

ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY  
FACULTY OF ARTS, HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

*HOW TO COOK A DRAGON: A NOVEL*

&

“FOOD AND CHEER AND PROSE”:

THE GASTRONOMY OF FANTASTIC LITERATURE

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By Grabthar’s Hammer, the road goes ever on and on.

ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY  
ABSTRACT  
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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

*HOW TO COOK A DRAGON: A NOVEL*  
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This creative writing thesis comprises a novel and critical commentary. *How to Cook a Dragon* is a high fantasy novel with an urban fantasy subplot centered on an annual cooking competition known as the Banquest and unfortunately this year it is plagued by violence and tragedy. The journeys of Banquestors half-elf Adrini Frey and halfling Jacque Bloomer are intersected with that of draconi Inspector Kallista Okoias as she unfolds mysteries close to her heart and tied to her past. The accompanying critical commentary rests at a junction of food studies and creative writing that defines “the gastronomy of fantastic literature.” I first analyze how the terroir of fantastic food influences the “taste of place” in fictional words. This thesis also shows how food can be identified and qualified within the taxonomy of Objects of Alimentation. Additionally, there are infrastructures of subcreation—nature, culture, language, and mythology and philosophy—where writers use the food of the Primary World to allow for more realized Secondary Worlds in fantastic literature. Finally, there is the consideration of the context and creative practice of the novel is viewed through genre and characterization.

Key words: fantastic, gastronomy, subcreation, food studies, world-building, terroir, alimentation, objects, genre

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*HOW TO COOK A DRAGON: A NOVEL*

GINGER LEE THOMASON

## PART ONE: THREE ENVELOPES AND THREE RECIPES

“Meddle not in the matters of dragons, for one is crunchy when roasted and tasty with ketchup.”—Raymornian Playground Taunt

### **From The Broadsheets**

THE SIXTEEN CONTESTANTS FOR THE EIGHT HUNDRED AND ELEVENTH BANQUEST WILL BE ANNOUNCED AT DUSK. Have the envelopes already been dispersed? Tickets for the seated viewing area already sold out. Standing room only tickets are still available and going fast.

ANOTHER TRAGIC TENEMENT FIRE IN THE OUTER QUAY HAS CLAIMED TWO LIVES, THREE PERSONS UNACCOUNTED FOR. Chief Constable Butters of the Raymorne City-Watch denies speculation that the so-called Gold Prophet is responsible. Candlelight vigil to be held at the Panthemia House and at Uthyri priories around the city. People are calling on the mayor for justice and stricter safety regulations.

A FIRST-EDITION PRINT OF TARLEAH SPOONER’S *IN A HALFLING HOUR* WILL GO HOME TO THE HIGHEST BIDDER AT THERMES AUCTIONEERS LATER THIS MONTH. Will it beat the auction house’s record of the most expensive cookery book ever sold? Other vintage books on sale include *A History of Broma* and *the Five Great Races of the Continent* by Thallan and *Collected Ballads of Runnyra*, the only Venerated Artisan elf in history.

## A Recipe

### Bun-Tin Puddings (aka bloomer puddings)

from *Simple as the Smallfolk: Recipes for Everyday Cookery* by Tarleah Spooner

Take two handfuls the whitest flour you can obtain. Use one-third of a standard pint of warm milk (either goat or cow, preferably with the cream). Then take four duck eggs (or if you must, four chicken eggs) and separate then beat the whites until foamy.

Vigorously combine all ingredients with a new metal whisk you can purchase from the Spooner family's own Inner Keane Big and Little Utensils and Supplies.

Now, in your bun-tin, coat the six vessels with reserved duck, beef, or chicken drippings and cook in your coal oven with the flue completely open until the fat glistens and hops. Divide batter among the twelve or six vessels in your bun-tin and return to oven closing your flue half way. The puddings will bloom and when removed from oven will be ready for stews, gravies, and other braises or to go with your rest-day roast joints and potatoes.



## Chapter One: Jacques

The spoon was gone. By the Rivers and Barrow, damn his family and their pettiness.

It took a lot to anger the smallfolk, but they could wield self-righteous fury just as easily as any enterprising human, aloof elf, reticent draconi, or irascible dwarf—all the races that made up the city and added to its ever-complex melting pot of peoples. New industries like factories, paper and fabric mills, and steam-powered rails and ships were changing the world so fast, faster than anything seen in living memory. And in a city like Raymorne living memory was centuries in the counting and family quarrels could last just as long.

The sunny but brisk morning signaled that summer was ending and the best part of the year, the All-Hands Harvest Festival, would arrive in the blink of an eye. It was a time when all the occupants of the city loosened their belts and bodices in the wake of all the surplus of delicious food competitions and exhibitions.

Jacque had, like most mornings, gotten on one of the canal boats with his supplies so they both could be shipped down the waterway behind the Fork. It was more hygienic than having animal carts walking through the streets of this particular food-filled corner of Raymorne. The Fork was part of a commercial area north of the harbor that facilitated the trade of goods and foodstuffs from the lands all around the Caerulin Ocean. Soon the sailors and dockworkers and warehouse workers would break for their midday fare, many heading to the food stands of the Fork.

His own food stall was Spooner's Bloomer Puddings. When he had decided to open up his own business, Jacques knew he would serve the family specialty. The bowl-shaped fluffy-yet-crispy puddings filled with all sorts of changing combinations—like parsnip, chestnuts, and bacon, to mushroom, asparagus, and goat

cheese for vegetarians, elves, and other non-meat-eating peoples. There were plenty of those even among his human customers.

He used the same recipe perfected by his great-great grandmother, Tarleah Spooner. She was purportedly the first to put pen to paper and lay out the ingredients and process in publication. Bloomers were part of the mythos of the family brand.

Every six days out of seven, he passed by his neighbors—colleagues really—walking alongside those who also used the canals for transport. Even though they operated separate businesses in the other food stalls around him, nearly everyone treated each other as though this part of the city was one giant family kitchen.

And then he would open his space from the front before unloading the supplies in the back. He would look up at his sign and know that this space was his own.

This was how he had discovered that the artisanal “Spooner” spoon had been pried away from his sign at some point in the night and angry scratches gored through his family name. His cousin Ansel had etched into the spoon’s copper head the Rivers and Barrow of the halfling ancestral seat. The spoon had been a gift from his family, congratulations on his hard work continuing the family traditions of good food and prosperous commerce.

For the first time in recent memory, he had zero desire to cook. The day had started out so wonderful when he and Astrid had spent the growing dawn in bed with both of their bodies curled around her belly feeling their child to come kicking as though they were ready to dance into the world two months early. Now all he wanted to do was go back to bed, pull the covers over his face, and wallow in shame. Which was probably what the family hoped he would do instead of flaunting his marriage and announcing to the world that a halfling, a true descendant of the ancient river-

kin, Jacque Spooner of the Inner Keane had married a human woman and that he was *breeding* with her.

It was so hard to choose love. Though he never doubted how much his heart loved every bit of Astrid's five foot-and eight inches and the soul that filled it, the weaker parts of Jacque yearned for just a bit of relief. He had learned all too well over the last few months that so few were willing to choose love over so-called family traditions. Ursula Raymorne had once said, "*Blood may be thicker than water, but milk is the stuff of plenty.*" Although he wondered if blood, water, and milk were all just spoils of conflict, with those on the bottom left wanting for a spoonful.

He snorted at the thought, knowing he looked like an idiot just staring up at his damaged sign. In fact, he was sure that he could go the rest of his life without seeing another spoon again. There was an idea: he could fashion a new utensil and take up that name for himself.

The food stall had never really felt like work and it had even led to him meeting Astrid. To this day, he still didn't know what had prompted him to be so bold, but he had, and it had changed his life. Barely two years ago, he had spotted her perusing the other food stalls of the Fork when she had stopped at the neighboring pasty stand.

"I didn't think swanmaids liked sausage pasties," Jacque called to her.

She looked over at him, her eyes almost carrying a star-like glint, but that was just their radiant cobalt color. She was all-human, he could tell. He'd developed a nose for guessing races, even those with only a bit of elf or even draconi from generations ago. He had to guess in order to offer them the cuisine their blood

preferred. It was most unwise, for his business and his hide, to offer someone something against the nature of their stomach.

“Swanmaid?” Her voice smooth and melodic with ice from the Karisic lands to the north.

“I only assumed,” Jacque said, putting on his most pronounced airs and most mischievous grin. “The long neck and feathery hair.”

In the heat of the summer and the humidity from the sea, a wispy halo of hair, like errant tendrils of down, had escaped the careful plaits securing her locks. She smiled and turned away from the pasties, looking over his offerings and at the brand new sign above his stand.

“That’s lovely,” she said, pointing at the etching in the spoon.

“My cousin Ansel’s work. He went against the family traditions to become an artist.”

“And the family tradition is what exactly?”

Jacque gestured up and down his four and a half foot frame with his big hands, down to his big feet.

“Aprons?” she asked, and then she giggled at her own joke.

Not missing a beat of their back and forth banter, he replied, “No, miss, just the most delicious offerings in this city.”

He then waved his hand at the chalkboard declaring what the day’s specials were. There was also another permanent sign advertising his most popular dish—squeaky, fresh cheese curds and crispy roasted potatoes piled into a pudding and slathered with a thyme, bacon, and beef dripping gravy. The meatless roasted onion and herb gravy over the cheese and potatoes was just as popular.

“I’ve heard of these,” she said, pointing a finger at some of the pre-made bun-tins. “What’s the best flavor?”

“For you, swanmaiden, I’d make a crayfish, smoked salmon, and potato stew with dill and topped with pickled vegetables.”

Her eyes widened. “That sounds delicious, but you don’t have that ready, do you?”

“Alas, no,” Jacque said, shaking his head. “But if you come back tomorrow I will. Tell me your name and I’ll have one ready just for you.”

She gave him her name, Astrid Espernøre. She had just arrived in the city with her mother, a former resident. And then she returned to the Fork and Jacque’s food stall the next day. Then she came back the day after that and many times more. Only months later, during that year’s harvest festival and in the tradition of his people, he gave her a wreath of autumnal foliage and blossoms. They were married before the bluebells and wild strawberries appeared in the spring.

All to his family’s horror.

Not that human-smallfolk relationships were all *that* uncommon in a city the size of Raymorne ... just not in the Spooner family. Never in the Spooner family. In fact, according to cousin Jamey, he was the first to marry someone outside of his species in at least half a dozen generations.

“You can bed a human, *couz*,” Jamey had said during Jacque’s stag night (the only one of his family to come). “But you don’t marry them.”

The only two halflings he had wanted the approval of were his parents, but they had been on another continent for the first year of his marriage. George and Claudette returned to the city for a brief respite in the spring. They said they disapproved but “still loved their son,” before getting back on a boat to sell more

Spooner books and merchandise across the seas. Otherwise, most of the clan had ignored him since the beginning of the courtship, which had suited Jacque, Astrid, and her mother, Marion Goosling, just fine. The food stall brought in enough money to keep the three of them happy and prepare for a new addition to his new family, but apparently Astrid's pregnancy was the final straw for the clan.

Now, the family had publicly and officially disowned him. He would have to fashion a new name for himself, literally. He would need to re-register with the Alimental Authority, the regulatory body of food related commerce and the organizers of the seasonal festivals, and have a new sign fashioned. Both would cost considerable money outside of their careful budget.

Was he too old to be adopted into some wayward clan of fellow disappointments? It was hard to talk to Jamey about all this and most of his other lifelong friends were busy with their own families or they still lived in the Keane. Some even lived in the Carinet, visiting the city maybe once a year anymore, like his parents.

Just before Jacque decided to shake the shame away and start the day—he had a baby on the way after all—he heard the sound of gravel scraping under the din of the Fork crowds. Emerging from the back, he saw everyone else around him was well underway and all set up for the day.

Next-door was a human woman, Kalilah, leaning over her counter and handing over a cone of iced cream to a short customer. She had a newfangled device that could churn out a gallon of all kinds of frozen fancies in minutes. She was very popular with fire draconi and the dockworkers. Across the street was a dwarf family who experimented with small-batch craft ales and beers. They were one of the few in this area of the city as their race tended to stay up in the Horn and the cliffs that over

looked the bay and curved to face the city. Sanara, the matriarch of the small brewer clan, caught his eye and gestured towards the front of his stall. When Jacque turned to face the sign again, he saw Astrid standing on a stepladder trying to pry the damaged piece of wood away from his stall.

Jacque could now hear her muttering of Karisic vulgarities that caused passersby to either stop and stare or drag their giggling children away from the towering menace of pregnant anger. As she tugged at the damaged sign the ladder's feet wobbled and his heart lurched.

"Astrid..." Jacque began, but when she turned her angry blue-gray eyes on him, he took a step back.

"Don you 'Astrid' me!"

More of Jamey's utterly wisest of words came to his mind. *"It's probably a good thing she's so tall. It'll make you feel like more of a man if she rages at you. Great-Aunt Teenie was barely three feet tall, and she could make you cower in fear as though she were a dragon."*

"Please come down," Jacque said to Astrid.

"Why don't you just cover it up for now?" Kalilah called.

"It's vandalism!" Astrid shouted back. Although she kept to the tongue of Raymorne, Karisic pronunciations often slipped through. Especially when she was mad. His favorite was when her "v" sounds started to turn into "wh" ones.

The whole spectacle was enough to turn his melancholy into manic laughter. Astrid on the step-ladder, Kalilah leaning over her counter with her curves as much on display as her frosty offerings, the passive-aggressive message from his family in the form of his ruined sign. At least life was not without humor.

"Please," he choked out between laughs. "Please come down."

Astrid sighed and stepped down. Though she was fiercely passionate herself, she could exude calm and bring about serenity with barely a word. It was just her actual presence and touch that could stop the world and any ugly thoughts. He absolutely loved that she towered over him because his mouth was on equal height with her navel, and their baby slowly growing behind it.

“Yous a’right?” asked Rinette, one of the young dwarf twins. Although they were only about thirty years old, still quite young for dwarves, they were already eye-to-eye with him. Minette handed him a cup of their mother’s brew.

He saluted their mother, Sanara, before taking a sip and she nodded back at him. It was a rich porter, full of caramelized sugar flavors with a hint of hazelnuts and orange, and it washed out the last bit of his sorrow. It was that good of a brew. They always were.

Jacque handed the cup back to Rinette and said in the dwarven tongue, “Many thanks, and what a great brew!” to Sanara. The twins giggled and walked back across the street. Astrid giggled too.

“What did I say?” Jacque asked, sure he’d had the cadence and guttural stops right.

“You’ll get angry if I say,” Astrid said.

“Tell me.”

The dwarf language of the Strugyrst was not a favored second language choice for Keane halfling children in primary school. He had learned the words of his people, the shared words of the coastal cities of the Caerulin, and a bit of the elven tongue. But Astrid had grown up in a Karisic city with a considerable dwarf population and had spent years speaking it as a second language.



After a few minutes of silence as they finished putting the fillings in their clay pots over fluted burners, she sighed and said, “Well, you’re never gonna learn if I don’ tell. You said, ‘full gratitude, this drink is on your tongue.’”

“I did not.” Jacque made for their cart and ruffled through a small pile of papers and books, pulling out the slim pamphlet on common dwarven phrases and looking at the translations. “I’m going to kill Jamey if this is some kind of joke,” he muttered to himself. But it was more than likely he had mixed up a conjugation, or two.

At least there had been no other dwarves about to hear him bastardize their language. May the Rivers and Barrow save him if he were to accidentally shame dwarven food or ale through his awkward translations.

Of course, the smallfolk loved food as well. Although each of the Raymornian races were protective of their food, the shared love of cuisine had helped to unite all the different peoples as the city swelled over the centuries. All tongues wanted to be satisfied with delicious bites full of flavor.

Remembering that fact, Jacque put off the sign and his family troubles and immersed himself in his work. There was a lot to make up for in the lost time, and he was so busy he hardly noticed the commotion in the front of the stand. He moved about in his small kitchen readying the pots of different mixtures. Today was all about the spicy stew of mixed peppers, sweet orange yams, chicken, and paprika sausage. The vegetarian option was a fragrant pot filled with cauliflower, chickpeas, and the new fruits of the west—tomatoes and potatoes— and spices like cumin, coriander seed, and fennel seed. All wrought by his hands. Pride to lift the spirits.

Except before Astrid could begin the work of spooning batter into the pudding tins, Philippa Spooner Goldenmead walked right into his space without any preamble.

“Cousin Phila...” Jacque began.

“Get out of here!” Astrid said pointing her finger at the intruder.

Although Astrid towered over Philippa, Jacque’s oldest cousin merely looked up and raised a russet eyebrow, keeping her cool composure.

“Good morrow to you, Miss Espernøre.”

“Don you...” Astrid began, but she saw the pleading expression on her husband’s face. She muttered an insult in Karisic and turned her back on the pair.

Jacque did not apologize on his wife’s behalf. He folded his arms and looked at his cousin. Half the family had dark red locks and the other had hair the color of toffee. Jacque possessed the latter and Philippa the former.

From her pocket she pulled out an envelope with a broken seal. Jacque recognized it. In previous years, the very same parcel had been passed around by its recipients in his family with pride and joy at gatherings.

“Coming to gloat?” he asked.

“Now really,” she said. She put her hands on her hips, the red glop of wax flapping and distracting his gaze. Then she handed it out to him. “It’s for you. It came with mine.”

The world both spun on the spot and came to a complete standstill. His arms automatically reached for the envelope while at the same time taking forever-long pauses to move and take it from her. “Truly?”

“Yes,” Philippa said. “You know you cannot—”

He interrupted her, snapping, "I know," at the same time his hands finally moved fast enough to snatch the glory before she could take it away.

He looked down at the creamy parchment paper and the seal of the Raymorne Alimental Authority. He had applied on the Viceroy's Birthday just after the vernal equinox. Some unknown member of the Authority had vetted him in the following months. He had been accepted. He had been chosen. He was going to compete in the Banquest this year.

Philippa turned to leave then stopped. "I tried to tell them you would just hand Ansel's spoon over, but Aunt Clementine thought you needed the lesson."

*Of course, it was Aunt Teenie,* Jacque thought to himself. Or maybe that was Philippa's excuse.

"You mean the embarrassment," he muttered.

She shrugged and then looked at Astrid pretending not to care about the conversation even though her long back and neck were stiff.

"Measure for measure," Philippa said, but then whispered, "good luck, Jacquey."

Jacque snorted and then pointed to the gap in the canvas from where she had entered without asking for permission. She took the hint and left his stall.

There were times when Astrid could not control her vivacity, but this was not one of those times. She remained quiet, giving Jacque time to process. As he looked at the envelope, the noise of the Fork dropped to a muddy din. Had there ever been two of their family chosen for the Banquest? He could not remember and he could name all the winners for almost a hundred years back.

Every year of the Banquest there were twenty-four contestants, out of a city of half a million citizens. His name would go down in historical registries, or well

whatever his name was now if he was no longer a Spooner. It was something he would have to decide.

Astrid's soft long-fingered hand slipped into his hair. He reached up and took it in his own. Though her limbs and torso were much longer than his, their hands were the same size.

"Oh, my love." She sat down on the stepping stool next to him.

"I know," he whispered and they shared a kiss that lasted until the smell of burning pudding batter filled their nostrils.

By chance, a passing draconi smelled the burnt puddings barely a minute later and offered to buy them all. Jacques asked if he wanted anything to go with it. The customer raised his head and sniffed the air again. Although most draconi looked quite human, this one was of some old blooded family. His nose was flatter and the nostrils were rather reptilian. His golden eyes also had vertical slits for pupils. "Pepper stew?" he asked.

"That's what the sign says," Jacques said. He tried to keep his voice neutral as to avoid offending a potential customer.

The draconi put more money down on the wooden counter. "Extra black talon peppers, please."

Jacques actually had three of the ridiculously spicy peppers on hand for customers like this. The vegetables looked like slivers from the claws of the fossilized dragon skeleton that hung in the House, the largest temple in the city. Jacques had heard of draconi eating black talons, ghoulish peppers, and demon chilies for sport; those of the hottest capsicum that grew just outside the tree line of far-flung jungles where they said giant spiders, flying feather serpents, bloated shriekers, and lizard-folk still roamed under impenetrable shadowy canopies.

“That’ll be a whole extra emmer,” Jacque said. The peppers were cheaper than they used to be thanks to new trade lines, but he didn’t feel right over charging the customer.

The draconi man handed over a few crinkled emmer bills and told Jacque to keep the surplus kernel coins.

“Many thanks, and good luck at the Banquest,” he said taking the bundle of bun-tins wrapped in broadsheet paper.

Unnerved, Jacque shuddered, and then saw that the envelope with the rules and regulations and details was still out in the open. Before he could put it away, Marion shuffled into the stall with Simo, her white and gray miniature husky with ice blue eyes, trailing behind her sniffing all over for fallen bits of food. She wore her pendant of pearls set into the handles of a ship’s wheel and a dress patterned with springtime flowers and carried basket of specialty shortbread biscuits with her.

She kissed the top of Jacque’s head as she passed and set her goods down. Astrid lowered her face so that her mother could kiss her cheek.

“How are we then today?”

Her accent was more Raymornian than of the arctic Karis. She had been born and raised in the city before marrying Captain Arik Espernøre, a deep-sea fisherman. She was credited with introducing southern specialties to the Karisic, and, with regular free trade and a growing publishing industry, she was able to make a living writing cookery pamphlets and baking Raymornian specialties for sailors. That was until publishers stopped paying her because they said she wasn’t due royalties in subsequent editions. After Arik’s death, she had wanted to return to her home city and Astrid came with her.

Marion tasted the two fillings of the day and declared them, “Sheer perfection.”

“Did you see the sign?” Astrid asked her mother.

“The waffle boys told me,” she said and from her bag pulled out a length of fabric. Jacque recognized it as coming from one of her dresses.

“Mother,” Jacque said, “you shouldn’t have.”

“It’s nothing, it’s an old one.”

But they did mean something. Marion had told her daughter that when living in her husband’s freezing homeland , what she missed most aside from Raymorian food were flowers. To compensate, Arik always returned from his voyages on the sea with bolts of vibrant patterned fabric. Astrid’s wedding gown had been made from the last bit of a silken weave of poppies and cornflowers.

From across the street, Syd and Landan from the waffle stand offered to help wrap the blooming fabric around his sign. Once again, he was grateful that there were so many people so unlike his real family here in the Fork.

## A Recipe

### Byrda Lagoon Black Turtle Beans and Rice

4 great handfuls of dried black turtle beans

12 cupful's water

2 sprigs oregano

2 bay leaves

Several generous pinches of salt

2 chopped onions

2 chopped long neck peppers

1 dried honey hutch pepper, but remove seeds for those unaccustomed to the Hacarrean heat

Generous pinch of cumin seeds, warmed in a dry copper pan and crushed with mortar and pestle

Two splashes of vinegar

The zest of a whole orange, or a spoonful of marmalade if you must

The juice of one lime

Cook beans until tender then add all other ingredients and serve with golden coconut rice and all-spiced chicken, pork, turkey, squab, or fowl.

## Chapter Two: Adrini

Sometimes it felt as though the barely controlled chaos of the kitchens at the High Larder on the Horn and their flaming stoves, searing ovens, and the endless clatter of sharp knives against chopping blocks was the only thing holding Adrini Frey together. The unpretentious bistro sought to reinvent the traditional food and drink of the city's varying cultures with the best ingredients that ships, fields, and greenhouses could supplement. In the heat of a kitchen moment, the thoughts in her head quieted. She didn't have to think about the doom and gloom of the broadsheets claiming the Gold Prophet was responsible for disappearances or tenement fires or that the new factories were actually going to harm the economy rather than help it.

Prep time was also soothing as Adrini turned onions into rings or tiny diced shards depending on the dish. Merritt Templeton said that all the cooks should share in the preparatory steps to ensure that all the ingredients were ready for the dinner shift and the various components of the menu that each station was responsible for. The last few months Adrini had been on the soups, stews, and gravy section and everyone else in the kitchen had come to *know* that her palate was exceptional.

"Does this need more cinnamon?" the pastry chef would ask holding a spoon with a spot of custard to her lips as she pounded away in the mortar with her pestle to make an herb paste used by the starter station on their scallops.

"Adrini, how much saffron? Really? That much? All right girl." And then later in the shift that same fellow cook would thank her and she'd leave the High Larder with her head held a bit more aloft.

When she had first approached Merritt having no experience on the line, after much needling and support from her housemate, the head cook had acquiesced



and said that she could stáge for up to a fortnight and if it didn't work out, she'd be out at the first mistake.

Except he hadn't thrown her out at the first mistake. Adrini knew she had made many, but somehow Merritt never saw them that way.

*"Too much salt? Add more vinegar."*

*"Yes, chef,"* Adrini would respond.

*"The spicy kisses of the peppers are the reward of this dish. You've got Hacarrean blood, right? Trust your tongue."*

*"Yes, chef,"* Adrini would respond again.

*"You have to burn the bottom of a fish and sausage stew, that's the secret flavor."*

*"Yes, chef, I do know that much,"* she would say, actually feeling the confidence inside her growing.

Merritt didn't tolerate any arsenard machismo or racial division that still lingered in many a kitchen. It was about the food. His domain was for bringing wonder into being over hot stations fueled by wood and charcoal magic. Filled with busy cooks in their black, blue, and green shirts, their knives chopping, pans sautéing, pots stewing, joints roasting, all in some kind of symphonious crazy and calm synchronicity.

Outside of the kitchen when the paralysis came out of nowhere, turning her thoughts to food assuaged the whirling thoughts. She would imagine going to the market stalls in the Fork and at the Spire that sold Hacarrean staple foods like plantains, bright purple tubers and orange sweet potatoes, fragrant spices, bottled pepper sauces, and maybe there would still be fat ears of sweetcorn. She would mentally fry up smashed disks of plantains and slurp on a creamy corn soup with

thick chunks of ham hock and cheese. It was enough to get her from the world around her back into the next shift at the kitchen.

Four years on now and she was the senior cook on the line, but today, for the second time that season, she had turned down a promotion to demi-chef.

“Why?” Merritt had asked when she pushed the blue fabric back into his hands.

“I can’t,” she’d said and returned to her prep work.

*Can’t. Can’t. Can’t.*

*Can’t. Can’t.*

*Can’t.*

“I hate it when you use the ‘c’ word.” Teague said. He’d snuck up behind her and sniffed over her shoulder at the venison stew. It would be served with blue cheese and hazelnut savory scones with a chiffonade of wild greens on top dressed in a tarragon vinaigrette.

“I hate it when you get into my head,” Adrini said. She elbowed him in his soft belly and he oofed as he got out of her way.

They laughed and fought like blood-siblings, which was a bit sad considering she had three older brothers, but they were not close. Xandre, Lewyn, and Emeric eschewed the city and its culture, whereas Adrini needed the bustle of Raymorne. It was the same reason she’d left Byrda from across the ocean behind. Especially when it came to their diet. They ate only raw fruits, vegetables, and nuts, and the elven bread, also called *keeta*, which was really just dense discs of sprouted grains mushed together. They also kept to the ancient tradition of not eating the wind, or *naivs*, the elven practice of abstaining from the consumption of birds, wheat, and the fruit at the tops of the trees meant for spirits ascending to the beyond.

Her brothers didn't understand how she could eat meat, cheese, or even noodles. How could she work in a kitchen filled with the "ghastliest" aromas? Because they were a balm for her uneasy, discordant, and whirling—all too human—mind. And her mother...well, Saverina was her own kind of eccentric, but was more or less oblivious to the food-focused culture of Raymorne since she preferred the calm of the Carinet.

Teague looked her up and down only now noticing that her shirt was the same sage green it had been yesterday, instead of the cornflower blue the demi-chefs wore.

"You turned it down again then?"

"It's not my time. I'm not ready. I need to learn more." She mumbled incoherently the same string of half-hearted phrases she'd given to her mentor hours before.

"That's not the Adrini Frey I know talking. Is it some fetch with her features again?" Teague leaned in and poked at her brown, barely pointed ears covered by the headband that kept her coiled black hair out of her face. She smacked his hand away.

She kind of hated her name. It sounded as though she were fabric coming apart at the seams, or the unfinished "afraid." Which of course, she was. She was afraid of being alone with her thoughts. Of not being able to be so focused on controlling herself, let alone overseeing other people.

"Stop," she said. "Who else would I be?"

"Exactly. You're Adrini Frey, master chef and roommate with a distinctive palate."

Adrini tried to give Teague her best and deadliest stare but he didn't budge.

“Speaking of which I need thy palate to inspect my new concoction,” he said and grabbed her apron. He flicked it. “Giddy-up.”

At least he made her laugh. She put the lid back on the pot and wiped her hands on her apron, wrenching the fabric from his hands.

The Asher Brew Works behind the High Larder was a sight to behold. Gigantic, gleaming copper vats held the ales, beers, pilsners, and specialty liqueurs used in the main kitchens of the restaurant and throughout the city. Adrini knew that two of the vats held cordials that draconi people used as medicines to control their fire or ice glands sold by an elusive figure even more mysterious than the famous Doctor Linnrom. Teague had been working in the brewery’s distribution for over five years now and had only just this year started making his own concoctions under the master brewer’s tutelage.

Vincinna Joast was the only woman master-brewer in the city. She had to be part dwarf some several generations back. She had a heavy jawline, wide body, and thick muscular legs, and was only about five feet tall, which wasn’t much of a difference for Adrini since she was barely an inch taller. But everyone in the room respected her and her commanding presence, something Adrini wished she possessed herself.

Though the brewery mostly concentrated on several varieties of beer—from rich and malty stouts to golden and tart lagers—they also dabbled in fruitier alcoholic beverages.

Vincinna knocked on a pot-bellied monster of a vat and listened for the echoes it made.

“Two more days!” she called and several of the men took note, even if it wasn’t the batch they were supposed to be working on.

“What’s in there?” Adrini asked.

“Cinnamon pear cider with just a hint of pumpkin squash.” That perked up Adrini’s ears. She loved the big orange vegetables and their creamy flesh and in perry, it was bound to be a lovely combination.

Teague had already vanished, but reappeared just as soon as Adrini noticed he was missing with a small glass of the palest green liquid.

“This looks new,” she said.

He nodded like a giddy child on his birthday. She smelled the contents. A strange combination of melon and two other flavors tickled her nose alongside the pungent alcohol. She took a sip, loved the way it danced on her tongue with the ripe, sweet green melon and crisp apple with the barest hint of thyme. It was like a breath of summer and a whisper of autumn together in one gulp.

She drained the glass and demanded, “More.” Smiling for the first time all day.

Teague was on his way to becoming a master. Then her joy faded when she realized that he was not letting himself get in the way of success. Teague wanted to be like Vincinna one day, master-brewer in his own right, while Adrini was so unsure of her future. Her brothers said one thing, Teague and Merritt another.

More of the spirits helped to lift her own for sure, and after three more small glasses hers were quite weightless. Then she noticed Vincinna looking peculiar.

“What?” Adrini asked.

“Nothing,” she said and then she went back to commanding the men, sans Teague.

Adrini eyed her friend with suspicion.

“Don’t give me that stink eye,” he said.

“Am not,” she said and then she hiccupped.

“Half-elves are such lightweights,” he said. “Come on, you’re going to tell me how you’re going to put that liquor into a winning dessert.”

Adrini stopped in her tracks, the effects of the alcohol still blocking the misery she had been experiencing earlier.

“Is that going to be your submission? For the harvest festival?” she asked.

Teague smiled a grin that could get almost any man or woman he wanted running to his bed. And it often worked.

“Why, Mistress Frey,” he said, “I believe I have just returned from delivering the required allotment to the Alimental Authority.”

Adrini put her arms around Teague and hugged him tight.

“You’ll win for sure I just know it,” she said.

“I know you will as well,” he replied.

That made her stop in her tracks between the restaurant and the brewery.

“Me? What am I going to win?”

“The Banquest.”

She burped and giggled. “Why would I win the Banquest? I didn’t even enter. How could I compete?”

The three statements were out before she saw the change in his smile. This time instead of a grin of pride, it was a shade of that mischievousness that often resulted in stray undergarments being left behind in their shared tenement.

“Teague, what did you do?” she asked.

Merritt’s uneven gait supplemented with the thud of a cane came up from behind her. “He didn’t do it alone.”

In her boss’s free hand was an envelope with a red seal.

Adrini realized what it was even though she had never seen one up close, and then she vomited on Teague's boots.

A few minutes later she sat in Merritt's office. Teague using the head cook's washbasin to clean her mess off of his shoes.

"I honestly expected you to try and hit me," he said. "Not ruin my shoes."

She muttered something in elven just to irritate her flatmate.

Teague turned to Merritt. "Did she say what I think she said?"

"Something to do with dragon shit and an elf's backside. Well, I don't say such words myself--my mother raised a good boy."

"You still said 'shit,'" Teague said.

Merritt shrugged. "She was a washer woman who could out curse a five-hundred-year-old dwarf and this one draconi medicine woman who was our neighbor that only ever spoke salty phrases. But still."

Brandishing the envelope, Adrini said louder than she probably meant to, "Can we get back to this?"

Her boss wasted no time attempting to honey his position on the matter. "If you don't take this opportunity to compete in the Banquest, I'll have to reconsider your place here at the High Larder. It changed my life for the better, and I know it will for you too."

The world spun. She would have sat down if she weren't already slouched in a chair.

"Merritt, please," Adrini whispered. Then she looked at Teague. "Why would you do this to me?"

Teague went down on his knees and put his hands on top of hers and the envelope. “Because all your life you’ve been telling yourself that you’re not good enough.” He pointed at the red seal, still holding the contents within secret.

The seal was stamped with the emblem of the Alimental Authority: a dragon cradling Ursula Raymorne’s cauldron. The Banquest was the biggest and most prestigious cooking competition in the city. The crowning event of the All-Hands Harvest Festival. She was afraid to open the envelope, but there was the tiniest spark inside her, ready to ignite promised fuel of the Banquest. How would her life change if she followed the directions within? To walk down the same path as Merritt and so many others and prove what? That she *could*. That life was more than about keeping her head down and toeing some line other half-elves like Xandre, Lewyn, and Emeric drew down.

“But you don’t need us to tell you you’re any good, either,” Merritt said. He stretched out his left foot, the one with the four-inch platform nailed to the bottom of his shoe, and then he laid his cane over his lap. The head of the cane was decorated with an enameled green and gold apple. “I could tell you no one can cook up a cider basted hog shoulder like you or make that pumpkin and chestnut soup like you can.”

Teague put a hand on his belly. “That cheese and apple tart with custard sauce.” His eyes rolled back in vicarious pleasure.

“But, you’re the only one who can muster the strength to show her quality,” Merritt continued. “That’s nothing that no one can teach you. Unlike little...” he attempted to say the elven vulgarity that had something to do with dragon shit and someone’s backside, but he garbled it so completely that she had to laugh.

Food, alcohol, and laughter were the best cures for the ills of her head.

Adrini sighed. “What dish did the adjudicator try?”



Working under Merritt and at one of the best restaurants in the city meant that the topic of the Banquest came up every late summer. Merritt had been a fourth place finalist when he was only twenty and in the last four years two of their kitchen staff had been chosen as a contestant.

Members of the Authority would disguise themselves and sample the potential contenders' food over the summer. At some point someone had sat at one of the High Larder's tables, was told that Adrini Frey had made this bowl of aromatic curry, a traditional Raymornian joint roast, or possibly her turmeric, cumin, and coriander seasoned fish and chips, and decided she was worthy of the mantle of Banquest competitor.

Something of worth.

Being worthy of more than just the racing and numb thoughts and general ennui that took up so much of her energy when she wasn't cooking.

"Donno," Merritt said and then held up his hands. "By the gods I swear. They have their own ways of discerning who cooks what. One of the many reasons the Banquest also includes artisanal and local foods. They just know what goes into a dish and how it's cooked and why it's the best."

"Ah, magic." Teague sighed. "The tool of so many, yet so indefinable to us human masses."

"Oh, there's plenty of human wielders of magic," Merritt said. "You're just feeding your own biases like the draconi insurgents." He shook his head, avoiding further discussion of unpleasant politics in a conversation so personal, and then looked back at Adrini.

"So's, that a 'yea' then?"

Adrini met his gaze and nodded.

“I’ll be sure not to fuck it up,” she said with a sly wink.

And there was a glimmer of hope amongst the seething snakes in her belly. Not any kind of assumption that she could possibly win, but one that could mean another shackle cracked. That she could rise above her inner anxieties and smother them with food. To cook a damn good dish or two and maybe, just maybe, hold her head a little higher in the tomorrows to come.

## **A Recipe**

### A Cooling Tonic for Fire Glands

Quantities must be adjusted to suit individual and size of fire glands, but the basic concoction is as follows.

Note: tonic may also be used for heartburn and nausea in humans, dwarves, elves, and halflings or added to willow bark tea to combat fever.

Apple

Mint

Cucumber

Celery stalks

Red horn root (ginger root is best if for human consumption)

Birch sap (honey may is best if for human consumption)

Muddle ingredients together in a mortar and pestle and cover with water. Bring to a boil; strain liquid from solids, and return to heat. Reduce to a thin syrup. Bottle and take a swallow every four to six hours or when your feel glands excited.

### **Chapter Three: Okoias**

In an unexpectedly vacant but restless house in the upper-middle-sort Acacia neighborhood, Inspector Kallista Okoias crouched in the corner looking at the two bodies of the previous tenants. The rest of the Raymorne City-Watch High Crimes Investigative Team had departed except for Okoias's partner, Inspector Crenn, son of Hrogon of the Azure Karst. He had the foresight to send a runner for a coffee refill, knowing she was not going to be moving any time soon.

Not that there were any particular afterthoughts to be gained. It appeared to be a typical robbery gone wrong. The couple's nicer belongings were either gone or callously left behind in the mad dash to flee from the mayhem that left a woman with a nasty head wound and her husband with a stab to the chest that had cut right into the aorta, almost severing it. Inspector Mimosa Rosewater had called up her River Guides, an old halfling piece of folk magic, to determine who had been attacked first. It was likely Natala Jonas, the thirty-nine-year-old human wife, had encountered the thief or thieves first. She had been shoved before she could scream and hit her head on the mantle. Thinking she was just unconscious the perpetrator or perpetrators tried to get away with what they already had grabbed when the husband, Allyn—a human man of fifty—followed his wife inside likely less than a minute later. This time a knife had come out.

But Okoias saw something on the countertop in the kitchen area: a bottle of amber fluid that she recognized as one of Doctor Linnrom's tonics. In her own drop leg bag, Okoias had a flask with the greenish cooling version because she was a fire draconi—the amber liquid meant one of the couple or the suspects was an ice

draconi. Doctor Linnrom preferred not to sell to humans as he felt there were other apothecaries that suited their needs.

“A kernel for your thoughts?” Crenn said. He didn’t have to crouch. They were of a height when she sat in this position, her bottom on her ankles, carefully balanced. He stroked his faded copper beard, fiddling with one of the blue-green family beads braided into the hair, while ruminating over the scene himself.

Okoias didn’t want to say anything yet, but soon the morgue would arrive and collect the bodies. She looked at the furniture in the room. At the relatively new stove tucked into the old fireplace, with its adjustable flue, directing the smoke through a chimney and out the top. There was a pot of stew that would never be eaten going cold since the collar had been turned to temper the flames when the first city-watchers arrived on site. Her propensity to avoid food waste at all costs due to her upbringing made her want to take the pot with her. But protocol said it would also have to be checked for contaminants, as though the couple had died more mysteriously.

The Raymorne City-Watch was at once one of the most advanced city police forces in the world with the most studious approaches to forensics and criminal justice and also an archaic body of internal anarchy. In the decades since Okoias had joined, she had seen its transformations, but memories were long and deep in Raymorne. The Half-blood Riots of twenty years ago meant many of the half-elves, part-dwarves and part-halflings and draconi who had protested alongside immigrant and diasporic humans and rare others were still relatively young, barely into mid-adulthood.

Members of the watch were also sometimes called “grays” by the populace because of their uniforms—slate padded jacket with an enchanted weave that could

stop many different blades, charcoal knee length boots with steel toes, and smoke colored trousers padded at the knees and slightly in the bottom for riding and protection. The gray theme was augmented with a blue shirt under the jacket and dark blue wide leather belt that held their regulation Wasps, a crossbow with a powerful bolt that required only one hand to use, their other side arm which in Crenn's case was a sleek axe and for Okoias a sword with a blade only as long as her forearm. From the belt and strapped to their thigh was a bag that among other things held a regulation poison and venom neutralizer. The antidote was somewhat of an antiquated necessity, but a useful one in case they encountered a victim of poisoning, which was not all that unusual.

“Do we have any idea of what was taken?” Okoias asked Crenn.

“Neighbors said they weren't a flashy couple even though he worked for Busbecq Jewelers and she had been an in-store model. But their alter is all smashed up. Not sure if it was an accident or part of the struggle.”

That piqued her interest.

Then she decided that she didn't want to wait for the autopsy. She walked over to the bodies to look at Natala Jonas again. It was hard to discern, but beneath the blood and half-formed bruises on the side of her face there were sharp cheekbones and full lips caught forever in a sad expression until her body was tended to under the funerary manner of her family or her husband's family.

“No children?” Okoias asked.

“No, they'd only been married for a few years.”

The runner had arrived with the coffee, a trainee who still blanched at the sight of the dead. A perverse part of Okoias wanted to do the blood taste test in front

of him, but she wasn't cruel. After handing over two covered mugs to Crenn, the runner left for his next assignment.

Declining the coffee for the moment, Okoias pulled off her uniform glove and dipped her forefinger ever so gently into the cold blackening pool next to Natala's body. She put the finger in her mouth and immediately recognized the taste of the flesh of her own people underneath the dull metallic flavor. Natala was draconi, and the bottle of Doctor Linnrom's tonic was indeed hers.

Another one. Another name to add to the weighty list in her pocket: a list of suspicions she hadn't even confided in Crenn.

A second taste test told her that Allyn was not of dragon blood himself.

Crenn hated when she did this and it wasn't an approved technique. Okoias couldn't exactly go to Captain Fisher and tell them this. Even Inspector Rosewater's River Guides were only meant to support what could be discerned through evidence, logic, and science.

After standing up and putting her glove back on, Okoias took the coffee and went outside. She wished it had cinnamon and cream in it, but the black brew was a welcome wave to wash away the blood lingering on her tongue. The sketch artists were called back in once the bodies had been moved. There was a final search of the Jonas's pockets before loading them into the cart. A gold pocket watch was removed from Allyn and a wedding ring from Natala. They disappeared under the treated white fabric that didn't absorb blood and were carted off to the Third District's morgue.

"I don't like that face," Crenn said.

"Why would you say that," Okoias replied. "My face is beautiful."

It wasn't a vain statement. All right, maybe a little, but Okoias knew she had a "striking quality" to her features. She often ceased being "beautiful" when some people realized she wasn't quite human.

Okoias was one of the few openly draconi people in the city-watch, and the only inspector. At least that she knew of. Some of her people were very good at hiding who they were, especially the milklings, those born through the vaginal birth canal directly instead of emerging from a laid egg. Many, like Natala Jonas, usually tried to pass for human, or at least human enough with an acceptable amount of elf, dwarf, or halfling blood to explain "striking" features. Okoias herself was an eggling actually, although her outward appearance did not suggest this upon first glance. She looked more or less human, with an exotic, angular androgynous beauty perhaps exaggerated a bit by her undercut with combed back dirty blonde hair on top. A dead giveaway to her heritage was her hard maroon fingernails, usually hidden by her gloves. People stopped to look twice when they noticed her eyes the color of the brightest emeralds, but they usually missed her sheer inner eyelid. Her looks did come in handy with the ladies, but, in the end, she was married to the city-watch with Crenn as her curmudgeonly work-husband.

The reason for apparent pensive facial expression had first caught her attention during a weekly debriefing by their commanding officer, Captain Michael Fisher. The captain was asking for extra volunteers for the Spring Fete leading up to the breakdown of high crimes of the following week. She had almost missed it when Crenn, who normally volunteered for such things, actually told her under his breath that his wife wanted to attend the faire because she had woven a particularly intricate canoe decorated with scenes from her home isles beyond the Calderon Peninsula. Okoias was about to ask for more details when Fisher pointed at two completely



different markers, blue for missing persons and yellow for burglary, happening in two neighboring houses in the Split. Something in her brain tingled then.

Inspector Marcus Irvine had handled both cases, and he was delighted when Okoias asked for the follow up on the two cases to be reassigned to her.

Without telling Crenn, she delved into the paper work and forensics taken at those neighboring crimes and it took her three days to finally figure out what her gut was telling her. It was there in an off comment by the medical examiner. Okoias had been in the same room delivering paperwork on another case when she overheard that one of the victims had vomited before disappearing and being listed as a “missing person.” To someone unfamiliar with the smell of fire draconi vomit, they might describe it as “rotting turtle stew.” She was familiar with the smell herself, having indulged way too often in her youth that brought on retching and headaches with the morning.

So, she kept her eye out over the following months for strange crimes happening in twos or threes close together. As soon as more than a dozen separate incidents in Raymorne and the Keane Valley matched with a reported missing person’s case, she had found her pattern.

“That face,” Crenn said, returning Okoias to the present, “the one that means you’re about to tell me something I don’t like and somehow you’re going to convince me to do a lot of walking and putting our noses in where they don’t belong.”

“Talk about it tomorrow?” Okoias asked.

“You sure?”

She nodded. There were a few places she hadn’t let her thoughts go towards, but perhaps now was the time. First, a few glasses of ice cold vodka was in order.

She would rather whisky, but that would get her glands overheated and she needed her head about her for the flight along the clouds of memory.

Okoias had seen a lot in her five decades of being a watcher. She had arrested many arsonists, burglars, murders, and rapists. There was no crime or methodology of criminal that she had not encountered, but she had never seen such an organized attempt to disappear known or suspected draconi peoples. Over a period of nine months, at least forty known draconi had gone missing. At least that she could tell, who knew how many more?

According to Polly, the half-elf records clerk, there were at least thirteen thousand unsolved reported missing persons' cases in the last decade alone. There had also been a steady increase in missing persons over the past seven years or so too. Around the time that the Gold Prophet supposedly went into exile, which had to be a stretch of her imagination. It was just decades of over analyzing, right?

People disappeared a lot in a metropolitan area of almost two million people, especially when that city was one of the largest trading ports in the world. Five distinct major races populated the city, each with their own unique heritage, prejudices, and magics. Thousands of ships came and went every year, bringing with them even more new goods, peoples and cultures. Innovative technologies were changing daily life in a blink; maybe even some day runes, psychometry, scrying, and other auguries would become obsolete in watch-work before she retired.

Everyone who has ever been young has made stupid mistakes. Okoias's wasn't even particularly dramatic. It wasn't as though she had fallen in love with the wrong person, or stolen from or physically hurt someone. She had been invited to a party because of her "striking features" and she had overheard the wrong people talking.

In her late twenties, barely out of her draconian extended adolescence, she'd used that beauty to seduce men and women alike, although after so many cocks, she knew that she vastly preferred the bed of women. Still, Julius had been less of a dick than most men and he had the face of a celestial incubus, so she accepted his plus-one invitation to one of Lady Sylfina Caereme's infamous gatherings.

It wasn't the one held every year during the Banquest, which were reputed to be spectacles of pure hedonism, but still Kallista had never seen such indulgences before. She was warned to arrive having had a mild meal—she'd only had a bit of bread with goat butter and an apple—and to not have imbibed any other alcohol, inhaled any quixotic smoke, or taken any other extraordinary substances. It would not do to try and out do such an experience before the real party.

In the foyer of Mauvine Crest, she handed over her shoes and jacket. She had been told to wear simple clothing as well, so she had opted for a sleeveless orange linen dress. Most of the guests were already relaxed, the music mellow and amplified via a crystalline dish above the musicians. An expensive contraption usually only seen at the great arena and some of the more expensive theatre venues.

Julius took two drinks from a nearly naked servant and handed it to her.

"What is this?" she asked. The lighting in the room was dim, but in the crystalline cup in her hand, the pink liquid swirled and glowed like some strange moon.

"Just drink it, makes everything feel like a dream," he said, downing most of his in one gulp.

Kallista took a slow sip. It was a bit like raspberry mead, but unlike any she'd had before. It danced on the tip of her tongue and...oh...in Frost and Flame, she could feel it already traveling through her blood via her throat in jubilant

miniature explosions. She followed Julius's lead and took a longer gulp and that one sent a throb through her vulva.

The Caereme manor was one of the most opulent places she had ever seen. It rivaled the Star Room at the Panthemia House in its decorative wonder. Instead of being trapped in a bubble of stars and distant planets, she was swathed in air that felt as soft as fur with the same living animal warmth. When she reached out with her free hand to trail her fingers along the paneling, the wood was both cold and warm at the same time. Under her bare feet the marble almost felt like gelatin. The whole house was an experience in sensory exchanges. She was absolutely certain that she felt the lights tickling her skin. At one point she looked up into the ceiling where the sun cradled the moon, making love to one another as they nestled in a blood red sky marked with winking diamond stars, as though the pair were two lovers that could only meet to dance in this room.

To say the music was hypnotic was an understatement. The music penetrated her very thoughts and became a part of her thoughts. Thoughts that preceded each chord and note. Except that was impossible. Kallista was certain that she could taste the notes of the music like a delicious multi-course meal of candy, effervescent mead, and whipped cream.

"What was in this?" she asked Julius waiving the empty glass at him. *Wait a tick*. It was not the same glass. It was a different shape with the dregs of an amber liquid in the bottom.

Julius, however, was on his third different liquid indulgence of the evening. Kallista looked around and saw people in various stages of undress and copulation. Some still trying to dance while their partners penetrated them standing up on the dance floor. Two men embracing the same woman. Three women with six hands

seemingly touching everywhere on each other's bodies. A woman at the end of a daisy chain of half a dozen men. All races caught up in the states of ecstasy and inebriation.

How long had Julius been holding her while Kallista had her arms around the sweetest smelling half-elf that she'd ever had the sheer pleasure to smell. Like a field of all the different blossoms in the world under a spring breeze, and unlike the odorous cacophony of some perfume shop in the Third Canal district, it was just another intoxication to behold and luxuriate in.

"I can assure you," the woman in her arms said, "that unless you ignored my rules before arriving, nothing in this house will harm you this night."

It wasn't just an elf in her arms. When Kallista kissed her, she tasted familiarity on those lips. Lady Sylfina Caereme was also draconi, like Kallista.

Before spending the rest of the night in Lady Sylfina's bed, the hostess pressed a small gilded chocolate truffle to her lips. When Kallista tasted of the unnamable fruity center, she was sure that for the first time in her life she felt a fraction of the flight of her ancestors. If only inches off of the ground.

Everything else after returning to the ground was in being pressed against soft pale flesh, running fingers through moon white hair, and staring into aquamarine eyes rolled over with bliss. In the bed next to theirs, Julius was enjoying the attention of Lord Maroque's lips and tongue.

Well, most of the night.

At some point before dawn Kallista awoke needed to seek out the privy and a large glass of water. She had a headache and the taste of Lady Sylfina lingered on her tongue.

She passed by the wrong room and over heard several people arguing. She looked through the slightly ajar door at the occupants inside. Lady Sylfina and Lord Maroque had thrown on dressing gowns to meet their unexpected guest. The second man in the room was rather ordinary looking, if not for the telltale characteristics draconi were always searching for in other people. The second nature to try and identify those like yourself, because they always had to hide or pretend to be human, or elf, or one of the other races to survive.

The stranger was tall with black hair tied back in a neat cue, but it was hard to tell what color or shape his eyes were because of the way he stood in profile. He wore the clarion bells of Uthyr Greatwing at his waist and spoke in a low, almost reedy voice, each word careful.

“It is your duty to support your race,” he said to the Caeremes.

“Which one?” Lord Maroque asked. “Do you mean the race that you wish to subjugate in the name of prosperity?”

The stranger hissed, hawked, and spat at Lord Maroque’s feet. A dwarf guard in the corner made a move, but Lady Sylfina held up her hand.

“You had many of our kind here tonight,” the stranger continued as though he had not insulted the couple. “My spy counted at least twenty that should be convinced to follow the righteous path. And yet you subjugate them with indulgences and poisons. They deserve to be free.”

“I know what you’re looking for,” Lady Sylfina said. She stepped closer to the stranger. “You seek to create an army, and for what? The world is not as it once was. Why fight a war you cannot win?”

There was a long pause before the stranger said so silkily, “The truth. The truth that this world is not only one of pleasure and pain, but of Frost and Flame.”

It was Lady Sylfina's turn to expectorate, to prove her heritage and might. The incendiary liquid projectile hit the marble floor with a hiss and the faint whiff of burning stone.

"You're just a pretender," she said, flicking her hand at the gold bells. "Nothing but fool's gold."

"Get out of our house." Lord Maroque said.

The stranger of course turned on his heel and marched straight towards Kallista. Because she was still slow from all hallucinogenic drink of hours before the stranger slammed the door right into her brow, splitting it open. For several seconds she looked up into the calm rage of the face of the Gold Prophet.

Blood started to ooze down and she tried to wipe it away. He cocked his head almost like a bird, curious as to what was caught in his nest. He bent over and held out his hand to her pulling out a handkerchief with his free hand.

"I'm sorry, my child," he began, but before the man could continue, a dwarf guard in the Caereme livery told the man to leave again. The Gold Prophet did not linger long enough to be asked a third time.

Kallista still had his handkerchief, and its owner would eventually find his way back to her.

Back in the present, and four glasses of whisky down, Inspector Okoias removed from her pocket the list of names she had gathered from poring over old case files and listening for briefs on missing persons. One of the names on her list only came to be there the night before. Julius Kaider, the same Julius she had attended the Caereme's party with all those years ago, was missing along with his partner, Athene Ruby and her daughter, Carro. Who had Julius and these others crossed paths with? The Caeremes or the Gold Prophet?

When Okoias returned home to the boarding house she shared with several other unmarried city-watchers there was an envelope with gilded edges and shiny golden wax seal on her bed. The impression in the pristine wax seal was of the moon being cradled by the sun. The urge to toss it unread into her room's brazier was tempered only by the alcoholic haze of her brain. Instead, she slipped the damned yearly invitation into a pocket of her bag next to her flask of tonic. She considered pulling out the files containing her research on the missing draconi and other suspicious crimes, but her oncoming headache squashed that debate. Before falling into bed naked hoping that she would not dream she had a thought, but before it could solidify the whisky and exhaustion won over that egg of an idea as well.



## **Chapter Four: Jacque**

Nearly everyone on his street of the Hock celebrated when Jacque shared his news. People brought and shared dishes from curries and stews to baked goods and a half-elf neighbor contributed some lovely mead. Even Kalilah, with her husband Sorren, and Syd and Landan came by with iced creams and waffles.

The next morning, along with a bit of a hangover, a message from Jamey arrived. He said he was organizing a celebration for Jacque “with those of us wee-folks you don’t have time for anymore.”

A week and a half later, with thirteen days to go until the Banquest, Jacque met Jamey at the Dancing Donkey. He honestly didn’t expect any other of his people to show up besides Jamey and maybe a few other distant sycophantic cousins at most. Even longtime friends had slowly stopped replying to letters and invitations to parties over the past year.

But Jamey was not alone as several other smallfolk sat in a corner table with his cousin. Jacque’s heart leapt as he recognized a couple dancing to the music only a few paces away from their tankards. Wyman Meggs and his wife Ivonne were the biggest surprise. They were nomadic trappers, with deep green-kin blood in their families. Their faces were weathered, but they looked like long forgotten dryads of myth. And they looked as in love now as they day they had married about ten years earlier. They rarely came into the city and usually sold their beaver skins and other pelts on the outskirts, but apparently, they had already been en route to the Inner Keane to visit Jacque and meet Astrid when they heard about his disownment and the Banquest.

Wyman enfolded Ivonne into his arms and then let her spin out again. Her feet were graceful in her leather sandals as she stepped right into Jacque's embrace, and though he immediately took up the next step he was sorely out of practice dancing with someone of a similar height. He bumbled several moves before she laughed and threw her sinewy arms around his neck. Her short curly hair smelled like autumnal trees.

"Congratulations!" She kissed each of his cheeks and embraced him again.

Someone clapped him on the shoulder and he turned his head to see another familiar and very welcome face. Murdoc Pryre still wore a beard that could rival many dwarves', intricately braided with beads woven through the honey-blond hairs. He worked in his family vineyard, and his older brother was married to Philippa's sister-in-law. So many of the halfling families who lived in the city, in the Midvalley and the Keane, were often family by marriage if not by blood somewhere a generation or two back.

"Grapestone!" Jacque grasped Murdoc's shoulder as well.

"Oh, my giddy aunt!" exclaimed Sofie Lange, an old school friend. She started giggly madly at the memory of how Murdoc got his nickname.

"I didn't swallow those rocks!" Murdoc said defensively before pulling Sofie into a dance.

It was how smallfolk gatherings were supposed to start, whether they were of the vale, barrow, green, or river-kin. Reunions and introductions were always made in the middle of continuous drink, song, or dance, and often with a sigh of memory.

And family really was all about food and memory.

The most surprising guest was Philippa's youngest sister-by-law. Lissey Goldenmead sat next to a halfling Jacque didn't recognize and Jamey's older brother

Roland sat on the stranger's other side. Roland looked like he didn't want to be there; or rather Jacque assumed he didn't want to be seen at any gathering celebrating him. After all there was plenty of delicious food and crisp cider from last autumn to be had elsewhere. But Jacque knew it would be hard, for any of them who wanted to remain in the good graces of Philippa, who was practically the matriarch of their generation. She had inherited Tarleah Spooner's gifts everyone said. That she could weave simplicity and complexity together with merely a wooden spoon. She above all others in their generation had the gift for creating a lifetime of memory in a bite of food. It gave her prestige since the smallfolk of old had always been about taste and comfort above all else. Or so everyone always said and maybe being a two-time Banquest winner proved that.

It was a bitter thought, but both Lissey and Roland were here, and maybe that meant something good after all.

Jacque squared his shoulders and held his hand out to Roland. There was a fraction of a heartbeat of hesitation and then Roland took it. He even took a step forward stood and embraced Jacque as well.

"It was a real dick move, what Ansel did," he said.

"Not just Ansel," Jacque replied without a moment's pause. Roland took the blow in stride.

"I will try to earn your forgiveness," Roland said as he gifted Jacque with several logs of saucisson and a joint of cured cotto ham that his side of the family was famous for.

Jacque also received a bottle of syrupy Pryre Heights' port courtesy of Grapestone himself and a jar of fireweed honey from Sofie's apiary.

“Well done, Jacquey,” Lissey said, planting a kiss on his cheek. She gestured to the stranger. “This is Beric Thornlock, we’re recently betrothed.”

Jacque locked hands with Beric and immediately recognized a difference in the stranger’s grip. His palms were rather wide and his fingers were short, but there was a discernable deftness in the digits. His hair was the color of wheat fields, and his bushy eyebrows sat low on a heavy forehead.

A distinctly dwarven kind of brow.

But Jacque said nothing about it. “Welcome,” he said. Then he clasped his hands together and rubbed them with disreputable glee. “So, who’s buying me my first pint?”

The Dancing Donkey was a smallfolk establishment with the occasional dwarf or shorter elf patron. It was built for those less than five feet tall, even the main bar only rose to the middle of Jacque’s chest. Like dancing with Ivonne, it was strange to be surrounded by furniture meant for his frame. The only space for long limbs was out on the patio.

The house he shared with Astrid and Marion required more compromise on his part than hers. But it didn’t really fit either of them. Their bed was too small and his wife always had to stoop more than was comfortable to put the kettle on or to prep for one of the pudding fillings.

The buzz that a Banquest competitor was in the house began almost immediately, but their corner was secluded enough and most of the staff treated them to privacy. The lack of a proper surname also hung heavy in the air. One particularly nosey barman kept telling people that “Jacque of Inner Keane” was in the Dancing Donkey that night, and as the servers brought out rounds of platters, more glances from the other patrons kept gazing over to their corner.

“Don bother wit’ them,” Beric muttered. “Vultures.”

The first covered plates to come out were an assortment of hand pies: lamprey, eel, bacon and onion, and one flaky one stuffed with soft goat’s cheese. The second course was a creamy roasted chestnut soup. The third was a relatively new vegetable in Raymornian memory—cobs of sweetcorn dripping in butter and liberally sprinkled with salt and roughly cracked black pepper, one of Jacque’s favorite foods since his father first bought a roasted ear off a cart vendor while doing business in the city (before George’s business interests were exclusively *elsewhere*). It was the perfect prelude to the whole roasted pork shoulder and vegetables with an early autumn applesauce and a pile of crackling.

“This is paradise,” Jacque said, his mouth still half full of food.

“Oy, Jacquey, mind your manners. Oh, wait that reminds me,” Ivonne said. It must have been pretty important to interrupt a smallfolk’s attention to crackling.

She made for her bag in the corner. The monstrous mound was probably half of Wyman’s weight. From a front pouch she removed something wrapped in leather. She handed it to him, pink appearing in her brown cheeks.

“Should’ve given it to you at the start,” she said.

“But it has been so long since we’ve had a Dancing Donkey meal,” Wyman said. He burped. “‘Scuse me.” Then he took a long pull on his cider, his seventh cup that Jacque had seen.

Smiling, Jacque opened the gift. Inside the roll was a knife. A gleaming cook’s blade five inches in length with a long straight spine that curved just at the tip and with a heavy bolster and a horn handle that gleamed in the light.

“Is this a real white stag horn?” Jacque asked in awe. He had no idea his friends had ventured so far and had been gifted with the horn of such a beautiful

creature. Only a horn gifted by the ancient creature, not taken, could hold such a pearlescent shine.

Ivonne nodded.

“And the blade’s good for choppin’ things two halfling hunters might’ve found near the hind herd,” Wyman said, this time followed by a hiccup. “Certain mushrooms that might taste like chickens.”

“Shh!” Ivonne said and there was an audible thump followed by Wyman hissing and swearing under his breath.

Through a mouth fit to bursting with pork, Murdoc produced some sounds that resembled a question.

“I think he’s wondering about your parents,” said Beric everyone at the table looked at him with awe. It was a rare gift indeed to be able to interpret a stuffed halfling mouth with such clarity.

Murdoc nodded and stabbed at a sprout.

With a sigh, Jacque took a long pull on his cider and then looked to Jamey to change the subject. “There’s a woman from Shudo competing in the Banquest,” Jamey said as he poured more gravy over his vegetables.

“I saw that in the broadsheets this morning,” Murdoc added between bites. “She owns the restaurant called Inari. Best noodles in the city. Pretty too, I saw her the last time I was there.”

“You’re just saying that because she’s Shudonese,” Sofie said.

Murdoc looked sheepish and then nodded his head over in Jacque’s direction. “Our boy has the right idea,” he said, the grin on his face visible beneath his great beard. “human woman are quite amenable.”

“Especially compared to, say, certain daughters of diminutive aunts,” Jamey said.

Roland nodded, “Shhh,” he hissed with the exaggeration of a lot of alcohol. “One of Great-Aunt Teenie’s grand-spawn might be about.”

Ivonne, Sofie, and Lissey, all being related to Clementine “Teenie” Spooner, threw bits of food at Jamey, Roland, and Murdoc.

“Oi!”

“Watch it!”

“Just bein’ a joke,” muttered Roland pulling a piece of gristle out of his hair.

“Everyone’s beautiful,” Wyman said.

“Except Great-Aunt Teenie’s heart,” Jamey said.

“Here, here,” Jacque chimed raising his cup and draining the last of the cider inside.

The whole feast ended with a modest two-tiered cherry chocolate cake covered in a shiny ganache with whipped cream cheese mousse between the cake layers. It was rich enough that there was more than enough to share between the nine of them.

He was going to waddle back to the Hock a happy halfling.

## Chapter Five: Okoias

The next morning Okoias was pleased to discover that Crenn had already brewed coffee. Bless him. Not that she had a hangover exactly, but she was still feeling the unwanted effects of excess alcohol consumption. She also took a pull on her tonic before adding a reasonable amount of cinnamon and sugar into her own cup. draconi food was a constant seesaw of contrasts between hot and cold. Though she was fire draconi, Okoias was mixed blood enough that she could enjoy hot foods without it overexciting her glands. Some were not so lucky, even with tonics to balance out the humours.

In contrast, as a dwarf Crenn liked simplicity to balance his job with his personal life, especially in his diet. Rarely did he consume anything that wasn't black coffee, bitter beer, dark bread, boiled vegetables, salted meats or sausages, and the occasional apple or pear. Like any Dwarf though he lived for the occasions that merited a great roaring fire and plenty of succulent roasts. He ate like some kind of forgotten pioneer, although the last time he traveled more than a hundred leagues was when he moved from the Karst, the underground river in the Treachmont Peak, to the city to be with Oleena Koi-Lei-Nana, the Muani island dwarf woman he'd fallen in love with. Crenn loved contentment between the busy bouts of watch-work, and Okoias had to admit she liked how his contentment was like a balm he could unconsciously share.

"Should I raise the price to a loaf for your thoughts?" Crenn asked then huffed, bristling his mustache at the adjustment to the idiom. "Doesn't have the same ring to it though does it?"

"You'll hate me for actually telling you," Okoias warned.



“Because it’ll mean a lot of walking and tiptoeing around Fish, I’d wager.”

“Perhaps.”

She looked over the papers on her desk including the morning’s broadsheets with the whole front page taken up by the faces and bios of the sixteen Banquest competitors. Then she pulled out of her satchel the folder with her private investigation.

They busied themselves with the paperwork that needed attention. The coroner had been busy at work all night with the Jonas couple’s bodies. Okoias noted that there had been a request for a rush on that from the constable chief. It made Okoias wonder if others with influence had asked for the expedition.

It turned out that Natala was indeed an ice draconi from the glands in her neck and the additional adrenal organs associated with that bodily system. She had also been about fourteen weeks pregnant. The coroner had found an egg about three inches long in her womb, the shell not yet calcified.

Okoias sighed deeply and closed the report.

“You don’t think I haven’t noticed there’s been something on your mind for the past couple weeks?” Crenn asked.

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Your business is usually your business, but I figured it’s likely not just that.”

She rose from her desk casually and closed the door to their office. Then she pulled the file filled with her notes on her private investigation and handed it over to Crenn. He put on his reading spectacles and looked through the papers with a furrowed brow, but not asking any questions. They knew each other well enough that Crenn was likely to discern Okoias’s thought process, sometimes almost

seeming to share a mind. It was what had kept them as partners for the better part of a decade.

“I recognize some of these names,” Crenn muttered about ten minutes into the reading. “This list?” It wasn’t a question exactly, but one of acknowledgement towards where her thought processes were going. With his spare hand, he shuffled through the folders on his desk and brought up the blue one for “Missing Persons” and crosschecked several of the names. Then he pulled out the yellow folder on his desk for the unsolved homicides of the last six months and flipped through those dossiers as well. Last night Okoias had added Natala Jonas to the end of her list of suspected draconi that were either dead, presumed dead, or missing.

Of all the names on her list, she only actually had a personal relationship with Julius Kaider. Other inspectors had handled the report from Athene Ruby’s employer that she had not come into the laundry for over four days. In the other inspectors’ notes, they found their tenement unoccupied and no sign of the child Carro either. Most of their possessions appeared to still be there, with possibly a travel bag or two having been packed. No indication of burglary or other suspicious circumstances. A neighbor said they hadn’t seen any of the home’s occupants, and was glad of it.

*“That girl was a hell storm. Always causing fires and screaming, the scab.”*

Even with her full head of hair, Okoias had been called “scab” a few times in her life.

Okoias thought that poor Carro likely had Silbinas Syndrome. It was a rare draconi disease that would first manifest around the age of three or four. The child would start to regress to infancy in their manner and then they would go rabid and

unable to control their fire or ice glands. Sometimes they attacked other people and the city would have no choice but to quarantine them.

“The one with the sick child,” Crenn said, tapping directly into her thoughts, as usual.

“I talked to a few friends over the last few weeks, trying not to raise suspicion,” Okoias said. She pulled her chair close to her dwarf watch-partner and sighed. “They’re all draconi.”

“No, I remember these,” he pointed at the names of the half-elf siblings, Phanessa and Infys Rhone. “These are half-elves. And this one was part dwarf. I remember thinking she looked like a barmaid in a tavern back in the Karst.”

Then Crenn gestured to the name Broianna Ivarr. That had been a particularly gruesome scene: Broianna’s husband half-decapitated, a mangy neighborhood tomcat nibbling away at his dead body. Mrs. Ivarr was eventually listed as a missing person of interest.

“Born an eggling,” Okoias said, letting the revelation sink in and then she knew she had to tell Crenn her deepest secret. It was the only way he’d know and understand how she had put these pieces together when no one else had. That there was a fever waiting to spread, right when the city was nearly fit to burst from the annual harvest festival.

“Are these all eggings?”

“Most of them, not all.”

“And this one,” Crenn pointed at a name in the middle of her list. “This is from a few years ago. Didn’t we arrest someone for this?”

Barkley of the Ninth Canal was one of the few openly draconi on the list. The counter and front of his butcher’s shop had been splattered with blood, which was

hardly unusual for such an establishment. Except that magical and chemical forensics had determined that several pools were tainted with draconi blood, and those particular cuts of meat had not been a part of his repertoire.

A human had been arrested for the crime, convicted, and was imprisoned in a static coma in the capital crimes wing of the Crimsonkeep on Oswick Island, the huge fortress on an island up the coast from the city.

“What does the captain say?”

“Haven’t brought it all up to him. I was just going to start with the most recent ones, but I wanted to make sure you were with me.”

Crenn cleared his throat and stroked his beard before rubbing his eyes perpetually shadowed with violet bags. He was her dearest friend. The man she trusted more than any in the world. Crenn, son of Hrogan, had bled for her and faced down the worst of the city alongside her, shoulder to elbow.

But could Okoias tell him the other truths?

“You think someone connected to the Gold Prophet’s Order is involved, don’t you?”

Crenn was a good watchman. He figured it out faster than she had, but he had the benefit of being an outsider. Okoias had been an outsider in the watch at first, and she knew she’d always had a blind spot where the individual who called himself the Gold Prophet was concerned.

Outside their office she could hear laughter and boisterous talk, so at odds with the grave conversation. Crenn sipped his coffee, waiting for her to continue. He seemed genuinely convinced that Okoias had stumbled on to something big.

“I think so. I tried so hard not to make it so. But it’s reminiscent of something he told me a long time ago.”

Crenn's bushy brows climbed up his wrinkled forehead, his eyes wider than she had ever seen them.

"What the does that mean, Kallista?" He used her first name as though he were a parent chiding a child. "By the Forge, are you saying what I think you're saying?"

This was probably a conversation that she should have had with Crenn a long time ago. Captain Fisher had never seen the need to discuss it with her again, so Okoias had never told Crenn. When the Gold Prophet had tried to incite violence and terror with his followers a few years before, Crenn had been happy that he and his partner hadn't been on the front lines of the investigation, but Okoias had known that Fisher had been protecting her and, like a coward, she'd let him.

After another sip of comforting coffee, Okoias told Crenn the story of the night of the hedony party at the Caeremes manor. She paused at the point when she mentioned the Gold Prophet storming away. She always paused here in her memories as though it were a play being retold and she could will the actors from the stage before the true conclusion of the scene played out.

The dark storms of her memories hung heavy in the room. Crenn had been silent the whole time, but when she recounted her literal run in with the Gold Prophet, he held up his hand.

"As you're a decorated member of the city-watch and a devout member of the Panthemia I'm assuming you did not become a member of that bastard's faction," Crenn said.

He would be angry. The Gold Prophet claimed responsibility for the murders of the Trinity, the archivists of the Great Library of the Karst. The slight against the

holy site and the theft of important texts and relics of the Great Artisans was still fresh in the minds of many of the city's dwarves.

"I attended one of his sermons," Okoias admitted. "But it clashed with my upbringing at the House, and fortunately I saw sense before I could go in deeper. This was fifty years ago, before they'd started hurting people."

Crenn nodded but his face was a solemn mask that told her time and intentions echoed both ways between the future and the past.

"Fish knows?" he asked.

"I told him after the assassination of Mayor Hopbine. Of course, the Gold Prophet had long abandoned his sermons at the Priory of Sant Clare and there was nothing new I could tell him."

"I wish you had told me this before," he said.

"I wanted to, especially after the attack on the Library, but I was afraid to."

"But now you think your missing draconi are wrapped up in some of his other machinations?"

"I don't know," she said. "I hope not, but then who else would be targeting draconi, especially those passing for something other than of the old dragon blood?"

Crenn gave a short agreeable nod.

"Will you help me?" Okoias asked.

Bushy eyebrows disappeared into his hairline again. "With what?"

"Convince Fish to let me chase this down."

"Convince Fish to let you hunt the ghosts of your past?"

"It's not the past if these murders and disappearances are connected to either the Gold Prophet or maybe a splinter group or faction we don't know about yet."

In answer Crenn shook his coffee cup at Okoias demanding a silent refill while he flipped through her file. She smiled sardonically at his loutish request and got them both more coffee.

## **From the Broadsheets: Exclusive to the *Seed and Spectator***

It's got to be the most shocking twist in the Banquest's modern history. Two previous two-time winners have been invited back to compete: Broganar, son of Troganor of the Orren Range and Philippa Spooner Goldenmead. It looks like the Alimental Authority is hinting that this year is going to be spectacular. What other surprises await the competitors, judges, and audiences? Authority Director Baron Maroque Caereme promises that this year's Banquest will surely go down in history.

