

The shadow of my father's citadel falls over me and still I tremble. Still I look perpetually over my shoulder as though you follow me, you who are banished from this land forever. In my fever I think that it is you who dries the leaves on the trees, blows away the petals of the rose. But no, it is only autumn, nothing more.

My father will be heartbroken. And you, you cannot lend me words to explain what I have done.

They say that when I was born, blossoms spread on the rose bushes outside my mother's birthing chamber. They say that where I step, blood-red petals spring from the earth. The first, my father tells me, is a legend. The second has been known to happen on occasion, though only by my design.

I was born deep in the northern mountains, far from the great confederacies, where my father nurtured his magic without interference. His was the power of earth, roots of stone and springs of water. My gifts, on the other hand, were merely decorative—grace and beauty and youth forever born anew in spring. Sorcerers traveled from the tradelands to court me, Rosalaia, Blossom of the North. I would have none of them. My father sent them all away. Far better for me to grant my grace at my father's side, take my consorts from the young men of the city, make our land a well-defended paradise.

For centuries I believed that this was the life for which I was intended.

My father hated the west. Great sorcerers ruled great nations through conquest and slavery, not the treaties and alliances that governed our more civilized lands. He never spoke of the reasons for his enmity, so I assumed the lords had offended him in some way.

We could not afford to abolish all intercourse with the western nations. When caravans and emissaries arrived at our citadel, I was banished to my chambers, forbidden to set eyes on the barbarians. But I knew the secret passages of my father's citadel at least as well as he did, and when I tired of my ignorance I slipped out to catch sight of one of these westerners for myself.

I needed no lantern to navigate the darkness. I had played here often enough as a child, and used the passages when I wished to go down to the city, though my father would not have cared if I had left by the front door. As though by instinct I found myself at the ledge that overlooked the audience chamber.

The spyhole was camouflaged within the whorls of my father's throne, so I had a perfect view of the westerner. He had not the courtesy to clean himself before the audience. He wore traveling clothes dull with dirt, and his yellow-white hair clung to his narrow head. He spoke of grain monopolies in a tedious drone, and my father responded with far more courtesy than the man deserved.

Then, as my father consulted with his minister, the westerner's gaze came to rest on the throne. It was as though our eyes met, though reason said he could not see me. Still my heart rushed and pounded, my knees gave way, and I had to wait until my strength returned before I could retreat to my chambers again.

I should have known, even then. The citadel obeys my father's will. He could have kept me in my rooms, the very stones locking me away. Yet only now do I realize he cared not what I saw, as long as I remained unseen. All he wanted

was to keep me hidden from you.

That winter a solitary emissary came to our citadel bearing a seeing-stone. When my father gazed into it, he saw a path of fresh green grass cutting through the snow, a constellation of southern armies set upon it.

You knew of my existence, the girl who made the roses bloom. Even in the civilized east, the Avenarch had many allies. You asked for my hand in marriage, and made certain my father could not refuse.

My father came to me with the terms you had set. His eyes were red, his face worn and polished as river stone. He had aged a hundred years since I had greeted him that morning. He lay the scroll in my lap and shook his head. "You don't have to do this, my daughter," he told me in a voice stung with grief.

I read over the scroll, the promises of extravagant dowry, and did not understand.

"You could flee. Across the ocean, where his agents...."

"Why should I flee?"

"Look to the west, beyond the mountains. See the powers that lie in that accursed realm. Then you'll understand."

I did as my father bade. Shut my eyes, let my perception travel westward along root and bough, out of my father's holdings, through snowbound passes and wild forest. The sweet scent of loam and sap took on a cloying edge, the promise of rot. Rosalaia. The wind whispered my name like petals on silk. Come to me. Let me look at you.

Fear overcame my arrogance then, and I opened my eyes. The smell of dead roses clung to the back of my throat.

"It is a travesty," my father said. "I would not give you to him for all the world."

"Then why don't you send him away like the others?"

With trembling hands my father passed the seeing-stone to me. I saw, then, and knew what would happen if he refused you. Your eastern agents would kill him, claim our holdings and our powers for their own. Then—and here was a message intended not for my father but for me, and only having heard your whispered voice could I perceive it—then your agents would hunt me down and bring me back to you, to serve not as betrothed but as slave.

I looked up from the stone, into my father's face. "I will go to him." I kept my voice steady, full of solemnity and sorrow. Yet my heart leapt with exultation. Here was what I had been born for, here was the life that awaited me, rich and decadent, flowers twining in the bones of a corpse.

He shut his eyes, pressing back tears, valiant as stone. He handed me a golden locket, and out of respect I did not open it, as much as I desired to see your face. He turned from me, stopped at the doorway, hands grabbing the lintel. "He has outlived dozens of wives, my daughter," he said. "Do not think you'll be the exception."

On the day I was to leave my father's citadel, word came that you were dead. Another sorceress had slain your body, sundered your spirit, set herself up as queen in your place. My father wept for joy at the news. I did not weep, not in my father's presence, lest he perceive the nature of my tears.

