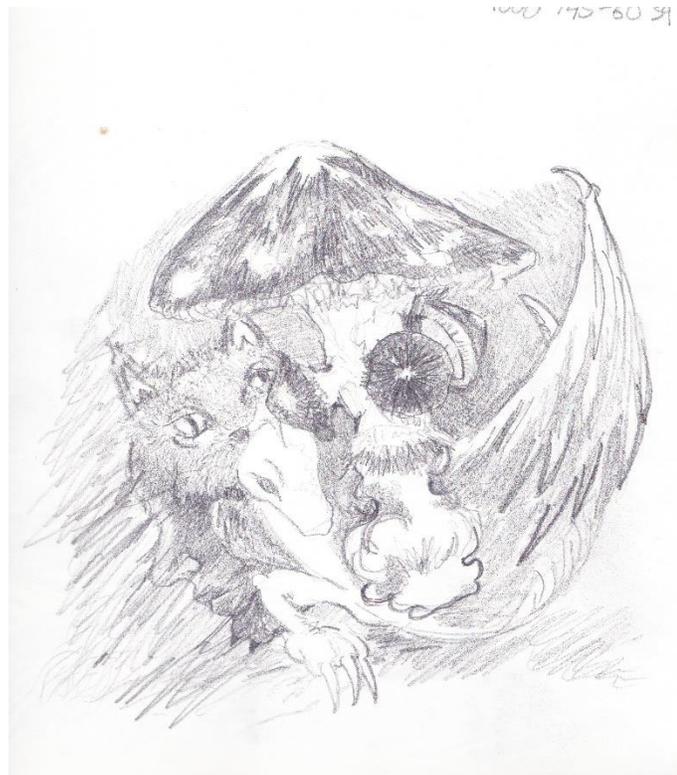


A Halo of Mushrooms



By Andrew Hiller © 2015

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A Halo of

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Support

Prologue

Missing

The cat slipped through shadows and stepped deftly into the hedge. Even here, even this close to the heart of things, the ground was hard and pebbled, a solid fractured mass that the branches and roots fought to break through. Thorns stuck out like spikes, but the feline didn't flinch or duck. Instead, she pressed into them, marking them, bearing the scratches and pain they left as she worked her way through the hollow and around the tan and golden branches.

Berries hung above, dangling bits of orange and blue poison that tempted with a citrus smell, but the summoning call was insistent, and she knew better anyway. She had been here before.

The black cat broke through the maze of prickles and sap, stopping only briefly to lap at a pool. The reflection that stared back at her carried a trace of silver, not only in the eyes, but on the chin and paws. It was unsettling, especially here where the vigor should be strongest. She shook her head. Droplets cast rings in the water that demanded study, but remained indecipherable.

Wonder died. Worlds faded. The cat knew this. Her ears quivered as the call rang out again and she hurried over summer grass that was sparse, sharp, and far more gray than it had a right to be.

She made her way, quiet as a hunter, to the ring, and saw the upturned earth. It was gone. Someone had stolen it. Her whiskers quivered. Sacrilege. The feline howled into the night, and suddenly heard thousands joining her. She looked about to find her brothers and sisters, aunts and cousins.

The hunt was on.

1

A Room with No Doors or Windows

Lara exited her apartment building. The gate clanged behind her. Down the street, a row of street lamps cast their light against huddled cars and darkened storefronts. The rolling security gates were still down. It was too early to be up. She was bundled in a puffy ski coat with the mitts attached by short tethers. Between her hands steamed a jogger's mug. Wisps of burnt auburn escaped her cap, and she looked out at the morning with a weary yawn. Today was a world-changing day. Not a drop-a-pebble-into-a-pond-and-let-it-ripple kind of day, but the sort that only happens when you invent the wheel, discover fire, or make a transcontinental flight in the space of a day. In a few minutes, the sun would rise over that building and cast a thousand reflected rainbows on the greasy puddles. An hour after that, cars would stir, and the bass from passing radios would shake windows and teeth. Sometime after that, she would change the world. This time, she wouldn't chicken out.

She took a sip.

Warm broth hit her tongue and wormed its way down causing a sigh and a shiver. She craned and stretched her neck, lunged to warm up her calves and hamstrings. Today, she would tell Jacob what she thought of him. Knees to the chest. Knees to the chest. The bag was packed and waiting in her friend's house. The jerk had come in so late he hadn't even noticed. He couldn't stop her this time. Not with words, not with his hands, not with the memories of pizza toppings or spins on the dance floor. It was time to acknowledge the dead.

She took a step down the walk and past a street lamp left darkened by the city's inability to pay its bills. A smell of refuse chased its way down the streets. As the day warmed, it thickened, but most people, hidden behind their walls and the whirl of recirculated air, failed to notice.

