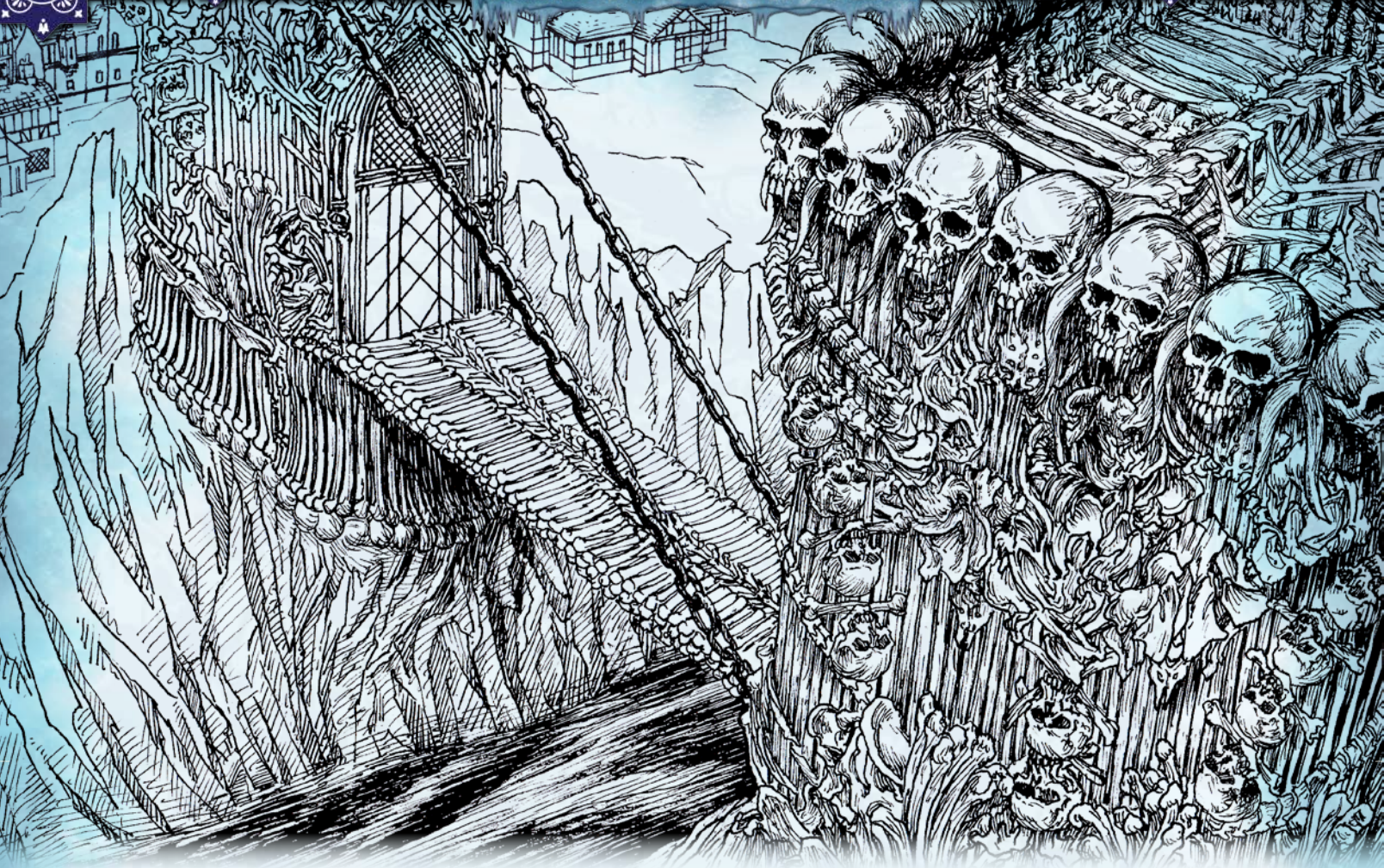


REIGN OF WINTER



THE BONE BRIDGE

PATHFINDER'S JOURNAL: THE BONEDUST DOLLS 4 OF 6

Being Galtan, I was familiar with the idea of being mistaken for a nobleman. Before the Revolution, it was a favorite among playwrights writing romantic comedies.