### Meet the Banquestors

- ADRINI FREY (30): Half-elf and cook at the High Larder on the Horn
- BROGANAR, SON OF TROGANOR OF THE ORREN RANGE (167): dwarf and restaurateur
- GABRIEL GALLEY (70): Smallfolk and farmer/owner of The Cottage Way
- HANNAH RACKSTRAW (50): human and personal chef
- JACQUE BLOOMER (49): Smallfolk owner and operator of Bloomer's Puddings
- LOGAN APPLEYARD (61): Smallfolk and head chef at the Malus Lake Inn
- MABB LYNX (35): Half-dwarf and chef at the Hare House
- MAGNOS, SON OF MAGNAR OF THE VISSIK CLIFF (122): dwarf and Master Roaster at the Vissik Cliff Court
- NYANARA, FROM THE ILYRIS THORN (90): elf and garde manager at Lumen
- PHILIPPA SPOONER GOLDENMEAD (65): Smallfolk and restaurateur
- RENATA LAWREY (72): draconi and owner and operator of Bread Ahead Bakery
- ROSAMUND SHUCK (33): human and owner of Curry Forme



- SAHARU NOBUE (39): human and owner/operator of Inari
- STERLING LEYTON (52): human and chef at Jubilee Grove
- TIRALANIS, FROM RAYMORNE (112): elf and chef at Little Leaf
- ZACHRIS TWINE (60): Half-elf and pastry chef at Medallion

## **Chapter Six: Adrini**

The Alimental Authority of Raymorne was a governing body on par with the Greater Raymorne Authority and City Hall, the Commissioner's Office of the City-Watch, and the University Assembly. They were responsible for both food safety and commerce and were overseers of the food cultural backbones of the city. They were the organizers of the All-Hands Harvest Festival, the Spring Fete, and Midsummer Fairs. The Authority were also the adjudicators for the fall Banquest and spring Bake-Ins, and they were responsible for the University's academia on food history and food science. Its headquarters were of a beauty that equaled the Panthemia House with generations of artifacts and décor that made one feel as though they had stepped into a museum of living culture.

In the foyer was a statue of Ursula Raymorne, different than the one in the House. She towered over the coastal municipality that bore her name, a gigantic loaf of bread cradled in her right arm almost like a swaddled infant. Her left arm extended over the miniature Keane valley and the Strugyrst mountains, with the open seas behind her. On the marbled walls surrounding Ursula were mosaics of foodstuffs and foodways. Fields of tilled earth and verdant explosions of vegetables, a winery relief, a fishing boat hauling in nets full to bursting, all composed from the finest marble, granite, and even accented with gold, silver, and gemstones. The bakery scene was gilded with gold, bronze, and copper that in the sunlight, made it seem as though the cold stones were giving off enough heat to produce dozens of loaves at a time for all the years that these walls would stand.

Before today, Adrini never had cause to venture in through the doors, but now she was an exclusive guest of the top Alimental Authority figures. The famed

afternoon tea was one of several exclusive perks of being a Banquestor. She had also received several gift baskets from completely random people, which were mostly unopened except where Teague had nosed around. She had decided to wait for Papa and Hemmie to arrive to go through them. Hopefully, they'd be here soon. The days to the competition were counting down and she was really hoping to see her father before the events began.

An attendant approached Adrini before she could feel stupid for standing around in her newest dress in the near empty foyer. Teague had insisted on buying it for her as congratulations; the skirt was a deep maroon color with a wide orange sash at the waist and an ivory bodice with flowy sleeves that ended at her elbows. The colors mixed with her brown skin so well and she felt like a walking autumnal grove with the light catching on her green agate beaded necklace and matching earrings.

"Miss Frey?" the attendant asked and Adrini nodded. "I'm Cassius, son of Cassim of the Keryini Hills, Associate Advocate of the Authority, and I am honored to meet you." He wore a rather nice dark gray suit and the chain of his office, a large gold medallion with the Authority seal, under a long sleeveless robe the color of a bold red wine.

"How do you do? Not much of an honor I'm afraid. I've only been cooking for four years," Adrini said in near a single breath before she could stop herself.

Cassius grinned. "Exactly." He finally let go of her hand and clapped his together. "Please follow me."

In the past few weeks, it felt that she was only really bothered at work by this strange turn of events that had become her life. She still wore a green shirt in the kitchens, but people in the dining room were specifically asking for her food. The other blue shirts, and Merritt's two black shirted sous chefs, all acted as though the

quiet and reserved Adrini had always been the star of the kitchen and not just some glorified taste tester who could also mince garlic. Not that anyone had ever been rude or particularly hostile to her, at least no more than they were towards everyone else in the heat of things, but being seen and noticed and asked for was still quite awkward.

And now she was going to walk into a room with real cooks and try not to be the mouse amongst the lions.

They walked up two flights of stairs before Cassius opened a large set of double doors. Inside about thirty people were already assembled. Adrini felt her jaw drop the second she spotted Vashti Caraway talking with a woman of Shudonese descent and a dwarf she was sure was Broganar, the former two-time Banquest champion. Vashti was one of the most beautiful half-elves Adrini had ever set eyes on. She had perfectly curled and shiny black hair, silver eyes, and ears that could almost be mistaken for a full-blooded elf. The only thing that really betrayed her human heritage was the rather bold nose, but even then, it suited the high cheekbones and sensuous lips. She owned an eponymous cooking school where Merritt had Adrini attend a few classes after she finished *staging* at the High Larder.

The threesome was also speaking with Baron Maroque Caereme, the Director of the Alimental Authority. He was, if possible, so handsome he made Vashti almost look common. His skin was a deep bronze and he had barely pointed ears that denoted his own elven heritage. His own long black hair hung loose over his broad shoulders, with some sections of braids bleached to the color of parchment. Heavy eyebrows gave his eyes even more intensity with their obsidian color so intense it was like looking into a starless sky. It was as though someone had plucked a masculine figure right off the cover of those cheap romantic novels sold by the

kernel in Paperback Alley. His outfit Adrini was sure, cost more than her whole lifetime's wardrobe combined. There was no way a brocade waistcoat with that deep a color of vermillion, accented with silver thread, with the solid gold buttons was anything but a one of a kind marvel. And he wasn't just beautiful; he was a cunning but caring businessman, the co-owner of Tallyran Industries which ran several factories, farms, and even the pocket of land that was the only known source of Auric truffles, the rarest in the world.

A human waiter in a red jacket offered her a drink, a slim tulip-shaped glass that looked like the finest crystal was filled with straw-yellow bubbling wine and a pale orange liquid that had settled at the bottom of the bowl. It broke the spell Baron Caereme's beauty had caught her up in, which was strange in and of itself since it always took more than a pretty face for Adrini.

"Thank you," she said to the waiter and he nodded.

In another part of the room, she spotted another Banquest judge, the part-halfling Merton Umber, in conversation with two people Adrini thought she recognized as Edward Flint and Bee Mayer. They had been the commentators for the Banquest and the Spring Bake-In for going on five years now. They also had a regular comedy show in the theater district of the city that Teague loved.

Other people in the room were less familiar to Adrini, but at least the Authority members were all dressed in gray and red to distinguish them. She was sure the halfling woman was Philippa Goldenmead, and there was the other judge, the notorious Fraser Brechin. Brechin was known in the industry as having both a demand for perfection and a bit of a temper. Merritt had worked under Brechin as well and said the experience had taught him a lot, especially humility. Adrini had briefly considered trying for one of Brechin's restaurants and had even made it

through the doors of Roux, Brechin's restaurant on the Horn, one afternoon when she heard a man screaming and swearing at the top of his lungs.

Needless to say, she turned right around and fought off the urge to run away from the rage.

The two pureblood elf candidates had essentially put up an invisible barrier between themselves and the other competitors. Adrini knew she would not be welcome there, and she didn't want to join the other half-elf, Zachris Twine, because he seemed to be the opposite of herself. He was clearly a character, soliciting laughter from the small crowd surrounding him. He was a bit Teague-like and she had plenty of that in her life.

Then Adrini noticed two individuals that were clearly of the "other" crowds that she tended to search for when at parties or gatherings: people who would likely relate to her desire to not be noticed and just be. The short one was part dwarf. That was obvious by the stout and broad body, and his face was handsome with androgynous features accented by a sharp undercut and brown hair swept back off his forehead. He wore a crisp white shirt under a violet waistcoat with brown trousers and thigh high boots. Over the back of one hand and wrist was a tattooed pattern of fish scales. If she remembered the names of the other contestants correctly, the only part dwarf was named Mabb Lynx. The woman standing next to Mabb was draconi, and the only draconi on the list was called Renata Lawrey.

Although her face was lovely in a fortunately more human way, there was the slight appearance of scales on her pale skin and she wore a long purple scarf that covered her hair completely with the tail of the garment hanging over her shoulder like a braid. Her body wasn't slim, but she lacked a curve in her bust and hips. There was a small jewel in her nose and several rings in her ears. When she moved, the

string of gold bells at her waist chimed. She held out her long fingered hand, with a thin band on each finger and carefully rounded out maroon colored fingernails.

“I’m Renata,” and she smiled a thin serpentine smile.

Adrini had heard of her and her bakery, Bread Ahead, in the Spire before the Banquest list was released. Teague had bought sweet rolls from there once or twice and they had been nothing short of sublime.

“Adrini,” she replied. “I work at the High Larder.”

Which was such a stupid thing to say. Of course, she worked at the High Larder. It was on every piece of news or Banquest advertising with her name and sketched face on it. And because her name was first alphabetically, she felt like there was an extra and strange situational prominence. Aside from Philippa and Broganar, she was sure that her name was whispered about and referred to the most.

Or it was all in her head, as usual.

“I’ve been there,” Mabb said. “I love the brewery behind it.” There was something in Mabb’s face that made Adrini wonder exactly what he thought of the brewery. Close up, Adrini could see the spice-colored stubble on Mabb’s cheeks and chin. He also held out his hand and Adrini shook it.

“And I do believe the liqueur in this drink is one of Vincinna’s creations.” He took another sip of his drink. “But the wine itself is from the Ritirata.”

Realizing she hadn’t even tasted the drink yet, Adrini smelled at the effervescent flute and under the crisp and mineral wine was the distinct scent of apricot and cherry. Indeed, one of the brew works’ liqueurs. The final decision on Teague’s own concoction hadn’t been announced yet since the festival was still a week away from opening celebrations.

“I’ve never had a cocktail before,” Renata said. “I’ve always just gone into a pub or tavern and had whatever’s on tap.”

“Not a Hare House thing, either,” Mabb said.

“I’ve had plenty,” Adrini added. “My best friend works in the brewery and is learning distillery from Vincinna Jost.”

Mabb raised one of his eyebrows and snapped his fingers. “I thought that’s who you were.” He finished his glass and as if by magic a server appeared at his elbow to take the empty glass.

“Another glass, uh, sir?” asked the server.

A flicker of annoyance passed over Mabb’s face but he nodded. Before he could further elaborate the tray of drinks reappeared with the same sparkling wine cocktails.

“Who am I?” Adrini asked. The bubbles from the drink contrasting with the weight of social uncertainty.

“You’re Teague Margo’s friend and housemate, right?”

“Oh, that,” Adrini said. She was relieved. Why? Why did social uncertainty always take away all her power? It kept reminding her that perhaps this contest was not a good idea. All she wanted to do was cook, read, and go home at night to someone she could share her heart with. Simple and unnoticed.

“Yeah, that,” Mabb said with a chuckle.

“Oooh,” cooed Renata. “What does that mean? Is he a handsome fella?”

“Yes,” Mabb and Adrini said at the same time.

Renata did not mince words. “Unrequited?” she asked Adrini.

“Oh, gods no,” Adrini replied. “Just friends.”



Renata giggled, and Adrini wondered if she could hear hissing in the gesture. Not that draconi people were bad or anything, just sometimes they could be a bit unnerving. That being said, Adrini also felt that elves and dwarves had their own unique qualities that were unsettling.

“Well?” Renata asked Mabb. “Do tell. I love a good romance story.”

“Oh no, not with me,” Mabb said. “He just facilitates the Asher Brew orders for the restaurant. We’ve had a few conversations. Last week he told me his roommate was the half-elf Banquestor.”

“But only one half-dwarf,” Adrini said and immediately wanted to take it back.

Mabb just smiled, and it was such a warm and comforting smile. “We’re definitely not as common,” he said. “Obviously, he forgot there were more than one half-elf in the Banquest but he was distracted by one of my coworkers. I swear his eyes move anytime someone attractive is in his periphery.”

They shared a knowing laugh and thankfully the conversation turned back to food.

“Why didn’t you go for the Bake-In?” Adrini asked Renata.

“Oh, I wanted to push myself,” she commented without much enthusiasm.

“My brother says I’m a brilliant cook and apparently the secret adjudicators agreed.”

“My sister says I should do more baking,” Mabb said.

“Guess the people we care about always see more about ourselves than we do,” Adrini said.

“And we’re the ones always looking at ourselves in the mirror,” Renata added with another thin lipped grin.

The room filled up around them. Over the next half an hour several other Authority figures introduced themselves to the three wallflowers. One of the judges even wandered by. Merton Umber was a small man, about two inches shorter than Adrini herself with thick glasses and hair sticking up all over. He had the pleasant, if quick and authoritative manner of the University lecturer that he was.

Just as the bell was rung for everyone to take their seats, Renata gestured to a halfling man with toffee colored hair who was a few inches shorter than Merton.

“Oh look, the controversial one,” she said.

“What do you mean?” Adrini asked. She tended to avoid the broadsheets and gossip on principle so as not to aggravate her normal state nervousness.

“He’s Philippa Goldenmead’s cousin,” Renata said. “A Spooner that’s no longer a Spooner.”

“Like Tarleah Spooner and the kitchen stores?” Adrini asked.

Renata nodded and then she proceeded to try and catch a seat next to the halfling man. Apparently the draconi baker loved gossip. Except there was assigned seating and the draconi woman ended up sitting next to a different halfling man and an Authority member. Through small fortune, Adrini and Mabb were seated next to each other. At least small talk had already been established with him and they had someone in common to talk about. The hard part there was over

And then unfortunately Fraser Brechin sat down on her right-hand side.

When not yelling however, Fraser had a lovely voice with an accent of the Rhyne Islands northeast of Raymorne.

“I am looking forward to this one,” Fraser said to Adrini.

“Really?” was the only response she could muster. He gave her a warm smile that was totally at odds with his reputation and then asked after Merritt and her experiences at the High Larder.

For the first time Adrini felt like she actually belonged in the Banquest.

## **Chapter Seven: Jacque**

He was ready; shoulders squared, knees not quite knocking, and stomach mostly hungry. Jacque followed his Authority escort up the stairs. He was late for the afternoon tea because he had been training Lissey how to work in his stall.

She had come to him a few days after the big dinner and persuaded him to let her help. She was sick of working for her family, especially since she was indeed coupled with a man who was not a full-blooded halfling. It was somewhat satisfying that Philippa's sister-by-law had sided with him over the whole family affair, and her family was not thrilled with Beric's grandfather being a dwarf. Still, they had not exiled her yet. The Spooners had waited until Astrid was pregnant though. Maybe the Goldenmeads were holding their final judgment until Lissey was with child before permanently casting her aside.

Beric had also designed for Jacque a new sign and emblem for his new name. The new badge on his chest was not as fine a work as Ansel's, but it meant more than the Spooner spoon ever had. Beric had fashioned for him a miniature bloomer pudding from gold onto a pin he wore in the lapel of his best jacket. Marion had even made him a new waistcoat out of one of her best pieces of floral damask.

When Jacque Bloomer, proprietor of Bloomers' Puddings, walked into the room with Philippa and the other Banquest contestants, he was ready to take on the world. He accepted a drink from the tray and looked around taking in the paintings on the wall and people milling about.

As soon as she spotted him, Philippa excused herself from a Shudonese woman and Logan Appleyard and immediately made for him.

Lowering her voice, her blue eyes ablaze with anger, she hissed through clenched teeth, “Really? You had to drag Lissey into this?”

“I did nothing of the sort,” Jacque said and took a sip of the sparkling wine. He barely noticed the added cherry and apricot flavor. He was actually amused by her reaction.

“Augustus is beside himself,” Philippa said, as though Jacque had ever garnished more than an upturned look from her husband. “Lissey is the youngest in her generation and you’re corrupting her. Enabling her and ”

Jacque rolled his eyes. “Do you really want to do this here? Now?”

It seemed she had forgotten where they were and why they were there. She took a deep breath and fiddled with her locket necklace while taking in his appearance and the new emblem he’d adopted.

She huffed and said begrudgingly, “It’s not a bad name.”

That surprised him. “Thank you.”

“But don’t say I didn’t warn you,” she said.

“About what? I think Augustus should talk to his sister. She was so afraid of what her own family would do when they found out about Beric’s blood, she decided to get ahead of them all before they embarrassed her the way that you all embarrassed me.”

A servant rang the bell signaling the start of the afternoon tea.

“You embarrassed yourself first, *Mister* Bloomer.”

That was the end of Jacque’s patience.

“I know, on my wedding day I actually dropped the wedding ring I was so nervous.” He started laughing and continued on as though this was a story that she had been begging him to tell. “And we, by that I mean Astrid, Marion, Jamey and I,

had to actually search the basement of the tavern because it fell through a crack in the floor.” He gave a hearty laugh, gulped his drink down, and handed the empty glass to Philippa, who was so stunned she actually took it.

The Alimental Authority had been wise to keep his seat at a distance from his cousin’s, and also away from the other smallfolk, Logan Appleyard and Gabriel Galley. Both of whose families were likely to want to stay in the good graces of the Spooners and Goldenmeads by not associating with him. He had been assigned to sit next to one of the commentators, Bee Mayer, and owner of Inari, Saharu Nobue.

His chair had been modified so that he could sit comfortably alongside taller people without them having to look down at him constantly as though he were a child in a grownup’s seat.

Saharu Nobue introduced herself in a practiced motion, placing her hands on her thighs and giving him a delicate, seated bow. Her eyes were dark, but he could still discern the amber glint in the brown irises and her hair was shiny and black and pulled up into a coil with an ornamental enameled fox hairpiece. She was probably still a good six inches taller than he was, although to her fellow humans she was probably a bit shorter than the average Raymornian.

He introduced himself to her with his new surname.

“Oh, so it’s pronounced like ‘jack’?” Nobue asked, focusing on his given name. “Only with a Keane accent?”

“Confusing sometimes for people not from Raymorne, I know. Or how long have you lived in the city?” he asked.

“Almost ten years.”

“That is about the time I first heard of Shudonese cuisine,” he said. “So, it’s all your fault then?”

When she laughed, her dark her eyes crinkled slightly downward. “No, I’m just riding the coattails of other men and women from Shudo, Kuai, and Hang-Que.”

“We do what we can behind our forbearers,” Jacque replied.

On their plates was the menu for the afternoon tea.

Pre-meal cocktail:

Star-wine with an apricot-cherry liqueur,  
designed by judge Vashti Caraway

Onion Soup Croquettes with a cheese crust,  
recipe by judge Fraser Brechin

Sandwiches, inspired by Edward Flint and Bee Mayer:

Quail egg salad with peppery greens  
Roasted pepper and eggplant with tomato jam  
Bacon, fig chutney, and brie  
Smoked salmon with capers and a lemon aioli

Orange and cardamom shell cakes  
and chocolate scones with cherry crème,  
baked by Merton Umber

The servers took everyone’s tea order. They held out trays with seven pots of different loose-leaf and herbal blends. Jacque smelled the first two; one a jasmine green tea and the other a deep black one with a slightly smoky and tarlike fragrance, which he assumed was the infamous High Court dwarf tea. The third was the one he

wanted, full of warm winter spices and vanilla notes. Nobue selected the jasmine tea and Bee's pot emitted steam that carried hibiscus and orange into the air.

Then the servers brought out the croquettes and there was a unison of pleasurable moans. Jacque resisted grabbing the two and three-quarter's pieces left on his plate with his hands and shoving them in his mouth. There was such a rush of richly deep, savory onion and mushroom flavor at first that he almost missed the herbal elements in the design. The thyme, bay leaf, and marjoram stopped it from being too much, even with the crispy cheese exterior. With a second bite, he realized that Brechin's recipe utilized several different types of onions. There was the sugary sweetness from the caramelized, yellow Keane onions, wine colored onions with their bittersweet tang, delicate bright scallions, and fine shallots still slightly crunchy that had been added in raw before being shaped into balls.

It was utter harmony. Jacque had wanted to take Astrid to Roux for a long time, but some random expense inevitably cropped up and required a redirection of their savings. Now, if he won, making a reservation at Brechin's restaurant would be the first thing he'd do. The chef's celeriac soup and tender roast beef with marrowbone potatoes were talked about with near religious reverence.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Philippa leaning across the table to talk to Brechin. It appeared that she had interrupted the half-elf with nut-brown skin and freckles across her nose, because the young woman slunk a bit in her seat and cast her eyes away. The half-dwarf next to her leaned in and he saw the girl smile.

*Good, Jacque thought. Don't let Phila ruin this for you either.*

"This is wonderful," Nobue said to Jacque.

"Indeed."



“He’s even used tamari sauce to achieve the,” she paused, obviously trying to translate something from Shudonese. “It is a word that means pleasant and savory taste. Like in a dashi or meat broth.”

Jacque nodded in agreement. Whatever that word was, it was what these croquettes were.

The servers then delivered to the tables paper models of various Raymornian landmarks. There was one that resembled the Spire market building, the Shelley Clock Tower near the mayor’s mansion, two of the most famous lighthouses in the harbor—the Howl and Lady Alice, and even one that resembled the Horn’s Lift. The servers set the sculptures down and everyone waited. Some with intrigued expressions, others looked expectantly at the landmarks.

Music started playing from the paper version of the hexagonal Horner Arts Hall in the center of the table. The melody was a well-known folk song celebrating Ursula Raymorne that basically sounded like the recipe of a creamy soup. Slowly, the exteriors of the models started to fold down like an accordion, revealing the sandwiches and sweets on tiered trays within. Their unraveling somehow danced alongside the tune in perfect rhythm. The music reached a crescendo and there was a chorus of horns as streamers and tiny fireworks erupted from the candelabra on the table.

Jacque clapped along with everyone else. Nobue said something in Shudonese.

“Oh lovely,” Bee whispered. “Splendid.”

Jacque turned to her. “I take it that’s not the norm?”

She smiled and shook her head of tight golden curls. “No, it’s a different display every year.”

“Are we expected to perform such tricks?” Sterling Leyton, the human to Bee’s left asked.

“I should hope not,” Nobue said. “I was never adept at,” she paused again for the right word. “Illusion?”

“The only magic I can do is in my cooking,” Jacque said, wholly without pretense. It was true. He had no talent for anything of that sort and few members of his family did. Great-Aunt Teenie said once that her grandmother, Tarleah Spooner, refused to call her talents in the kitchen magic though.

*“The magic isn’t in the cook. It’s on the tongue,”* was one of Tarleah’s more famous sayings.

The sandwiches, of course, were just as delightful, if simpler than Brechin’s offering. The bacon ones were his favorite. He could have eaten a whole picnic basket full of them.

“Oh my,” Bee sighed, as she dipped a shell shaped sponge cake into her tea for a second time.

She looked up and down the table and waived at Merton Umber.

“You sly devil,” she mouthed.

He saluted her with his teacup.

Jacque saluted Umber, too. It was, without a doubt, two of the best afternoon tea pastries he’d ever had. He would have to get Marion to try and reproduce them since she was the better baker of sweets.

Towards the end of the afternoon, Baron Caereme stood up and addressed the crowd. “Thank you to our judges, commentators, cooks and staff for sharing this meal with us,” he began. Jacque could immediately see that Baron Caereme was not just a handsome man, but he also could command a room. Everyone had turned their

attention to him, as though the crumbs of the delicious meal still on their plates were just afterthoughts of a typical lunch.

“It is an honor to once again preside over the Banquest and have to brought everyone here together, contestant and adjudicators alike. We are all one under the creed of our city’s Founding Mother who united many faiths and cultures through food. It is humbling and sad that I announce to you all first, that this will be my last seasonal affair holding the office of Director of the Alimental Authority.”

That announcement obviously surprised a lot of people in the room. Baron Caereme was known for having worked hard to prove he was more than just the money, estates, and lands that he had inherited from his father. He and his wife were champions of the new industries bringing unprecedented numbers of jobs to the city in the growing factories that processed and preserved food. He had rightfully earned his way to the top office of the Authority, one of the most powerful executive positions in the city. He had helped to ensure food safety laws and social safety nets, rather than exploit workers and consumers of his factories and farms. He had helped organize the sister celebration of the Bake-In during the city’s spring fete. Baron Caereme was as much a part of the Banquest as Ursula Raymorne was.

“Thank you for your sentiments,” Baron Caereme said. “I definitely have new ventures in the works and of course, I am not leaving until I see this Banquest open and close. We’ve gathered some of the finest cooks that we’ve seen in decades. We’ve brought back two two-time champions giving them both a third bite of the apple, but I have to say, and I have sampled all of your fares, Philippa and Broganar do have their work cut out for them.”

Servers brought around more glasses of sparkling wine, plain this time, and Jacque saw that the liquid inside was nearly colorless. As though moonlight was

winking at him from the bubbles climbing up the sides of the glass. It was one of the finest bubbliies he'd ever had and he felt so privileged to be witness to this moment.

“By the Artisans,” Baron Caereme said extending his glass to Broganar and Mabb. “In the Breath of the Forest,” this time he extended his glass to the elf and half-elf contestants. “By the Rivers and Barrow.” Jacque felt a strange pleasure at being acknowledged personally. “For the Gods and in Ursula’s name,” this time the human contestants were indicated, “In eight days, you all better cook your hearts out.”

## Chapter Eight: Okoias

There was a beautiful half-elf in her bed, covered in a sheen of sweat and satisfaction. Okoias kissed the inside of Briar's lush thigh before crawling up the length of her body, stroked the curves of her plump belly, and planted another slow kiss on that supple mouth.

"Again?" Briar muttered with a laugh.

"I've missed you."

"It's not my fault you work the most incongruous hours."

"That's not *my* fault, blame it on the criminals."

"How would I go about doing that?" Briar said.

They both shifted so that they lay on their sides, one set of hands clasped together and the others sliding along sweat dampened flesh.

"You could talk to you your best customer," Okoias said. "Increase food subsidies to the poor, better working conditions in the warehouses and factories..."

Briar interrupted her with a giggle. "You've been a gray for what, fifty years now?"

"Forty-five," Okoias interjected.

"A long time, but you're still filled with idealism."

"Faith," Okoias whispered. "I'm filled with faith."

"Well, the mayor does what she can."

Briar's best customer was in fact the Mayor of Raymorne, including many of her staff and the city council. Mayor Sheridan Ursula Greer wore androgynous clothing along the same lines as Okoias did off duty. It was one reason she'd wandered into Briar's shop. Although the stylish shirts, waistcoats, bracers, trousers,

and coats cut for both sexes at Blue Mercury Dressers were far outside the price range of a city-watch inspector's salary.

Courting the shop's co-owner had come with fashionable perks in addition to having a lovely companion like Briar who vacillated between the masculine and feminine with such ease. It had taken Okoias decades to learn how to be as comfortable with herself as Briar was. She'd had to take up tailoring because many stores were inept at lines suited to full-figured women. All around them in Briar's living quarters above the shop were samples of fabrics, threads, and ribbons. More than once a stray needle had poked Okoias's ass because Briar had been working in bed.

But post-coital political debates were generally like a poor idea. Okoias was trying to get away from her thoughts about the missing draconi and talk of economics always made her heart heavy. She had seen so much poverty in her childhood and as a member of the city-watch, and discussing the violence of her life with companions had often led to short relationships for herself and many of her fellow inspectors. Crenn's wife was a rare woman who had literally weathered cyclones, so their marriage was nothing compared to winds that could uproot hundred-year-old trees. Irvine was on his third marriage with twice as many children, but at least he didn't soothe those burns with alcohol like so many other watchers. Rosewater had a husband and two children but never talked about her job in their presence and rarely spoke of her family at the station.

Whatever Okoias had with Briar it was reaching the point where they would continue in spite of the difficulties or they would break up. Briar deserved someone who could give more of themselves than Okoias could. Maybe her next conversation

with Crenn would be about how to keep a woman instead of following more dead ends on her list.

“I need some water,” Briar said, interrupting the chain of Okoias’s thoughts.

She got up out of bed and over to the bucket of water drawn daily from the well on the corner. She filled two cups and walked back over to the bed.

“Could you hand me my bag?” Okoias asked before Briar could sit down. She took the spare cup and enjoyed the view of pale flesh dotted with freckles as the half-elf picked up the rucksack where it had been unceremoniously dropped upon entering the flat a few hours before.

“Did I get you that hot?” Briar asked with a wicked grin as Okoias pulled out her flask with tonic.

“Always.” She took a swig then put it away and started sipping on the water.

Before Okoias could button her bag closed, Briar pulled out the invitation.

“What’s this?” she turned it over to see the wax seal and her eyes widened.

“What have you done to merit correspondence with the Caeremes?”

“Ignored them,” Okoias muttered reaching for the envelope. Briar whipped it from her grasp.

“The paper is linen,” Briar said and squinted at the gilded edges. “Real gold, or I’d eat my hat.”

“It would give you the foulest of stomach pains,” Okoias said and held out her hand.

Pouting, Briar gave it back. “I can play inspector too,” she said.

“Oh?”

“That’s not just normal correspondence,” Briar said. She put a finger on her mouth and hummed. “Caereme family seal in the Lady Sylfina’s color, gold on vellum paper, and the autumnal festival is fast approaching. Hmm.”

Okoias could tell Briar had reached the correct conclusion; there was no point in trying to deny it. She handed the envelope back to Briar, giving her the honor of opening it.

Briar’s blue eyes widened as she saw the words on the small sheet.

“The Nimius?” she whispered.

“It’s a joke,” Okoias said. “It amuses her because she knows I’ll never go.”

“You know Lady Sylfina?”

“I knew her and I *knew* her.”

Briar’s eyes went wider.

“Just briefly. It was the last stages of my adolescence and I made some poor choices.”

“Fucking one of the most beautiful women in Raymorne is hardly the worst choice anyone can make,” Briar said.

Okoias leaned forward and pulled her in for another kiss. “Yes,” she said. “I have been and she also makes the most beautiful clothes.”

Briar flushed pink and there was another round of mind numbingly blissful lovemaking.

In the morning though, as Okoias collected the envelope and invitation to return it to the pocket in her bag, she realized her brain was trying to recall some thought it had already processed. It was right there, like a sneeze that wouldn’t pass. She looked at the bag, half hearing Briar’s words, but trying to hone in on the thoughts trying to voice themselves again.



“Tea?” Briar asked, sounding frustrated.

“What?” Okoias asked.

“Tea? I’ve got lime and jasmine and vanilla-orange.”

“Natala,” Okoias whispered.

“What?”

Part of her felt guilty for ignoring Briar but Okoias just pulled on the rest of her clothes and kissed her girlfriend on the cheek.

“Sorry, epiphany,” Okoias said and she dashed out the door practically running to her office.

Once there she barely started the coffee pot before pulling out her files and the list of names. She went through them and cursed herself for not trying to connect anyone to the Caeremes. The Jonas’s at the bottom would have likely caught the attention of either the baron or his wife, especially since Natala would have been on display at Busbecq as a living mannequin, and both of the Caeremes were connoisseurs of physical beauty. Their annual Harvest Nimius was a feast of the senses, not just of food and wine. She flipped through some of the sketches from her list and marked off a few other names.

The excitement had her heart racing and she could feel the fire burning in her belly, almost quite literally.

A halfling clerk came by and dropped off files and orders for the day but Okoias belayed her by asking, “Can I get a list of the effects logged in these cases? Or—or—the whole file?”

Okoias handed over a fresh list topped with the names of five cases, including the Jonas’s, where the persons were identified as draconi and would

possibly move in social circles that might overlap with the Caeremes. The clerk looked both exasperated and surprised.

“You all right, inspector?” she asked.

“Please as fast as possible.”

Crenn arrived twenty minutes later and adopted an expression similar to the halfling clerk’s ponderous look.

“Okoias? How much coffee have you had already?”

“Not enough.”

She showed Crenn the invitation and explained the names she asked for and why.

“The Jonases worked for one of the most elite jewelers in the city. The Rhone sisters were antique book dealers and the Caereme’s are notorious collectors of cookery book first editions.”

“They are?” Crenn asked.

“It was in the broadsheets the other day,” Okoias said, almost out of breath in her excitement. “The Caeremes paid a record amount for that Tarleah Spooner book.”

“For someone who’s hidden her past for so long you sure pay attention to it.”

“Oi!”

Crenn chuckled and put his lunch box on his desk and handed over a still warm bag of Oleena’s mini pasties. Then he settled in to go through the paperwork that Okoias had ignored.

“It’s a good lead, you should chase it,” he said and then added, “I had an epiphany of my own.”

“Oh?” Okoias asked finishing the dregs of her fourth cup of coffee.

“Your tonic and the one at the Jonas murder, it’s from that one doctor, right?”

“Linnrom?”

“Him.”

“Have you thought about talking to him? He’s the big name, isn’t he?”

Okoias slumped back in her chair and considered Crenn’s query.

“No one talks to Linnrom,” she said. “The city-watch has never been able to crack him for any information. Ever.”

The infamous alchemist, Doctor Linnrom, would indeed have knowledge of many of the names on her list and more importantly many of the city’s secret draconi residents. He was notorious for his neutrality though. He didn’t keep records of customers and often employed couriers whom he also swore to secrecy. If one talked to any city-watch or other officials, the courier would be blacklisted from even being able to buy his tonics.

“Kallista,” Crenn said, employing her first name for the first time in years, “we have to talk to him. He’s the logical first step. If we can get him to talk and give credence to your theory, Fish’ll have no choice but to authorize this. Without that, you’re just flailing.”

In response she took a mouthful of her tonic and gave a heavy sigh.

How could Okoias get Linnrom to talk to her?

She had started this, and Okoias owed it to her people to find the answers.

“He puts a lot of stock in protocol and respect,” Okoias began and pulled a fresh piece of paper from her drawer. She penned a formal request for a meeting and insinuated that she knew what was going on in the draconi community even if her

fellow city-watchers didn't. She didn't seal the letter with a city-watch crest, but with her thumb; this was all meant to be in good faith.

Okoias opened up the paper bag and took a deep breath of the steam still escaping from the pasties filled with roast pork and yams. The flaky crust was slightly burned at the corners. Delicious.

"Crenn, I wish I could marry your wife," she said after inhaling one of the pasties.

"Well, too bad I got there first and I think Briar would have a thing or two to say about that. You going to change into your uniform and comb your hair now?"

"After more coffee."

It took six days for Linnrom to respond and another five to hammer out a mere half of an hour of a meeting. He even turned over an hourglass when Okoias and Crenn walked in the front door of his shop. He refused to come out from behind the counter and held a bottle in his hand of something that looked like a glowing icicle. There was nothing else in the lobby of the building and the door to his workshop was closed but the smells of his craft permeated the otherwise neutral space. Okoias could smell the recipe of her own preferred tonic that was heavy on the mint headily mixed with the intense spices of cinnamon, nutmeg and cloves. There were other blends reminiscent of other common tonics prescribed to non-draconi customers, even the mild astringency of willow bark touched the back of her tongue through her nose.

The notoriously private Doctor Linnrom was a tall and spare man, an inch under seven feet if that. He was the picture of draconi blood with no hair, scaled skin, bottle green eyes with slits and second inner vertical eyelid and long fingers with hard slate-colored talons. The old-fashioned brown monk's robes, hood, and

stole added to the appearance of his mysterious alchemical nature. Okoias had stopped at city hall records before the meeting to see his business license and he had been operating out of a building just off the chemistry building of the University for over a hundred and fifty years. The oldest elf on the city council herself was only a hundred and forty.

“You’re wasting your time, inspectors,” he said as the silence lingered. The hiss in his voice was also pronounced, though Okoias wondered if it was natural or from years of playing the part.

“I’m surprised we’re actually here,” Okoias said. She pulled out a fresh copy of her list. She had randomized the order of crimes and names and removed any of her ticks and tally marks. She did not want to influence Linnrom or perhaps give him cause to suspect her motives.

He took it and looked at the names. His face did not change but his eyes flickered from Okoias to Crenn and then back to the list.

“All but one are draconi, but I am sure you knew that,” he said.

Actually, she didn’t. She was still trying to clear several of the names.

“There are those on your list that have active enough glands that they needed regular doses of my tonics.”

Okoias did not want to snap that she would prefer him to name names, but she bit down on her tongue.

“Three have Silbinas and yes that would make them desirable to *him*,” Linnrom said and then spat on the floor. The ice shattered and sounded like a cannon shot in the quiet room.

To his credit, Crenn didn’t flinch.

“Because they would produce extra fire or ice?” Crenn asked.

“Precisely.”

“But you don’t know who the Gold Prophet is?” Okoias asked.

Linnrom scowled. “I have answered that question already to the city-watch before. Ask it again and you will need to find another tonic maker for your troubles, inspector.”

“Why Silbinas?” Okoias asked.

“Surely you heard the tales growing up in that crèche at the House.”

“But we draconi can’t burn down buildings or freeze them until they shatter like the most ancient of our kind,” Okoias countered. Her impatience was growing; she clenched her fist and tried to keep her calm. To find another tonic maker would be a huge pain in the ass and not one that she could afford now.

“Individually? No,” Linnrom said and then he slowly extended the rod of ice in his hand. “This took me the better part of a year to craft and it is very volatile, ten times more destructive than dweorg fire.”

“Dweorg fire” or “dwarf fire” was a black powder compound and a closely guarded alchemical recipe by the dwarves of the Strugyrst. They used it almost exclusively in mining and sometimes fireworks but a leaked less potent recipe had been used to develop artillery weapons like cannons and mortars.

“So, if we proved to be hostile you would have blown us up?” Crenn asked.

“Between this City, the Uthyri, the Gold Prophet, the House, and *that* family I have had to find my own ways to ensure my peace. My work is *my* work.”

Okoias recoiled at his insinuation that the Panthemic Order would desire violence or control over Linnrom, and the Uthyri were pacifists and agrarians, so few remained in the city. It was one of the reasons they had expelled the Gold Prophet from their fellowship decades ago.

The sand in the hourglass—or was it a half-an-hour-glass?—was nearly spent.

“Are you saying that I should look at the House as well?”

“All fires leave behind ashes. Prophets and politicians are only honorable in their own homes, even She of Bounty who fed the masses.”

In a final act Linnrom pulled out a pen in his free hand, this caused Crenn to flinch for the axe at his side, and added a note. Not a word but an old Uthyrian rune, the one that kind of looked like a closed pot over a fire, and meant “vessel” or “containment.” A common enough symbol in Raymorne as it was associated with Ursula Raymorne.

An old adage came to Okoias’s mind then, “Fire and ice are not contrary, but the same story told by different tongues.”

They left and walked a few blocks before turning to talk to each other. Crenn pulled out a handkerchief and gave his nose a thorough blow.

“Did he mean the Caereme family?” Crenn asked.

“Undoubtedly, I’ve never heard of any outright animosity between them but it could be slights of previous generations.”

“Not unheard of,” Crenn muttered as he looked at the huge poster across from them displaying the names of the Banquest competitors where the surname of Jacque Spooner had been redacted by some hand. The buzz of the family drama had been pushed to a footnote in the press considering the two previous two time champions also competing.

Okoias noted the name of the baker Renata Lawrey. The Lawrey twins were famous eggings, one of the few pairs ever recorded in this millennia and they were Uthyri members.

Damn Linnrom for giving her more questions instead of answers.



## Chapter Nine: Adrini

The only thing that could have topped the enchanting tea party was news that the *Malinda*, the ship her father took to Raymorne every year around this time, would be coming into port the next night. They would share food and drink and laughter and settle her mind for a brief time, maybe even enough to sustain her through the Banquest. She wished she could meet her father and stepmother at the docks, but she had promised Teague to attend the ceremony naming the winner of the best cordial of the Banquest. So, as usual, she would meet them at her flat. At least this year she could afford a runner to give her father the news.

Teague didn't win, but he took his loss with his usual cocky grin.

"There's always next year, and that vanilla fig mead is pretty damn delicious," he said to Adrini as they picked up last minute groceries.

Their guests had taken a canal bus from the docks to the tenement complex that housed Adrini and Teague's flat. Fortunately, their window overlooked the waterways and she was able to relax with Figgy the cat in her lap with a book while Teague, always unable to sit still, moved between tidying up and reading from several different books until she spotted her parents unloading way too many bags and trunks for just two people. She raced down the stairs, Teague in tow, and right into Hemmie's arms first as Lyreon tipped the ferryman.

Her father, Lyreon Frey, resembled a dark lion with his mane of intricate braids, high forehead, long face, and trimmed gray beard. There were still plenty of black strands on the top of his head, but his whiskers were the color of ash. He had loved Adrini's mother, Saverina, but was not a man of Raymorne nor of this side of the ocean. After Adrini's birth he took up a post with the Hacarrean embassy

travelling back and forth between home and his daughter. Eventually he met and married his current wife and visits to Raymorne became more infrequent, but Adrini never felt anything but love towards her stepmother. Hemmie Milas Frey was a woman whose warm disposition and beauty made Adrini want to drink it up like the sun. She had a plump body, and big eyes that were speckled with green, gold, brown, and amber set in a square face softened by apple cheeks and a thin but ever-warm smile. She did not follow in her husband's traditions of keeping her hair in braids, but instead let curls soft and flow around her shoulders, courtesy of a regimen of special oils and creams.

“Sun and Stars, Papa, did you have to bring the whole Hacarrean with you?”

Adrini asked over Hemmie's shoulder at the amount of luggage.

Lyreon snorted. “Raymorne ‘as more blood of the Hacarrean and the Sand Sea and de Nzere in its soil den people pretend.”

“I thought we weren't going to talk about that this time,” Teague said.

“You don't have to talk 'bout it pretty boy,” Lyreon said. But he shook his head, indicating he knew that such concerns about the exploitations of the old spice routes and its peoples also tended to upset Adrini. She wished she had the headspace to care about those things, but could only worry about so many things at once.

He took the back of her head in his hand and leaned forward to kiss her forehead. She returned the gesture, relishing the feeling of the different coils of his hair under her hand. He had traveled the Caerulin Ocean all his life to learn the secrets of his people, and he had a different braid or dreadlock for each tribe or region he had visited. But his heart belonged to the Hacarrean Isles.

Likely after a big meal and many glasses of rum, he would end up returning to the ancient diaspora and plights of their ancestors.

They managed, with Teague's help, to get all the bags upstairs in one trip. The one bedroom flat was not of the best quality, but it was a home she had come to cherish. It actually had running water, which in her opinion was worth her bed occupying the shared living space. The water could then be pumped into a basin or directly onto a square of porcelain with a drain that served as both the bathing area and privy. A folding screen afforded her some privacy both while bathing or doing other business, and then moved over her sleeping area at night. Teague paid the higher portion of their rent for the bedroom with a half-obstructed view of the Horn. Although of late, he had been spending more nights away from home than in the past. On those nights she enjoyed sleeping in his bigger bed and waking up with the sun on her skin.

Teague had generously offered his room to Lyreon and Hemmie for their stay. He said he was going to be spending the time with his lady friend Kate, whom he was rather secretive about. Perhaps this meant it was more serious than his other flings and affairs.

"And what's this one's name? Don't you ever get them confused with one another?" Hemmie asked. She knew that Teague was a bit of scoundrel, having met him twice in the five years Adrini had lived with him.

"To be fair it's easy to confuse Kate with Kevan sometimes since they're both brunets," he replied without missing a beat.

Adrini thanked the Sun and Stars that her parents did not think twice about Teague's proclivities. Or if they did, they had kept their opinions it to themselves.

The bounty was uncovered as they started to unpack their clothes, toiletries, and a taste of the Hacarrean. There were several bags of dried peppers, her favorites that were still hard to get in the city like honey hutch, green glass, and red runners.

Despite there being several cultivated chili pepper varieties in the vast city greenhouses, they were always expensive and somehow not the same. There was a bag of dried coconut flakes and some dried plantain chips made by her Aunt Cedeila. A jar of pimenta allspice and cinnamon sticks were lovely ground up and sprinkled over chicken skin so that the crackling would char and have a superb fragrance to the delicious crispy fat.

Yesterday, Adrini and Teague had gone to the Hacarrean section of their favorite marketplace to purchase a few items such as tomatoes in all kinds of shades of green, red, and yellow. Some of the more traditional vegetables she wanted to use, such as sweet potatoes, cassava, and okra were either out of season in Raymorne, or weren't available from the enchanted greenhouses at all. At least they had been able to find ears of sweetcorn.

The main stars of their dinner, however, crawled over each other in the washbasin. The mottled grayish lobsters had tails nearly as long as her forearm with antennae several inches long. The seller had even thrown in a fat female one with no extra charge and had pointed out that she was probably still full of eggs. There was a strange allure in the attention Adrini had received over the last few weeks. Even though she still wanted to hide behind a stove or stay at home, she had to admit the prestige was addicting if it meant getting treats like free lobster roe.

In addition to lobsters and gift baskets, at a cheese shop shortly after the broadsheets bearing her face had been distributed, she was given several extra ounces when she picked up a wedge of red-rind and aged, buttery Inner Keane cheese. Ever since the announcement, the dining area had been full nearly every night. Several customers at the restaurant had also asked to meet her and wanted

assurance that she was cooking their food so that they could have a taste of it even before the Banquest judges.

Merritt had assured her there was much more to come, and the elaborate afternoon tea a few days ago had been proof of that. It had been one of the most expensive meals she'd ever eaten, but she would rather have boring old fried fish, cornmeal cakes, and pickled vegetables if it meant she was eating with Papa, Hemmie, and Teague.

"How are yer brethren?" Lyreon asked as he began his task of shucking corn, taking care not to remove all the leaves.

"Fine, I still don't see them that often," she said.

"And Saverina?" Hemmie asked, without a hint of animosity towards the elf that had broken her father's heart thirty years ago.

"I saw her at the summer equinox," Adrini said. "We went up the Avonnas and danced naked with a mixed race commune. I tell you there's few things stranger than a bald dwarf woman and a halfling with hair twice as long as their body doing traditional step dancing with your mother."

"I wish I'd gone," Teague said. "Maybe I could have ended up giving you your next half sibling."

"It wasn't a fertility rite, you hedonist," Adrini shot back at him, lobbing a piece of carefully diced onion at him over her shoulder.

"No hedony allowed here," Teague replied, with something less than his usual arrogance. She barely noticed it and since he was across the room next to the faucet rinsing vegetables, she couldn't see if his expression had changed.

Lyreon and Hemmie didn't seem to notice anything as they carried about their tasks to help bring dinner together.

Over the course of an hour the amaranth greens, kale, and some shredded sprouts with several hearty pinches of smoked paprika and one of the dried honey hutch peppers sautéed together to become a decent enough callaloo substitute. There was another pot filled with toasted coconut rice and they had laid the corn in its husk on a grill over the stove's embers.

And then it was time to cook the lobsters. After they had cooked two at a time in the biggest cookpot she owned, she harvested the sac of eggs from the female's tail. Then she mixed the coral roe with some softened butter to brush on the corn and with a final flourish dusted the cobs with some cracked black pepper. From their ice bucket Teague produced several bottles of lager in the Hacarrean style.

It was a meal fit for a Banquest, in Adrini's humble opinion. The delighted murmurs echoed throughout the room. The four of them cracked into their now bright red shellfish and plucked the pink flesh out with their fingers. They dunked the pieces in either plain melted butter or butter mixed with the best hot sauce in the city sold in the Fork by a cantankerous dark skinned, dwarf shrew called Dizzy. It was a blend of vermillion red peppers, garlic, a hint of honey and sharp vinegar that matched the sweet and salty meat with toe curling delight.

Conversation was muted by the sounds of chewing and savoring. Cups of rum were continually refilled and by the time her bowl was licked clean, Adrini was in a state of inebriated bliss.

They had opened all the windows in the flat during cooking and finally a cool autumn breeze drifted through the tenement buildings. Figgy munched on the discarded bits of lobster, the digestive scraps and gills, and then proceeded to lick the shells clean. No cat had it so good in their area tonight.

The sounds of a larger group out in the courtyard were enjoying their own communal feast and some were striking chords and blowing into woodwind instruments. A baritone voice crooned an old folk song, the lyrics about the man who rescued a maiden on a rock only to discover she was really a seal wearing a stolen human skin. He drowned trying to stay with her when a storm blew his boat to pieces and swallowed up her rock.

After that song was over Teague sat in the window with another bottle of beer and whistled with his thumb and forefinger. “How ’bout we sing something happier?”

Adrini wasn’t sure which of her neighbors below was the singer, but the deep voice called up, “All the best songs are sad ones!”

“Do they know ‘The Lass Who Lost her Freckles?’” Hemmie asked, a strange request for someone not from the Ennislee Isles, but she must have picked it up somewhere. It was also a sad song about a man who’d lost his lover.

*Why did men and their lost loves get so much lyrical space*, Adrini wondered after Teague relayed the request and the Ennish tune started up from below. Teague and Hemmie sang along, she in her quiet voice like a harmony of wind chimes and he with his silken timbre.

While they sang, Figgy decided he wasn’t getting enough attention. He darted out from under Adrini’s bed and laid in a targeted attack on her father’s longest braid dangling over his chair.

“Oh, yeh scamper,” Lyreon said. He reached behind him but Figgy bolted, hitting her father’s knapsack. A box toppled from the open top.

Hemmie laughed, reaching for the cat herself in the middle of the song, right before the lamenter went into another verse. She ended up missing the cat, picking up the box instead and handed it to Lyreon.

Teague finished the song with a wave and blew a few kisses down at the applauding crowd below. He stayed in the window, eyeing the box just like Adrini.

Adrini poured everyone a final measure of the rum and sat on the arm of the sofa chair next to her father. “So, what is it, Papa? Why do I always have to ask?”

It was always his way, he’d make it known for Adrini or Hemmie that he had a little something, but he never came out and said it. He wanted just as much attention as he was about to give out.

“Yah tink you should get dis now?” he asked while holding out the wooden box.

“Yeh,” Adrini replied in her own Raymornian muted tones and then adopted the vocal tones of her youth. “Mi tink mi should.”

“I miss hearing dat in yer voice,” Lyreon said and he handed over the box. The wood smelled like the home of her second heart. Where the thatched huts were fragrant from the constant hot, wet air that intermingled with flowers, resin, and bushes bearing pepper and allspice berries. Inside was a slim, almost glowing crystalline phial filled with shimmering gold liquid wrapped in wire around the handle of a tiny spoon attached to a long gold chain.

“It’s gold bug essence,” Lyreon said. “Warriors in the Hacarrean, de southern Unified Territories, and the northern banks of the Maipura have been coating their steel with the substance for many millennia. Yuh gonna go inta yuh own kinda battle at da Banquest, yuh need a bit of de warriors’ soul that broke da chains of slavery and beat back da dragons all dem years ago.”



“Papa,” Adrini breathed. She threw her arms around him, feeling his beard against her cheek. “Thank you.”

“Yuh welcome, my sweet phara flower. You’re gonna do your people proud. Me and your mama.”

It was never easy to hear her father talk about her mother. Saverina had broken his heart so bad when she claimed that she would never set foot on a boat. She could never leave the soil, her people, or her sons behind. elves were rare across the ocean. They had resisted the natural perpetual migration of humans, keeping their strongholds in this continent of their ancestors. They were as immovable as the dwarves and halflings.

Teague got up from the windowsill and asked to see the necklace. He examined the charm between the thumb and forefingers of both hands.

“What makes it all shimmery like that?” he asked. “It reminds me of Vincinna’s Amber Mirror.”

“Cold Sun Beetle,” Hemmie said. “They have little pouches on their bums filled with the fluid. An old Palenque goddess showed her warriors how to use the material on their weapons so that soldiers could have a slice of the sun to fight the only dragons who dared to cross the ocean. It was rediscovered by Boussa Klass and used to help free the people of the Byrda from their shackles before they shared the secret across the Hacarrean and beyond.”

“I’d love to hear some of those stories and songs,” Teague said as he handed the necklace to Adrini.

She slipped it over her head and it rested right over her breastbone.

Teague pulled out a bottle of dwarven whisky. “Anyone?” he offered.

“I’ll have a measure with ice and a bit of that bitter cherry liquor,” Adrini said.

“That kind of attitude is going to make you a winner,” he said with a wink and pulled out their insulated ice bucket. As Teague was already on his way tipsy, he dropped one of the glasses that he’d likely pilfered from the brewery.

“Balls,” he murmured. Hemmie tried to help him clean up, but in the already overindulged haze and with an unfamiliar body moving about in his space, he ended up cutting his thumb on a shard. “Fuck!” and then he muttered a hasty apology to their guests before sticking his thumb in his mouth.

“It’s alright. We’ve been at sea for two weeks,” Hemmie said. “I’ve heard worse just this morning.” She then pulled out her herbal kit and mixed up a quick poultice for Teague’s cut.

Adrini handed over a roll of gauze from her workbag and then she finished making the drinks.

“It’s barely a nick, you baby,” Hemmie said as she finished bandaging his thumb.

“I’ve got delicate hands,” Teague said. “Adrini’s got more battle scars than me.”

“All earned with honor,” Adrini said and she held up her new necklace and gave out a war cry. Lyreon and Hemmie gave the comrade’s reply and Teague looked completely lost.

Then Teague started laughing so hard that he could barely catch his breath. Before a few seconds of that had even passed, he started gagging with such force it was surprising he made it to the washbasin next to the faucet. He retched so violently that Adrini was worried he was choking on his own guts. A gush of gelatinous, half-

digested food came up and when it hit the bottom of the basin the sides started to frost over when the bile touched the metallic surface. It was foamy with slight crystals of ice in the mixture of the wonderful dinner of barely an hour previous.

By the Sun and Stars, Adrini knew what that meant.

Several minutes passed by without anyone in the room speaking. Even Figgy was nowhere to be seen, probably hiding in a bundle under Teague's bed.

Mechanically, Hemmie opened up her medicine kit searching for herbs that could sooth an upset stomach. Adrini opened the cupboard searching for the tin of mint tea.

"Teague?" she finally asked after he had settled shakily to the floor next to the basin filled with vomit and dishes. He looked like he expected more to come out of his mouth that weren't words.

"Teague," she started again, "are you draconi?"

## Chapter Ten: Teague

The festival air still bubbled throughout the city even though the sun had set and the scheduled events for the day had concluded. There were food stalls everywhere cooking up pasties, dumplings, fried potatoes, waffles, pancakes, and donuts. Children were still up even though it was likely bedtime on any other night, but this was only the second day of the best week of the year. There would be time to be concerned with work and school another day.

In school, he had been a terrible speller, and not very good at reading and letters in general. But he was sure that he was F-U-C-K-E-D. That one was as favorite a word as much as a smoky and peaty Strug whiskey was his favorite libation and everything Adrini cooked was his favorite food.

The word “fuck” was good for so many emotions, but now it was one that meant he had been exposed.

He had worked so hard to fit into the world as his long-lasting adolescence waned. Latching on to Adrini in their last year of school had seemed like such a good idea. He had reached the point in life where he had finally peaked and he could pass himself off as something a bit more than human, but obviously *not* draconi. Adrini was so wrapped up in her own head to not realize any of the signs of his otherness and she had always taken his libido and carelessness as a sign of his personality, not an indicator of his age or race.

She thought they were both in their thirtieth year, but truthfully, because of his draconi blood and having been born an eggling, he was in his mid-fifties by the Raymornian calendar. He didn't know the exact year or date of his birth, so at least the weight of that lie was easier to bear.

The guilt at tricking her, Lyreon, Hemmie, Vincinna and everyone around him was always there. Only ever lifted for a time when he was wrapped up in the limbs of, and inside the body of, another being. Where the kitchen calmed Adrini, fucking was the only thing that calmed Teague.

After meeting Kate, he had realized that this was rather typical of their kind, especially in the last few centuries. Their longer pubescence, coupled with the cultural desire to see anything Draconic suppressed, led to high percentages of sexual promiscuity and alcohol or other stimulant abuse.

It had been such a relief to meet Kate at first. She had recognized him right off the mark. She said she had tasted the familiarity on him, knowing that they bore the same blood.

“Drop for drop, scale for scale, claw for claw, tooth for tooth, we are of one people,” she sometimes chanted while they fucked. It was a prayer that made his soul sing. He was no longer lost.

Finally, he had found the truth, and he knew he didn’t have to hide.

That is, until Teague had realized that Kate had been lying to him as well. She had used her body to feed him a different, far more dangerous lie. But that hadn’t stopped him from returning to her bed and turning a blind eye to her religious fervor.

It also hadn’t stopped him from figuring out whether her claims about the Prophetess of Plenty were false too. It had intrigued him and he had turned to the Uthyri and Panthemia to find whether their words were any more or less satisfying than Kate’s. He had also flirted with those that preached heathen and decadent ways contrary to both the Book of Uthyr and the House. Those had been some especially licentious events at one of the grandest houses on the Horn, both Baron and Lady

Caereme had been appreciative of his beauty but had done nothing to assuage his guilt or give satisfactory answers to his questions. But right now, after having covered the dirty dishes with icy vomit and revealing himself to Adrini and her family.

That his carefully liqueur creation had not even placed in the All-Hands Harvest Festival awards had hardly registered amongst all the other great happenings in his life. And now this. All Teague wanted to do was lay his head in Kate's lap and just ignore the existential.

Except tonight, Kate was in a strangely exuberant mood. Never in the year that he had known her had she mentioned that she was a sausage maker. Yards and yards of fat links were festooned around the kitchen area of her living quarters. The mixed scent of different types of charcuterie hung in the air. There was also a pot on the small stove that emitted its own unique savory scent under the heavy clouds of frost Kate breathed out to keep the sausages cool. She was ice draconi, like himself.

"What's wrong, my love?" she asked, but didn't stop from her work filling casings with what appeared to be darker pork mince mixed with chunks of garlic and thyme.

He walked over and put his arms around her slim waist. He buried his face in her thick, black hair and inhaled the mixed aroma in the air alongside her perfume and the pure scent of her skin.

"Don't squeeze the life out of me," she gasped. "I've got to finish these for the Feast."

"I didn't know you *made* sausages," he said feeling a smile creep onto his lips.

“Oh, a friend of mine asked me to lend a hand for the Feast,” she said, seemingly not catching his double entendre. Kate had somewhat of a deficit of humor.

“What Feast?” He muttered into the hollow of her neck.

“The one at the Priory of Hallow Sant.”

“The Beggars’ Feast?” Teague asked, more than a little surprised.

She knocked her head back into his nose.

“Ow.”

“Don’t call it that. It’s not nice. Give me a second, I’ll wash up.”

The Three-Day Feast, also known as the Beggars’ Feast, was hosted by the Panthemia clerics and the few Uthyri monks in the city, and it was also supported by the Alimental Authority as part of the charitable nature of the harvest. He never expected Kate to be there or care about it, but once again she was full of surprises.

She finished filling and tying off the last foot of sausages. Then she untied the strings holding the kitchen sleeves to her upper arms and removed them and washed her hands. Kate then removed her dirty dress and Teague couldn’t help but scoop her up and deposit her on her bed. She shrieked and giggled but did not protest when he immediately kissed his way down her belly, untied and pulled off her petticoat, and used his mouth to pleasure her. She was more than happy to reciprocate after his tongue and fingers coaxed such lovely growls and a satisfying peak of pleasure.

Except he couldn’t rise to the occasion.

*Fuck!*

His lover wasn't deterred however, especially when her fingers found their way to his rear, but it was no use. There was a complete block between his desires and his body.

"What's wrong?" she purred looking at him with her golden eyes with their Draconic slit pupils. She put a hand on his chest and he looked down at her navy colored nails.

Talons actually, they weren't fingernails. Humans, elves, dwarves, and halflings had fingers. draconi had claws with talons. Kate even had patches of scales on her hips, shoulders, knees, and elbows.

The strangest thing about Teague was that he had no outwardly draconic features. Even his looks were given the descriptors of "handsome" or "beautiful" instead of "exotic" or "striking" as most draconi were thought of. The only thing that had ever truly marked him as anything but human were his ice glands that sometimes turned spittle into a frozen gel or vomit into shards of ice like the previous night when his body rejected the food of the Hacarrean islands. Even though it never had before.

Or had it been the contents of the necklace that Lyreon and Hemmie had given to Adrini? Had some residue of the glowing insect made its way through the cut on this thumb? He hadn't thought of that until now. Was it still inside his body? Could he somehow make Kate sick? She seemed fine, rubbing her cheek against his chest and casually stroking his still limp cock with her hand.

"I was a bit ill earlier this night," he admitted.

"Draconi don't get sick," she said.

True, most draconi, even many milkings, were unsusceptible to human illnesses. Their dragon blood gave them stronger constitutions than that of a dwarf.



“Stress,” he lied.

“Such a human weakness,” Kate said, darkness taking over her expression, her hand a bit too tight on tender parts.

“Careful there, love.”

She released her grip. “I know what will help.”

She got up and ladled some of the contents of the pot into a bowl. He inhaled the heady aroma of a rich stew with finely diced meats in a reddish gravy.

“My grandmother’s recipe for all that ails,” she said patting his thigh. “I imagine it’ll perk you right up.”

It was actually delicious, rich and warm. “I never realized you were such a good cook,” he said.

“Just because I don’t believe in the whore, doesn’t mean I don’t like food.”

“I know,” Teague said, not wanting to hear another rant about the “false prophetess” right now. “You’ve just always had a such sparse larder.”

Kate shrugged, tracing her foreclaw in swirls on his back. “We can’t all live or work with chefs.”

“What meat is this?” Teague asked after the last bite. He had noticed that some of the pieces had a different texture than others.

She didn’t answer. Instead, she took the empty bowl from him and put it aside. She pushed him back and grabbed each of his wrists. With a pair of discarded stockings, she secured his arms to the bedposts. When he tugged at the restraints, he was a bit worried at first that they were rather tight. It would be a fight to free his hands.

Excitement and trepidation rushed through his body, finally pushing the blood into his groin.

“That was some stew,” he said.

“Shut it,” Kate said before shoving another of her stockings into his mouth.

This wasn’t a new game between them, but there was an added excitement he had not felt in their dynamic before. She rode him like some ancient dragon rider, expecting to be bucked off at any minute before mating with the godlike beast as some draconi legends went. Her thighs gripped his hips and her hands dug into his chest, actually piercing the skin. But Teague was flooded with such a swirl of sensations from the warm stew soothing his belly to the slickness of Kate’s cunny and the strength of her hands. It was no surprise that he was able to climax, but she did not relinquish, continuing to shimmy up and down on his still hard cock, her eyes rolled back in bliss.

Sometime after his own second climax, she rolled off of him and sat beside him breathing deeply. He tried to mutter through the gag, but she swatted his thigh.

“Shush, you can stay there for a bit,” she said, her voice darker than he’d ever heard it before and once again he was a bit frightened of her. In their courtship he had discovered she was indeed physically stronger than he. More than once she had beat him at arm wrestling as her muscles were strengthened with a stronger concentration of the blood and bone of their Draconic ancestors.

“I’ve got to finish the sausages before the meat goes bad,” she said.

Kate redressed and pulled the gag from his mouth, but did not untie his hands. Deciding to play her game he tried to relax and not say anything.

Instead, Teague thought, wondering how he was going to explain everything to Adrini. She had to understand, right? How hard it was to be anything that wasn’t human, elf, dwarf, or halfling. To be a part of a fractured community that was half hidden and settling for a fraction of a normal life. Most people didn’t understand

how scattered draconi culture was. That they were in fact a race apart from dragons and humans; that in all likelihood, thousands of years ago in this valley, they were their own people and civilization just like the incoming settlers from other lands.

Perhaps it was in the innate variability that had culminated in their predicament. Parents and children rarely looked like one another. His own mother, Kearyn Margo, was so dragon-like she'd had webbed toes and hands and no body hair. She hadn't even been able to nurse him as she'd had no nipples or milk to give when she'd finally freed her clawless, black haired babe from his egg. And unlike her son, Kearyn had neither ice nor fire glands.

Teague wondered if somehow draconi were like apples, the pips never resembling the fruit that carried them. He had learned this from Vincinna when she took him to the orchards that grew the smaller apples for cider, versus the bigger fruits that were for eating.

*“In order to get the same kinds of apples, you have to cut a branch from one tree and graft it on to another,”* she once told him. *“Because if you plant any of the five seeds from the apple, you’ll get five completely different cultivars. No one’s really sure why.”*

Maybe draconi were indeed like apples, or maybe it was a curse. Some kind of long ago wrong that plagued their blood.

Or maybe the time of the draconi was ending, just as the time of the dragons had nearly thousands and thousands of years ago.

Hardly the attitude Kate would have tolerated, so Teague kept his mouth shut while she continued to make sausages.

She pulled out a hunk of meat and some pieces of offal from one of the ice-walled chests and started to carve everything into smaller pieces in order to fit it through her grinder.

Curiosity got the better of his tongue, as it often did. “What kind of meat is that?” he asked.

The large piece of musculature had a fat cap and flesh like a duck breast, but it was larger than any waterfowl Teague had ever seen, even in the dim light of Kate’s room. He could see that the structure of the fat was...all wrong, and the kidneys and heart were the wrong size for duck organs as well.

Kate looked at him over the top of her grinder and asked a morbid question, “Do you ever wonder if our dragon ancestors preferred the taste of human over that of dwarf or elf or halfling?”

“I had never given it much thought,” Teague replied. He hadn’t ever given it a thought really. Venison, pork, beef, and poultry suited his tastes just fine.

After a long pause, she broke the straining silence. “They taste like wild pigs,” Kate said, her voice such a dark, rich purr it felt like mink fur sliding over his skin.

“Um, what?”

Dread settled in his stomach as he watched her dropping hunks of meat and fat into the grinder, turning the handle with effortless cranks. He casually tugged at the stockings, but they were of thin, but well woven wool.

“Humans,” she said, almost absentmindedly as if the conversation were the most normal thing in the world. “They taste like wild pigs that have fed themselves on bread and meat and fish and beer.”

This time he didn't even try to disguise his attempts to free himself. Teague pulled and pulled on his restraints, the fabric itching small wounds into his straining skin.

"Now elves, they're tricky. Mimi says their flesh is like that of a deer, but I'm of the opinion it's closer to that of an ostrich. Have you ever had ostrich?"

Teague was in such shock he could barely shake his head. He was well aware of his mouth hanging open and the cold vapor emanating from Kate's mouth. Never in his life had he been cold, a benefit of his ice glands, but he suddenly understood that phrase "chilled to the bone."

"Now this," Kate said, indicating the hunk of meat in front of her. She moved her thin, razor sharp knife through it and held up a near paper-thin sliver of the scarlet meat. "The smallfolk, they taste like duck. The fattest ones have such silky livers that are just delightful on toast. Better than butter."

She held out the piece of raw meat to him. He looked at the sausages around the room and he felt the bile rising up in his throat again for the second time that night. He looked over at the pot of stew and felt even sicker.

"Oh gods, what was in that?" he wanted to shout, but found himself gagging instead.

Kate cocked her head to one side and placed the raw meat on her tongue and chewed. The look of hedonistic bliss on her face almost exceeding that of the one she had enjoyed while straddling him barely minutes ago.

"I believe at the High Larder your dear friend makes a different dish with a similar ingredient called 'lamb fries?' Well, these were a mixture of other kinds of fries. There were several pairs to spare."

He could feel the bile rising. The gagging straining the muscles in his stomach in protest at the second assault on his stomach that night started to roil.

Kate leaned close and whispered in his ear, “If you throw up my hard work, I will make you eat it again.”

What had happened to his lover? Who was this bitch?

“Now, I’m sure you’re wondering what do our fellow dragon-folk taste like?” she asked, which was about as far from Teague’s thoughts as the moon was from the shore.

“We dragons,” she purred, “We taste like magic.”

Teague fought every natural instinct and tried to breathe through his nose to calm down, but doing that just sent the smell of the sausages in the room deeper into his brain.

The worst part was that they still smelled so delicious, even in their raw, pink state. He was a creature of the cold. Adrini’s food reminiscent of spice and heat always paled in comparison to frigid flesh. Fire was a medium of good food, but the truly delicious to Teague had always been that of the cold. It was what had attracted him to brewing, fire was only on the periphery of the enchantments that yielded beers, ales, mead, and cordials. What happened in the vacuum state of a quiescent vat that waited for oxygen to revisit it and unleash flavor was magic.

After several moments of reflection and deep breaths, he was ready to speak again.

“What the fuck are you?” Teague asked her.

Kate lowered her head again, staring at him, their eyes locked together, her hair tickling his bound left hand.

“I am but penitent before the Eternal Frost and Flame. You’ve known who I am and who I serve for months. It hasn’t stopped you from coming around to fuck me or the friends we send your way.”

As she spoke, he wound his fingers in the tendrils of her hair. It was a masquerade, it helped her walk the world as a spy and he was going to use it as a weapon against her. And he let her continue to speak, her words coming out as feverish breaths.

“What has this,” he gestured as best he could at the sausages, “got to do with anything?”

“Oh, this is just common sense. ‘Waste not, want not,’” she quoted. “There’s always so many of our kind at the Beggars’ Feast, always ignored by the city.” She spat on his cheek, a shard of hard ice spattering into his skin. “Especially during the Festival of the Whore.”

This was it. He balled his hand and her hair into a fist and used all the leverage he could in his prone state to pull. It was undignified and unmanly, but who the fuck cared when a crazy bitch, who had fed you a stew of testicles and was making halfling sausages, had you by the balls?

She shrieked and he bellowed, both of their cries in rage.

Kate tried to pull her hair away, but his fingers, so used to twisting caps off unyielding bottles without an opener, were strong and were locked tight. She raked her talons on his chest and belly, their struggle locked until he felt his bonds loosen as they stretched and finally his hand slipped through the knotted circle. He did not let go of her hair, instead he levered his body and arm against her weight to bring him under her. She still raked at his tender skin with such force that the smell of his blood started to meet his nose.

“Hedonist! Traitor!” she screamed.

He tugged and tugged at the bonds on his right wrist, the effort leaving abrasions as the bonds twisted into his skin, but finally it came free as well. And then with his other hand he seized another handful of her hair and butted his head against hers.

Of course, in the blind attack, he received a return injury, her chin hit his brow and they both broke apart. She lifted her hand to her mouth, blood seeping down. Had she bit her lip or tongue in the process? He didn't care. He lunged and tackled her and this time her head hit the back of the table bearing the sausage making instruments and she fell limply to the floor.

Panting he searched for his clothes. Also, on the floor he spotted some papers and on instinct he pocketed them and then picked up the large knife on the cutting board next to the cubed pile of halfling meat. He fought back another roil of nausea at the macabre surroundings.

Teague turned to Kate's unconscious form and knew he should bring the sharp blade across her throat.

Except he couldn't. He tried several times to strike but each time her prone form came back into focus and he remembered that he thought he had loved her. That Kate had been the one person who had understood him.

He had been so lost for so long. Adrini was actually the only one he truly loved and cared for as deeply as though she were his own kin and yet he'd never entrust her with his deepest secret. He had wandered from temple to temple, visiting the House and the Pories, reveling in the hedonism of Mauvine Crest, and even a few excursions into the Carinet and up the Strugyrst to learn of the dwarfish Artisans and elven Sky Spirits. He had been looking for a reason, but had found nothing.



Teague had thought he'd found something with Kate and her interpretations of the words of Uthyr Greatwing, but now he could see that was all a lie as well.

Teague dropped the knife and did what he had always done in life; he ran and he would hide.

## PART TWO: THE BANQUEST AND OTHER FEASTS

“We are all, quite simply, the fruits from the orchard, the vegetables in the field, the bread fresh out of the oven, or the wine flowing from a cask.” –Ursula Raymorne

### **Chapter Eleven: Okoias**

The Bountiful Arena was one of the smaller competitive venues in the city, just off the waterfront near the Horn lift, but it didn't host any kind of sporting events. That lent to the exclusivity of affairs like the Spring Fete's Bake-In and the displays of prizewinning harvest fruits, vegetables, and livestock before the year's culmination of the Banquest. Other competitions like the winter ice sculpture carving and the summer drama festival were also featured for up to five thousand people with a skybox for even more elite attendees. But this morning it was a center point of damage and chaos.

Under the sound of fellow city-watchers milling about, collecting evidence, and asking questions was the sound of banners fluttering in the early morning breeze. There were advertisements for companies sponsoring the festival and Banquest and their products, from the Spooner's legendary kitchen equipment to restaurants that promised “unparalleled dining experiences on the Horn.” One of the banners had sustained damage of its own, splitting in half a smiling woman's face holding up a cup of some liquid that “perks up your...” something. Morning? Life? Cup? “Perks up your cup?” The company's logo must have been in the bottom corner which had been torn away in the explosion.

The cooking stations appeared to be the main targets. They had been arranged so that the halfling and dwarf sized seats in the stands could easily view their fellows' cooking without being hampered by the taller races. Dozens of the smaller seats were ravaged and all but two of the bantam sized portable kitchens were beyond repair. Some indiscernible instrument had cleaved off pieces of countertop and stoves, almost as though a giant hammer had struck. But then where had all the liquid come from? Sludgy and gelatinous-like puddles of wood and iron were dotted all over this side of the arena.

On opposite sides of the arena floor, between the kitchens and the stadium seats, one of the two large, crystalline sound amplifiers had also been destroyed. What had originally been a large concave disk about thirty feet across that could amplify an announcer speaking into its miniature twin crystal was now nothing but a bunch of shattered magic. The tiny shards resembled raindrops that would never seep into the ground and return back to the cycle of life.

She had just bent over and picked up what used to be a piece of a carving board when Captain Fisher called for her.

"Okoias? What's the damage?" he asked. Captain Fisher was a tall human, but lanky and wiry, like some kind of birch tree come to life. He also had a rather gentle voice, but the kind of gaze and presence that made one feel like his silence was a blade rather than a balm.

In answer she lifted the piece of wood closer to her nose and inhaled. The strangest sensation went off in her mind and she wanted to proclaim that the damage smelled like winter.

No, not winter.

Like ice.

