

Swynwold Hospice, The Severn Foothills — Fia Leigh stepped outside into a rare, golden day of late winter. The sun warmed the granite rocks of the Hospice walls so that they steamed, releasing months of damp. She lingered on her way to the kirk, eyes closed, letting the warmth simmer and expand in her limbs. She imagined herself a green tropical plant, drawing in the energy to do the job at hand. If only this could be enough to sustain her: the sun on her face, the sense-memory of home.

Today, she moved slowly through the frostbitten garden. Her limbs were clay, her heart pumped sludge. Ten years of summonses at all hours, and Fia could feel little except a bone deep exhaustion that had built slowly, layer upon layer.

Still, she shouldn't tarry. Delay too long, and she wouldn't like what she found.

A breeze turned the corner of the garden shed, skinning Fia's neck with an underside of winter. She shivered and forced herself onward into the shadow of the kirk. When she reached the cellar doors, she pried them open with a practiced hand. She took a last deep breath of fresh air before descending into the dark.

As always, the first steps into the cellar felt like diving into a bottomless, black well: she was leaving the land of the living, and trespassing on the shores of the dead. At the bottom of the stairs, she filled her lungs. The familiar smell of camphor greeted her, the cool, subterranean air

pricking the hairs on her arms.

Magistra said that Swynwold Hospice stood on hallowed ground. A healing spring once bubbled from the rocks where the founders built the kirk, in the time of the former king's great-great grandfather. The sick and the friendless came from far and wide to drink and bathe, living out their remaining days within the shelter of the Hospice walls and praying in the kirk. The spring had long since run dry, but its protections had seeped into the soil.

If there had once been a spring, Fia had seen no evidence of it, apart from a pervasive damp that stained the packed dirt floor.

Slowly, her eyes adjusted to the candlelight. By practice, she focused straight ahead of her, avoiding the center of the room and the disarray she would find there. *No order from disorder*, Magistra's voice repeated in her head. At the far wall, the tapers illuminated a long worktable, with its familiar drawers of herbs and medicines—yarrow, feverfew, valerian, goldenseal. Jars and bottles of elixirs and draughts lined the top of the table in rows. Magistra kept the worktable stocked primarily as stores for the regular patients in the Hospice, the ones with flu and dropsy, broken bones and fever. The patients that Fia saw in the cellar—the ones dropped at the gates of the Hospice or abandoned in carts—could not be cured with such medicines. Still, she found the worktable soothing, an island of possible solutions in a sea of misery.

Her eyes found the small, round bottle of Lethean. It was nearly full.

Studiously keeping her eyes forward, Fia followed the perimeter of the room, remaining in the shadows. When she reached the worktable, she straightened the stack of blank parchment, where she would record her fabricated clinical notes. Evidence, Magistra had told her, in case they needed it. At first, the dishonesty had bothered Fia, as if her secret had sprouted roots and

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flowers that anyone could see. Now, she barely thought twice. What had she written last time? Dried borage leaves ground with mustard paste? She couldn't recall, anxiety and fatigue fogging her mind. She scribbled something barely legible and certainly nonsensical. It made no difference. The notes were like fictional diary entries that no one would read.

Over her shoulder, she could hear the labored breathing. How many today? She guessed only one or two, based on the sounds—a small relief.

She closed her eyes and tried to clear her thoughts. *No order from disorder*. Did she even believe that anymore? Fia rotated the spiral stone in her pocket, soothing against her palm. At last, when she could find no further excuses, she turned to examine the patients.

Her stomach twisted into an acid knot even before her mind had caught up.

A man and a child lay on two cots in the center of the room. The rapidness of breath and the strange, distorted cast of the man's waxy face told Fia all she needed to know.

Damn it, McTavish, she thought, casting for someone to blame, though it was not really the Swynwold caretaker's fault. Often, they were just too far gone when they arrived. But McTavish, or at least Angus, should have known the signs by now. They should have known the sorry choice it created for her.

Fia moved quickly now, her lethargy forgotten, crossing to the patients. The man's lips were already a bright, ghastly blue. His face was bloodless. Crimson spittle dotted the corner of his mouth, which was twisted in a frozen grimace. His muscular arms hung limp in the restraints. The man's hair, the only part of him which retained its normal coloring, was a vigorous chestnut shade, untouched by grey. She recognized the garb of a Midlands yeoman—dark trousers and a loose workman's smock. No wonder they were near dead. Whoever brought them had come far on nothing but a rumor. From old habit, she felt his pockets. Empty of course—not a peg to pay

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the reaper.