Nowadays it usually ended in a date with the guillotine.

I didn't know which applied in Irrisen, but I had been looking for an entry into the noble houses. While I had planned to go with peddling perfume and fireworks, being mistaken for a long-dead duke miraculously restored to youth and health would work.

I wondered if Dr. Orontius, who collected pre-Revolutionary art, possessed an early portrait of Arjan Devore, Duke of Dabril, and had noted a resemblance to myself. It wouldn't even be that much of a coincidence—as the joke went in my hometown, there were only five men in Dabril, repeated with variations of hairstyle and age.

I then kicked myself mentally. Forget some damned portrait: Dr. Orontius was old enough to have met Arjan Devore and know all about the duke's formulary, ruby glove, and alchemical honeymoon to Irrisen. He could have been at the wedding.

I had the guest list. Orontius's name was not on it, but then again, "Dr. Orontius" was a wizard's craft name if there ever was one. If he hadn't reinvented himself after the Revolution, I'd eat my liberty cap.

We emerged from the Four Tusks. "You will remember this from your last visit."

Grandmother Morgannan—should I call her "Byanka," I wondered?—reached into her sealskin muff and produced an ivory statuette. A goat. It lay in the palm of her mitten, its horns and hooves bright gold like the repairs on her teeth. "You had such a lovely word for this," she said. "Chryselephantine."

THE BONE BRIDGE

“Chryselephantine?” Orlin echoed.

“Ivory accented with gold,” I explained. “Ivory for flesh, gold for everything else. Popular among the ancient Taldans.”

“And you pretend to be a different man, ‘Norret Gantier,’” Grandmother Morgannan chided, taking her albino peacock feather fan and tying its strings to the goat.

I wanted to protest that I had simply heard the word somewhere—Devore’s formulary? Powdermaster Davin’s figurine collecting?—but could not immediately recall where.

The fan was chryselephantine as well. The ivory handle formed the peacock’s head and body, with the eyes, beak, and guardsticks composed of gold. Grandmother Morgannan snapped the fan open and tossed it and the statuette high into the air over Porcelain Street.

While not especially conversant in the exotic language of the fan, said to have originated in the distant east, I knew that throwing one meant *I hate you!* I could only imagine what it meant when the fan was tied to a goat.

Perhaps it only meant that the language of the fan had not made it as far as Irrisen. The feathers caught the air, spinning like a whirligig, causing the toy to drift gently down. “Trip-trap-trip!” Grandmother Morgannan doffed her right mitten and snapped her fingers thrice. “It’s time to dance and skip!”

It sounded like a rhyme from a children’s game. The goat grew larger, as did the peacock. Its tail fanned out, the golden guardsticks clutched in its claws growing along with it. A moment later, four golden hooves landed in the snow, followed by the golden runners of a peacock-shaped ivory sleigh. A shaggy white mountain goat capered about in the golden traces that had once been fan strings, dancing as if for sheer joy at suddenly being alive. The peacock sleigh sat proudly aloof, its albino plumes billowed out into an overarching canopy. It remained impassive as the goat pulled it around to the steps.

Kyevgeny assisted Irynya into the front bench, then aided his grandmother and sister. “I’d best take the middle.” He scooped up Tinka, placing her on his huge lap as he took his seat in the back. The gilded leaf springs bowed with his weight. Orlin went around the left while I squeezed in on the right. Soft-feathered lap robes blanketed us against the chill.

A cloud of color alit on the goat’s golden horns—Irynya’s parrot. “To the palace, billy-boy!” it cried.

The goat danced about, apparently considering this more merriment, until Grandmother Morgannan shook the reigns. “As the parrot commanded!” The goat took off.