She would go to the country. She and her friends in a rented van. They would pile in with music collected over the years and a bag of clothes and a cooler full of food. Someplace hidden would emerge. A spot with untended grass that sprawled like bed head. Then she would go up to a store or a coffee shop and grab the HELP WANTED sign, and they wouldn't ask about degrees or references but simply hand her an apron. She would pour, laugh, and at night, plot.

And the world would change. The whole of it.

Or maybe she would just jog and at the end of a circuit return home. The shower would invite, and a coarse towel would dry her off. The fried breakfast (boyfriend prepared), the poured milk, and the dried berries and nuts all settled in a bowl would satisfy. A bit of work waited too. Hypotheses that demanded another trial. *Important duties*, she thought sardonically. Ones that made her eyes itch, reminding her she'd slept in her contacts again.

At work, she railed against the laws of nature by creating substances in pipettes that no eighteenth-century secularist could have imagined. These healed. These soured, poisoned, grew, boiled, and endlessly, endlessly spun. This time, she might find the right combination. That penicillin moment. That first gyration of Elvis Presley's hips.

And the world would change. The whole of it.

Warmed by the drink, she set off. Her pace was less than half of what it would be if someone chased. Her breath huffed out, and her arms bunched in and out. She checked herself out in reflections, imagining a longer stride and a chin a bit less rounded than it was. The mug, clipped to her coat, banged with a happy rhythm against her hip. A few dark shapes shifted, and she saw a cat echoing her progress, tightrope walking along the top of an uneven fence. She put on speed and turned the corner, only barely catching a glimpse of silver.

The earliest smells of baked goods reached her. Hot breads, bagels, doughnuts. Delivery trucks groaned as men hefted piles of paper and boxes onto their beds. Henry waved. Henry ... who once iced her ankle and wrapped it in something that smelled of fish when she tripped earlier in the winter, who always had a friendly joke ready (if she stopped) and kept an extra thermos of coffee just in case. He had the dumpy look of a man ready to climb into a cubicle, though his life had always had a manual edge. His world would never change.

Henry served as a signpost in her life. She knew he would be there and missed him when he was absent.

She continued on, feeling lighter. A spark of light from a shop wicked. Another jogger ran past being pulled by his dog, who impatiently strained at the leash wishing it could be free to hunt, explore, and return.

She went far enough that she tore the hat off her head and stuffed it in her pockets. A sheen grew on her forehead and neck, but her hands were still cold. She paused at a traffic light, jogging lightly in place, waiting for the walk signal even though there wasn't a car in sight. The cat with the silver eyes returned, this time sitting on a swinging sign that advertised holiday cards. Its coat was shabby, and its face was narrow. Its whiskers quivered. Lara was always followed when she ran. She preferred the cats to men.

Someone shoved her. She fell to the sidewalk, sputtering, catching herself with mittened hands.

“Hey!” she shouted.

The man continued on, hurrying around the corner. He had not shaved for several days, and his brow jutted forward so far that his eyes were in perpetual shadow. His arms were thick under his shirt suggesting powerful muscles. A look backward dismissed her, which made her cheeks redden angrily before a more primal part gladdened. The stranger ran bowlegged, and his teeth were so long that she could see their impressions through a closed mouth. She picked up her pace for a stride or two. An apology was owed, and she could chase him down, but as she turned the corner to follow, the size of him struck her. He was NBA tall but sumo wide.

Deciding quickly, she turned around and headed home. She looked for Henry, who was deep in his truck and had missed the event. Jacob would love to hear about this. He always chastised her for jogging alone, saying, “It isn't safe,” while enveloped in a world about as dangerous as a womb.

Her hands burned from where she'd caught herself. The song in her ear told her that she hadn't gone far enough. She needed to go at least ten minutes further. Still, today could be a short run. That's okay, she needed energy to change the world, right?

The truck was white where it wasn't covered with graffiti. Henry sourly lifted another crate of free newspapers for delivery. His back hurt, and his hands were locked. His partner had called in sick, but that didn't mean that the three hundred pounds of local news could stop. If delivered late, the boss didn't pay. Besides, after papers, he had to pick up other stock. The girl, Lara, was twenty-five his junior, but that didn't stop his mind from playing "what if" sometimes. He never acted, of course, because he liked talking to her, and that happened rarely enough as it was.

She had a round face with a delicate little bump of a nose. Her lips were a bit wide, and her forehead was a touch high. A mix of colors lit her eyes, but not enough sparkle, he thought. Still, the package worked. When she shouted, he tried to move forward, but she was already up and moving away by the time he hopped down. The crowbar in his hand dropped, and he sighed. The offender, the only other one who was out, was a big guy, at least six feet tall, and moving at a good pace. Well, he would have showed him anyway.