Her mind went back to the conversation with Doctor Linnrom a few weeks ago. Had it been weeks ago? She and Crenn had been so damn busy with the serious, but rather petty, criminals that always popped up around the festival. The ones that sold fake tickets to events like the Banquest, illegal foodstuffs for parties that wished they were as grand as the Caereme's Nimius, and general riff raff and squabbles excited by the influx of the harvest attendees. It had taken them a week to find the pair of lowlifes selling tainted green rush, which had sickened over two-dozen pipe weed smokers. But she still replayed as much of Linnrom's words when Okoias found herself in the quiet either in the office with Crenn or at night after Briar had drifted off to sleep.

Ice as a destructive force. Any dwarf could tell you how much trouble ice could be. How it could creep into rock structures and freeze, destabilizing centuries of work in a fierce winter frost. Or how ice had carved out masses in mountains over the centuries. Even the Keane Valley was suspected to have mostly been under ice and water hundreds of thousands of years ago. Perhaps even millions of years.

"It's like everything was damaged by some kind of mortar, but the effect was ice and frost, not fire," Okoias mused.

Captain Fisher must have been thinking along those same lines because he nodded. Though he was human, he had graduated from the university with a degree in draconi biology and history. A difficult study as draconi history was garbled by fierce wars with the elves, dwarves, and halflings over a few millennia, and their biology, while theoretically sound, was just as perplexing as when humans mixed their blood with elves, dwarves, and halflings. Still, it meant he had a stronger grasp on issues between the draconi residents of the city and the government. Did he know

something of Linnrom's own weaponizing of his ice gland secretions? Was there some university text that chronicled historical uses of it?

It felt strange that she didn't know this part of her peoples' history. Okoias had been trying to get Albius, a fellow orphan raised at the House, to talk to her, but as he had been recently invested as a high priest, he had been harder to make a meeting with than Linnrom.

Indicating that she should follow him, Captain Fisher led Okoias over to a small puddle that didn't appear to have any detritus like dirt or gelatinized wood or iron in it. She pulled off her regulation gloves once more and dipped a finger into the ooze. It was cold, so cold it felt like the tip of her finger was on fire. But no, she knew fire. Fire was her friend. This stuff was like a cooling tonic only instead of relief, it brought pain.

"Is it cold when you touch it?" she asked with a hiss.

"Well, for fuck's sake, stop touching it," the captain said, pulling her hand away. She didn't realize she still had her finger in the sludge.

No way was she putting that stuff in her mouth. She wiped the offensive goo off with a handkerchief and then looked around for some way to discard it.

But then she had an idea.

"We should collect it," she said to Captain Fisher.

"Chief is on his way to the Authority head offices now to discuss options, until then, we best not do anything until they say so."

"The Alimental Authority is now in charge of law and order in the city?" Okoias asked.

"Don't be foolish, Kallista," Captain Fisher said. "You know better. The baron is just as powerful as the mayor, maybe even more so and especially now."

“He said he’s retiring,” Okoias muttered.

“Because those businesses of his and his wife are about to become the treasury in this town,” Captain Fisher said. “Their canneries and factories are about to feed the world. They’ll basically start minting all the money.”

She huffed, but of course she knew all this. Yet another reason to disdain the Caeremes. They always wanted more and more and more and they always got it.

But who would try to damage the arena and sabotage the Banquest? Certainly not the Baron or Lady Caereme. This had to be the work of the Gold Prophet. It made sense. In his previous acts of destruction, he had never claimed credit. Other criminals, rebels, and terrorists of various causes would all point their fingers at one another, while the Gold Prophet’s silent circle would weave more webs throughout the city to catch up vulnerable draconi to join their cause.

Okoias was sure the names on her list were people who had been unwilling to play his games. Or were they victims caught between the rising greed of the Caeremes and some other element? Like the Gold Prophet?

Her finger still throbbed so she went in search of something to warm it up.

A beautiful runner by the name of Constable Green had set up a table in one of the arena’s tunnels with several carafes of coffee and baskets of baked goods and fruit donated by the Authority. She went straight for a crescent roll filled with marzipan and held it in her mouth while she poured some coffee. On top of everything else, tomorrow was the start of her three-day fast. No food during the sunlit hours, only unsweetened coffee and water for her. She would be meditating on the state of her body and the nature of food as to how it fed both the vessel of flesh and the spirit within. How it was all things in one, just as Panthemia was all beliefs in pursuit of life and faith under one creed.

*Note to self*, she thought as she stuck her finger in the hot dark liquid and sighed in relief. *And stay away from ice draconi mouths.*

“Always with the coffee,” she heard a voice from behind her, or rather behind and below. Inspector Mimosa Rosewater was also making a beeline for the coffee and pastries.

“Hey Mim,” Okoias replied through a mouthful of almond paste and flaky pastry.

“Where’s Crenn?” Rosewater asked.

“He’s got the delightful job of helping Irvine interview witnesses,” Okoias said.

They both laughed, knowing how much both men hated drawing that short straw of duty.

Rosewater pointed down the tunnel at what had been the kitchens for the halfling and dwarf Banquestors.

“You think someone’s not happy about Goldenmead and Broganar?” she asked.

“Why would they?” Okoias asked.

“Three bites at the apple, broadsheets are saying its favoritism and unfair.”

“Enough that someone or some-ones would resort to terrorism?” Okoias asked.

“Plenty of some-ones that take the Banquest as seriously as they do religion, especially among my people.”

That thought hadn’t occurred to Okoias. She naturally assumed the perpetrators were bent on chaos of a broader kind. Could it be something as simple as a rivalry between the supporters of Broganar versus Philippa Goldenmead?

No, that didn't track with the cold substance that had nearly given her frostbite.

"What do we know about the guards?" Rosewater asked.

"Two of the guards employed by the Authority are dead and the two employed by the city as extra security for the festival are missing," Okoias said and then she asked, "When are you going to do your thing?"

"Energy," Rosewater said with a mouth full of fried dough and powdered sugar. She chewed, swallowed, took a sip of coffee and then reiterated, "Need energy. I was up all night with Alexis, he's teething."

"On top of everything else, eh?" Okoias replied.

Rosewater nodded and sighed. She pulled out her compass and started triangulating where northwest was in order to strengthen the spiritual channel between Raymorne and the Rivers and Barrow, essentially the heart of a halfling's universe. Unlike elves and dwarves, who seemed to have many variations on their blood across the world, the smallfolk of Rosewater's people belonged to the continent of Broma alone. Oleena, Crenn's Muani wife, was a *dwarf*, but not a dwarf of the like of the Strugyrst or the Great Karisic Range at the top of the continent. It used to be the same was thought of in dragons as well. There were reports of dragons in places like Shudo, Hang-Que, and Kuai, but those dragons didn't have wings. The long-ago ancestors of Okoias's people had once bore wings.

Crenn, Irvine, and Okoias all gathered around Rosewater as she prepared to summon her River Guide. From a pocket she pulled out a bottle of water captured from the Wellspring at the Barrow, which was said to be a mixture of all the waters of the world distilled into the five rivers that fed it. Magic borrowed as much from actual nature as it did from myth; great mysteries that were pondered over at the



University as the world continued to change. In a wooden bowl she'd carved herself, Inspector Rosewater gathered up some of the packed earth of the floor of the arena and also deposited some of the still icy sludge into the bowl as well. Normally, she worked with hairs from a victim—blood was too intense and volatile—but she had done similar work at locations of arson and other property damage, although the River Guides were finnickier and answered when *they* willed. It was not in their nature to care about non-living things, those without spirits or souls. However, they could retrace the steps of living creatures like a transcendent tracker or ranger.

The River Guides could also take many forms, often of river creatures such as waterfowl, beavers, frogs, and even dragonflies. Rosewater's was a bluebelly otter. Even in its ethereal form, the telltale silver-blue stomach was clearly indicated in the strange gaseous liquid body. It emerged out of the bowl nose first as though it had honed in on a scent. It lazily drifted about, greeting Rosewater by flowing around her body in an affectionate greeting. The otter took notice of the damage and skittered through the wreckage. No matter how many times Okoias watched Rosewater work this enchantment it left her stunned, proof that magic still existed in the world. Magic was as solid as one of Oleena's sweet rolls hot from the oven or one of Briar's bewitching kisses.

According to the guide, after working backwards from the main icy explosion, several persons of interest entered the arena from the entrance that faced the southern waterfront where the most likely witnesses were ships sleeping in the harbor. It wasn't a commercial harbor, but a leisurely one, on the other side of the city from the warehouses and fish markets. Even the lift up the Horn would have been quiescent in the early hours of the morning. The otter identified several clusters

of fresh footprints in the packed earth where it had been combed over for the Banquest the night before.

“They probably came in off the water,” Rosewater suggested. The others agreed with her.

“But when?” Crenn asked.

“Had to be long before last night,” Irvine said. “These berths would’ve been full for at least a week before the festival’s beginning.”

“We’ll have to track down the local quartermaster then,” Rosewater said. She was smiling as the otter flittered about. It suddenly perked up its head and zoomed back into the arena. The four inspectors raced to follow it. It led them to another entrance tunnel closer to the entrance square of the arena, back to where one of the dead guards had been found. His blood still stained the ground, though the body had already been packed into a stretcher in the back of a cart headed for the Third District morgue. Okoias signaled down one of the coroners’ group members and as she did so the River Guide did the most curious thing: it went for Okoias. Not in a threatening way, but like a playful child intent on exploring what was in the pockets of her jacket. The immaterial hands pawed at the pocket where she kept her list of names.

Okoias looked at Crenn, who knew where she kept the source of her constant ruminations of late. He lifted a quizzical eyebrow where Irvine and Rosewater laughed.

“Fish in your pocket?” Rosewater asked.

“I had fishcakes for dinner last night,” Okoias lied.

They chuckled again and Irvine and Rosewater followed the otter as it continued to flitter about on the last legs of its lifespan.

Out of the corner of his mouth Crenn muttered, “What was that about?”

“Probably just read my feelings.”

The coroner’s assistant approached Okoias and asked what she needed.

“Anything unusual with the body of this guard?” Okoias asked.

“Just that his truncheon was missing. He’s got a blow on the back of his head so leading theory is someone must’ve hit him with his own weapon.”

“Nothing else?” Okoias asked.

“Bunch of papers found under his body, mostly flyers and such.”

Intrigued she asked to see them.

At the cart, they pulled out the evidence envelope and handed it to Okoias. She looked through the papers, indeed flyers for events like the Font of Offerings celebration at the House, for the harvest festival feast at Priory of Hollow Sant, also known pejoratively as “the Beggars’ Feast.” There was also blood on the papers, but dried, days old blood.

“Can you get anything off it?” Crenn asked her as he held a torn bill of sale for a portable meat grinder purchased over a year ago. The manufacturer’s label was inconveniently absent.

“Too old,” Okoias said.

The last page was a copy of this year’s Caereme Nimius invitation. Not an official invitation, it was on the wrong paper, but a copy right down to the flourishes in the lettering and where the gilded edges would have been. It too was stained in old blood. Crenn raised his eyebrows at it and swore under his breath.

She thanked the assistant and pulled Crenn back into the arena to look at the destruction once more.

“What do you make of Rosewater’s Guide?” Okoias asked him.

“That it’s giving you some kind of excuse to follow your feint of an investigation instead of the one at hand,” he cautioned.

“What if it is part of all this? Maybe the Caeremes are the ones behind my list and this,” she gestured with her hand at the bloodstain on the ground and at the damaged arena, “and not the Gold Prophet?”

“The truth will emerge in good time,” he cautioned. “Not when you go off halfcocked or single-mindedly.”

They spotted Captain Fisher talking to Irvine and Rosewater. The captain told them that a few witnesses on the northern side of the arena facing into the city had spotted a young man and were working with sketch artists to come up with a composite. That would take several hours and Okoias was itching to visit the House and ask more of the clerics there. Possibly even have a chance to speak to Albius in private.

“Sir,” she said, “the guard was found with flyers for the Font of Offerings that’s today at the House. Perhaps Crenn and I could go there and ask around once we have the composite.”

Crenn gave a cough of annoyance, but Fisher nodded in approval.

“As soon as we have flyers printed you can go, but the Authority wants us to keep combing the streets around the arena in the meantime. Make sure there’s no surprises that’ll disrupt the start of the Banquest.”

This time Crenn made a louder and ruder noise of protest.

“I agree,” Fisher said, his own words measured to avoid disclosing his true displeasure at the situation. “I kept telling the baron he should postpone, but he wouldn’t hear of it. They’re having a meeting to determine how to proceed, and

damn the inconveniences. He's bringing in masons and a crew to clean up the damages as fast as possible."

"Sir?" Okoias asked but Fisher responded to her unasked question.

"I've ordered the specialty clean-up crew to take the mysterious substance into the alchemical lab to determine what it is and where it came from."

They had their orders. Okoias, Crenn, Irvine, and Rosewater were going to be knocking on doors for the next few hours in any case.

Okoias scowled at the "perk up your cup" banner. Something told her there was not enough coffee in the world to get her through the day or the rest of the festival week.

## Chapter Twelve: Adrini

*Damn you, Teague. May all the stars never light your way again, you lying jerk.*

Although her thoughts said one thing, Adrini knew in her heart that she was truly worried about Teague. She was more worried about her friend than the ruckus at the arena and how the Banquest was going to proceed. When she first heard the news that the arena had been damaged by vandals, Adrini had half-hoped the Banquest would be cancelled and she could just return to the High Larder and worry about Teague there.

Instead of meeting at the arena as previously instructed, the Alimental Authority had sent runners to the Banquestors and told them to meet at the Authority headquarters. It was there they were told about what had happened to the Bountiful Arena and that they were trying to come up with a solution to allow the competition to commence on schedule. The grays then asked the competitors about any threats or suspicious activity in their lives. Adrini did not tell them about Teague because it was none of their damn business and had nothing to do with what had happened.

Now they were all just waiting. Adrini couldn't help but notice the sweat breaking out on her palms and on her brow.

"At least the food is good," Mabb said as he tucked into a second grilled flatbread, topped with a butternut squash sauce, a sharp nutty cheese, roasted figs, and arugula greens. Trays of food were all over the room, catering to the diverse palates of the competitors.

Adrini had only sampled the ginger tea. It was the only thing she could trust her stomach with.

“They’re fattening us up so they can eat us,” Renata said, barely containing a fit of giggles. Adrini suspected though it was more from the nervousness at the delay rather than her own joke.

Just to have something to hold, Adrini reached for a copy of the city’s most popular newspaper, the *Seed and Spectator*, and opened it at random. Instead of being relieved, she was reminded why she never read the broadsheets in the first place. Her eyes honed right on the column with a plea for information on the disappearance of “our most dear sisters and friends, Phanessa and Infys...” The etching of the half-elf siblings made Adrini grip the paper so hard it crackled. Too much chaos and sadness in the world. It never ended.

“Can I have that?”

She looked, well, not up, but into the big eyes of Philippa Goldenmead. She had been quite an unpleasant person to sit next to during the afternoon tea. But then again, perhaps Adrini would be more boastful and extremely self-assured if she were a two-time Banquest champion and the figurehead of one of the city’s most influential culinary families.

“Before you rip it?” Her tone was not demeaning, but being a former champion, Adrini was sure she loathed that some newbie, unimportant competitor, had managed to snag the last free copy of the S&S.

She handed it to the halfling woman without a word and then unconsciously put her forefinger in her mouth and started to chew on Hemmie’s careful work of filing and buffing her nails. At least her father had helped braid up her hair so that she wasn’t constantly pulling at and twirling errant strands. In all honesty, it was the best hairstyle she’d ever had. Lyreon had sectioned off five neat rows of braids on the crown of her head. Then he had worked one of Hemmie’s balms into her hair,

twisted what felt like a hundred locks all around her scalp, and in the morning untwisted the careful work so that it looked like she had a beautiful bouquet of curls bursting a black halo around her nut-brown face. For the cooking part of the Banquest, she had decided to wear the sage green shirt, black trousers, and gray apron she wore every shift at the High Larder. She still felt like she hadn't earned the blue chef's shirt yet.

Pulling her finger out of her mouth, she fiddled with her spoon necklace instead.

"That's really neat," Renata said, leaning in for a closer look. She reached out her hand in a silent ask to see it. Afraid that it would sicken her as well, Adrini tried to keep it as far away as she could without seeming rude.

It wouldn't do to accidentally poison one of her competitors. After Teague (*damn him*) had fled the house, leaving her to clean up his sick, Hemmie had pulled out her own vial of the insect essence from her naturalist case. She, being the curious daughter of her tribe's medicine woman, scooped up some of the sick and put it in a jar. When she added in a few more drops of the shimmering fluid, the vomit hissed and popped like onions did when added to hot oil, further confirming what the ice crystals had. That she was wearing something toxic to draconi was both a comfort and felt like some clarion call for trouble.

"It's from Cold Sun Beetles, they glow in the dark and they're found in the Hacarrean and Unified Territories," Adrini explained.

Apparently, Renata had never heard of the insect. She half-shrugged, and half-shuddered. "Never been a fan of beetles and the way they hide their wings under their asses."



Mabb gave an appreciative chuckle as he flipped through the rather dull *Keane Recorder*, a publication focusing almost exclusively on index prices and economic market trends. There was an advertisement for Arrow Pont Industries and a mass hiring for their new factory to the south of the city.

The din in the room was snuffed out when the door opened and the senior Alimental Authority members came in, followed by the judges and commentators. Once again Adrini couldn't help but admire the charisma and beauty of Baron Caereme, even though such features were ineffective in securing her attentions.

"We have reached a decision," Baron Caereme began, curiously hesitant as he normally radiated pure confidence. "And please remember that this was not an easy one."

Adrini held her breath, half-hoping that the Banquest would be cancelled, and half-furious that it would be cancelled.

Baron Caereme continued, "In the spirit of Ursula Raymorne and the nature of camaraderie and unity that food represents, for the first time ever, the first round of the Banquest will be fought in pairs. The intent will be to produce one, single and unique dish together for the first round. The goal will be to complete a singular plate that reflects both of your styles and your teamwork, and this will also be a criterion that the judges will be observing. After the tasting two pairs will be eliminated and the contest should continue as planned."

All sixteen Banquest contestants went silent. Some looked around at each other. From the corner of her eye, Adrini saw the fury and anger on the faces of Philippa Goldenmead and Zachris Twine. She never realized how furious a halfling could look. Next to her, Mabb held on to the *Recorder* as though it were grounding his reality. Renata merely picked at a loose thread in her colorful skirt,

“We know this is a shock,” the head of the Alimental Authority continued. “We feel this to be the only way to avoid cancellation or delay of the event or unfair advantages in height disparities if you were forced to share kitchens as competitors. Because of this we will also be revealing the first secret ingredient before you enter the arena. That way you may confer with your teammate and discover between yourselves each other’s talents.”

Philippa Goldenmead raised her hand, her gaze split between Puck and the back of her cousin Jacque’s head. Although Adrini hated gossip, she wondered what the full story was. Her own family dynamics were complicated things when one was half-human and half-elf, but Adrini had heard of some halfling peoples holding grudges on such a grand scale it could make a dwarf say they were being unreasonable.

“Yes, Philippa?” Baron Caereme said.

“How will these pairs be determined?”

Cassius the Authority member stepped forward with a bag that clicked as he jiggled it. “We’ve selected 8 pairs of game tiles for everyone to choose from and it’s all in the luck of the draw.”

“What about the kitchens?” asked the halfling Gabriel Galley. “What about accommodations for those of us being paired with taller folk?”

Adrini thought it was interesting, the concerns of Philippa Goldenmead versus Gabriel Galley.

“The arena is still being cleaned up and we assure you, stools and kitchen implements will be adjusted accordingly, as much as we are able,” Baron Caereme said. “This is the best solution that does not mean we give up our values or the importance of the contest and of our Founding Mother.”

Adrini thought she heard Renata snort, but maybe it was just a sniff.

Giving the bag another dramatic shake, Cassius began moving around the room extending the chance offerings to each contestant. She wondered if she wanted Mabb or Renata as a teammate, or did she want someone she had yet to form a bond with? Would that be easier? She was entirely comfortable working in a team after all, but voicing her own opinions was still something she struggled with. Merritt was always trying to coax ideas out of her, and it wasn't like she never cooked her own dishes, but never in front of her High Larder peers. She was always experimenting at home on Teague (*damn him*). He had rarely complained about her combinations, and it wasn't like Teague was ever uncomfortable voicing his opinions.

There were less than a quarter of the tiles left when Cassius reached her, Mabb, and Renata. She grabbed the first one her sweaty fingers could get a grip on. She held it tight, still not sure what she wanted. Adrini was sure she would be helplessly miserable if she were paired with a superstar Philippa, Magnus, or Broganar. That would be like a mouse laboring to keep up with a lion.

Unclenching her fingers, Adrini looked down at the tile in her hand. It was the bear tile. Not a sign of submission then, at least. Bear tiles were pieces that helped players navigate the river in one of the more popular tile games.

"Bear," Adrini said, holding out her game piece.

"Where!" Mabb asked, looking around in mock panic. He chuckled at his own joke and held out his. "Moose."

"Goose tastes better," Renata said. "I've got the raven."

"You're on your way to attempted murder then?" Mabb said. Both Adrini and Renata giggled this time.

The room was shuffled chaos as they all tried to find their unexpected partners.

Hers turned out to be the other halfling man, Jacque Bloomer, the same one that apparently had family issues with Philippa Goldenmead. Authority members escorted the pairs to empty meeting rooms and offices around the headquarters. They were given some papers, ink, and pens and left alone for the next hour.

“Well,” Jacque began. “This is unexpected. I don’t think we had a chance to meet at the afternoon tea, did we?” He held out his hand, which looked rather large for his small frame.

She had never really associated with halflings. None had ever been employed at the High Larder, and in her previous dishwashing and butchering jobs she had always been the smallest person there.

“No.” She didn’t say anything about witnessing the scuffle between him and his cousin at the tea, or commented on his family name changing between the first broadsheets announcement and the subsequent ones.

Out of nervous habit, she made to tuck her ears under her kerchief, but she wasn’t wearing one and instead grabbed for a lock of hair and twirled it around her finger.

“Well, nice to meet you now,” Jacque said. He then pulled a piece of paper towards him, dipped a pen into some ink and started writing. Dividing the page into three columns and then in half he wrote “Best Dish,” “Strengths,” and “Weaknesses” in each column. She suppressed a chuckle; it was probably the same thing that Merritt would have done.

In her tendency to lean negative the first thing that came to mind was, “I’m terrible at elven food,” she said.

Jacque gave an amused smile. "I think even elves are terrible at elf food."

That made her like him even more.

"Although to be fair at the summer solstice the moon woman put together a nice salad with a dressing of jam-fruit and spring water," she said.

"Very true, it's not all awful. But the bread," he grimaced. "How has a race grown so mighty on such a loaf?"

"It stays in the stomach forever," Adrini said. "Allows you to dreamstate for much longer. A lot of honey helps too."

"I didn't know that."

"Besides, I don't think Vashti Carraway would appreciate us making Keeta bread."

He chuckled.

In his own "weaknesses" column Jacque put down "plating and presentation."

"I'm afraid not much design is called for in the Fork. Just wrap things up in old broadsheets."

"Well, Merritt's drilled me for weeks on how a plate should look before it goes out in the dining room."

"Wonderful. Can you make bloomer puddings look pretty?"

"You're asking for the moon it seems," Adrini replied, finally feeling a smile touch her lips.

He wrote down some of the combinations that went into his puddings down under in the first column. Her stomach grumbled at the thought of "hot peppers, onions, cheese, and sausage" in a crispy bloomer sounded amazing.

"I'm good with spicy and bold flavors. My father's Hacarrean."

“I seem to attract draconi customers, so I always keep black talon peppers on hand.”

Her stomach clenched. For a whole few minutes, she had stopped thinking about Teague, but now that was coming back.

Where was he?

## Chapter Thirteen: Jacque

Open mouth and insert big, hairy foot.

Jacque had inwardly cringed at the jest regarding elf food. For all he knew Adrini Frey eschewed animal proteins and products like many city elves did. Although that never made sense to him, plenty of books at the University library described wood and moon elf diets as being as diverse as halfling ones. He'd spent many hours there learning about the food culture, business, and history of the city in order to stay ahead where so many food stalls failed. Perhaps the penchant towards herbivorism was some kind of attempt to reclaim nature within the cityscape. Wyman and Ivonne had noted that most of the elves they had encountered deep in the Carinet were hunters and omnivores.

His gaffe about elven diets was hardly the smoothest way to make friends with someone who had gone from competitor to ally.

And would return to the former soon enough.

She had laughed though and he was relieved. He was also looking forward to picking her brain about what to do about the now not-so-secret-ingredient. She had to be a good cook to work at the High Larder under Merritt Templeton. The restaurant was another on his bucket list that he wished he could take Astrid to. At least he would get a chance to sample the wares of one of its chefs soon enough.

He scrawled on his piece of paper "height" under "Disadvantages."

"I doubt it will be a problem," Adrini said.

Jacque looked at her incredulously. "My wife is nearly six feet tall and we have customized our kitchen over many months. I doubt something put together in a few hours will suffice."

“We’ll make it work,” she said. “If we have to, we’ll both climb up and sit on the countertop and chop vegetables.”

There was a geniality to her smile that told him she was willing and able to take him on as a partner in a competition that could change their lives, even if they didn’t win. He had already seen his business boom beyond belief, having to hire Lissey and then another pair of hands so that Astrid could have a break. He’d also had offers from restaurants, cooking schools, and shops to appear, mostly he suspected because of the controversy between himself and Philippa. But he wanted to keep things low-key until the Banquest was over. He was just enjoying being a few steps above hand-to-mouth week to week.

There was a long pause. Adrini wrote down random ingredients on her piece of paper in the silence—squash, rum, bacon, golden garlic. They looked like it would go well with the first round’s main ingredient.

“It’s strange, isn’t it?” she asked. It was an open question that could encompass everything that they were both thinking in that moment.

“Quite,” Jacque admitted.

“They say we’re some of the best cooks in the city, or rather those that make it their trade.”

“Indeed,” he said.

“I didn’t ask to be entered,” Adrini said and he had a feeling she had not told anyone this.

“I wanted to prove myself to my family,” he said. “And provide a better life for my wife, child, and mother.”

“What does your mother think of your marriage?” she asked.



“Oh, I meant Astrid’s mother. My parents haven’t been back to Raymorne in forever. They work for the Westward Trading Company.”

“That’s nice that you like your wife’s mother enough to call her your own.”

“She’s Marion Goosling,” he murmured.

Adrini’s eyes went wide. “*The* Marion Goosling? I just love her walnut frangipane recipe! Your baby comes from cooking prestige on both sides then.”

“Yeah, and for all my luck she’ll only ever want to eat bread and jam like my cousin Breton.”

“You think you’ll have a daughter?”

Jacque didn’t realize he had given his child a preferred gender. But he supposed a baby girl would be more wonderful than anything else in the world. A child that would be the best of Astrid and himself should probably be a girl.

Ingredients, cooking methods, and other plusses and minuses appeared on the papers before them. Adrini also took to sketching out the idea for how they were going to plate all their components. She was no paper artist, but he could clearly see where she was going and knew it was going to look magnificent for the judges.

“It almost looks like a fairy garden,” Jacque said.

“Well, with the secret ingredient, I think we have to go that way.”

There was a knock on their door.

“Time to go down,” announced some Alimental Authority member.

They took deep breaths together, stood up and headed out to the arena as a team.

## **Chapter Fourteen: Round One of the Banquest**

On the floor of the arena the destruction had left behind some scars. Canvas awnings had been hastily put together to cover cordoned off sections that weren't safe. The Bountiful Arena had many ugly wounds, but that wasn't going to stop the greatest cooks in the city from showing off their talents.

The Authority's artisans and conjurers had done a magnificent job given the few hours they had to rearrange the kitchens. Instead of two rows of eight, they had deferred to the usual plans for the second round of the Banquest. The kitchens were aligned in an eight-pointed spark pattern, complete with brand new black as coal, cast iron gas stoves with adjustable burners on top. In the center of the kitchens was the magnificent pantry. Being the only ones needing a modulated height kitchen, the team of Broganar and Gabriel were at the northern point, facing the Authority's viewing box.

At strategic points, artists set up their stations with paper, pencils, and other implements so that they could capture the Banquest in progress. Later the drawings would become etchings and distributed to broadsheets, and collectors would snatch up original prints.

With one of the crystalline sound amplifiers damaged, Bee and Edward were going to have to do a lot more sharing than usual. There just simply wasn't time to manufacture another one, especially since the masterpieces were basically two of a dozen in the world. The thin clear discs carried sound from the matching crystals Bee or Edward would speak into, describing the contestants' dishes, and providing their own input on the furious cooking that the Banquest was.

“Ready?” Edward asked Bee as they noticed the excited buzz of the crowd was escalating.

“As I’ll ever be.”

“Do you have your notes?” Edward asked.

Opening her notebook, Bee showed Edward the joke she had come up with regarding the secret ingredient and the new twist of the Banquest pairs in the first round. He chuckled.

“Let’s do it.”

The spectators cheered in their seats, the judges watched from their vantage point, and the two commentators waited for the that moment to begin. It was like waiting for a heavy bottomed pot to get hot enough before dropping in the ingredients to begin the magic.

“Everyone and all,” Edward began. There was a distinct vibe as the humans and mixed races of the crowd cheered.

“Greetings to the peoples of the mountains, dwellers in stone and silver,” Bee continued into the speaking crystal. Gravelly ovations and grave dwarven percussion sounded as heavy hands clapped against knees and feet stamped in a cavernous rhythm.

“To those of the moon and stars—may your farewells be far away and the moments of now shine,” said Edward while the elves and half-elves of the crowd whistled and hummed.

“With friends of the Rivers and Barrow,” said Bee. The halflings in the crowd were as raucous as the humans. Cheering, clapping, hooting, and wolf-whistling for their four smallfolk representatives.

“And to those of skin and scale, we welcome all to this year’s Banquest,” said Edward. “This time-honored tradition is where we celebrate the best of the best from Raymorne’s kitchens, bakeries, and hearths.”

They introduced the sixteen Banquest contestants. The two-time previous winners, Philippa and Broganar, received especially boisterous cheers. Bee and Edward took turns reiterating the decision to change the format of the first round. They both skirted around the possible reason for the destruction against the arena and kept smiles in their voices to avoid any shadows of dark intentions from further infiltration on this event.

“In echoing the dreams of Ursula Raymorne, the Mother of our City and an honored Artisan,” said Bee, “we gather here each autumn to celebrate in the bounty of the valley and seas. To search for the tastes of our dreams and to make a little magic happen.”

“Although the use of charms, runes, potions, and conjurations are strictly forbidden of course.”

There was an appreciable laugh from the audience.

“Absolutely, Edward,” Bee said. “However, we all know how enchanting it is to take in that perfect bite of food. Like when you top toast with roasted steak mushrooms and a perfectly poached egg.”

“Well, I am rubbish at poaching eggs myself,” Edward said. “But when you get those tiny button mushrooms marinated in a vinaigrette with fresh greens, spring onions, and olives? That’s my favorite fungus dish.”

“Edward, did you hear that one about the mushroom that walked into a tavern?”

“What about it?”

“Well, the barkeep said we don’t serve toadstools here. And the mushroom replied, ‘oh come on, I’m a ‘fungi.’”

The crowd laughed at the pun, but the second punch line was Edward’s to deliver.

“Hey Bee, how can a single mushroom be a ‘fungi?’ Wouldn’t there have to be more than one entering the tavern? At least a pair?”

“Well, there are plenty here today, Edward,” Bee said.

“Fungi?”

“Pairs.”

The sixteen competitors walked out into the arena at their cue and made for their designated kitchens as pairs.

The crowd was quiet for a beat, and then realized that what was happening.

“For the first time ever, in wake of the accident that has disrupted several kitchens, it was deemed that the fairest course of action, and in keeping with the spirit of the Prophetess of Plenty’s credos, the sixteen contestants will be competing in pairs.”

They listed off the pairs that had been determined only a short time ago. Bee and Edward were of course used to being a twosome. While many of the Banquestors came from kitchens where camaraderie was expected in order to keep the culinary ships sailing, they had not expected one of their competitors to become their ally for the first round.

Some of the pairs seemed ripe for drama. Edward and Bee both had left it unsaid that those paired with the full-blooded elves were in for some interesting experiences.

She and Edward made their way to the mystery box. Thousands of eyes honed in on the center of the kitchens. In the front-middle, surrounded by tables overflowing with fruits and vegetables, meats kept cold in pans set into pillows of ice, carafes of cream and milk, bottles of wine, ales, and spirits, was a large chest the size of a small rowboat.

“Back to the fungi,” Edward said. “We all know the story of Ursula’s mushroom hunt, and although it’s not the first time we’ve featured these ‘sporific’ beauties, this year we have a few special varieties available to our cooks.”

“Bring them into the light!” Bee cried and she knocked on the large wooden chest.

The mystery box’s lid creaked open of its own accord, revealing the wealth of mushrooms within. There were easily a dozen different kinds of mushrooms and quite a number of preserved and artisanal items. They weren’t just brown or white mushrooms, like the most popular culinary varieties tended to be. There were nubby yellow mushrooms, long stalk mushrooms that were nearly translucent, dark steak mushrooms with caps the size of an outstretched palm and fingers—which held a firm, beef-like texture even after cooking—and even a small handful of magically treated mushrooms that one only saw in spring, like apricot caps and ash colored honeycomb thumbs.

In one basket there was a pile of mossrooms. They had the traditional stalk and cap much like a chestnut or white button mushroom, but their tops were covered with a fuzzy green patch. Prized mossrooms had tiny little stalks and a single leaf like tip the size of a pinhead that typically had a flavor reminiscent of a bouquet of herbs caught in the rain.

“The dwarves of the Karst prize the flesh of the reindeer that favor mossrooms for their autumn rites,” Edward added. Broganar and Magnos both nodded tersely. Even a dwarf not of the Karst appreciated the succulent roasts, steaks, and stews that resulted from that magnificent beast.

The white puffball mushrooms that looked like clouds seized from the sky and had the taste of an ocean thunderstorm were nestled together next to another hamper filled to the brim with orange shelf-like mushrooms that were often called “fairy stairs” and when roasted tasted like a corn-fed chicken.

“And look at these diamonds of the kitchen,” Bee said, gesturing to a stand containing eight bell jars. It was one of the most expensive fungi to be had on the continent, the cost even higher than the bespelled out-of-season varieties of mushrooms. The “diamonds of the kitchen” were eight black-umber colored truffles, each barely the size of a walnut nestled in a bed of rice.

Bee and Edward then described some of the selected products that had been curated from individuals and culinary craftsmen throughout the city. A gray bouillon powder that when added to water made an instant broth. Jars of teas, salt blends, and spice mixes infused with mushrooms. Different kinds of mushroom ketchups, jams, marmalades, terrines, aspics, and pâtés rounded off the generous selection.

“Here we have mushroom bacon designed by famous city elf chef, Ma’arri,” Bee said as she pointed to the pile of what looked like woodchips, but were actually slices of sun-dried lobster mushrooms, which had taste and texture of cooked back bacon.

“I love this,” Edward said as he picked up bag and opened it up and took a sniff. “It’s d’jon-riz from a small island in the Hacarrean. They add mushroom

compost as fertilizer to the rice fields and it results in a black grain with such a rich, deep, and almost smoky flavor.” He smacked his lips audibly. “Delicious.”

“There you have it,” Bee said. In unison, she and Edward gestured with their free open palms around the spoke of kitchens.

“To honor this city,” Edwards said.

“And the Prophetess of Plenty,” Bee continued. “Our cooks will have one- and one-half hour.”

“To craft a single dish that shows teamwork, tradition, and innovation,” said Edward.

“And one that’s an absolute winner. Remember, only eight will move forward to round two.”

“And only four will move to the final round to cook the feast of their lives.”

The giant clock had also been damaged in the attack, so instead of a chime to resonate the start of the Banquest, a great horn sounded.

Sixteen cooks from a wide variety of races and backgrounds were now given over to a bounty of food most gourmands only dared to dream that they would be able to actually cook with. Aside from the mushrooms the pantry was full of peak autumnal produce and other preserved fruits and vegetables. There were plenty of root vegetables—potatoes, beets, carrots fresh out of the ground merely days ago—as well as fish fresh from the rivers and seas and aged beef, venison, and cured hams.

They didn’t all enter the pantry at the same time. Some pairs stayed at their kitchens and instead pulled out pens and pages of paper to plan. Others made their way over to the offerings, inspecting unfamiliar products or reacquainting themselves with perhaps some distant memory brought on by the smell of a particular fish or the taste of a specific apple variety. Philippa Spooner Goldenmead



picked up an Eastling Dawn apple; the fruit resembled the colors of a sunrise, dusky red near the stem and fading to paper yellow at the bottom.

The first group to return to their kitchen was Logan Appleyard and Zachris Twine. Two ingredients of note that they had chosen were a jar of pickled mushrooms produced by an Inner Keane family and several bone-in pork chops so big that they conceivably be used as a blunt instrument. Appleyard wasted little time in stepping up on his stool so he was on height with the counter and poured the pickling liquid over the pork chops. He massaged the liquid and extra salt into the meat before rinsing off his hands and starting the next task. Appleyard then ground spices in a mortar and pestle, including juniper berries, fennel seeds, and dried orange peel. Zachris proceeded to work on the mushrooms themselves.

“What are you planning on doing with the penny bun and trumpet mushrooms here?” Edward asked, pointing to a pile of the tubular mushrooms that had been carefully sliced into coins.

“We’re going to do our own quick pickle on them,” Zachris said.

“So, you’re not going to use the pickled mushrooms themselves?” Edward asked the pair.

“Just the liquid for the brine,” Logan said.

On the other side of the circle of kitchens, Renata Lawrey and Philippa Spooner Goldenmead were both arms deep in flour and lard on its way to becoming dough. The shortcrust forming between Renata’s fingers was a gray-brown color, a bag of mushroom powder having been deposited in the mixture.

Bee asked them what they had in mind for their dish.

“We’re playing to our strengths,” Philippa explained.

“We’re both bakers at heart,” Renata said.

“So, are you doing two different pies or pastries?” Bee asked.

“Three,” Philippa said. “I’ve got an idea for something very Keane and Renata has an idea that I’m sure will absolutely delight the judges.”

“And the third item?” Bee asked.

“Something my family is very famous for,” Philippa said with a wink.

The quietest pair was Mabb Lynx and Saharu Nobue. They were working in what appeared to be genuine synchronicity. Nobue had also used mushroom dust in a dough mixture, and now she was rolling the dough as thin as possible. A rolling pin longer than her arm glided over the pale-gray blob in careful precision before she then folded the sheet like an accordion fan. Then she produced a long, wide knife in the Shudo design and sliced the dough into ribbons barely wider than a strand of twine. On the other side of their kitchen, Mabb was at work chopping vegetables and coaxing a broth out of fresh and dried mushrooms and from some of the bacon mushroom chips with a sprinkle of dried fish flakes and seaweed sheets. Throughout the whole round, he and Nobue barely spoke more than a few phrases to one another.

When Bee checked in with them towards the end of the round, they had a broth the color of liquid bronze, served in a teapot beside a bowl of the expertly prepared Shudon noodles, long straw mushrooms, and long thin cuts of purple carrots. On top of the noodles, carefully arranged, were steamed clams topped with caviar with the fronds of mossrooms inside. Then their dish was crowned with one of the most perfect looking pieces of red snapper with a crispy, mushroom dusted skin. Bee gestured to Edward as they passed each other. He raised his eyebrows and gave a silent nod that clearly said, “odds on Mabb and Nobue to be in the top four.”

Sterling Leyton and Tiralanis from Raymorne used both white rice and the black mushroom rice to craft a dish from the northern Apennine peninsula called

“risotto.” The bowls of creamy white grains were dotted with carefully spooned spots of the black rice. In a precise pattern that used up every last moment before the final gong, they placed lobster and apricot cap mushrooms, precise cubes of squash and steak mushrooms, and then drizzled a ring of herb, mossroom, and oil sauce around the rim of their plate.

Adrini Frey and Jacque Bloomer also used the d’jon-riz, squash, and steak mushrooms in their dish. They had sliced and roasted rounds of butternut squash and steak mushroom caps and had crafted two small black rice cakes with the pieces lain out like stepping-stones in a garden on their plate. The greenery was represented by a slaw made from shredded apples, red button cabbages, and onion in vinaigrette made with bacon mushrooms and mossrooms. They both carried similar looks of anxious pleasure in their results. It was a dance of body and facial movements the commentators and judges had seen many times in previous contestants—nervous but determined with undeniable skill.

But not all groups were handling the pressure so well. Hannah Rackstraw and Rosamund Shuck were imploding. One would think that two humans from similar backgrounds would be able to get along, but in the end their ideas were not cooking up well together. They had picked out squab and tried to stuff them with all kinds of mushrooms, without realizing that was a doomed venture. Puffballs released too much water and turned to mush unless coated with flour and cooked quickly by either frying or sautéing. Mossrooms lost their delicate balance of earthy and herbal flavors if mixed with stronger mushrooms like the honeycomb, oak caps, and penny buns. They had also abandoned the creamy rice side that was supposed to go with their main dish in order to try and save the bird.

Magnos and Nyanara's offerings were not coming together in a single harmonious dish either. Nyanara produced a delicate deconstructed salad resembling a forest floor, which did not seem to go with Magnos's forearm sized, venison loin stuffed with mushrooms, pine nuts, capers, and olives topped with a pesto made from mossrooms and wild greens. Even though they were both producing components that looked expertly prepared, the dwarf and the elf had purposely missed the important new rule of producing a united dish.

The other dwarf, two-time champion Broganar, had also chosen venison, but in conjunction with Gabriel Galley's own ideas. Edward had noted that the venerable dwarf had yielded to some of the younger halfling's suggestions. Gabriel had made three different batches of pillowy gnocchi dumplings from sweet potatoes, beets, and pumpkin, finishing them with a sage, brandy, and brown butter sauce and topped with thin mossroom slices. Broganar had smoked and roasted the fattest fairy stairs, trumpet, and penny bun mushrooms over different woods and coals and brushed with different sauces, using the dwarves closely guarded roasting techniques to treat the fungi in a similar fashion as whole animal carcasses. Even though he was doing the sectioning in full view, slathering different sauces on the same steak mushroom, the process was rarely well replicated by other races.

The horn gave its first short blast signaling that there was only five minutes left to go. Most of the dishes were already completed, except for the two teams that had struggled the most. Plates, platters, and in the case of Nyanara, on long strips of bark, were set at the ends of the kitchen stations. As soon as the hour and a half was over, the crowd cheered in time with the final horn.

The crowd kept up the raucous air as Bee and Edward introduced the judges. Vashti Carraway, Fraser Brechin, and Merton Umber walked out into the arena

smiling and waving. Before tasting any of the dishes they made their way through the kitchens, inspecting what Edward and Bee had described or missed during the commentary and seeing what products the competitors had selected from the pantry and perhaps attempted to use or discarded in the act of potential failure of a component. The Banquest wasn't just about what ended up on the plate; the journey was just as important.

The speaking crystal was handed over to the judges. Vashti spoke first, her refined voice like silky chocolate. "We see that you all have tried to keep to the spirit of our new rule under the circumstances of surprise." She handed the crystal over.

"Some more than others," Fraser said in his brusque manner.

"But we will take this into account," Merton added, his voice exact and neutral.

"Still," Vashti said, "this is the most prestigious cooking event of the year. Winners have literally gone on to leave legacies that are still lauded today. The winner's purse allowed Tarleah Spooner to purchase her own printing press and started a revolution in cookery publishing." She gestured with her hand to both Philippa and Jacque, both direct descendants of Tarleah.

"My grandfather was a winner," Merton said. "He used his funds to establish the school of food chemistry at the University."

"And I was able to use the notoriety and money to open Roux," Fraser said. "Standards are high, no matter what the circumstances. Alone or together, you're sixteen of the best cooks in this city. There's nothing that should've stopped stop you from the pursuit of preparing the best dishes of your lives."

It was hard to see from the stands, but those in the immediate vicinity could see that Hannah and Rosamund were already on the verge of tears. It wasn't as

though they weren't seasoned cooks—together they had more experience than Jacque and Adrini—but nerves and pressure were not their friends today. The judges could clearly see that in their attempt to rescue their dish. The squab on the four plates, one for each of the judges and one for the commentators to share, had golden exterior. The salvaged array of mushrooms on a bed of autumn greens beneath was not so impressive.

“What happened?” Vashti asked, a sympathetic coo in her voice.

Rosamund sighed and Hannah shook her head.

“I've never worked with anything other than button mushrooms,” Hannah said. Being predominantly a baker for the viceroy's household, this was somewhat expected.

“My nan always said to stay away from mushrooms in the woods,” Rosamund added. “I've always found them too strange.”

Neither Fraser nor Merton asked questions before cutting into the squab and using their knives to push some of the pile beneath the birds onto their forks.

“The skin on top of the bird is actually perfectly crispy,” Fraser said. “You chose herbs that would've complimented both the meat and many of the mushrooms you selected.”

That made both women smile weakly. At least it was a compliment.

“Unfortunately, what should be the star of the dish,” Merton began, but then he paused, pushed his glasses back up his nose and gave the pair a pitying look. “The mushrooms are rather awful. You misjudged the water content in the mossrooms and the puffballs and it caused the other mushrooms to release their juices and turned your stuffing to mush.”

The crowd gave a commiserating groan at the sound of that assessment.

The judges made their way to the next pair.

As Bee and Edward had predicted, Mabb Lynx and Saharu Nobue left the judges with not much to say but “oh my,” “my stars,” “wonderful” and “perfection.” Nobue kept a calm composure, with a half-smile on her cherry red mouth, and Mabb looked like he was about to literally jump for joy and sprint around the arena.

“I don’t think I’ve ever had a dish in this competition that has captured the power of food precision quite so much,” Fraser said. “One of the finest pieces of fish and bowl of noodles I’ve ever had in my life.”

“I thought you might have been gilding the lily with the clams and caviar,” Merton said. “The dish would not be in the same ocean of perfection without them.”

Vashti, in the Shudo tradition of appreciation, slurped on a long noodle. She set her eating tools aside and gave Nobue a ceremonial bow, which was returned in kind. Fraser and Merton also shook Mabb’s hand.

Underneath Zachris and Logan’s pork chops, with perfect black crosshatch grill marks, was a pile of pickled and roasted mushrooms and in a ramekin to the side was potatoes and mushrooms in the au gratin style of the Outer Keane. The judges each cut into their meat and showed each other that the pink-white interior was slightly dry on each chop.

“The spices on the chop are an interesting choice,” Vashti said. “I wonder though if it’s a bit too much with the mushrooms underneath and it doesn’t compliment the potatoes very well.”

Merton echoed similar sentiments. “The pork is tasty on its own. Your own quick picked mushrooms are nice. The potatoes are a deft hand, but it doesn’t all come together.”

The excitement fled the pair as fast as a failed leaven discovered by a baker in the morning after hours of hard work the night before.

The black rice in Sterling and Tiralanis's dish was slightly undercooked.

"Makes it feel like there's tiny pebbles in the food in some of the bites," Fraser said. "Shame."

Vashti, who always seemed to want to find something positive to say, added, "The mushrooms are lovely though. You did right to make sure those were well done, just..." She let her voice trail off gently.

The judging was already drawing clear lines of who was going to be culled and who would move on to the next round. The task of working in pairs was so contrary to the expectations they had all prepared for. This was especially true in the case of the master roaster focused on the big picture and the pantry chef who was responsible for carefully crafted vegetal forward dishes.

"All the things over here," Merton said after tasting all the components of the forest floor, "are delicious and the venison loin is faultless. You two shared a kitchen, but did not create a dish."

Neither the elf nor the dwarf appreciated the half-human, half-smallfolk man critiquing their creations as he did. In the only display of camaraderie that the pair had managed in the whole competition, Magnos and Nyanara took their plates away from Merton at the same time and let the plates fall to the ground. The crowd was a mixture of cheers, groans, and hisses while the artists at their stations furiously recreated the moment.

Merton merely shrugged. "Well, at least the rest of the uneaten and uncooked food is going to the House and not to waste."



The hisses from the elves in the crowd rose again, sounding like a hive of angry bees. Nyanara held up a hand, her fingers in a graceful gesture that no human, dwarf, or halfling hand could replicate, and the hissing stopped. The dwarves made no noise, but absolute stoicism still radiated like heat in the arena.

In the judges' eyes, there was no displeasure to be had in Broganar and Gabriel's plate. They could not find fault in the gnocchi or in the expertly roasted mushrooms. Even more extraordinary, the dumplings and mushrooms all complimented each other.

"Each bite is a wholly different, yet unified, experience," Vashti said.

Both Fraser and Merton extended their hands for the second time to a Banquest pair and the crowd loved it. The dwarf and the halfling would surely face Mabb and Nobue in the next round.

The time had come to judge the Spooner cousins and their prospective partners.

Bee whispered to Edward, "Whose idea was it? To do it like this?"

He shrugged. "Makes it more exciting, don't you think? Aside from Broganar, the broadsheets are all about Spooner versus Bloomer."

"I'll bet the Spooners are thrilled with that," Bee said.

Edward snorted. "Jack and I were at a dinner seated next to Ansel and Verity Spooner a few weeks ago, and he was quite..." he paused, seeming to search for the right word. His eyes flicked from Philippa to Jacque. "...colorful, when speaking of his cousin."

What a jackass for talking about family issues in public so. "He's an overrated sculptor," Bee said of Ansel Spooner.

Edward snorted, shushed Bee jocosely, and they turned their attention back to the judges and the greenest pair in the Banquest.

The plates offered up by Adrini and Jacque had captured the scene of some kind of enchanted painting from the University or mayoral gallery. The uniform stepping-stone motif of steak mushroom, squash, and rice cakes was surrounded by little mounds of shredded cabbage and apple. They had also grated truffles to mimic the appearance of mist over the path of the food.

“It’s lovely and it looks harmonious,” Vashti said. “This slaw is fabulous. I do hope you’ll share the recipe.”

Jacque’s eyes went wide and Adrini put her hands to her mouth in shock, almost as if in prayer.

“You used molasses and rum on the squash?” Merton asked.

Adrini nodded, her hands still over her mouth.

“And marjoram and sage,” Jacque added.

“The sweetness is expertly balanced against the salty and savory. Everything complements the other components rather well, and of course the rice cake is nice and tender on the inside and crispy on the outside.”

Adrini let out a breath and clutched Jacque’s shoulder for support. She quickly let go, but the halfling looked up at her and gave her hip a nudge with his elbow.

“The steak mushrooms were expertly cooked,” Fraser said. “Texture is so similar to a fillet that it’s almost like I’m eating actual beef. Well done.” He extended his hand to Jacque and then to Adrini. It was only then that she lowered her hands from her face, smiling wide with pride.

Edward and Bee gave each other sidelong looks after their own silent sampling of the dish. Philippa clearly had her work cut out for her. Bee had been around for Philippa Spooner's first Banquest almost fifteen years earlier. Philippa Spooner Goldenmead had then repeated her conquest eight years after. The shortest span between wins ever. In comparison, the time between Broganar's wins was stretched over two decades.

Goldenmead and Lawrey had completed three different mushroom forward baked goods had been completed in the hour and a half. The first was a tart with mushroom dust in the crust, topped with thin slices of penny bun and fairy stairs alternated between slices of squash, ham, and potatoes in a beautiful flower pattern on top of a truffle infused celeriac puree. The second offering was four hand pies, golden and looking flaky to the touch, in the shape of a mushroom cap with a stubby stem and their own ketchup on the side. The third offering were miniature bun-tin puddings, filled with roasted mushrooms, and unlike Rosamund and Hannah, the medley was cohesive in a rich gravy.

"The cheek," Edward whispered to Bee.

There were of course, no complaints from the judges. The bottom of the mushroom tart was flaky and crisp. The judges were unified in their moans of pleasure, and while Renata looked humbled but pleased, Philippa stood a little taller than her four feet, chin lifted in satisfied defiance.

"Whose idea was it to do three different baked goods?" Vashti asked.

"Renata's," Philippa said.

"Both of us," Renata said.

"Oh, come on," Philippa reached over and touched Renata's elbow.

The audience cooed scattered, "Aws."

When Fraser turned his knife and fork to the hand pie, there was a collective held breath in the air. Inside the filling was still steaming with fennel, green apples, and mushroom and pork cheek pâté.

“What’s in the condiment here?” Merton asked.

“Long Jon’s mushroom ketchup, caramelized onions, and apple juice,” Renata said. “Long Jon’s shop is also in the Spire.”

“Fantastic,” Fraser said.

“And the puddings are absolutely delightful,” Vashti said after popping one whole in her mouth, chewing for a bit and swallowing.

The crowd applauded and cheered as the tasting portion of the first round came to a close.

Taking back the speaking crystal, Edward informed the crowd the judges were going to talk amongst themselves and reach a decision.

Nearly half of an hour later Fraser took up the crystal again to speak to the crowd and competitors. “We would like to extend our deepest thanks to our competitors,” he said. “It is not an easy challenge, but the best never comes from easy.” He handed the crystal over to Vashti.

“Hannah Rackstraw and Rosamund Shuck, you are the first pair to leave the arena. Sorry, your dish just wasn’t up to scratch,” Vashti said.

Teary, Hannah and Rosamund left their kitchen behind and exited.

Merton dismissed the next pair. “Zachris Twine and Logan Appleyard, it was a valiant effort, but, unfortunately, it wasn’t enough.”

The first half-elf and halfling pair departed.

Fraser was given the crystal again. He took a deep breath, rubbed his forehead and said, “Even though the food these amazing cooks presented was nearly

flawless on both accounts, that they did not work as a team, in the hour of necessity, is the reason we're having to dismiss Magnos and Nyanara."

With a bit more reserve than they displayed during judgment, the dwarf and the elf departed as they entered the arena, separately.

"Now the first two pairs to go on to the second round of the Banquest were unanimously decided by us," Merton said. "Saharu Nobue and Mabb Lynx, and Philippa Spooner Goldenmead and Renata Lawrey, we are looking forward to each of your next offerings. Thank you."

In the last several years, it was always Vashti, the kindest judge, who broke the news of who was in charge of bearing the burden of breaking the good news to one and the bad news to the other.

"The next pair to depart, leaving us the four other semi-finalists, is," Vashti said. She paused for effect, six cooks waiting for the answer that meant they still had one more shot at winning.

"Sterling Leyton and Tiralanis, we're so sorry, you were both just barely edged out because of the slightly undercooked rice," Bee said.

"That means Adrini Frey, Jacque Bloomer, Broganar, and Gabriel Galley will all be joining us for the mystery basket round in two days' time!" Edward said, barely audible over the applause from the audience for the eight semi-finalists.

## Chapter Fifteen: Okoias

It was her first home. When her mother, Cressida, laid an egg halfway through her pregnancy she had, to put it mildly, broken. Not unreasonably, of course, because her father, Garren Okoias, had not known he was an eggling himself and Cressida's bloodlines hadn't produced an egg in ages. It was something his family didn't discuss out in the Nicander Isles and her family had ignored by claiming to be part nymph.

They had been newlyweds trying to make it in the great cosmopolitan city of Raymorne. Kallista's birth, however, had irrevocably ended whatever love her mother had for her father, and Garren was a less than ideal parent. When Cressida's milk had dried up from rage and despair, she told her husband to give the child to the House while she traveled back across the Caerulin. Garren had joined a sailing crew himself and that was that.

Growing up amongst other egglings, Okoias eventually came to understand why Cressida couldn't love her. Or at least at the time she had believed in the validity of Cressida's excuses. Some of the other draconi children were monstrous as were some of their dragonborn caretakers who tried to hide behind headscarves, hoods, wimples, and other garments. Some considered it their mere duty to produce productive members of society in the children, and as a result it had taken Okoias many years to learn to love herself. Stumbling through events that took her from the House to drink and drugs and then to a job she could lose herself in. Finally, she had found a balance between the House and the city-watch being her mother and father and people like Crenn, Rosewater, and Briar as her daily foundations.

"By the Forge," Crenn whispered as they walked through the main entrance.

“In Frost and Flame,” Okoias agreed.

It was quite the understatement to say that the House was huge.

Hanging from the rafters inside the main hall was a whole fossilized dragon skeleton with outspread wings. It had been discovered almost two hundred years before in a cave a hundred leagues down the shore from the city. The mouth was so huge it could swallow Crenn whole.

Beyond the fleshless beast were different halls of worship for the major races of Raymorne. The elves didn’t worship gods so much as they did the spirits of things that lasted longer than they did: the sun, stars, moon, ocean, mountains, and even some of the ancient trees deep in the Carinet. And they held a deep affection for “the things of the wind,” which was one reason they didn’t eat wheat or birds. Their room was essentially a botanical garden, complete with a tree and stone supplication circle, and with altars made from the materials of different locations in the Carinet and on the Strugyrst Mountains.

The dwarves didn’t venerate the mountains so much as what was under them and what could be shaped by the Forge, the deepest flames of creation, still thought to be stoked by dwarven prayers thousands of feet below the surface of the world. In tribute, there was an eternal flame always ablaze in that hall here at the House. Dwarves on the continent of Broma also had venerated a canon of Artisans, which included Ursula Raymorne.

For the smallfolk, a scaled replica of the Rivers and Barrow had been erected in their hall and was often alight with River Guides like Rosewater’s otter. Aside from the huge dragon skeleton, the largest monument in the House was dedicated to Ursula Raymorne, or rather the Prophetess of Plenty that she had become: a twenty-foot statue of a voluptuous woman with long hair, a sweet smile, and wide eyes

holding a huge wooden spoon in her hands, stirring an invisible stew in the giant iron cauldron. Ursula's only son had sculpted the statue himself from a single block of pure white marble. The wood for the spoon had been cut from the Hyperae, the tallest tree in the Carinet, and carved by Zarek Spooner. The cauldron itself had been cast and fashioned from ore mined in the dwarven deeps of the Strugyrst.

"You were raised here?" Crenn asked, the reality of it sinking in for the first time in their decades-long partnership.

"When was the last time you were at the House?" Okoias asked.

Shrugging, Crenn said, "I've been preoccupied with Oleena's gods I suppose."

"They have an alter for the Menehune gods." She pointed towards one of the halls for the gods beyond Raymorne.

Crenn's wife was of the Muani, a vast chain of islands west of the Continental Territories. Both the human and dwarf peoples in those tropical nations tended to be stocky and dark of skin with thick black hair. Oleena had come to Raymorne intending to sell designs of the outrigger-double hulled canoes of her people to the shipwrights of the city. She had stayed for Crenn, son of Hrogan. There was probably less than a hundred of her people in the city that had trickled in over the last century or so.

"She has the seashell and sand altar she brought with her," he said, still staring up at the dragon.

"You mean you've never even come to see Plucky?"

That snapped Crenn out of his reverie. "Plucky? The dragon?"

Okoias smiled, "I always thought if someone was big enough, like another dragon, they'd be able to pluck the strings holding him up to make music."



Crenn huffed, shaking his head and then someone bumped into him, knocking him into Okoias.

“Watch it!”

“No need to be rude.”

It really wasn't prudent to just stand there staring up at the skeleton. The whole hall was packed with people, more than she could recall seeing on the day of the Font of Offerings in the past. Humans, and those who were half or part of another race, had started having larger families in the last century or two and the demographics were starting to catch up. The House was keeping up with the growth itself. The plaque outside lets visitors know that the plans initially envisioned a building occupying a space of ten thousand square feet. Over the years additions to the initial structure had grown to near eighty thousand square feet.

All throughout the halls people were exchanging gifts of food, baskets and bags with treats of all kinds here and there with candies made from citrus, honey, and aniseed. There were piles of fudges and tablets of many flavors from berries and cream and vanilla to coffee and even chocolate. Hampers were filled with picnic stuffs like cheeses, crackers, breads, salted and cured meats, fruits, and munchable vegetables to dip into jars of spreads made from garlic and chickpeas, creamed fish roe, and mashed eggplant. There were also too many bottles of wine, beer, and spirits to count. And very few of the items being shared would appeal to her partner, although Okoias spotted a group of dwarves bearing bottles of ale from a small stand in the Fork Crenn was particularly fond of.

The House was supposed to be everyone's home during the All-Hands Harvest Festival, or at least that was the illusion of the day of the Font of Offerings. There was a definite division of classes on this day that had led to an economic

schism of worship. The middle-sort classes and above flocked to the House and to share frivolous things like candy and specialty spirits, whereas those who had trouble filling their bellies throughout the year would go to the “Beggars’ Feasts.” These were held at Panthemic priories throughout the city and helped supplement bare pantries with grains, dried legumes, and other long lasting foodstuffs in addition to filling their bellies with shared stews and other communal type dishes. The harvest was a celebration and carefree week for some, but for many it was a reminder of the daily difficulty in satiating hunger, even in a city like Raymorne.

Out of the crowd emerged a man of Draconic features similar to that of Doctor Linnrom, from the second inner eyelid to a flattish nose and hard blue talons. But he exuded a much friendlier disposition than the cantankerous alchemist. Albius Portho has been abandoned by his parents only a week before Okoias had, so he was almost like a fraternal twin brother to her. They had hit many of the same physical and educational barriers at the same rate, slower than the human children but at about the same rate as most half or part elves and dwarves in the crèche at the House. Okoias, though, could pass as mostly human, where Albius could not.

He opened his arms wide, the sleeves of his robe almost mimicking dragon wings in the voluminous cut. They even greeted each other as brother and sister, taking a moment to nuzzle each other’s cheeks.

“You never visit or write,” Albius said, but not in anger or exasperation.

“Same could be said of you, *Brother* Albius.”

“The lives of priests are hardly sedate,” he acknowledged. Albius held his hand out to Crenn and they shook.

“Kallista has told me all about you, or she did, what was it? Three years ago?”

“Closer to five,” she said, remembering that night of the Font of Offerings because she had met Briar only a few days later.

“We’re both nearly eighty and we still say there’s never enough time,” Albius said. He gestured for them to follow.

It was difficult, weaving throughout the crowds gathering to give and take from the Font. Many were lingering in the chairs set up throughout the House. The prayers leading up to this night’s feasts attracted many from all walks of life and faiths, the true meaning of Panthemia.

As Albius’s dominant faith was Uthyrian, he led them down that hall. The dragon, bell, and flame and frost motifs were prominent in the art, statuary, altars, and tapestries. His office was off one of the oldest alcoves, built over the spot where it was said Ursula herself had been baptized. As a high priest, Albius was as burdened with paperwork as he was with the souls of his charges. He offered them tea and Okoias wished her brother had the same endearing love of coffee that she did.

They made some pleasant chitchat about the festival, about the Banquest competitors and the stories being woven about the two-time champions returning, about the Spooner clan drama, the first Shudo competitor, and of the youngest and least experienced competitor ever. Albius and Okoias talked briefly about some good eateries and reminisced about their childhood, but it was forestalling the inevitable conversation that was likely to end with a fight. Albius distained the city-watch’s history for dealing with the least fortunate members of the city and Okoias insisted she was seeing changes come about slowly but surely throughout the institution.

“I know you’ve already been to Doctor Linnrom,” Albius eventually interjected.

Crenn interrupted him. “We’re not here about that.”

Okoias shot him a glare, but her partner chose to ignore her.

Crenn handed over one of the copies the composite sketch of the man witnesses say they saw lingering in the pre-dawn hours around the arena. He was young man with high cheekbones and thought to be human or of diluted elf blood. A washerwoman, a man waiting to open up his breakfast counter, a patrolling city-watcher, and a young boy sneaking down for a snack and who had peeked through the window just as the explosion happened all agreed they had seen this individual on the northern side of the arena. It was still assumed most of the perpetrators of the deed had escaped through the harbor.

“The problem with these,” Albius said, while reading through the other characteristics denoting height, build, clothing, “is that this could be anyone or no one at all.”

“And that’s why we at the city-watch ask around,” Okoias said. “He was seen outside of the Bountiful Arena. You heard what happened?”

“Just what the Broadsheet headlines said. I haven’t had time to myself for anything until just now.” Albius put the sketch down and sipped at his tea.

“Any rumblings about the Gold Prophet?” Crenn asked.

“Nothing out of the ordinary. Is that who you think messed up some Banquest kitchens?” Albius asked. “Hardly seems like a bother for that faction’s desires. I mean considering the credit they took for the bridge attack and the sabotage of the Horn lifts.”

“There was something very unusual about the destruction of the Bountiful Arena we’re trying to keep out of the papers,” Okoias said. “We think someone is trying to make dragonfrost again.”

It was the only thing that made sense to Fisher and Okoias. How something *cold* could possibly *melt* cast iron. Something cold that was more powerful than dwarf fire, and where there was frost, there was flame.

The shock on Albius's face looked genuine. "How?"

"Linnrom knows how it seems," Crenn said.

"Of course, he does, but he would never share the secrets with the Gold Prophet. Especially not after..." Albius stopped talking suddenly and took a sip of his tea.

"After what?" Okoias asked.

"I told him I'd never repeat the story."

"Albi," Okoias said in a slight singsong.

"Kalli," Albius retorted in clipped tones. He sighed. "It's like when you saw the Gold Prophet arguing with the Caeremes all those years ago."

Crenn shifted in his chair and Albius put a hand to his mouth.

"He knows," Okoias interrupted.

Albius gestured with his hands. "None of the powers over our kin like each other. The Caeremes grate against us here at the House because we reject their hedony and we also reject the bastardization of Uthyrian beliefs of the Gold Prophet. Then there's Linnrom who's two centuries old and refuses to take any sides. I do what I can here, just like the clerics that raised us did, but there's a storm coming and we're still just ships in the middle of an ocean of thought."

Okoias leaned forward and put her teacup on his desk. "I know," she tried to say with as much empathy as possible. They were both just individuals, drops in that ocean beset by storms they have no power over but were still connected to by all the

other drops of water. “Albi, if you know of anyone who’s a part of this, we need to learn what they know.”

Albius sighed and gestured to the sketch. “He does remind me of a soul who came to our halls, a young man with long dark hair and similar facial features, probably no older than twenty-five in human years. He asked questions of all the clerics and I think he talked to Lavender, she’s a halfling who follows the call of the Bells and the Rivers and Barrow.”

Crenn stopped in the middle of his note taking and asked, “Where’s this Sister Lavender?”

“She’s helping to set up the feast at the Priory of Hollow Sant,” Albius said. He pulled from his desk a piece of paper and then unscrewed a pen. He wrote out a message telling Lavender it was okay to talk to Okoias and Crenn.

“Thank you,” Okoias said.

“You can do something for me in return,” Albius said with a slight twinkle in his blue-green eyes.

“What?”

“Will you ring the bell and share an offering with me? I imagine you’ll have little time for it and the fast begins tomorrow.”

Okoias chuckled. “Are you so concerned for my soul?”

Albius didn’t respond. He shrunk into his robes, his shoulders slumping and leaving his stole looking like a defeated flag absent of a breeze.

“Your querying of Doctor Linnrom did not go unnoticed. I heard he was furious,” Albius said.

Crenn grumbled something in his native tongue much to the consternation of both draconi in the room who were more charitable towards Linnrom's position in the greater community.

"Do you think there's something to it? The missing and draconi? Is it more than it seems?" Okoias asked, even though she knew if Fisher caught her doing so, he would blow like an angry geyser.

Albius fiddled with his pen and then appeared to make up his mind about something. "I have noticed that some of my less than fortunate worshipers have not been returning for blessings and other services provided by the House, and those of better means are also seen less and less. When I broached the subject with my fellow clerics of the other halls of worship, they claimed it was just the changing times. When your first message asked me if I knew anything, I wanted to dismiss it. But since then, I have been trying to keep a closer eye on my parishioners."

"And?" Okoias asked.

"I would continue your investigation, but not at the cost of your job. I'd rather have you in the watch than someone who does not understand what it is to be different."

In the alcove dedicated to Ursula Raymorne's conversion to Frost and Flame, Okoias shared the Rite of Blood with Albius. It wasn't as gruesome as it sounded. First her brother poured a measure of red wine into a bell chalice as she pricked her forefinger with the service dagger strapped to her thigh. He followed suit and they both added a drop of blood to the wine. Albius rang the bells at his waist with his free hand as he took a sip from the cup. Okoias could taste her blood and Albius's mixed in with the fermented grape juice. Any liquid could be used, but since wine

was used in so many other rituals around the world it had been adopted as the traditional carrier for centuries in the Panthemic House.

“May you find the answers you seek,” Albius intoned.

“May you serve long and gracefully, as long as the bells shall ring,” Okoias responded

“In Frost and Flame.”



## Chapter Sixteen: Adrini

Finally, the day was over, the food had been cooked and it had been *good*. Adrini had endured and survived the post-round interviews with the Authority and broadsheets journalists and sketch artists. Now bellies were full of a simple dinner of fish pie, bread, and gooseberry fool, and it was late at night in a cozy pub. New friends gathered in a corner booth at The Bird and Nest near the arena. Jacque's wife, mother-in-law, and her dog joined Adrini, Mabb, Nobue, and Renata. Lyreon and Hemmie arrived shortly after dinner was over. They sat down and pulled chairs up to sit between Adrini and Jacque. Renata's brother, Simon, joined them as well, although his contribution to the conversations was in the form of silence.

The peace that had taken over during the cooking and the celebrity chaos afterwards was slowly ebbing away from Adrini. Her thoughts kept running away from the conversation back to the other night with Teague. She had seen what draconi fire looked like once before, but not ice. One of the chefs at the High Larder, Dorian, liked to show off his control of his scorching saliva by spitting on old metal spoons, knives gone to pasture, and old pots to create strange works of art. It was a bit disgusting in Adrini's view, but apparently it was a test of skill and proof of blood among bolder draconi peoples.

*Where was he?* Damn her friend, damn him.

"Why aren't you celebrating with your teammate?" Mabb asked Renata after another round of drinks was delivered. Adrini noticed his eyes following the barmaid back to the bar. Something stirred in her chest, mixing with the food and resurfacing anxieties about Teague.

Renata looked around the pub before leaning in and whispering, “Philippa’s quite the bitch, isn’t she?” Jacque audibly coughed mid-swig of cider. Renata laughed and pointed at Jacque, “Just wouldn’t shut up about you.”

“What did she say?” Astrid asked.

“Oh, nothing really coherent. I mean I didn’t understand everything, I mean one has heard rumors, but the way she was aggressively kneading dough one would have thought you’d killed a litter of puppies and drew evil runes in her garden with them.”

“That’s a macabre image,” Mabb said.

“Sorry,” Renata said and held out a scaly hand. “It’s the dragon blood.”

“I knew an ice draconi family in Nøsrogood,” Marion said and Adrini still couldn’t believe she was actually sitting in a tavern with *the* Marion Goosling. “They were a lovely clan, would tend Astrid in their crèche whenever I needed to pop into the town,” Marion continued.

“I’m fire,” Renata said. “Must be why I’m so good at baking. And making three different pastries was ‘my idea’,” she huffed, “my molting arse. I’m so bloody relieved those damn puddings turned out.”

“I’m glad they did,” Jacque said. Everyone looked a bit incredulous about that. “Truly, it means she knows my puddings are the best in the family, since they got me into the Banquest.”

Teague and Merritt were the reasons she was in the Banquest. No, that wasn’t true. It was her cooking that was the reason she was in the competition. Her skills. Her merit.

“You think you’ll make puddings two days from now?” Adrini asked, trying to keep her head in the conversation.

“Guess we’ll see what the mystery basket holds,” Jacque said.

“Well, here’s to hoping for some Barkony pork and the finest shellfish in the mystery basket,” Mabb said, raising his tankard in a salute to the culinary dwarf artisans.

Nobue raised her porcelain glass of rice wine in a similar gesture. “I will wish for a basket of ingredients to make sushi. Leave you all in the dust.”

“Be careful,” a stranger said approaching their group. “She’s a tsunami, she’s just good at hiding it.”

A half-elf with Shudonese features, his long black hair secured in a topknot accentuating the sharp cheekbones in his round face, had approached their table and Nobue’s face lit up with a genuine smile. Behind him was a man who looked to be his father, of the same human descent and lacking any elvish characteristics. However, the elder man did appear to be of mixed human origin himself, looking like one of his parents wasn’t from Shudo.

Nobue provided introductions. “This is my suitor, Ikeda Jiro and his father Ikeda Tsai.”

Everyone introduced themselves to Jiro and Tsai.

Tsai gave a slight bow. “You all did magnificent today. I was very impressed. My daughter-to-be has her work cut out for her.”

“Father,” Jiro said.

“He’s right,” Nobue said. “It’s going to be a welcome challenge.” She stood up from the table, took Mabb’s hand for a brief moment in thanks, and then excused herself to join her fiancée and his father.

As soon as they were out of earshot, Renata leaned over to Adrini and said, “He was quite the looker, wasn’t he?”

“I thought so,” Hemmie said.

Running a hand through his locks, Lyreon said, “I got beddah hair doah.”

“The best,” Hemmie said and she kissed her husband on the cheek.

“I’ve been thinking about trying out the topknot look,” Mabb said. He untied the leather strap holding his hair back. He pulled his caramel and chestnut locks up on top of his head and then retied the thong around the base of the balled up hair.

Looking at Adrini he asked, “What do you think?”

“I think my hair is better,” Adrini said and she kissed her father’s other cheek. When she looked back at Mabb, she saw him give her a wink.

Was he...he was flirting with her? She felt the blood rise in her cheeks and her belly squirmed again. Or was that the beer? Or just the exhaustion slowly creeping in?

She tried to shake it off by drowning her racing thoughts with more alcohol. The Redbreast Ale was slightly sour, but flitted around her taste buds in a rather pleasant manner.

“How do you plan on spending the day tomorrow?” Jacque asked Adrini and Mabb.

“Sleep,” Mabb said, taking another sip of his beer. “Perhaps after half a day of that, curl up with my cat, a book, and gallons of tea.”

Marion’s dog Simo woofed, as though the mere mention of cats was offensive to the fluffy miniature wolf-like pup. Adrini chuckled. She liked dogs as much as she liked cats, but the thought of cuddling with Figgy for support tonight sounded rather ideal as well.