“My lady,” Grandmother Morgannan glanced to Irynya, “would you find it presumptuous for me to remark that you have an extremely silly familiar?”

Irynya paused, waiting until the moment a gray cat launched itself from the last railing of Porcelain Street, only to land squalling, scrabbling, and sliding down the neck of the albino peacock. “Not at all, Lady Byanka.”

The cat suddenly levitated, as if an invisible hand had grabbed it by the scruff of the neck, dropping it in Grandmother Morgannan’s lap. Her familiar clutched her for a moment, eyes wide, accusing all of us. Then it settled down to washing its ears and ignoring everyone, especially the peacock.

“My thanks.” Grandmother Morgannan glanced over her shoulder to Orlin. “Murzik may thank you as well, but he is a cat.”

Orlin nodded.

The journey to the palace took us back past the Frosthall, east along the edge of the Merchant’s Quarter, then south on the Bone Road. The snow began to fall more heavily. Bewitched winds whisked it from the street.

I looked down at what I now knew was a river of skulls. I was uncertain whether to be appalled or just recognize that if the Gray Gardeners were to grind up all the skulls in Isarn’s catacombs, we could pave every street in the city.

The palace barbican appeared to be built from solid ice, as was the palace itself, rising high out of the lake on its frozen pillar and connected to the rest of the city by only a heavily guarded crystalline causeway. Here the Bone Road ended, the only skulls present those in the heads of traitors on pikes atop the gates. I felt sorry for the ravens; Irrisen’s eternal winter forced them to peck at frozen meat.

We bid adieu to Irynya and Olya, and Grandmother Morgannan invited me to sit in the front. “It is a pity I have a goat rather than a griffin. Otherwise, we could simply fly home.” She pointed her spiraled ivory walking stick through the snowfall to a white tower beyond the roofs to the west. Looking through a gap between buildings, I could see a great gulf between our isle and that of the tower. “It is a lovely sleigh ride, anyway.”

We went north, out of the district she called the Floes, around the splintered islets and cliffs at the south of Whitethrone, back around past the Frosthall, then south along the cliffs overlooking Glacier Lake. The snowfall lifted as we rode, and the wintry sun peeked out through the clouds, leaving Whitethrone bright and clear for the first time that day.

To our left stood a small isle, an outcropping that would have been truly impressive if not for the specter of the royal palace rising from the waves to the south. On the nearest end rose a buttressed tower with a familiar shape, supported by four immense tusks that appeared to be from two of the titanic elephants sometimes spoken of in legends. I suspected their origin was more mundane and that the Morgannans had created them via plating with ivory panels.

Then again, Irrisen was founded by a witch who traveled the worlds in a hut dancing on giant chicken legs. Taking the tusks of cosmic mammoths as souvenirs was hardly impossible where Baba Yaga was concerned.

REIGN OF WINTER

A number of large buildings occupied the center of the island. At the far end sat another tower matched by its mate on this shore; the pair looked like the rooks from an immense chess set made of bones. More rooks perched on the merlons or wheeled in the air, mixing with ravens and crows.

“As you may recall, our family built the Bone Road,” Grandmother Morgannan noted, recalling history about which she had doubtless bragged to Arjan Devore half a century before, “and after Queen Morgannan was called away by Baba Yaga, we were allowed to retain Morgannan Isle.” She waved her alicorn walking stick toward several buildings in turn. “There is the Boneworks, where our serfs make the boneware. There is the Hall of Porcelain. There is the Pearl House. And there is the old Palace of Bones—Morgannan Abbey now—where we hosted you last time.” She indicated a long building with flying buttresses protruding like ribs, making it appear to be some great beast that had died long ago.

“It is hard to believe that ours was once the highest tower in Whitethrone, but even the tallest turret of the Royal Palace will soon be overshadowed—at least if the Iron Tooth is completed before Baba Yaga’s return.” She pointed beyond the Ivory Tower to something glittering in the distance.

