasps, and daggers, obviously intended for some witch’s Merrymead feast. Others sold busts of Queen Elvanna in assorted sizes, biscuit jars in the shape of goblins, vinegar cruet trolls with removable heads, figurines and decorative plates of every description. But mostly Porcelain Street sold dolls. Hundreds of dolls lined

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the street, watching from windows like Galtan children curious about the tumbrel carts on their way to the guillotine.

"The Four Tusks, driver." Valya pointed to Porcelain Street's most elegant shop.

The Galtan in me insisted I shake the driver's hand, slipping him a few coins. It is an honor to serve the Revolutionary Council, but risky to ask payment. I presumed Queen Elvanna's palace operated similarly.

The doors of the shop were opened for us by Ulfen guards almost as tall as Kyeveny. Between them, the trolls, and the giants, Whitethrone was conspiring to make me feel positively short.

We were met by a balding, middle-aged Ulfen man sporting a kaftan of spotless white, sewn with seed pearls in a pattern that resembled four tusks, an ivory tower, or a monogrammed M—the same mark as on the back of the porcelain. "Lady Morgannan!" he greeted Valya. "What an unexpected delight! And Madenya too! Such a pleasure!"

"It is good to see you as well, Ermutt," Valya squeezed his arm, "and before you ask, Holgrim is getting on very well. Grandmother has promoted him to Kyeveny's valet."

"Oh, good! Oh, I am so happy. Oh—" He froze with the look of a frightened deer as he glimpsed Irynya.

"Lady Irynya," Valya supplied, "great-granddaughter of Her Majesty."

Ermutt bowed so low his carefully coiled forelock fell off his bald spot and onto the floor.

Irynya stifled a giggle. "You may rise." He did. She giggled more as he hastily brushed the hair out of his face and onto his head where it sat like a pile of golden cobwebs.

"Shall I clear the shop so you may browse in private, your ladyship?"

"No need." She stepped to one side and gestured to Orlin. "This talented young witch has acquired a whipping child, as is proper," her eyes flicked to me, "and his brother thought that she might want a doll." She dimpled, obviously stifling a laugh.

"Of course, your ladyship." Ermutt betrayed no impropriety. "Was your companion wanting a particular style of doll?"

"Oh, he's a stranger to Irrisen." Irynya laughed lightly. "Just show us everything."

"As your ladyship pleases."

The Four Tusks catered to the nobility. Tables displayed platters and punch bowls in the "Icicle Crown" pattern created for the coronation of Queen Elvanna, reserved for members of the royal family, and dismissed as "Oh, those," by Irynya. Vitrines on the staircase landing showcased porcelain miniatures of the wild creatures of Irrisen: a panoply of snow geese, snowshoe hares, pine martens, white harts, and gray boars. One corner curio displayed a large number of gray housecats in various charming poses.

Upstairs, hundreds of dolls—girls and boys alike—watched unblinking. Most were gold- and copper-haired

Ulfen children or platinum-tressed Jadwiga, but there were a number of dark-haired Varisians and Chelaxians represented, some Tians and Kellids, and a few from races even farther from Irrisen's borders.

"You will note," said Ermutt, proudly displaying his wares, "most of our children wear the traditional clothing of Irrisen. But some wear their native costumes, like this fine fellow in his Varki gákti," he gestured to a doll wearing a blue tunic like our sleigh driver, "and others in more exotic garb. See this lovely? She depicts one of the geishas of Minkai." He pointed out a Tian girl in an elaborate silk robe and sash, her black hair pinned up with jewels, her face painted with white lead. I didn't know what a geisha was, but she resembled a handmaid from before Galt's Revolution.

I glanced about, seeing if I could see any more mature dolls. I was rewarded with a case of older fashion dolls and a shelf with no less than a dozen crone dolls.

Ermutt followed my gaze. "Ah yes. We also have the mothers for all our sweet little children, and of course our babushkas, the grandmothers, whom no proper Irriseni home is without."

I regarded the crones. While the faces of the child dolls and the middle-aged dolls had been cast with a range of expressions—happy, sad, mischievous, petulant—they were all some variety of pleasant.

The crones wore an assortment of evil expressions—conniving, furious, gloating, malicious, disapproving, grim. All were dressed like the statue of Baba Yaga from Market Square: broomsticks in one hand, bundles of sticks on their backs, and plucked golden cockerels at their waists along with silver sickles, garlic braids, various roots and herb pouches—the tools of the witch's trade. The crones' sarafans were the moss green of woad overdyed with weld, their blouses the contrasting purple that came from the costly Taldan dye murex. Instead of kokoshniks or crowns, they all wore black leather skullcaps over their snow-white hair. Their eyes were silver and ultramarine and frighteningly intense.