And for the first time in a very long time, Adrini wished she had someone to curl up in a bed with. On cold nights, she and Teague would sometimes share the

bed for the added body heat. Unlike her mother, and Teague, who basically wanted to bed anything that moved, Adrini was always reserved with whom she shared her body. She had always needed more than just physical attraction.

And right now, part of her wanted to share herself and more with Mabb.

Dammit, she was tired. That was all.

“That sounds like a lovely idea,” Astrid said. She kissed the top of her husband’s head and Jacque placed a hand on her rounded belly. “I exhausted myself watching the two of you. I wanted to shout when Jacque went to take the lid of the rice too soon and you just stepped right in as though you knew he was going to.”

Adrini remembered that moment, catching the halfling in the periphery of her vision, knowing that if he lifted the lid off the ceramic pot, precious minutes of cooking time would go to waste. It was another trick Merritt had taught her. Rice had to keep its lid on, steam was just as important as heat in the cook.

“Working on the line, you have to watch your flank,” Adrini said. “I’m glad he didn’t take anything personally.”

“That dwarf and elf,” Hemmie said with a cringe. “So rude.”

“They’ll be talked about for years to come,” Marion added. “And I’ll bet they’re considered heroes by their tribes tonight.”

“I think the best heroes are at this table,” Astrid said. “But I still think my husband is going to clean your clocks.”

“He’ll have to take the victory from me first,” Renata said. “*I* made the pudding batter after all. Philippa just cooked them.”

There was another round of laughter and then they collectively finished off drinks before the respective groups acknowledged it was time to depart. The matron

of the Bird and Nest bid them farewell and asked for them to mention her food to the broadsheets.

“We will,” Jacque assured her. The woman turned bright red and tried to push on all of them some ginger biscuits to take home.

“Send them to the Beggars’ Feast,” Renata said.

Before reaching the street Mabb asked, “Adrini? A quick word?”

She told Lyreon and Hemmie to give her a minute.

Mabb pulled her off to the side just off the entrance, putting on his overcoat, the musculature of his arms flexing as they disappeared into the gray wool sleeves.

“Where was Teague?” he asked.

Adrini tried to shrug casually and fumbled while wrapping her scarf around her exposed ears in the rising autumn breeze. It stirred up the assorted smells of the city. The unctuous tang of fried fish from the tavern, the stinky refuse and privy smell festering in the alley behind them, but there was also the clean promise of rain showers on their way.

Her parents were having a last minute talk with Jacque, Astrid, and Marion. She thought she overheard them promising to send Hacarrean spices to them as well.

“I don’t know,” she said, responding to his question.

Mabb sighed. “I hope he’s not in trouble.”

“Me too.”

“And, if anything else happens,” Mabb said, leaving the possibilities of more destruction sounding like something more tangible than just a possibility. “Weird things have been happening in the city of late. Things you don’t hear about in normal circles or high places.”

“Like what?”

“People disappearing or dying. People on the fringes,” Mabb said. “People like me.”

“What do you mean like you?” Adrini asked.

“Those that are...just a bit too different. I’m sure you know what I mean.”

He rubbed at the stubble on his jaw.

“Like those that are undergoing hermetic treatments at the University?”

There really weren’t kind words for people like Mabb. Born with bodies that didn’t match their souls. Elves and dwarves were actually the most accepting of gender diverse children and adults than much of the greater human population. Her brother Lewyn went through the rebirthing rituals when he was Adrini’s age and was given his new name. She wondered if Mabb was close to his dwarven heritage to go through the same, or if they were put off by his human blood. If so, instead of getting the help he deserved from dwarven magi, Mabb was probably spending what must have been a fortune at the University’s alchemical remedies.

She realized that in their close proximity, she could smell his cologne. The notes, a mixture of cedar, sea froth, and sage, were leaving her more drunk than the alcohol she had consumed.

But then her brain took a turn back into the stormy thoughts causing tears to prick at her eyes but she was unable to hold all of them back as several fell down her cheeks. Gods, why did she have to cry now?

“I can’t think about anything bad happening to my friend.”

Mabb pulled a patterned handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to her.

“I hope not either. He was always nice to me.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t try to seduce you,” Adrini said with a choked, teary laugh. Out of the corner of a bleary eye, she could see her father considering approaching them. She waved him off.

“Oh, he definitely flirted with me,” Mabb said, laughing as well. “But I don’t favor other men.”

“Thanks.” Adrini handed the handkerchief back. When Mabb took it, their fingers brushed and she felt that rare jolt of pleasure in the excitement of skin on skin.

He leaned forward, she closed her eyes, and then she felt his lips on her cheek. It tingled every hair follicle on her body and warmed her from the points of her ears to the tips of her toes. In response she kissed him back. He tasted good, almost better than rum cakes.

“I’d wish you luck,” he whispered when the kiss ended. “But I do so want to win.”

They both laughed softly, still lingering in the moment.

“You too,” she whispered back.

Walking back towards her father, she saw a look of worry on his face.

“Papa?” Adrini asked and she turned her attention to what Lyreon was staring at.

Plastered up on a wall across from the Bird and Nest was a series of police notices. There were several sketches, including one of a dark haired man with high cheekbones, a full mouth, and good looks to spare. The warmth of Mabb’s kiss drained away replaced by a dull cold in her face hands and feet. It was Teague. No question. The grays indicated that he was a person of interest in the arson attack on the Bountiful Arena that left two people dead.



When they arrived back at the flat, Adrini gathered up Figgy from a pile of Teague's clothing and burst into tears. Lyreon and Hemmie held her and the cat and did not ask any questions of her.

*Damn you, Teague.*

## **Chapter Seventeen: Okoias**

On their way to Priory of Hallow Sant and before her fast officially started with the setting sun, Okoias and Crenn indulged in a quick meal from a food stand. The proprietor handed her a cone of fish and chips and to Crenn just the chips. Her partner wrinkled his nose at the pungent curries bubbling away at the establishment next door as he started to eat his fried potatoes.

“How did your mother react when she realized she’d birthed such a persnickety eater?” Okoias asked him.

““Persnickety?” Hardly, I eat like a normal dwarf of the Karst,” he said in defiance.

“I’ve never seen you eat anything pickled,” she said, adding a generous sprinkling of vinegar to her piece of fried fish.

He didn’t respond.

“Dwarves still fish from the underground rivers and lakes, and I’ve never seen you eat fish.”

This time Crenn glared at her. “If this is about lutefisk,” he growled.

Okoias threw back her head and laughed. It was so much fun to poke the bear that was her partner and it provided a respite from the theories and facts bouncing around in her brain. She was also trying to assuage the guilt within her about eating lazily without a second thought to the cost of take away food from one of the culinary centers of the city. The Fork was slowly morphing from a destination for the working class of the docks and factories to a curiosity of those with deeper pockets.

Before they boarded one of the canal boats for the Feast, Okoias took a short detour to a candy shop and bought a whole pound of peppermint candies wrapped in wax paper. She indulged in one, the sugar bursting on her tongue with the joy she wished she could normally feel during this time of year. Last harvest festival she and Briar bought tickets to each of the plays put on by the Flexion Theatre Company, who were famous for putting on productions of the classics with genders of the characters mixed up. Sometimes she wondered how much longer Briar would put up with her.

They arrived just before the first night's feasting was to begin. Close to a thousand displaced or disenfranchised peoples from all races were about the grounds of the humble brick priory building. It was the opposite of the House, but no less full of that peace that comes from the spirits, gods, and ancestors of the penitent.

It was like someone had taken the orderly commerce of the Fork, shook it up and plopped it down in a huge churchyard, stripping money from the equation. There were innumerable benches and tables set up in the open courtyard and there were even more people inside the ruddy brick building. People bent over large pots of stews or tended to vegetables and cheap cuts of meats and sausages over grills and wood fires. There was even a vat filled with roasting locusts in a sticky, spicy sauce. A few stations had been set up near the entrances to the courtyard where those who were either more reserved or more ashamed of being seen at the Beggars' Feast, could take away sacks filled with provisions like grains, dried legumes, and even pouches of salt. Women and children washed dishes and linens. The feast was a continual flow that was open to anyone over the next three days.

Although most in the crowd were human, Okoias noticed there was a shift in dynamics from previous years that she could remember; there was a distinct uptick

in the number of draconi faces from her last volunteer stint at a Three-Day Feast, which was too many years past for her soul.

Okoias and Crenn's presence was immediately hit with quiet hostility. Parents of all races pulled their children away from the two city-watchers without even questioning the intent of the draconi woman or dwarf decked in the unwelcome gray and red uniforms. Perhaps after she was able to put her theories about her list to bed, Okoias would be able to talk to Captain Fisher about better community engagement.

One of the Panthemia clerics wove through the crowd towards the two inspectors. She was an older half-elf, at least a hundred but looked like a human of about sixty. Her ashen hair was short and a few shades lighter than the gray of her cowl.

"I'm Sister Ellabor," she said with false congeniality. "How can we help you?"

"Brother Albius directed us here," Okoias said and pulled out the sketch. "He thinks Sister Lavender might know this individual. We believe he's connected to the damage to the Bountiful Arena."

If she knew the individual or knew anything about the arena, Sister Ellabor's face remained neutral. "Sister Lavender is helping at the pie making station right now. Come."

They wove in and out of crowds once again. A lot more children were about, waving ribbon wands, hoop rolling, and showing off treats. One child who looked half-dwarf shouted that she was so excited that she had a piece of fudge to share with their sibling. It was a decidedly different air of giving and sharing than at the House. Groups of older men and even some women sat playing dice or tile games, while

other groups wove baskets, knitted, and knotted rope all while sharing stories and songs.

A line had formed at one set of tables as people accepted miniature fruit pies fresh from the oven of all sorts of donated fruits from apples, quinces, pears, figs, and berries and even some sweeter squashes and pumpkins. Tallyran Industries, a company owned by the Caeremes, had even donated several huge barrels of snowy white sugar, an absolute luxury.

It turned out that Sister Lavender was of a rare mixture of the prominent races of Raymorne. She was short, hardly an inch taller than Crenn, with the build of a halfling and telltale draconi features. Her hair was a mass of tangled orange curls and her eyes were draconi green with slits for pupils and patches of scales on her dough flecked hands and arms.

To either side of her were children who had yet to hit that bit of growth that preceded early adolescence, their own hands caked in raw piecrust.

“Don’t eat the raw dough!” she said with a bright smile to the little draconi girl next to her.

The human boy on Sister Lavender’s other side squealed, “Yeah Carro! Save some for meeee!”

Carro stuck out a bluish tongue at the boy and Okoias’s breath caught in her throat.

“Carro?” Okoias asked.

The little girl looked up at Okoias and smiled.

“You’re so pretty!” she said. “You look like a princess!” But then she cocked her head like a bird and looked at Okoias’s uniform with a skeptical look. “Or maybe you’re the warrior princess?” The girl’s teeth were slightly pointed. Okoias was sure

she had never seen a draconi with such obvious dragon features. She was more reptile than humanoid. No hair to speak of, not even eyebrows or eyelashes, and more scales than skin. Was this really the missing Carro Ruby, Julius's stepdaughter?

Sister Lavender cleared her throat and told the two children to carry the tray of raw miniature tarts already set into tins to the bakers tending the outdoor oven. They both squealed and admonished one another to hold their end up. Then the cleric gestured over to a sink and Okoias and Crenn followed her so that she could wash her hands and talk to them at the same time.

"How can I help you?" she asked

"Albius sent us. We're looking for someone," Okoias said.

Sister Lavender laughed, a slight bitter tone in the sound. "We've got plenty of someone's here and it's only the first night."

Crenn produced the sketch and handed it to Sister Lavender.

"Looks familiar," she said and then squinted at the descriptor details at the bottom. "Could be a few young men I've seen about the House and other Priors." She clicked her tongue and handed the sketch back. "If you go over to the sausages station and ask for Kate, it might be her fella, but she's not fond of the city-watch."

It was a refrain Okoias was sick of hearing even though she could sympathize. The world wasn't exactly the harmonious simmering stew Ursula Raymorne said it should be.

"His name?" Crenn asked preparing to jot down the details in his notebook.

"Teague, I think," she said. "If it's the same man. Fits your descriptors. Most would say he's a good looking human, if that's your sort of thing."

The last bit was directed at Okoias and she wasn't sure what to make of the statement. Okoias wanted to retort with a "what the fuck do you mean by that?" but she was still trying to maintain a diplomatic air.

The girl called Carro skipped back over to Okoias and Crenn with two tarts still warm and oozing from the seams of the crust with violet-blue jam. She handed them out and up and smiled.

"For the warrior-woman and the fire golem!"

Carro looked at Crenn this time with some amazement, and Okoias knew exactly what she was thinking about. She must have had a copy of *The Curious Princess*, a book about an ancient draconi princess who journeyed deep into the earth to find her mother's stolen crown. In the illustrated edition of Okoias's childhood, one of the fire golems the princess encounters did indeed resemble Crenn's faded red hair.

Okoias bent down and held out a piece of candy in exchange for the tart. "He is," she whispered to the child. "And we're helping Princess Isabella solve another mystery."

When she bit into the tart Okoias wanted to laugh. Inside the steaming filling was of apples and frostberries. Crenn *hated* frostberries. They were a soft fruit that usually appeared after the first frost of the autumn; a bluish-purple globe not unlike a blueberry but with a slight white sheen that made them look permanently frosted. Rosewater had once brought in a pot of jam her mother made to share with her fellow inspectors and Crenn told Okoias he thought they tasted like a raspberry's fart.

"I helped make these," she said still holding the second one out, her lip a fraction of a second away from beginning to tremble.

Crenn recovered before she could begin to cry and accepted the offering.

“Suppose I better let it cool,” he said blowing on the tart.

There was another bright smile from the girl and she dashed off to find the boy again.

“What am I supposed to do with this?” Crenn muttered.

“Don’t be an ass,” Okoias said. “Let it cool and put it in your pocket. I’ll eat it later.”

He wrapped the tart in a handkerchief and put it in his thigh bag. Okoias heard the clan signet ring on his hand clinking against the neutralizer vial in the process.

Sister Lavender was looking at them less skeptically now and smiled openly at Carro. She told them to find Kate Fletcher at one of the grills on the eastern lawn of the priory.

Before she could turn her attention back to the more pressing case at hand, Okoias asked Sister Lavender in a whisper, “Is she Carro Ruby? Athene’s daughter?”

Eyes wide, Sister Lavender also lowered her voice, ignoring Crenn’s mutterings of admonishment. “Yes, we’re caring for Athene, she’s pregnant but her egg isn’t dropping.”

“And Julius?” Okoias asked.

Sister Lavender shook her head. “I don’t know him. Mother and child came to us, worried about Carro’s condition and her own state of health. We’ve managed to control Carro’s Silbinas outbreaks but Athene is still sick. The midwife doesn’t know what to do.”

“Nothing else untoward?” Okoias asked.



The sister shook her head again. “We’re taking care of them.”

At least that was two names resolved on her list. Okoias breathed a sigh of relief and ignored Crenn’s mutterings that the Eternal Flame of the Forge would never yield strength to her for at least a fortnight.

“Only a fortnight?” Okoias asked.

“Blasphemer,” Crenn retorted.

They found Kate in a circle of mostly men of different races and she was telling a joke about a dragon, a knight in an ancient suit of armor, and the problem with the size of cooking pots.

“Wait, then the knight turns to the dragon and says, ‘Ave you got any ketchup to go wit’ these chips?’”

“So, the knight is suddenly Ennish?” asked a halfling with a prominent bald patch wearing an especially threadbare and patched cloak.

“Well, only an Ennish knight would dare put ketchup on chips,” Kate said with a wink and taking a swig from a bottle.

The crowd then started a debate about the proper sauce for chips and one made a slide joke about princesses and their “fish sauce”, which Okoias was more than happy to interrupt. She cleared her throat loudly and the crowd hushed a bit but also caught Kate’s attention.

“Miss Fletcher? Could we have a brief word?” Okoias asked.

“I’d have more than a brief word with her,” one of the bawdy, and clearly drunk, humans muttered.

“I’m not a fan of sausages,” Okoias said back to him. That made Kate laugh and it wasn’t a light laugh either. It was harsh and unforgiving.

Kate's draconi nature was not as prominent as Carro's but it was evident enough. Crenn once again pulled out his notebook and the sketch. Instantly, Kate's eyes widened and she muttered under her breath, "fuck me."

Okoias suspected that would not be a particularly enjoyable experience. The woman exuded frost and not just because she was ice draconi. Every instinct in Okoias was on alert.

"Do you know this man?" Crenn asked.

"Yes, he...he was my, well we've been seeing each other for almost a year now. Or we were."

The concern in Kate's voice was less than genuine. Okoias wished she could take Kate away from the feast, but the men in the circle she had been charming would likely have something to say about that. They were obviously the sort who found themselves facing the truncheons and other weapons of the city-watch with some frequency.

Okoias would have to play this wisely. "When did you last see him?" she asked.

Kate screwed up her face. "Last night. He was all in a dither over something but wouldn't say what. We spent a few hours together making sausages and he left my room well before dawn. I've been here the rest of the day."

"She's the Queen of Sausages!" shouts the closest of the men who must have elven hearing.

Over his shoulder Crenn gives the man a look and a shake of his finger, this causes the man to seize up and return to his drinking. This has made Kate laugh and pull back around her that air of a woman who loves being the center of attention.

"Name?" asked Crenn.

“Teague Margo.” Without waiting for the next question, Kate continued, “He works for the brewery at that one restaurant on the Horn and lives, damn, where did he say he lived, we always met up at my place.”

“Do you mean the Asher Brew Works?” Okoias asked.

“Yeah, that one. What’s going on?” Kate put on a face of worry, but again Okoias didn’t buy it.

“He was seen near the Bountiful Arena before the attack this morning,” Crenn said. “We’re just hoping to find out if he saw anything.”

Kate put a hand to her mouth and Okoias noted her sharp talons. Most draconi took pains to keep their nails blunt if they had the thicker and stronger keratin.

“I swear I haven’t seen him, but I know he was going to be going to,” Kate paused, looked over her shoulder at the crowd still eyeing them and said in a whisper, “the Caereme Nimius. He was invited, he went to one of their other parties this year and he was so excited for this one because of how exclusive it is. I told him not to get involved with that, that hedony, but he wouldn’t listen to me.”

Teague Margo would hardly be the first to ignore such well-intentioned advice.

“Is there anyone else here that knows Mr. Margo?” Crenn asked.

Kate shrugged. “We didn’t exactly run in the same circles. If he wasn’t at work he was usually with his flatmate, although I know they weren’t fucking.”

Crenn raised his eyebrow. “Oh?”

“She’s just the cold fish type, you know? She’s in that Banquest too.”

That last sentence dropped something cold into Okoias’s stomach and added yet another thread to the tangled web weaving around her head.

Kate offered them each a sausage on a roll from her grill, but Crenn declined and Okoias didn't want to add anything on top of the roiling fish and chips and frostberry tart.

Maybe the attack on the area did have something to do with the Caeremes and not the Gold Prophet. She wanted to kick something, spend some time in the boxing gym at the watch-house and then the rest of the night with Briar. However, Okoias suspected she was going to be pouring over everything that the patrols collected over the day's events. There would be no going home, only onward to find the next piece of the puzzle, and she hoped that didn't mean darkening the doorstep on the night of most notorious party of the year either.

## Chapter Eighteen: Jacque

Jacque had absolutely no reason to lie to himself: returning to his food stand after making it to the second round of the Banquest felt awesome. He almost felt like a hero in the old stories, returning home from a long life-changing journey. Like the tales always said, he was seeing the familiar through different eyes. And it wasn't over yet.

He spent the day chatting and making banter with customers while Lissey, Beric, Ivonne, and Wyman helped fulfill orders, which brought the cycle of teasing and humor round full circle. Wyman in particular kept cupping his hand to his ear and shouting, "We can't hear you all the way up there, ya big man!"

Astrid and Marion both spent the day at home, but Jacque couldn't sit still. It was like he had consumed a dozen cups of coffee in one sitting. All the other vendors around him were just as happy that he was in the Banquest. Kalilah had also taken on additional help to sell her iced creams. She had even come up with a new flavor named in honor of him—vanilla and whisky with a cherry jam ribbon, nicknamed "Whisky Jacque."

It was barely noon before all the stews for his puddings and the Whiskey Jacque had sold out. Instead of heading home they decided to give the food stall a deep clean for good measure. It was almost like they were kids again, dutifully doing their chores before they could head down to the creek for more fun.

"Second day in a row we've sold out before luncheon hour was even over," Lissey said.

"I'm already thinking of moving," Jacque said.

"That's a shame," Beric said. "It's a prime location."

“True,” Jacque said. “But it’s hard work cooking everything off site but the puddings themselves and sending everything in by canal every day.”

“This city life is the hard work,” Wyman said.

“Of course, you’d say that,” Jacque said. “When was the last time you shaved? You look like a bear that’s birthed a dwarf.”

“That’s what I meant,” Wyman replied, ignoring the comment about his beard. “City life, shaving, frying up puddings all day, its hard work.”

“We’ve only been here for a few hours, love,” Ivonne pointed out. “Besides, the ale and cider are better in the city.”

“Only good thing about the city,” Wyman muttered.

“Mr. Bloomer?” someone asked. Then they said again, “Mr. Bloomer?”

Ivonne had to poke Jacque to pay attention. He still wasn’t used to his new surname.

The human man trying to get Jacque’s notice was tall, one of the tallest people Jacque had ever seen, and that was saying something working near between industrial center of the city and the dockyards.

He bent down so that he could extend his hand to Jacque.

“My name is Dacre Hest, I’m with the *Arrowhead*.”

“Nice to make your acquaintance,” Jacque said and was suddenly aware of Ivonne and Wyman in his periphery holding back laughter. He ignored his friends and added, “I’m sorry but the Alimental Authority said we’re not allowed to give interviews or comments to the broadsheets without pre-approval.”

“Oh, no I’m not here to ask you about the Banquest, well not directly. My publication is actually interested in yourself and Miss Frey for a special topic piece.”

Dacre gestured to a more private space between the pudding stall and the iced cream stand. “Could we speak a little more privately?”

Jacque nodded and wiped his hands on a fairly clean rag. Behind the food stand, there was the sharp drop down to the canal docks. Boats and rafts drifted by carrying all manner of cargo and peoples up and down the calm waters.

“We were very impressed with your performance yesterday of course,” Hest said.

For some reason his comment bristled Jacque. “I didn’t do it all alone,” he said, defending Adrini’s performance as well.

After finally meeting with and talking to Adrini Frey one on one, Jacque was astounded by the half-elf. She was young, barely out of the longer half-elven adolescence, and had been cooking as a profession only a few years—and she was amazing. The way she was able to zero in on flavor combinations and utilize basic techniques, like her knife skills, she was something special. But she didn’t see it in herself.

Jacque could empathize. It had taken him so long to get out from under his wandering parents’ shadow and out of one of the family’s franchises into becoming his own man. A man that had fallen in love with a woman outside of his race but with someone that literally still made his heart leap every time they touched.

“Of course,” Hest said. “What I meant to say was you both have made an impression considering your backgrounds. Since we’re a family owned paper, we’re interested in the different familial dynamics throughout the city.”

To be honest Jacque knew very little about the *Arrowhead*. He knew it was a paper owned by the Arrow Pont Company, which was mostly a cannery business one often saw flyers advertising for jobs for their growing business throughout the city.

They had slowly been growing over the last few years to compete with the Caereme's Tallyran Industries and the conglomerate Over the River that owned a small piece of the Spooner family's business.

Thinking about his "family's" business still left a bitter taste in Jacque's mouth. Is that what Hest was referring to? He wanted to pour salt on that wound for the sake of selling broadsheets?

"Oh, please don't mistake my intent," Hest said reading some expression on Jacque's face. "We're impressed with your moxie and determination and would like to feature you in the *Arrowhead* under a special column that intersects self-determination and the values of the Prophetess of Plenty."

That didn't sound too bad, Jacque thought.

"Whatever happens over the rest of the course of the Banquest, we'd still like to feature you, your family, and your business."

"That sounds interesting. And what about Adrini?"

"Oh, well with her father working for the Byrda attaché to Raymorne and her mother as a sky priestess, her family background is also interesting." After a pause Hest continued, "We actually stopped by Miss Frey's flat but she didn't seem to be in. Did she happen to mention her plans today? We're wanting to do this interview after the second round and get it to the press before the third so we're anxious to get a reply from her as well."

Jacque shook his head.

"Well, that's quite all right. I am sure we'll be able to find her." Hest handed over a piece of paper with questions. "This is a small sample of what we would like to ask you and your wife and Mrs. Goosling if possible."



“I’ll talk to Astrid and Marion,” Jacque said taking the page, folding it, and putting it in his pocket.

“Thank you, Mr. Spooner. We’ll be in touch.”

Hest held out his hand and Jacque shook it. Was it Jacque’s imagination, or did the man have very dry and cool skin, almost like a lizard? The reporter walked away, weaving in and out of the crowd with expertise. Being a head taller than the average human was probably an advantage for Hest in staking out the best path to lead off a target for his journalistic queries.

After returning to the stall, he told his friends what Hest wanted and they all said it was a great opportunity to establish himself as his own man. They had done a great job cleaning everything even and the portable gas fryer was almost spotless, save for some streaks that would never gleam again. Such was the nature of the new stainless-steel material that had permeated the kitchen equipment industry in the last decade.

Beric excused himself to go and flag down a canal boat on Jacque’s behalf.

“You look like you’d walk right into the water,” he said. Beric took a second to watch Lissey bending over and then chided Jacque for following his gaze. “That’s my girl, not yours.”

“Beric, ew, she’s like a second cousin on both sides of my family.”

“I don’t know how all you Keane dwellers keep family trees straight,” Beric said, another indicator that he was an “outsider” as much as Astrid was to the Greater Spooner clan.

Pocketing the letter, he approached Lissey and asked her how things were with Beric and with her family and Augustus.

“Brothers are just, well, they’re horrible,” she said and took out her anger on the dirt on the ground with a broom.

“What about your parents?”

“They’re deferring to the family patriarch, who also agrees with Philippa. They said I shouldn’t accept Beric’s proposal, but they’re not forbidding it.”

Jacque remembered that same conversation, the unspoken “but if you do, there will be *consequences*.”

“It’s never wrong to choose love, Lis,” he told her.

“It’s just damn hard sometimes,” she said, almost sounding defeated.

Jacque took the broom from her and put his arm around her shoulder. “Well, if you do, Marion will gladly do your wedding cake,” he said.

Lissey’s eyes lit up. “Really? *The* Marion Goosling would do that?”

“*The* Marion Goosling happens to be my mother in law, and she would do anything for family.”

She hugged him and whispered, “Would you take it back if you could? Astrid?”

“Not for all cider in the Appleyards. What about his family?”

“He only has his sisters and father, who is the half-dwarf.”

“With the ease in which we’re all able to make babies with each other, you think that it wouldn’t be an issue,” Jacque said. When he and Astrid had decided it was time to eschew contraceptive measures and try for a baby it hadn’t taken more than a few months before they conceived.

“That’s not what people like our families or that Gold Prophet think,” she said breaking the embrace and looking down at her pruned hands.

Jacque pulled out a container of Astrid's hand cream and gave her a smear. She thanked him and rubbed the shea butter, scented with lemon and lavender, into her skin. When Beric returned he and Wyman loaded up the cart in a canal boat and Jacque waved them as he took some time to be alone.

He took a minute to imagine, not for the first time, what it would be like to win the Banquest. To obtain the financial security of the winner's purse, the prestige of the title, and to be independent of his family. During the first round Merton Umber spoke of what other winners had gone on to do. Did he want a restaurant? No. He loved his bloomers stall and the relative flexibility of creativity it offered. But maybe he could take on jobs to cater for semi-prestigious parties, nothing like the Caereme's Nimius or the mayor's birthday party, but perhaps for business parties during the harvest and spring fete. He liked the thought of that, designing a menu like the afternoon tea he'd enjoyed just a few weeks ago.

And soon he would be able to introduce to his child the joys of food. He looked forward to seeing the expression on her little face as she tasted cakes, custard, lamb stew, griddlecakes, sweetcorn, and everything else life's pantry had to offer.

For a good fraction of the next hour, Jacque felt peaceful.

But that was not to last. It was just as he was securing the locks on the new doors, which he had installed at the front of his stand to prevent any further signage thefts, that the world flew apart.

The only thing that resembled the sound that suddenly broke the Fork was of fireworks. But even then, those boom and crackles paled in comparison to the wrenching cry that cut through the bustling and peaceful atmosphere of people just eating and perhaps relaxing for a brief respite in their hard day. What followed was a ringing in Jacque's ears and the realization that he had been knocked off his feet and

onto his back. Before he could take a breath, the conversation he'd had last night with Astrid flickered through the smoke and rising screams around him.

They lay in bed, facing each other, the whispers of the night making soft noises. The rustle of sheets, the soft breaths, and the gurgles from Astrid's stomach were peaceful. But there was something less than peaceful on his wife's mind.

"What happened to the arena and the kitchens," she whispered. "It scares me."

"It worried me too, but the Authority and the city-watch say that it was just vandals," he said.

"I don't believe that," she said as she put a hand on her belly. He reached over and put his hand next to hers, their thumbs brushing against one another. "If there's danger and it's the Banquest, would you drop out?"

"In a heartbeat," Jacque had replied. No hesitation. It wasn't even a question.

This had taken his wife aback.

He had garbled his reply in the Karisic tongue, but the point had come across. He would do anything, even move the Rivers and Barrow, the sun, the moon, and the stars themselves for his family.

She had laughed, while still managing to frown. "Your dwarven is still much better than your Karisic. I know you'd never leave me or our child, no matter what."

"Are you truly afraid of something else happening to the arena or Banquest?" Jacque asked. He had been so keyed up to just cook, and then once those mushrooms were revealed, there had been nothing else on his mind.

"Everyone in the box was talking about it," Astrid said. "What if they do it again while everyone was around this time? The Banquestors and the audience. Baron Maroque wasn't in attendance during the last round."

“With the extra security, would anyone dare?” Jacque asked.

“Which means there’s less city-watch and Authority guards elsewhere, right?”

“I think between the grays, the Authority, the mayor, plus the reinforcements from the Keane and the elves and dwarves coming in, nothing else will happen.”

“But if there’s another threat? If someone goes after you?” Astrid asked.

“We will immediately go with Ivonne and Wyman to their house in the Keane,” Jacque assured her. “Safe and sound.”

“Would I fit in their house?” Astrid asked.

“With your mother also? Barely.” Jacque said.

“What about Simo?”

“He’ll have to stay in the yard. Chase the chickens.”

“Thank you,” Astrid said, she yawned and snuggled into her pillow more.

“I would do anything for you.” He felt the baby kick under his hand and Astrid moaned. “I’d do anything for her too.”

The smells of burning wood and more brought Jacque back to the present. He tried to roll over but the shock of being thrown back had caused all of his muscles to seize. It took several breaths for everything to unlock and he was able to move. Half sitting up on his elbow he looked towards the black clouds and screaming crowds, many of which were stampeding his way. He scrambled towards the safety of the space between his stand and Kalilah’s.

Jacque saw his neighbor crawling out towards him. She shouted at him and even through the ringing in his ears, he was able to discern she was asking if he was all right. He tried to tell her he was and ask what had happened but even his tongue was stilled by the impact and chaos. After several breaths he was able to stand up

and look around, but of course he was too short to see anything of note. Inside his stand was the stepladder Astrid had used to try and remove the shame of his old sign. He crawled up it in order to stand on his countertop.

Up the road, about a hundred yards, to where the Fork forked into its three separate streets, he could see the flames and the source of the smoke. It looked as though something had punched up through the ground with a blast of fire. There was a hole where a stand that had sold pasties shaped like dragons used to be. He then squinted at the stand on the other side of his and he saw his neighbor Travers, an older human man who sold goat cheeses for his family's dairy, had been knocked over by the blast too. Instead of hitting the ground though, it looked as though he had hit his head on the back countertop. He lay on the ground prone and unmoving.

Ignoring all instincts of self-preservation, Jacque jumped down and made his way over to Travers. Kalilah called after him, but he yelled at her calling for ice. He wasn't sure if she heard him, but he couldn't pause. He could see that Travers's head was bleeding. Jacque was still wearing his apron and he carefully lifted the human's head to press the fabric to the wound. However, the back of his skull felt wrong. There was a tender ridge, like a bruised apple, slick with blood under Jacque's fingers.

"Travers," Jacque whispered. "Come on man, say something."

Travers didn't, his tongue was sticking out of his mouth like the goats he milked for the cheeses he sold. His eyes were rolled back in his head and his eyes were half closed.

Ice would do the man no good.

Nothing could.

After a short shuttering breath, Jacque learned what it was to have someone die in front of him.

## From the Broadsheets

The Banquest's Round Two is still set to continue even after the explosion in the Fork thought to be caused by stolen dwarf fire. Nothing will stop the Mystery Basket and its ingredients from continuing traditions of food, family, and unity. As usual, the semi-final eight Banquestors will conceive of a dish not only using, but also *highlighting*, the items found within the mystery basket at each of their kitchens. Attempting to open the basket before the signal will disqualify the competitor. All of the ingredients must be used in the dish.

Previous mystery baskets have included:

- A Bounty of the Rivers and Barrow: heather-fed lamb leg, stone fruit chutney by Bottleleaf Seeds, amber wine from Pryre Vineyards, and yellow swede
- In the spirit of a University Midwinter affair: A whole goose, dates, orange spice liqueur by Vincinna Jost, and a sheaf of Tallyran sardine crackers
- Inspired by old dwarven traditions: Reindeer loin, frostberries, dwarf tea, and Verdant Karst beer
- In keeping with elven culinary conventions: Glass rabbit from the Carinet, sprouted bread baked by Princess Eskyia, plum wine bottled by Demiear Distillery, and fallen chestnuts

Four will be eliminated after the judges taste and evaluate all the dishes.

Four will move on to the Final Feast.

Only one Banquestor will win.



## Chapter Nineteen: Jacque

The death of Travers and the explosion at the Fork haunted Jacque's dreams. It had been the first time he had seen real violence, not just a pickpocket or back alley brawl. Everyone said Raymorne had its dark corners but he never imagined it entering his space. The destruction of the Avonnas Bridge had been a distant disturbance in his life. It was even more of a presence than the damage to the Bountiful Arena. That had felt like a blessing from the Rivers and Barrow Themselves considering the result of the first round.

Astrid was still asleep when images of burned streets, a bloody canal, and bodies heaped on the travel barges interrupted the precious few hours of shuteye he had been able to claim. Carefully, he slid out of bed and laid the covers up to her shoulders. She could sleep through anything as long as it was warm enough, and being from the Karisic lands, warm was a debatable temperature.

Before he got up, he recalled the conversation with some of the grays yesterday and how he wasn't able to give much information except for his conversations with Dacre Hest and his friends beforehand. Fortunately, Beric, Lissey, Ivonne, and Wyman had already been well up the canal when fire and smoke rained down on the Fork.

In the kitchen, he found Marion was already awake, reading a book by lamplight with Simo still half-asleep at her feet. The morning's *Seed and Spectator* was half hidden under the ledger for Jacque's Bloomers and he could see the headline: 11 DEAD AND DOZENS INJURED IN THE FORK.

"Good morning," she said shifting the ledger to cover the S&S completely. "I already made tea."

“Might need something stronger,” he muttered.

“There’s coffee,” she said making to get up.

He gestured with his hand for her to stay seated. He washed his hands in the water basin that Marion had already filled with boiled water, which was now tepid. It was just fine however when splashed on his face and as ran his hands through his sleep mussed hair.

“Since when can we afford coffee?” he asked.

Not that the roasted beans and their resulting brew was completely out of their budget, especially after the trade agreement with a large farm coalition in Lower Khagerica a few years earlier that brought a bounty of tropical foods to Raymorne with regularity. It was just one of those things they had decided to pinch their kernels on in order to save as much as they could for when Astrid couldn’t assist him at work.

A smile touched Marion’s mouth, the lines of her face crinkling and her eyes filling with the same delight.

“I was going over the books with Astrid, and we’ve netted two hundred percent more in the last few weeks than we did all year.”

His eyes widened, welcoming the good news. “I didn’t realize it was that much.”

The boon of the Banquest and the publicity in the broadsheets on his business still hadn’t hit him fully. Everything in the future beyond the first, second, and third rounds had been a distant noise. Except there was now a dead man’s face swimming in and out of his thoughts.

“And we keep selling out. We’ve made do with selling sweet puddings on the side with butter, lemon juice, jams and marmalade, but we’re going to seriously have

to reevaluate the model soon. I just didn't want to bother you with it. Keep your mind on the Banquest."

Jacque found the burlap sack with the ground coffee beans. He inhaled their toasty, nutty and slightly dried apricot scent and the heady aroma made him feel a bit better. He threw a handful into the mill and cranked it with his still aching arms. Then he tipped the grounds into the especially battered, spare copper kettle and put it on the cast iron stove, adjusting the rusty flue. He already pined for the top-of-the-line kitchen he had shared with Adrini. Maybe if he won, they could move into a house with the latest model.

Soon he was tucking into coffee with lots of sugar, and a sausage and egg sandwich with a generous spread of whole grain mustard. It was a breakfast that managed to banish the nightmares, and non-Banquest or business-related anxieties, into the far, far nether regions of his mind for now.

"You think I should move to another stall? Is something opening up? I feel guilty I haven't been giving it my full..."

Marion interrupted him. "You have a perfectly adequate excuse for that, and besides that what's Astrid and I are here for."

His family. The ones that wanted to be his family.

He licked the last bit of sausage grease from his fingers.

"Do you want me to ask around?" she said.

"Not yet," he replied, filling his cup with more coffee and sugar. "Never know, I may still take the nut and find myself with some unforeseen opportunity." He chuckled to himself.

As though he understood the conversation and Jacque's sarcasm, Simo gave a soft woof that likely meant, "you dolt." Marion reached down and scratched

between his glossy ears. She then picked up her book again and they both waited for Astrid to wake.

In an attempt to keep his mind busy, Jacque also opened a book: a monster of a tome that had been given to him by his parents when he reached manhood. Tarleah Spooner's masterpiece, *The Culinary Primer*, was the summary of the Spooner family legacy, an encyclopedia of food and cookery knowledge used by the University and in nearly every culinary school in the Keane Valley. This particular fourth edition was twice as long as the first edition published seventy-five years earlier which had merely focused on the gastronomy of the Keane Valley. This particular copy was not only laden with ingredients from all corners of Broma, it was one of the first books printed with the updated information on the latest discoveries like baking powder and bicarbonate of soda, Shudonese ingredients like tamari, dashi, and miso paste, and Hacarrean peppers and spices, and so much else.

Before he knew it the quiet was broken. Astrid was up and moving. She only had a cup of milk and nibbled on some crackers for breakfast. The worry of what happened to Jacque yesterday had inflamed the heartburn that had plagued her off and on throughout her pregnancy. Their child would soon be here and hopefully that would help Astrid, but what would come first was the second round of the Banquest.

Time moved strangely again and it was suddenly late afternoon. One minute he was gathered with the other seven semi-finalists in the arena's waiting room and the next he was walking out into a packed arena, with noticeably more guards in the tunnels and in the stands. The Authority was determined to continue the Banquest without interruption.

So many people cheered loudly when his name was called. It was still strange to hear "Jacque Bloomer," but the frequency of broadsheets, Authority members,

and patrons of his food stall addressing him as such made him feel like he had fashioned an acceptable moniker.

Bee Thom and Edward Flint then came out to their own raucous applause. They waved at the crowd as they walked around the spark pattern of the eight kitchens that were left mostly unchanged, save for four of the kitchens were now meant for dwarves and halflings and the others were meant for those of longer legs and limbs. Jacque was happy that he didn't have to stand on a stool to reach the counter top.

Waiting on the cutting board was the knife Ivonne and Wyman had given him, and had proved to be a comfortable blade in his hand in the first round. He touched the white stag horn handle and felt the same comfort his breakfast had given him. It was already familiar, already an extension of his arm.

He was so wrapped up in his thoughts he missed the first part of Bee and Edward's commentary. Jacque was sure that they had made a few jokes about the mushrooms of the previous round. He didn't think there were many mushroom jokes left, but the pair proved him wrong.

"Say Bee, what did the bottle of mead say to the pretty lady at the bar that doesn't allow fun guys?" Edward asked.

"Hello there, honey?"

"No, you look bee-utiful today."

"I always do," Bee replied, bouncing her curls with her hands. "And this is sure to be a mead-y round."

Jacque tried to not groan and likely succeeded, but it was hard to tell over the laughter of the crowd. They were the ones running on pure enjoyment of their surroundings, whereas Jacque was thinking the wisest plan would be finding some

mead for himself. And then he looked at the mystery basket on his station, sure that the bad puns had just revealed one of the mandatory ingredients of the second round.

The commentators continued for a few more minutes, but Jacque didn't hear them. He looked over his shoulder at the special guest viewers' box. He imagined Astrid, Marion, and Simo watching him with pride. He looked across the circle in the middle of the kitchens and saw Adrini. She looked like she had the same amount of sleep that he had. Instead of the keyed up partner he'd had in the first round, she looked weary. He tried to discreetly give her a thumbs up, but she was also looking at the viewers' box.

Somewhere behind him was Philippa. She still hadn't spoken to him since the afternoon tea. Part of him was worried that they would both make it into the final four. But then what did that mean? That he was worried what would happen if he triumphed over her? Or that she would walk away from the competition with a third win? That would mean Broganar wouldn't have a third win either.

Part of him was sure it wouldn't be either of the previous winners. The newcomers and veterans all had an equal chance. The basket on their counter tops made sure of that.

Jacque almost missed the reveal of the mystery basket ingredients. He was the last one to put his hand on the cloth covering. He was still working through his thoughts when his fingers pulled off the fabric with the Alimental Authority seal embroidered on to it and revealed the contents within.

It took him several seconds to register the four items inside and then several more heart beats to fully appreciate the gifts within.

In previous years the mystery basket had been filled with a few foodstuffs that seemingly could not go together at all. He remembered Philippa recounting the

second round of her second win. The basket that year held lamb fries, licorice candies, button cabbages, and a citrusy pale ale. Somehow, Philippa had managed to not only combine the ingredients into something edible, but also into something that was still on the menu of the Goldenmead restaurant, the Long and Short Table.

Inside the basket Jacque recognized the Harpery Family Farms seal on the brown paper packages. For himself and his fellow semi-finalists this year, there were several choice cuts from a wild boar hybrid, specifically the Outer Keane Razorback that the farm was famous for. Edward explained to the audience that each contestant had a dozen rashers of hickory-smoked bacon, a joint of loin, and a square of pork skin to work with.

There was also a bunch of rose-colored baby turnips, the bulbs barely bigger than walnuts. They still smelled of the earth and had flecks of dirt on the leaves. A bottle of crimson colored liquid that turned out to be pomegranate mead from Erikson's Bee Yard and a pot of pink paste with a tag that read "Quince and Pear Butter by Cordelia Leeth's Jams and Jellies."

Jacque had a sneaky suspicion that when put together, all four items would have very similar hues. The Authority was being especially gracious this year. There had to be a trick.

As though Edward had read his, and likely a lot of other minds in the crowd, he smiled and spoke into the crystal. "Sounds too easy, right? Well, it is."

"And not," Bee clarified. "This simply must be one of the best dishes you've ever conceived of and cooked in the span of just one hour."

The audience gasped and Jacque wasn't the only contestant to swear.

A whole half of an hour of cook time off of the traditional second round time of ninety minutes was the price of such a glorious selection of choice products to work with. It was unprecedented as far as Jacque could remember.

He focused himself completely on the ingredients in the basket and then looked over at the generous pantry. He couldn't let himself wonder what any of the others might cook. Except his mind wouldn't listen. Philippa was bound to do something in the family wheelhouse but with a twist. He had to get ahead of her. He couldn't think like Nobue, did they even have mead in Shudo? The one time he had a bowl of noodles from a Shudonese vendor in the Fork it had been a delicious vessel of pork perfection. But Nobue had already done noodles. Broganar looked as stoic as any stoic dwarf could look. He hadn't reacted to the subtraction of their cook time at all.

And then in a blink, Jacque missed the beginning of the round. He took a moment to pause, to take a deep breath and try not think of how much the pomegranate mead looked like blood.

Travers's blood.

To shake it off and calm his nerves, and taste what he was going to be cooking with, Jacque broke the seal and took a taste of the mead. It was a punch in the mouth of sweetness and acidity. His cheeks concaved inward in protest, but it was not an unpleasant after-wave of flavor on his tongue.

Pork and apples was too obvious. So were pork and mushrooms. Before heading to the pantry Jacque pulled out the rashers of bacon and set them on a cooking rack. He pushed it into the coal oven over the glowing embers. He had a daring idea. He poured half of the mead into a pot, set it on a burner and adjusted the temperature so it could simmer down to a syrup. Perhaps some bacon candied in



sugar and a reduction of mead would be the ticket to set him apart.

## **Chapter Twenty: Okoias**

Time was not on her side and neither were memories. Okoias had wanted to interview Adrini Frey about Teague Margo yesterday but the explosion at the Fork had taken up all of her time and mental space. Was this what Linnrom had warned her about? The secrets of dragonfrost and dragonflame once again brought down destruction in Raymorne.

Throughout the city harvest activities were severely curtailed, but of course such activities like the mayor's dinner and the Caereme's Nimius were not cancelled. Nor was the Banquest, which in Okoias's most humble of opinions and astute intuitions, was asinine. But who were the bodies behind the shadows cast over the city? Did it have to do with the Gold Prophet or the Caeremes or someone else? Or was there some other puppet-master pulling strings?

Okoias sat at her desk, her thousandth cup of coffee in her hands as she pondered the next step. Her files and list were laid out before her and she tried to find the threads that wove everything together. The next step was to get ahead and be the one initiating the surprises for once. From the papers she pulled out the invitation and made for Captain Fisher's office.

Inside he looked worse than she felt but she knocked, entered and closed his door behind her before he could say anything.

"Inspector?" his voice was weary rather than angry or even inquisitive.

"I want to talk to the Caeremes," she said.

Fisher huffed. "No one is talking to them until tomorrow."

"I think Lady Caereme will talk to me," Okoias said.

"She's not talking business with anyone until tomorrow," he reiterated.

In response and with a certain relish of dramatic flair, she handed him the Nimius invitation. Fisher's eyes went wide at the name "Kallista Okoias" on the envelope and the fine gilded paper.

"After all these years?" he asked.

She nodded. "Guess it's finally become prudent that I attend."

Fisher thought for a few moments and then made a decision. "You and Crenn and a squad of constables to back you up."

"They probably won't even let Crenn in."

"He won't want to go, but he will for you." Fisher paused and narrowed his eyes at the invitation. "Make that elite bitch talk. I agree, they know more than they're saying. Nobility." He said the last word as though it were bile in his mouth.

It was a better result than she could've hoped for and indeed Crenn grumbled the whole way as they took a carriage to the Horn and then the lift up the cliff face. The crowd on the crest thought that the troubles in the greater city below couldn't touch them up here. An even higher class of festival activities bustled in the High Square. But as the crowd was still thinner than that of those below, Okoias, Crenn and the six constables accompanying them made good time winding through the crowd to the road that lead to the mansions on the rise.

Mauvine Crest was a place Okoias had hoped to never visit again. The massive mansion was bigger than the mayor's house and nearly as large as the viceroy's palace in Ambergate town north of the city. It was also not unheard of for guests of their famous wild parties to take the extremes of the pleasures outside into the city below, often with disastrous consequences. Their money bought the couple plenty of plausible deniability and they never served anything too illegal, but they

did seem to particularly enjoy stretching how far the shadows covered the gray areas of their lives.

The flagrancy towards normal society started at the front gates. Two identical male elven youths in white and gold body paint stood behind the gates dressed only in embroidered loincloths barely bigger than tea towels.

She had hoped to arrive before any guests, but even though dusk was still at least an hour away, there was already a line and the lawn between the gates and house was dotted with people.

Crenn cleared his throat but couldn't find the words he wanted to speak to the elf twins. Okoias saw on his face that he had finally realized that the rumors surrounding the sensations within were likely to be understated. Or at least he had probably taken great lengths to turn a deaf ear to such depravity.

"Invitation?" they asked in unison.

After handing over her invitation, she and Crenn also pointed out the inspector's badges on their chests. "We're here in our official capacity as inspectors of the Raymorne City-Watch," Crenn declared.

This made the twins and the other guests around them hesitate and then buzz with whispers. A couple a few paces ahead of them shifted and looked back at the inspectors, possibly contemplating leaving the queue. But that would be the epitome of foolish. No one with half a brain and a tongue in the head would miss out on the Nimius.

A figure emerged from the gatehouse. Unlike the twins he was dressed in security livery, a surcoat with the Caereme's sun and moon emblem made the same reinforced material as the city-watch and mayor's sentry's jackets. The layers of near impenetrable cloth could stop almost any dagger or arrow. His skin was a rich

brown, he had a beard the color of smoke, and his black eyes were hidden in the shadows of a heavy brow.

“Miss Okoias,” Torwin said, as though the last time they had seen each other was last week instead of decades before. Yes, she was sure his name was Torwin.

““Inspector,”” she corrected him. “Inspectors Okoias and Crenn. We have cause to speak with the Caeremes.”

“This is the night of their Nimius and I’m afraid their dance card, so to speak, is already rather full,” Torwin said.

“I have an invitation and I promise my behavior will be of the upmost respect, but I know that the baron and lady know more about things going on than they have been forthcoming with. I also have reason to suspect this man,” she pulled the sketch of Teague from a pocket, “is also on the premises.”

The guard barely looked at the drawing that had been circulated in every major broadsheet that morning. Suddenly, Torwin turned his head back towards the house as though he could hear some far off distant voice giving him instructions. For all Okoias knew, the crystal stud in his ear was some kind of receiver for Lady Caereme’s thoughts in the same fashion of the sound disks seen at many arena, amphitheater, and playhouse.

“You inspectors may enter, but not your constables,” Torwin said. “And you are also to go in unarmed save for your service daggers.”

That did not make Crenn happy. He thumbed the axe on his belt like a security blanket. Okoias handed over her sword to one of the constables and her Wasp with more expediency than Crenn.

“Is Teague Margo inside?” she asked again.

“He is on the list of invites,” Torwin said without a beat. “But I am unsure of his current attendance.”

There was no way their secret tug-of-war of dominance over the draconi of the city was not still underway. Lady Sylfina had to know something about the missing draconi.

Perhaps even Torwin did as well.

“Please, do not disturb the guests and any activity you deem illicit is not your business this night,” Torwin warned.

“Understood,” Okoias said, even though she would have gladly arrested everyone under this roof tonight for breaking laws the rich felt they did not have to follow.

Crenn grudgingly agreed with a grunt.

As the gates creaked open, Okoias offered her partner a piece of advice.

“Don’t drink or eat anything. You never know the strings attached to it.”

“Do you remember who you are saying this to?” Crenn said.

Okoias did remember because he was a dwarf with the worst taste in cuisine ever to exist. But that didn’t mean temptation wouldn’t be lingering in the corner of their eyes every second they were inside *this* house.

Inside the gates there was already an insane, meticulous attention to detail. Even in the early evening light, dozens of topiaries danced in the shadows cast by lanterns scattered across the lawn. The walkway itself was flanked by two grand creatures. On the left, and facing north, was a white stag. The animal had been cut from a large entanglement of silver bush woven with white sage and blond thistle. The beast was so lifelike rearing majestically in dusk, unaware of the dangers it faced being so exposed and out in the open. Erupting in a crown from the stag’s head

were great antlers of gold and white marble. The second was a kraken cut from a gray-leafed laurel, bursting forth from the waves of a blue and white flowery bush, the steel arms and silver metallic tentacles flailing as it tried to escape invisible hunters that were intent on bringing it to land. Okoias shuddered after passing between the topiaries. They felt wrong and out of place, even though she knew they weren't the real creatures seen in the wild.

The house itself was a testament to the finest dwarfcraft of the continent. Mauvine Crest had actually been in Baron Caereme's family for a millennia, the barony bequeathed to the draconi clan by the first viceroy. Eventually the family began investing in industry and the young Lord Maroque married the part-elf, draconi heiress Sylfina Tallyran sixty years ago. They hadn't sired any children since but had fostered half a dozen young draconi over the years, although no official heirs had been named.

Their yearly Nimius liked to pretend it was nothing more than another celebration of the harvest; of Ursula's creed that food could undo any quarrel and lay down old hurts. But it was anathema to that. To come from the Beggars' Feast to this was like walking through a mirror made of smoke and on the other side was a blazing whirlpool of vice.

In all fairness, Okoias's recent journeys through the pillars of her childhood—revisiting the House and the Priory and seeing Brother Albius again—had stirred up too many old feelings of resentment that had been solidly blocked by her faith. A faith that had been tempered in the slurry of the darkest parts of Raymorne through her career with the city-watch. She knew the city had its darkneses but also it was full of kindness and unity. Not just annually at the Beggars' Feast, but at the charity events for the widows and widowers of fallen city-

watch members, at the spring Bake-In that saw the poorest parts of the city inundated with bread at the end of long hollow winters.

Inside the foyer stood a pair of draconi, one male and one female, slightly apart in a fountain dispensing what appeared to be red and white wine down their bodies. They were completely naked and hairless, standing like dancers about to make the first move, their arms extended from their bodies. In the dim light Okoias could almost see the tube running up their leg and spine to the top of their heads so that the wine could flow back down in golden and crimson cascades.

A racially mixed group of men stood before the female trying to each hold a cup under her breasts, one was a dwarf already many cups into drunkenness. They did not touch the body—they knew they didn't have permission—but the spectators took full advantage of being as close to her as possible, filling up their goblets as their morality drained from their bodies. Another group of human and half-elf women giggled with abandon as they each filled their glasses from the red wine trickling down the semi-erect penis of the male figure. The draconi pair might as well have been statues, but Okoias could make out their steady, slow breathing beneath the music trickling in from the next room.

Torwin did not bother offering Crenn or Okoias a cup to catch whichever vintage they might fancy. Instead, he guided them into the next room, which was lit in shades of palest blue. And it was cold. Just cold enough that Okoias could feel her muscles threatening to seize. One of the negatives of being a fire draconi, she was really sensitive to temperature changes and she was dressed for the mild autumn outside. Half a dozen tables bearing trays, some carved from actual ice, displayed dozens of varieties of seafood. One particular six foot icy tower was loaded with oysters, mussels, clams, cockles, scallops and abalone and all the dressings and



saucers one could dream of. For a brief moment, Okoias was severely tempted by a display of bright orange sea urchin that she'd only tasted once before on a date with Briar.

"You're welcome to take anything..." Torwin began but then he caught Crenn's eye and gave a half smile at the expression on his fellow dwarf's face. "I'm not fond of seafood either."

Okoias also looked at her partner. One of the things he loathed most in this city was the fishmongers' section of the docks for their smell and in their offerings. Fortunately, they had only ever had cause to visit them once in their partnership and he only ever tolerated the presence of seafood on rare occasions for Oleena.

The music surrounding them was dreamy and flowing, like the ocean. Musicians sat in the corner, as unaware of their surroundings as the draconi pair in the foyer. Many hands waved for more sparkling wine, while the other hands of the walking bottomless pits that had previously been normal people devoured more and more fish. Other platters were set with steamed red lobsters, pink prawns, langoustines, and great legs and claws of orange crabs. At another table were slivers of different varieties of salmon, tuna, bream, snapper, mackerel, and yellowtail. The fruits of the sea in this room alone was likely, at the very least, equal the cost of one of the nights of the Beggars' Feast.

The centerpiece in the center of the room topped it all—a dismembered carcass of a baby blue-gray kraken. Even though "baby" in this case meant a creature that was ten feet long and weighing two hundred pounds before some culinary mastery of knife work had broken it down into food. One older dwarf male beckoned for a slice of eye, which when whole was the size of a dwarf's fist. A lovely young

draconi server took the piece and laid it in this mouth. He squirmed in delight at the sensation of eating something that should be so unattainable.

Did Okoias feel so self-righteous right now because of the wanton way the kraken was being enjoyed? That it wasn't for sustenance or even for pleasure. It was solely for the delight of being able to do so when hundreds of thousands outside the doors of the house could never dream of eating such a morsel? That after the harvest festival thousands of people in Raymorne would still be in doubt of where their next meal was coming from?

Shaking her head, she followed Torwin and Crenn into the next chamber.

This room looked as though someone had transplanted into the manor a real grove from the foothills of the Strugyrst. The sounds of nocturnal birds, rusting trees, and a bubbling creek was just barely audible beneath the hubbub. The focus of this room was a huge fire pit against the wall, the heat of which should have been blazing and filling the space with smoke. But a unique flue, disguised as a tree, directed the smoke away from the guests, up through the branches and leaves and out a window. Above the glowing embers of the pit was half of an animal carcass, and, judging from the pure white horns jutting out from the head of the master roasting chef, it had once been a magnificent white stag. The heavily muscled human roasting chef wore a wrap of the white pelt around his hips and nothing else as he basted the caramelizing flesh of the beast with a closely guarded dwarven technique.

"Thieves," Crenn muttered. Okoias could barely hear him and lowered her head so he could clarify the charge.

"Hardly theft," Torwin said. "Sectioning has been shared with outsiders before."

"Blasphemy then," Crenn retorted.

“He learned it from Mallik, son of Magnos,” Torwin said.

Crenn made a sound halfway between a snort and the beginning of one hocking up a glob of phlegm. But he quickly swallowed as he remembered whose house he was in and what one was prepared to prove with one’s expectorate in a draconi house.

Okoias vaguely knew what sectioning entailed. It enabled a roaster to use various types of basting sauces and spice rubs on a spit-roasting animal without them intermingling. Without a doubt there was probably a bit of dwarven showmanship in addition to the special thread and cutting methods that was supposed to stay secret deep in the rock halls or in the canyons of the Strugyrst. The other half of the majestic animal had been used in rich braises, cut into thick steaks waiting to be grilled, and even one of the legs, with the hoof still attached, had been pit smoked.

Once again, the room was a tribute to utter gluttony, but this time there was no possible way Okoias could deny the appeal when she realized she was drooling a little. She turned to their escort and asked, “How many more fucking rooms?”

Torwin looked at her with incredulity, that she would ask such a question in such a house knowing full well there were indeed actual rooms being put to that very purpose even as they spoke.

She moved closer to Torwin and in a dangerous whisper asked, “Did she tell you to mess with us?” It was the kind of thing Lady Sylfina would do.

“I do only as I am told and then I get paid. That is all. The rest is their business,” Torwin said.

“No more show,” Okoias said, “I want to see her and her husband.”

“I don’t do what you tell me to do.”

Crenn muttered several sentences in the dwarven tongue. Torwin considered the words and then barked a laugh. He beckoned them to follow, pulling back a drapery covering one wall in the antechamber and led them through a door. It was an antique secret passageway. The party's sensations dimmed in the gas-lit corridor.

He led them into a conservatively decorated office, the walls filled with dozens of bookcases, a desk heaving with papers and ledgers, a lounge chair before a fire, and a table that could seat eight meant for business meetings and other mundane affairs.

"I will return with the baron and lady as soon as I can." Torwin opened a second concealed door behind a painting and disappeared.

## Chapter Twenty-One: Astrid

“At least have some tea,” Marion said. “Are you sure you wouldn’t rather be home?”

“I’m fine,” Astrid replied. “It’s just my stomach. Feels like it’s on fire.”

Hemmie Frey leaned across her husband on the couch and said, “Have you tried ginger? Ginger and honey were about the only thing that kept me sane during my four pregnancies. I would suggest coconut water, but I doubt you could find some in the city that wouldn’t cost a fortune.”

“Tried everything,” Astrid said. “All kinds of milks, ginger, mint, anise. I’d pay almost any price if coconut water cured this.”

Marion pushed her to sip on some water, which was about the only thing she could tolerate right now.

Beyond the window that gave everyone in the box a magnificent view of the Banquest, Astrid could see Jacque furiously at work on the mystery basket. People were always asking her how she made it work with someone so different from herself. The answer was always the same, even if the question was never vocally expressed, “Because he’s the only one that makes my heart feel like it’s a ship finally come to shore.”

It was what her father had always said about her mother. *“She’s my lighthouse, anchor, and berth. She’s everything that keeps me tethered.”*

“What about me?” she’d once replied.

“You’re the little fish we caught together.”

And then he’d pop his lips like a giant cod, coming closer until he kissed her on the forehead and scooped her up into his arms.

There was a little fish growing inside her. There were so few human-halfling relationships it had taken forever to find a midwife who could assure her that the lack of weight gain and the tiny baby bump on Astrid's rather slender frame was within the realm of normal. Until the baby had started kicking, she had still been worried about its vitality. There were no worries about that anymore.

Now her greatest fear was that she would suddenly start spouting fire like a dragon. Her stomach had to roil today of all days, leaving a metallic, acrid tang in her mouth. She pulled out a peppermint-ginger candy and sucked on it. It barely helped, but better than no help at all.

Because of Jacque and Adrini's paring in the first round, Astrid and Marion had become acquainted with Lyreon Frey and his wife who was essentially a princess by Raymornian standards. But Hemmie was warm and welcoming, a disposition very unlike what the sensationalist Karisic broadsheets said about the Princess Dagmar of Skanders.

And then of course, right as she was getting comfortable in the chair and relaxed enough to hopefully just enjoy watching her husband excel, she had to pee.

She excused herself to the private privy down the hall. It was actually an exquisite piece of architecture with high ceilings, divided cubicles with doors for privacy, and even running tap water. One of the many things she wished she could afford in their home was running water. The shared well in their neighborhood was always crowded and drawing water everyday had become a bit more of a task for her pregnant body, and for her aging mother, than she liked.

Returning from the privy she saw that the seat next to her mother was now occupied by Yama Tasi. Marion made to give up her seat but Astrid held up a hand. Standing had relieved the acid somewhat. That was until she needed to sit down and

alleviate her swelling feet. How some women managed to endure these months more than once in their lives was astonishing.

At the bar a halfling man with astonishingly lovely golden curls turned around in his stool and Astrid was caught in the gaze of Augustus Goldenmead. They had never officially met, but his face was in one of the prints of a family etching Jacque still refused to take off the walls. It was a funny family portrait where Jamey was making an obscene gesture. He had paid the etcher to include the rude position of his fingers even though it was so small one could barely notice. Apparently, Great-Aunt Teenie had noticed though and concluded that Jamey was still young enough to earn a beating on the back of his buttocks with a wooden spoon.

The etching did not do Augustus's handsome face justice. He gestured to the empty seat next to him and Astrid decided to take it. If nothing it would give her a chance to glean any knowledge of other forthcoming Spooner plots to hurt and embarrass her husband.

He held out his hand. "I don't think we've ever been formally introduced."

"No, we have not, Mr. Goldenmead."

He grimaced at the formality but then gave a nod of his head.

"I'm sure my complacent ignorance has earned such treatment," he said.

In her time spent with halflings she had come to discern that there were only a few major accents and dialects. Those raised in the city of course sounded more or less like the humans in Raymorne. Those from Jacque's family's area, the Inner Keane had a slightly nasally sound with rounded vowels and a kind of flourish that reminded her of gentle ocean waves. The Goldenmeads were from the point where the Rivers and Barrow met the ocean on the other side of the city. It was a forceful

ocean wave reminiscent of pastoral musical: so lyrical and poetic sounding, if a bit supercilious.

Augustus even pronounced Jacque's name like "zha-ak."

"If my Pippa doesn't win, I 'ope it is Jacque," he said.

"Funny, feel the same way, I hope my husband wins as well."

He took a sip of his scotch. "We deserve your enmity."

"You're speaking for yourself or for your wife?" she asked.

The bartender asked if she wanted anything.

"Do you have anything for heartburn?" Astrid was so desperate and this conversation was not helping.

The draconi man next to her snapped his fingers and winked at her, if Astrid remembered correctly, he was Renata Lawrey's brother, Simon. He hadn't joined them for dinner the other night, but she was sure that's who the man was. Simon pulled from his pocket a glass flask filled with a pale green liquid. He asked the bartender for a small glass and measured out a few mouthfuls.

She took the glass and sniffed it. It smelled like the last breath of spring, cold minty air with a touch of anise and sea salt.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Tonic normally meant for fire breathers," Simon said. "But my cousin was a midwife and she'd give it to her patients."

She took a cautious sip of the tonic, hoping it would indeed help and not exacerbate her symptoms. It instantly alleviated the worst of her heartburn and she sighed in relief. At least it didn't feel like the bile in her stomach had a life of its own and was trying to crawl up her throat anymore.



“Thank you,” she said to Simon. He nodded and turned back to staring off into the distance. Astrid herself twisted, fully intending to get away from Augustus when he made a move to touch her arm, but stopped short.

“I,” he began, but was interrupted by a server wheeling carts of glasses of the very pomegranate mead that was in the mystery baskets below. Augustus thanked the server and the man offered a glass to Simon who also took one. Astrid declined.

The server then started to his way around the room with his cart of flutes that looked like a less viscous version of the blood used in the more expensive stage productions of Sight End.

She started to move off the stool again, the muscles in her back and stomach now complaining. Oh, if only she could have this baby now and have it over with.

“Please, Astrid, I would like to explain,” Augustus said.

Against what she was sure was her better judgment she stayed.

“Nothing like this has happened in the Spooner family and now Lissey is...well, never mind Lissey, the point is...”

“I think,” Astrid said, interrupting him, “you should realize that Jacque and Lissey are grown halflings capable of making decisions of the heart for themselves. Sometimes I think the world sees your kind as too small, perhaps even too childlike for anything other than your Keane pastoral ways, and you’re all comfortable with isolation and distancing.”

The mead in Augustus’s hand shook.

“If you want me to absolve you of your ignorance, I cannot. I will not,” Astrid said. Before he could regain his tongue, she continued with, ““The Rivers remember.””

“They remember slights against those that would pollute...”

“I’m pollution then? The bilge of the docks, fish guts and waste and piss?”

Next to them she heard Simon snort into his glass.

“No,” Augustus said, and he downed half his own mead in one swallow. He held up his hand. “I want to apologize.”

“To whom?” Astrid said.

This was obviously not the conversation he had ever imagined having with a Karisic woman, a daughter of the ice and sea. She was also her mother’s daughter.

*“Never let them ruin your leaven with their salt,”* her mother always said.

“I guess I don’t know how to apologize,” Augustus said. “But I don’t want to lose my sister.”

“You won’t,” Astrid promised. “If you accept that the man she loves, is simply that.”

On the other side of the room, Simo started whining. The man with the cart full of glasses of mead rolled by Marion, Lyreon, Hemmie, and Yama Tsai. Only Marion accepted a glass.

Simo then started barking and pawing at Marion’s leg.

Astrid thanked Simon again and asked who the tonic maker was.

“Doctor Linnrom, Third Canal.”

She thanked him but walked away from Augustus without a goodbye. He only deserved her time if he dared to treat her with the respect due to the wife of a member of his family.

“Simo, stop that,” Marion said. “It’s rude to interrupt other people.”

Tsai chuckled and gave the dog a scratch behind the ear, but he still continued to whine and whimper.

“Mama, he probably needs to use the privy himself.” Astrid held out her hand for the lead and Marion handed it over, but held on to her daughter’s hand for a moment.

“Just a minute, Starling. Who would win in a fight? A butcher or a deep-sea fisherman?”

Astrid giggled. “What?”

“I say the deep-sea fisherman,” Hemmie said. “Better legs.”

“I say a butcher,” Tsai countered. “It’s in the power of a punch.”

“My kernel is on the halfling out there,” Astrid said.

“Which one?” Marion said, and then laughed prematurely at her own joke.

As Astrid turned to walk away, she realized she actually had to tug on Simo’s lead to get him to follow her but the dog kept trying to head for the table where half empty glasses of red liquid sat. That wasn’t like Simo to not want to go outside when the opportunity presented itself.

“Oh, is dat it?” Lyreon asked with a chuckle. “I tink he want a bit of tippie.” Adrini’s father made a face, “Nevah been a fan of mead. Too sour.”

Marion licked her lips. “I love it.”

They all started in a fit of laughter and Astrid gently puled the dog out of the room so he wouldn’t pee on the carpet.

She took one last distant look at her husband cooking and smiled to herself. knowing that he was all hers.

## Chapter Twenty-Two: Okoias

“What did you say to him?” Okoias asked Crenn as soon as they were alone.

“It’s a funny story actually. I merely reminded him that we are but two of the city-watch and that kraken meat has to be processed in the fish market. Whole carcasses cannot be transported beyond the docks for safety reasons.”

“And how do know you that?”

“I overheard old Beeton telling Oleena the story of the time they tried to transport an adult kraken through the city streets. It apparently did not go very well.”

“Was it the ink sac?” Okoias asked.

“Apparently it exploded all over the city hall.”

Okoias laughed.

Crenn nodded in appreciation. “The City Council passed a law banning the intercity transportation of any meat carcass with a hanging weight above thirty-five stone. They either have to be processed in the slaughterhouses if it’s cows, elk, what have you, or at the docks.”

Of course, not even a law like that could stop the Caeremes from doing whatever they wanted during *their* party.

As they were both inspectors of the city-watch, curiosity was as unconscious as breathing. Okoias and Crenn looked about the room, careful not to move anything out of place. The contents of the desktop were typical for household accounting. Budgets for food, taxes, and staff salaries were visible, the numbers seemingly so impossible it made her head spin. And this party was probably barely a drop in the bucket for them.

“They have a lot of religious texts,” Crenn commented as he looked at the bookshelves. “I recognize some of these from University, but they’re all over the place. *Treatise of the High Artisan Thurinus* and *The Milk of Ursula the Divine* hardly belong next to each other. The University Librarian would have a fit.”

Crenn pulled a slim book out that had been wedged beneath the two dense volumes of theology and squinted at the yellow cover.

“*Tarleah Spooner’s Spectacular and Tempting Treats*.” Crenn shuddered as if the order of the books had actually offended him, and slipped the Spooner cookbook back between the *Treatise* and *Milk of* tomes.

“It’s likely a family collection,” Okoias said, though unable to explain the ordering system. “Lady Caereme is a disciple of the Uthyrian-Hedony Reconstructionist Movement.”

Which was the rather academic term for what Panthemia just called “hedony,” without the codifying terms; it was essentially a rejection of all the rules of Uthyr Greatwing but still claimed fidelity with his teachings.

He looked over at Okoias. “Didn’t they practice self-cannibalism? Or whatever it’s called?”

“Only at the moment of highest exaltation.”

“And how does one know when *that* day has arrived?” Crenn asked.

“I was twenty-six, and it’s not as gruesome as it sounds.”

Neither of them had noticed the arrival of Lady Sylfina Caereme from behind yet another hidden door. She startled Crenn enough that he reached for his side dagger, and behind Lady Sylfina, Torwin made to draw his weapon.

The draconi part-elf held up a delicate hand toward her guard. “They were just invested in my household affairs and family’s book collection.”

“Talk about stating the obvious,” Crenn muttered. He did not let go of his side arm though. Instead, he walked over to Okoias, but there was no telling if the bookshelves hid another secret door that could lead to an ambush.

Her face was practically the same as she had all those years ago, as though she were immune to age. Tonight, she wore a backless dress made from individual silk autumn leaves sewn together in an ombré starting with a parchment yellow at her bustline that didn’t hide the dark pink of her nipples, turning to vivid orange and ending at a blood red hem. The biggest change was in the shape of her belly. She looked like she was about ready to lay an egg any day now.

“Where’s your husband?” Okoias asked.

“Can we let him finish his business first? I’m more than happy to entertain two of the city’s finest for the time being.”

It didn’t need to be said what kind of business the baron was “finishing up.”

“Would you like to have a seat?” Lady Sylfina sat down at the table, leaned her chair back and propped her bare feet up. “Torwin? I think I’d like a tray from the ice room.”

“I’ll tell a servant.” And the dwarf guard left his lady with the city-watch inspectors.

She turned back to her “guests.” “Something tells me I should probably keep things in balance for this conversation. Which is such a shame. Our master roaster has learned his craft well. Should I ask for a plate for you, inspector?” she directed the last question at Crenn.

“No need,” Okoias said.

“Still fasting during this time of year, are you?” Lady Sylfina made a face as though Okoias were the blasphemer. She adjusted the necklace at her throat, making

sure the face of the dragon's head pendant was settled between her breasts. Her charms no longer worked on Kallista, let alone Inspector Okoias. And Crenn would find a draconi half-elf about as desirable as a mountain goat.

But the show, the flash and flamboyance wasn't for them. She genuinely enjoyed and thought that this mode of beauty suited her.

"What brings you to my house this night?" she asked. "Doubtful you actually wanted to come."

"I was tempted to throw the invitation away," Okoias said.

"That would have been a waste," Lady Sylfina retorted.

"It's a waste of money and paper," Okoias added.

"Nothing beautiful is a waste of money or resources."

"I have a question," Crenn said, interrupting the pair of them. "What exactly is the ritual or rites around self-cannibalizing?"

Lady Sylfina laughed at the question. A tinkling, but harsh sound. Like shards of glass trying to hold back a deluge of sparkling wine.

But Okoias realized what Crenn was doing, he was trying to get Lady Sylfina to start talking and then eventually lead the conversation back to this Teague Margo and the other queries that they had.

"You said you attended university. Did you not study hedony?"

"I only attended long enough to deduce that my magical sensitivity had no manifestations," Crenn replied. "I was directed to the Rhyne College and eventually found my way to working for the city-watch."

Intrigued, Lady Sylfina asked another question. "What kind of sensitivity?"

"Alchemical and metallurgical, like many dwarfs, but I also had and some outer-sight."

It was what made Crenn an excellent inspector. He followed his intuitions and they were more often right than wrong. It would lead him down unexpected streets or into a den of iniquity with his overreaching partner.

“I didn’t last long at university either,” Lady Sylfina said with an exaggerated sigh. “At least I’ve retained my alchemy knowledge. It helps me mix up some wicked drinks and sauces, but I found exaltation in the dissolution of barriers. After discovering such a magic, why would you not pursue it?”