The child—*oh god, he couldn't be older than seven or eight*—was faring no better. He, too, had chestnut hair, cut in the same bowl shape as the man, and wore a child's version of the trousers and smock. The freckles on his skinny, pale arms stood out like flecks of mud on a fresh tombstone. He was a shrunken version of the man—no question they were related. A father and son? It seemed more likely than brothers. The boy's ribcage rose and fell with alarming rapidity. White dust coated his boots and fingernails, which were curled inward toward his palms. Cautiously, Fia pried his fingers loose. He didn't react. He was clutching a small wooden carving of a rabbit. It wasn't the first time she had seen something similar—a useless talisman against the Blight. Squinting, she saw a name carved into its underside: Peter. She closed his fingers around it.

They were both too still, too listless. They didn't writhe or cough, scream or yammer nonsensically. Fia knew from experience that stillness usually preceded the final death throes. They likely had only minutes left to live. By the time she saved one, the other would be dead.

And the dead were beyond her help.

A wheezing rattle from the boy's blue lips sent Fia to the worktable. She grabbed the bottle of Lethean and the tablespoon, pouring a measure of the clear liquid. Though it looked like water, Magistra said it was more valuable than gold orailles. Since the fall of the old king's reign, traders in the capitol used it as currency, or so some of the Hospice patients claimed. Fia's father would have been an even richer man, had he lived—had the fields of asphodel that he grew, the seeds of which were crushed to make Lethean, not died in the Blight along with him.

Her hand shook as she poured the liquid. Sweat dampened her brow despite the chilly temperature.

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She forced herself back to the center of the room and stood over the boy. As Fia looked at him, so small and alone, a familiar, thorny sorrow bloomed in her throat. She didn't want this choice, this beggar's bargain. Yet here she was, forced to play god—to choose who would live, and who would not. The last time this happened, Fia hadn't slept for months, tossing and turning while images of pale faces and blue-eyed strangers tried to grasp her, begging her to change her mind. She would awake with the old feeling of dust under her nails, the dead earth on her tongue.

A fast death is a mercy, Magistra said, but by the time Fia administered Lethean, a patient had suffered already.

Fia knew she should pick the boy, Peter, but what would happen to him? His mother had almost certainly succumbed to the Blight already. There was no safe haven for an orphan like him, no home to return to, none that openly welcomed what should not exist—Fia would know. The man was stronger, more likely to make it, and still young himself. Wouldn't it be better, in the end, more humane to let the boy go?

She hesitated, thinking of Angus, the first person she had saved in the cellar—a boy then too. But he had been allowed to stay at Swynwold. Wearily, not for the first time, Fia wished there was someone, anyone, who could help her bear this burden. She was tired, so tired.

An animal howl tore the stillness behind her. Her heart lurched and she spun around, trying not to spill the Lethean. The man's eyes were wide open, staring at the ceiling. Before she could properly react, he screeched again, the muscles in his neck popping, white gums rimmed with blood. His eyeballs swiveled to Fia, the irises an unnatural, electric blue. Pale stiff hands gripped her arms, and she realized too late he had broken his restraints. He yanked her forward, icy lips crushing her ear.

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“Save him,” the choking voice snarled into the side of her head, his grasp bruising. She cringed, unable to free herself, afraid he would rip off her ear with his teeth or snap her neck. In the final throes, the Blighted moved with the thoughtless, desperate fury of men set aflame.

A convulsive cough seized the man. Fia used the moment to twist and break free.

She didn’t waste time. His wishes were clear, and he was too far gone, his eyes rolling back in his head. The Lethean had spilled, but if she were lucky there would be enough residue on the spoon to work anyway. She gripped his chin and thrust the spoon into his mouth. She pushed his jaw closed, leaning on him with all her strength. He thrashed and then stilled, his contorted hands going limp.

Fia didn’t wait to check his pulse. Behind her, she could hear the boy softly moaning. She whirled around, ripped open the boy’s shirt, and put her hand on his chest. Then she closed her eyes and dove down into the roiling sea.

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