Tinka pointed to one bearing a particularly haughty expression, her finger shaking. "Mother and Father kept ours beside the hearth. We told Baba Yaga when our chores were done and left her an egg cup filled with cabbage water every night." Tears welled up in the child's eyes. "But I spilled it! And Mother sold me to the thrallmistress!" She looked in horror at the dolls all around us. "The thrallmistress said the Bone Mill would grind my bones and turn me into a doll!"

Valya gasped. "The old woman said *that!*?"

Tinka nodded, eyes wide.

"Something should be done about that," Irynya sniffed. "First trying to make a witch her thrall, next telling ridiculous lies?" She shook her head. "I've heard of magic mills that churn out salt, coffee... even gold! But complete dolls? Preposterous!"

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"It would greatly simplify the process," Valya snorted, "but it's completely untrue." She knelt down, facing Tinka, her face serious. "This is Madenya." She held up her doll. "She doesn't believe a word of it. Do you, Madenya?" Valya must have had some of Kyevgeny's puppetry training, for she made her doll shake her head in an exceptionally lifelike way. "You mustn't believe a word of it," she told Tinka. "Nor repeat it to anyone else. Do you understand?"

All at once, Tinka brightened. "I don't believe a word of it!"

"Good." Valya stood, the child as good as forgotten.

Orlin locked eyes with Irynya. "Then what does the Bone Mill grind the bones for?"

"Oh, various things," she dismissed. "The nicer skulls are used to repair the Bone Road, choice bits are sold to necromancers or made into furniture, but mostly they're just ground for bread for the ogres and trolls."

Valya nodded in agreement. "Some of the poorer wolves too, though don't let them hear you saying that. It's a horrible insult to a winter wolf to accuse them of looking for scraps around the Bone Mill."

"Especially if it's true," Irynya added impishly.

"Exactly." Valya stood up. "No one eats troll bread or ogre sausage except the trolls and ogres. And sometimes the giants."

"And the goblins," Irynya added, "but goblins eat fish heads, so that scarcely counts."

"Troll bread!" squawked Olya.

Irynya mock-glared at her parrot. "Yes, and you too, but you're a featherbrain." She kissed her familiar on the cheek.

"You won't feed me to the trolls?" asked Tinka.

"Of course not," scoffed Irynya. "You're not my whipping child." She looked to Orlin.

"I'm not going to feed her to trolls!"

"There you are then," Irynya concluded. "I expect he will keep you as a pet, and you'll only be whipped when your master does wrong. If you are very good, when you're older, you may earn some trusted place in his household."

Ermutt nodded. "My son Holgrim is now a valet," he said proudly.

"Better than bodyguard," Irynya snorted. "Can you imagine?"

Valya chuckled. "He was Kyevgeny's whipping boy."

I sighed. "I take it that whipping children don't generally get toys."

Irynya dimpled. "Not new ones."

Valya nodded. "Generally they get our cast-offs."

"You could get a new doll, Valya," Irynya suggested, "and give her Madenya."

"No!" Valya cried fiercely, hugging her doll. "Grandmother gave her to me after Mother died birthing Kyevgeny. She even had Madenya's wig made from Mother's hair!"

Irynya mouthed the last words, rolling her eyes, then turned to other sport. "Mostly we give our whipping children our old clothes. Though this was especially funny with Holgrim," she explained. "He's short for an Ulfen, and looks positively ridiculous in what Kyevgeny's outgrown. Which is everything."

"We Morgannans are an old house," Valya reminded her friend. "Kyevgeny takes after our ancestress Sudreyskr is all." She looked to me and explained, "Jadwiga marry Jadwiga to keep the lines strong. The exception is when there's a fosterling, a witch of impressive power from another race—such as Orlin here—who is taken into one of our families and raised as our own. Sudreyskr was one such. There have been Morgannans since who inherited her stature or golden hair."

"A pity Kyevgeny didn't get her magic in the bargain."

"Says the girl who didn't find her familiar till last year."

"I found *her*," Olya corrected.

"That you did." Irynya kissed her parrot again. "No matter. Poskarl is a year older than Kyevgeny, and he's barely had his monkey since Crystalhue. There's time for your brother to catch up."