“Not everyone has to or gets to choose the same spiritual path,” Crenn said. “I think it makes for a far more interesting world.”

“Gold Prophet kind of interesting?” Lady Sylfina said, feigning the casual drop of the suspected terrorist’s moniker.

“What do you know?” Crenn asked.

“Maroque is all in a tither, he’s needed some extra attention tonight to keep him calm,” Lady Sylfina said with no need to clarify as to what “extra attention” the baron was receiving tonight. “And many of my guests tonight have none of their usual verve.” This time she pouted as though she were a child. “This is supposed to be a time of celebration, is it not? Especially for our people.”

Based on what little of the party Okoias had seen, most of the guests had been too wrapped up in hedonistic revelry to give any thought to what had happened at the Bountiful Arena and the Fork. But then she thought back through their tours of the room. She couldn’t recall feeling or smelling a great presence of those of her blood. Only a few here and there.

“Where are they?” Okoias asked.

“Some are here, some in their own so called safe houses,” Lady Sylfina said. “It’s like they trust me even less than they do the false ‘Gold’ fool.”



“How many are eggings?” Okoias asked. Now that she finally had someone willing to give answers to her questions, she didn’t want to change the subject.

“Here? Barely a handful, we get rarer and rarer with each decade.”

“I just assumed,” Okoias began but then the glassy tone in Lady Sylfina’s voice shattered.

“*That* is where you and your ‘watch’ fail. You assume there’s more home births because we’re scared to seek out midwives, have you even asked the midwives of our kind what they’ve been seeing? You’ve been fluttering about with your list of names the world has already forgotten not asking the right questions.”

“What do you know about that?”

“You’re not as careful as you think. There are players everywhere. The blind fools of the House and the idiots that suck that Gold Prophet’s cock as though he cums with fountains of wisdom.”

“There’s an image I’ll never get out of my head,” Crenn said.

Lady Sylfina waived him off. “My point is this city’s grown so big there are eyes everywhere, but no ears or mouths to share the information. You’re here tonight far too late.”

“More people don’t have to die,” Okoias began.

Someone knocked on one of the indistinguishable doors before Lady Sylfina could spit out more retorts. A young woman entered, dressed much like the guards at the gates, although she was afforded the additional modesty of a gilded leaf on each breast. She set a giant tray of seafood before Lady Sylfina and stood waiting for her next order.

“Alaine, tell my guests how many eggings you’ve help to deliver before you entered my service,” she commanded.

Alaine raised her head and Okoias could see the slit pupils and then noticed the patches of scales on the servant's shoulders and hips.

"Um, I spent eleven years as a draconi midwife before we had to close our clinic due to the lack of patients. My last year I helped only three women lay and tend to their eggs."

"Thank you, Alaine."

The former midwife curtsied and exited the office.

"See what happens when you widen your focus to the so called greater good? Fuck the city and the Authority. It's our people we have to look after." She slurped down an oyster before gesturing at Crenn with the empty half-shell. "They have their own ways. So do elves and halflings and humans."

"But we've been intermixing with all those races for over a thousand years, your own father is from a long line of half, and more or less than half, elves."

Lady Sylfina picked up a delicate silver fork and pierced the succulent flesh of a fine slice of abalone. She locked her eyes with Okoias and put the piece of mollusk in her mouth with exaggerated sensuality. She swallowed then took a long sip from the goblet of wine on the tray. "I admit I should have agreed with the Gold Prophet that night, even if his proposed methods were rather ghastly."

"You mean the part where he wants us all to start breeding as much as we can to produce eggings and those with more fire and ice secretions to make weapons?"

"Oh, so you have been paying attention. Maroque knew instantly and that beast of burden of a captain seemed to realize it even before you." The lady was enjoying picking at Okoias. "What kind of draconi are you?"

“One who does what she can for the greater good of all.” And Okoias truly believed in that. It was the cornerstone of Panthemia and anathema to the principles of hedony. “It’s not all about food and sex. The world turns on so much more.”

“Oh really? Life isn’t about living?” She turned back to Crenn. “That’s what the ritual really is all about.”

“Pardon?” Crenn asked.

“The now forbidden Uthyri rites that include self-cannibalism,” Lady Sylfina clarified. “Sure, you cut off and eat a piece of yourself, usually just a small part of your arm or leg.” She extended her forearm to show off the shiny patch of scar tissue barely bigger than a kernel coin. “It’s about taking in your body, your blood and reuniting it with your mind, heart, and soul. What is a Mountain Feast but that? It’s unification between your body and the earth that feeds your body and the Artisans who have passed on. A community that feeds each other whether it’s blood, brains, and organs or your mama dwarf and her fifty lovers behind your papa’s back.”

Crenn said something in dwarven that Okoias was sure was an insinuation that Lady Sylfina was an ignorant loose woman. The rough translation was the “queen of slopping jilts.”

That elicited another glassy laugh from Lady Sylfina before she slurped down a few more oysters. Like a cat now bored with the dangling piece of string, she sat up straighter, downed more wine, then said, “So, who are you looking for in particular? I can’t guarantee that they’re alive but if they’re draconi, well, I make it a habit of knowing the clans of our breed, even if they don’t carry banners or family names.”

Crenn removed a copy of the etching of the man they suspected was called Teague Margo.

Lady Sylfina's eyes widened. "Well, I'll be a kraken's dinner. I told that boy to stay away from..." She didn't finish the sentence right away. She ate a few more oysters until there was only one left and took a big gulp of wine. Everything was on her time. No one else's. "Teague's here. He's safe and recovering."

"And you let him?" Okoias asked at the same time Crenn said, "Recovering?"

"He's paid for a little hospitality from me and my husband more than adequately in the past. Just like you, Kallista."

"Inspector Okoias," she corrected.

"If that's the mask you want to keep wearing fine, so be it."

Okoias ignored the statement. She knew who she was and was comfortable in her skin and scales. "Let me talk to him," Okoias said. "Blood to blood."

## Chapter Twenty-Three: Adrini

Three days. Teague had been missing for three days and after she had heard what Jacque had witnessed and what had happened in the Fork, Adrini was sure her friend was dead or dying. A floater fished out of the canal or burned in the blast now rotting in some underground morgue or hospital, unidentified by the city-watch. Trapped in some sewer grate with the rats feasting on his bloated flesh, or carried out with the waste of the city into the ocean. It didn't help that a constable from the city-watch pulled her aside as she arrived at the arena to ask her questions about Teague but wouldn't answer hers. All she said was, "I was just told to ask you where he could be, as two of our inspectors would like to have a word with him." The grays and broadsheets made it sound like Teague, or the figure that looked remarkably like Teague, was involved in the violence at the arena and in the Fork.

"I can't do this, Papa."

"Yah really gonna let some dragon-ass white boy determine yah future?"

Lyreon had asked a bit harshly. But he did have a point. When was she going to step up and be her own person?

"An' besides," Lyreon continued after a kiss to her forehead. "Who else could possibly be di winnah?"

So, she had walked into the arena, to her kitchen absent of Jacque this time, and had opened the basket with determination. But the racing thoughts just wouldn't stop. She tried to stay focused, but five minutes into the round she sliced into the tip of her finger.

"Fuck you!" she screamed at her knife, food, and missing friend.

A medic came over and examined the wound. Someone else took away her cutting board and the pile of the baby turnips she had been trying to turn into uniform wedges to roast.

“You all right?” asked the University medic as he cleaned her wound with a strong white alcoholic solution that stung.

“Yes,” she hissed.

The medic pulled out a pot from his bag and opened it to reveal a waxy blue paraffin inside. They used the same stuff at the High Larder whenever anyone had a cut that did not need sutures but couldn’t risk getting blood in the food. The resin stopped the bleeding in her finger, and she was able to continue a few minutes later.

A new bundle of turnips was placed on her board. She looked around at what the others were cooking while trying to keep Bee and Edward’s running commentary out of her head.

“Ooh, look what Philippa is doing.”

“That’s an interesting technique being used by Broganar.”

“Who doesn’t love pork, thyme, and apples? It’s like they were made for each other.”

“I could live off this quince and pear butter. I’d probably even spread it on a bacon sandwich or in porridge every morning.”

*“Your friend is dead, Adrini.”*

*“Just give up.”*

*“The only reason you’re here is because he was trying to be someone else through you. Teague has always been a liar.”*

*“He could have told you any time he wanted what he was. It’s not like he didn’t know you’ve been a half-breed loser all your life, too.”*

And then the smell of burning pork skin interrupted her thoughts. She pulled out the black sheet of fatty flesh, practically threw it on the cutting board, and then sat down on the ground and started to cry.

This was it. This was the point in which she failed. Luckily, she wasn't facing the viewers' box so that Papa and Hemmie and everyone else could see her cry. But half of the audience could. Her tears muffled the sounds coming from the commentators and the kitchens around her.

She could still smell the meats cooking, meat going into sauces, and the sticky scent of the quince. It all tasted much better with her tears.

*"Are you going to just give up, my tree-lily?"*

Adrini looked up, so sure that she had not actually heard that voice in her head and yet so sure that she had. It was a voice she had not communed with mind to mind in many months. She stood up and looked around. There were people in the crowd obviously whispering about her, but there, near where the stadium seats were still undergoing repairs, were four figures.

There they were: Saverina standing between Xandre and Lewyn with Emeric waving at her next to Xandre.

Her brothers were *here*. Her mother was *here*.

*"Get on with it,"* she heard Lewyn in her head, a bit more distantly. The memory-speak connection was always strongest between mother and child, but with practice, those elves that had shared a womb could also share their voices with their siblings.

Had they ever practiced together? She had spent so little of her life with her brothers. Bee had noticed Adrini's crisis and began to approach her station.

“Got to cook!” Adrini said and Bee reported into the speaking crystal that Adrini Frey was back in the game.

She squared her shoulders and re-evaluated her station.

Merritt’s words came to her then as well. *“Make sure everything is in its place. A cook cannot do so if they do not have everything lined up. A messy station means a messy dish.”*

She looked at the pork she had left on the open grill. Fortunately, she had returned to her senses in time. She flipped over one chop and it was gorgeous with dark brown, not black, grill marks and a crisp exterior that meant pure heavenly flavor. The other three were just as perfect.

Right, that meant a few more minutes on that side, she could take a deep breath and then concentrate on the turnips. There wasn’t enough time to properly roast them, so she sliced them as thin as possible, paying absolute attention so as not to get blood on a second batch. Then she put the pan of reserved bacon fat back on a hot hob and added a spoonful of lard. When the pan was hot and the lard had sizzled down into a bubbling pool, she set her slivers of turnip out on one layer in the pan to make turnip chips.

“Oh, look at this,” Edward’s voice rang, breaking into her concentration.

Adrini tried not to pay attention to the commentary. *Stupid commentary.*

“That bacon lattice on that pie is stunning.”

“She really is a magnificent baker.”

Adrini did not look to see if they were talking about Renata or Philippa. She hoped it was Renata of course.

Even though her family was spread out across the valley and often overseas, Adrini knew that they would never willingly abandon her for whomever she chose to



love. That anyone could do that to a pair as lovely as Jacque and Astrid was utterly senseless.

Working alongside Jacque, Adrini had seen someone she wanted to emulate. Merritt had taught her most of the steps of being an excellent cook, but love had been missing in her life. She had let herself become detached, with only Teague for a tether. Now that he was gone, she felt lost in the clouds, but now she knew that she wasn't.

There were at least fifteen minutes left in the round when the horn sounded to end the round. All eight of them looked at Bee and Edward for the reason. The commentators were talking in hushed voices to someone from the city-watch and someone from the Alimental Authority. Another half dozen grays rushed to stations and removed the bottles of mead, telling cooks to step back from their stations.

"What's going on?" Adrini asked when she saw the dwarf Cassius pass by her station.

"Step away from the stations and return to the contestant waiting room," Cassius said. He turned off the gas valve to her stove, the light inside the oven and below the pots puffed out.

Like a calf to its mother, Adrini made for Jacque who was soon buffered on one side by Renata and Mabb on the other. Nobue followed, her steps serene, but her face also sharing the same confusion and concern of the other cooks.

In a soft echo, Adrini heard her mother asking, "*What is going on?*"

She took a deep breath and concentrated on the simple, "*I don't know.*"

All the food and drinks were gone from the waiting room, which irritated Gabriel Galley who demanded something alcoholic to temper his mood. The room

had also been stripped of broadsheets and leaflets. Seemingly agreeing that a drink was an excellent idea, Mabb also looked around the bar.

“Not a drop to be had,” he reported.

Philippa tested the door handle and reported to the room, “It’s locked.”

Then they all started talking at once and of course Adrini felt the hurricane of thoughts and fears begin to turn in her head again. Someone put an arm around her shoulders, as if they already knew what she was feeling. It was Mabb. She put her arm around his waist and leaned her forehead against his temple. It felt so easy and natural, unlike any other man she’d had feelings for.

“You all right?” he asked.

“Been better,” she said.

Jacque approached them. “Am I the only one who thinks that this has to do with whoever wrecked the kitchens and the stadium a few days ago?” he asked.

“Very astute,” muttered Philippa as she passed by on her way to a chair.

They waited, all eight of them, in near silence. The only things they had to voice were questions and none of them had any answers. The lack of talk was punctuated by breathing, fingers fiddling, legs shaking, now and then a cleared throat.

Adrini spent it thinking about the calluses on her hands compared with those of Mabb’s. More specifically the lack of calluses on his right hand, compared with those on her left. Cooks’ hands, fingers entwined, and in quiet acknowledgement that these newfound feelings and expressions transcended the Banquest.

Part of her wanted to tell him about her mother and brothers. She wondered if Lewyn and Mabb would have much in common considering they had taken two

different paths towards affirming their masculinity. But the moment so recently shared between her mother and her brothers was for Adrini alone.

The memory-speak bonds were sacred in elven culture. Rarely spoken of and only seen in the ancient symbols carved into settlement-trees and settlement-wells. She even doubted the highest non-elf scholars at the University knew much about the ability. Memory-speaking was part of the story of how the elves came down from the trees, leaving the birds and winds behind, called by the Wilde Hunter to live centuries long lives on the ground. Forever searching for the voice of the Moon Mother to call them home. And they all returned to the sky in the smoke of a funeral pyre. It was a strangeness that elf bodies burned so well in old age, as though they were merely sheafs of paper walking upright. The stuff of trees bound up like the pages in a book.

A breath caught in Adrini's throat. It was not a coincidence she was thinking about death and funeral rites. There was a logic and method behind it that was lacking in her normal racing thoughts.

"Someone's dead," she whispered.

Because no one in the room was speaking, all seven pairs of eyes turned to look at her.

Philippa was the first to scoff. "Why would you say something so ghastly?"

"Shut it, Philippa," Jacque said.

"Please," Nobue agreed.

Philippa turned to Gabriel. "Really," she said indigently.

But her companions seemed to trust that Adrini's instincts were tuned into something beyond this room. Mabb's fingers left hers and he put his arm around her shoulders again. Jacque, Renata, and Nobue leaned in.

“Death is in the air,” came out before Adrini could stop herself. Fuck, that sounded so pretentious, she was not some high druid whose senses barely touched on this plane of existence anymore after decades of study with their thought lost in the sky.

“Maybe it’s just all that delicious pork that’s no longer going to be enjoyed,” Mabb said, genuinely trying to assuage her dark thoughts.

Before the conversation could continue, the sound of a key unlocking the door cut off whatever Adrini had meant to say next. It was Jane Alexander, the hotelier and the heir apparent to Baron Caereme’s spot as the head of the Alimental Authority. She looked grave and angry and was followed by Cassius.

“Could we ask Mrs. Goldenmead, Mr. Bloomer, Ms. Lawrey, and Mr. Galley to join us in another room please?” Jane Alexander asked.

Everyone looked at the four who had been called and then at each other.

Adrini extended her hand to Jacque.

“It’s all right,” she said. She then tried to say, “It has to be,” but her voice cracked. The peace her mother’s presence had brought in the arena outside was broken.

She once again imagined Teague as a corpse.

A junior member of the Authority brought around glasses of water for the four left behind. Cassius was saying something like the city-watch was on their way and further explanations would be given in short order, but Adrini felt numbness seeping into her skin and soul.

“What’s going on?” Adrini asked, not even sure if she expected an answer from Mabb or someone else in the room.

And then tears, refusing to stay put behind her lashes, started trickling down her cheeks. Death, there was death in the air.

### PART THREE: QUARRELS AND EMPTY STOMACHS

“No quarrels can contest with a happy stomach.” –Ursula Raymorne

#### **Chapter Twenty-Four: Okoias**

A clock ticked in the silence that stretched on after Okoias made her demand to see Teague Margo. Lady Sylfina cocked her head to the side, more like a curious cat than a dragon. “No,” she finally said.

Okoias snorted, almost a half suppressed indignant laugh. “Do you want me to call in the constables? Bring in more of the watch and break up your little party and go room to room? I’m sure there are plenty of laws being broken in this house. Once they come to light even you and your husband would have to face the consequences.”

It was a half idle threat and Okoias knew it. There was a distinct possibility that even in the chaos of the recent ice and fire attacks and the upset of the harvest, Chief Butters was probably in the house right now in some secret room enjoying the indulgences of the Caereme’s bribery.

“You have hardly earned the right to ask for courtesies in my house,” Lady Sylfina said. “You accepted my invitation but did nothing to return the courtesy of hospitality in kind.”

Crenn chuckled at that. The sound a deep rumble of tumbling rocks in his chest. “You’re going to pretend something like the old rites to courtesies matter to

you?” he asked. “After what you just said about hedony being worship without rules?”

Lady Sylfina stood picked up an oyster and held it out to Okoias first.

“Only if you take food from the hand and claw of our people, then you may ask this of me.”

“This is ridiculous,” Okoias said. She didn’t think the food was tainted or anything. There would be no reason to do so. People came to this house willingly for the indulgences within. There was no magic to it. It was pure carnality that drove the energies of this house that was anathema to the true House.

“I have extended my protection to Teague Margo,” Lady Sylfina said, the oyster in her hand unwavering. “And now you will also enter into that shared covenant.”

Sighing, Okoias reached for a wedge of lemon from the tray in one hand, while taking the shell in the other. She slurped down the briny mollusk and then bit into the lemon to chase the sea taste with the acidic tang. In an instant, she felt it, brought forth by the dynamics in this house and in the contemplations of her fast. She tasted what the oyster had ingested as it lay at the bottom of the sea, and the flavor of algae was not unpleasant. In fact, for the briefest of heartbeats and pop of essence, she *was* the oyster; gulping down its food so that it could eventually feed her its own flesh. The lemon of course had captured pure sunlight and wind and rain in its bright pulp and juices.

To seal the bargain that she would not bring harm to her hosts or their other guests, Okoias took a sip from Sylfina’s own goblet and the mineral crisp white wine set off another burst of pleasurable sensations on her tongue.

“Was that so difficult?” Lady Sylfina said, and then she turned to Crenn extending a hand to the tray of seafood.

In the dim light of the library, the dwarf’s face almost turned green. There was nothing on that tray that he would ever consume. Not even Oleena could coax him to taste the prawns dripping in peppery butter sauce or the crackers shaped like fish, for surely the shape was indicative of their taste? Then his mustache bristled as he let out a long breath.

“I must consume something that was offered by someone of draconi blood?” he asked.

“Is there something from the stag roast you’d prefer instead?” Lady Sylfina made to give an order but Crenn interrupted her, holding up his large hand.

He fiddled with the clasps on his thigh bag. Inside he removed a bundled handkerchief and under the folds was slightly squashed tart pastry.

“It was made by Carro Ruby,” Crenn said, and then he echoed “By hand and claw of your people.”

Instead of being furious because she was outwitted in some game of wills, Lady Sylfina smiled in amusement.

Even though it was made with something that tasted like “the corpse of a raspberry,” Crenn bit off half of the apple and frostberry tart. A few crumbs caught in his beard as he grimaced at the taste and swallowed after only two chews. He clearly was not riding the vicarious pleasures of the night in this half-measure of getting around rites no one really followed anymore. Even the dwarves of the Karst didn’t expect guest rites to be exchanged between non-dwarves anymore.



He looked around for a place to set the rest of the tart down, when Lady Sylfina extended her hand and snatched it up. Popping the other half in her mouth was another exaggerated performance.

“Hmm,” she said, and then closed her eyes, reveling in some revelation the pastry offered her. Okoias barely heard her whisper, “Interesting.”

Crenn must have missed it. He was gargling with some water from a carafe on the desk.

“You know that came from the Beggars’ Feast,” Okoias said.

“Yes, it did, but you were seeing the feast with the wrong eyes.”

Beckoning the inspectors to follow, Lady Sylfina led them herself through tight, barely lit, secret passages, avoiding the partygoers and other revelers. Torwin brought up the rear. He and Crenn exchanged muttered tones in the dwarven tongue. Although but it was never a language that she had mastered. Okoias was pretty sure that Crenn was asking if there was any decent beer to be had to wash the taste out of his mouth.

He said something that made Torwin bark with laughter again, an unnerving sound in the near dark of the passageway. Lady Sylfina said something back in the guttural tongue. Crenn’s reply was obviously rude and meant to be heard.

“That wasn’t very nice,” Lady Sylfina said.

“Neither are you, my lady,” he replied.

“Of course not. I am charitable, hospitable, and protective. When is ‘nice’ a prerequisite for any of those things?”

“Manners,” Crenn said.

“Manners are how weak people navigate uncomfortable situations,” Lady Sylfina said as she came to a stop in the middle of the corridor. “And life should never be comfortable.”

“Hedony nonsense,” Crenn said.

Okoias smiled to herself. Good for him for not being taken in by Lady Sylfina.

A door finally opened in the darkness and even Okoias was surprised at what was inside. Rows and rows of makeshift beds, some slightly off the floor on cots, while others were just piles of blankets turned into nests. There were about ten draconi inside the secret room. One woman curled naked around a pale blue opalescent egg, the size of a large and oblong summer melon. draconi eggs were fragile, barely harder than a chicken’s egg. Another reason it was so uncommon to find an eggling anymore. The modern world wasn’t a place for fragile things.

On one cot in the corner lay a man curled up in a more humanoid fetal position. His naked body was covered in a sheen of sweat while he muttered and shivered in his sleep.

Lady Sylfina lowered herself to the cot and stroked Teague’s damp hair. She genuinely looked concerned for him. “He was barely alive when he came to us. He’s not sure if that cunt Kate added something to his food, or if it’s lingering exposure to an insect...” she paused and turned to Alaine who had appeared from the passageway bearing a tray of food and drinks for the secret guests. “What did that one medic call it?”

“The blood, well, actually it’s called hemolymph, of a cold sun beetle,” Alaine added. “Apparently it’s something that’s toxic to our blood. He was accidentally exposed to it he said shortly before the attack on the arena. It’s

apparently something that stays in our livers and kidneys. Doctor Linnrom is working on a tonic as best he can.”

Teague Margo stirred on his bed, turned over and looked up at his captive audience. Aware that he was naked in front of strangers, he fumbled for the blanket caught up under his body, his hands shaking with the effort. Lady Sylfina helped him.

“You think you can manage more broth or juice?” she asked.

He shook his head but accepted the cup of water from Alaine. Lady Sylfina helped him sip the water. Okoias decided to let consciousness fully return to Teague before asking her questions. The sight of Lady Sylfina playing nursemaid was odd to say the least, if not downright unnerving.

Torwin had returned with two stools for Okoias and Crenn to sit on.

“I’ve never heard of a cold sun beetle,” Okoias said.

“They’re not native to our continent,” Alaine said. “They’re in the Continental Territories, the Hacarrean, and the Maipura rainforest.”

“How the hell did he get exposed to it? Does the Gold Prophet have this as a weapon in his arsenal as well?” Okoias asked.

Teague shook his head, winced in regret, but in a hoarse voice said, “My friend, her family is from Byrda. It was a gift. It was an accident.” He held up his thumb, which was bandaged and shorter than a normal thumb would be.

“The medic had to amputate his thumb above the joint,” Lady Sylfina explained. “A cut had gone necrotic in a matter of a day.”

Alaine poured a milky orange liquid into a small clear glass and handed it to Teague. Okoias recognized the scent of ginger, cinnamon, grapefruit, and coconut

milk that was the fiery opposite of her icy cordial. After a couple of sips Teague looked ready to tell his story.

“About two years ago I met a girl,” he began.

*Doesn't it always begin with a girl?* Okoias thought to herself.

“Kate Fletcher works at this alchemical lab that I thought was mostly just research into food preservation for Arrow Pont Industries,” Teague said. “At first it was just physical. She would sometimes bring other draconi into our bed. It was a comfort to just be myself with my people.”

It was a familiar refrain and not just one Okoias had lived, but so many others of their kind in this broken society.

“She then told me she worshiped at a different Uthyrian congregation and wanted to introduce me to a man who could teach me the truth and divinity of our blood.”

“The Gold Prophet?” Okoias asked.

“At first I thought he was just anti-Panthemia. The House and Ursula Raymorne were favorite topics of his rants. I didn't really buy into it all, but then he told me it was my duty as an eggling and ice breather to...help repopulate the right kinds of our species and to help them make weapons to fight back against blasphemers and hedonists.”

Lady Sylfina made a disgusted sound and put a hand on her belly, looking over at the blue egg a few beds away. Okoias did as well. It was what the Gold Prophet had said to her all those years ago as well. Only back then he hadn't mentioned making incendiary weapons from frost and flame. It must have been something he'd discovered in the past three decades.

Crenn held up his hand. "Forgive me for asking." He paused, looking extremely uncomfortable. In addition to being a picky eater, he was a bit of a prude when it came to the bedroom centric activities of others. "Do you have children? Had you proved to be, well, passing on the nature of your birth to your offspring? As our hostess said earlier, egglings are something of a rarity anymore."

"I'm a big fan of coitus interruptus when it comes to my female lovers," Teague said from some deep reservoir of bravado. "I wouldn't know if I could pass on that part of my blood."

Lady Sylfina gave a rich, throaty laugh.

Red-faced, Crenn turned a few pages in his notebook, to his scribbles from the Beggars' Feast, and read aloud. "'Height of five feet eight inches, weight nine stone, black hair, golden eyes' is this your Kate?"

"Could be," Teague said. "Why?"

"We were directed here by a woman named Kate cooking sausages at the Beggars' Feast," Okoias said.

The slight color the tonic had restored to Teague's face drained away in an instant. Okoias got it a second later. Had she and Crenn been set up so that they could lead the Gold Prophet's followers to Teague? To provide some other distraction or to make yet another destructive move against the Caeremes? To stir up more chaos to interrupt the harvest?

Lady Sylfina turned to Torwin but he was already marching out of the room and back to the party.

"I'll alert your constables," the captain of the guard said.

But Teague was shaking his head, moaning and making like he was going to be sick. That was apparently the limit of Lady Sylfina's nurturing side. She stood up and Alaine took over the task of attending to him.

"Did you eat any of the sausages?" he finally gasped out between anxious breaths, abject horror and disgust in his voice.

"No," Crenn said, "We were on official duty. I wasn't even supposed to accept..."

Teague had started gagging. "I forgot...My thumb...I should've warned..." he coughed out. Alaine grabbed for a bowl just in time for Teague's slushy vomit.

After emptying his stomach of the meager amount of tonic and broth, he stood up on shaky legs, the sheet falling from his body. He wobbled over to the corner of the room, the former midwife following. She patted him on the back and gave Okoias and Crenn annoyed looks.

Teague kept moaning, "Oh gods. Oh gods," and then started hitting the wall. "Fucking bitch. Evil bitch cunt...I should have stopped her...I tried to help the guard too, but he was already dead. They saw me. I could only run. Coward. I'm a fucking coward."

"Shh," Alaine soothed, half consoling, half supporting Teague's shaking weight.

"She made those...things...out of people," Teague finally managed to say. "The sausages."

Okoias and Crenn looked at one another, both knew exactly what he meant. Of the names on her list, Okoias had a subsection for other races that had disappeared in proximity to draconi crimes.

Had the Gold Prophet been disposing of bodies caught in his crossfire as food for the poor?

When she felt the bile rising in her gut Okoias took a long pull on her cordial. Crenn voiced his desire for beer again and even Lady Sylfina's coquettish and brash mask had cracked unleashing the rage and anger beneath.

"Abomination," Lady Sylfina whispered.

Everyone in the room quieted for several long minutes. Crenn took to stroking his beard.

Okoias pulled out her list, some of the names accounted for during her conversation over the past weeks, many not. She looked at those who were likely to lack any dragon blood and wondered, much to the roiling of her stomach, who had ended up being fed to the city's poorest and neediest citizens. Had it been meant as a cruel joke? Or just an easy means of disposal?

"What else do you know?" Okoias asked, trying to bring everyone back to the conversation. There now seemed to be an absence of time.

Before Teague could answer, the other half of the Caeremes appeared. Maroque usually looked like nothing in the world could faze him, but the stresses of the past few days had stripped away some of the perfection in his features. His hair was disheveled and he was barely dressed in trousers and a billowing white shirt, possibly only just *roused* from bed. He made his way to his wife and pulled her into his arms, not even acknowledging the inspectors.

"What is it?" Lady Sylfina asked.

One of the constables Okoias and Crenn left outside the manor gates was panting, holding a message in her hand.

"Inspectors," Constable Scott gasped. "There's been another attack."

“What?” and “Where?” both echoed from Okoias and Crenn.

“They used poison this time,” Lord Maroque Caereme said through the top of his wife’s hair.

*This time*, Okoias thought. *What was next?*



## Chapter Twenty-Five: Jacque

“Where the fuck is my wife!”

Jacque wasn't sure that it was even him who had said those words to Captain Fisher of the Raymorne City-Watch. They were words spoken by a man who had thought his day would be akin to walking across a raging river on a rope bridge only to suddenly discover it had become knife's edge in the midst of a Hacarrean hurricane.

He wanted to rush the nearly six and a half foot tall, two-hundred-pound human with huge fists. It didn't matter that the gray was armed with a heavy truncheon. Jacque wanted to express his rage and have that answer the question of where Astrid could possibly be at this very moment. The fury was barely holding back the tears he wanted to cry over Marion.

*Oh, Empty Rivers...Marion.*

How was the world to keep on existing if Marion Goosling wasn't in it anymore?

She never made it out of the viewer's room after drinking the tainted pomegranate mead. According to Captain Fisher it had been quick because she was older. They were still trying to figure out what poison had been added to the mead served in the viewers' box. Augustus Goldenmead was suffering fits and had not opened his eyes since falling out of his chair over an hour before. Gabriel Galley's wife was in the same state, only she was apparently having fewer fits, which was not a good sign either. Simon Lawrey had been conscious, his screaming audible from somewhere in the arena. Jacque had wondered why they couldn't give him something to dull the pain. It felt so cruel to let someone suffer like that.

Everyone else in the room had been lucky not to drink from what was believed to be a single tainted bottle of mead. It wasn't known whether Astrid had been poisoned because she wasn't in the room when her mother and the others collapsed. Witnesses said Astrid had taken Simo for a walk just as the drinks were served but she had not yet been found.

Inaction was even crueler than the lack of pain relief.

"We're searching the surrounding blocks for her. It's hard to miss a pretty Karisic woman even in this city."

"Pregnant," Jacque said, as if that were a status that both exempted his wife from being a victim while simultaneously targeting her for malice.

"Do you know anyone in the area?" the halfling Inspector Rosewater asked.

Jacque wondered if he had ever seen a gray shorter than himself, and with such a prestigious rank. If his mind were clearer, he would have loved to learn her history. The Rosewaters were one of the first families to leave the Inner Keane and settle permanently within Raymorne proper. Then he wondered if Captain Fisher had asked Inspector Rosewater to come along so that the one halfling could look after the other. As though kinship would keep Jacque from tearing down all the walls of the arena and every building in the city to find Astrid.

"Mr. Bloomer," Captain Fisher said with caution, as if he could sense that Jacque was about to explode.

"Yes?" he replied as calmly as possible, but it still sounded like an accusation.

"I've been told that you were also a witness to the incident on the Fourth Canal a few days ago."

As if Jacque needed reminding of that, but he automatically corrected, “the Fork.” It was the Fork that had been hit, a motley collection of food entrepreneurs and their enterprising patrons. The Fork that had been his second home, already tainted by terrorists, and now they had hit *his* home. They had killed the mother that had welcomed him with open arms and possibly taken his wife and child.

“Is there anything about that afternoon you neglected to tell us?” Rosewater asked

“No,” Jacque said through clenched teeth. “I spent all day yesterday at home. But today, I can barely tell you what happened between breakfast and the start of the second round.”

“And you don’t have any draconi friendships or business relationships?” Inspector Rosewater asked.

“Not really, but sometimes you never know, do you?”

It made him wonder, and not for the first time, especially since Astrid had gained less than twenty pounds, if his child was more halfling than human. At least it wouldn’t walk through life trying to disguise scales or claws. He thought of Renata and her scarves that substituted for hair. Yes, he found draconi people unnerving. They were reminder of the destructive ancient force that had plagued the halflings of the Keane several millennia ago.

“Indeed,” Captain Fisher said. “Please, Mr. Bloomer. If you’ll stay here, we need to talk to a few other individuals.”

Suddenly so tired, Jacque resigned to his fate of worrying in a room whose previous purpose was indecipherable. Was it a waiting room for one of the other events throughout the year maybe? At least there was a window. He walked over to it and looked out on the street. The arena had been evacuated but many from the

audience and other bystanders lingered. Some angry airs made it up to his ears but mostly it was that curious din you could find in any crowd. There wasn't the same kind of visible damage of a few days ago and, of course, the city-watch had likely not disclosed that people had been poisoned by one of the second round's very mystery ingredients.

It was probably not going to be a good quarter for Edward's Bee Yard or any of the other businesses.

Jacque was about to turn from the window when he was sure that he had spotted Astrid. A tall blonde woman holding a silky longhaired dog was trying to get through the crowd. He nearly tripped over his feet as he bolted for the door. He tried the handle but found it was locked. In frustrated fury, Jacque banged on the door while shouting obscenities at all the people in this fucking city that were between him and his wife and child.

Inspector Rosewater returned, incensed over his behavior. "Mr. Bloomer, we're sorry for your loss but..."

He tried to push her away but in the next blink of an eye he found his arm being twisted behind his back. Then Rosewater's ankle hooked behind his leg and both of them fell to the floor. Even though he had a good six inches and thirty pounds on her, the way she held his arm made it feel like it was on fire.

"Mr. Bloomer, as I was saying..."

"She's outside! I could see her!"

"Rosewater?" called someone, but not Captain Fisher.

Jacque couldn't see who initially until Rosewater let him up and he saw it was another inspector, a human man.

“She’s outside,” Jacque said again, this time as calmly as he could and massaging his arm.

“Your wife?” Inspector Rosewater asked.

“Yes.”

Inspector Rosewater called to someone in a constable’s uniform.

For some stupid reason, Jacque explained, “She has Simo with her.”

Inspector Rosewater looked up at the constable and explained, “There’s a tall woman in the crowd. White-blond hair, wearing a blue dress and brown boots and she has miniature husky with her. Her name is Astrid Espernøre. Please find her and escort her up here.”

The constable said, “Yes, inspector,” and jogged down the hall with actual haste.

“Thank you,” Jacque said. “Sorry.”

“It’s understandable,” she said and then actually gestured down the hall where the constable had gone. “Your friends have been asking after you and your wife, you can join them.”

Friends? What friends did he have here? Jamey or Lissey and Beric didn’t want to come today in case Augustus decided to be an arsenard, and Ivonne and Wyman were not the sort who liked crowds of thousands. But they had reserved a space for celebration at a mixed-height tavern a few blocks away. A celebration, or commiseration depending on the outcome, that was never to be.

In another room, the waiting room for the Banquestors, he saw Adrini and her parents and four other elves sitting in a corner. Adrini got up and walked over to him and then she opened her arms. He accepted the embrace. Yes, he did have friends here.

“I heard they were looking for your wife,” Adrini said.

“She was caught outside. Took the dog for a walk.” In his head Jacque thanked the Rivers and Barrow and the Artisans and the Panthemia prophets and every other deity and every other blessed paragon he could think of. Until he remembered once again that the woman who had been the most motherly to him in his whole life was dead.

“Is it true?”

Jacque saw it was Nobue who had spoken.

“Is Marion Goosling, dead?” she asked.

Of course, many if not all the people in the room would know who Marion Goosling was. She once wrote a very popular cookery book that so many of them would have likely read it was so ubiquitous. People often asked him why the son in law of the author of *The Simplicity of a Recipe* lived in the Hock and had to work six days a week pushing puddings. Marion’s book was in every penny shop, but she had been robbed of her royalties from that Rivers forsaken greedy publisher from day one. It was one reason she had started her own pamphlet business up in Nøsrogood so that all the costs and profits from future ventures would be hers.

Jacque nodded in answer to Nobue’s question. She gasped and then covered her mouth and turned into her fiancée’s shoulder. Even Broganar made a fist, touched his thumbnail to his lips, and then touched his fist to the floor in Marion’s honor.

A little squeak sounded from a chair behind Renata and Mabb. Philippa stood up and rushed at Jacque. He actually put up his hands to defend himself, nerves still freshly charged from Rosewater’s wrangling. Instead, his cousin wrapped her arms around his neck and started sobbing into his collar

“They won’t let me see him!” she wailed and he bucked his head back because she had practically shouted in his ear. But he knew it would be cruel—and not without any kind of irony—to push her away. Awkwardly, he patted her on the back. It was even more awkward when Astrid finally entered the room with a wriggling Simo in her arms and saw the unusual reunion.

He looked at her and mouthed, “Help me.”

Gabriel Galley saw the request and said, “Philippa, here.” He opened his arms for her and they sobbed together.

Astrid let the dog down, fell to her knees and kissed Jacque with a reserved passion. Unsure how grateful she was to see her husband in the face of sorrow, which he could taste on her lips. It had always seemed so strange to him that tears were salty. Salt was the lifeblood of delicious food. Perhaps it was meant to be a sign of the continual spiritual and physical exchange between food and life. Because life was as full of joy as it was of sorrow.

“Where were you?” he asked. He cupped her face in his hands, looking into her reddened blue eyes, feeling his own free-fall of tears now sliding down his cheeks.

“I took Simo for a walk and then I...I just didn’t want to come back until it was over.” Astrid put her mouth to his ear and whispered. “I was afraid of saying something vicious to Augustus. We had a bit of a talk.”

“About?” Jacque whispered back.

“About how much I love you.”

“I love you too.”

And then Jacque kneeled and put his face in Astrid’s lap and said to their unborn child.

“I love you too, little one,” he whispered. “I wish you could’ve met your grandmama.”



## Chapter Twenty-Six: Adrini

There was no clock in the waiting room at the Third District city-watch station to tell her how much time had gone by. If seconds were measured in heartbeats, then it must have been hours, as Adrini's heart would not stop racing. She felt for Jacque and Astrid, and had truly enjoyed the few hours she had spent in Marion Goosling's company. Having read so many of Marion's cookery books and pamphlets and cooked many of her recipes, it had felt like meeting an old friend that night after the first Banquest round. Such a shame to have experienced too short a friendship.

And now, she had learned that Teague was somewhere in the same complex, but they would not let her see him. Inspectors Crenn and Okoias had asked her what felt like a thousand questions about what she knew about the High Larder's brewery, Teague's visitors at their flat, her relationship with Teague, and so much else. It was all swimming in her head like a murky potshop stew filled with bits and pieces of everything. Was that a fish or chicken bone? Turnip or potato? By the Moon Mother was that...tree bark mixed in with the neeps and tatties?

Was Teague the man she thought or someone else entirely?

Was he truly mixed up with the Gold Prophet and his zealotry? Or something else more sinister?

"Can I ask a question?" Adrini said.

"Please," Inspector Crenn replied.

"Where did you find him?" Adrini asked.

"He was in the company of the Caeremes," Inspector Crenn said. As though that answered all the new questions arising from that insinuation.

Who was her friend? Was he involved in some kind of destructive hedony or malicious misinterpretations of Uthyri?

“Can I ask again why you didn’t tell us you recognized the man in this sketch?” Inspector Okoias said, pushing the sketch with Teague’s face across the table again.

“I didn’t want to believe it was him,” Adrini said and that was when she started crying again. But she didn’t sob or wail. The tears just flowed like that one broken water tap in the High Larder’s kitchens.

“It would have helped us,” Inspector Crenn said.

“Can I see him?” Adrini asked again.

“He’s still in poor health, but we’ll see what we can do. He said that he was sickened when exposed to,” Okoias flipped through several pages of notes in her book, “‘the hemolymph of a cold sun beetle’.”

“What?” Adrini asked.

“Bug guts,” Crenn clarified.

“Oh,” she breathed.

Adrini made to extract the necklace from beneath her shirt, but stopped, and just rubbed her hand on her throat instead. She wasn’t sure why she hesitated in revealing information to the inspectors about the little phial set in the handle of the tiny wooden spoon. She didn’t want to part with it. It was also hard to trust the city-watch when there were still pockets of grays antagonistic to those of darker skin, and some that were also notoriously speciesist towards those of mixed blood. Adrini had it on both sides of her parentage and she remembered the time Xandre had been roughed up by a gray over a false accusation of theft. Another reason why her brothers had eschewed city life for the Carinet. Even with the promised reforms over

the last couple of years there were still miles to go in regaining the trust of the public.

Coupled with the fact that she knew the city-watch was going to keep her separated from Teague for as long as they saw fit, she bent the truth and said, “There was a jar of it in my stepmother’s healing kit. Teague had cut his thumb after touching it and that’s when he got sick. She thought there must have been residue on the jar.”

“Does she still have it?”

“It’s at the flat.”

“Do we have your permission to obtain it?” Okoias asked.

“I suppose,” Adrini said, shrugging her shoulders.

The two inspectors appeared to be finished with her after what was likely another ten minutes of questions. They asked if she knew a Kate Fletcher. No, she didn’t. Did any of her other friends subscribe to non-traditional Uthyri beliefs? But she didn’t even know Teague had been on some kind of spiritual journey along his general desire to bed anyone he could. Did Adrini know of any other draconi in contact with Teague? How the fuck did she know? She didn’t even know Teague was draconi until earlier this week. They made her account again for every place she went just before the start of the Banquest up to this morning. Just as she thought they were about done with her, Inspector Okoias clasped her gloved hands together and leaned forward, locking Adrini in place with her intense emerald gaze.

“Is there anything else you can tell us, Miss Frey?”

Once again, there it was, that sound. The emphasis on her name that echoed the notion of something unraveling. That she was a knitted scarf with a frayed edge, and one tug could undo everything.

“Not that I can think of. Can I see Teague now?”

“Very soon. He is still being checked out by someone from the University. That stuff made him really ill for days,” Inspector Okoias said, in a tone that sounded like “soon” was probably somewhere between now and never.

A gray human city-watchwoman escorted Adrini back to a large waiting room. A small table held several teapots in gray thermal cozies beside a basket of fruit and nuts. Jacque and Astrid sat on a bench together while Mabb sat on the floor with an arm around a sobbing Renata. There were a couple of people she didn’t recognize, though some wore junior Authority member pendants, and one person she thought she recognized as one of the artists doing live sketches of the Banquest events.

Adrini sat down on the floor beside Mabb and rested her head on his shoulder.

There was a long bout of quiet, broken only by murmurs between the Authority members.

“How long are they going to keep you two here?” Adrini asked Jacque and Astrid. It was so cruel to keep those mourning, one of which was over seven months pregnant, cooped up at a city-watch station.

“They said they’re ensuring that it’s safe for us to return home,” Jacque said. “But as they’re stretched so thin, we’re safest here. Just in case.”

“Philippa?” Adrini asked and then turned to Renata. “Any news about Simon?”

Renata shook her head. “They don’ wan’ me to leave an’ they won’ let me see ’im.” Her accent was thicker than normal through her grief. “Jus’ that he’s still alive.” She gulped and looked at Astrid. “I dint mean it like that.”

Astrid reached out to Renata and they gripped each other for a moment in solidarity. After their short squeeze of hands, Renata pulled hers away and started to pray. She also rang the bell that hung around her neck at different intervals in her chanting.

In the renewed stillness, Adrini wondered where Papa, Hemmie, her mother, and her brothers were. She hadn't felt the presence of Saverina, Xandre, Lewyn, and Emeric in hours. And she wondered, again, about Teague.

Except, she was growing tired of worrying about Teague. In fact, she was furious that he ran off and never came back, leaving her to deal with the heavy absence of his secrets. Now these grays knew she was holding back. She fiddled with her pendant nervously, feeling the different textures between the glass phial underneath the spiral of wire connected to the bowl of the spoon.

Renata suddenly started, as though she was the only one to hear someone dropping a heavy object in the room.

"I haveta pee," she declared. She got to her feet and then started pounding on the door to the hall all of a sudden in a complete, mad frenzy. "Lemme out! Lemme out! Lemme out!"

Both Adrini and Mabb tried to put comforting hands on her shoulders but she kept banging on the door until a gray unlocked and opened it.

"Gods be good woman!" the constable shouted over Renata. He was human with a heavy brow and tired look, completely not in the mood for a hysterical woman caught up in her grief.

"I need the privy! Now!"

"It's an outhouse," he said, as though trying to convince her that was the last place she should be visiting.

“Don’t care,” Renata said.

“Look, we can’t stand outside waiting for you to have a wee,” he said. “Can’t you wait?”

“We can take her,” Mabb said, indicating himself and Adrini.

The gray looked Mabb up and down, raising a condescending eyebrow at him.

“And me,” said Jacque. The constable was still not impressed.

Perhaps if the watcher had been a bit more alert, if it wasn’t so obvious that he was probably at least a day over worked and in need of food and sleep, he wouldn’t have let them down the hall.

“You okay?” Jacque asked Astrid. “Do you need the privy?”

Astrid shook her head. She stood up and poured herself some tea. “I probably will in a few minutes though,” she said, trying to give him a sad smile.

Adrini, Jacque, and Mabb helped Renata down the hall and out a door that led to the dark lot behind the city-watch station on the Third Canal. The temperature had dropped considerably and Adrini wished she’d packed an extra scarf or a thicker cowl. It made her wish she could leave Raymorne for a time and go back to Byrda with her father.

It didn’t occur to any of them to question why the back lot was so quiet and seemingly empty of grays smoking tobacco pipes, catching some air, or making water themselves. At least, the four of them didn’t question anything until four sets of strong hands covered all of their mouths with quick and hard practiced movements and dragged them away before any of them could scream.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven: Teague

“You’re bloody well fired, constable!”

Teague jumped at the sudden shouting in the hall. He had been halfway in a doze, waiting for Inspectors Crenn or Okoias to come back with Adrini. After hours and hours, they had finally relented in letting him see her. In a half-alert state, still in pain from being poisoned and losing half a thumb, he had started to imagine their reunion. It involved her shouting at him, cursing at him in that chef’s way she had adopted in the time spent working at the High Larder.

And he would welcome it. Because once Adrini had stopped swearing, after telling him what he could do with dragon shit coming out of an elf’s backside, they would hug and everything would be okay again. He wouldn’t have to carry secrets around her again.

Well, he would disclose the big things, the confidences that friends who were like family shared, but he wasn’t going to tell her every little thing...

He stood up from the chair in the cramped room that Okoias and Crenn had deposited him in hours earlier and put his ear to the door. He still shook, but admittedly getting out of the basement of Mauvine Crest and into the cold autumn air had done him some good. The hours of interrogation by everyone from Inspectors Okoias, Crenn, Rosewater, and Irvine, had worn him out again. It was sometime before dawn when he figured and hoped that they had parceled everything out of him that they needed.

“You’ve got us stretched to the limit!” A new voice bellowed in response. “We can’t keep eyes on every guest and person of interest in this building. There’s not enough of us.”

The first man who had shouted repeated himself, “Constable Garden, you’re fired. You had one door to watch. One. You better leave this building now before I beat you bloody with my own bare hands.”

“You can’t talk to me like that!”

Teague muttered to himself, “I’m sure he can.”

“You know I can,” the authority figure said, unknowingly echoing Teague.

“Get out before you’re brought up on charges of dereliction of duty.”

*What happened?* Teague wondered, and again, as if he were just slightly ahead of events, but knowing nothing about what was actually happening, Inspectors Okoias and Crenn entered the room with a red-faced human in tow. They introduced him as Captain Fisher and Teague swallowed hard.

“If you’re holding out on us Mr. Margo,” Okoias said, cutting through any formalities, “you best tell us now.”

She sat down in the chair across from him and grabbed his hands. He looked down at her ungloved fingers for the first time. She had the maroon fingernails of a fire breathing draconi. In the gas lamp light of the room, he could now see the near invisible double lid of her green eyes. She was asking him not as an Inspector of the Raymorne City-Watch, but draconi to draconi. Eggling to eggling. Blood to blood.

“What happened?” Teague asked again, this time aloud.

“Why would they take Renata Lawrey, Jacque Bloomer, Mabb Lynx, and Adrini Frey?” she asked.

Panic seized Teague’s already fragile stomach. “What?” he breathed, barely a whisper of a word.



“Where would they take them?” Okoias asked again. “Simon Lawrey, Renata’s brother, gained consciousness for long enough to tell us ‘they’re under the factory.’ Does this mean anything to you?”

“I don’t know Simon Lawrey,” Teague said. “And I told you, if I knew where the Gold Prophet was, I would say so. I haven’t been to any services or meetings in months. Kate didn’t push it.”

“Tell us again where you saw him,” Okoias said.

“Underground somewhere. Kate blindfolded me and would take me in a carriage or through what seemed like the old tunnels.”

“How long were you blindfolded?” Crenn asked.

“Sometimes an hour, sometimes a little longer. I’m pretty sure we never left the city.”

“Tell us what color was the stone? Was it wet or dry? What color was the moss? Any other plant life?”

Those were questions that a dwarf would think to ask.

“I often smelled...mushrooms,” Teague realized. “That smell that’s dirt but also not only dirt but you know, mushroomy.” He closed his eyes and remembered the glowing blue lights and realized they had also been fungi. He hadn’t given them much thought before.

“Blue glowing mushrooms?” Captain Fisher asked and rolled his eyes. But Crenn was nodding as though he knew what Teague was talking about.

“Nonedible species, hard to cultivate, they used to grow in the old tunnels,” Crenn said. “Not unlike the short torches in the Karst, but I thought they died out when the old tunnels started to collapse and people weren’t spreading their spores.”

“You know a lot about something you refuse to eat,” Okoias said.

“Do you know a Dacre Hest?” Crenn asked.

Teague was surprised that Okoias and Fisher found this an odd question but Inspector Crenn held up his hand waiting for Teague to reply. That name was familiar. More than familiar, Teague was sure that he’d bedded someone with that name. Or was it familiar from somewhere else? Or both? His mind was still fuzzy and the sorry excuse for coffee served by the city-watch wasn’t helping like he’d hoped.

“There was this one man, Kate pointed him out to me once. He worked for a broadsheet. He was,” Teague stopped, pulled his hands from Okoias’s and pressed his fists to his head. “He was there with his children?”

Yes, that was it, he remembered Kate saying that Dacre had proven himself exceptionally fertile. The image of a rather common looking man, playing with a pair of twin girls and a young son that had been at a celebration denouncing the “whore.”

Although it had sounded like all of the sermons and celebrations Teague had attended were mostly about how Ursula Raymorne was a key reason that humans had been able to whittle down the draconi culture of the Outer Keane and across the seas. Except the House and the University had a different story. draconi eggings had been on the decline for over a millennia even before Ursula Raymorne had come to the city that now bore her name.

He had been wracking his brain for hours trying to come up with something. Kate had kept him at a contrary close but cautious distance. His reticence at joining the other followers had not endeared him to the others. Part of him had convinced himself that he was somehow redeeming Kate by staying close to her.

There was another commotion out in the hall and the door burst open and in marched the Baron and Lady Caereme. The captain of their guard led the draconi midwife who had cared for Teague into the room, and her hands were in shackles. The look of murder on Alaine's face was evident, as was the split lip and swelling cheekbone. There was also a blister of a bite mark on her neck.

Sylfina Caereme spoke instead of her husband. "Alaine, do tell these inspectors and Captain Fisher what you told us."

"You expect us to believe whatever she says? It looks like you beat her to get the information!" Okoias shouted at Sylfina.

"Sometimes you need to bite back when a dragon has already shown its teeth," Sylfina said.

Teague looked at the woman who had shown anguish during the amputation of his thumb and had cared for him almost as much as Sylfina had.

It was complicated, how Teague had found himself moving between so many different contradictory circles in his quest to find himself. The Caeremes were two of the most adventurous lovers he'd ever had, if not soulfully satisfactory. He didn't tell the couple about Kate and his relationship with her until after he had gone to Mauvine Crest for help when he witnessed the Gold Prophet's disciples, including Kate, plant the mortar made of draconi ice at the Bountiful Arena.

The last few days had been such a blur, not helped in the least by the unintentional poisoning of Adrini's necklace.

He remembered a hazy conversation between Alaine and Takissa the pregnant draconi woman as she struggled to lay her egg. After the shell had passed from her body, Alaine suggested the woman should seek out help from the managers

of the new Arrow Pont factory for honest work instead of continuing her association with the Caeremes.

“Arrow Pont?” Teague said.

Everyone looked at him and Alaine’s eyes were icicles.

“The new Arrow Pont factory, you told Takissa she should go there after baby hatched. That the factory was being built especially to be staffed by draconi, including a special crèche for draconi children.”

“Finally, he remembers something,” Inspector Crenn muttered.

Lady Caereme looked satisfied. “That is what my dear Alaine told us after the Inspectors and Mr. Margo departed a few hours ago. There’s a mushroom farm under the factory in one of the old tunnels. Beyond that farm is where the Gold Prophet currently waits.”

In response to her words, Alaine raged and lashed out at Sylfina. She spit ice and tried to bite the lady, obviously in kind for the wound on her neck. Baron Caereme backhanded the midwife turned spy and the inspectors in the room all expressed their own outrage.

But Teague was all caught up in his brain once again. There was the deep, fiery revelation that the Gold Prophet had Adrini. That bastard had the woman he loved, who he called “sister.”

The inspectors and Captain Fisher were leading the Caeremes and Alaine out of the room, but Okoias lingered.

“Can I have a word, inspector?” Teague asked.

Okoias nodded and closed the door.

“It’s likely Alaine hasn’t gotten word to the Gold Prophet about me coming here,” Teague said.

“Unless there’s another traitor in the Caereme house,” Okoias said.

“Do you think they’d’ve let any of their staff leave after you and your constables arrived?”

Okoias gave him a conciliatory nod.

“I want to help,” Teague said. “Send me in first to see what’s going on. I want to help Adrini.”

He was not going to run away from Adrini again. They had been through too much together.

“Let me talk to the captain to see what he wants our next move to be,” Okoias said and then she put her hand on top of his. “Penitence is not an easy path.”

Wearily, Teague replied, “I like a good walk. Fresh air and a long road is always a nice way to spend the day so long as there’s a pint and pretty body at the end of it all.”

## **Chapter Twenty-Eight: Adrini**

One day, shortly after Adrini had started work at the High Larder, they had received a huge order of mushrooms of all kinds. Merritt told her about all of them, showing her their different smells, textures, and appearances. But she had never been able to shake the first thought about that order of mushrooms, the first whiff she had caught of the pounds and pounds of fungi. In the first Banquest round she had barely blinked when they told her what the mystery ingredient was and knew immediately what she wanted to do for her dish with Jacque. She had gotten over her squeamishness about mushrooms, but now it was all she could think about—that a lot of mushrooms bunched together smelled like a cemetery just after a hot summer rainfall.

Such was the scent of the great cavern she awoke in, only this was more of a cold autumnal graveyard than a summer one. When she exhaled, she could see her breath. She tried every technique she had ever been taught to keep her breathing steady in the rising anxiety of capture. Adrini did not doubt that if she started to panic, she would bring the kidnappers' attention back on them, and not for anything good. They'd already smacked Mabb upside the head so hard his eyes were glassy and unfocused. She wished she could help him, but he was on the other side of Jacque.

At least they were all conscious and chained together in a corner. Renata wasn't panicking any more even though their captors had taken her scarf and Uthyri bell. She just sat there numb, staring off into the distance.

Jacque's soft grunts were the only thing breaking the tension as he tested the roominess of his shackles. They were the loosest on him, but he couldn't quite get

his thumb through. He kept swearing and muttering, “Damn, out of practice...bloody... haven’t done this in years.”

“Done what?” Adrini asked in the lowest whisper she could manage.

Jacque swore louder as he shook the chains, cursing all the Rivers and the Barrow. Fortunately, no one paid the sound any mind. Their captors were certain they posed no threat. How could they?

Adrini took in their surroundings. The luminescent mushrooms that glowed in the cavern were the equivalent of several low-lit gas lamps. She could almost make out the dragon motif in the arches of the ceiling. Great wings, limbs, and spine swirling and bowing into a beautiful network of ancient physiology set into stone. Atop the alter were two stone dragon eggs with some ominous red stains. On the pulpit was an ornamental Uthyri sacramental chalice, wrought from battered old gold and dull sapphires and rubies. There were about twenty pews that could conceivably seat four times that number. Adrini marveled at the numbers of it. That only eighty or so people could bring the city to its knees in terror, could carve such a schism into the near sacred traditions of the Harvest Festival that had the city-watch strained to the breaking point. They were in the realm of the Gold Prophet. It was the only thing Renata had said since they had woken up.

On the other side of the cavern was an open door. The sound of children was the strangest thing of all. Were they victims of abduction as well, Adrini wondered?

Both Jacque and Mabb had folding blades in their pockets and Renata’s Uthyri ceremonial dagger had been taken away. To comfort herself, Adrini pulled out her necklace and traced the bowl on her lips and was thankful it had not been taken from her when they had been patted down. *Some chef I am*, Adrini thought; she had a tiny spoon and a tiny phial of insect guts.

Something in Renata stirred. Her nostrils flared as she looked at what Adrini was holding. “What is that?”

“Something my father and step-mother gave me.”

She held out her shackled hands, elegant and strong baker’s hands, tipped with their maroon fingernails. Unlike most bakers she didn’t have any burn scars because, as a fire draconi, she welcomed the heat of an oven. Adrini reluctantly pulled the chain up around her head, the links of her shackles ringing.

“Be careful,” Adrini said, remembering Teague’s reaction to the necklace.

“Why?” Renata asked.

“My father and his wife made it for me.”

“It’s lovely,” and then almost wistfully, Renata whispered, “I miss my father.”

Distracted by her last statement, and in the ache of needing her own father, Adrini asked, “What happened to him?”

The question made Renata shrink again, but then, something lit up her eyes, as if she realized she could no longer run.

“My father was human, a baker. My mother thought she was a milking because she didn’t look draconi at all. Proof I suppose, it doesn’t matter,” she said, gesturing to scales on her face and scalp. “The dragon in us comes out as it wills. Not even a slave to biology.”

“Who was your mother?” Mabb asked.

In the barest of whispers, Renata said, “The sister of the Gold Prophet.”

The silence that followed was barely punctuated by the sounds outside of the underground chapel.

Until Jacque spoke with anger in his voice, “Is that why we’re here?”



Renata looked pleadingly at him. “I don’t know. I swear. I didn’t even know that he knew I existed.”

“Horse shit,” Jacque spat.

“I swear,” Renata said. “My brother and I, we protected each other because we’re so obviously draconi and so many have been dying of late. We didn’t realize what the Gold Prophet was doing until that Inspector Okoias said that it was likely they’ve been taking other draconi under the cover of their terror. If I had known, I would have fled the city, but...”

“But you wanted what we all wanted,” Mabb said. “A bit of glory. A fat purse to make life a bit easier for ourselves and those we love.”

“Sure,” Jacque grumbled. “Be the considerate one.”

“I’m just as thickheaded of a man as you,” Mabb said.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Jacque said.

“I know.”

Renata’s revelation didn’t change or help their situation. Whatever plans the Gold Prophet had for his niece, whether he knew the truth of that or not, was moot.

Adrini held the spoon up and in the strange glow of the mushrooms she watched it glimmer like liquid gold. Then she looked at the phial and then at the chalice just a few paces away. Her mind replayed that night when Teague got sick and tried to remember what else Hemmie had told her about the lack of dragons in the stories of the Hacarrean and the Territories. She also knew very little about the Uthyri religion. Lyreon and Hemmie worshiped the wind and sea gods across throughout Hacarrean and Saverina followed the elven nature deities.

Lowering her voice to the barest of whispers, Adrini put her mouth close to Renata’s ear. “What do they do with that cup?”

“Why?”

Adrini huffed and before she could say more, Renata said, “It’s part of the sacrament, the Rite of Blood.”

Adrini swallowed at the name “Rite of Blood” wondering whose blood would be used in the rite. “When do they do that?”

“The way my mother would do it, twice a day, with the dusk and with the dawn and on feast days like the Font of Offerings.”

“What do they drink out of it?”

“My mother just used water and her blood in her favorite blue cup.”

Adrini swallowed before she asked, “When is that altar used?” It was the most mundane way she could put it.

“I don’t know. My mother didn’t practice ceremonial sacrifice on people, no true Uthyri does. It’s part of his bastardization.”

“So, they would drink from the cup *before* hurting anyone of us?”

“I think,” Renata said.

It was the best Adrini could hope for.

She started to carefully pry the wires around the spoon loose so that she could remove the phial.

“This,” Adrini said, “is poisonous to draconi.”

Taking care, Renata pulled her sleeve over her fingers to take it from Adrini. “It’s barely a drop of fluid,” Renata said. “I doubt it could do much damage.” Then her face took on a look of utter resolve.

“Jacque, hand me that.” Renata pointed at the water cup they had been given. She poured out most of the remaining contents of stagnant water and then said, “Watch the door. And cover us.”

Mabb and Jacque repositioned themselves in their corner to hide Adrini and Renata from view.

Taking the vial, Adrini broke it and three miniscule drops of cold sun beetle hemolymph—or blood or whatever it was called—fell into the cup. Renata took the cup into her hands and started chanting. Adrini recognized it as the old songs sometimes sung in the House by the Holy Uthyri Choir that was about sustenance and nourishment. A song long since tied to the story of the Prophetess of Plenty.

As she sung, the contents in the cup started to multiply, the droplets connecting to other droplets that had not been there moments ago.

Adrini realized she was witnessing a miracle.

*The* miracle. The same act Ursula Raymorne had performed on that frigid night a thousand years before when the denizens of the city were starving. Three single drops suddenly became thousands in the same way that three loaves of bread and a few fishes became a feast for several score of hungry bellies.

“Not just the Gold Prophet’s niece,” she said, her voice slurred as though she were drunk. “We’re both direct ancestors of the Prophetess herself. She married a draconi man after all.”

“Yes!” Jacque hissed almost too loudly. It startled Adrini and she nearly dropped the cup.

“You moron,” Mabb said, hitting Jacque in the arm, but then they all saw that he was no longer shackled.

“Told you it was something I hadn’t done in a while,” he said. “Me and my cousins used to pretend to be grays and burglars. I was always the pickpocket who could escape his shackles and free my cousin Jamey to do more thieving.” He held

out his hand for the cup and Adrini put the cup in his hands, both thumbs flopping oddly.

Before Jacque could take a step, Renata swayed where she was sitting. She put a hand to her head and moaned. They all collectively held their breath, watching the open door just a hundred feet away.

No one outside the chamber was paying them any attention.

Jacque, with nimble feet, made his way over to the chalice and poured half of the contents in the cup. He paused to remove the cork from a bottle of wine next to the chalice and poured a bit of the gold liquid inside. Moments later he was done and was about to put his shackles back on.

“No, go get help,” Mabb said.

But they had missed their chance. The voices outside started shouting, what sounded like boos and heckling. Jacque squeezed his hands back into the shackles and put the cup behind his back.

In the time it had taken Jacque to do all that Renata started shaking, almost like she was about to have a fit.

“Renata?” Adrini said with a sob.

“I had a feeling this would happen. It goes through me first,” and then she clarified. “The magic. At least it’s a poisoning for a poisoning. ‘All things, being equal, are in balance between frost and flame.’”

## Chapter Twenty-Nine: Okoias

The whole journey, from the city-watch station to the entrance of the Gold Prophet's dominion, Okoias prayed. She had to have faith, and trust in the bones of her forbearers, in the Prophets of the House, and even in Crenn's Artisans that she was doing what needed to be done. That she was not leading her fellow watchers into a trap of some kind. That she was not walking to her death and that her brothers and sisters by claw and blood were not wholly entrapped by a false creed.

The sign affixed to the yet-to-be-opened Arrow Pont factory made her huff in exasperation. Between "arrow" and "pont" was that damned rune Doctor Linnrom drew for her. "Why couldn't he just *tell* me?" she mumbled.

"Huh?" Teague asked. He already looked dead on his feet. His eyes darted all around the complex in the late morning light.

The factory building was situated in the growing industrial sector off the docks and warehouses. Arrow Pont even had its own quay to both the wharf and to a city canal for easy access, which was likely how they had moved their quantities of ice and fire to the arena and the Fork. The main warehouse was surrounded by a gate that appeared unguarded, or perhaps the guards were on rotation.

One reason the old tunnels were so unstable was because of the construction of the canals and the salinity of the water. It ate into the old stone corridors that had mostly been closed off for decades. The decision to start building again this side of the city had seemed risky to Okoias, but engineers insisted in the trade broadsheets they were taking steps to reinforce the ground below the buildings.

They approached what would be the guardhouse off the quay and Teague knocked on the door. There was no reply. She heard him audibly gulp and when he

sighed, he exuded a puff of frost that mingled with the chill autumn night. Okoias felt the cold deep in her joints. Winter was mild in Raymorne, but it was still uncomfortable for fire draconi.

“You all right?” Teague asked when she rolled her neck and shoulders in an attempt to loosen the muscles.

“I hate the cold,” she replied.

He chuckled. “Never bothered me. Pretty strange, aren’t they?”

“What?”

“draconi bodies. So different from elves and dwarves and halflings and humans.”

“It’s the only body I’ve ever had, nothing to compare it to beyond the academic,” she replied. “Besides, compared to ifreet and djinn, we’re basically humans with biological quirks.”

She heard Teague huff. “There’s no such thing as ifreet and djinn.”

“Are you so sure? Stories of dragons never appeared in Continental Territories, Hacarrean, or other folklore in the lands of the West until draconi sailors touched down three or four thousand years ago.”

“You’re talking about the bug guts that poisoned me,” Teague replied.

“Yes, there’s also the naiads, dryads, and fairies of the Ancient Carinet. What about centaurs and griffins? All in the historical record.”

He scoffed again. “Myths, not history.”

She shrugged. “When you think about it, we’re all basically walking, talking, eating, and fucking stories waiting to be told to future generations.”

Someone came out from behind a stack of crates with a crossbow and when Okoias looked up she saw two archers in the tower nest were holding weapons at the

ready . Even from the distance Okoias could see they were war ready instruments with thick bolts and wickedly spiked arrowheads.

“This is private property!” One of the guards on the ground called.

Okoias said what Teague had told her to say. “I am but one of the lost, now found, a humble penitent of the flame and frost.”

“You already know me as Teague Margo, son of Kearyn and born of a blue shell.”

That caused a bit of a murmur. Okoias was sure she heard someone whisper, “It can’t be, that prick?”

Okoias slowly held her hands aloft. She had changed out of her gray uniform for a simple white shirt, tan trousers, black knee-high boots with a long purple frock coat with gilded buttons in the shape of dragon’s heads that Briar had given to her for her birthday. Her profession would soon be revealed if these guards didn’t already know about the draconi Inspector Kallista Okoias.

The guard on the ground was a huge a draconi woman nearly six and a half feet tall and built like a trebuchet. She looked Okoias up and down before looking down her crooked nose at Teague with golden dragon eyes. Not snake or lizard like. They would not have looked out of place in of Plucky the dragon’s skull.

“You’ve got some stones for showing up now after we’ve been looking for you for days.”

“I took ill,” Teague said.

From above, one of the guards’ spit from the nest. The glob hit the ground and sizzled with heat a bare inch from the point of Teague’s shoes. He took a cautious step back.

“You took up with the hedony whore on the Horn,” the spitter said. “Again.”

“Wouldn’t you think twice, Reianne, if Kate fed you a bowl full of dwarf and halfling balls?” Teague said.

“She’s pretty fucking crazy,” Reianne said and they all had a chuckle.

“Plus, there was my face all over,” Teague added.

“Your fault for putting your nose in business that wasn’t yours,” Reianne replied. “Who’s this?”

“Someone the Gold Prophet will want to meet,” Teague said. “She can give you the city-watch.”

“Won’t need it after today,” Reianne said.

“The time has come,” the spitting man said. “The true Rite of Blood will be held and the city will know true terror.” His voice quaked with that religious fervor Okoias had expected to see in the Gold Prophet’s followers.

“Shine, Weir,” Reianne said her voice chiding. “Come down and search them.”

They were quick in coming down out of the tower. The man, Weir, searched Teague while the woman, Shine, searched Okoias with such practice it was almost as if she had spent time in the city-watch.

“Take them to him,” Reianne said.

She then took up her position again in the shadows of the building with her weapon at the ready. It was unlikely that she was alone. Okoias had been trying to keep her senses open, but this was their domain. They knew the secrets of the entrance to their sanctuary.

Moving forward, Okoias continued to pray silently and hoped the crystal in her ear would continue to go unnoticed as anything other than an earring.



The inside of the factory was filled with brand new equipment set up in a semicircle of an assembly line. Huge iceboxes that could fit several animal carcasses stood next to gleaming vats and brand new valves and pumps. There were dozens of large trays, similar to the sea salt drying pans on the western coast, in wheeled racks. At the end of the process were several giant mechanized mortar and pestle looking devices all powered by steam energy.

“What are you making here?” Okoias asked.

“It’s supposed to be dried meat broth. Part of our prophet’s genius. Gather our people forgotten by the city for work, food, and community to show them the true path,” Reiann said.

The factory was quiet, not a soul was around to even pretend to be making bouillon.

Okoias had told Teague to stay silent if he was confident in their surroundings or to start coughing and having a fit if he wasn’t sure. So far, he had kept a hold on his tongue.

As they arrived at a pair of double doors, Reiann rhythmically knocked and there was a specific signal knock in reply before they opened to another guard situated above a set of stairs.

“In frost and flame,” Reiann said to the new guard and he replied in kind.

The space directly under the factory was a mushroom farm. Thousands and thousands of mushroom caps popped out of rich dark earth beds. Okoias marveled at the sight. It was a fully realized plan of putting on a front. Was this how names from her list had disappeared? Looking for promised jobs only to never leave the bowels of a factory unless they converted or fulfilled some other purpose?

What about others looking for work or those who had stumbled on to the ruse? Okoias remembered what Teague told her about the sausages Kate had been making, and she felt her stomach roll again.

The door at the end of the mushroom hall farm did not seem to require its own security knock, and when Okoias was led inside, she gasped at the sight. It was a huge cavern filled with draconi, and so many were *children*. The youngest draconi were not even hatched when she spotted a clutch of six eggs being warmed by the cocooned bodies of their mothers. Some of the children were being rowdy, others recognizing that something reverent was in the air. Okoias counted at least twenty draconi under the age of ten with at least twice as many over the age of fifteen and sixteen up to late adulthood. It was a whole populous of draconi.

It made her breath catch and her feet stumble. She felt tears prick at her eyes. She thought back on what Lady Sylfina had said of her numbers that she fostered and kept safe, less than half of what walked about in this cavern.

But at what price of the soul?

“You could have been part of this decades ago, child of fire,” said a man with a voice as smooth as silk.

Teague dropped to one knee. Out of the corner of her eye, Okoias could see his shoulders were tense, his body waiting for punishment.

Okoias squared her own shoulders and looked the Gold Prophet in the face. He was still handsome with cheekbones that even outclassed Teague’s. His long, thick black hair was bound in a simple queue at the nape of his neck and he had a neat mustache and beard now streaked with some gray. Those eyes were still the same: black inky pools without any hint of mercy in the over one-hundred-year-old soul they reflected. He looked so human it was almost laughable, except for the

maroon talons instead of fingernails. The bronze bells of Uthyr Greatwing were still at his waist, sounding their hollow clank as he moved. He also wore a ceremonial dagger with a hilt of bone.

Behind him she saw Sister Lavender and Dacre Hest, and though she had smelled the trouble from afar, the cannibalistic Kate Fletcher zeroed in on Teague from the crowd.

“Inspector,” Sister Lavender said, but a sister of the Panthemic House no longer. She had traded her green robes for a simple blue dress with the frost and flame chalice embroidered on the bodice.

“Where’s Carro?” Okoias asked before she could blink.

Lavender rolled her eyes “She’s fine of course and Julius and Athene are taking care of their egg. It’s due to hatch any hour now. Likely to be the first child of the new era.”

Kate, with an agenda all her own, walked up to Teague and put a hand on his head. “And just where have you been?” she asked although she already knew the answer.

“Not now,” the Gold Prophet said to Kate, holding out a hand to reel her back.

With a pout she stepped back, her eyes still on Teague, a hand on her stomach.

“You’ve arrived just in time for morning sacrament,” the Gold Prophet said to Okoias. “Will you join us?” He held out his hand to her.

It was a test. Every inch of her did not want to touch him and she wished she were wearing her city-watch gloves. But she took his hand and he guided her through the crowds.

“It’s taken you far too long to come back home,” he said. “I would have expected an inspector of your caliber to have found us ages ago.”

“I was also busy protecting the city,” Okoias said.

“From the wrong criminal elements,” he said.

Looking over her shoulder she saw Teague shuffling forward, trapped between the Gold Priest and Kate.

“Most of the pockets of dragonfrost and flame are already about the city, waiting for our final act,” the Gold Prophet said. “Just a few more hours.”

“And what then?” Okoias asked, although she regretted it.

The Gold Prophet gave a wry, knowing smile, but said nothing. He led her to an archway that opened up into a great chapel of stone.

“Adrini!” Teague shouted. He tried to run to the four people shackled and chained together near the altar, but Kate slid around him like shadow and knocked him to the ground.