I knew I should have been glad for my reprieve, for your love would have consumed and destroyed me. You never promised me anything different. But you had chosen me, plucked me from my father's vine, whispered to me secretly through those long nights. I slept with your locket under your pillow to dream of your fair face. With you gone, my purpose was gone as well.

Decades passed. The sorceress who had murdered you in turn let her own life be forfeit, gave the land over to men without magic. The new regime banished all sorcery, replaced true power with common machines. Many refused to deal with such barbarians, but my father had no such scruples. He was happy to trade with the west, now that my betrothed posed no threat.

The breach of my engagement changed me. I was no longer the first blush of spring but the decadence of midsummer, bees among the roses, fruit ripe on the vine. My step was heavy, and the scent of crushed petals lingered as I passed.

One midsummer there came another man from the west. He was nothing like you, a trader and a trader's son, not a thimbleful of power in him. Yet he was handsome enough, bright and cheerful. My every movement fascinated him. He was in love with magic, drunk on it, as only those born outside its grasp can be.

I let Parlan woo me, encouraged him with fair words and smiles, let my heart warm with the thought of his presence. He knew nothing of my true age or nature. Never did I speak of you to him. Enough that he knew I had been once betrothed, widowed before I wed. I could not tell him that my betrothed had died in his grandfather's day, that his homeland made a holiday of your annihilation.

When the time came for him to return to his homeland, he asked me to come away with him. I agreed, let him spirit me away in the night. I told myself I was lonely, too lonely to spare a thought for my father. My heart had been sworn to the west, I had to see for myself the fate I had escaped. I must have known I lied to myself, even then, but the truth was too shameful to admit.

Parlan promised me his hand in marriage. I knew the offer was empty, even if he did not. His family had power and standing; he'd not be allowed to marry a woman from the sorcerous East. But I said nothing, for I wished my lover to see me as less than what I was.

As soon as we approached within ten leagues of my lover's homeland I understood why he had fallen for me so. The air stunk of smoke and oil, and the sun's rays struggled weakly through the cloudless sky. Trees dropped leaves and branches, crops grew pale and lanky as though starved of energy. Animal carcasses littered the ditches, feeding unfamiliar and misshapen vermin. Of course, I thought. You had drawn your strength from the currents of nature, just like me. Your murder had turned this land against itself.

I did not know. I was still innocent. I had no way to see the truth.

At night I wept despite myself, wept at the thought of being trapped in this blighted land. I told Parlan it was homesickness. Close enough to the truth. I had lived too long in my father's artificial paradise. I'd grow accustomed to this place in time.

I never did meet the man who was supposed to become my father-in-law. Parlan set me up in an apartment in a fashionable district of the city and went to share the good news. He returned, predictably, in tears, one cheek red. "He won't hear of it. He says he'll disown me! Oh, Rosalaia, my only love, I will do right by you, I swear it, I'll find work, I'll--"

I placed my hand on his cheek to silence him, to guide his handsome face toward mine. "Hush," I said. "You will not lose me. You need not think of my honor. Don't you see, I gave it all up when I followed you?"

He wept and cursed, but in the end his courage did not match his intentions. His father set up a hasty marriage to a woman below his station, one who could not afford to dishonor even a loveless marriage of convenience. In exchange for this public show of respectability Parlan was allowed to keep me as his mistress. I cared nothing for my reputation, nor for the gifts my lover brought to assuage his guilt. It was a small price to pay for being here, in this hateful city that would have--should have--been our shared domain.

It was the cusp of autumn when the stranger came to my door. A woman as tall as a man, dressed in a plain gray suit, dark hair unfashionably short. Even for a westerner she kept close self-possession, so that I could not read the simplest thing about her. But I was not easy to intimidate, and I greeted her with an innocuous smile.

"You are Rosalaia?" the woman asked, her harsh intonation robbing my name of all poetry.

"I am. Have we been acquainted? For I fear--"

"We have not."

Surely she was an agent of my lover's father, come to send me home. I stood aside and let the woman enter. She stepped only far enough to allow the door to close, then looked me over with eyes of a blue so pale they might as well have had no color at all.

"Why are you here?" she asked me.

I cast my eyes downward. "I realize I have been too foolish and too forward," I murmured, my accent thicker than I usually allowed it. "Forgive me. I have been in love. Surely you must understand this."

I'd meant it as a stupid aside, the words of a coquette. Yet the woman stared, cold and sharp, as though I'd touched truth. It made no sense; this was not somebody to be made the fool by love.

"This isn't a place for you, princess. You should go home."

Princess? What had Parlan said about me? Didn't he understand the danger? "You mistake me—" I began.

"No. I do not." As she spoke she let her self-control loosen so that I might see what lay beneath. Energy, subdued, controlled. Iron and fire and human will, each in precisely measured components. The woman before me was a sorceress in her own right. And her skill and power put my own to shame.

I gave up playing at innocence. "I don't understand."

"There is a reason," she said, "why sorcery has been abolished in this land. You might believe it is to protect the powerless from those who would exploit them. But perhaps it is to protect the sorcerers from themselves. Go home, Rosalaia. You've seen what the Avenarch did to this land. There's nothing for you here."