Lara ran past Henry toward home without a nod, and he watched her go. She was a wisp, barely the size of a sixth grader. Her gait was slow and a little clumsy. It was clear that she'd never been an athlete, never run track or cross country. Her arms stayed fairly tight to her body but had a tendency to flap. He smiled, turned, and resumed work, only stopping to swat at the old

stray who sat atop his truck watching the same girl running away from him, just as she did every morning.

Lara returned to her front step at ten minutes before six and saw a man standing in front of her landing. For a moment, she found him remarkable. His trousers were dirty and stained and had a patch or two that belied a rather tailored cut. His hair was neat and shorter than was quite fashionable as if it had been hacked away with a knife. It was his back, though, that caught her attention. He had the posture of an aristocrat on horseback. One firm hand rested on the railing as if he was considering climbing the steps.

She trotted to a walk and stopped several steps away.

“I saw a light,” he said apologetically. It was definitely a voice that hadn’t had its morning coffee. In the shadow, she thought she saw a bright scar run down his cheek, but the light showed no markings on his face other than dirt. And strangely, it was dirt and not filth, earth rubbed into his face and shirt and hands as if he’d been sleeping outside in a forest during a hard rain. He seemed to notice her attention, smiled, and then brushed off his hands and sleeves. Cracked pieces of brittle earth sprayed off.

“Do you know where I might find a market?” he asked, his tone smoother from use. He swallowed. “I could use some breakfast.”

“There’s a diner,” Lara answered and pointed, “two blocks.”

He went to tip his hat and then frowned, finding nothing atop his head. Striding away, he seemed smaller and, well ... less remarkable. She wondered about his story while climbing the steps to her landing. He pivoted back, and she turned away, feeling a sudden surge of shyness.

He mouthed something like “thank you” or “beware of cats” before continuing on.

A step around the corner and he would be gone, probably never to be found again. Cities were like that, even Clarksburg (which was barely a city in the grander sense.)

She considered following him, trying to remember the last time she felt caught out like this. The last time she felt something. An instinct said no. It was the same instinct that kept her from chasing down that other man earlier or prevented her from changing the world. She argued with herself before finally groping for her key, turning the lock, and closing the door on the situation.

Facing the stairs to her apartment, she thought, *Stupid endorphins*, and unzipped her coat. She didn't notice the cat slip in behind her just before the door swung shut.

Cerulean versus Gray

The walls were cardboard brown and the carpet only a shade or two darker. A few prints hung on the wall, cityscapes that one might find pre-framed in the back of a grocer's shop. Jacob's snores passed through the door, the loud rumble of an unhappily thawing river.

Lara took off her mittens, coat, and shirt. She wrung the latter off in the sink after smelling it. She enjoyed the smell of her own sweat. It seemed honest, even though it was mixed with the flavor of the decaying city. She picked up some hand soap, prepared to do some

handwashing, but then her eyes slid left. The dishwasher rack was full, still, but she didn't dare empty it. The rattle would certainly wake him up, and then there would be another fight over who held the title of most inconsiderate.

She left her yoga pants and the rest of her clothes on the floor and walked to the shower. As the steam hissed, she assessed herself. In a fogged up window, she felt sexy even though she still had never found a hairstyle that suited her. This month, it was shorter, curled at the ends and frizzed by the sides. Closing her eyes, she stepped into the stream and felt it pulse against her forehead. She enjoyed the drumming and let it massage for a bit before reaching for a shard of soap. Somewhere in the cupboard there waited a new bar, but she would not break it out. That would be like a commitment. A statement that she planned to stay. *Well*, she thought, scrubbing her jaw and cheek, disliking the antiseptic smell of clean that replaced the glisten of sweat, *that isn't going to happen*. That bag was packed. The same one that sat full in Juanita's place for the last three weeks. The one filled with all the "lost laundry and dry cleaning." At least that's what she told Jacob when he noticed that the closet was a bit emptier.

That was a sign of caring, wasn't it? That he noticed things like the number of skirts in a closet? Mind you, he never found the missing pumps and sneakers, but guys and shoes, you know? His observations didn't matter, except they somehow very much did. That, and the fact that the sound of his sleeping invaded even the shower.

She got out, dripping, and admired herself in the fog, twisting and pushing herself forward. Her skin was red, and the mist heavy. For the few seconds it lasted, it felt like the moist heat of a sauna, and the girl staring back with the white towel already wrapped around her looked relaxed. The neat knot would hold well enough that if needed she could go around the whole day

in perfect modesty. Well, not perfect modesty, she thought with a little blush, projecting her hip a little out to the side. With a giggle, she finished the ritual she began at fourteen, tracing her shape with a finger in the standing mirror ... and if she exaggerated the curves a touch, who was to know? In the mist, one needn't live in reality so hard, and maybe this shape suited her anyway. It felt true. Besides, no one ever checked. The steam faded too quickly, and the marks of her fingers never came back.