"Indeed..." Valya looked pensive, turning toward the windows so I saw her in profile. She was quite pretty, with fine angular features, and resembled her doll, Madenya. That was unremarkable, for the doll had been crafted in memory of her mother. What was remarkable was that, seen in profile and serious, both bore a striking resemblance to what I had taken to be a bust of Queen Elvanna. But it was not. It was the bust of another woman, one who looked close enough to Elvanna to be a sister, but instead of wearing the crown of iron icicles, wore a tiara formed of four ivory tusks.

I flipped down my telescopic lens. The inscription read as I expected: *Queen Morgannan*. The prongs at the front of her tiara formed a stylized M. I now knew who "The Mistress of the Ivory Tower" in Duke Devore's journal referred to.

A sharp tapping on one of the windows startled me out of my reverie. Valya rushed toward it, opening the casement.

A thrush flew in, landing on her hairband's cherry twigs and frantically chirped in her ear. "Grandmother!" she called out the window. "We are upstairs!"

A minute later Kyevgeny loped up the staircase, his owl-beaked hood flapping back.

"Where is Poskarl?" Irynya demanded.

"At the palace," Kyevgeny wheezed. "We left him at the palace barbican."

A minute later, a green-eyed gray cat with fur as thick and dense as plush padded purposefully up the steps, glanced at each of our faces, then sat on the top step to one side.

The woman who came upstairs could only be Grandmother Morgannan. She appeared far older than her ancestress at her prime, but had the same fine features, the same regal bearing. Her ivory M, instead of being the forepiece of a tiara, was a device worked into the front of her

kokoshnik. Her cape was white sealskin, and her sarafan was embroidered with countless seed pearls forming a beaded mosaic of an ossuary. A thousand skulls peered out from the rows of pearls. In one hand she held an ivory staff, the haft was a tapering spiral that could only be the horn of an enormous unicorn.

She surveyed us like her cat, then said, "Koliadki has told me everything." She looked to Irynya first. "Lady Irynya, I am certain you are anxious to rejoin your cousin, Lord Poskarl. I offer transport in my sleigh if you would deem it meet. The Royal Palace is but a slight detour."

"Is he well? What's happened?"

Grandmother Morgannan inclined her head slightly. "I have found it prudent over the years not to inquire too deeply into matters which do not concern me, especially where House Elvanna is concerned. Suffice it to say that I made it clear to the wolf Silvertooth that my grandson was no part of his and Lord Poskarl's business, whatever that may be. I also noted that while I may be an 'old bitch'—to use the wolfish honorific—I find this preferable to being transformed into a chipmunk."

"Grandmother, you didn't!" gasped Valya.

The old woman smiled sweetly, revealing a number of teeth repaired with gold. "No, I did not. But I left the possibility open to be revisited in the future. Wolves are very much ruled by power and the perception of the same, and while a curse may be broken, one could never live down the shame of being a tiny prey animal scurrying about the trees stuffing his face with pine nuts."

"And Poskarl?" Irynya asked.

"I offered him the same as I do you: transport in my sleigh to the palace barbican."

"I accept, Lady Byanka." Irynya made a brief curtsy. "My thanks."

"The pleasure will be mine." She turned and looked at Orlin, then reached out a sealskin-mittened hand and tipped his chin up, then nodded. "You must be Orlin Gantier, the young Galtan witch I was told of. It would be my pleasure if you would dine with us this evening at Morgannan Abbey and allow us to show you some of the family splendors."

"Okay," Orlin said, eyes wide.

Grandmother Morgannan's old lapis eyes flicked to Tinka standing halfway behind Orlin. "This, however, will not do."

She glanced to Ermutt. "I believe you have some of the clothes we keep for the larger dolls?"

"Of course, ma'am." Ermutt held out his hand to Tinka until she took it.

Grandmother Morgannan's eyes then went to me. She looked at me for a long moment, then glanced down to my left hand, the glove of unicornskin, and the ruby cabochon winking dully on the back. She smiled. "Duke Devore,

so lovely to see you again. I congratulate you on having regained your youth. How is your clever young wife?"

"My wife?" I was conscious of everyone looking at me. "I am sorry, dear lady. You have me mistaken. I am Norret Gantier."

She paused, then said, "I am seldom mistaken." She raised her walking stick and revealed the handle. Her lapis blue eyes were magnified by the lenses of an ivory lorgnette.

She lowered the stick. "We are among friends here. There is no worry of word getting back to Galt and—" She paused then. "Your wife? She did not survive?"

"Duchess Devore has not been seen in years," I said truthfully.

The awkward silence was broken by Ermutt returning with Tinka, now dressed in Irrisen finery. "Doesn't she make a perfect doll?"

"Oh yes," said Grandmother Morgannan, taking her in. "Yes, she does."



*"Grandmother Morgannan knows more than she should."*