I dropped a series of monocle lenses and closed my right eye, bringing it into focus. I saw iron bars that looked like toothpicks upon which walked humans the size of aphids, trolls the size of ants, and frost giants the size of ladybugs.

“You didn’t see *that* the last time you were here.”

“No,” I agreed semi-truthfully.

“Do you remember me now?”

I opened my right eye and flipped up all but the smoked lens on my left. I saw a stunning woman halfway in age and appearance between Valya and the bust of Queen Morgannan.

“How could I forget?” I forced a light laugh. “You look as lovely as ever, Byanka.”

“Well, not all the time.” She slipped a silver compact back inside her sealskin muff. “But a witch has her charms...” She smiled coquettishly.

“Grandmother!” Valya protested.

Byanka pointed a finger at me. “How old do you think this man is, my dear?”

Valya glanced, uncertain. “Perhaps twenty?”

“He was far older than that when he visited fifty years ago, seeking keys to the riddle of the alchemists. Witches aren’t the only ones who know how to regain youth’s charms.”

Valya stared at me, looking betrayed, then turned on Orlin. “How old are you?” she demanded.

“Um... older than I look,” Orlin admitted bashfully.

“I brought him back to life,” I explained.

“With a philosophers’ stone,” Byanka hazarded correctly.

“A what?” asked Kyeveny.

“A wondrous gemstone,” his grandmother explained.

“Alchemists use them to turn lead into gold and for all manner of useful tricks.”

The philosophers’ stone was actually a chunk of sooty rock that looked like anthracite coal. At best it could be polished up for jet. But mourning jewelry was not its main use. If broken open, it held a measure of philosophic mercury that turned lead into gold and iron into silver. Mixed with a healing potion—easily brewed with an alicorn fragment—it resurrected the dead.

I had found a stone left by the duchess. Whether she had acquired it for study or made it herself was a question I puzzled over in the odd hours of the night.

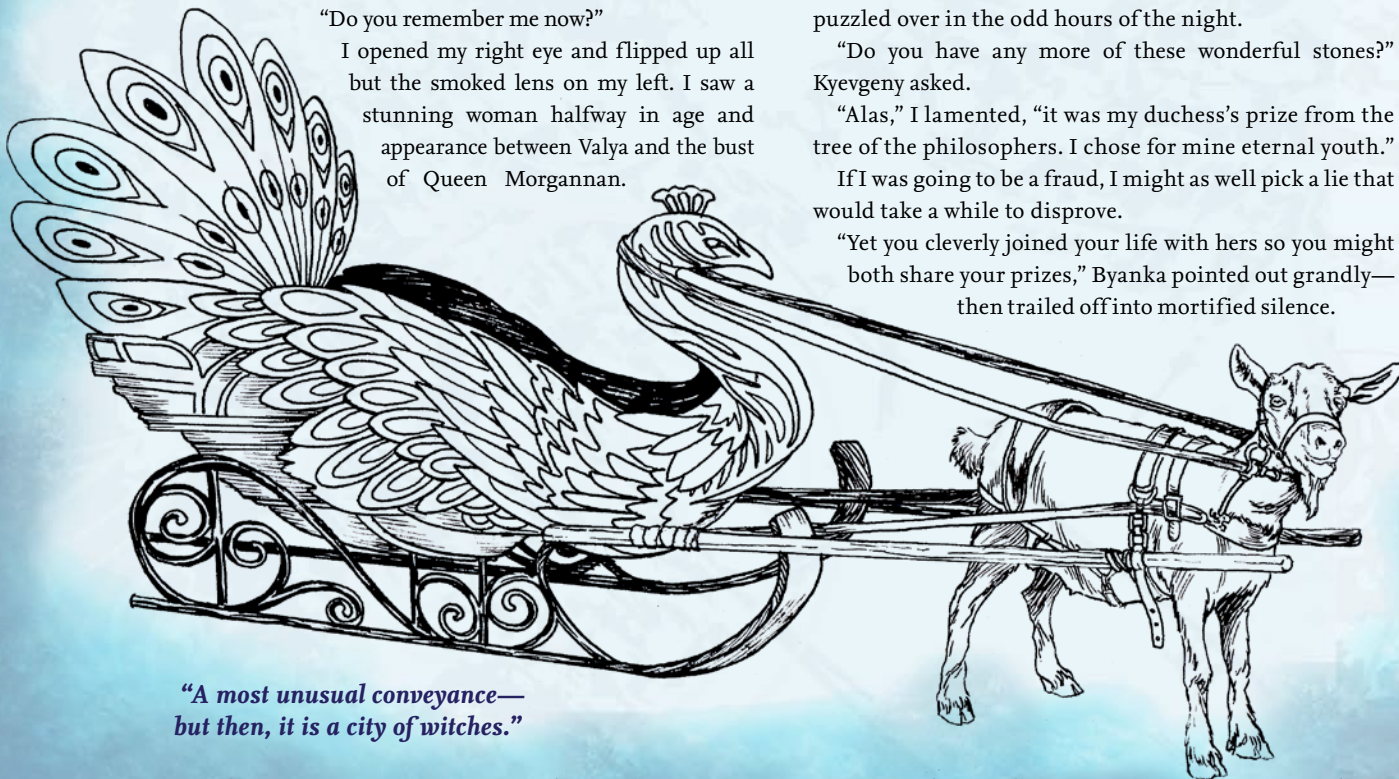
“Do you have any more of these wonderful stones?” Kyeveny asked.