“I did warn you,” the Gold Prophet said to Kate. “He is not one of us. One hopes his seed will be more faithful.”

The mission wasn’t Teague Margo and his bad decisions. It was the Gold Prophet. Okoias knew if she moved on the leader, Kate, Lavender, Hest, and many others would overwhelm her before she could even think about trying to snap his neck or sliding his own dagger into his heart.

The worshippers in the caves filtered in behind their Gold Prophet as he led Okoias to the pulpit. Kate half carried a defeated Teague up the aisle and dropped him next to Adrini Frey, Mabb Lynx, Renata Lawrey, and Jacque Bloomer. The four looked relatively intact, although Jacque was holding his sleeve to a bleeding lip and Renata looked as though she had broken out in a fever. Though her skin had its share

of scales, she was dripping in sweat, her face was pale, and her eyes were glassy. She held a hand to her mouth as though she was fighting the urge to vomit. No one else was paying her much attention.

The fight was out of Teague. He had been pushed too far, the color had also drained from his face, and he was barely getting up from the floor of his own accord.

Okoias was on her own.

“What of them?” she asked the Gold Prophet.

“The traitor daughter will die first,” he said. “The others will stand in for their kind, sealing the fate of this cursed city in the first true Rite of Blood in many millennia.”

Okoias thought back to the broadsheets. Adrini Frey, born to a human and an elf. Jacque Bloomer, halfling born on both sides. Mabb Lynx, half-dwarf and half-human. Renata Lawrey, of draconi blood. Four sacrifices, five different bloods.

She waited patiently as the pews filled up, and as bodies filled the sides of the room, spilling out into the hallway beyond. She wondered how far behind Crenn and the others were. How much more time she had to wait and wonder how many people were going to die today.

“We were lost,” Lavender began from the pulpit in the common language of the city as though she were merely addressing a normal congregation at the House or one of the priories.

The congregation, those that were old enough to talk, echoed the sentiment back.

“We were found,” Lavender said and so did the audience.

“As was our newest child of this thunder of dragon blood.” Lavender gestured to Okoias. “Born of a red egg, daughter of Garren and Cressida.”

“But not him!” A weak but determined voice croaked, echoing off the stony walls of the cavern.

Okoias and everyone else turned to the four prisoners shackled on the floor.

Renata shakily got to her feet and looked at the Gold Prophet with venom.

“Why don’t you tell them your real name?” she said. “The name of your mother, the woman who carried you in her body the whole time and nursed you from her breast instead of on blood and meat?”

*What was she doing?* Okoias wondered.

*What did she mean?* Was likely what the audience was thinking. In answer to her bold tongue, Kate stepped forward and backhanded Renata. She fell into Adrini Frey’s arms. The congregants began to hiss at Renata.

Very few managed to hear the numb word, “Hypocrite” before Renata’s eyes rolled back in her head.

Adrini started shaking her, but Okoias seized on the first thing she could to distract everyone from the prisoners. She stepped forward and grabbed the gold chalice on the altar. She held it aloft, knowing what tradition asked of her in this moment. To possibly assuage the Rite of Blood with her own.

“We drink together first,” Okoias said holding out the chalice. “To finally seal the bargain that you made to me all those years ago.”

“No!” the halfling Jacque made to stop Okoias, but Kate interfered again. This time she slammed her elbow back into Jacque’s nose.

“How dare you blaspheme!” Okoias said to the prisoners, trying to deflect attention from them. She held the cup out to the Gold Prophet and he smiled.

“They taught you well, my sister,” he said to Okoias. He picked up the bottle of wine, uncorked it and poured a measure into the chalice.

The Gold Prophet then procured his blade and pricked his forefinger with the tip. He let several drops of his blood fall into the dark liquid. In the strange lights of the cavern, Okoias thought to herself that the wine had an odd shimmer to it.

“We drink together,” he said and took the chalice from Okoias and handed her the blade.

Kallista Okoias, of a red egg and the daughter of Garren and Cressida Okoias, cut open her own forefinger and added her own blood. She took a sip from the cup and handed it back to the Gold Prophet. He turned and gestured with the chalice to Renata.

“May those that turn from the hand and claw of our people find no respite from the thirst of knowledge.” He took a sip from the cup as well.

And that was when Okoias heard the scuffle out in the hall, which meant the Raymorne City-Watch that she had put her faith in was there to back her up.

And then she felt the burning in her throat as the lights in the cavern started to pop and flash.

## Chapter Thirty: Crenn

Crenn, with a strength and frenzy that bordered on disgraceful conduct, pushed women and children out of the way to get to Okoias. He was hardly aware of the added screams. Through a gap in the rushing bodies, he saw the Gold Prophet convulsing on the ground and that damn reporter Dacre Hest howling over his leader's body. But what made his heart almost stop was the woman from the Beggars' Feast, Kate Fletcher, with a dagger in hand, about to plunge the blade into Okoias's back.

Crenn didn't think twice he pulled a slim throwing knife from his belt, took aim, and with fifty years of practice hurled it at her. It caught her in the chest. She gasped and fell backwards.

Seconds later he was at Okoias's side. Pink froth dribbled from her mouth.

"It was the chalice." Crenn turned and saw Teague Margo crawling towards them. He laid a hand on Kate Fletcher's belly.

"We did it," said the half-elf Banquest competitor, Adrini Frey, from the altar, barely audible over the din.

"Did what? Crenn growled.

"She had a necklace," Teague said. "With the beetle blood."

Somehow, the pieces fit even as the world around Crenn shattered into chaos. He looked at his partner, the person who he trusted above all others to ensure that he returned every night to his beloved Oleena. He couldn't let her die.

*Would it work?* Crenn wondered.

Inside his holster bag was the vial of neutralizer—the antidote carried by all watchers that could counter most poisons. He didn't give it a second thought. With



his teeth he removed the wax seal, tilted Kallista's head back, and poured the milky contents into her mouth. It carved a liquid line through the bloody spume dribbling from her lips.

And then he prayed. For the first time in decades, he prayed to the Our-Father and the Every-Mother and in the grace of all the Blessed Artisans for Kallista's life.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Teague Margo pleading with Rosewater to help the Banquest baker Renata Lawrey. But it was Kallista he cared most about. Everyone else could wait until her fate was sealed.

"By the very bones of this hall," Crenn prayed, as though the words had always been in his very marrow. "Tooth and claw and frost and flame. Don't let her go."

PART FOUR: GRATITUDE GIVEN AT THE TABLE  
IS HEARD BY THE STARS

“In giving thanks to the hands that have prepared our food—from the farmer to the cook—we are by default, extending our gratitude to the Rivers and Barrow and to the Maker.” –Tarleah Spooner

**Chapter Thirty-One: Okoias**

In the dark the first face Okoias saw in the Eternity was Briar. She wanted to apologize to Briar about how sorry she was that she was not a better companion. Love had always been so fleeting in her life, but Briar had been so free and abundant with it, and Okoias had kept her at arm’s length. But Okoias couldn’t talk and so she made do with stroking Briar’s hair, ears, and face in the hazy pain.

If she was dead, why was she still in pain?

The second face pissed her off. Sylfina Caereme’s features were smug as always. Okoias wasn’t sure because she couldn’t see the lady’s body, but in all likelihood, she’d laid her egg and should be tending to it. They were so strong in life, but so fragile in the beginning. Like all creatures great and small.

“You did well,” Sylfina said. Okoias was not going to call that cow “lady” anymore.

Again, Okoias tried to talk but Sylfina shushed her and placed a chunk of ice on her lips. The heat of her skin started to melt it instantly. Sylfina helped herself to a few chunks and chewed on them.

“It was so strange, but all through my gestation I craved ice all the time. Since Maroque is of frost, I wonder if that means our child will be?”

The sound of aching groans from Okoias’s mouth could be roughly translated as “fuck off.”

“No, you’re not dead,” Sylfina said and showed Okoias a crystal bottle filled with silvery liquid. “The university hospital medics are so stupid. One of the reasons Linnrom refuses to work with them. The wife of that Hacarrean attaché also had knowledge of what poisoned you.” She put the bottle of Linnrom’s tonic back down. “You know, I’ve always wanted to go to the Hacarrean and the Maipura. I hear the food is exquisite.”

Okoias wasn’t dead, but she was still being punished.

“Yes, I’m here while your throat is still too damaged to talk. You were lucky.” Sylfina took another couple of chunks of ice and popped them into her mouth and crunched loudly before continuing to *talk*. “Maroque has officially resigned from the Alimental Authority, it’s always caused him such stress, I’ve been telling him for years to quit. The draconi under the False Prophet’s thrall are under my care and your brother Albius and others from the House are assisting in their care. The coward Hest gave up everything including the other caches of dragonfrost and dragonflame. Linnrom is also begrudgingly assisting with that. I’m sure after this he won’t talk to anyone for several decades.”

Okoias closed her eyes. The Gold Prophet was dead. Another ice cube was placed on her lips and this time she opened her mouth to let the cold trickle down her throat. It felt like the most wonderful thing in the world. Well, second most wonderful after one of Briar’s kisses. All right, third best because Oleena’s cooking was transcendent.

“The four Banquestors also are fine if having accumulated a few scars on their soul as such things tend to happen. The acting head of the Authority still wants the third round to happen, I suppose it should.”

Sylfina once again reached for something outside of Okoias’s limited view. Her head also felt so heavy, as though her brains had been replaced with plain dwarven porridge.

This time the damn woman had a plum in her hands and she took a gushing bite of the bursting fruit. Evil. The Gold Prophet was evil and so was Sylfina Caereme. Okoias felt her stomach clench at the sight of the purple-orange globe and felt the saliva in her mouth start to pool.

“Your partner showed me your list. Many were indeed enthralled or otherwise held captive by the False Prophet or ran afoul of his followers. You served justice,” Sylfina said and she reached out with a wet finger and painted Okoias’s lips with the plum juice. “You and that strange motley of captors. I suppose us dragonborn don’t give other half-breeds and the smallfolk enough credit.”

Because of the ice and the saliva in her mouth, Okoias was able to slowly extend her tongue and lick the juice from her lips.

“I hope we see more of each other soon,” Sylfina said standing up and adjusting her lush blue and orange brocade coat. “And not another couple of decades from now.”

It was also exceedingly delicious to make a rude gesture with her hand at Sylfina Caereme’s back, even if it took forever to do so.

It took many more days before Okoias could speak again and a whole fortnight before she was allowed to eat solid food. Crenn brought her a feast cooked by Oleena filled with some of Okoias’s favorites. Muani-style roasted pork and rice

with a dark, rich sweet and salty sauce, a small loaf of dark dwarven bread, a cold spicy seafood stew bright with lime and garlic, and a salad of autumn fruits—pears, persimmon, apples, figs, and plums drizzled with honey. The portions were too big for the tiny vessel her stomach had shrunk to, but that meant she could share with Briar later.

Crenn was his usual quiet self; she really liked that about him. His calm and steady presence that was as solid as a mountain.

“Kallista,” he said after she had picked out and eaten all the figs.

“What?” She still sounded like a pair of stones grinding against one another. The medics weren’t sure how long it would take for her voice to heal, if it ever did at all.

In spite of what she knew was on Crenn’s mind. It had of course been on her mind as well.

“The standard issue antidote,” Crenn began.

“I know,” she said.

He continued, as though he had to say it in order for it to be fully discounted.

“It shouldn’t have neutralized whatever that beetle blood was.”

“Hemolymph,” she said.

Crenn grunted.

“Why can’t you accept my ancestors or your Our-Father and Every-Mother?” she asked him.

“Because the gods and ancestors don’t walk in this world and haven’t for many, many millennia.”

It was Okoias’s turn to be silent and pensive. Her formative years had been spent in the House. She had walked the line of hedony and had tested her faith in

some of the darkest corners of draconi beliefs. She thought about that giant statue of Ursula Raymorne in the foyer of the House right under that giant dragon skeleton.

“I don’t remember my father much,” Okoias said. “But I have a memory of him helping me skip through puddles in some street. Holding onto my hand as he guided me from one muddy pool to the next. Maybe that’s what the gods are? Just memories of a guiding hand?”

The minutes stretched on before Crenn said, “Maybe.”

Because how else could they explain those four Banquest chefs, being there at the right time, to pull off some impossible sleight of hand that had likely saved countless lives.

“Could you do me one other favor, Crenn?” Okoias asked.

“Anything for the hero of the hour,” he said.

“I’d love some iced cream.”

## **Chapter Thirty-Two: Jacque**

Elodie Marion Bloomer, six pounds of squishy cheeks and golden hair, was born twenty-two hours after Jacque was returned to Astrid's arms. She had been born in the same secure ward of the university hospital where Inspector Okoias, Teague Margo, Renata and Simon Lawrey and others were convalescing while the chaos of post-violence and post-harvest died down. Adrini and Mabb had both insisted on returning to their homes a week before, but they both came back to the hospital regularly to see their friends. Jacque was sure they were spending the nights together as Mabb seemed to only wear the same two outfits where he had always been rather dapper in previous encounters.

The Alimental Authority and city-watch were leaning on the broadsheets to keep things quiet, no doubt to assuage some of the grimmer aspects of the events of the last several days. Apparently, the city council was supposed to be holding an emergency meeting that day to figure out how to compensate those who had attended the Beggars' Feast. Speculation over possible poisoning had scared people away from food charities, but when Jacque had learned what was in some of the sausages of the Beggars' Feast, he hadn't been able to eat anything minced or cured for many weeks after.

Accepting the security of the closed ward also gave him an excuse not to attend the farewells of both Augustus Goldenmead and Gabriel Galley's wife. They still hadn't held Marion's funeral because Jacque knew Astrid could only deal with so much at the moment. And that was okay.

“She’s absolutely beautiful,” Okoias said to Jacque as he introduced his daughter to the inspector that had saved his life. Unnervingly, her damaged voice sounded almost like the rumble of what one would expect of an ancient dragon.

“Thank her mother, because it’s not from my side,” Jacque said.

“She’s probably already got your bravery,” Okoias said making faces and gravelly coos at the infant.

“Have they announced how they’re going to handle the final round of the Banquest?” Okoias asked.

“Still trying to figure out what to do with us,” Jacque said. “You should focus more on getting better.”

“Well,” Okoias said, her maroon fingernail gently touching the tip of Elodie’s little nose, “seems like it’s what that bastard wouldn’t have wanted.”

“Can I ask you something?” Jacque said, tipping his hand for the other reason he had visited Okoias’s bedside.

“Of course, you poisoned me after all.”

He grimaced, bouncing Elodie in his arms but cleared his throat and whispered, “Who was he? The Gold Prophet? Renata’s still not saying anything.”

Poor Renata was also suffering from the effects of whatever she had done to what little of the substance Adrini had in that necklace of hers. She was half-catatonic most of the time and when she wasn’t in bed staring at the ceiling, she insisted she wanted to help in the hospital kitchens. Fortunately, her brother was recovering from the poisoned mead. It still didn’t make sense to Jacque, but then again who was he to question a miracle?



“He’s dead,” Okoias croaked with little affect in her statement. “There’s a lot of people hurt. Let the broadsheets talk about them. Talk about better things. Like who the bloody winner of the Banquest will be.”

Holding Elodie in one arm, Jacque picked up Okoias’s hand and kissed the back of it.

“Hey there, don’t you be making moves on my girl,” a woman’s voice said. It was Okoias’s girlfriend Briar West.

“Just expressing my gratitude,” Jacque said. Then he held out his hand, fingers spread representing the Rivers and Barrow of his people.

Briar pointed to the cloth sack in her hand. “Whiskey Jacque ice cream.”

Jacque chuckled and then left to give them some privacy. Astrid had awoken and it was time to feed Elodie again. He marveled again at the ability of his wife not only to grow a whole little baby in her belly, but also nourish their child further with more of her body. It was a wonderful sight. But he also couldn’t wait to introduce little Elodie, and possibly future brothers and sisters, to delicious things and to cook Marion’s recipes for them so that they could at least know a sense of the grandmother.

“Any news?” Astrid asked. She was just as anxious for the Banquest to be over as well.

“Nope.”

“Guess again.” It was the Alimental Authority member Cassius. He handed Jacque an envelope with a red seal.

“This looks familiar,” Jacque said and then spotted Adrini making for him and Astrid from across the room, an open envelope already in her hands.

“Read it,” Adrini said.

As Jacque opened the envelope he asked, “How’s your friend?”

“Barely talks more than Renata,” she said looking over at the curtains surrounding Teague’s bed. “The city-watch is still pretty mad that he didn’t come forward before all this happened.”

Snorting, Jacque wanted to say, “me too” but he was distracted by the Authority’s decision on how to proceed with the Banquest.

*“Ruth Clyde, the Acting-Head of the Alimental Authority of Raymorne, invites you, Mr. Jacque Bloomer to fight for the title of Banquest champion alongside finalists Adrini Frey, Broganar, son of Troganor of the Orren Range, Mabb Lynx, and Saharu Nobue in a contest to celebrate the best traits of this city with a Menu of Love.”*

The rest of the details of the cobbled together final round were detailed. Instead of four finalists there would be five. Poor Renata was unable to continue due to her health and both Philippa and Gabriel Galley had gone back to the Keane Valley to mourn.

“Menu of Love,” Jacque repeated. “They’re not asking much of us, are they?”

“I think it sounds like it should be fun,” Adrini said.

“I’m all out of fun,” Jacque said. He wanted this all to be over with, but not enough to abandon the chance to still claim that title and the winner’s purse.

He looked over at Astrid who was wiping milk from her breast and Elodie’s mouth.

*A menu of love?*

“Astrid, what was your favorite dish that Marion would make for you?”

### **Chapter Thirty-Three: The Banquest Final Round**

The final round was not held at the Bountiful Arena, instead Fraser Brechin closed his landmark restaurant, Roux, for an evening and the five contestants were allowed to cook in a state of the art kitchen. Everything inside was gleaming copper or slick, black cast iron with the options of gas, coal, wood, and clay ovens. There were instruments that several of the competitors could have only previously dreamed to cook with. There was Merton Umber's patented, hand cranked food mill that ensured purees were silky smooth for mashes, soups, gravies, and pastes. There was even an iced cream maker, wide and shallow, with a perpetual crank that produced a quart of iced cream in fifteen minutes, with an accompanying ice cave box to keep the frozen concoctions cold and firm. Brechin also had several short-statured cooks on staff, so Jacque and Broganar were not subject to any unfairness in the heights of countertops and cooking stations.

In the third round they were traditionally able to hand over a list of the ingredients they wanted to cook with, within reason. One year, when a finalist asked for an Auric truffle from the Caereme's private reserves, they were less than politely told "no."

The competitors carefully screened loved ones waited in the dining room for the news of the outcome. There was no commentary but there were still sketch artists there to capture the moments and provide proof that nothing could stop the Banquest.

Five stations were ready, each distinct because of the culinary profile of the cooks. There was a bounty of spices in front of Adrini Frey. Jacque had a medley of

vegetables and herbs before him. Broganar's was the picture of autumnal flavor.

Mabb and Nobue held the monopoly on seafood, some items so fresh they still swam in tanks in the kitchen.

There were also four different types of freshly baked bread on each of the stations: the typical molasses laden black dwarven bread, fluffy milk bread from Shudo, a seed and nut loaf inspired by the sprouted grain loaves of the Carinet elves, and two long batons of crusty bread of the Caen-Rouen in the Outer Keane. As Renata was still recovering, it had taken her the better part of three days just to cook the batches for these loaves, when she was so used to producing dozens of loaves of about the same number of varieties in a single day. Adrini had proposed the idea to the Alimental Authority. Some knew something of Renata's circumstances, but not that she had helped to stop a cruel fanatic from sacrificing them and suffered cruelly for it by being unable to compete. Inspectors Okoias and Crenn had also petitioned for the request and even though Nobue and Broganar also didn't know the details, they acquiesced to the idea. At least some of Renata's food was in the final round of the Banquest that she would have undoubtedly earned a place to compete.

There was a kind of crazy-calm as the five cooks took up their stations in the gleaming and polished Roux kitchens. Jacque's new emblem, the "blooming pudding", was embroidered on his apron that he wore over shirtsleeves and trousers with clogs on his hairy feet. Broganar stood a few inches taller than the halfling, in a black and gray chef's jacket with his restaurant empire slogan: "Food is Life" emblazed on the breast pocket. Nobue wore a high-collared, fitted, brocade red robe patterned with the mythical Inari white fox. Mabb wore a jacket similar to Broganar's in the dwarven style, but with short sleeves that showed off his hairy forearms and the fish scales tattoo. Adrini recently learned that the pattern actually

extended over his left shoulder and pectoral muscles. She had decided to wear the High Larder's blue chef's jacket, although she was not sure that she would return to Merritt's brigade after the Banquest. The future was vast.

They were ready. Knives sharpened. Their stations stacked with ingredients and three hours to turn raw ingredients into the three cooked dishes that would make one of them a winner.

Almost at the same time, Mabb and Broganar cracked their knuckles. They noticed the simultaneous action but gave no outward sign of awkwardness. It was the dwarven way.

"Begin!" Bee and Edward said in unison in what was really their only purpose for this round. Somehow though, it wouldn't have been a final round without them.

The big pot, like an ancient cauldron, was the center of many a kitchen, along with water and fire, that was where most recipes began and ended. So, for this round, Adrini knew that she was seriously pushing the three-hour time limit even with the state of the art ovens. Because it would take the longest to cook, she started on her goat leg curry first. She removed as much of the meat from the bone as she could and then dropped the stripped bone into a stew pot filled with several quartered onions, smashed cloves of garlic, salt, pink peppercorns, herbs, and curry leaves. She poured water to cover the bone and covered the pot with a lid to boil and make stock. Then Adrini cut the meat into manageable, but hearty chunks, and seared the pieces off. She put those into a separate pot with chopped tomatoes, a splash of vinegar, a finely diced fresh honey hutch pepper, splash of black rum, and a medley of spices that she toasted and ground herself. These included coriander, cumin, allspice,

mustard, clove, white peppercorns, and some grated nutmeg. The dish was already coming to life and she felt—no, Adrini *knew*—that this final round was hers to lose.

On the station across from Adrini, Nobue was singularly focused on her work. She had several whole octopuses that she was breaking down with knife strokes that mimicked streaks of lightning to remove the tentacles and empty out the entrails from the head. Beautiful, in its own way, a reminder that meat came with a cost and it was the cook's due to respect that price all the way through the cooking process. Something that was slowly being forgotten as eyes turned to the mechanics of the future and the abandonment of the pastoral past.

Which was what Jacque also seemed to be capturing. Like Adrini he had decided to use a big cooking pot, much like Ursula Raymorne's symbolic cauldron, to stew together a bean and meat dish typical of the region between the Inner and Outer Keane where so many modern cooking standards had been set down by figures like Tarleah Spooner. Inside his vessel were the base of many a Caen-Rouen dish: onions, carrots, celery in sizzling duck fat with some diced tomatoes, minced garlic, and a bundle of herbs tied with string. He poured in a half bottle of white wine and a few quarts of water with a big handful of salt. Then he added a bunch of dried white marrow beans and covered the pot. He gave the sign of the Rivers and Barrow over the pot, willing them with all his luck to cook in the two hours and forty-five minutes that he had left.

Mabb had filled his largest pot with a similar base of sliced onions and a fennel bulb, and lots of smashed garlic as well, but he was adding flavors that were more familiar to the palate of his mother. He put in several pinches of saffron, grated off the zest from several oranges, and then added in sprigs of rosemary and covered that with white wine and water.

Broganar was also embracing the stew theme, only his was focused on a traditional dwarven dish of beetroots cooked in a rich broth and vinegar. He was obviously taking a diversion from the ruby-violet version with a bounty of orange, yellow, and red and white striped beets, cutting them into perfect crescents to roast in the oven until they caramelized on the outside and were tender inside. He had also laid long beef bones, halved with the thick marrow exposed down the center, in the pan to bake in the oven for the second part of his starter.

Some diverted their attentions to the iced cream maker. Nobue, Adrini, and Broganar all wanted to do frozen desserts but Jacque wanted to add something frozen to his first course and he had asked Kalilah all she knew about making water ices.

To serve their first and second courses one after another before using the final half an hour to finish off their desserts they all had to precisely balance their timing . The minutes ticked by as pots bubbled and pans sizzled and five “menus of love” came into being.

Merton, Vashti, and Fraser all sat at the unique “chef’s table” right inside Roux’s kitchen. There the elite could pay extra to see the spectacle of their dinners come into being right before their eyes and hungry stomachs. Mabb served to the judges first. He presented bowls of bright seafood stew, an elevated version of a provincial fisherman’s pot. Crispy spicy fennel sausage had been sprinkled on top of the vibrant broth swimming with chunks of cod, grouper, bass, and mussels. A piece of toast from the long baton bread was slathered with garlic aioli.

“A perfect execution of a traditional southern provincial dish,” was all Fraser had to say.

Once more Vashti bowed her head to Mabb and Merton joked about asking for another piece of toast to soak up the saffron broth.

“Is that licorice I detect?” he asked. “Not just the fennel sausage.”

“Yes, I added a splash of anise aperitif,” Mabb confirmed.

The judges were equally impressed with everyone else’s opening courses. Adrini’s was a silky smooth sweet potato and chestnut soup, with a few complimentary dots of bitter herb oil on the bright orange surface, and the croutons made from seed-and-nut bread toasted in butter and cinnamon served on top. Adrini explained that this dish was for her mother and brothers in the Carinet. The hot dish was contrasted with Broganar’s cold beetroot soup topped with beetroot greens and a side of roasted bone marrow with crunchy black dwarven bread. Nobue diverged from the soup theme with her rice balls wrapped in seaweed sheets and stuffed with salmon flavored with garlic, ginger, and tamari with a pickled plum sauce to dip the dumplings in.

Jacque presented a trio of oysters, explaining, “On my first date with my wife we went to a place near the wharf and stuffed ourselves silly with oysters.” One of the oysters was dressed in a vinaigrette of shallots, garlic, herbs, and instead of the traditional vinegar he used grapefruit juice. The second oyster had a spoonful of agave spirit and lime ice on top and the third oyster had been fried and was covered in a sticky hot sauce.

“If I were you,” Fraser said, “I’d open up a stand selling these.” He pointed at the second shell. “Especially on a hot summer evening.”

The judges held off revealing their scores as the five finalists put the finishing touches on their second courses and ensured their desserts would be ready for the eager judges.



For the main course, Broganar had grilled wild boar belly rubbed in molasses-sugar and spices until it was crispy and the meat was dripping with juices. To accompany the meat, he made a salad from hearty greens, crispy butter beans, and roasted pears dressed with a tart blackberry dressing.

Jacque also used wild boar and butter beans but his main dish was a stewed duck leg, boar bacon, and beans in rich gravy with a dollop of tomato jam. Renata's baton bread appeared as well as breadcrumbs mixed with lemon zest and chopped parsley. It was a traditional dish of the Rivers and Barrow especially when the wind blew in cold off the waters. "And Marion always asked me to make it for the Midwinter River Dance," he explained.

It seemed Adrini was taking a chance with her stewed Hacarrean goat curry over coconut red beans and rice, since her first dish was a soup. Merton, the most well-traveled and arguably most varied eater of the two judges had something amazing to say to Adrini.

"I know goat curry is the pride of Queen's Peak," he said and then after a long pause finished his thought, "but I would say your goat curry is the crowning recipe."

That compliment brought tears to Adrini's face. She wasn't ashamed of them either. She thanked Merton and even Mabb took a moment to kiss her cheek when she returned to her station.

"That's my girl," he said.

"Oh, I'm your girl now?" Adrini replied.

"I think the past couple of weeks speak for themselves."

So did Mabb's main course of a perfect filet of halibut crusted in little slices of potato that looked like golden brown scales. The fish was surrounded by a rough-

cut vegetable medley and a celeriac puree. As they were both seafood enthusiasts, Nobue tried to top this feat with a duo of octopus. One preparation involved grilling the tentacles in a sticky tamari and ginger marinade and a sauce of wild garlic and wild onion, the second was a braise in Shudonese beer accompanied with fried aubergine crisps.

Unfortunately, Nobue made the first big mistake of the round and her octopus was. Vashti was gentle in her assessment as she said, “It’s tough, you over cooked the tentacles and didn’t cook the body long enough in the beer.”

“More like chewy tendons,” Fraser muttered.

Nobue took this judgment stoically and merely nodded.

Since each judge awarded a Banquestor with a score out of five for each dish, the results going into the deserts stood at:

Adrini Frey: 28/30

Broganar, son of Troganor: 25/30

Jacque Bloomer: 27/30

Mabb Lynx: 27/30

Saharu Nobue: 22/30

The tough octopus really had messed with Nobue’s score.

Merton also added, “Unfortunately, Broganar, your food is spectacular as always but we felt you weren’t pushing your limits, especially since this your third time in the final round of the Banquest.”

Broganar also took this assessment austere.

There were cheers from the dining room as Edward and Bee delivered the scores, but the chefs were already back into the groove of it all with their desserts.

During each round, the cooks were given an opportunity to explain their dishes and why they encompassed a menu of love. Adrini spoke of her family in each dish, a vegetable soup and elf inspired bread for her maternal side, the goat curry for her paternal side and for Hemmie. This time she presented the true crown of her menu. It was in part for Teague and for Mabb the two men she loved most—Teague who had become her fourth brother and Mabb. In her mind, Adrini knew that what she had with him was unexpected, but wholly recognizable as something special. But it was also dedicated to other new people who had warmed their way into her heart over the course of this life-changing journey.

“This tart is a standard shortcrust, but with a walnut frangipane and on top are apples and a sauce of farmer’s cheese. On the side is an iced cream flavored with honey and rosemary.”

The judges each took a slice and a scoop.

“Who here at this table hasn’t made Marion Goosling’s walnut frangipane?” Merton asked and the other two nodded in agreement.

Aside from that comment, the judges ate but kept their game faces on, merely nodding in approval.

The most unusual dessert was Nobue’s with “cubes” of bread pudding made from the Shudo milk bread, a strange gray iced cream made from black sesame seeds, with a shard of white and black sesame seed brittle. She explained that her fiancée had introduced her to iced cream made with rice milk and she couldn’t get enough of it some days.

Broganar presented a pearapple strudel with his own iced cream of vanilla and cinnamon and nutmeg. Mabb also used pearapples, but his were poached in brandy with a walnut-oat crumble and a vanilla-cinnamon Chantilly cream.

Last came Jacques's dessert and he'd added in his own halfling cheekiness to the round. "No dessert in the Keane comes before the cheese course," he explained, indicating the spread of blue cheese on a tuile-like cracker topped with dried fig pieces and a drizzle of honey. The real dessert was a clafoutis. Plum chunks and whole frostberries had been laid out in a careful pattern in the bottom of a ceramic dish before Jacques had poured a version of his pudding batter over the top to be supplemented with a lemon sauce.

"Since a clafoutis batter is so similar to a bloomer pudding batter, I supposed I should use it at least once in this competition," Jacques said and the judges chuckled appreciatively. The halfling continued, "My wife just loves frostberries and I'm mad about plums, so this dessert is Karisic and Keane all at the same time." *Just like Elodie*, Jacques thought but didn't say. No need to lay it on *that* thick.

Then came the maddening wait in both the kitchen and the greater dining room as the judges discussed for a good half of an hour. One of the things Mabb had asked for was a bottle of sparkling wine, but he never meant to use it in his dish. He opened it up as they waited, took a swig, and then passed the frothing bottle around to his other four competitors.

They then let the Banquestors back into the main dining area. Jacques embraced Jamey, Lissey, Beric, and then Astrid who was sitting in a chair with Elodie. Unfortunately, Ivonne and Wyman had returned to the Carinet.

Mabb stood with his sister and human mother between Adrini and her mother, brothers, father, stepmother, and Merritt. She held hands with her new beau and wished Teague could have also been there. It was going to be a long journey back to the trust she had thought she'd shared with her best friend, but she was

willing to give him a chance. After all, Ursula Raymorne said, “Blood may be thicker than water, but milk is the stuff of plenty.”

Broganar held hands with his wife and Nobue sat with her fiancée and his father.

They waited, hardly anyone exchanging any words, but many of them laughed when Elodie gave a particularly endearing gurgle.

The judges finally emerged with looks of satisfaction on their faces from both having tasted from five amazing meals and having found the best cook of the year despite everything.

“We’ll start from last, but far from the least, place,” Vashti said. “With thirty-four points out of forty-five, is Saharu Nobue.”

Everyone still clapped and Nobue gave a sad smile.

“Next,” continued Edward, “He’s earned thirty-seven out of forty-five but is still a two-time champion: Broganar, son of Troganor.”

The same appreciative and conciliatory kind of applause sounded as Broganar waved his hand and nodded in acceptance.

Adrini and Mabb held hands even tighter now as Jacque and Astrid did the same.

Bee announced the third-place winner. “With thirty-nine out of the forty-five is Mabb Lynx.”

Under the claps Adrini kissed Mabb on his cheek and whispered, “I’m sorry.”

He shook his head and she almost missed under the din, “I’m only sorry I didn’t get to taste your pie today.”

Adrini covered her mouth with her free hand to keep her from squeaking in embarrassment.

In the trembling tension as the final scores were given, Adrini clasped mother's hand. Who would've ever guessed it took the Banquest to bring Saverina back into the city? Lyreon was behind Adrini with a hand on her shoulder and her brothers forming the back wall of their half circle of family alongside Merritt.

A few feet away from Adrini, Jacque had his arm around Astrid's shoulders while Elodie lay bundled in her arms, a look of curiosity on the small squishy face. Jacque saw once again that the granddaughter had her grandmother's slightly upturned nose. True, he'd already won something amazing, but still being the winner would be cherry on top of everything else.

"Second place has earned forty-two points and first forty-three," Merton said and then let Fraser announce the winner of this year's All-Hands Harvest Festival Banquest.

"I'm so privileged to announce the youngest winner of the Banquest ever, and she's got the most amazing start on a stunning career: Adrini Frey."

The crowd erupted into jubilation. Ruth Clyde put a medallion around her neck with the Alimental Authority seal declaring her the winner while Jacque received a slightly smaller one himself as the runner up. Everyone was hugging and congratulating one another while several more bottles of sparkling wine were uncorked.

It was all a delicious whirlwind of emotions, but really, all that Adrini could think of in that moment was: *what will get to I cook next?*

## **From The Broadsheets**

ANOTHER YEAR, ANOTHER BANQUEST. THE SIXTEEN WILL BE ANNOUNCED AT DUSK AS THE ENVELOPES ARE ALREADY ON THEIR WAY OUT TO ALL CORNERS OF RAYMORNE. Security is a cause for concern, but the Alimental Authority and the City-Watch say nothing will ever stop the celebrations. Authority Director Ruth Clyde has assured that security protocols and concerns have been strengthened. "The Banquest is the beating heart of the All-Hands Harvest Festival, and food and all our peoples are the strength of this city. We are stronger together at the table breaking bread."

## A Recipe

### Clafoutis is for All-Seasons

from *Art in Cookery and Family: The Collected Recipes and Musings of Marion Goosling*

A clafoutis (pronounced kla-*fou*-tee) is a lovely and easy way to end a meal. One can slip the dish into the oven before sitting down for supper and it will be ready right after the traditional Keane cheese course. Marion Goosling's favorite clafoutis was a summer one of strawberries and rhubarb, but most fruits are suitable for this wonderfully adaptive dessert.

Simply rub a generous amount of butter into a shallow and wide ceramic or cast iron pan of about eight inches. Lay down your chosen seasonal fruits, no need to be fussy with a pattern if you can't be bothered, but it is always nice to see cherries in a spoke shape or plums laid out like a sunburst just so.

In a separate bowl mix one-half cup of the finest flour, a spoonful of extract of vanilla, one-half cup of sugar and one-cup of milk, and a pinch of salt. Beat the mixture until smooth and pour over your fruit. Then sprinkle the top with an additional generous three or four pinches of sugar.

Bake in an oven with the flue adjusted to the middle so as not to burn in the absence of the strictest of attentions.

Serve with cold cream or custard.



## Epilogue

Shortly before the one-year anniversary of Marion Goosling's death and the beginning of the next Banquest, people were flocking to bookstores to get their hands on at least one of the books being hyped in the broadsheets. *Art in Cookery and Family: The Collected Recipes and Musings of Marion Goosling* was released in tandem with Jacque and Adrini's cookbook *How to Cook for a Dragon*. Their debut was filled with recipes melding together the flavors of the Keane with the Hacarrean and with the great diversity of the city. A true melting pot of recipes. Although, this meant that both titles would be competing against Baron Maroque Caereme's autobiography.

"Are you sure you're not going to read it?" Astrid asked Okoias as they sat in a sunny corner on the veranda of Blooming, Jacque's flagship restaurant. It was situated at the end of the Fork where the food stalls started melding into the surrounding typical city architecture of too close buildings and plenty of foot traffic. There were also plans on opening up a location in the Inner Keane off the Sidara River City and one up the coast in the resort town.

Okoias snickered into her coffee and shook her head. "The baron's book? Not even the flying bones of my ancestors could get me to read such vainglorious ramblings."

"It probably means he's running for mayor," Briar added.

One of the halfling servers, a young woman named Canary, asked if the three of them wanted more coffee. This prompted little Elodie in the highchair next to Astrid to cry out, "More!" And then kept repeating, "More. More. More," as she pawed at the berries and banana slices on her plate. Briar and Okoias laughed.

"But you might be in it," Briar said elbowing her fiancée.

“Doubtful,” Okoias said. “He’s not one for kissing and telling. The *Lady* Caereme on the other hand...”

“Such a cow,” Briar muttered. “Shall we return the conversation back to the food?”

“Sounds like it’s going to be a lovely wedding,” Astrid said. “It’s too bad Renata’s not doing your cake after all.”

It still saddened Astrid that Renata Lawrey had not returned to baking or cooking after what she had done to help save Jacque, Adrini, Mabb and possibly many other countless lives in the city. She heard that the draconi woman was still in the city, but had declined all invitations for dinner or tea.

“Teague told me that Linnrom also offered her a chance to learn how to make tonics,” Okoias said, “But she declined the offer.”

“Still, it’s quite the feat that we have both Jacque and Adrini doing the catering,” Briar said.

“Anything for the woman who practically took a bolt for my husband,” Astrid said holding up her coffee cup in salute.

Briar smiled, lifted Okoias’s hand and kissed the back of it.

“My wife to be is a hero and I wish I could scream it to the world, but since some of that bastard’s followers escaped Fisher says we shouldn’t talk about it.” Briar then realized she was indeed speaking of it in public and shoved the raspberry-chocolate mini-bloomer into her mouth whole. She wiggled in her seat with pleasure and took a sip of her tea.

The bell over the door to the café portion of the restaurant tickled as two familiar people came through the door.

“I wonder when we’ll hear about another wedding,” Astrid said as Mabb and Adrini came into the store with a heavy box in each of their arms.

Patrons of the restaurant also recognized the winner and third place runner up of last year’s Banquest as the buzz shifted in that direction. Adrini attempted to wave at Astrid and almost dropped her package. She came towards them and set the box down on the table.

“What’s this?” Astrid asked, peaking in at what was inside. She recognized the blue willow-pattern cover of the book she had spent the year editing. Carefully inserting her mother’s true words alongside recipes for everything from her infamous frangipane—both almond and walnut varieties with adaptations for chestnuts and hazelnuts—to her marinated lamb and smoked salmon.

“Mabb and I were at an antique store and there was a copy of one of Tarleah Spooner’s books in the window,” Adrini began. She pulled out a copy of hers and Jacque’s cookbook showing off the texturized green cover. “It was signed by Tarleah with a note to ‘cook well’.”

“Then I turned to Dree and said ‘what if we sell signed copies in Jacque’s restaurant?’ And then I suggested we could do the same for your book too,” Mabb indicated the *Art in Cookery* book in the other box.

The all too familiar feeling of tears pricking at her eyes made Astrid pause. She pulled out a copy of *her* book. Hers and her mother’s. Shortly after the conclusion of the Banquest last year, Vashti Carraway approached both Astrid and Jacque about doing a cookbook to honor Marion Goosling and she even offered to help hire a lawyer to get some of the rights to Marion’s earliest publications returned to Astrid. The project changed course when Jacque and Adrini started combining recipes from their repertoires and *How to Cook for a Dragon* was spawned alongside

the initial project. Carraway's publishers of course said yes to the first joint cookbook of a winner and runner up of the Banquest.

"Have you decided on the appetizers yet?" Adrini asked Okoias and Briar. She sat down and Canary appeared with a glass of sweet ice tea.

"The mint and pea pesto and yogurt-cheese on flatbread for sure," Briar said. "Kallista wants fried prawns, but I want the oysters Jacque did."

"But you still want the lobster curry?" Adrini asked.

"Of course," Briar said.

"I want lobster curry again now," Mabb said as he sat behind Adrini and put his head on her shoulder.

"You just have to wait two weeks," Adrini told him.

"She's so mean to me," he pouted.

"I know the feeling," Okoias muttered and Briar gave a sound of indignation.

Adrini poked Mabb and said, "Go get the big guy."

Mabb snorted and made for the back of the house.

"Now?" Astrid asked.

"The first day of the Banquest is in a few days. Put them out now and we'll be sold out by the end of the first round," Adrini said. "Got to keep on cooking."

Sliding out from the collar of her shirt, Astrid saw the recreation of the little spoon that had saved her husband's life. Once again, she felt sorry for Renata and Teague, but also still felt a little bitter towards them. Perhaps if they had spoken up sooner, her mother, and Philippa's husband and Gabriel Galley's wife, would still be alive. Then again, the world still didn't want to hear the bad news.

The blue and white book in Astrid's hands was the beginning of the reclamation of her mother's legacy. One that would surely be as solid as Ursula

Raymorne, Tarleah Spooner, and the others that came before her and those that would come after. She wiped at a tear and picked up the pen that she had been using to finalize this newest menu of love for Briar and Okoias's wedding in less than a month.

"Mama?"

Turning, she saw that Elodie had mashed some of the berries into her bib instead of into her mouth. She sighed and started to put the pen down when a pair of hands yanked her from the highchair and Jacque started spinning his daughter around in circles.

"She just ate!" Astrid said with half a giggle and half of an admonishment.

"Oops," Jacque said and immediately sat Elodie back into her seat. She gave a squeal and then a burp. Everyone at the table in the corner laughed.

Once more, Elodie gestured with her little fist at *Art in Cookery and Family* and then said, "Mama."

Two tears broke from her eyes and as Astrid pulled out a handkerchief, embroidered by her mother with strawberries on the vine, Jacque kissed the top of his daughter's head then put his arms around his wife.

"One day at a time," he whispered to her with a kiss.

"One dish at a time," she whispered back.

The wedding menu was finalized between the jumble of signing books.

"Oh, and my best man," Okoias said after finishing off her jam tart, "is pleading with me for no frostberries anywhere in sight."

"What if I added them to the floral arrangements?" Briar asked.

The table erupted with laughter; the notion of wasting such perfectly delicious frostberries was out of the question.

*“Waste not and want not; there are always stomachs to fill.”* Ursula

Raymorne once said and Marion Goosling had added in the corner of a notebook:

*“For the menu is never finished nor is it the sustenance to savor.”*

THE END

“FOOD AND CHEER AND PROSE”:  
THE GASTRONOMY OF FANTASTIC LITERATURE

GINGER LEE THOMASON

“If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold,  
it would be a merrier world.” –J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*



## **Introduction: The Menu is Not the Meal**

“What do you want for dinner?” and “What book should I read next?” are not as disparate questions one might assume straightaway. What is for dinner is just what is for dinner, for most people. However, both queries can encompass immense variations of the human experience, if only one meal or one story at a time. For some, the question of dinnertime does not seem to carry the same magnitude of academic considerations as to what a particular work of literature has done in the building up of, or in the dismantling of, civilizations. Food as an integral part of literary theory and analysis is a growing niche, now recognized as deserving of its own scholarship. This thesis will seek to rectify and reconcile the bridges between the dinner table and the bookshelf.

Until recently, there was not a separate academic discipline to study food cultures and foodways. To study food at an academic level was mostly relegated to the scientific minded fields of nutrition and food ecology with some considerations in human anthropology such as in the works of Claude Levi-Strauss (*The Raw and the Cooked*) and in some of Margaret Mead’s observations (*Food Habits Research: Problems of the 1960’s*). In the new millennia, the growing field of food studies has emerged as “an academic discipline that studies the relationships between food and the human experience” (Zhen, 2019, p. 19). Incidentally, at the same time scholastic considerations of fantastic literature, and its place of deserving analysis in literary theory, has also increased. This thesis then sits at a nexus of human experience as it considers the “gastronomy of fantastic literature.” The word “gastronomy” has several considerations in that it has come to mean “the art of eating” in common discourse but it is also the concept that “a meal had links beyond the kitchen to the

culture and landscape” (Davidson, 2014, “gastronomy”). The “fantastic” draws from Dr. Erik S. Rabkin’s *Fantastic Worlds: Myths, Tales, and Stories* that: “Such worlds are not merely *different* from our own, but *alternative* to our own. Fantastic worlds— perhaps paradoxically— are defined for us and are of interest to us by virtue of their relationship to the real world we imagine to have been thought normal when the story was composed” (1979, p. 4, italics in original). Under the umbrella of “fantastic,” I have drawn from traditional fantasy sources such as J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, but also from other subgenres such as horror, science fiction, and magical realism that have both influenced me as a writer and as an academic, as well as examples that will provide clarity and context in the understanding of the theories I have presented in defining the “gastronomy of fantastic literature.”

Because food studies is a new academic field, even more so when considering the gastronomy of fantastic literature, questions about the nature of food in literature can cast a wide berth. As such those that arose early in my research included: “why is food imagery important to works of SFF?,” “how can it be identified and classified and how has it changed throughout the years?,” “how is it different in SFF versus other fiction genres?,” and “does food imagery change between SFF subgenres?” These are hypotheses of which I have elaborated on in chapters two and four. Much of chapter three formed around the queries “how does food imagery play into world building and setting?” and “how does food define characters in their response to the meals they eat or food they encounter?” A final research postulation that formed during my research proposal was the consideration of the both the writer’s and the reader’s reactions in regards to personal dietary preferences and primal or cultural aversions to the consumption of taboo food. These

are answered throughout this thesis as one considers the nature of such notions as desire, disgust, and vicarious enchantment of fantastic food.

My novel *How to Cook a Dragon (HtCaD)* was not what I initially proposed as the creative component for this PhD. Originally, I had envisioned a collection of short stories with accompanying recipes to explore how food imagery is used in the different subgenres and tropes of the fantastic, with *HtCaD* as the central piece of the collection. It grew too big for a short story, but in the longer narrative I was still able to explore and still cook up a menu of the various uses and applications of food imagery within a novel. Philosopher and Zen devotee, Alan Watts was known to often suggest that “the menu is not the meal” (1957, p. 13) and in building on that musing, there are many courses to consider in my novel and its accompanying critical commentary.

Throughout my thesis I use a handful of terms. Some concern more recent theories in academia, while others have had new life breathed into them by these theories. Concerning “world-building,” I have used Mark J.P. Wolf’s preference for a hyphen instead of using world-building as one word or as two separate words. World-building is both the act of, and the result of, creating fictional worlds. “Every setting of every piece of fiction ever written is by definition a product of someone else’s imagination,” asserts author Jeff VanderMeer, and to what depths world-building occurs is an indeterminable gradient, varying from one fictional world to the next, between the “Primary World” and the “Secondary World.” The Primary World is our own reality, whereas a Secondary World is the slice of alternate reality or a whole separate universe in a work of fiction. Examples of Secondary Worlds can be both the fictional French village of Lansquenet-sous-Tannes, which is on the same map of France as Paris and Marseilles in Joanne Harris’s *Chocolat* novels, or

an entire invented universe riding on four elephants on top of a cosmic turtle in Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* series. Finally, there is "subcreation", which originated in J.R.R. Tolkien's lecture "On Fairy Stories" and was subsequently borrowed by Mark J.P. Wolf for use in *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation*: "Tolkien termed the making of a secondary world 'subcreation', meaning 'creating under', since human beings are limited to using the pre-existing concepts found in God's creation, finding new combinations of them that explore the realm of possibilities" (2013, p. 23). These terms became the foundation for exploring how food imagery influences and is influenced by world-building and the consequent considerations of our Primary World versus Secondary Worlds and the subcreation that is unfolded usually via the narrative of a story.

For Chapter One, "Terroir: Oh, the Places You Can Taste," I propose a theory that fantastic literature itself has its own "terroir," taken from the French term "*goût du terroir*" meaning "taste of place." Terroir supposes that the flavors of food in our Primary World are affected by the soils, geography, and microclimate of agricultural areas. Historically, the term was merely applied to traditional French foodstuffs such as cheese and wine but has since grown both poetically and scientifically to encompass the "taste of place" in other items such as chocolate and coffee in our world and now via the food imagery in the Secondary Worlds of fantastic literature.

With Chapter Two, "'Objects of Alimentation': A Taxonomy of Fantastic Food Imagery," I consider what qualifies as food imagery in fantastic literature and how readers can use this new taxonomy to explore the relationships between food and fantastic literature. This taxonomy also contemplates how food as philosophical

objects are perceived through the experiences of characters and vicariously in readers.

Moving on to Chapter Three, “Mise en Place: The Infrastructures of Fantasy Subcreation,” I examine theories of how food imagery and foodways are integrated into world-building through Mark J.P. Wolf’s theories of subcreation and its infrastructures of nature, culture, language, and mythology and philosophy. There is also an analysis of particular food subcultures, which are often explored via the narrative of fantastic works.

Finally, Chapter Four “Mastering the Art of Fantastic Food: The Context and Creative Practice of *How to Cook a Dragon*,” explores the pantry of ingredients that went into the creative practice of my novel and how fantastic subgenres such as high fantasy, low fantasy, and urban fantasy, and the tropes inherent in their traditions, shaped my novel and PhD.

Before continuing on to the rest of this thesis, I would like to call upon an assertion of literary theorist Rosemary Jackson, who wrote that fantasy is a “literature of desire” (1988, pp. 3-4). One of the greatest of human desires, both of survival and of pleasure, is that of food. A meal can make or break a day for any real or fictional person; it can soothe, provide comfort, and even ignite the human desires to avoid the negative, mainly those of disgust and illness in regards to rotten or taboo food. Both sides of desire will be explored in the preceding chapters, explaining some of the context of the desires in the characters of *How to Cook a Dragon* and in the desires emanating from my research.

## Chapter One:

### Terroir: Oh, the Places You Can Taste

One of the greatest things about literature is that stories have the fantastic ability to transport readers anywhere, even to places that have never existed outside of the aether of imagination. Anywhere, anytime, anyplace can be imagined by an author and interpreted by readers with the mere magic of words. Food holds similar enchantments, albeit of the kind that can actually be experienced by an eater. A dish or a flavor not only invokes different places and past memories, it can alter life experiences in profound or unexpected ways. Stephen King asserts in *On Writing*, rather poetically, “Books are a uniquely portable magic” (2000, p. 104), which can invoke a form of “telepathy” and time travel from the mind of the author to the reader over a distance of years, decades, or even centuries. In *The Missing Ingredient: The Curious Role of Time in Food and Flavor*, food writer Jenny Linford observes in the section titled “Time Travel” that “While eating is essential for sustaining life, food is so much more than fuel. It is resonant, laden with recollections, emotions, attachments; able to vividly conjure up other times and places” (2018, p. 326). When combined, the juxtaposition of the notion of the magic of words with the idea of taste across time and space is evocative of the French food descriptor known as “terroir.”

Traditionally, terroir has been almost exclusively tied to French wine and cheesemaking, describing “place” as a component of the flavor of these decidedly regional foods, but the term has evolved to mean more. Terroir (or *goût du terroir*) traditionally meant that the soil, climate and microclimate, the specific fermenting yeasts and bacteria, and even the exact geographical location of production have a

distinct and discernable effect on the flavor, taste, and the overall experience of wine and cheese (Robinson, 2015, p. 739). Several different volumes, both academic and mainstream, have emerged in the last twenty years defining what terroir could come to mean and encompass outside of this traditional French definition. Amy B.

Trubeck, a cultural anthropologist and trained chef, states in *The Taste of Place*, “In France, food and drink from a certain place are thought to possess unique tastes.

Thus, more than words, terroir and *goût du terroir* categories frame perceptions and practices—a worldview, or should we say a foodview?” (2009, p. 25). Her book explores the journey of the concept of “terroir” from being a French term to something that has more global implications. Foods that have their own provenance in terroir beyond wine and cheese include chocolate, coffee, maple syrup, honey, tea, and even cannabis and tobacco. And where food can have its own terroir, so does literature.

Although we do not actively “taste” literature as we read, we use terms such as “consume” to explain what we are doing when we do so: we are absorbing them into our bodies in a metaphor adjacent to eating. In this, readers and scholars can see how the stories themselves have their own terroir, and fantastic literature has its own “*goût du terroir*.” Trubeck has provided further definitions to distinguish between the two terms:

The classic nineteenth-century French dictionary, Pierre Larousse's *Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle*, defines *terroir* as “the earth considered from the point of view of agriculture,” and clarifies with *le goût de terroir*: “the flavor or odor of certain locales that are given to its products, particularly with wine” (2009, p. 10).

Over time and through different translations, adaptations, and expansions beyond the original definition the “*goût de*” or “*goût du*” prefixes have been dropped. Now, terroir of fantastic literature has its own “agricultural point of view” found in the

history, archetypes, and even the regionalism of the authors. That terroir is a new and identifiable literary device has been explored previously in an interdisciplinary curriculum at Evergreen State College's Whetstone Internship and Digging into Food Studies Field Study. In 2016, student Anne Sloan wrote an essay in defense of this new concept, and she argues that "Terroir can be experienced in most (if not every) novel ever written, even in the novels written by English writers—despite their tame cuisine" (2016). Terroir is not just about the writer's personal cultural cuisine, but also about the very nature of vicarious flavor impacting food imagery in a text. Just as terroir as a concept was something that has evolved over time, so has it come to be recognized as a literary device, as Sloan continues in her essay:

Masterful writers know that the *terroir tool* is available. Anything ever written was done so by someone who ate and most likely drank and walked through fields. And, if the readers want to experience life and literature more fully, they shouldn't be afraid to become a student of *terroir* (2016, italics in original).

Fantastic literature has a distinct palate of tropes and traditions that have roots in both the science fiction and fantasy canon and in fandoms of various fantastic worlds and their creators that can be explored in the terroir of their works.

Writers consciously or subconsciously fortify their worlds with a sense of terroir to fit the setting. This can be intentional when a writer is trying to capture a particular culture or infuse their world-building with their own palate. As previously defined in the introduction, my use of the term "fantastic" is akin to Eric S. Rabkin's assertions that fantastic places are not "different" from but an "alternative" to our own. This means that the terroir within fantastic worlds is also affected by the taste of their alternative place as well, whether they be the idyllic fields of the Shire (*The Hobbit*), the moisture farms of Tatooine under two suns (*Star Wars*, 1977), or the commercial shipping capital that is Raymorne in my novel *How to Cook a Dragon*



(*HtCaD*). Nebula Award-winning writer Aliette de Bodard knows her background influences of nearly every dish she writes about: “I come from two cultures, French and Vietnamese, that are totally obsessed with food” (Wilde, 2012). De Bodard’s work has been noted for her use of food imagery, even when it’s not Vietnamese or French. She also has a “recipes” section on her personal webpage. When considering the food for her Aztec setting in the *Obsidian and Blood* trilogy, she actually ended up ruminating on the terroir of that setting as well:

There are a lot of maize-based meals. A lot of things they fished from the lake—crunchy fried newts and frogs and fish. I don’t think they had much meat because they were in the middle of marshes and had overhunted their game sources, so they had birds, but not much in the way of large meat animals – they raised dogs and turkeys for food but didn’t have oxen or what we’d think of as farm animals like hens or cows (Wilde, 2012).

There are foodstuffs in the quotation above that are indicative of a new setting, a new Secondary World, that is different from any other place most people have ever visited, not just in the pre-industrial Mesoamerican setting. These marshes would certainly affect the taste of the waterfowl that would be far different from the game available in the Fens of Cambridgeshire or in the halfling territory of the Rivers and Barrow outside of Raymorne (p. 5). Returning to Sloan’s essay, she contends, “I’d actually explain that terroir—the tastes of foods, the heats of the sun, the smoothness-es of clays, the smells of flowers or the sippings of teas—is so uniquely personal yet incredibly shareable that it surpasses anything learned academically” (2016). This of course indicates that terroir is not just ingredients or flavors, nor is it merely a reflection of a particular food culture; it is both experience and knowledge relayed into literary imagery of how food tastes and how those flavors can inform the sense of where those foods come from, even if they’re in a wholly new fantastic world.

Because the terroir of fantastic literature is the sense of *place* within a story, this means that the experience cannot happen without the soil—essentially the writers and their canon—that it grows from. Many writers have been designated as part of the science-fiction and fantasy (SFF) “canon,” the forbearers of what and what does not constitute SFF and what should be read by contemporary writers and readers in order to both understand the genre and continue the veneration of its roots in new writing. There have been many debates on what constitutes *the* science fiction-fantasy “canon,” so this canon of what food and flavors make up the terroir of SFF is loose and obviously impacted by reader-response reactions to novels and short stories that provide individual canons for readers and writers. This in turn leads to contention in both academic and professional literary circles as to why the SFF “canon” does or does not matter, or even if there is indeed a set canon. In her 2019 acceptance speech for the then named John W. Campbell award, author Jeannette Ng contends that while the influential editor Campbell helped to establish “the canon,” the canon is actually changing, “These bones, we have grown wonderful, ramshackle genre, wilder and stranger than his mind could imagine or allow” (2019). The “bones” as Ng says, are another way of identifying soil-like components of the terroir of fantastic literature, acting as the soil and climate that can give certain volumes their own distinct flavor. Like real soil, there has to be more than just the sand and clays giving nutrition to the crops; there needs to be diversity of minerals and organic matter that mimic the diversity of writers and readers. As science-fiction writer John Scalzi also observed regarding the roots of Campbell and his impact on the so-called canon, “There are at least two generations of adults now, and two generations of genre writers, who didn’t grow up on it and fundamentally don’t care about it” (2020). As there are many soils and climates across the globe of the

Primary World, so there are many diverse writers with their Secondary Worlds. The various geographical conditions of the terroir of fantastic literature are not affected by a single vineyard or orchard, and therefore the canon is not one set of conditions either.

While there is not a canon set in stone, there are many ways the terroir of fantastic literature has been influenced by previous storytellers. Foundations like these are essentially the sun shining on the soils of fantastic literature. Food is abundant in mythology and religion, from the Garden of Eden to the divine diet of ambrosia and nectar of the Greek gods, and in the presence of one or more gods of the harvest and of alcoholic beverages in nearly every pantheon around the world. In folklore and fairy tales it means leaving bread and milk out as an offering to fair folk in Ireland (as retold in *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman) or finding witches' houses made of baked goods (*Grimm's Fairy Tales*), both of which are now echoed in leaving out milk and cookies for Santa Claus on Christmas Eve.

The three modern authors that have left some of the most definitive imprints on the terroir of fantastic literature are J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Roald Dahl. Though it is mere anecdotal evidence, almost every time I have mentioned my research to SFF readers, writers, and other speculative fiction academics, one of these authors will come up as an example. These three writers have also left their particular marks on my own literary history. Tolkien and Lewis in particular were influenced by medieval texts and the food tropes in those stories and folklore. However, the way Tolkien, Lewis, and Dahl shaped contemporary fantastic literature have fossilized them as part of the "bones," or terroir, of this genre. In my MFA craft paper, I delved into how Tolkien's use of the feast trope, as seen in the beginning of *The Hobbit* and in Bilbo Baggins's 111<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration at the beginning of *The*

*Fellowship of the Ring* is a device that allows for immersive world-building. Lulling readers into a vicarious food coma through feasts and grand meals is as much a hallmark of fantastic literature as dragons, quests, and swordfights (all of which are also staple tropes of Tolkien and the genre). In a special edition issue for *Newsweek*, editor James Ellis argues:

Scholars, academics and casual enthusiasts have spilled tons of ink (both of the real and virtual varieties) about the exact definition of fantasy (does an epic poem such as *Beowulf* count?) and the genre's origins (do Greek myths qualify? Romantic poems from the Middle Ages?). But the overwhelming influence of J.R.R. Tolkien on the genre remains a fundamental certainty. The British author didn't invent fantasy, but he defined it in the minds of millions with his seminal works *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* (2019, p.56).

C. S. Lewis also employed the meal as a form of connection between reader and fantastic world, as seen in the afternoon tea Lucy and the faun, Mr. Tumnus, have during her first trip to Narnia in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950, p. 20). In addition to this cozy tea party, Lewis emphasized food's more enchanting properties, especially in times of wanting. Although Turkish delight is a mystery to many American readers, this inadvertently allowed for even greater heights of "delight" when wondering how this confection could cause Edmund to turn on his siblings (Lewis's Turkish delight and its popularity in fantastic food imagery will be further discussed in Chapter Three). Through marvelous creations such as a giant peach (*James and the Giant Peach*) or in Willy Wonka's Everlasting Gobstoppers (*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*), Roald Dahl has ensured that wonder became an essential component in the terroir of fantastic literature for both readers and writers to desire in their fantastic worlds. These authors have established tropes and given vocabulary to other literary devices that come into play when utilizing food imagery in fantastic literature. These are some of the more recognizable examples of fantastic food, but there is so much more to soil than just the crumbs of dirt.

Some of the fantastic soils that *How to Cook a Dragon (HtCaD)* took root in do include the works of Tolkien, Lewis, and Dahl, but just as no single dish represents entire cultural cuisines, there is not one work of fiction that has influenced my novel. However, one specific fantastical work that influenced my novel is the Pixar film *Ratatouille*, and it is a film with a strong sense of fantastic terroir. The story of a rat named Remy who just “likes good food, okay?” (2007) and wants to share that love with his fellow rats, and with the humans who are at the pinnacle of culinary achievement, arrived at a moment in my life where I was teaching myself how to cook. The fantastic elements of Remy’s spiritual guide and his ability to manipulate the body of his proxy cook, Alfredo Linguini, are just some of the magic at work in this film. The food is the heart of the magic of this story and can be explored through the lens of terroir. Remy actually invokes terroir in a scene in which he asks his brother to taste a piece of cheese and then a grape with deliberate consideration: “Chew it slowly. Only think about the taste. Creamy, salty sweet, an oaky nuttiness. [...] Now, imagine every great taste in the world being combined into infinite combinations. Tastes that no one has tried yet! Discoveries to be made!” (*ibid.*) What Remy is asking his brother to consider is not only the flavor, but also the whole picture of food and in turn the whole story between taste, meal, and experience. The “terroir tool” was not just available to *Ratatouille* director and writer Brad Bird (and the myriad of animators) because the movie takes place in France. The terroir of *Ratatouille* is built into the very heart of the story, “anyone can cook” and terroir is how we bring those flavors together.

The terroir *Ratatouille* explores is decidedly that of French cuisine, specifically the *haute de cuisine* popular in high-end restaurants in Paris, which is where Remy ends up. French ingredients and methods are everywhere as Colette, a

*commis* (cook) in Gusteau's restaurant, tutors Remy, Linguini, and the audience in the ways of great food. This is alluded to as I introduce Adrini in her first *HtCaD* chapter (p. 19), where the reader is thrust into the kitchen much in the same way as Remy when he falls through the skylight. There is literal magic in *Ratatouille* and in the film's dishes such as soufflés, potato-leek soup, and of course, the titular ratatouille that saves the day when the antagonist Anton Ego experiences a Proustian moment of terroir as he tastes Remy's version of the classic French "peasant dish" (2007), but perhaps there is a form of time travel as suggested by King and Linford above. Terroir is also explored through various aphorisms in the film that harken to the words of famous French gastronomes. As Remy's palate starts to develop at the beginning of the film, he asserts, "If you are what you eat, then I only want to eat the good stuff," which alludes to of the most well-known food aphorisms from Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin's *The Physiology of Taste: Or Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy*: "Tell me what you eat and I will tell you who you are" (2011). This in turn is echoed *HtCaD* where Ursula Raymorne (the "Founding Mother" of the city that is her namesake) is reputed to have said, "We are all, quite simply, the fruits from the orchard, the vegetables in the field, the bread fresh out of the oven, and the wine flowing from a cask" (p. 117) This is one of the most enduring and repeated food metaphors of the last few centuries, which can literally mean our bodies are a product of what we put on our plates but also has a poetry that we are the terroir of what we consume either from a French restaurant or perhaps even through the library.

Terroir is also found in various elements of literature, such as in metaphor, symbolism, and archetypes, and can be identified via food imagery. Food as a metaphor and vehicle for temptation and deception is as old as the Forbidden Fruit in

Genesis and in ancient myths around the world. The Three Sisters of Mesoamerican myth are symbolic of the food staples of the indigenous North American peoples and represent squash, beans, and maize (Landon, 2008). In Ancient Greek there is the story of Tantalus who butchered and served up his own son, Pelops, to the gods to test their omniscience (Leeming, p. 310). Today, Tantalus's name is the root of the word "tantalizing" (*ibid.*, p. 375), which now denotes something to be irresistible. In some interpretations of the myth the goddess Demeter accidentally consumed part of Pelops's flesh, because she was grieving for the abduction of her daughter, which has become an archetype of food adulteration. This is echoed in the inherent deception of many cannibalistic scenes and characters in literature, such as in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy, and the notorious Hannibal Lecter created by Thomas Harris, and now in *HtCaD* where Kate serves Teague a mystery bowl of stew in his state of distress (p. 108). These literary devices have also given way to a cultural bedrock that mimics tradition in the interpretations of terroir that in turn resembles the tropes of modern literary theory.

Tropes are another means of identifying the terroir of the fantastic. Some tropes have given way to clichés, such as the orphan chosen one or damsel in distress, which can detract from rather than enhance a story. If used properly, tropes can serve the same purpose as the literary devices mentioned above and assist readers in navigating fantastic worlds through recognizable clues, similar to how wine makers describe flavors in wine beyond the grape. The trope of the fantasy feast is realized in several different themes and their purpose is often the same: the feast occurs as another mode for immersing the reader in a fantastic world and to experience that world's terroir. There is the feast that features magical or enchanted food, often invoking the temptations of the Garden of Eden. These feasts go back

thousands of years to Circe's feast in *The Odyssey* that turns Odysseus's men into pigs (Homer & Wilson, 2017) or in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* when Ariel invokes visions of a banquet for the marooned sailors. There is also temptation in the precarious nature of food found in fairy or other wonderlands, such as the magic of Alice's "Eat Me" cakes and "Drink Me" bottles or in the repeated refrain to "Come buy, come buy" the fruits of Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" (2015). There is the feast for a celebration—birthdays, holidays, and congratulatory events—such as the dinner Jacques has with his fellow halfplings after his spot in the Banquet has been announced (Chapter Four: Jacques), Enid Blyton's Famous Five's picnics (, or in the various school feasts at Hogwarts for the beginning and ending of term or for holidays such as Halloween and Christmas (Rowling, 1998). Other reasons for a feast in fantastic literature serve to set the scene of the novel. We learn much about the cultures of Westeros and Essos in George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* via the copious and varying descriptions of food and how specific food imagery reinforces the quasi-medieval setting with over one hundred and sixty dishes and foodstuffs described over the first four novels of Martin's series (Rosenberg, 2011).

To understand terroir is to have conscious access to a flexible and valuable piece of the writer's craft. It adds complexity to food imagery that in turn leads to further comprehension of food as an inspired resource for storytelling in fantastic literature. James Beard winning food writer Rowan Jacobsen notes that the geophysical patterns in terroir not only enrich food but also the experience of eating, which is not so far removed from food imagery in literature:

Nature offers different deals in different places. The patterns of wind, wave, light, and life that define a region come through in the plants and animals that grow there. If you want to understand the world—if you find joy in its diversity—then those patterns are worth paying attention to (2010, p. 5).



This means that “terroir” can be viewed as something beyond a what has been previously viewed as a pretentious descriptor of food, it is possibly now a new literary device describing “the taste of place” in and of itself. It is in the terroir of fantastic literature one can learn about the influences of the “canon” of Tolkien, Lewis, and Dahl and see how they have informed the food imagery in contemporary writers such as J.K. Rowling, Terry Pratchett, and Neil Gaiman. Terroir is both a component of and a defining element of symbolism, metaphor, and other literary devices, which in turn has given a foundation to tropes that assist readers and writers in navigating new and fantastic worlds. The terroir of fantastic literature is exploring the flavors of alternative worlds and perhaps as writers allows us to utilize different flavors to enhance the recipes of our stories.

## **Chapter Two:**

### **Objects of Alimentation: A Taxonomy of Fantastic Food Imagery**

Food is a universal element of the human condition and too often, because it is such a constant artifact in our lives, these alimentary objects fall into various liminal spaces between the mundane and the extraordinary and can be qualified through various echelons of experience. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner happen every day for the majority of people in the developed world in addition to snacks, coffee or tea breaks, and a “drink at the pub” with similar predictability. Food is often measured in calories and/or desire: the choice of a banana, peanut butter and whole wheat toast with orange juice over a full English breakfast from a greasy spoon, continuing on to dessert at a restaurant and whether one is in the mood for cheesecake or banoffee pie. There are circumstances when food is about cost. Within even a single square mile of a first-world city, a single parent may be purchasing the bare essentials with government-sponsored food vouchers while another individual is eating a Wagyu steak with truffled mashed potatoes and washing it down with Dom Perignon. Sometimes food is measured in time such as in tea or coffee breaks or in holidays where the menu changes with the season. Other times food is calculated on the glycemic index in carbs versus protein or through hashtags and likes shared on Instagram and other social media (#fictionalfood). All of these examples become qualifiers to Objects of Alimentation, which adds to the metaphysic nutrition found in the fictional and fantastic food writers use in their stories and through which we can analyze and catalogue food imagery in literature.

An “object” is a philosophical term wherein a something is experienced by a “subject” (Proudfoot & Lacey, 2009, p. 282) and in this thesis “Objects of

Alimentation” are semantical objects that writers use to convey experiences in their stories’ subjects. These subjects can be both fictional characters and, albeit vicariously, readers. Alimental objects can be abstract, such as arbitrary breakfast time, lunchtime, and dinnertime or in calories that cannot be seen with the naked eye. Alimental objects can be tangible things: food such as orange juice or Wagyu beef; or everyday kitchen items such as spoons, teapots, and toasters. “Coffee” is an abstract object before the first cup is ever consumed in the morning. That is until coffee beans are ground up and boiled with hot water in a copper pot and poured into a mug, all objects adjacent to the Alimental Object that is “a cup of coffee” in the morning for Jacque on page 205 of *How to Cook a Dragon (HtCaD)*. In his food-filled adventures in Wonderland, Lewis Carroll’s Walrus (the subject) muses on the nature of alimental and other objects to the Oysters in his poem “The Walrus and the Carpenter”:

The time has come,' the Walrus said,  
 ‘To talk of many things:  
 Of shoes—and ships—and sealing-wax—  
 Of cabbages—and kings—  
 And why the sea is boiling hot—  
 And whether pigs have wings.’  
 [...]
 A loaf of bread,' the Walrus said,  
 Is what we chiefly need:  
 Pepper and vinegar besides  
 Are very good indeed —  
 Now if you're ready, Oysters dear,  
 We can begin to feed.' (2019, p. 105).

The philosophical subject is both the Walrus and the Oysters he is ensnaring. The objects at first appear to be a nonsensical list that includes “cabbages” and “kings,” but soon the Oysters themselves become Objects of Alimentation in the second stanza above. In a novel, these objects experienced in the Secondary Worlds of

fantastic fiction are almost always abstract but can usually be tied into desires and memories of real-life experiences in the Primary World.

Due to the universality of these alimentary objects in both our lives and in fiction in general it was necessary for me to find a way to define food imagery and how authors use it in their storytelling. This would allow me to isolate and extrapolate various uses and meanings in a story, and to understand and illuminate the differences in even common foodstuffs. Bread imagery in fantasy literature is only one such example. What was the difference between the Biblical “Bread of Life,” J.R.R. Tolkien’s *lembas* bread in *The Lord of the Rings*, or in Peeta Mellark’s burnt bread given to Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games* compared to the loaves coming out of Renata Lawrey’s Bread Ahead Bakery in Raymorne in my novel *HtCaD*? That is, if there is any difference at all? Or maybe the differences exist on a gradient requiring classification? What emerged during the course of my PhD studies took on the form of a taxonomy informed by certain distinctions between philosophical objects and how they are experienced in the minds of writers and readers.

The “Objects of Alimentation” formed out of an established taxonomy by Robert Appelbaum from his essay “Existential Disgust and the Food of the Philosopher,” featured in *Food in Literature* (Shahani, ed., 2018). Appelbaum leans heavily in his essay on the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre and specifically the novel *Nausea*. In Sartre’s novel, “objects of experience” are philosophized as being essential to understanding consciousness and reality, which provides the theoretical base for Appelbaum’s taxonomy, and for this thesis the “objects of experience” are further qualified as “Objects of Alimentation.” In the opening lines of his essay, Appelbaum explains that, “Food, so far as it appears as an object in literary

discourse, can be categorized as any of a number of things – ‘things’ in the sense of objects of experience, cognition, and inquiry. Six of them seem especially important” (2018, p. 130). In the introduction to *Food in Literature*, editor Gitanjali G. Shahani streamlined Appelbaum’s six categories, and for brevity’s sake in the discourse of this thesis I have added my own abbreviations:

- I. Food as a material object (Material Objects)
- II. Food as an occasion of gustatory and olfactory sensation (Gustatory-Olfactory Sensation)
- III. Food as a historical phenomenon (Historical Objects)
- IV. Food as a sociocultural phenomenon (Sociocultural Objects)
- V. Food as the object of a practice (Object of Practice)
- VI. Food can be identified as an “order of being” (Order of Being) (p. 25)

These six “things,” or taxa, end up providing an effective device for identifying and classifying food imagery in fantastic literature.