She swept in and out of the bedroom. Jacob lay on his stomach. The bristles of his wiry beard had somehow withstood the sonic devastation of his sleep. A tangle of sheets left his calves open to the air, and his feet were flexed as if clawing at a rock surface.

Fall, she thought.

She chose a black blouse, short sleeved with a coiling neckline adorned with cotton pebbles that fell to her back. It paired with a dark green skirt whose length the boss deemed appropriate. Good to hide the knees. Knobby little elephant heads. Then she covered it all with the white lab coat with her name stitched in blue cursive, grabbed her bag, and headed for the door.

As she turned the knob, she heard a muffled, “Bye,” and she bent her head. He always stirred long enough to wish her off. She fingered the paper and pen in her pocket, quickly checked to make sure she still had her phone, ID, and the rest of her cards before slipping out the door. Behind her, she left a trail of sweaty clothes, the towel, and her dishes. They might get picked up. More likely they would be shoved aside.

“Bye,” she said back, surprised to hear her voice sounding cheery, and she closed the door.

And the world would change. The whole of it.

The city appeared strange to him. Gray on gray stacked one upon the other whether on hill or flat. Buildings pressed against each other almost as if in an attempt to suffocate one another, with a black snake of a road winding between. No, not winding, but moving with geometrical precision at hard right angles. No sign of green at all except the broken shards of glass bottles that lie in gutters.

The stranger sighed and resisted an urge to tug at the bag on his hip. He knew it was there. Its weight pulled and bumped with each stride. No need to alert those who might suddenly think he carried something of value, something important to him.

The vista wasn't all gray. Behind the windows peeked hints of color, a flash of red silk or a crisscross of textures. A few potted plants leaned against windows as if hoping to escape or snare some touch of sunlight.

That, Derik (the stranger) considered a hopeful sign.

He never considered begging, though thievery could carry a touch of nobility at need. He still held three gold coins in his pocket, each the size of his thumbnail. The face engraved was not one familiar to anyone in this place: A woman with a broad face and a long nose with spiked hair that almost flared like quills. That his coffers were that bare surprised him every time he thought about it.

He was still not used to doing without, and in the early morning, with his back stinging again after yet another hard night's sleep, he felt the urge to call for help. His estates were not the

largest, but they were proud enough. Every man and child had their own steed and at least three geese for pets. Even with a good stride, it would still require the better part of an hour to exit his property. And the walls ... the stonework was gently culled from the earth with almost the same care that kosher shops on this block treated their cuts of meat.

The stranger remembered how on a hot day back home, his palm could almost feel the pulse inside the rock. He certainly often traced their veins. That wasn't true here. Here, the rock had been smashed to a powder before being mixed and poured out. It was like walking on ashes, and that made it harder on the feet, back, and conscience.

That's not to say this place felt more wrong than other cities he knew. In some ways, this place stood better, in his opinion. Certainly, it was more honest and forthright. This was "man's" place, and even among the stacks of compressed buildings, he could feel the bunched muscles of a great enterprise. This place lived. It even grew (which was strange). He wasn't sure how things grew without greens and browns. Perhaps it was all about the shipping. "Or maybe," he said, clutching at the sack tied to his hip, "it is just a different way."

That was a hopeful thought.

When the sun rose, it did so in a groggy way, creeping over the edges of the squat rectangles in the east before clambering past the more sedate towers that pressed farther back. He found horses finally, though these were neutered and wingless. They were also statues.

Light lingered in a pool of metal cloth on the uniform of a soldier sitting atop his steed. The hero of the monument forever pointing his saber at some foe that clearly must have been vanquished. The horse's nose flared, and Derik could see its teeth as it gulped for breath. The man appeared more sedate. Clearly, he had never seen battle before to look so calm, or perhaps

he was one of those lucky gentry who got to sit the hill while others tested their mettle and had their metal broken.

Derik knew he would need a job. Some invisible task beneath him that would allow him to costume himself like someone who belonged here. A way to give him time to see if the mushroom, his burden, could find a home here. The fact that cats gathered in such prominence, strutting as lords and city guards, disturbed him. He saw them as masters of the house sitting in windows and knew himself watched, though he hoped not discovered. Their failure to notice him was not something he wished to test. They might not name him, but they saw him and knew he was new to their territory. Better to become normal quickly. A job, then, something to take him off the streets and away from curiosity.

He wanted to risk a searching, but the sparks felt few here. Certainly, there was plenty of magic, for lights grew bright without flame, carrying boxes rolled without the groan of muscle, and most important there was life. How could there ever be creation without magic? At the same time, the magic felt suppressed, guarded ... hidden.