“Alas,” I lamented, “it was my duchess’s prize from the tree of the philosophers. I chose for mine eternal youth.”

If I was going to be a fraud, I might as well pick a lie that would take a while to disprove.

“Yet you cleverly joined your life with hers so you might both share your prizes,” Byanka pointed out grandly—then trailed off into mortified silence.

*“A most unusual conveyance—
but then, it is a city of witches.”*



THE BONE BRIDGE

“I—” My voice caught, more from trying to get out the lie than any true grief. “I lost Anais long ago. I try not to dwell on it.”

“I understand.” Byanka laid a sympathetic hand on my arm. “My Rezny died fighting the barbaric Linnorm Kings. Not a day goes by that I do not find some reminder of him.” She squeezed my arm. “I know how you and your duchess were linked. It takes time to pick up the pieces of a broken heart.”

I nodded, hiding my lack of tears with Arjan Devore’s unicorntskin glove, surreptitiously popping the cork of my smelling salts. Sal volatile made tears well up like actual grief.

I brushed away my false tears, pushing up my smoked lens as I did. Byanka Morgannan caught my hand before I could drop the lens back. “Your eye,” she wondered, “it is as silver as a mirror...”

“Philosophic mercury,” I explained. “It got in when I brought my brother back.”

“I wonder if anyone else looks out of it,” mused Valya.

Byanka glared at her granddaughter. “Valya, be good enough to tell Yelchev to lower the bridge. Have the tower ready to receive guests once we have toured the factory.”

“Yes, grandmother,” Valya said humbly, then took her thrush down from her hairpiece, whispering frantically.

“I know, Valya,” Koliadki chirped. “I know. I know.”

“Then fly, little one,” she said, casting him off the cliff.

The thrush spread his wings, winging across the waves and whitecaps of the channel that led to the lake. I dropped my telescopic lenses and watched until he flew through an arrow slit in the farthest tower of bone. A minute later, a whistle screamed. A plume of steam erupted from the tower’s crenellations as one side began to lower, like the grossly distended jaw of a monolithic troll skull. The nearer tower screamed in answer and the facing side lowered as well. Crows, rooks, and ravens took to the air, croaking, as the two spans of the bridge came down.

The goat trotted gaily along the cliff’s edge until we neared the tower of bones. The goat skipped right, cutting a graceful arc in the new fallen snow, then tripped across the cobbles inside the arch of the tower itself. The slats of the bridge were human femurs. The sleigh’s runners chattered across them like wooden slats, its peacock head still proudly aloof.