Through this taxonomy, I will explore how these Objects of Alimentation are used in both my novel and in other works of speculative fiction to inform and enhance world-building, characterization, and narrative. There will be food examples from our Primary World and how often these inform or subvert expectations in fictional food found in my own Secondary World, the city of Raymorne in the land of Broma, and in other works of speculative fiction. Though *HtCaD* is firmly rooted in the fantasy genre, I will occasionally employ examples from science fiction and horror, as much of my research and personal inspiration crosses these genre boundaries. Psychologist and behavioral food researcher Paul Rozin observed that “Cuisines embody some of a culture's accumulated wisdom about food” (Pollan, 2006, p. 296), and my novel is also an “accumulation” of the wisdom of literature I

have analyzed before and during my postgraduate research. These various analyses will include how Appelbaum's taxonomy provides a lens for viewing both the different types of food imagery in literature, consider their meaning within a work of literature, and highlight author choices in world-building, characterization, and in the narrative, often through the use of metaphor and tropes.

### I: Food as a material object (Material Objects)

Food as a Material Object is one of most prolific of examples of food imagery and as such leads to dismissal as being commonplace and without need for analysis, which mirrors food attitudes in our daily lives. Appelbaum's own thoughts on this categorization conclude simply: "Food can be a material object, among other material objects" (2018, p. 130). To clarify further what is meant by Material Objects instead of simply just "objects," linguistic philosopher Ernst Tugendhat explains: "Now what is meant by the word 'object'? This word too, in the comprehensive sense in which it is used in philosophy, is a term of art. In ordinary language we are inclined to call only material objects...objects, and not e.g. events or numbers [...] (Zalta, ed., 2017)." As previously mentioned, food is easily obtained in the developed world. The Object that is food is ubiquitous through the constant exposure in markets and grocery stores, has long been a subject in art and in countless hours on television, and is found in countless cookbooks available at bookstores and libraries. The food and drink imagery in these mediums often present, at least at first, as a Material Object that is simply just *there*. A meal exists as both a whole Object and in the discrete ingredients. Other related Objects can be identified in auxiliary items such as cutlery, crockery, and appliances and in the

places where food is found such as kitchens, canteens, restaurants, stores and markets. It is through these mundane and everyday experiences of Material Objects that a reader is often first exposed to food imagery in fiction.

Sometimes Material Objects are merely fleeting impressions and unconsciously dismissed as standard or unimportant components of the narrative. It could be as simple as a character waking up in one of the first chapters of a book and going about making a cup of coffee or tea, as Arthur Dent does in Douglas Adams's *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. However, even in this recognizable everyday routine, the food or drink will still point to clues in world-building and characterization. Perhaps later in the narrative Material Objects may become motif or metaphor in the narrative and are elevated to another taxa. For Arthur, a morning disrupted by construction work cannot interfere with the routine of shaving, followed by the ordinary habit of "Kettle, plug, fridge, milk, coffee. Yawn" (Adams, 2002, p. 7). Even after arguing with the construction manager, Arthur's life is unchanged and presumably will return to its normal schedule marked by when to eat lunch or stop for a cup of tea. Only after Earth is destroyed and he has been catapulted into a new world does the routine of a cup of tea become something more symbolic for Dent early on in the sequel, *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*: "'No,' Arthur said, 'look, it's very, very simple.... All I want... is a cup of tea. You are going to make one for me. Now keep quiet and listen'" (Adams, 2002, p. 155). Because Arthur has to explain to the Nutri-Matic, and therefore the audience, about the history of tea, the process of brewing a "cuppa," and his preference for milk before the tea, this daily ritual and its associated objects for millions of people is transformed from a Material Object to something belonging to another category in this taxonomy. This is not uncommon for Material Objects and will be explored further along this thesis.

To consider foodstuffs and cooking implements as mere Material Objects in literature requires an absence of certain embellishments and descriptors, mainly of taste and smell, thus rendering food imagery “a material object among other material objects.” It is natural for a writer attempting to “show not tell” to make sure a reader is able not only to read about something as simple as a pile of oranges on a page but smell their zest and feel the gush of juice from a segment. This is the biggest drawback of the first classification in that Material Objects are often banal and therefore do not seem to need more attention paid than the initial encounter of the word “oranges” on the page, but it is still an important category in understanding even the seemingly most basic components of world-building. Much of the food imagery in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1998) appears to only be mere Material Objects. The enslaved narrator Offred is responsible for two things that are material objects (lowercase) in the world of Gilead: food and offspring. Offred walks every day to the various grocers to obtain foodstuffs that reflect the Commander and Serena Joy’s statuses in this new Secondary World that was once an academic and urbane Cambridge, Massachusetts. One day while shopping, Offred spots both scarce oranges and a rare pregnant handmaid during the same daily trip to the store. In her first-person narration, Offred considers, “It will be something, a small achievement, to have made oranges happen,” (1998, p. 25) but Ofwarren, formerly known as Janine, has managed to take the handmaiden’s greeting “blessed be the fruit” and make it reality. The connected metaphor is reinforced as Offred notes, “The pregnant woman’s belly is like a huge fruit” (*ibid.*, p. 26). Tropical fruit and children in Gilead are Material Objects among other objects in the dystopian world of Atwood’s novel.



When considering what qualifies as food imagery, sometimes the inedible tools that assist in the production, preparation, and preservation of foodstuffs is neglected. The spoon is one such tool that does not seem to be significant at first glance. It is a Material Object that is inseparable from the primary use in helping us feed ourselves. Spoons are also among the oldest cooking instruments; they predate the fork, which first gained a place on the dinner table in the 1600s because of pasta-eating Italy, as a dining utensil by thousands of years, (Wilson, 2012, p. 192). In the way that food is an everyday occurrence, spoons are also a staple of nearly every single human culture as Bee Wilson observes in *Consider the Fork: A History of How We Cook and Eat*: “Spoons hold up a mirror to the surrounding culture precisely because they are so universal. There are fork cultures and there are chopstick cultures; but all the peoples of the world use spoons [...] In the distant past, humans lashed shells onto sticks and used them to consume foods too liquid to be eaten with fingers” (2012, p. 184). The spoon as a symbol and motif has been incorporated into many properties of modern fantastic food imagery such as in Pixar’s *Ratatouille*, where the rat protagonist Remy is often featured in media and merchandising holding an oversized spoon (Figure 1). Cookbook author and baker Frances Quinn, the Series Threes winner of *The Great British Bake-Off*, designed her “spencil” logo, a combination of a spoon and a pencil, to symbolize the creative endeavors of her craft (2017) (Figure 2). There are also many examples of themed gifts for chefs, cooks, and foodies on Etsy and other sites, such as spoons engraved with “cereal killer” or jewelry, which inspired Adrini’s necklace that ends up helping to save the day, as seen in Figure 3.



Figure 1 (Empire.com, 2007)



Figure 2 (Quinn, F., 2013)

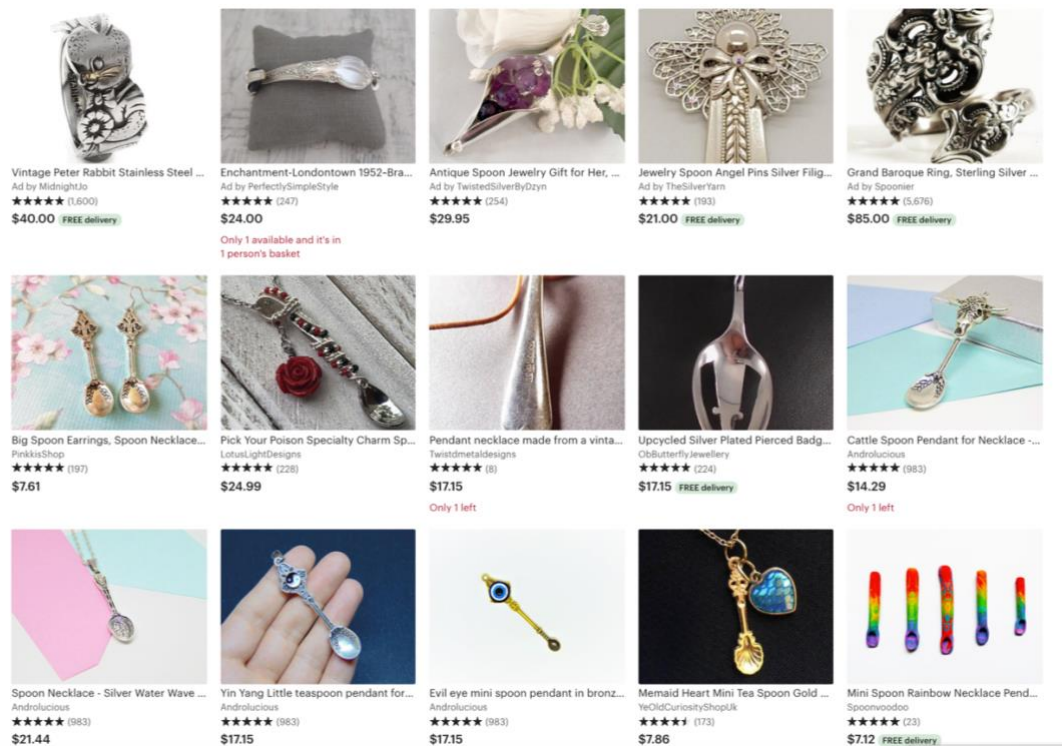


Figure 3 (Screenshot of Etsy.com "spoon jewelry" search results, 2021.)

In *HtCaD*, the halfling Spooner clan utilizes the Material Object aspect of the spoon as a part of their family symbolism and uses it in the logos of their cooking supply shops and cookery book publishing. In the fictional continent of Broma, the Spooner spoon is a trademarked item, and Jacque takes advantage of this iconography in his business venture selling bloomer puddings in the Fork. But in the opening of chapter one this symbol has been taken from him, along with his surname, as punishment for daring to marry a human woman:

The artisanal “Spooner” spoon had been pried away from his sign at some point in the night and angry scratches gored through his family name. The spoon had been a gift from his family, congratulations on his hard work continuing the family traditions of good food and prosperous commerce (p. 5)

Jacque’s predicament, in conjunction with prevalent spoon symbolism in the Primary World, exemplifies how food imagery can extend beyond edible food imagery through the exploration and identification of Material Objects in literature.

Material Objects also surround and inform the environment of my other primary protagonist, Adrini Frey, in her introductory chapter. In contrast to Jacque, she works for the High Larder, a top-of-the-line kitchen that reflects the new, oncoming industrial age of Raymorne in the vein of contemporary high-end food empires run by the likes of Gordon Ramsay, Wolfgang Puck, and Alice Waters. The High Larder’s kitchen is full of basic cookery Material Objects:

It was about the food. [Merritt’s] domain was for bringing wonder into being over hot stations fueled by wood and charcoal magic. Filled with busy cooks in their black, blue, and green shirts, their knives chopping, pans sautéing, pots stewing, joints roasting, all in some kind of symphonious crazy and calm synchronicity (p. 20)

These Material Objects capture the first impressions of the back of the house for someone who has not experienced this section of a restaurant. It is this kitchen and in Jacque’s little stand in *HtCaD* where dishes come together from Material Objects as

ingredients assisted with the Material Objects of utensils and cooking vessels, and through the chefs, to become objects of Gustatory and Olfactory Sensations.

## II: Food as an occasion of gustatory and olfactory sensation (Gustatory-Olfactory Sensation)

When a reader processes food imagery on the page vicarious tastes and scents can manifest, enhancing and enriching the experience. To differentiate between food as a Material Object and as one of Gustatory or Olfactory Sensation, Appelbaum continues in his essay: “Similarly (but this is not exactly the same, since a material object can be observed without being tasted and smelled) [food] can be an occasion of gustatory and olfactory sensation” (2018, p. 130). He then considers the nature of experiencing these sensations:

Since Plato philosophers have asked, what do I perceive with my senses, and can I trust it? In Sartre the question is more like, what do I feel as I see, hear, touch, smell, and taste, and what do I feel in my situatedness? Can I trust my feelings? That is, can I trust them as authentic feelings, attuned to existence? (p. 135).

In creative writing the answer is that these senses are experienced vicariously between the author, the character, and the reader in a fluctuating synchronicity. This is very similar to general olfactory and gustatory sensations in real life where no one person experiences a dish in the same way, but we can all attempt to describe what an apple tart tastes like because most people have experienced the components of apple, pastry, sugar, and spices and this is easily translatable. What takes food on the page from a Material Object to something Gustatory or Olfactory is a deeper active interaction between a reader and the characters’ experience in the narrative. This requires proxy sensory descriptors of taste and smell, but also sight, sound, and

touch, by taking Primary World associations and accentuating Secondary World alimental objects with these descriptors.

More often than not, food is sometimes first perceived as a Material Object (as stated in the previous section) because this is a primary reaction to the written word either in context or out of context of the story. The author may introduce a foodstuff such as ice cream or candy and then add descriptors, which then make the dish an object of gustatory sensation and desire. In *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* by J.K. Rowling, when we meet soon to be eleven-year-old Harry Potter, he is begrudgingly dragged along to his cousin Dudley Dursley's birthday party at the London Zoo (1997, "The Vanishing Glass"). When his aunt and uncle buy Dudley "large chocolate ice-creams at the entrance [of the zoo] and then, because the smiling lady in the van had asked Harry what he wanted before they could hurry him away, they bought him a cheap lemon ice lolly. It wasn't bad either, Harry thought..." (*ibid.*), the qualifiers "large chocolate" and "it wasn't bad" take the treats from Material Objects to something that is enjoyed gustatorily by the characters in the novel. The difference between *just* Offred's oranges, or Arthur Dent's tea, or Harry's ice cream is in the supplementary imagery and the transition from Material Objects to objects of Gustatory Sensation.

Another author whose use of food imagery begins with category one, and probably does not even end with category six, is J.R.R. Tolkien. Much of the ubiquity of food imagery in science fiction and fantasy, in addition to many of the standardized tropes of fantasy fiction, can be traced to Tolkien's influence on the terroir of fantastic literature. This can be seen in the first lines of *The Hobbit* where, "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in

it to sit down on or *to eat*: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort” (2012, p. 3).

While there are not exactly any Material Objects or Gustatory-Olfactory Sensations in the opening paragraph of this seminal novel, there is no doubt by the end of the first few pages that food, in all its stages and glories, is as woven into the framework of Middle Earth as it is in our Primary World. As readers explore this “hobbit-hole” with the narrator, we unconsciously take inventory of the objects Bilbo Baggins has in his rather well-stocked pantry, or rather “pantries (lots of these)” (p. 3). After the wizard Gandalf invites himself over for tea and Bilbo sets out another teacup and an “extra cake or two,” quite a few more individuals arrive over the course of an evening to deplete Bilbo’s *pantries*:

“Now we are all here!” said Gandalf, looking at the row of thirteen hoods—

the best detachable party hoods—and his own hat hanging on the pegs. “Quite a merry gathering! I hope there is something left for the late-comers to eat and drink!

What’s that? Tea! No thank you! A little red wine, I think for me.”

“And for me,” said Thorin.

“And raspberry jam and apple-tart,” said Bifur.

“And mince-pies and cheese,” said Bofur.

“And pork-pie and salad,” said Bombur.

“And more cakes—and ale—and coffee, if you don’t mind,” called the other dwarves through the door.

“Put on a few eggs, there’s a good fellow!” Gandalf called after him, as the hobbit stumped off to the pantries. “And just bring out the cold chicken and pickles!” (pp. 13-14)

The recognizable staples in the quotation above situate the impromptu feast menu somewhere between Material Objects and Gustatory-Olfactory. Such simple yet deep food imagery, reflecting the simplicity of Bilbo’s life, establishes for the reader what kind of world this is and what Gustatory-Olfactory pleasures there are. This is a world of hobbits, dwarves, and wizards, but also has a vicarious pantry of recognizable nibbles for both the reader and the late-comers to sample.

During the drafting of *HtCaD*, I initially focused on the recognizable cuisine of the Western World instead of what fictional food should be fantastical in order to establish that Raymorne is in a Secondary World closely adjacent to our Primary World. One of my approaches was to weave in my own food journey in relocating from the Salt Lake City in the United States to Cambridge, England. As an expat I was introduced to truly delicious aspects of British cuisine, a particular favorite being Yorkshire puddings, and I knew I wanted to include them in *HtCaD*. Since there was no Yorkshire anywhere near Raymorne for Yorkshire puddings to hail from, I had to adjust the language while still aiming to give readers easily identifiable Material Objects and their Gustatory-Olfactory experiences. I provided the readers with a basic recipe for dripping puddings, and those who have been exposed to Yorkshire puddings before should recognize them (pp. 3-4). Others who are baking savvy would see a batter recipe similar to popovers. So, at first, the “bloomers” or “bloomer puddings” are Material Objects encountered in recipe form. Then when readers are introduced to Jacque Spooner, he is on his way to his food stall stand where the narration explains he makes bloomer puddings and loads them with stews and other fillings. These fillings go from Material Objects casually mentioned into Gustatory-Olfactory Sensation over the course of the chapter:

Today was all about the spicy stew of mixed peppers, sweet orange yams, chicken, and paprika sausage. The vegetarian option was a fragrant pot filled with cauliflower, chickpeas, and the new fruits of the west—tomatoes and potatoes— and spices like cumin, coriander seed, and fennel seed. (p. 12).

The use of these spices, which are often found in an Indian inspired curry—cumin, coriander, and fennel—are themselves evident of further progressions through this taxonomy, especially as Historical and Sociocultural derivations of the Gustatory-Olfactory Sensations this spice imagery would invoke in readers.

### III: Food as a historical phenomenon (Historical Objects)

Cuisines, dietary cultures, and food environments in our Primary World do not happen overnight, nor are they static. Some diets are the result of thousands of years of tradition and some are barely decades old. Some “diets” are that which the word has come to mean in most daily parlance, a way of eating meant to lose weight or improve athletic performance. In the last ten years, it has become common to design foodstuffs that are meant to “go viral.” From cronuts, to rainbow bagels, to steaming bowls of pho, and gargantuan milkshakes topped with various accouterments such as whole donuts or slices of cake, these visions show that food is a living historical spectacle in the making but always connected to its natural roots. These Historical Objects, including how food is prepared, is what Appelbaum means when he refers to food as a “historical phenomenon” (2018, p. 130). Not only are certain meals, produce, proteins, or spice blends indicators of the history and culture of the Primary World, they are often reflected in an author’s Secondary World as well.

Because of previous research and food writing, I was conscious of incongruous food errors long before I started writing *HtCaD*. Many years ago, I learned that some of Middle Earth’s botanical genus such as tomatoes, tobacco/“pipe weed,” and potatoes/“taters” (or as Samwise Gamgee says to Sméagol in *The Two Towers* movie, “po-tay-toes”) (2002) are blatant anachronisms even though they are themselves prominent Historical Objects. If Middle Earth is intended to be a folkloric or lost mythos of Primary World’s England as Tolkien intended, (Rateliff, 2007) then these botanical foodstuffs could not exist in a pre-Columbian Europe.



Tomatoes were not written about in Europe until 1544 by an Italian botanist, and Christopher Columbus's men's first encounters with tobacco are well documented (Nunn and Qian, 2010). The tomato error was actually corrected in 1966 for the third edition of *The Hobbit* (as seen above) when Gandalf's request for "cold chicken and tomatoes" was changed to "cold chicken and pickles" (Ratcliff, 2007, p. 43). This anachronism was repeated in Peter Jackson's cinematic adaptation of *The Fellowship of the Ring* when Sam, Merry, and Pippin fry up some "tomatoes, sausages, and nice, crispy bacon" (2002). Tolkien scholars are not sure though if this change in later editions of *The Hobbit* was mandated by the author because of the seasonality of pre-industrial tomatoes or because of the anachronism (Ratcliff, 2007, p. 43). Historically in our Primary World, the potato soon followed the tomato to Europe before the end of the sixteenth century (Nunn and Qian, 2010), but the tuber was first part of Spanish diets before making its way to England, the geographical and cultural inspiration of the Shire (Ratcliff, p.102). The effects this can have on successful world-building will be further discussed in Chapter Three and under the infrastructures of nature and language. However, careful consideration of Historical Objects can prevent mistakes from happening in subcreation and the drafting of stories.

During the drafting of *HtCaD*, I wanted to avoid anachronisms because they, like plot holes and inconstant characterization, can undermine authorial intent and narrative authority when the Historical Objects clash with the world-building of fantastic settings. To have Jacques be a purveyor of Yorkshire puddings where there was no Yorkshire opened up other questions in the subcreation of the historicity of Raymorne. How could I realistically introduce tomatoes, potatoes, and other far-flung pre-colonial foodstuffs into my own pastiche of Tolkienesque (or pre-modern

historical setting) tropes? (p. 12) I was also challenged by my supervisor about the viability of a publishing industry (re: Marion Goosling's career as a cookery pamphlet writer) in a pre-industrial setting (p. 16). In answer to both questions, I decided to move up the timeline (relative to the Primary World) of Raymorne, Broma, and the greater world setting of *HtCaD* relative to a few hundred years post-Middle Earth's pre-industrial setting. This also facilitated in establishing Adrini's paternal background as being analogs with our Primary World's Caribbean cultures. To assuage what could be diagnosed in the real world as generalized anxiety disorder, Adrini thinks about the food of "home" which has a different historicity than the greater Raymorne culture but is still likely to familiar to readers:

She would imagine going to the market stalls in the Fork and at the Spire that sold Hacarrean staple foods like plantains, bright purple tubers and orange sweet potatoes, fragrant spices, bottled pepper sauces, and maybe there would still be fat ears of sweetcorn. She would mentally fry up smashed disks of plantains and slurp on a creamy corn soup with thick chunks of ham hock and cheese. It was enough to get her from the world around her back into the next shift at the kitchen (pp. 20-21).

These are Historical Objects that assist in moving the subcreation of a Tolkienesque civilization to one on the cusp of an industrial revolution. This also allotted me more freedom to explore Primary World food cuisines beyond those established medieval food tropes that Tolkien inadvertently laid a foundation for.

Accelerating the technological correlations between our Primary World timeline and the chronology of Raymorne has not only given my story access to foodstuffs only accessible via colonization and worldwide trade routes but also many ingredients that are now plausibly available via global trade. This also allows the reader to see just how old certain types of food technologies really are. In his essay, Appelbaum continues to expound on food as a Historical Object:

Food can be a historical phenomenon, as when it is observed that new products and technologies of trade and cookery have been discovered or developed, most famously in modern history such products as chocolate and sugar. Recipes, kitchen protocols, and regulations about taste and propriety are a part of this historicity of food (2018, p. 130).

Some less than famous examples I have used in *HtCaD* include canning, bouillon powder, cast iron cookware and stoves, professional kitchen hierarchies (from chef to line cook), food safety bodies (the Alimental Authority), and steam engines—all technologies or strata that came about between the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Industrial Revolution (pp. 194, 146, 141, 19-21, 61, 4). In Adrini’s introductory chapter, I preserved and strengthened the Primary World ideal of what a kitchen looks like from the auxiliary imagery facilitated by popular culture as seen in Anthony Bourdain’s memoir *Kitchen Confidential* (2007), Gordon Ramsey’s reality competition shows (such as *Hell’s Kitchen* 2005-Present), and movies such as Jon Favreau’s *Chef* (2014) or *Ratatouille* (2007). For example, I use the words “demi-chef” and “chef” and “*stäge*” to invoke a more modern brigade or “*brigade de cuisine*” system at High Larder, even though this is French in origin, stratified by Auguste Escoffier in the 1800s (Wilson, 2012, p. 52). This scene grounds both the characters and the reader in a certain setting marked by a sense of historicity that can only come from this kind of environment typical of a high-end restaurant.

Because Raymorne places such a cultural emphasis on food, I have also shifted the chronology of the development of food safety and governing bodies like the US Food and Drug Administration (or FDA founded in 1903) by introducing my in-universe regulatory body of the Alimental Authority. These institutions in our Primary World can also be considered Historical Objects in the Primary World since they’re a more bureaucratic manifestation of the “regulations of taste” stipulation Appelbaum lists in his qualifiers of Historical Objects. Unfortunately, food fraud and

adulteration, as Bee Wilson explains in *The Way We Eat Now*, “is an old phenomenon—as ancient as the buying and selling of food itself” (2019, p. 175). Throughout history there have been many laws addressing the need for reducing the adulteration of foods. The Code of Hammurabi, one of the oldest surviving legal texts, declares that “If bad characters gather in the house of a wine-seller and she does not arrest them and bring them to the palace, that wine-seller shall be put to death” and also “If a priestess who is not living in a convent opens a wine shop or enters a wine shop for a drink, they shall burn that woman” (Oldstone-Moore, 2013). Another more modern food law came about as the result of a sweet shop owner mixing up the more benign powdered gypsum (which was often used to stretch out sugar supplies) with powdered arsenic this then became known as the “Bradford Sweets Poisoning” and contributed to the passage of the 1860 Adulteration of Food and Drink Bill (Johnson, 2019). Political science history shows that when groups of laws are passed, eventually governing bodies such as the FDA or the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) are created to enforce those laws. In *HtCaD*, the Alimental Authority (“alimental” meaning “to supply with food/sustenance”) is the governing body responsible for cultural engagement and sustainment and for regulating food safety in Raymorne’s restaurants, markets, factories, and other food production entities (p. 61). They also have the authority to dispatch the city-watch and make arrests for crimes such as the adulteration of flour. This of course is far different from the US FDA, which until 2011 had very few legal powers to make arrests or even actually require companies to recall their food products, with baby food and medications being exceptions (Agres, 2015). Before the United State Congress passed the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) it was the responsibility of private companies to enforce protections for consumers. However, a food-centric

city with a history and culture based on the precepts of its Founding Mother, Ursula Raymorne the Prophetess of Plenty, would never stand for such lax policies, which also is an establishing point for the sociocultural traditions within Raymorne and how these objects compare to other examples within other fantastic literature.

#### IV: Food as a sociocultural phenomenon (Sociocultural Objects)

Unlike the previous categories, Sociocultural Objects require a bit more forethought and foreknowledge to actively identify because their purpose in a story is built into the signs, signifiers, and mythoses of both the Primary and Secondary Worlds. It is both easy and difficult to point at an example of food in *HtCaD* or another work of literature and designate it as a Material Object or Gustatory Sensation and, even with a small amount of foreknowledge, point out the Historical examples. Returning to Shahani's introduction to *Food and Literature* and her condensation of Appelbaum's taxonomy, she simply says the fourth category is "relatedly (to category three), food as a sociocultural phenomenon, at once material and symbolic" (2018, p. 25). Shahani appears to be arguing that Historical and Sociocultural are merely extensions of one another. However, Appelbaum actually has a lot to say about our fourth category as he argues that, "(category four) is not the same thing as the historicity of the phenomena of food, although it is related to it, food can be a sociocultural phenomenon, at once material and symbolic – material because food is part of the economic life of a society, symbolic because food also means; it is inevitably a sign, a signifier, or in special cases [...] a 'myth'" (p. 130). These Sociocultural objects elevate the material and symbolic surrounding food imagery to further enhance the story's verisimilitude.

Within the sociocultural context of Raymorne, the Banquest is a culmination of signs, signifiers, and the mythos of both the Secondary World and of the Primary World's own cooking competitions that are now staples of popular culture.

Agricultural shows and county fairs have two-hundred-plus years of history in both the United Kingdom and United States, and eventually the events grew to more than showing off the best produce or animals, but also the literal fruits of those labors.

These cooking competitions have become a diverse group of Sociocultural Objects in their own right as *The Oxford Companion to American Food and Drink* observes: "America's interest in cook-offs continues to grow. Whatever the reason, the cook-off is a uniquely American institution that has become deeply ingrained in our social culture and foodways" (2007, p. 159), although they're hardly solely an "American institution" anymore based on the popularity and spinoffs of UK television cooking competitions such as *MasterChef* (1990-2001 and 2005-Present) and *The Great British Bake-Off* (2010-Present), which have come into prominence since *The Oxford Companion to American Food and Drink* was published in 2007. These influences eventually collided in my novel to form the Banquest, which is also deeply ingrained in the social culture and foodways of my fictional world.

The Banquest is the nexus of Jacque and Adrini's stories and it is a Sociocultural Object, as the annual competition is "at once material and symbolic." Instead of the gladiatorial based "bread and circuses" of Ancient Rome, Raymorne embraced food competitions (p. 117). While the pop culture foundations for the Banquest itself are of course situated in more modern food competitions, such events do have roots even deeper than the agricultural fairs of the US and the UK. *Gastro Obscura's* associate editor Anne Ewbank recounts the tradition of competitive cooking in Medieval Iraq that even included the caliph rulers of Bagdad (2019). The

tales of an “Abbasid gourmet prince” and caliph al-Ma’mūn facing his brother in a macho story that sounds almost like a modern BBQ pitmaster boast were eventually gathered up alongside other historical texts:

Chronicles typically devoted to battles and successions means they were considered important social activity. Poets wrote elaborate food poems, and manuals describing how to be an ideal “boon companion” for a ruler emphasized the importance of cooking. One recommended that these men learn a repertoire of at least 10 exotic dishes. It was this gourmand culture that produced the first medieval cookbooks, containing the favored dishes of the elite (*ibid.*, 2019).

Just like these historic analogs, the Banquest itself is mythologized in *HtCaD* as both a celebration of the Founding Mother of Raymorne and a way of continuing to strengthen the food-centric culture of the city and perpetuate other mythoses. The Banquest judges note this before they taste the dishes in round one:

“Still,” Vashti said, “this is the most prestigious cooking event of the year. Winners have literally gone on to leave legacies that are still lauded today. The winner’s purse allowed Tarleah Spooner to purchase her own printing press and started a revolution in cookery publishing.” She gestured with her hand to both Philippa and Jacque, both direct descendants of Tarleah (p. 152).

It is not just about the food or the taste, or even the history anymore, for the Banquestors, judges, commentators, this competitive cooking is now indivisible from everyday food experiences. It is as built into the sociocultural narrative of this Secondary World as Food Network and BuzzFeed’s Tasty videos are to millions of viewers in our Primary World. All of this is supplemented by the hundreds of cookbooks published each year in both the US and the UK, and in the burgeoning subculture of cooking foods from fictional worlds.

Because of their very nature of cooking for other people, there is a sense of commensality in cooking competitions, even if only vicariously experienced by the audience. At the root of commensality is the idea that “food is part of the economic life of a society” (Appelbaum, 2018, p. 130); “economic” in this instance relating to

the original Greek definition meaning “household management” or *oikos* (Davies, 1992, p. 290). Commensality is derived from the Latin *commensalis*, which means “with the table” and as David B. Goldstein asserts in his essay “Commensality” defines not just the “what of eating” in literature but the “how of eating” (Shahani, 2018, p. 22). This is at the heart of what also defines Sociocultural Objects as something that is not just consumed but shared, “Food brings people together in a shared experience of humanity. But every meal privileges some of those particular humans over others” (p. 47). At the heart of food culture in Raymorne, and commensality is especially highlighted during the harvest festival, is the rite of sharing.

Commensality is prevalent throughout *HtCaD* because it is in the nature of food itself, to share and to avoid unnecessary waste. Human civilization would have never happened if hunter-gatherers refused to pool community resources to feed one another, especially those who could not hunt or gather (Pollan, 2006, Chapter 18). Not only does food sustain the individual body, mind, and heart, but the greater community as well. “The whole feast ended with a modest two-tiered cherry chocolate cake covered in a shiny ganache with whipped cream cheese mousse between the cake layers. It was rich enough that there was more than enough to share between the nine of them” at Jacque’s dinner with his fellow halflings and of course as seen above when Carro Ruby shares a treat with Inspector Crenn at the Beggars’ Feast (pp. 186-187). A lens on the lack of sharing and the consequences thereof can be seen at the Banquest:

“All the things over here,” Merton said after tasting all the components of the forest floor, “are delicious and the venison loin is faultless. You two shared a kitchen, but did not create a dish.”

Neither the elf nor the dwarf appreciated the half-human, half-smallfolk man critiquing their creations as he did. In the only display of camaraderie that the pair had managed in the whole competition,



Magnos and Nyanara took their plates away from Merton at the same time and let the plates fall to the ground. The crowd was a mixture of cheers, groans, and hisses while the artists at their stations furiously recreated the moment.

Merton merely shrugged. “Well, at least the rest of the uneaten and uncooked food is going to the House and not to waste.” (p. 155)

Here we can see that in the city of Raymorne, like in many places across our contemporary Primary World that are trying to address food waste, refusing to share perfectly edible food is seen as rude, and sometimes close to taboo. This is my fictionally inspired response to the staggering numbers associated with food waste:

[An] estimated 125 to 160 billion pounds of food that goes to waste every year, much of it is perfectly edible and nutritious. Food is lost or wasted for a variety of reasons: bad weather, processing problems, overproduction and unstable markets cause food loss long before it arrives in a grocery store, while overbuying, poor planning and confusion over labels and safety contribute to food waste at stores and in homes (FoodPrint, 2021).

However, there are trends in the modern restaurant industry and in contemporary television food competitions striving to avoid food waste during the celebration of cooking and eating. *Guy’s Grocery Games* on the Food Network is one such program leading the charge. As it takes place in a reproduction of a typical American grocery store, there is plenty of food that goes unused after production is over. The show then goes about “donating leftover items from each episode — thousands of pounds of food a week — to the (Redwood Gospel) mission” in California (Sweeney, 2015). In the continued spirit of commensality in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, Fieri has also raised over \$21 million dollar in 2020 as unemployment relief for restaurant workers (Krader, 2020). Through these examples, the purposefully discarded food by Nyanara and Magnos in the Banquest becomes Sociocultural Object rather than a Material Object by the not sharing of it.

It is also in the sharing of food where food can take on more than just the nutritional and emotional supplementation for our bodies and society into an Object of Practice.

V: Food as the object of a practice (Object of Practice)

It is under this category that we continue to dig deeper into abstraction, where food is more metaphor and symbol than sustenance, and in which food takes on more meaning than the simple pleasures of consumption. In Appelbaum's taxonomy, food as an Object of Practice is where we tend to focus more on what we do with food beyond eating and cooking it or even more than the exchanging or receiving of food. He goes on to explain, "[...] all these practices are socially regulated. Ritual practice comes under this category, as do social norms concerning such categories as status and habit" (2018, p. 130). As such, abstract ideals encompassing manners, etiquette, protocol, and even economics and politics surrounding food come into play under this category as well. Observing these Objects of Practice enforces the power of the Historical and Sociocultural traditions, giving orders of meaning that often denote specific food traditions that are even seen in the fantastic.

Built into the world's oldest writings and religious traditions are dietary restrictions and codes of conduct. Theories regarding the reason behind such credo as the Kosher laws of Judaism include possible food sanitation habits in addition to the spiritual means and symbolism of declaring animals that "chew the cud"—most prominently camels, hare, and, of course, pigs—are unfit for consumption (Pollan, 2013, p. 97-98; Deuteronomy 14:4-8). The attempt in keeping food sanitary for consumption is also theorized for Halal, although in the Islamic tradition mollusks

are permitted, whereas they are not in Judaism with little scriptural explanation why those aquatic creatures are “clean” (aside from the lack of scales) and pork is not (Davidson, 2014, “Muslims and Food”). This had led to varying built-in mores in many Middle Eastern and outlying cultures stemming from Abrahamic traditions regarding what is edible and permissible, but in Christianity there are very few rules regarding what meat is actually allowed, unless one is Seventh Day Adventist, a sect that discourages meat eating (Wilson, 2016). Only cannibalism is generally inherently frowned upon across the religious and cultural spectrum although, ritual exceptions have existed such as in the Aztecs, Ancient Egyptians, and Papua New Guinea (Alimentarium, 2021). Because I come from a Mormon Christianity background that was omnivorous, the notion of limiting diets in Raymorne along the lines of Kosher and Halal laws was not something I actively sought to do until I stumbled upon the idea of the elves of my world being thought of as descendants of creatures of the sky, “They [Adrini’s brothers] also kept to the ancient tradition of not eating the wind, or *naivs*, the elven practice of abstaining from the consumption of birds, wheat, and the fruit at the tops of the trees meant for spirits ascending to the beyond (pp. 21-22). Only when I considered this did a religious or cultural taboo against eating birds seem to emerge that was in the tradition of not eating “unclean” meat. Here it is a subversion, since elves do not eat birds because they are *too* pure.

Possibly because of the mimetic power of other dietary restrictions in wider culture readers instinctively latch on to warnings about food in literature. This harkens back to the earliest instructions from our parents as children, such as “don’t eat the mushrooms in the garden, they might be poisonous” or just not to put things in our mouths that we know are not clean to avoid sickness. There are many such warnings throughout fantasy literature that are insistent upon more than merely

heeding advice to avoid foods that might make you sick because they might harbor more devious consequences. Warnings are built into literature because they are guides to both heroes and the writers to beware of *everything* in the text; we do not know what's coming until the story is actually told. The consequences for not heeding these warnings are varied; one may be stuck in the Underworld a la Persephone or one may find that once they have tasted fairy food, nothing in the human world will ever taste the same. Hope Mirrlees wrote of the unfortunate effects of consuming fairy fruit in *Lud-in-the-Mist*, "Anyone, then, who has tasted fairy fruit walks through life beside other people to a different tune from theirs" (1926, p. 47). In contemporary fantasy literature, these warnings are often imparted from someone more experienced with fairies or other forms of the supernatural. In Jim Butcher's urban fantasy novel *Summer Knight*, the hero and wizard-for-hire, Harry Dresden, guides his werewolf friend Billy through fae territory as they investigate a murder and issues the typical warning:

Billy shrugged. "Okay. No gifts. Dangerous faeries. Got it."  
 "I'm not finished. They aren't going to be offering you wrapped packages, man. These are the Sidhe. They're some of the most beautiful creatures there are. And they'll try to put you off balance and tempt you."  
 "Tempt me? Like with sex, is that what you're saying?"  
 "Like any kind of sensual indulgence. Sex, food, beauty, music, perfume. When they offer, don't accept it, or you'll be opening yourself up to a world of hurt."  
 Billy nodded. "Okay, got it. Let's go already" (2003, pp. 190-191).

Later in *Summer Knight*, Harry is offered a hoagie and Coke (his favorite drink) by someone who turns out to be a leader of the Summer Court (p. 235). The consequences for taking this food are waived by the Summer Lady, but several times throughout the series, the trope of "don't accept gifts from the fey, especially not food" is always lingering in the background as an Object of Practice. The story of

Childe Rowland is very clear of what happens when you do not heed the warning to avoid the fruits of fairies or goblin men, “drink a drop, or bite a bit while in Elfland you be and never will you see Middle Earth again” (Jacobs, 1890). In order for a journey to begin though, characters and readers alike may need to break these rules because the narrative cannot continue if warnings are always heeded.

In *HtCaD*, as Inspectors Okoias and Crenn unravel the dual mysteries of the missing draconi and the terrorist attack on the Banquest arena, they navigate through several different food subcultures in Raymorne and observe different Objects of Practice. Instead of a hidden fairy world, they venture through both the poorest and richest strata of the city, and even in Raymorne, gifts have their burdens. Being more experienced with the Objects of Practice dispersed throughout circles of both the Beggars’ Feast and the super-elite Harvest Nimius hosted by the uber-rich Caeremes, Okoias feels the need to only impart a warning in the latter circumstance:

As the gates creaked open, Okoias offered her partner a piece of advice. “Don’t drink or eat anything. You never know the strings attached to it.”

“Do you remember who you are saying this to?” Crenn said.

Okoias did remember because he was a dwarf with the worst taste in cuisine ever to exist. But that didn’t mean temptation wouldn’t be lingering in the corner of their eyes every second they were inside *this* house (p. 217).

They are of course inevitably tempted to break this caveat as they navigate the Dantean levels and decadent atmosphere of the manor. When both finally meet with Lady Sylfina Caereme, and after seeing some of the most tempting and expensive food on display that rivals even the fare readers have been treated to at the Banquest, the hostess insists they follow the Objects of Practice of nearly forgotten guest rites and protocols of hospitality, “‘I have offered Teague Margo my protection,’ Lady Sylfina said, the oyster in her hand unwavering. ‘Now you will enter into that shared covenant’” (p. 250). Okoias, breaking her fast (another Object of Practice), eats the

proffered mollusk with only minor hesitation, but it has been previously established that Crenn is an extremely picky eater and still a very cautious man:

“I must consume something that was offered by someone of draconi blood?” he asked.

“Is there something from the stag roast you’d prefer instead?” Lady Sylfina made to give an order but Crenn interrupted her, holding up his large hand.

He fiddled with the clasps on his thigh bag. Inside he removed a bundled handkerchief and under the folds was slightly squashed tart pastry.

“It was made by Carro Ruby,” Crenn said, and then he echoed “By hand and claw of your people.”

Instead of being furious because she was outwitted in some game of wills, Lady Sylfina smiled in amusement (p. 251).

The twist in *HtCaD* of course is that the food at the Harvest Nimius is by far the lesser of evils in the dual worlds of the rich and the poor. Crenn’s tart is likely uncontaminated but a few pages later we learn that one of the Gold Prophet’s followers has indeed served her sausages made of the flesh of halflings, dwarves, elves, and humans at the Beggars’ Feast as implied in an earlier chapter (pp. 256-257). Further analysis of both the Object of Alimentation that is Okoias’s oyster and the practice of cannibalism/sapiophagy will be revisited again later in this chapter.

#### VI: Food can be identified as an element of or an order of being itself (Order of Being)

Although Appelbaum’s Order of Being is focused on nausea and food imagery of disgust in literature, it has a much wider applications and considerations via this thesis’s Objects of Alimentation. The Order of Being has the most complex, and even seemingly contradictory, descriptions in discerning between different types of food imagery in literature:

(6) And then there is what might be thought of as the metaphysical identity of food, which takes at least two antithetical forms. On the one hand, (6a) food can be identified as pure nutrition, an element in the dynamic order of being, the being of living (and dying) things; on the other, (6b) food can be identified as an existent with irreducible qualities over and above its nutritional character; it can be identified as a characteristic or index of an order of being itself (2018, pp. 130-131).

Appelbaum's argument for this category suggests that food imagery is at once metaphysical but is also capable of providing actual nutrition for readers. Sometimes this takes on a form of pleasure, and others disgust or nausea. *The Order of Being* has an inherent dichotomy where imagery is both metaphysical and capable of providing actual nutrition for readers.

This metaphysical nutritional component feels contrary to Michael Pollan's assertion in *Cooked* that because of the way we engage with food imagery both in food literature and in the greater world through cooking programs, advertising, and modern food systems, "We end up trying to nourish ourselves on images" and that cooking is an "antidote to this abstraction" (2013, pp. 10, 407). That food imagery is a form of abstract and empty calories is in contrast with the physical gustatory, olfactory, and other senses when cooking happens in the Primary World whether we're in the kitchen actually cooking or observing these culinary antidotes.

Appelbaum argues that because of how readers react to imagery that access the order of being, they can nourish themselves on images: "That food is a nutrient metaphysically speaking may come as no surprise, although the very concept of nutrition is subject to considerable variation. What is nutrition in *Paradise Lost* is a lot different from what is nutrition in *The Atkins Diet*" (2018, p. 131). *The Order of Being* shows that a work of fiction and even a diet book have imagery that enlivens and feeds our imaginations through metaphysical nutrition vicariously digested by our imagination. Perhaps Pollan just needed to dig deeper into the abstractions of

food imagery to find more in the Order of Being of food imagery that there is a subtle nourishment that can then be turned on its head (or subverted) for literary affect. When using subversive or transgressive or just plain gross food imagery, a writer is invoking the Order of Being into their works, a vicarious element beyond nutrition. “One result of this approach is that people might really be able to come to terms with themselves and the beings they are by experiencing nausea” (Appelbaum, 2018, p.135), which is to think of both life and death in the food on the page and experience the “coming to terms with themselves.” And yet, many initial reactions to nausea and its accompanying disgusting imagery are forgotten in the transgressive nature of certain food items ... or certain items that should not be enjoyed as food.

Regarding nutritional transgression, we first return to cannibalism. In one tense scene of the cinematic adaptation of *The Two Towers*, one Orc beheads another in “hangry” frustration and the Uruk-hai leader Uglúk exclaims, “Looks like meat’s back on the menu, boys!” (2002). So, instead of eating their captive Hobbits Merry and Pippin, the Orcs fall on their slain brother and devour him, complete with viscera flung about. In this example, the Orcs eating one another is surely categorized as part of the Order of Being, as in death there is the giving of nutrition for life even in the feelings of disgust it is meant to provoke from the audience. In Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* novels rules against cannibalism exist even in a world where everyone outside of the 1% is starving. During the brutal spectacle that is the Hunger Games in Panem, Katniss explains, “we really don’t have any rules (in the Hunger Games) to speak of except don’t step off your circle for sixty seconds and the unspoken rule about not eating one another” (Collins, 2008, p. 242). The blood-thirsty Capital citizens apparently draw the line of brutality before cannibalism during their favorite annual event of child murder. However, in *The*



*Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*, young Coriolanus Snow acknowledges that cannibalism did indeed take place during the First Rebellion war:

They watched as their neighbor Nero Price, a titan in the railroad industry, carved the leg from the maid, sawing back and forth with a terrifying knife until the limb came free. He wrapped it in the skirt he ripped from her waist and then bolted down the side street that led to the back of his town house. The cousins never spoke of it, even to each other, but it was burned into Coriolanus's memory (*ibid.*, 2020, Chapter 1).

Perhaps because this image is so burned into the memory of a character that would become a Hunger Games gamemaker and eventual President of Panem, he instituted this unspoken rule against cannibalism and this nauseating component of the Order of Being of food imagery for his nation.

In a Secondary World like Raymorne though, cannibalism is an insufficient word to describe this Order of Being imagery. With characters that are not just human or animal, a new word is needed to describe the behaviors of someone of the draconi race eating the flesh of other humans, elves, halflings, or dwarves. A call for help from fellow SFF enthusiasts on Facebook and Twitter and a Google search led me to the word “sapiophagy” (Appendix A, p. 463) This is a neologism inspired by the word “anthropophagy,” which is a term from the social sciences that is essentially the cultural practice of eating other humans, versus cannibalism as the individual practice of this act:

Ethnologists make a distinction between anthropophagy, the act of eating human flesh, and cannibalism, which is always practised in groups and is considered a **ritual and social** institution. The term ‘anthropophagy’ was borrowed in the 15<sup>th</sup> century from the Ancient Greek ‘anthropos’ (man) and ‘phagein’ (to eat) (Alimentarium, 2021, source emphasis).

In all likelihood, Thomas Harris's own Hannibal “the Cannibal” Lecter would at least frown on the incorrect linguistic use of the rhyming in his nickname since the majority of his crimes were solitary meals. Although, in the television series

*Hannibal*, the titular character insists that the semantics are still all wrong because “it’s only cannibalism if we’re equals” (2015). Still, for my Secondary World the term “sapiophagy” is a better fit as it captures Kate Fletcher’s post-coitus musings to Teague in *HtCaD* since she has a certain relish for the specificity of flavors of other races’ flesh:

Kate looked at him over the top of her grinder and asked a morbid question, “Do you ever wonder if our dragon ancestors preferred the taste of human over that of dwarf or elf or halfling?”

“I had never given it much thought,” Teague replied. He hadn’t ever given it a thought really. Venison, pork, beef, and poultry suited his tastes just fine.

After a long pause, she broke the straining silence. “They taste like wild pigs,” Kate said, her voice such a dark, rich purr it felt like mink fur sliding over his skin.

“Um, what?”

Dread settled in his stomach as he watched her dropping hunks of meat and fat into the grinder, turning the handle with effortless cranks. He casually tugged at the stockings, but they were of thin, but well woven wool.

“Humans,” she said, almost absentmindedly as if the conversation were the most normal thing in the world. “They taste like wild pigs that have fed themselves on bread and meat and fish and beer.” (p. 111)

There are several layers to the Order of Being here in the realms of disgust and nausea that this exchange is meant to invoke. It is here where the food imagery has “irreducible qualities over and above its nutritional character” as the vast majority would not consider sentient creatures edible, but there are complex natures in this imagery. In *The Culinary Imagination*, food writer and editor Sandra M. Gilbert notes of the use of nausea in food scenes in literature that, “Nausea, we learn, is the poison gift of being, the dreadful consciousness of nothingness absurdly coiled at the heart of it all” (2014, p. 250). Having just had sex with Teague, Kate has participated in another ritual that is often corollary with the giving of life that is also often juxtaposed with death, *a la petite mort*. She then participates in an activity meant for providing life to others, making sausages for the Beggars’ Feast. However, with the

sapiophagy revealed, the metaphoric iconic polarizations in both acts are subverted from positive to negative. To write a food-centric novel utilizing nefarious elements like sapiophagy in the narrative, one also needs to consider the aftereffects of drugging or poisoning of food or drink and its place in the Order of Being.

We place a lot of trust in the food and drink people prepare for us. The first entity being our mothers/parents giving us our first taste of milk and later life in we place our trust in those that we pay to grow and prepare food for us outside of our gardens and kitchens. Much has been written on incidents of food adulteration in journalism, food studies academia, and even in fiction, with Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906) and the film *Soylent Green* (1973) being some of the most prominent examples in popular culture. Unfortunately, even with these exposes there are still regular outbreaks of diseases such as E. coli in beef production and vegetable farming in the US due to lax cleanliness laws, mass production oversight, and monoculture that enables dangerous bacteria to grow and find its way to grocery stores (Pollan, 2007, p. 82). Although corporate greed or neglect is a cause for trouble in our Primary World and its nonfiction, intentional poisoning by a single foe or a collective organization is what we often find in fiction. The world of Raymorne has the Alimental Authority though that both protects its citizens from food adulteration and also enables entertainment through food. Except that this trust is exploited when the Gold Prophet manages to poison mead that is served to the supporters of the Banquest in the private viewing box in the second round (pp. 229, 259). Because he uses poison as a weapon, the Gold Prophet does not expect it to be used against *him* at the end of the novel where Adrini, Jacque, and Renata manage to taint the sacramental chalice (p. 285)

With the terminology that Appelbaum uses, it is hard to see poison as part of the “Order of Being” in food imagery, but it is. But he accounts for this in the conclusion of “Existential Disgust and the Food of the Philosopher” explaining that, “Food—metaphysically first of all nutrition, and psychologically and socially a source of immense satisfaction—becomes something monstrous and disgusting [...] In some respects such representations of disgust at what is meant to be pleasant function as memento mori [...]” (2018, p.242). In *HtCaD*, the sacred belief in the pleasures of, and the life-giving nature of, food is shattered during the Banquest when it is revealed that one of the secret ingredients sampled by the family and close friends of the competitors turns out to have been poisoned at the behest of the Gold Prophet. From Jacque’s point of view, readers experience this memento mori caused by the pomegranate mead, something that should have only brought in joy from the Order of Being:

Jacque wanted to express his rage and have that answer the question of where Astrid could possibly be at this very moment. The fury was barely holding back the tears he wanted to cry over Marion.

*Oh, Empty Rivers...Marion.*

How was the world to keep on existing if Marion Goosling wasn’t in it anymore?

She never made it out of the viewer’s room after drinking the tainted pomegranate mead (p. 259).

The Order of Being, the *memento mori* in this instance is the death of innocence that food imagery often encourages in a text, such as when a character eats the fairy fruit and can no longer return to their normal life or even the mortal world. Readers, out of disgust, try to distance themselves from the darker natures in the cycle of life and death. The food imagery encountered throughout the Banquest and the Autumnal Harvest Festival are not detached from the darker aspects of Raymorne exposed by Inspectors Okoias and Crenn’s investigation. These Objects of Alimentation are a culmination of the Material, Gustatory and Olfactory, Historical, Sociocultural,

Objects of Practice and of the Order of Being that food imagery encompasses, and sometimes the parts cannot be subtracted from the whole. They are meant to be experienced in succession and all at once.

#### I-VI: The Objects of Alimentation

Though I have examined these Objects of Alimentation separately drawing on examples from my novel and from the wide umbrella of fantastic literature, the essay “Existential Disgust and the Food of the Philosopher” focuses on one main piece of food imagery that draws from all six categories. The main focus of Appelbaum’s essay is on the sensation of nausea and he uses this example from Dickens in how food imagery can invoke such feelings. To this end, at the beginning of Appelbaum’s essay, he takes a single food scene—Pip’s discovery of Miss Havisham’s decaying wedding cake in *Great Expectations*—and dissects it through the six distinctions of his taxonomy. There are many food scenes I could select from speculative fiction that could be applied to all six categories as Appelbaum has done with *Great Expectations*. My attempt is not to invoke a philosophical discussion on disgust (for most of the food imagery seen in *HtCaD* at least) but to celebrate food and its many applications and affects. To that end I have selected two examples that diverge in tone from Appelbaum’s original analysis of these Objects of Alimentation, first from Seanan McGuire’s third book of her *Wayward Children* novellas, *Beneath the Sugar Sky* and secondly from *HtCaD*.

McGuire’s novella is mostly based in a Secondary World known as Confection, which can be accessed from Earth via enchanted Doors. There are also Doors to many other worlds and sometimes children find their way back to Earth

after traveling for a time. The series is about how these children adapt and how they violate the third proviso of Miss Eleanor West's Home for Wayward Children: No Quests. Unfortunately, Onishi Sumi, one of the students, is murdered in the first novella and because of this her daughter Rini is being slowly erased from existence. *Beneath the Sugar Sky* is about restoring Sumi's body through the culinary magic of Confection. After her fellow students obtain her skeleton and soul, they find the Baker of Confection, a deity-like figure, who is able to rebuild Sumi's body through baked goods:

Bit by bit, [the Baker] had built up Sumi's limbs with rice cereal mixed with melted marshmallow and honey, covering each layer with a thin sheet of modeling chocolate, until the combined confection began to look like human musculature. She was working on Sumi's shoulders when the timer dinged on one of her ovens. She crossed to it, opened it, and withdrew a sheet of sugar cookie organs, each dusted with a different color of sugar (2018, Chapter 11).

Already at play from the Objects of Alimentation are (1) Material Objects in the rice cereal, modeling chocolate, and sugar cookies. There is likely the smell of baked goods in the air from the sugar cookies, (2) to necessitate the Gustatory-Olfactory Sensations. There are (3) Historical Objects here since the kind of baking McGuire is describing is a relatively recent kind of process. Ingredients such as baking soda and baking powder, along with ovens with easily controlled temperatures and the ubiquity of sugar, are modern and contemporary elements in the history of baking. The whole process of making a *real* human body from confectionary takes place over several pages as the characters of the novel learn more about the Baker herself:

The Baker laughed. It was a bright, utterly joyful sound. "I love baking," she said. "It lets you make the world you want, and it makes everything delicious." She picked up a large pastry bag, beginning to pipe frosting intestines into the hollow of Sumi's gut. Bit by bit, the glittering bone disappeared under layers of pastry. Bit by bit, the structure of the Baker's creation was built up to overlap (Sumi's) silent, almost disapproving shade, until the Baker was using modeling chocolate to sculpt the fine angles and planes of Sumi's

face. Layers of yellow cake had been laid down for the fatty tissue, covered by a slightly thicker layer of gingerbread which was covered in turn by a fondant shell, dyed a few shades darker than Rini's skin (2018, Chapter 11).

The (4) Sociocultural Objects here are in the contemporary attitudes towards those that can make amazing things with basic ingredients, with this scene invoking something one might see on a television show such as in *The Great British Bake-Off* or *MasterChef*. There is the feeling of a camera centered on the Baker here as she is telling her story to the audience. (5) Objects of Practice here are invoked with the mention of yellow cake, gingerbread, and fondant. These are typical of a baker's repertoire to make marvelous wedding and other show-stopping cakes, and in how people make gingerbread houses to celebrate Christmas, a season marked by another birth. And finally, in (6) where the Order of Being is seen as both "pure nutrition, an element in the dynamic order of being, the being of living (and dying)" and as food with "irreducible qualities over and above its nutritional character" in that Sumi is currently a being of Confection and of various confectionaries before she is baked and the magic Confection world finishes resurrecting her.

The example from *HtCaD* I have chosen is a bit subtler than Miss Havisham's wedding cake or making a human body out of confectionary, but it is a meaningful scene for the tertiary protagonist, Inspector Kallista Okoias. During her investigation into the terrorist attack on the Banquest, Okoias is conducting the three-day fast that is normally only conducted by Panthemia clerics. After the sacramental rite she observes with Brother Albius, Okoias only allows herself coffee, milk, and water in the daytime hours (p. 121). This is partially inspired by the Mormon way of fasting that I am familiar with from my youth during which liquids were permitted and milk was often used to curb the hunger pains of the absence of breakfast and lunch on Fast Sunday. To break her fast in the Caereme home, a place

that is anathema to her religious beliefs, is a meaningful circumstance not to be overlooked in the analysis of these Objects of Alimentation:

Sighing, Okoias reached for a wedge of lemon from the tray in one hand, while taking the shell in the other. She slurped down the briny mollusk and then bit into the lemon to chase the sea taste with the acidic tang. In an instant, she felt it, brought forth by the dynamics in this house and in the contemplations of her fast. She tasted what the oyster had ingested as it lay at the bottom of the sea, and the flavor of algae was not unpleasant. In fact, for the briefest of heartbeats and pop of essence, she *was* the oyster; gulping down its food so that it could eventually feed her its own flesh. The lemon of course had captured pure sunlight and wind and rain in its bright pulp and juices (p. 250).

First (1) we see the Material Object the oysters, and secondarily the lemon, before (2) Okoias's Gustatory-Olfactory Sensations are triggered by the immediate exposure to her taste buds. There is a sense that the oyster is a Historical Object (3) in that they have long been written about in fiction from the oysters being led to their death in "The Walrus and the Carpenter" to invoking supposed aphrodisiacal characteristics, which in the Caereme house are further compounded as a (4) Sociocultural Object after the display of sex and gluttony Okoias and Crenn have just recently navigated. The (5) Object of Practice, the ritual tradition undertook in devouring the oyster could be interpreted two different ways: one, that Lady Sylfina, despite her insouciant attitude, does indeed desire to ensure her guests are protected; two, in that Okoias is breaking her fast after being tempted by the copious amounts of food on display at the Nimius. Finally, (6) as an Order of Being the oyster is transformed by the atmospheric pressures around Okoias at the decadent party, and in the act of having broken her fast she is reminded once more how food is a part of a cycle of living and dying.

These Objects of Alimentation are of course only one way of identifying, analyzing, and explaining food imagery and its interactions with plot, character, and



narrative in fiction. With identification comes other questions in regard to expounding upon the gastronomy of fantastic literature, such as how does food imagery take form in a writer's conscious and unconscious decisions as they craft worlds and stories that push the boundaries of human imagination and considerations of the human condition via the fantastic. This taxonomy has provided groundwork for recognizing food imagery in fantastic literature and provides a stepping-stone in utilizing the infrastructures of world-building and how food is then used as a component of subcreation to be explored in Chapter Three of this thesis.

## Chapter Three:

### Mise en Place: The Infrastructures of Fantasy Subcreation

World-building is a hallmark trait of fantasy fiction, and food has been an understated, yet ever-present, component of secondary worlds and the theories behind subcreation. From Homer to the Grimm Brothers to Lewis Carroll, through C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien and into contemporary mainstays such as Terry Pratchett's *Discworld Series* of forty plus books and through media franchises like *Star Trek*, there are plenty of feasts and fantastic bites to be found in worlds beyond our own. As seen in the works of authors Joanne Harris (*Chocolat*), Neil Gaiman (*American Gods*), and Jim Butcher (*The Dresden Files*), the dishes that characters consume and the food imagery in these stories reinforces the synthesis between the Primary World and these Secondary Worlds that is inherent in the results of successful world-building.

The motif that unites many of the fantastic worlds mentioned above, and in so many others, is the use of food imagery that strengthens the infrastructures of subcreation. As previously observed in the Objects of Alimentation, food is pervasive, constant, and essential and yet little scholarship has been given to it in literature, creative writing studies, and general academia until recently. Only in the new millennia have monographs and texts such as Joan Fitzpatrick's *Food in Shakespeare* (2007) and in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Food* (Piatti-Farnell, F. and Brien, D.L., 2018), gained footholds in this new niche of literary analysis. The growing discipline of food studies has given legitimacy to examining food in multi- and interdisciplinary contexts, and this chapter will be exploring food imagery as a tool in world-building and how I implemented this in

*How to Cook and Dragon (HtCaD)* in conjunction with and in contrast to other works of speculative fiction.

Just like food studies, although on a smaller and more precise academic scale, the number of scholastic and analytical works on the subject of world-building, imaginary worlds, and theories of subcreation have increased over the last ten to fifteen years. Even though the acts of fantastical world-building are old and deeply entrenched in storytelling, as a discipline it is rather new and still fungible. In “On Fairy-Stories,” an essay originally published in 1947, J.R.R. Tolkien alluded to world-building and addressed the act of “subcreation” and the distinctions of the Primary World and Secondary Worlds (1988). Mark J.P. Wolf later borrowed this term in his book *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* and wrote of his word choices to describe the components of world-building. These are just two examples of scholars addressing the history, undertaking, and scholarship on world-building, not to mention the countless blogs, writer’s how-to guides, and fandom conference panels dedicated to the practice. However, for this thesis, I have elected to use much of Wolf’s chosen vocabulary.

Allusions to Tolkien’s world-building and his influences on my own writing were unavoidable as I delved into my creative writing processes for this thesis. In *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*, Stephen King reflected on the lasting imprints Tolkien has made on writing and why he still continues to influence writers today:

Even after a thousand pages we don’t want to leave the world the writer has made for us, or the make-believe people who live there. You wouldn’t leave after two thousand pages, if there were two thousand. The *Rings* trilogy of J. R. R. Tolkien is a perfect example of this. A thousand pages of hobbits hasn’t been enough for three generations of post-World War II fantasy fans; even when you add in that clumsy, galumphing dirigible of an epilogue, *The Silmarillion*, it hasn’t been enough. Hence Terry Brooks, Piers Anthony, Robert Jordan, the questing rabbits of *Watership Down*, and half a hundred others. The writers of these books are creating the hobbits they still

love and pine for; they are trying to bring Frodo and Sam back from the Grey Havens because Tolkien is no longer around to do it for them (200, p. 136).

The *Lord of the Rings* cinematic adaptation directed by Peter Jackson in the early 2000s refreshed these tropes and themes through the gorgeous world-building realized via the visual medium for a new generation of emerging writers such as myself. After the release of the films, I devoured the influx of tie-ins and reprints of the art of and encyclopedias of Middle Earth ephemera in a quest to understand how to build such a fantastic and enduring fictional world to revisit over and over. Thus, consciously I approached the world-building of *How to Cook a Dragon* through two different avenues of thought: that food imagery, and through the influences of the food cultures of our Primary World, could provide a foundation for successful Secondary World subcreation through verisimilitude and familiarity. Secondly, by subverting previously established tropes of Tolkienesque high fantasy containing elves, dwarves, human, and dragon-like creatures.

For my MFA master paper on the writer's craft, I wrote about food tropes, specifically the trope of the feast and its role in world-building and as such my master thesis paper "Mise en Place: Where World-Building Starts with a Feast" was also in the forefront of my mind throughout much of my research. There I analyzed the feasts of the *Harry Potter Series*, *The Hunger Games Trilogy*, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, and *The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings* and how they ingratiate a reader into unfamiliar and fantastic worlds. Some of the conclusions I reached regarding the use of food imagery in these novels was in how scenes of "the feast" were a mode of transporting the reader from their world into these secondary worlds. Even then I could see that food imagery in literature is at once a simple expression of human

activity and as complex as the socio-anthropological and scientific fields that encompass food studies.

In the face of my continued studies into world-building and subcreation, “mise en place” encompasses more than just utilization of individual food scenes in a novel being used to integrate a reader into fantastic worlds, it can be applied to the infrastructures of subcreation itself. “Mise en place” is the concept built into the “brigade de cuisine” model of modern kitchens (McPhee, 1979). It translates as “everything in place” or “setting in place” meaning that in the kitchen ingredients are ready to from onions being sliced, diced, or even caramelized to beef wellington having already been wrapped in its puff pastry for baking, is arranged so that restaurant orders are all streamlined with little interruption. In his expose that also served as a reinvigoration of food writing at the start of the new millennium, Anthony Bourdain emphasized how important mise en place is for a chef:

Mise-en-place is the religion of all good line cooks. Do not fuck with a line cook’s ‘meez’ — meaning his setup, his carefully arranged supplies of sea salt, rough-cracked pepper, softened butter, cooking oil, wine, backups, and so on [...] The universe is in order when your station is set up the way you like it: you know where to find everything with your eyes closed, everything you need during the course of the shift is at the ready at arm’s reach, your defenses are deployed (2007, p. 58-59).

As in the kitchen, so it is at the writer’s fingertips where the universe of storytelling turns. Although the “meez” of a writer’s station is often in their mind and sometimes not as streamlined as having all ingredients physically in one place, the infrastructures of world-building still act as the ingredients, which add up to a fully realized world that makes for a delicious story.

Authors have approached the mise en place of world-building from many angles which has led to countless subsequent blog posts, how-to books, and discussions in writers’ groups about what constitutes good world-building, how

much background information an author should include on the page, and how they go about answering these questions. Science fiction and fantasy writer Chuck Wendig opines on the delicacy of this balance on his blog, “You build a world to serve the story or stories you want to tell; you do not tell a story that is slave to the worldbuilding. Story comes first. Worldbuilding supports the story” (2013). Like a dish coming out of a kitchen (built up from the *mise en place*), there are foundations for the desired results that can be minute and subtle or clearly part of the design as it serves a purpose to inform readers of the viability of these invented worlds. Mark J.P. Wolf reinforces the idea that world-building is not all information or the *mise en place*, nor is it all just narrative:

Besides Primary World defaults which still hold true in a secondary world, similarities with the Primary World can be found in the kinds of infrastructures that provide a framework in which to locate information about a secondary world. These are the structures by which we make sense of a story or a world, whether in fiction or lived experience, and which place individual facts and details into the larger contexts needed for them to be fully understood. (2013, p.154).

The Primary World “defaults” are certain infrastructures identified by Wolf as particularly important to form a strong narrative for the world built for a story to orbit around. The infrastructural systems, the *mise en place* of world-building, that make up the ingredients of subcreation include Nature, Culture, Language, and Philosophy and Mythology, and, as in the Primary World, the food cultures of fantasy can be explored through these systems.

### Nature

Because food is a product of nature and the natural world, it would seem that at the most fundamental level, this is where food is at its most mundane and most

prevalent. Wolf states, “Nature, then, deals with the materiality of a world, its physical, chemical, geological, and biological structures and the ecosystems connecting them” (2013, p. 172) and that “The most common type of invention regarding an imaginary world’s natural realm is that of new flora and fauna” (*ibid.*, p. 172) which all lends itself to looking at food through both how we encounter it in the Primary World and how this translates the way that characters experience food and nature in a Secondary World. Many fantasy worlds contain newly imagined plants and animals that on the surface are meant to be merely evocative, such as *Utu mauti* or “push fruit” and *Nikt'chey* or “food wraps” in James Cameron’s 2009 movie *Avatar* (Pandorapedia, 2019) or in the numerous kinds of bioengineered botanical cakes and gourds in *Compendium* by Alia Luria. In contrast to the pre-colonial nature of Cameron’s Pandora, Luria says of her fantastic world, “Only in Lumin do you eat your light fixtures and computers,” (Luria, 2020, Appendix B, p. 464) because she has established through subcreation that the infrastructural nature of the myriad of gourds in her world are of biotechnological, architectural, and culinary synergy, much in the same vein as Cameron’s Pandora. There is even “nature” on a desolate world like Mars in *The Martian*, where Andy Weir’s character botanist Mark Watney figures out how to grow potatoes through his “botany powers” (Weir, 2014, p. 15). Writers have a gradient scale where nature is either completely fantastical or more grounded in recognizable Primary World flora and fauna when they invent their own species of edible plants and animals and how those choices influence the “biological structures” of Secondary Worlds.

During the subcreation of Raymorne and the greater world of Broma, I consciously wanted to avoid creating too many unrecognizable plants and animals that could reduce the reader’s vicarious enjoyment of the food in the text. However, I

did springboard off a common and diverse foodstuff for the “mystery ingredient” in the first round of the Banquest. The episodes of the popular cooking competition TV shows *Iron Chef* (1993-1999) and *Iron Chef America* (2005-2013) are built around a battle of who can best highlight the “secret ingredient”. For the Banquest in *HtCaD*, the mystery ingredient I chose was mushrooms, which would highlight the diversity of nature in my Secondary World and service the narration of the story. It was then easy to pick from the terroir of Raymorne and add new fungi varieties to this world system. Inspired by all the moss growing on walls, fencing, and other surfaces I see as a pedestrian in the UK, a portmanteau entered my head and found its way onto the text:

In one basket there was a pile of mossrooms. They had the traditional stalk and cap much like a chestnut or white button mushroom, but their tops were covered with a fuzzy green patch. Prized mossrooms had tiny little stalks and a single leaf like tip the size of a pinhead that typically had a flavor reminiscent of a bouquet of herbs caught in the rain.

“The dwarves of the Karst prize the flesh of the reindeer that favor mossrooms for their autumn rites,” Edward added. Broganar and Magnos both nodded tersely. Even a dwarf not of the Karst appreciated the succulent roasts, steaks, and stews that resulted from that magnificent beast (p. 145).

After establishing the presence of fungi in Raymorian culture, I could add in something as otherworldly as mossrooms. The second paragraph of the above excerpt illuminates how in both the Primary World and in the Secondary World terroir and the infrastructure of nature can change the taste and texture of meat and game. Kobe beef in Japan is some of the most expensive food in the Primary World because of the special diet and treatment of these cattle, which includes beer and frequent massages, to ensure an especially rich marbled beef (Davidson, et al. 2014, p. 74). There is also the black Iberian pig whose grazing in pastoral herds that are also filled with acorns give the resulting Iberico ham a delicious and expensive



culinarily prized flavor (*ibid.*, p. 379). Now in fiction, the reindeer meat of the Karst herds have luxurious characteristics because of their mycophagy (mushroom eating), and of course, mushrooms have long played an infrastructural role in folklore and in other fantastic stories.

Mushrooms have been a part of the mythos of many cultures around the world, which in turn has found its way into fantastic world-building. The fairy ring is a common sight around our Primary World where fungus spores spread out in a circular pattern and eventually connect the mushroom mycelium, or roots, in a circular shape (Leng, 2018). It varies from culture to culture as to whether the fairy ring itself is a good or bad omen, even within the United Kingdom. Some stories say that a person who walks into a ring will be trapped within the fairies' dancing circle and can only be rescued with thyme or marjoram, which are now common herbs used in the cooking of mushrooms (*ibid.*). However, in Welsh folklore, fairy rings are symbols of fertility and fortune, and were considered ideal sites to start planting crops (Hamlin, 2013). Obviously, both the positive and the negative stories about mushrooms are rooted in mycological truth. Mushrooms have positive attributes—calories, nutrition, and flavor—but they can also bring about nausea based on a person's culinary preferences or even sickness and death. The *Discworld Almanak* warns that "There are two facts to bear in mind when selecting fungi: 1. All fungi are edible. 2. Some fungi are not edible more than once" (Pratchett & Pearson, 2004, p. 39). And even with all of the contemporary modern equipment and theory, much of the mycology of mushrooms, from their reproductive properties to their biological purpose, is still hard to measure scientifically (Pollan, 2006, p. 377), which seems to add to their historical and literary verve. There's no debate about mushrooms among Hobbits as they "have a passion for mushrooms, surpassing even the greediest

likings of Big People. A fact which partly explains young Frodo's long expeditions to the renowned fields of the Marish, and the wrath of the injured Maggot" (Tolkien, 2012, p. 102). In the 2001 film adaptation of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, a bag full of mushrooms is sacrificed to help the four Hobbits escape from their Ringwraith pursuers; the most devout of fans recognize what Merry's gesture would mean to Frodo and Sam. Mushrooms and fungi can even transport people between star systems and alternative realities in the *Star Trek* through a "Mycelial network." The character Dr. Paul Stamets (an "astromycologist") explains how this world-building works in-universe, "At the quantum level, there is no difference between biology and physics. [Spores] are the building blocks of energy, across the universe. Physics AND biology? No, physics AS biology" (2017). The infrastructural nature of *Star Trek* indicates that one can even ride the cosmos on something we in the Primary World think of as an ingredient to accentuate dishes such as risotto, pasta, and eggs or to serve as meat substitutes for vegetarians and vegans.

Nature as an infrastructure of a world-building also gives a foundation to geography. As mentioned in "Objects of Alimentation," ingredients can often provide clues to locations, but these can prove misleading if the botany does not match. Some authors actively try to avoid anachronism traps by paying close attention to where ingredients come from in the Primary World, how they end up on a character's plate in their Secondary World, and what this means for the story. George R.R. Martin is well known for the many menus scattered throughout *ASoIaF* series, which provides insight into the characters and their world. Sansa Stark loves lemon cakes, a tiny sweet confectionary that is utterly an indulgence in the perpetual winter of the North, but symbolizes her sweet and delicate nature and her dreams of an opulent life in King's Landing (Martin, 1996, p. 251). The class divisions in the

Night's Watch are emphasized when Lord Commander Mormont and his guest, Tyrion Lannister, feast on shellfish preserved in barrels of snow that have been transported hundreds of miles inland, while lower members of the Watch eat whatever the cook can scrounge up from baser ingredients, such as a stew of mutton and onion ale that Jon Snow thoroughly enjoys in *A Storm of Swords* (*ibid.*, 2000, p.616). Would *ASoIaF* be as lauded for its attention to detail if Martin had his characters boiling up potatoes and smoking tobacco in lieu of Tolkien's own oversights? As it turns out, Martin also makes mistakes regarding anachronistic food, items such as turkey (*ibid.*, 1996, p. 342), squash (*ibid.*, 2000, p. 94 & p. 245), and peanuts (*ibid.*, 2011, p. 77) are not native to pre-Columbian Europe, (Landon, 2008) as is sweetcorn which the Night's Watch Lord Commander Mormont's crew is rather fond of (*ibid.*, 1996, p. 473 and 2011, p. 47 & p. 270). So many details go into world-building that its inevitable there will be some continuity or anachronistic errors, even in the tightest actions of subcreation. Although one would wonder in-universe if the Stark ancestor, Brandon the Shipwright (a Columbus-like figure in Westerosi history), might have managed to bring items such as these to Westeros from west of the Sunset Sea (*ibid.*, 1999, p. 457). There is no perfection in world-building, but establishing verisimilitude and authority in the rest of the world-building and other foodstuffs consumed by characters can go a long way in certifying the credibility and creativity necessary for successful narratives.