It smelled closer to alchemy than wizardry. Power pulled from bits of earth, rock, metal, and plant rather than from the deposits within one's own spirit. That wasn't a bad thing. Not all alchemists were necromancers sucking the very last living ember that turned coal to powder or sucked the black blood from deep in the earth only to burn it in a simulation of the sparks that wizards named magic or soul. Some alchemy even produced new sparks and gave birth to fresh wonder. It didn't have to be a taking art, a wretched science. Why, some of his best friends had been alchemists, he thought grimly. At the least, he allowed them to treat his blades and armor.

Back when he still had those. Much ... most of his possessions fell discarded in the haste of flight or the desperation of near escape.

Still, if time presented, he could make himself more tools. If time and the resource of three unfamiliar coins could buy anything of worth.

He needed a friend, an ally, or at least a guide. Trust mattered little because he could hide and lie well enough. Still, he needed someone to teach him enough of this place so he knew where to look, where to hope.

This, then, brought his mind back to the man with the dog. The woman in the large coat and unseemly jester tights would not do. Clearly, this woman craved attention and, worse, found herself running. What brought her to flight in the dead of the night with no visible pursuers concerned him. Dangers hid well. Monsters hid better.

And yet, here you stand gawking at a statue and idling in your thoughts.

As if summoned, the running woman appeared. She came out transformed, but Derik recognized her easily. The puffed coat was replaced by a slicker leather one, and peeking beneath that, modest layers of white that fell just above the calf. Her shoes were cloth, low, and bound in an alchemical rubber, but not the ones that girded her flight earlier. The satchel she carried was large enough to carry a week's worth of food (if carefully rationed) or missives enough to salve a small band's homesickness. Her ears held two tiny white plugs connected to a vine that stretched into her pocket.

He followed for want of better. The press of buildings offered few clues as to what direction might best suit his purpose or even meet his most immediate needs (like food or shelter.)

Lara walked purposefully to a metal posting. The signage indicated transport. His suspicion proved correct. A large wheeled box rolled to a stop before them, guttering smoke as passengers exited. Most of these were dully dressed, but here and there a flash of red or orange appeared. They wore remarkably similar expressions: lips compressed, eyes down, backs slightly stooped. Either they were a beaten people, or they were always tracking something. Something elusive.

That too was a hopeful thought.

“Where will this take us?” he asked Lara.

She looked up, startled. Pulling one of the plugs from the ear, she asked, “What?” A tiny thread of music, more signs of magic, emerged from within the tiny holes of the plugs.

How could a world that creates harmony be without wonder? Derik thought, hoping that these small wonders, these flashes of music, of color, of magic, might mean he had finally reached someplace potent enough ... someplace that could create a home for his burden.

“Where will this take us?” he asked aloud.

“Downtown,” answered a man in a brown jacket and coarse, dark jeans. His hair fell over his face in a manner too careless in appearance to be anything other than carefully practiced.

“Dandy,” Derik breathed to himself, but said aloud, “Thank you.”

The man smiled with a short nod and returned to looking at the ground before him, periodically peaking upward to try to spot something. Lara stared at him; over her eyes, Derik noticed a film ... *Giving her true sight? Obscuring her sight?* He couldn't be sure, but it was certainly more alchemy. He shuffled his feet a bit and tried to find the spot about half a stride in front of him that everyone else seemed to focus on.

Perhaps a master would come to punish any who met their eyes? Glancing back, he found Lara watching him again, though she turned away quickly as their eyes met.

“It was a cold night, but promises to be a warm day,” he said at her, while continuing to stare at the ground before him in order to fit in.

“What?” she responded, taking the plugs out of her ears again. Once more, a tune rose, but a different one this time. This song was ruled by a drum and an unimaginative singer who seemed to repeat the same phrase almost hypnotically. It was a dangerous magic then. A cult magic for those trying to seduce a person to sleep, to lull them into contentedness or worse, dullness.

“Did you lose what you were running from?” he continued more directly. “You were not running at great pace, so I did not think your fear great else I would have ...”

But would he have? These days, could he afford to be gallant? Perhaps not in a city of cats.

She smiled as if he were teasing her, but then looked down and away again. He saw her mouthing, “You're weird” to herself. The interview seemed over. He'd failed to meet her standard. Something which, for a very odd reason, bothered Derik.

“The song is bad,” he informed her.

She looked up.

“It’s a classic.” She disagreed.

“A classic bit of nonsense. An insipid melody with almost no musicianship. Lazy fingering on the chords, and the drummer seeks power. Yes, he creates a heartbeat, but it is the steady beat of a man asleep and not engaged in activity.”

“Oh,” she said, and she looked him up and down, “a musician.”