Standing at the far side of the bridge, blocking it easily with his massive bulk, was a huge troll. While most of his kind wore little in the way of clothing, this one was encased in layers of heavy bone armor. His eyes peered out from beneath a helmet made from the skull of a walrus, its tusks sliding down to either side of his own. He leaned on a huge whalebone club.

“Who seeks passage to the Isle of Bone?” he recited ritually.

Byanka reined in the goat and we skidded to a stop. I became quite conscious of the bridge having no railings.

She stood. “You know my sleigh, Yelchev. It’s *my* bridge you guard.”

The troll’s expression didn’t change, nor did he move aside. Byanka sighed heavily.

“I am Lady Byanka Morgannan, head of House Morgannan in Whitethrone, descendant of Baba Yaga herself. I claim right of passage across the Bridge of Bone.”

Nodding, the troll stepped aside. As the sleigh passed, Byanka sighed again. “Trolls. It takes forever to train them, and then you find you’ve trained them *too* well...”

We parked the sled and toured the Boneworks first, the air white with bonedust, frosting everything thick as talc. Serfs carved ivory chess pieces and made hat racks out of rib cages.

The Pearl House smelled worse. Great piles of bleaching mussel shells surrounded it, as did cawing, incontinent corvids. Inside I covered my nose with the duke’s glove, still scented with the duchess’s perfume. Serfs shucked mussels, putting the meat in crocks. Occasional cries of jubilation accompanied the discovery of a pearl. Foremen tallied these, taking them to the more breathable side of building to be sized, graded, and strung. Other serfs polished shells and punched buttons from them, filling the air with powdered nacre, like pearlescent bonedust. I wondered if this were the secret of Winter’s Kiss.

At the Porcelain Works, I spied the unfired parts of a doll. The vaunted clay appeared to be ordinary kaolin, grayish-white and unremarkable.

Powdermaster Davin, being a dwarf, had taught me the surest test of any earth was taste. I leaned upon a counter, peering closer at the unfinished doll—a little boy—then stepped back and bit the finger of my glove, musing. The unicorntskin had picked up crumbs of clay. It tasted smooth and earthy, but with an unexpected creaminess.

Calcium.

It tasted like the Cocoa Pot’s cocoa, minus the cocoa powder.

That richness I had attributed to milk. But calcium had other sources.

Limestone.

Shell.

Bone.

I dusted my fingers with a handkerchief, folded it, and tucked the specimen back in my pocket.

Our tour continued to where the bisque-fired porcelain received its first glaze, then into the room where glazed pieces were graced with porcelain paints before the second firing.

Painters added tiny gold spiders to a service netted with scarlet spiderwebs. I knew the secret of the ruby glaze to be more gold dissolved in aqua regia. Byanka called the costly service “Scarlet Spinner”—a commission from someone called the jorogumo, a group of spider-women in a far-off province of Tian Xia.

REIGN OF WINTER

I had had quite enough of spider women already, thank you, but professed an interest in porcelain painting. Byanka let me decorate the center of a sugar bowl's web with a vignette of spiders from Galt. I painted a garden spider crawling on a spray of eglantine, adding a rainbow raindrop as a flourish. I licked my brush to a point between each color, tasting.

"Ah, you still have Shelyn's hand!" Byanka cried delightedly.

I paused, the ruby winking on the back of my glove, then smiled in genuine appreciation. Shelyn, goddess of beauty, was Dabril's patron. It came as no surprise that her last duke had been a devotee. I had his formulary. His watercolors were exquisite, his penmanship exemplary. I had made a conscious effort to refine my cruder talents to something approaching his.

Byanka smiled back, still a beautiful young witch, only the gold-filled cracks in her teeth betraying her age. "Koliadki has informed us that tea has been made ready."