To avoid anachronisms, and to have more freedom with food in the text of *HtCaD*, I purposefully ensured that both the geography and available technology meant I could conceivably have access to the ingredients I needed for a diverse and expansive pantry. Raymorne is a city meant to be flexibly analogous to Regency/Victorian London, pre-Civil War New York City, or even in the vein of

Amsterdam, at the earlier height of the East India Trading Company, the last example influencing Leigh Bardugo's Ketterdam in the *Six of Crows Duology*. Point of view character Wylan van Eyk reflects in Bardugo's *Crooked Kingdom* that although very little is actually made in Ketterdam almost everything can be found in the city because of its place in the world as a leader of trade:

As a child, he'd thought everything came from Ketterdam, but he'd soon learned that, though just about anything could be had in the city, little of it was produced there. The city got its exotics—mangoes; dragon fruit; small, fragrant pineapples—from the Southern Colonies. For more ordinary fare, they relied on the farms that surrounded the city” (2016, p.199).

In the spirit of Bardugo's Ketterdam, Raymorne is situated on the coast and at the delta of a river that ensures ready access to forests, mountains, and diverse farming valleys. To be able to invoke and mimic the food culture of today, a fictional city with such a love of food would need to have access to diversity of plants, geography, and peoples as indicated by the additional mise en place of the infrastructure of culture.

### Culture

How someone reacts to a food on the plate or on the page is often the cultural culmination of one's personal encounters (or lack thereof) and many generations of experience. This is a key component in understanding how both Primary and Secondary world cultures are shaped by food. Sometimes it is about the best food to eat and how one goes about eating it. If you're in New York City you would never dare to eat that huge slice of pizza with utensils. But if you're in Chicago, that flat stuff from NYC is not pizza: this upside down deep-dish where the toppings come before the cheese and sauce is what's really pizza in the Windy City, and, yes, you'll

need a knife and fork to eat it. This is food culture semantics at some of its most recognizable, where one dish is interpreted many ways based on group values and geography and how writers choose to integrate Primary World cultures into their subcreations. For example, in the Chicago in Jim Butcher's *Dresden Files*, pizza is beloved of both mortal and paranormal characters. In *Storm Front*, wizard Harry Dresden summons a faery called Toot-toot (Butcher, 2000, p. 68). To perform this summoning Harry draws a magic circle and uses the traditional bread, milk, and honey to entice the wyldfae, because apparently "there's been a real dearth of milk in the Nevernever (fairyland) since hi-tech dairy farms took over the industry" (*ibid.*, p. 69), which might explain Toot's preference for pizza instead. In thanks for providing important information on his case, Harry rewards Toot and other smaller fae with weekly deliveries of pizza. In the fourth book, it is this generosity that earns Harry his own regiment of wyldfae who call him the "Za Lord," although it is implied that the pizza Harry sends them, Pizza 'Spress, is of the typical Pizza Hut or Dominos variety instead of the archetypal Chicago deep-dish kind. A character comments later in the series that Harry himself is not an especially complicated eater, and since he's not a native of Chicago, he's probably forgiven there for his choice of "'za" (*ibid.*, 2010).

In fantasy literature it is often easy to tell the difference between one food culture and the next. From Primary World to Secondary World and especially in children's literature the cultural and generational obsession with candy is often a vehicle for literal magic. In the *Harry Potter* series for instance, magic does not stop at the dinner table. During Harry's slow immersion into the Wizarding World, he even encounters magic via the food trolley on his first Hogwarts Express ride: "What she did have were Bertie Bott's Every-Flavour Beans, Drooble's Best Blowing Gum,

Chocolate Frogs, Pumpkin Pasties, Cauldron Cakes, Liquorice Wands and a number of other strange things Harry had never seen in his life” (Rowling, 1997, “The Journey from Platform 9 ¾”). The pictures in the trading cards with the Chocolate Frogs do some wandering and only real magic could seemingly capture (and want to) “every flavor” of jelly bean as “Harry got toast, coconut, baked bean, strawberry, curry, grass, coffee, sardine and was even brave enough to nibble the end off a funny grey one Ron wouldn’t touch, which turned out to be pepper” (*ibid.*). The Wizarding World ups the candy ante (so to speak) in the third book as the cultural candy subcreation expands with the introduction of Honeydukes where readers are treated to even more magical sweets:

“Special Effects” sweets: Drooble’s Best Blowing Gum (which filled a room with bluebell-colored bubbles that refused to pop for days), the strange, splintery Toothflossing Stringmints, tiny black Pepper Imps (“Breathe fire for your friends!”), Ice Mice (“Hear your teeth chatter and squeak!”), peppermint creams shaped like toads (“Hop realistically in the stomach!”), fragile sugar-spun quills, and exploding bonbons (*ibid.*, 2001, p. 197).

And further still, when mischievous twins Fred and George Weasley open their own joke shop, they introduce “Skiving Snackboxes” with candies that make people sick and cure the illness in the same piece, “enabling you to pursue the leisure activity of your own choice during an hour that would otherwise have been devoted to unprofitable boredom” (*ibid.*, 2003, p.96). Adding to the familiar juxtaposed with the extraordinary, the primary treatment against the Dementors, whose presence inflicts depression-like symptoms, is chocolate (*ibid.*, 2001). Authors engender further authenticity in their subcreations when they can connect readers to something ordinary and every day with a fantastic twist. This enhances the cultural nexus of a Secondary World and can make it even more special in the minds of readers, which is often a hallmark of engrossing fantastic world-building.

One of the most famous and endearing examples of confectionaries and how it influences the cultural infrastructures of a fantastic world appears in C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* when Edmund Pevensie turns against his siblings because of enchanted Turkish delight. There have been many interpretations given over the years as to why Edmund would have asked the White Witch for Turkish delight. The most acknowledged theory is that because the novel was set during the London Blitz and written while England was still under post-war rationing during which confections of all kinds were limited—and Turkish delight is essentially pure sugar—it is easy to see how this treat could become an obsession for a child, a confection out of reach except in a fantasy setting. Even though Turkish delight is essentially just sugar mixed with flavoring and gelatin, it was apparently historically difficult to reproduce authentically in England: “Many people tried, and put forth reasons why their attempts weren’t successful (one secretary of state for foreign affairs blamed the water, among other things)” (Strickland, 2016). Consequently, it remained an expensive Turkish import. Food writer Cara Strickland offers up another layer to the theory, noting that timber and Christmas trees were also still limited in 1950 when the book was released, and the White Witch has trapped Narnia in a forever winter without Christmas: “When the White Witch asks Edmund what he’d like best to eat, it’s entirely possible that Lewis was answering for him: the candy that would be most difficult and expensive to obtain. Edmund isn’t just asking the witch for candy, he’s essentially asking her for Christmas, too” (*ibid.*). The cultural infrastructures in these novels are informed by, and not just about, the confections in the diets of the characters, but also in the context of the wider Primary and Secondary Worlds within.

Candy and confections also have their place in Raymornian culture. As part of the annual harvest festivities, people exchange food at the Panthemia House as a form of religious worship similar to Christmas, Halloween, and Purim, “All throughout the halls people were exchanging gifts of food, baskets and bags with treats of all kinds here and there with candies made from citrus, honey, and aniseed. There were piles of fudges and tablets of many flavors from berries and cream and vanilla to coffee and even chocolate” (p. 165). After learning that their investigation is taking them to the Beggars’ Feast, Okoias (even though she has begun fasting) decides to bring along some sweets purely out of generosity. “(...) Okoias took a short detour to a candy shop and bought a whole pound of peppermint candies wrapped in wax paper. She indulged in one, the sugar bursting on her tongue with the joy she wished she could normally feel during this time of year” (p. 182). Also, while under a drug induced, synesthetic experience in her youth, “Kallista was certain that she could taste the notes of the music like a delicious multi-course meal of candy, effervescent mead, and whipped cream” (p. 39), which would be a trinity of indulgence for an orphan. The last mention of candy in *HtCaD* concerns Astrid’s multiple treatments of her late-stage pregnancy heartburn. In an allusion to the draconi fire glands:

Now her greatest fear was that she would suddenly start spouting fire like a dragon. Her stomach had to roil today of all days, leaving a metallic, acrid tang in her mouth. She pulled out a peppermint-ginger candy and sucked on it. It barely helped, but better than no help at all (p 225).

Confections are a cornerstone of food culture as historically they were a “treat” to brighten up an occasion and today they can be had at any time at any place. Perhaps that is why the confections of fantastic worlds like Raymorne can include chocolate truffles can make one float in literal ecstatic bliss (p. 40) or even be an edible kind of



thirty pieces of silver in a story. While candy is more of a cultural staple seen in children's fantasy literature (sometimes divisible by social or cultural status as seen above), it is not completely forgotten in adulthood or in Astrid's case, is a part of her daughter's pre-birth experience.

Considerations of culture within subcreations also include how social strata are divided in the Secondary World infrastructures of the story. In *HtCaD*, I approached this with an attempt to turn a lens on not just middle and upper-class celebrations of food, but also onto those living in poverty. A hierarchy emerged from this thinking, as seen in Figure 4:

# Fantastic Food Subcultures



Extreme Delicacies



Epicurean Desires



Everyday Cuisine



Food Insecurity

Figure 4 (Thomason, 2021, Appendix C, p. 465)

Most divisions of food cultures in subcreation fall into one of these four subsets: Extreme Delicacies, Epicurean Desires, Populist Tastes, and Food Insecurity. Each have their own socioeconomic influences on the cultural infrastructure that is filtered through the Primary World into subcreated Secondary Worlds. How characters in fantastic literature encounter these food subcultures also provides additional world-building subtext and understanding.

The definition of “Extreme Delicacies” is borrowed in part from the film subgenre of “extreme cinema,” in which filmmakers use gratuitous scenes of sexuality, violence, and disturbing imagery to challenge social mores and expectations (Kuhn, 2012, p. 152). Extreme Delicacies then are meant to challenge the notions of what food is and what kind of sustenance it provides for body, soul, and imagination. Food can exist as sustenance and entertainment, but sometimes the imagery conveyed by the author adds an additional subculture to the more obvious cultural infrastructures. Returning to Harry Potter’s first trip to Honeydukes, not only are there “Special Effects” sweets, but also a section of “(UNUSUAL TASTES)” (Rowling, 2001, p. 197). These tastes include blood-flavored lollipops, Cockroach Clusters (which supposedly look like peanuts), and Acid Pops that can literally burn a hole through one’s tongue. These would fall under Extreme Delicacies and in this case the food is meant to be both humorous and slightly malicious and add a bit of body horror at the same time.

Extreme Delicacies are also more likely to include food stuffs not palatable to most readers, or even to human stomachs, but the imagery is still alluring. In *Lustlocked*, the second book of Matt Wallace’s *Sin du Jour* series, the Sin du Jour team has to cater for a wedding between a Goblin Prince and his human bride. But in this example, Wallace’s goblins are ethereally beautiful with a taste for precious

metals and gems. The gratification in the atypical ingredients by the preternatural characters are taken as seriously as if the confections were what you would find in any human bakery:

[...] First, for the...groom's side of the aisle, what I've done is created a ruby jam center. The frosting is silky pearl, both white and black, which we've blended. And it's sprinkled with blue diamond chips."

Lena can't believe the description.

Ruby jam?

Frosting made from pearls?

"How the hell—" she begins, catching herself quickly.

No one seems to notice.

Everyone except Bianca takes up a fork.

Soon an inhuman crunching of jaws fills the room.

"That is utterly magnificent," the king says without hesitation.

[...]

"And for the bride's side, we have blood orange cake with a frosting of vanilla bean ganache. The sprinkles are crushed hard candy made from sea salt, taro, and blue agave."

"Jesus, they look identical," Lena can't help whispering (2016, "A Hint of Stardust").

In this exchange, the stark contrasts between the human world and the preternatural world that *Sin du Jour* caters to is highlighted. Even though later on in the story where the wedding's catering is enchanted by a malicious force to turn guests in to sexually overexcited lizards (imagery in line with the body horror staple of extreme cinema), the extreme delicacies are what first signal to the reader to pay attention to the food and what delicacies, delights, and disturbances will subsequently unfold through the menu of subcreation.

Although the *Banquest* does not quite reach the culinary heights of a ruby jam made from actual rubies, there are several examples of extreme delicacies to be found. Most of these can be found at the Caereme's parties such as the magic levitating truffles, the hallucinogenic cocktail *Okoias* drinks in her youth, and in the baby kraken and white stag preparations (pp. 38-39, 220-221). In *HtCaD*,

immediately upon entering Mauvine Crest, Okoias's fasting and religious convictions are challenged by an unusual fountain in the foyer:

A racially mixed group of men stood before the female trying to each hold a cup under her breasts, one was a dwarf already many cups into drunkenness. They did not touch the body—they knew they didn't have permission—but the spectators took full advantage of being as close to her as possible, filling up their goblets as their morality drained from their bodies. Another group of human and half-elf women giggled with abandon as they each filled their glasses from the red wine trickling down the semi-erect penis of the male figure. The draconi pair might as well have been statues, but Okoias could make out their steady, slow breathing beneath the music trickling in from the next room (p. 219).

The fountain above is an intentional twist on a scene from Robert Rodriguez's 1996 movie, *From Dusk till Dawn*. In this film that borders on the extreme cinema subgenre, Selma Hayek's character preforms a striptease and pours tequila down her leg and into Quentin Tarantino's character's mouth mere scenes before transforming into a reptilian vampire (1996). The body wine fountain is also a riff on the practice of nyotaimori where sushi is served on nude, usually female, body (Rees, 2019). An even more exaggerated/extreme example of a twist on nyotaimori also happens in the "Unleashed" episode of the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* spinoff *Angel*. Here a character is wheeled out on a gurney, dressed up as a bodily platter, garnished with leafy vegetables, except she's going to be cut into and cooked while alive after her transformation into a werewolf (2003). At least Kate in *HtCaD* is not so cruel as to practice her sapiophagy on living victims, cannibalism being a staple of body horror imagery inherent in the "extreme."

Moving down the hierarchy to Epicurean Desires, this is the term that embodies the heart of the novel: the Banquest. "Epicurean" has come to mean in modern conversation a person with "refined tastes" regarding food and drink (Davidson, 2014, "epicure"). In many foodie circles this is compounded by the

themes present in one of the most influential food websites, Epicurious.com. The Banquest as a fictional cooking competition highlighting these Epicurean Desires has its roots in television cooking competitions such as the previously mentioned *Iron Chef*, *Iron Chef America*, *Masterchef*, and *The Great British Bake Off*. Communications Professor Cheri Ketchum analyzed over 70 hours of Food Network television shows for her paper to discern how consumerism and the network's programming generates actual "fantasies" in a web of discourse: "The Food Network fits nicely into this consumption-oriented world, promising the pleasure of either fantasy or actual sensual delights [in their content]" which could also be used to describe the heart of *HtCaD* (Ketchum, 2005). In an attempt to "sell" my story, I have tapped into the vivid imagery of Epicurean Desires to "create the fantasy of closeness and the pleasure of audience intimacy" in my story (*ibid.*). However, unlike Ketchum, I am using "fantasy" as a mode of literary genre versus the psychological reaction to media stimuli. In the chapter detailing the first Banquest round, I knew that I had to leave behind the close third-person POV of the previous chapters because this part of the story could not just be told from Jacque or Adrini's perspective, as they were on the same team. Thus, through the eyes of the commentators, readers are able to experience an opportunity similar to sitting down and watching hosts Mel Giedroyc and Sue Perkins and judges Mary Berry and Paul Hollywood in the white baker's tent on a sunny summer day weaving in and out of panicking *Bake Off*'s bakers during baking challenges (2010-Present).

Also surrounding the Banquest are other tropes to highlight the Epicurean subcultural infrastructures, most notably in the specialty alcoholic drinks brewed by Teague and his teacher Vincinna Joast, and in the artisanal pomegranate mead used in the disastrous second round of the Banquest. Ale or wine are often the typical

alcoholic drinks featured in fantastic literature. Alcohol serves as the social lubricant it is in the Primary World, it has been viewed as being a “safe” beverage to drink before modern waterworks, and as the means to intoxicate fictional characters into giving up secrets or to moving the plot along by making them do something stupid, as what happens to Teague when he breaks a glass and accidentally poisons himself with Adrini’s gift from her parents. Historically, beer and wine are among the oldest alcoholic beverages cooked up by humanity and there are several anthropological theories that suggest hunter-gatherers began to turn to agriculture to secure a more ready supply of intoxicating beverages (De Witte, 2018). Ale and wine also have religious and cultural symbolism that denote sociability and revelry whether it is consuming steins at Oktoberfest or goblets at a Bacchanal. Fantasy and science fiction writers have echoed this historic revelry in their works such as the propensity towards wine in the characters of Tyrion Lannister and in the hobbits of Peter Jackson’s cinematic adaptation who are more than happy to discover that ale comes in pints at the human-ran Prancing Pony of Bree. In Raymorne, echoing the contemporary craft liquor culture that has sprung up in recent years in our Primary World, there is a distinct delight in the Epicurean Desires of something more elaborate than the mainstays of mere wine or beer:

Though the brewery mostly concentrated on several varieties of beer—from rich and malty stouts to golden and tart lagers—they also dabbled in fruitier alcoholic beverages.

Vincinna knocked on a pot-bellied monster of a vat and listened for the echoes it made.

“Two more days!” she called and several of the men took note, even if it wasn’t the batch they were supposed to be working on.

“What’s in there?” Adrini asked.

“Cinnamon pear cider with just a hint of pumpkin squash.” That perked up Adrini’s ears. She loved the big orange vegetables and their creamy flesh and in perry, it was bound to be a lovely combination (p. 23).

This exchange in chapter two is another layer added to the Epicurean Desires that make up Raymornian culture in the novel. These desires are emphasized not only through food, but that alcoholic beverages are subjected to the cultural elevations surrounding the Banquest and other modes of celebration that perhaps *The Hobbit's* Thorin Oakenshield's dying dream that "if more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold," a "merrier world" could be possible (Tolkien, 2001, p. 312). Unfortunately, such utopias seem to be beyond humanity (and its fictional representations).

The choice of phrasing for this third subculture of "Everyday Cuisine" is not to suggest that there is a lesser degree of enjoyment of food, but that the subculture in fantastic literature is more focused on other values often not considered in Extreme Delicacies or in Epicurean Desires. Even though people in the Primary World middle class are usually the main targets of cooking shows and websites such as [Epicurious.com](http://Epicurious.com), the Everyday Cuisine in fiction are less about stretching culinary boundaries than they are about having a decent tasting and adequately nutritious meal most days of the week, usually within the median social classes between the "rich" and the "poor." Thus, "Everyday" as a hierarchical state is more or less a placeholder for those with comfortable budgets to feed themselves and their families who also may take time to traverse the Epicurean if they so desire. While Jacque and Adrini (pre-Banquest) would likely be considered "working class" or "lower middle class" by many modern standards, their attitudes and careers land them more on the Epicurean side. Inspector Okoias on the other hand is probably the character most affiliated with his designation. She is a member of law enforcement and has an average diet with a slight coffee addiction and she is voluntarily fasting during her investigations according to the branch of the Panthemic religion she follows. This is



a choice of dietary practice that is traditionally not associated with Extreme Delicacies or Epicurean attitudes, nor is willing abstinence from food a sign of those who are Impoverished. Food writer and anti-poverty activist Jack Monroe expounded on the difference between dietary practices and those “choices” that are not in someone’s control:

Poverty diets are not a choice. A diet lacking in meat and dairy products for want of the finances, resources and availability of them, is not the same, not remotely the same, as having access to these products and choosing not to use them (Monroe, 2018).

Thus, something like fasting for religious or dietary reasons (such as in the recent weight loss trends of “intermittent fasting”) is a choice of the middle grounds of social strata, rather than a consequence of poverty. Inspector Crenn is also shown to have very Everyday Cuisine tastes as he obviously makes a comfortable living, but “Rarely did he consume anything that wasn’t black coffee, bitter beer, dark bread, boiled vegetables, salted meats or sausages, and the occasional apple or pear. Like any Dwarf though he lived for the occasions that merited a great roaring fire and plenty of succulent roasts” (p. 51). This is a tribute to typical dwarven fare seen in fantastic literature, especially in the unexpected party at the beginning of *The Hobbit* previously referenced in Chapter One.

The subculture of Everyday Cuisine can also be observed many times over in the works of Neil Gaiman. Most often his characters are average people who are caught up in the strange things happening around them. Richard Mayhew in *Neverwhere* is one such individual before his journey through London Below. While in London Above he is a white-collar worker who drinks too much whiskey at his own going-away-from-home party (Gaiman, 2009, p. 5). He complains about overpriced sandwiches and apple juice at the Tate Modern and orders takeaway curry while pondering how to win his fiancée back after bunting up the dinner date to

meet her boss (p. 11 & p. 26). Also, Richard, like many residents of the British Isles, is often seen drinking tea. This normal diet disappears along with the rest of his normal life as the narrative drags Richard along into a new subclass of Food Insecurity prevalent throughout London Below. Gaiman's use of the subcultural infrastructure of Everyday Cuisine in his novels is typical of the one side of the coin of how Primary World food in fantastic literature is used to ground readers as they vicariously journey alongside the characters in these new Secondary Worlds.

Unfortunately, in almost all Primary World cultures where there is an excess of food systems (whether it be of extreme, Epicurean, or everyday diets) there are those who occupy the other side of the spectrum. Within *HtCaD*, such a fantastical tale about food and taking place in a city whose culture revolves around cooking and eating, the absence in the story of those that struggle to fill their bellies would perhaps be too much of a fantasy. Poverty exists and to deny it in a novel would be akin to contemporary discourse regarding the lack of representation of peoples of color or LGBTQ+ individuals in pre-contemporary SFF stories. To ignore poverty in a Secondary World is akin to ignoring it in our Primary World, thus undermining the authority of the world-building of a story. Even in fairly secure financial worlds of SFF, there are variations in the standard of living and definitions as to what constitutes the upper, middle, working, and impoverished classes and what is economically considered higher or lower than the center. In John Scalzi's *Interdependency Series*, there is a financially secure upper class reinforced with a religious ethos of "interdependency" and that as long as, "the Interdependency's baseline standard of living [was] one where no one starved, or was without shelter, or died of easily preventable diseases or went bankrupt if they had a heart attack or lost a job, or both" the whole system would continue to survive

(2020, Chapter 8). Those that lose access to this system end up starving to death if they end up surviving the collapse of the social strata.

Food insecurity in a story continues to reinforce these infrastructures of world building and because of the sheer number of pages in the novels, there are very few topics about culinary cultural modes and mores that George R.R. Martin has not touched upon in the currently available five books of the *ASoIaF* series. The divisions of dietary satisfaction for characters in Martin's Secondary Worlds is vast. The Great Houses are depicted as almost always having far more than enough food to eat, even during the years-long winters. The inhabitants of Flea Bottom in the capital of King's Landing are not so fortunate and the culinary specialty of these streets are "bowls o'brown." After moving to King's Landing, the Starks dine on pumpkin soup in *A Game of Thrones* (*ibid.*, 1996, p. 181) and Tyrion enjoys "a creamy soup of mushrooms and buttered snails, served in gilded bowls" in *A Storm of Swords* (*ibid.*, 2000, p. 674). After her father is arrested in the first novel of the series, Arya Stark is forced to navigate a whole new subculture of Food Insecurity Flea Bottom and the little food it has to offer,

In the Bottom there were pot-shops along the alleys where huge tubs of stew had been simmering for years...Arya would have given anything for a cup of milk and a lemon cake, but the brown wasn't so bad. It usually had barley in it, and chunks of carrot and onion and turnip, and sometimes even apple, with a film of grease swimming on top. Mostly she tried not to think about the meat. Once she had gotten a piece of fish (*ibid.*, 1996, p. 601).

What Arya is worried about that the meat *could* be is left unsaid and she is far too young to consider or have likely even heard about the more nefarious sources of protein. This is cleared up in *A Storm of Swords* though when adult POV character Tyrion has his sellsword, Bronn, take care of a singer who was trying to blackmail

him. Naturally, there were plenty of places to take care of a bunch of meat, no matter what the origin:

Bronn grinned. “There’s a pot shop I know in Flea Bottom makes a savory bowl of brown. All kinds of meat in it, I hear.”

“Make certain I never eat there.” Tyrion spurred to a trot (*ibid.*, 2000, p.358).

The people of Flea Bottom do not have the same dietary choices as those in the Great Houses, and once again the novels show how Martin’s highborn characters, no matter how much we love their quibbles and quips, have gaping spots of morality in the casual way they treat the impoverished.

That there are transitive layers between Primary and Secondary Worlds considerations is almost handwaved by Wolf, and this is not so. His assertions are that, “Culture links nature to history and is usually central to the unique situation that provides a story’s conflict; and an invented culture can be more specifically tailored to the author’s needs and does not come with the baggage of an existing culture” (2013, p. 179). Except infrastructures like food cultures are so intertwined with the nature and history and cultures of the Primary World, especially in particular the subcultures of Extreme Delicacies, Epicurean Desires, Everyday Cuisine, and Food Insecurity and in how they relate to the wider language of food. The “baggage of an existing culture” is always carried over into fictional works and especially in fantastic literature. Many say that writers have a responsibility to navigate through these Primary World issues via their own fantastic worlds and I concur with Hugo nominee Mimi Mondal’s declaration: “So it is worth building our fictional worlds with care, for these are the signage we leave for the people we are and wish to be. And it is always, without fail, political” (2019). One of the ways to achieve this is through the infrastructure of food cultures and subcultures and also through the linguistic choices we make in our stories.

## Language

One of the more distinguishable features of the high fantasy genre is constructed languages, also known as “conlangs.” Once again J.R.R. Tolkien’s legacy rears its head, as he is one of the most prominent names when it comes to the linguistics of fantasy worlds and one of the foundations of these infrastructures. One of the more well-known words from Tolkien’s conlangs is *lembas*. In Sindarin, the language most people associate as “Elvish,” *lembas* means “waybread” and in the more ancient tongue of Quenya it means, “life-bread” (Tolkien, 2002, p. 403). This secondary translation reinforces the Eucharistic metaphor between *lembas* and the sacramental host wafer, since Tolkien was a devout Catholic. That *lembas* essentially means “bread” has led to a pop culture tautology in the *Lord of the Rings* cinematic trilogy where the journeying staple food is called “*lembas* bread” by the characters, including Legolas in a scene in the extended edition, the character who actually is an elf.

Unlike Tolkien, I am not a master linguist and thus I inevitably decided against generating my own conlangs, even for the elf, dwarf, and halfling races in the novel, which actually strengthens my own world-building. In the first draft of Jacque’s first chapter, I had a scene in which Astrid, who is not a native Raymornian, is speaking her own “Karisic tongue”. Since second languages were not my strong suit, I initially used a variant of Danish for her curse words, which ended up confusing beta readers. This was dropped in the second draft in favor of broad strokes of what she is possibly saying about the slights against her husband, which allows the reader to fill in with how they would defend their own partner to strengthen the connection with these characters. In that same chapter Astrid reveals

to Jacque that his dwarven phrasing of “thanks” to a fellow food stall merchant is not very good either. In the chapter where we meet Adrini’s father and stepmother, Lyreon slips into a Patois, as he is from an island that is analogous to Jamaica. This is the extent of the most obvious uses of alternatives to the English language in *HtCaD*, but there are layers in the linguistics of food that people often miss at first glance, with some that cause schisms between the Primary World and Secondary World of Raymorne.

Regionalism is built into the language of food and can cause inconvenience for Secondary Worlds that are not parallels of the Primary World. Geolinguistics goes beyond regional slang such as in “soda” versus “pop” versus “fizzy drinks” or in the intercontinental labeling of produce like “zucchini” versus “courgettes.”

Cheese is particularly susceptible to regional linguistic names of our Primary World from cheddar to Parmesan, Camembert, and Oaxaca, not to mention wines—would you care for a glass of Riesling or Bordeaux? Even bread and many baked goods are subject to geolinguistic schisms (pumpernickel, brioche, or Bath bun?)

Geolinguistics caused me to pause at the onset of my first draft. Jacque is a purveyor of savory puddings, also called in-text “bloomer puddings” or “bun-tin” puddings, and but readers would know them as “Yorkshire puddings” in Britain or as “popovers” in the United States. However, there is no Yorkshire in Raymorne or in Jacque’s native Keane Valley. This means other terms are necessary to facilitate the world-building that readers first see in the recipe for “Bun-Tin Puddings (aka bloomer puddings)” right before the first chapter begins (p. 3). These terms are given further in-text authority when Jacque takes the surname “Bloomer” after being disowned by his family and in the final pages where “Bloomer’s Puddings” have become the first chain restaurant in Raymorne and beyond.

Language in a story also feeds into the previously discussed infrastructure of culture. “Invented languages maybe central to a story or world, or merely used to add flavor to the background, (2013, p. 189).” Wolf asserts, and like other infrastructures, they should blend seamlessly into the story, “(...) even when only well-constructed glimpses of them appear in a story, these languages add to the narratives and mythologies that they help to support.” Because Primary World languages and cultures are always evolving, there is fungibility in the lexicon an author has access to. This is actually a benefit for writers because it allows for the strengthening of world-building and can bring in tongue-in-cheek humor, which allows for a bit of absurdity to excuse what could be constituted as “mistakes.” This allows for the strengthening of the connection between the language and the audience to these secondary worlds. Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett used humor to their advantage in *Good Omens* to ponder on the nature of language and food:

“So I’ll be popping along,” Crowley babbled. “See you guys ar—see you. Er. Great. Fine. Ciao.”

As the Bentley skidded off into the darkness Ligur said, “Wossat mean?”

“It’s Italian,” said Hastur. “I think it means ‘food.’”

“Funny thing to say, then.” Ligur stared at the retreating taillights (2007, p. 18).

What words authors choose in either their completely re-imagined Secondary World or something more analogous to our own should ultimately provide for a logical, yet immersive, experience. This continues to assist in the world-building process continuing into the infrastructure of mythology and philosophy.

## Mythology and Philosophy

Both fantastical elements and food imagery are prevalent in the earliest works of human art and storytelling. In *A Short History of Fantasy* Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James declare, “Fantasy and not realism has been the normal mode for much of the history of Western fiction (and art)” (2004, p. 7). Food and literature have been intertwined since the first stories were told, at least in the ones that have survived oral tradition and the early written word. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, dated to 1500 BCE, the wild creature Enkidu is “civilized” by wine (or beer depending on the translation) and bread (Jastrow and Clay, 1920). This of course makes sense in many ways. Food is essentially the cornerstone of literary imagery and to invoke it in a story continues the tradition of connecting an audience with the storytellers.

The Book of Genesis is one of many creation myths found throughout the world but because of the continuing traditions of Abrahamic religions, it is one of the most well-known and it is abundant with food imagery. As fantasy critic Andrew Blair observes, “God managed to build the world in six days, though to be fair he didn’t really do much plotting” (2018), which has also contributed to many reinterpretations of what happened “In the Beginning...”. One of the most pervasive and iconic foods in mythology and religion is the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden depicted in the Book of Genesis. What did Eve pluck from that tree, giving into temptation and desire? An apple, Latin name *Malus domestica*? This is the most popular image in contemporary discourse and is also associated with other world myths that reinforce the notion of temptation and discord, such as in the Golden Apple that started the Trojan War with the imagery perpetuated into



*Paradise Lost* and other works (Martyris, 2017). A quince? A fruit that is difficult to eat raw, but is delicious once cooked, and that food anthropologists say was cultivated in Mesopotamia long before the apple (Reich, 1999). A fig? The leaves of which clothed Adam and Eve's newly discovered nakedness (and sexuality) after consuming the Forbidden Fruit (Genesis 3:7). A pomegranate? Another fruit associated with Hellenic tradition, the inside of which somewhat resembles female genitalia, and the juices, menstruation (and later connotations with the Blood of Christ)? (Riddle, 2010, pp. 33-53). One of the more recent radical suggestions is that it was not a fruit or vegetable at all, but a mushroom (there they are again). Some have interpreted a thirteenth-century fresco in the Plaincourault Abbey as Eve ingesting a genus of psychedelic mushroom (Figure 5) and was later re-suggested by ethnobotanist Terrence McKenna in his book *Food of the Gods: The Search for the Original Tree of Knowledge A Radical History of Plants, Drugs, and Human Evolution* (1993, Chapter 3). Whatever the botanical genus that the Tree of Knowledge actually bore is lost to human memory and translation, or never existed outside of the mythical space of the Garden of Eden, much like the ambrosia of the Greek gods.

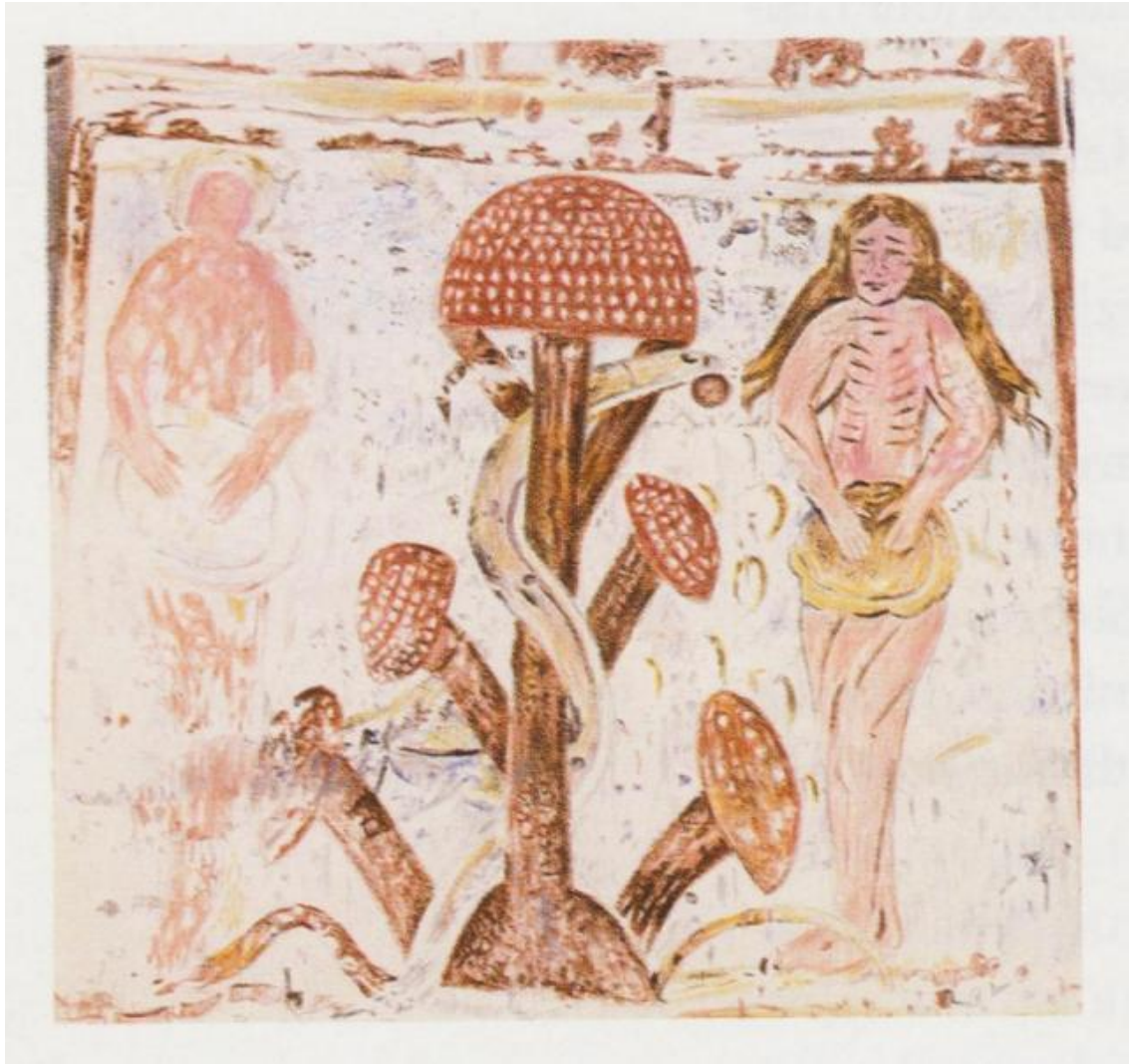


Figure 5 (Herb Museum, 2012)

Food continues to be an integral part of the Biblical chronicles of the first man and woman and their children. After leaving the Garden of Eden, Eve and Adam are shown by the Lord God how to clothe themselves with animal skins and how to eat and sow the “herb of the field” and “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground” (Genesis 3:18-19). In the next chapter of Genesis, their children, Cain and Abel, then take up these mantles of farming and animal herding. In an interesting reversal of what is now known via archaeology and anthropology, the first-born son of Adam and Eve, Cain, becomes a farmer and his younger brother, Abel, becomes a shepherd in a schism of history that is echoed in the schism between the brothers. Mountains of evidence and excavated sites of course shows that the earliest civilizations were not built around agriculture but as hunter-gatherer systems (Wilson, 2012, p. 13). The motive for the first murder could also be seen as an argument over who cooked the best meal, where burnt offerings were essentially the original backyard barbeques, “And in process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the LORD./ And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And the LORD had respect unto Abel and to his offering” (Genesis 4:3-4). Cain took his vegetarian labors and cooked them up for the Lord God, but their dinner guest apparently preferred the juicy lamb roast instead of salad. This was again repeated a few generations later when Noah gave burnt offerings after the forty days of flooding. Michael Pollan reiterates the gustatory choices of the Old Testament god, remarking, “The aroma of burning meat is so pleasing to God that it tempered his wrath and moved him to take the option of worldwide doom completely off the table for all time” (Pollan, 2013, p. 40). It seems that even deities are not themselves while hungry.

Bread symbolism is also traditionally prevalent throughout the Bible, providing additional backbones to metaphors of Western diets and in much of Judeo-Christian worship that is echoed in *lembas* and other notable loaves in fantasy literature. Unleavened bread is an important part of the rites of Passover and of course later in the Last Supper. Five loaves and two fish fed “the multitudes” in the “First Miracle” which then gave rise to the saying that Jesus was “the Bread of Life” taken from the Gospel of John: “And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst” (John 6:35) Here, bread is a vessel of both life and the giving life to sate hunger. In the Mormon faith of my youth, the bread portion of the sacrament was not a communion wafer or other form of unleavened bread, but often torn up bits of Wonder Bread, because the symbolism of bread was more important than the recipe. The metaphor of bread rising has also become intertwined with Christ rising from the dead in Western literature (Pallant, 2017). Bread has been used to strengthen this metaphor in many fantasy texts, straightforward such as the Biblical retellings in *Paradise Lost* through trails of bread crumbs in fairy tales and into modern and contemporary speculative fiction, especially in Suzanne Collins’s *Hunger Games Trilogy*. From the raisin and nut bread that Peeta intentionally burns to give to Katniss, to each district—including the Capital—having their own bread type, to the name of the country, *Panem*, bread is life and death in Collins’s Secondary World (2008).

Because food has long been a part of religious traditions, wrapped up in the earliest recorded stories, it has made its way into subcreation in the metaphors and philosophies of its writer. One of the most famous contemporary examples of this can be seen in *The Chronicles of Narnia* and the layers of Christian subtext

intentionally utilized by C.S. Lewis. A form of Christian imagery has found its way into Raymorne as well via my Mormon past in the parallels between Ursula Raymorne and Jesus. Although Ursula is a well-documented historical figure in *HtCaD*, she has been elevated to religious worship by not only humans, but also those of other races in the story. The Panthemic House, which has strong ties to all of the prominent fantasy races in the novel, has designated her “the Prophetess of Plenty,” and she is an Elevated Artisan in the dwarven religious traditions, which is akin to a saint. Like Jesus, Ursula took small amounts of food and was able to feed multitudes and did this many times throughout her life, which is a rare magic in this world (otherwise there would be no hunger, and as stated above, there is food poverty even in Raymorne). This is in the vein of food and magical theory in *Harry Potter* as explained by Hermione in the seventh book:

Your mother can't produce food out of thin air, no one can. Food is the first of the five Principal Exceptions to Gamp's Law of Elemental Transfiguration...It's impossible to make good food out of nothing! You can Summon it if you know where it is, you can transform it, you can increase the quantity if you've already got some... (Rowling, 2007, p. 238)

It also continues to explain why food poverty exists, even in magical worlds. As observed above in the sixth taxonomy category in the first chapter, in the Order of Being life and death are cyclically trapped together and are dependent on one another to continue existence.

The central mythology and philosophy of *How to Cook a Dragon* is deceptively simple, as is the premise of food studies as stated in my introduction: food is good to think and good to eat. This was the central infrastructural foundation that I tried to follow throughout the writing of my novel and in the academic studies that have tied into it. Wolf notes that narrative is the most important infrastructure that holds imagination together, “Infrastructures provide the scaffolding by which a

world logic can take shape, as well as a platform on which further extensions of a world can be devised and built” (2013, p. 197). No matter how many plates of food described form the basis of nature, culture, language, and mythology and narrative, the scaffolding is not the building and to quote again from the philosopher Alan Watts, “the menu is not the meal” (1957, p. 13), but there are many fantastic meals to be had with the right mastering of food in fantastic literature.

## Chapter Four:

### Mastering the Art of Fantastic Food:

#### The Context and Creative Practice of *How to Cook a Dragon*

The potential of a meal starts in the pantry, and even stories have their own pantries. Before we start cooking, we have preconceived notions about what the desired result could be. Bee Wilson explored the development of eating habits in *First Bite: How We Learn to Eat*, observing, “Our tastes follow us around like a comforting shadow. They seem to tell us who we are” (2016, p. xiii). There are many hows and whys of eating, one of which is to develop a palate of one’s desired tastes that should ideally compliment nutritional needs. This is so our natural omnivore’s dilemma is satisfied to continue with other tasks in our lives, and the same can be said of the writer approaching the genesis of a story: we read and tell stories to develop a palate. Like a dish, a novel is pulled from random items in the pantry of the mind, from previous stories read and written, and prepared with a pen and paper or computer instead of with knives and spoons and pots and pans. This PhD is also a sum of multidisciplinary experiences, drawing from childhood memories of storytelling and poring over cookbooks of all types leading to the desired passion needed for a project of this caliber. This chapter will explore how certain items, pulled from the pantry that is my creative background, have contributed to the context of the writing of *How to Cook a Dragon* and the subsequent creative practice that was observed during this process.

Most of *HtCaD*’s construction developed from something of a buffet of conscious and unconscious effort. I am not by nature a rigid outliner, but I do try to plan ahead in the story so that I know where I am going. With that in mind, I started

to gather the ingredients that had been planted in the soil of my imagination—having gone from the fantasylands of playtime in my youth, through the rigors of academic study that started in my creative writing bachelor's and MFA programs and into the research framework I set out in my PhD proposal. The main ingredients that went into *HtCaD* and this critical commentary also include the books read, the events and activities I have attended—these include the British Library's Food Season events, various food-themed exhibits at UK museums, and visits to historical kitchens such as those at Windsor Castle, Anglesey Abbey, and Hampton Court Palace—and the instructions and constructive criticisms provided to me by my advisors and fellow students. As writer and editor Lisa Tuttle eloquently declared, "Having the idea is only the beginning. Now it's time for the hard work" (2005, p. 34). I have previously identified the infrastructures of world-building as another ingredient, part of the *mise en place* that sets up a story. This also means world-building could be viewed as something akin to a stock which is often the base for many dishes. Since the stock is an ingredient that requires its own recipe and cooking, it is important to observe these traditions in a similar vein to those previously considered in the terroir of fantastic literature.

A recipe, like a novel, starts in the imagination and there's often a Freudian elemental influence. This begins in the subconscious before the ingredients are ever selected, possibly before the food is ever grown and processed. What came "before" *How to Cook a Dragon* (and other works of literature), the context of its genesis, is an important element in the analysis of any creative act. In Rosemary Jackson's psychoanalytic work *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, she contends, "Fantasy is not to do with inventing another non-human world: it is not transcendental. It has to do with inverting elements of the world, re-combining its constructive features in



new relations to produce something strange, unfamiliar, and *apparently* ‘new’, absolutely ‘other’ and different” (2003, p.8, italics in original). This is essentially the same objective of a recipe. More than likely every dish is *not* going to be transcendental; this is not even a peripheral goal of cooking for most people, let alone most chefs. For most cooks, recipe writers, and eaters a recipe is about taking food that is, in the words of anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, “good to think and good to eat” (Pollan, 2006, p. 287) and “re-combining its constructive features in new relations.” This in turn then develops from the subconscious context of a novel.

For the purposes of this critical commentary, I will turn to a short analysis on how the three main characters and my novel’s cross-genre atmosphere were fleshed out of the context of past pantry ingredients and came to represent different modes of creative practice. Lisa Tuttle goes on to give this advice in *Writing Science Fiction and Fantasy*: “Because you’re not writing an essay, but fiction, most of the background information won’t be presented in chunks of information but rather filtered throughout the story in the way in which characters react and how they live their daily lives” (2005, p. 39). This is also how ingredients work in a recipe—the separate elements come together as they’re cooked with the newly coalesced flavors explored through each bite.

A high fantasy novel (with a pastiche undercurrent) about food that does not allude to the most famous foodies of modern fantastic literature, hobbits, is almost unthinkable. However, this is a word/term I could not use due to copyright law. The Tolkien Estate and the holders of merchandising rights have long established their ownership of the term and they do not give out many permissions to use their intellectual property (Tolkien Estate, 2015). They have also sought legal action against those who took inspiration from the novels to create roleplaying games, such

as Gary Gygax’s original *Dungeons and Dragons*, and other proprietary terms used in even parody and tie-in cookbooks like Astrid Tuttle Winegar’s *Cooking for Halflings and Monsters* (Winegar, 2017, “Introduction”). But like name brands on grocery shelves, the tropes of my novel allow readers to recognize and appreciate the lens focused on “halfling” characters like Jacque, Philippa, and Jamey while adding to the canon of the “Shire-folk” who live for “second breakfast” and all the other meals in between.

From the beginning of the first draft, I decided to fall back on the method of employing fair-use words “halfling” and “smallfolk” (used interchangeably in-universe). Since the very nature of *HtCaD* is both a subversion and pastiche of classic Tolkienesque fantasy, most readers will immediately equate Jacque with more famous halflings. But the spirit of the “Hobbit” fantasy race is there: Jacque has a deep love of food, a fierce devotion to his family, and a slight passion for contentedness. The halflings of Broma originated in the “Rivers and Barrow” and now mostly live in the Keane Valley, which is partially inspired by Tolkien’s Shire, but those who live in the city itself have slight departures from those whose “hearts truly lie in peace and quiet” and in things that grow (*Fellowship of the Ring Extended Edition*, 2002). Like the rest of the peoples and technology of Raymorne, halflings here have evolved as well, similar to fantasy races in the Disney-Pixar film *Onward* (2020) and the Netflix film *Bright* (2017). Halflings have adapted to their cityscape, including carving out their own spaces such as the Dancing Donkey where Jacque reunites with some of his smallfolk fellow and mends bridges with others. After all plants are not the only things that grow that halflings can “share a love for.” Other things that can grow include circles of friendships and families, and in *HtCaD* Jacque’s circle definitely grows between the birth of his child and in his new

friendship with Adrini, a half-elf who is rather different from the typical Tolkien elves.

Like halflings, the elves in Raymorne that I have created have seen their share of changes to the method and tropes set by Tolkien and reinforced in properties like *Dungeons and Dragons*. In this case I was able to use the elf template as a counterpoint to halflings in how to explore how near-eternal and ethereal-like beings would adapt to a world of technological, culinary, and social changes. Instead of fading away, there were those that changed alongside the cityscape and those that retreated back to the Carinet Forest. The character Adrini Frey has walked in both worlds and, as a consequence, she suffers from anxiety and identity issues, hardly the serene elf of the tropes she is descended from. In *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games*, Ebony Elizabeth Thomas supposes that the historical lack of diversity in fantastic writing by white authors serves to reinforce “comfortable and safe world-building,” since many Caucasian people are unable to imagine a world with more than a few token characters of color:

As Toni Morrison noted in *Playing in the Dark*, “The subject of the dream is the dreamer,” and, as Tolkien observed, “The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed.” Seeing a dark-skinned character, particularly one who is of discernible African ancestry, seems to break the spell for many despite the fact that there were people from many different cultures living in England during late antiquity and the early Middle Ages (2019, p. 75).

Because Adrini would also be classified as a person of color in the Primary World (both her mother and father have brown skin), it provides a (hopefully successful) subversion and new lens on how POC characters deal with identity in these Secondary Worlds. Subsequently, Adrini’s win of the Banquest casts another spell that disperses previous trends regarding characters of color not only being a part of fantastic worlds, but actively the heroes of these stories. Unlike many detractors who

saw the lack of white characters in the film *Black Panther* (2018) as some kind political statement of “identity politics,” I absolutely loved that there was this rich new world to explore with points of view that were not my own. *Black Panther*, and works filled with food imagery by authors of color such as Nnedi Okorafor’s *Akata Witch* and P. Djèlí Clark’s *Ring Shout* (2020), influenced me and the context of the world-building within *How to Cook a Dragon*. They made me realize that as a white writer I have a responsibility to provide immersive world-building for all readers. As I continue to read and consume media that is written and produced by people of color, even in food memoirs such as *Eat Up* by Ruby Tandoh (2018) and *The Cooking Gene* by Michael W. Twitty (2017), I find myself *needing* it in other stories in order for those stories to feel reflective of the whole of human experience.

Like the real-life reality of poverty and food insecurity, to ignore Adrini’s skin color would be irresponsible. The character of Adrini Frey is indeed a conscious effort to ensure that characters of color are represented, which is a problem that persists in fantasy tropes. Historian Paul B. Sturtevant observed in his article “Race: The Original Sin of the Fantasy Genre” in 2017, “The core of the problem is that Tolkien conflates race, culture, and ability. Hobbits, he says, are a race, and based upon a combination of their hereditary traits and cultural practices, are better at being stealthy than other races” (2017). As a consequence, “dark” races like the Uruk-hai, and later in the mythos of Drows the evil “sub-race” of elves in *Dungeons and Dragons*, leave behind a bitter reminder of post-colonial racism, Sturtevant then asks of creators to:

Insist that people of color and non-European cultures are a vibrant and equal part of your invented world. If you want to keep the elf-dwarf-human-hobbit-orc lineup that Tolkien established, understand what it means to do so. Perhaps you could even use the paradigm to critique or deconstruct the racist structures of previous fantasy works. Whatever you do, you can work to subvert and dismantle the racist

structures that are a deep part of the genre (2017).

Hopefully, I have succeeded in dismantling some of the usual tropes and paradigms in my characterizations and food preferences of other elf and part-elf characters of color such as Lyreon Frey (a human male of analogous Jamaican ancestry), Hemmie Milas Frey (a woman of indigenous and Southern American and Haitian analogous descent), Saverina of the Maiwyn (an actual brown skinned elf), Baron Maroque Caereme (who is part draconi and part elf and analogous to Pacific Islander), and in Ikeda Jiro, Sarahu Nobue's fiancée (of Japanese parallel). After all, there were far more people of color in our Primary World Medieval Europe than there were potatoes, despite what some so-called "history buffs" try to claim about medievaesque fantastic literature and media (Mueller, 2016).

The context and active creative practice of this project also began as one intending to explore food and how it fits into the various niches of science fiction and fantasy subgenres. Knowing where one's creative work sits is important during the penning of a literary work because it can allow for the ease of constructing frameworks and exploring familiar foundations with a new eye. During the shift from a proposed short story collection to a novel, I knew that the main storyline of *HiCaD* would follow a high fantasy format, while the subplot would have the thematics and narrative similar to that of an urban fantasy novel. That urban fantasy also tends to straddle the low fantasy genre meant I could still explore the differences amongst fantastic subgenres in my research. In the online version of *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, the definition of "high fantasy" is very succinct: "Fantasies set in Otherworlds, specifically Secondary Worlds, and which deal with matters affecting the destiny of those worlds" (Clute, 2012). The definition of low fantasy on the same website is a bit more complex, perhaps owing to the fact that it

does tend to settle liminally between borders in contrast to high fantasy's distinct use of "otherworlds." The definition for "low fantasy" in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* contends, "The introduction to *The Fantastic Imagination* (anth 1977) ed Robert H. Boyer and Kenneth J. Zahorski defines High Fantasy and implies LF as an antonymic description of fantasies not set in Secondary Worlds, nor elevated in their literary style" (Langford, 2012). That high and low fantasies are antonyms is slightly incongruous with Wolf's assertions that the very act of subcreation implies that a fictional world is almost always a Secondary World, separate from the Primary World. Wolf clarified his own stance in an interview with Professor Henry Jenkins regarding the separation of Primary and Secondary Worlds:

As I point out in the book's first chapter, there are varying degrees of what we could call "secondariness", based on how much invention a secondary world contains; some, like the Star Wars Galaxy or Middle-earth, are very different from the Primary World, whereas others, like Lake Wobegon or More's Utopia, have less invention but are still imaginary (Jenkins, 2013).

For example, the America of *American Gods* is decidedly different from our Primary World as in reality there are (likely) no lingering Norse Gods running con jobs, nor are there leprechauns starting bar fights, or Egyptian gods of the dead running a funeral parlor in Illinois. Yet, the world of Gaiman's novel is little different from the food to the technology and daily situations the characters find themselves in such as hailing cabs or hiring prostitutes. Still, the liminality of the Primary and Secondary World is felt on almost every page, which also extends into other fantastic subgenres. In *HtCaD*, the world that exists has elves, dwarves, halflings, and long-gone dragons situated in a nexus of Primary World concerns such as food adulteration, governmental bureaucracy, and family squabbles.

Low fantasy is not necessarily the opposite or antonym of high fantasy, but merely an expanse of liminality during the creative practice of subcreation. Zahorski

and Boyer are also quoted in the *A to Z of Fantasy Literature* regarding the categorization of low fantasy, which continues to suggest that low fantasy is the natural opposite of high fantasy since, “[...] nonrational happenings that are without causality or rationality because they occur in the rational world where such things are not supposed to occur” (Stableford, 2009, p.256). There are subtle examples of “nonrational happenings” in *Chocolate* by Joanne Harris. Here the author has a fictional town but in a very real area of France. Harris has said in interviews that *Chocolat* is meant to be a timeless, placeless village, where literal magic happens in the sweets and cakes crafted by the main character. Even though the main character Vianne consciously denies to the reader that it is a form of witchcraft, the words “magic” and “alchemy” in regards to her creations are used, they are both played as real and as metaphor (Harris, 1999, pp. 53, 159). Harris also reminds us that “Just because it’s fantasy doesn’t mean it can’t be real” (*Joanne Harris: Food in Fiction*, 2019). The writer’s authority in a story is what gives readers the ability to accept gods walking amongst us or that chocolate can change a heart because the “nonrational happenings” have a logical causality in the story regardless of the genre.

Part of my approach to ensure the practice of blending of genres between the two plotlines of *HtCaD* was in ensuring this logistic causality. There is the high fantasy world in which there is a city called Raymorne where occupants run the gamut from human to elf, dwarf, halfling, and draconi. This diversity is considered mundane within the greater world-building, as it often is with many high fantasy novels. This is the point of immersive fantasy modes and it is what sells the reader on the authenticity and authority of the story. In the recently released “suburban fantasy” Pixar film, *Onward* (2020), there is a similar establishment of high fantasy

tropes infrastructures where elves, centaurs, cyclopes, fauns, and manticores exist in a Second World adjacent to our Primary World. Just as in our world, the Pixar film's sociological evolution followed a similar path of progression as in *HtCaD* where technology has slowly supplanted magic (*ibid*). Like the draconi of Raymorne, who have evolved to the point where not all progeny have the ability to breathe ice or fire or even have scales, the pixies of *Onward* have forgotten how to fly and the manticore character has been "neglecting her wing exercises." These are invocative of our own daily life where we no longer exercise the same daily activities as our ancestors such as baking bread, tilling the earth, or sewing our own clothes.

Just as with "high" and "low" fantasy, there are several ways to define the urban fantasy subgenre. Sometimes it is considered a genre between high and low fantasy where the liminality is blended between a wholly new Secondary World, often modeled after a large urban area in our Primary World. *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* defines urban fantasy:

UFs are normally texts where fantasy and the mundane world intersect and interweave throughout a tale which is significantly about a real city [...] the general principle still holds: the city of a UF may be located in a Secondary World, but in such a case it has been created not just as a backdrop but as an environment (Langford, 2012).

That the urban environment is essential to the narrative is what often settles the genre between "high" and "low" fantasy and has made it difficult to define beyond the essential city/urban elements. Because many urban fantasies are first-person narrator, or if not first-person then close third-person like Okoias's chapters in *HtCaD*, the main characters are both the guide and the participant in their stories; they assist the reader in traversing the barriers between the mundane and the fantastic of their municipalities.



Many popular urban fantasy series follows this model. As previously mentioned, Jim Butcher's *The Dresden Files* takes place in Chicago, Illinois, and is narrated by the titular hero, Harry Dresden. But this Chicago is situated on lay lines that cause a convergence and an excess of magic that the "wizard for hire" takes advantage of for a profession, although most humans do not or cannot believe that the supernatural exists. Not only does Harry follow clues in his detective cases to real places—from Saint Mary of the Angels Catholic Church to Graceland Cemetery and Wrigley Stadium—he also traverses the "Undertown" of Chicago (based on the real-life Pedway and the stratigraphic architectural nature of cities). Harry can also open up access points to the magical supernatural lands of the Nevernever, or the "spirit world." Many points in Chicago can take Harry from the frozen lands of the Winter fay, and their stronghold of Arctis Tor, to the Ways that can allow one to walk from Chicago to Edinburgh in less than an hour. All of the above exist in Butcher's Secondary World with the fantastic "interwoven" with the mundane. The same is true for Laurel K Hamilton's *Anita Blake: Vampire Hunter's* reality-adjacent St. Louis (2002), the London of *Rivers of London* by Ben Aaronovich (2011), Seanan McGuire's *October Day Series*' San Francisco with its pockets of fae kingdoms (2009), and Cassandra Khaw's rendering of Kuala Lumpur in *Gods and Monsters: Rupert Wong Series* (2017). These authors use their respective cities as both a setting and as a narrative device to hold up their world-building and characterization.

Of course, Raymorne is not a real city, but that does not negate the applicability of urban fantasy pantry staples into my novel. However, for the subplot that follows Inspectors Okoias and Crenn through the various subcultures of the city, I was inspired to capture that urban fantasy feel, as well as that of low fantasy novels

that also straddle the genres. The cross-genre subplot was heavily influenced by Leigh Bardugo's *Six of Crows*. Ketterdam is a city on the True Sea in the island nation of Kerch, modeled after the height of the Dutch empire's late-nineteenth century Amsterdam. The characterization of Kaz, the leader of the six main characters, is compared to the city setting in the opening paragraphs of the novel.

Kaz Brekker didn't need a reason. Those were the words whispered on the streets of Ketterdam, in the taverns and coffeehouses, in the dark and bleeding alleys of the pleasure district known as the Barrel. The boy they called Dirtyhands didn't need a reason any more than he needed permission—to break a leg, sever an alliance, or change a man's fortunes with the turn of a card.

Of course they were wrong, Inej considered as she crossed the bridge over the black waters of the Beurskanal to the deserted main square that fronted the Exchange. Every act of violence was deliberate, and every favor came with enough strings attached to stage a puppet show (2015, p. 15).

Here readers are guided through this unfamiliar Secondary World via the strong characterizations of the first-person voices of each chapter. Slowly Ketterdam coalesces into a real city reflected in the personalities of the six main characters, but most especially in Kaz who as a child was the victim of a brutal con and was left destitute to be revived as a criminal, “My mother is Ketterdam. She birthed me in the harbor. And my father is profit. I honor him daily” (2016, p. 200). Even though the city itself is left behind for the plotted heist across the sea, Ketterdam is like revisiting a city you've already been to in the sequel *Crooked Kingdom*.

*HtCaD* was actually built from the city outward, since an event as grand as the Banquest would need economic and cultural opportunities only found in cosmopolitan areas. So, like urban fantasy, the city itself became the nexus for the storytelling and neighborhoods, points of interest, municipalities, and living spaces arose to continue supplying the narrative. The Fork where Jacque's stand is situated became a center of trade while Adrini's workplace is in the literally and figuratively

elevated borough known as the Horn. Okoias traverses the great temple of the Panthemic House to the lowly priory where the Beggars' Feast takes place. Throughout the city though, there is the undercurrent of food, which is essentially the *genius loci* (or the "spirit of a place") of Raymorne, "animating the narrative and determining its fantastic nature" (Irvine, 2012, p. 201). Although Okoias is not actively cooking, she is still participating in this animating element of the city; almost every time she goes from one setting to another, she is observing and sometimes participating the food subcultures I described in chapter two. And in this the creative practice and context of my novel can be discerned as the three separate subgenres blended together just as the three separate storylines eventually converge in the novel.

Much like a recipe, this thesis has separate elements that come together in a cohesive exploration of the context and creation of a dish or novel. There are the ingredients to consider and the method and directions for preparing those ingredients. Some of these ingredients are the make-up of the taste of place in fantastic literature through the explorations of terroir. I have also extrapolated and expanded a taxonomy tucked into a recent text and used it as a lens to identify the components of art and how they indeed were also used in my own work. I have also utilized world-building theory to show the essential nature of food in realized worlds. For some authors this is more of a soupcon of flavor of their works (such as in the writings of Neil Gaiman and Margaret Atwood) or the how and why food is a cornerstone of a Secondary World as seen in Middle Earth, Discworld, Panem, and in *The Dresden Files*' Chicago.

The final component of a recipe that I have left to discuss is the title, which of course always comes first, but here is presented last after all the ingredients have

been pulled from the pantry. Another confession here: I am terrible at coming up with titles for my stories, which leads to anxiety about the final choice. However, I have always been sure of *How to Cook a Dragon*, even if I did not know the whole story. The title existed long before Jacque, Adrini, and Okoias ever did as it first came to me when I was researching postgraduate programs in the spring and summer of 2016. It was inspired by a segment in the first Halloween special of *The Simpsons* “Treehouse of Horror” (1990), in which Lisa discovers an alien cookbook with a nefarious title in a parody of the *Twilight Zone* episode “To Serve Man” that actually turns out to be harmless (Figure 6). The title is meant to invoke humor as much as the question of “what does a dragon taste like?” I think I agree with Kate in *HtCaD* that dragons “taste like magic,” (p. 113) but in the Primary World there is no answer to that question. However, because I have actively engaged in creative practice and literary theory, I can imagine what the lands of dragons taste like via the terroir in my novel, through consideration of the Objects of Alimentation, and in the mise en place of the infrastructures of my world-building.



Figure 6 (*Treehouse of Horror I*, 1990)

## Conclusion: Bon Appetit

Food is memory, and reading fantastic literature gives us memories of places that will probably never exist, but we can still savor the sensations and consider their meanings for our present lives. A meal does not begin or end with the kitchen and neither does the novel begin or end with the writer. “Writing, creative writing, is transformative, performative in ways that cannot be calculated or foreseen,” (Bennett and Royle, 2016, p. 105) and yet this thesis is an analysis on the calculated *and* the unforeseen of *How to Cook a Dragon (HtCaD)*.

Searching for the words to write this thesis often felt like assigning definitions to flavors I had only ever tasted once before. I was continuously reaching into the nebulous clouds of research and grasping for clues. “Flavour is, of course, notoriously subjective and hard to describe,” argues food writer Niki Segnit in her book *The Flavour Thesaurus* (2010), and I have to agree, although it’s more about finding the right lexicon for the task. Eventually, I found my own thesaurus to coax out the theories and analysis necessary to elucidate my nexus of food studies and creative writing.

Through the terroir of fantastic literature, I have considered the ways in which a culinary term, sometimes dismissed as old-fashioned or unquantifiable, has a definable impact on the ways writers and readers engage with the taste of the places they visit via fiction. Terroir is a new literary tool available for those who need something that has a bit of poetry and philosophy, and even science, to understand the choices a writer makes that impacts their story. The terroir of *HtCaD* is something that grew out of the “soils” or “bones” of many writers and perhaps will serve to influence future writers in their own fictional food journeys.

In the Objects of Alimentation, writers and readers can consider the influences that food objects hold for the subjects. The philosophy of objects hold various meanings for the story and the vicarious reactions of the reader. The taxonomy afforded by these alimential objects can be subjective but nevertheless provides a framework for observing the power of certain food imagery and overall food scenes in literature.

The food infrastructures of subcreation provide a pathway through world-building that writers can use to reinforce their world-building and then subsequently blend these infrastructures into their stories. The choices writers make need not be logical or accurate every time something is taken out of the milieu of the Primary World and utilized in Secondary Worlds, so long as the writer maintains their authority over the narrative.

Finally, I looked into my own creative practice and the contexts in which the genre and themes of *HtCaD* developed. There's a whole pantry of goods a writer stocks themselves based on favorite books and stories and the passions beyond creative writing that drive their creative voice. Genre is perhaps more mutable than one thinks and through exploration of character and setting this is proven so. Once accepting this, the liminal and shifting boundaries of genre can provide context and clarity for those who want to know more about cooking dragons.

Attempting to cook a dragon is less about preparing a meal from fictional dragon flesh than it is completing one's own hero's, or heroine's journey. The full circle of this thesis began with the discovery there were gaps in academia concerning the gastronomic in fantastic literature and creative writing. Food has been touched upon in writers' blogs about world-building and a few panels at conferences such as Worldcon and New York Comic Con, and even at conferences like the 2020 Dublin

Gastronomy Symposium which discussed the “future of food” with some researchers looking to science fiction for previously imagined clues. However, the how’s and why’s of its importance have been but crumbs at the end of a meal scattered throughout food studies and literary discourse. This thesis has been about making space for a new shelf in the supermarket filled with ingredients (and newly defined flavors) for those in creative practice and research who seek to imagine fantastic food. In the gastronomy of fantastic literature there is an endless pantry provided by the Primary World to give flavor to Secondary Worlds.

One final note: I apologize for any unintentional snacking undertaken as a result of reading *How to Cook a Dragon* and the accompanying critical commentary. Might I offer suggestions of what I consumed during the writing process—these include Coke Zero, coffee, and wine (but not all at once), custard creams and Oreos, apples sliced spread with creamy peanut butter, and a choice selection of cheese and crackers. As Julia Child said at the end of every episode of her world-changing cooking show, *The French Chef* (1963-1973), “Bon Appetit.”



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## Appendix A

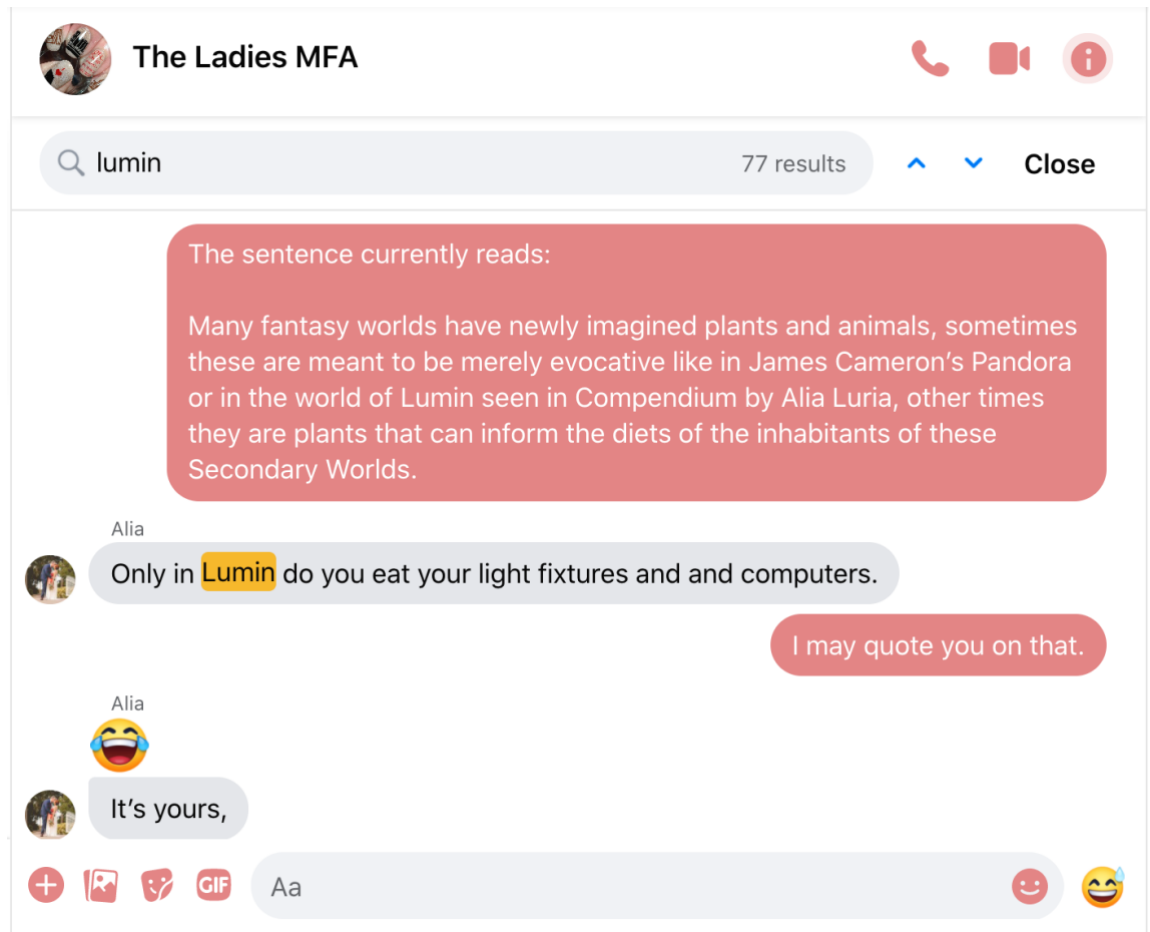
The top screenshot shows a Reddit post in the r/worldbuilding subreddit. The post is titled "If a human eats a human, that's cannibalism. If a hobgoblin eats a human, what's that?" and is posted by u/DarthCloakedGuy 5 years ago. The post is marked as archived, and a message states: "This thread is archived. New comments cannot be posted and votes cannot be cast." The post has 39 comments and is 100% upvoted. The post content discusses the legal term for cannibalism in a world with werewolves, vampires, ghouls, and gnolls. The post also includes a link to a thread titled "If a hobgoblin eats a human, what's that?" by Haddontoo, which has 42 points and is 5 years old. The thread content discusses the legal term for cannibalism in a world with werewolves, vampires, ghouls, and gnolls.

The bottom screenshot shows a Reddit post in the r/worldbuilding subreddit. The post is titled "Sapient" and is posted by Milkyway\_Squid 5 years ago. The post is marked as archived, and a message states: "This thread is archived. New comments cannot be posted and votes cannot be cast." The post has 32 points and is 5 years old. The post content discusses the difference between "Sapient" and "Sentient" beings. The post also includes a link to a thread titled "What's the difference? English isn't my native language, that's why I ask." by piojosso, which has 3 points and is 5 years old. The thread content discusses the difference between "Sapient" and "Sentient" beings. The post also includes a link to a thread titled "A sentient being is capable of subjective experience, a sapient being shows human-like wisdom and capacity for understanding. Humans are the only sapient animal; in part because sapience is defined around human characteristics such as capacity for language, abstract thinking, and ability to reason." by jokul, which has 6 points and is 5 years old. The thread content discusses the difference between "Sapient" and "Sentient" beings.

The right sidebar of the top screenshot shows the "About Community" section for r/worldbuilding. It includes a description of the community, a link to the community page, and a "JOIN" button. The right sidebar of the bottom screenshot shows the "r/worldbuilding Rules" section, which lists seven rules for the community. The rules are: 1. Be kind to others and respect our purpose. 2. All posts should include worldbuilding context. 3. Put in some effort. 4. This is a DIY community. 5. NSFW content requires special care. 6. We allow non-disruptive advertising. 7. The Full and Comprehensive List of Rules. Below the rules is a "Resources" section.

*Screenshot of r/worldbuilding discussion, 2015. Reddit [online] Available through <<https://www.reddit.com/r/worldbuilding/>> [Accessed 5 September, 2020].*

## Appendix B



Luria, A., 2020. *Discussion about the infrastructural nature and food of her fantastic world Lumin*. [Facebook Messenger]. 20 August, 2020.

# Fantastic Food Subcultures



Extreme Delicacies



Epicurean Desires



Everyday Cuisine



Food Insecurity

SmartArt design of “Fantastic Food Subcultures” table was generated in Microsoft Word and the images on the right hand side, from top to bottom, are cited as follows:

[*Naked sushi model and chopsticks*] 2016 [image online] Available at:  
<<https://mk0funamsterdamlvnow.kinstacdn.com/wp-content/uploads/edd/2016/07/Naked-sushi-grid.jpg>> [Accessed 3 June, 2018]

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[*Shopping cart at grocery store*] 2016 [image online] Available at:  
<[https://www.thehealthy.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/01\\_really\\_need\\_clean\\_shopping\\_cart\\_Minerva-Studio.jpg](https://www.thehealthy.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/01_really_need_clean_shopping_cart_Minerva-Studio.jpg)> [Accessed 3 January, 2021]

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