It seemed to be a lowering assessment, and while Derik agreed that bards often wielded a simple type of creation, he hardly looked down on it as a craft himself. After all, music took from the self and the infinite and wasn’t as miserly or greedy as alchemy, which only sucked from exactly what stood before it and as such was so limited in its variety of effect.

Another carriage came by, stinking of death though it wore a banner proclaiming it burned “clean gas.” Lara chose this one. She entered third, swiping a card from her pocket. Seeing this, he paused and took a step backward. He had no prophecy deck (or whatever this was) with him, and if it were a notification, then it might be dangerous for him to leave a trace of himself anyway. He tugged on his sleeves and balled up his fists under them. It might become a warm day as he promised, but it wasn’t yet.

She took pity. This wasn’t like her. Normally, she wouldn’t go out of her way for a stranger, and a rude one at that. One had to be safe, but he talked a little like a PBS melodrama

and looked a little like he belonged in some old-timey character show. Besides, she liked the dirty smell of him. Check that, the smell of dirt on him. She couldn't really smell him at all.

"Come in," she said, swiping for him. The carriage driver motioned him in with a grumpy look. She walked to the back and found a seat. He settled next to her, standing, with his hand on a loop to keep steady.

"Thank you," he said. There was a bow in his voice, though his body didn't perform it.

"Sure," she said, and he frowned, "You're welcome," she amended, and received a slight smile and a flash of ivory tooth. "Where you heading?"

He paused and studied her. His scrutiny made her press her back deeply into the unyielding cushion. His grip tightened on the loop.

"Downtown," he answered after too long of a pause and then chanced, "I'm looking for work."

She nodded. That, at least, was normal.

"Good luck."

That phrase conjured a genuine smile.

"With all my hopes," he answered, almost as if they had just shared a secret. He looked out the window and saw the stacked buildings blur by, only to be replaced by crushed stone monoliths. Each one higher than the next, and every one taller than a dark wizard's fortress.

"It is frightening," he admitted, and when she didn't respond, added, "being alone in a place such as this. I feel adrift."

“Don’t say that,” she chided, “Don’t act like you don’t belong.”

He heeded the warning and waited, saying nothing more until they reached her stop at the edge of the city. She got out, and he followed. Her shoulders bunched nervously. Being followed was not a good feeling. She increased her pace, and the stranger finally paused and turned. That disappointed a hidden part of her, but once at her office building, she keyed the electronic door open and didn’t turn back.

As he stared at the sludgy river, hardly any ripples broke through its dreary mass. It appeared closer to black than blue or green and if there were fish, plants, or anything living in its murk, he couldn’t see them. The water stood right at the edge of her building and stretched far away from the city. It was wide enough not to be forded even at the deceptively still pace it offered.

“Certainly, this is a dark alchemy,” he said dipping his finger into the water to find it covered with a slime. “I think I understand why they look down now.” He wandered away, glancing back at her building, and noted that every window was shut. Somehow, he needed to find work. Trash skittered down the street, and he saw more shards of glass, broken bottles. It would be unpleasant to work here. Still, if need met labor ... *well, a broken fast promised better days.*

The stretch along the water held a number of factories, office buildings, and a few shops and grubberies. Each building carried its own peculiar smell. The big one smelled of sewers and coal, the tiny one of slaughtered burned meat, and this one smelled of scribes ... dried ink, oil, and grease. The lettering was foreign, which felt peculiar. Why should the translation into this

world allow him to speak its tongue but not read it? Was it an imperfection in the magic? A fault in his own mind?

A quick stroll down the lane suggested three choices for work: A grocer, where his back and muscles might matter more than his unfamiliarity with the oddly shaped fruits and merrily colored boxes; a card shop that sold an assortment of sentiments and pens, but no ink, and a baker's shop. He rejected the diners and coffee shops immediately. He wanted unseen work. They certainly looked for him, and he needed to stay ahead of the chase.

A pet shop offered itself, but he quailed at the kittens locked in their tiny cages. They watched him too carefully, almost as if aware. How such an infiltration could be countenanced was beyond belief. If so easily fooled, these men should still be in caves ... but they had mastered so many mysteries. That cats represented other than the enemy fell low on the scale of possibility. It was a constant in all the worlds he knew. Besides, they were travelers, and all came from the same origin. Their unison feline stare caused him to back him off, and he quickly worked his way past their hunters' vision.

The baker first, then, he thought.

A smell rose of hearty bread. Thick-crust loaves piled in the window. Some were long like a walking stick and others stout and squat like a sounding horn. He admired the golds and deep umbers, pressed his hand against the glass to get closer to the toasted seeds baked into the crusts. One upon the other stacked in a beautiful, orderly avalanche of sustenance. Yes, this place beckoned.