The sleigh took us to the Ivory Tower. A footman almost as tall as Kyevegeny helped Valya and Byanka alight. Once all were out, Byanka snapped her fingers, calling, "Trap-trip-trap! It's time to take a nap!"

The golden-horned goat promptly yawned and bowed its head, eyes shut. The peacock folded its tail, the canopy collapsing, the benches disappearing beneath the ruffled feathers of the lap blankets, then tucked its head beside one wing. Both dwindled.

The tall footman retrieved a toy goat and an albino peacock feather fan, presenting them to Byanka.

She led the way inside the tower, which was indeed made of ivory. Mwangi hippo-tooth doorknobs. Walrus-tusk candle sconces. Beautifully scrimshawed paneling. A tinkling of the ivories as a duet for harpsichord and pianoforte drifted from floors above. And a grand staircase made from the tusks of a mammoths' graveyard spiraled around a central chandelier fashioned from a thousand spiraled ivory horns. A thousand alicorns.

I nearly fainted, from both the enormity of the wealth represented and the crime. A thousand unicorns murdered for their horns.

Orlin, returned to life with unicorn ivory, stared at the chandelier, stricken. Some of the horns were burning.

"Oh good," Byanka said softly, her words punctuated by a harpsichord solo, "we had enough spermaceti." She moved behind Orlin and placed her mittens on his shoulders. "You must think us terribly extravagant, my dear, but I assure you, we Morgannans are not *that* rich." She gave me a knowing wink.

She wanted me to explain. Correction: she wanted Arjan Devore to explain.

I racked my brains. Arjan had written a great deal about unicorns, as they were part of his armorial bearings. Then I remembered.

"Those are narwhal tusks," I told Orlin, "and twisted spermaceti candles, both from the Erutaki whalers atop the Crown of the World."

"There's quite a trade in false alicorns," Byanka said. "And they do make a lovely chandelier."

"Isn't it a crime to kill a unicorn?" asked Orlin.

"Without a permit, certainly," said Kyevegeny. "Unicorns are reserved for the Crown."

"Please don't bring it up around Irynya," begged Valya. "You wouldn't believe how she goes on about her family's unicorn hunts. She hasn't been to one since she was eight!"

"Ah," Byanka warned, raising a finger. "Even an unfavored Elvanna is still more favored than us. Never forget that, my dear."

"Yes, grandmother." Valya bowed her head, chastened, making her familiar flutter aloft.

"Tea is in the gallery?" Byanka asked the thrush.

"Yes, grandmother!" Koliadki chirped.

"Marvelous. Let everyone know."

The thrush winged his way up the grand staircase to the next floor. We followed.

Halfway up the stairs, the music stopped.

When we came onto the landing, I stopped as well. Around us were a thousand dolls, all sitting in doll-sized chairs, posed with tiny teapots or little plates of dainties. One sat before a child's pianoforte, another before a virginal—a tabletop harpsichord—both composed of ivory.

Then I blinked. There were somewhat fewer dolls than I thought. Mirrors paneled the gallery's walls, yellowed by centuries of candle smoke, reflecting the narwhal-tusk chandelier, multiplying everything. Four oriel windows, set at the cardinal points, provided panoramic views of Whitethrone. The one to the west showed the sun setting behind a snow-capped building. The fireplaces flanking the window seat were lit, isinglass screens before them.

A few human-sized furnishings stood nearby, as well as one Kyevegeny-size chair built from sturdy whale teeth. Koliadki perched on the finial of a three-tiered tray bearing pastries and finger sandwiches beside a silver samovar and an ivory basket stacked with golden pears.

I wondered where the servants had gone, particularly the musicians. I had not recognized the composition. I assumed one of the mirrors concealed a door leading to a servants' passageway.

Kyevegeny loped to the refreshments table. He had almost touched the topmost pear when an ivory walking stick tapped the inlaid ivory floor resoundingly.

He sheepishly took back his hand.

Byanka turned to me. "I find that dolls make the perfect children. Always quiet and mindful, never needing to be told twice what's expected."