A man led by his stomach falls down the worst of paths.

He entered quietly, smoothing his hair and straightening his cuffs. A doughty woman with skin the color of pumpernickel straightened when he entered. A welcoming smile and a discerning frown battled for prominence on her face. She stood behind a case of cookies, pastries, and other moon- and round-shaped treats. The cook on each item was identical, their shapes veritable twins to each other, but he was disappointed to see such little variety. The cakes, pastries, and loaves were hardly more than bread and jam. The filling smelled of little other than fluff and sugar. He reached into his pocket and placed one of his last coins on the counter.

“Would bread, butter, and coffee be possible?”

She looked at the coin in confusion. At first she thought it a toy. A small, gold-colored fleck of plastic, but the sound against the counter sounded too heavy, and the sheen was too bright. She picked up and turned it over.

“Is this real?” she asked.

“Not the coin of the land,” Derik admitted, “but it should be honored, I would hope.”

She assessed him. Crazy was the simplest answer. Crazy was pretty common. Yet, there was an earnestness to him and a sense of awareness that argued against it. Not that she had any idea of what constituted crazy or any true skill in assessing it, but she thought she knew *nuts* when it came to her door, and if he was off, it wasn't in the worst of ways.

She considered biting the coin. Characters on TV always did that to determine if a coin was real, but she didn't know the taste of gold well enough. He turned his back on her to study

her shelves. His back was straight and his shoulders relaxed. He tilted slightly when he walked though as if used to adjusting to a weight on his side.

“I think you do this well,” he added, “The smell is rich, and the color is good. I think you good enough to chance a Pom de Cerulean, a Ruge, or even a serfitt.” The stranger lifted his hands peaceably, obviously not wanting to offend. “I expect you know your customers well enough, but there is value in challenging, no?”

He turned.

“Do you bake?” she asked, unfamiliar with the objects he named, but still uncertain of whether he was spouting gibberish or if he was ...

“Not as well as you,” he answered. She blushed slightly and took the coin, trading it for a loaf of raisin sourdough and a cup of coffee. If he thought he deserved change, he said nothing. He handed the bread back asking again for a slice with butter.

“Toasted?” she asked.

“If you would.”

She presented it on a paper plate, which he stared at dubiously.

“To the matter of occupation,” he said, eating daintily.

“I don’t have anything,” she answered quickly, looking at the too-full shelves and the too-empty store.

“But you do,” he countered, “If I cannot be entrusted to cook, then I am handy with a broom and a rag. I know I look proud and with a certain degree of accomplishment. I assure you. This would be a favor. Try me, madam.”

Crazy then. Dangerous?

“I really don’t have an opening.”

He licked his lips clean of the butter and blinked at her. He tore off another chunk of bread instead of asking for another slice.

“This is a young sourdough, but well made.” Derik assessed, “This bakeshop has not been in your family for generations. I understand the obligation of survival and commerce. Trust me when I tell you that I am a boon and not a threat. I also do not need employment long term. I will be on my way once my pockets are well-filled,” and to her lack of change in her expression, “No madam, I am no threat to your person or drawers.”

She pretended to dust the surface. He waited, tenting his fingers and closing his eyes.

“A test perhaps?” he said finally.

“Test?”

“Surely it is fair for you to doubt me when you know no history of me. I wish I possessed references you could call upon, but I do not (*dare not*, he thought). Still, I ask for work, not charity.”

Sighing, she relented, “What kind of test?”

“Excellent. I shall return with the ingredients.”

He exited the bakery with a slight hop and turned into the market.

The shapes were wrong, but he smelled deeply. This warmth, this heat, this sour, and this sweet. This full, this binding, and this flourish. And of course, eggs, milk, flour fell into his cart. He studied the mushrooms, but rejected them fearing a tell. An assortment of green stalks and pods made their way into his basket. He knocked on melons with a concentrated frown and shook a can of nuts, discarding fifteen based on their rattle. Finally, he approached the meats and fish. These he studied with a sorrowful expression before dismissing them all as old and weathered.

He swept past the cash registers, announcing that he would pay by end of day, and was out so quickly that no one moved to stop him. He strode down the block crisp with anticipation. A shout passed him, and he heard the slap of leather that meant pursuit. He turned with a soldier's precision, and the grocer and two others stopped suddenly, almost falling over each other.

“Good sirs,” he addressed them, “of course you may watch. Your generosity champions me in a most welcome—indeed, a splendid—way.”

And this peculiarity stopped them. They followed as bid and entered the baker's shop. Others who heard the strangeness also followed. A good crowd of ten or twelve hovered by the shelves and three round tables.

“And as should be,” he said addressing them all, “a test must have witnesses and audience. For if I should fail, it should be noted, but if I win out ...”

And with this he removed a hunter's knife from somewhere unseen and began chopping celery. His hands blurred. The stalk fell to dust as fine as ground pepper, which he sparingly added. Salt, flour, eggs, milk, and a rush of ingredients and an explosion of spices and herbs followed. The knife work was precise. Sometimes, Derik used the tip and other times, the blade. The food chose.

It took a good hour before he paused, and by then an impossible, mismatched brown sludge gathered itself into the bowl. He wiped his brow with a dirty sleeve and then tapped the bowl ritualistically with the pommel of his knife before scooping it out with his hands.

“You must understand,” he said while kneading, “it is not ideal working in an unfamiliar kitchen.”

Around him, more settled and a few smart phones videoed the flurry of movement, the plumes of dust, and the clouds of fruit debris. A little business was done as the smells urged hunger and the cash register added its timpani to his blade's drumming rhythm. His clothes absorbed the battle stain of more than one badly squirted lemon or plum.

“Now, I shall need heat ... flame!” and with a look over his shoulder, he took the bowl into the kitchen proper.”

The alchemy of the equipment baffled him, but with a little experimentation he found the dial that excited the ignition of gas. He made a *tsk* sound, disappointed. His Pom would be tainted by the chemical heat. Still, he spooned a bit of the raw mixture into his bag to feed the mushroom. It absorbed the fifty ingredients quickly, tasting of this world and began pulsing, finding a slightly longer shape, and then thrummed.

Into a pot, he poured the rest. It sizzled immediately. He whisked in some liquor from his own flask to excite the mess and then stirred aggressively.

The smell rose gently as the curves of the Pom began to harden and fluff. Odd flowerings burst from within the swirls of dough. The heat intensified. Derik blinked away sweat, wondering if he'd managed magic instead of cookery. He put the thought away and breathed into the pot, using the pressure of his wind to shape the delectable and guide it upward into flowering puffs of nimbus blue. Then he broke the surface with his knife and from the liquid within pulled out branches like quickly hardening chocolate to lace the Pom and give it an anchor so it wouldn't float away.

When he stopped, he heard the chatter of a full shop. The baker wasn't watching but attending to a line of customers. When he struck the knife against the pot, the ringing resonated through the bakery and caused the stem holding the Pom to shatter.

A satisfying gasp reached him. He deftly caught the treat and with a sweeping motion laid the edible skyscape on the counter for the baker to inspect.

A full horizon sat before her. A golden sun above and a silver moon below tied together with an airy blue sky and puffs of clouds entwined by reaching branches that promised to bloom. Awoken, the room smelled not of sweets or bread, but of a morning above the mountains following a brief snow.

Derik felt strangely refreshed. He expected the effort to drain him. So many nights of flight and days of too little food thinned his blood, but the Pom ... a very poor Pom if he were to be honest ... did reflect and offer. And what else could you truly expect or want from a dessert?

He broke off a piece of cloud and put it in her hands. She inspected it curiously, her wide, round cheeks strained by a smile. Her shelves were a third sold, her shop full, and here in her hands ... she couldn't even feel its weight. It truly floated like mist in her hand despite the cauliflower, carrot, and roots that she saw blended into it.

It was impossible to bite for it had no true substance, but Derik motioned with his mouth, and she slurped at it. The taste was as complex as the ingredients that went into it. Her eyes widened in shock as the texture unwound. It was wet and rough and slick and sharp and soft and cool and boiling and earthy and so many other things simultaneously. It reminded her of her mother's pot roast and of a mouthful of sand earned after being knocked over by a sea wave. At the same time, it tasted of the sweetest fruit compote and the richest vegetarian chili. She couldn't grasp it or make sense of it. Every time it hit a different part of her mouth or tongue, it spoke of something different. She continued tasting it even after she swallowed.

"A marvel," she said quietly and then realized that the room had stopped to await her judgment. "It is ... amazing."

"No," he said stopping her, "No more than I gave you. Too much is grave." His countenance was severe. She removed her hand from the Pom, and he eased back. For the grocer, he broke off another cloud, and the man cautiously sipped. The others watched, hoping.

"Oh yes," he said, "yes."

And then the purchases came. Derik took charge. Not in the cost—he had no idea what a Pom de Cerulean should cost—but of the portion. He could tell that these people were more

starved for sustenance than even he was. It shamed him to charge them at all, but he did need the work and must pass his test.

When they were finally gone, he turned to her.

“Have you a place for me?” he asked.

“If you can do that again,” she answered.

He nodded, but waved at the counter.

“It shouldn’t be done every day. Keep it special. Keep it rare.”

“Imani,” she said, introducing herself.

“Derik,” he said with a nod. “So, I have passed.”

She returned his gold coin to him, and they shook hands.