I nodded then paused, seeing a movement, a reflection of a reflection.

A soldier learns to be watchful. I turned and locked eyes with a doll. Not a Jadwiga with lapis eyes and silver hair, nor an Ulfen child with blonde or ginger locks and eyes of turquoise or jade. This was a Galtan doll, her eyes hazel like my natural shade, her chestnut tresses loose in artless dishabille. Her face was one I had seen before, a mixture of the features of Arjan Devore—or myself—and the face of his wife.

“Anais...” I breathed softly, snapping my fingers both from recognition and force of habit. The duke’s formulary appeared in my hand, summoned forth from the enchantments worked into the glove.

I acted as if this action were unremarkable, for why shouldn’t Duke Devore consult his formulary?

I flipped through the relevant sections, rites for the alchemical wedding of Anais and Arjan, the white queen and the red king. A diagram of the Crapaudine, the toad’s diamond set on the back of Anais’s glove, and the Unicorn’s Carbuncle, the legendary gem on Arjan’s. Both donated a chip, the shards united via intarsia, the gemcutter’s art, forming a diamond-ruby doublet—the heart of their “magical child.” Beside the duke’s watercolor of the babe, I perceived the faintest silverpoint script, a note in the duchess’s hand. A name: “Emilie.”

“You recognize her,” Byanka said approvingly. “I was worried. Last you were here, your wits were fading. After you asked for our arts to bewitch your glove and carbuncle, they faded further.”

Bewitched? I had assumed wizardry or sorcery. Then I remembered Dr. Orontius’s words about how the witches of Irrisen could take a shard of soul and hide it in an exquisite jewel, as Baba Yaga had done with Kostchtchie.

Or Arjan Devore and the ruby in his glove.

I then realized than Arjan and Anais had both taken fragments of their jewels, chips of chips of souls, joining them to create a new jewel. A new soul.

“Papa?” said the doll. “At long last my papa has come for me?”

There was a gasping of breath, as if a hundred dolls had opened their mouths then stayed silent.

“Yes, Emilie,” Byanka answered. “Your papa has returned. And as it has been over fifty years, I will

overlook you speaking before outsiders. This once.” She glanced to the assembled dolls. “This man is an old client. He has paid to know our secret. This boy is a witch—likewise permitted. This girl?” Byanka paused, musing. “Well, she knows. We shall simply have to deal with this. Feel free to speak, children.”

“What a happy occasion!” Madenya exclaimed, still in Valya’s arms. “For Emilie, I mean,” she added quickly to me. “I’m so sorry you lost your wife.”

“As am I,” I said, unsure. “She was... a remarkable woman.”

“All women are,” proclaimed Madenya. “I raised Valya myself after the poor dear lost her mother. At least until we got Klaufi to help.” She turned to Kyevgeny. “Where is Klaufi? He should be here!”

“He’s in the theater working on a special project.”

“I know,” chirped Koliadki. “I sent Holgrim to fetch him!”

A half-eaten pear fell to the floor with a *splat*. “You did *what!*!” Kyevgeny boomed.

“He’s your valet!” the thrush chirped. “I showed him where you hid the key!”

“Did he wear the cloak and slippers?”

“What cloak and slippers?”

“No!” roared Kyevgeny, rushing up the stairs.

Everyone exchanged glances, apparently as confused as me.

Then Tinka screamed, pointing.

The situation became clearer and exponentially more horrifying as a hundred Tinka-sized blue-and-yellow spiders appeared in the mirrors. One descended by a silken thread down the stairwell.

Byanka pointed her ivory cane and hissed two words in a language I didn’t recognize. Neither sounded particularly vile, as curses go, but the spider immediately shivered and shrank, losing legs, becoming drabber and furrier until all that was left at the end of the thread was an extremely surprised chipmunk.

“Children,” Byanka ordered, “grab your knives and follow me.” The dolls did.

“Byanka may look young, but beneath the illusion lies the mind of a crone.”