I looked at her curiously. Did she know of my history? The sorceress who had overthrown the Avenarch was dead, executed under the new laws of this nation. But sorcerers are notoriously difficult to kill.

"And if I choose to stay?"

She shut her eyes, and when she opened them again, she no longer met my gaze. "Then I suppose I'll clean up after you when you're done."

The years in that blighted land passed long as centuries. I saw my lover more and more seldom, and out of respect for him I took no other man. He had given me what I wanted, and I had only myself to blame if I was dissatisfied with the results. The words of the western sorceress lingered in my mind. I could not say why her visit had aroused such fear. Yet I dared not indulge myself even with flowers in winter, lest I draw suspicion.

After several years my lover came to me, his eyes red with the tears that came so naturally to him. "My wife is with child," he told me.

I turned away. I knew he lied. He'd tired of the forbidden and exotic, that was all. To be thrown aside for a common woman stung my pride. But the poison of the land had taken hold of my veins, and I could not stir myself to anger.

"Go to her," I said. "She needs you now."

"Rosalaia," he gasped. "I'm so sorry—"

I had no doubt. Pity tempted me to turn and comfort him. He'd never been strong of will, even at his best. He'd be better off without me.

I was grateful to him, I realized, grateful even for the lie. He had set me free. My thoughts grew clear again, and I knew what I had come to this land to do.

Would you not think they would make the site of your downfall a monument, the spot where your blood soaked the soil a place of pilgrimage? They have not. Instead they have locked it away, set guards around the perimeter to keep your legacy inviolate.

I passed through like shadow, leaving behind nothing but the breath of roses. It is a crater now, where once stood your citadel. Somewhere there would have been your throne, and mine beside you. Somewhere there would have been your bedchamber, where we would have been made as one.

No animals moved across the barren ground. No night-hunting bird crossed the moon overhead. Yet the air was thick with the scent of grass and blossom, welcoming me.

I fell to my knees. The hardpan cracked and turned to loam under my hands. My fingers were roots prying through the soil, hungry for what little power you might have left for me. I breathed in deeply of the blood and rot that feeds the battlefield, coaxes brambles from the bones of the dead.

Finally you've come. I was starting to lose hope.

The plain grew gray and faded, and before me stood a being of light. It showed me the face I had seen in the locket, but it was only an image it wore, as I might put on an embroidered gown for company. This creature had never been human.

My father was so looking forward to meeting you. Rosalaia, mountain rose of the north. How precious you must be, to be kept so carefully hidden away from him. A foul wind stirred the hair at the nape of my neck like a caress.

There were things about sorcery I knew only from their absence. Books my father refused to read, lessons he refused to teach, tales he refused to share. I had no words for the being that stood before me, naked and glorious, skin bright as congealed starlight.

"What are you?" I breathed, tasting perfume at the roof of my mouth.

I am the Avenarch's only son. The only one that matters. He reached out to me, brought me to my feet. Do you want to see?

I did not. But the spirit left me no choice in the matter. It bent forward as though to kiss me, infusing me with its presence, and I saw what you had done. I heard the screams of children and tasted the tears of their mothers. Blood suffused my vision like a veil. How had I gone so long without knowing the power that lies in sacrifice? My father had kept that knowledge hidden from me. But you, you understood it better than anybody. Had you lived, you would have taught it to me. Fed our own children to your golden god, your most enduring creation, as you had for hundreds of years.

I would have learned. I would have been strong, endured what your other brides could not. I was worthy.

Shall we avenge him, mother, bride? I cannot do it on my own, he is torn from me, tossed across the sea, the sea separates us, shall not let us be again as one. But you are born to this, innocence and cruelty, petal and thorn.

It would have been different if you had asked. I could deny you nothing, I know that now. But this being before me was not human, and I had not fallen far enough to follow him.

The spirit's power entered me against my will. Branches ran like blood through my veins, thorns tore out of my flesh. Too late I understood the gray woman's warning. They had outlawed all sorcery in this land to keep this spirit asleep within the earth. And in my thwarted desire I had brought it back awake again.

A voice called my name, over and over, very far away. I did not recognize it. An endless waste of foul pleasure stretched between it and me.

The sky brightened, harsh and pitiless, like a break in the clouds of winter. I recognized, now, the voice of my lover—my true, human lover, not the beast that had tried to consume me. Still the spirit's presence smothered me. Black roses bloomed in my eyes, and I could not see.

"Help her," Parlan screamed, to whom or what I could not tell.

"I have." The other voice was cold and inhuman to my broken ears.

"Look at her, you can't—do something!"

The sound of flesh against flesh. A slap. "You did this. You brought her here, you—how could you have been so stupid?"

"I loved her. How was I supposed to know?"

In the silence wires grew like crystallized iron. The gray sorceress. She had judged me from the first, and I had met her every expectation.

"Why didn't you stop her?" Parlan asked, with more will than I had ever heard from him.

I felt the woman's anger in the silence. "It wasn't worth the scandal. I doubt she'd have survived if you hadn't gone after her."

Parlan took me in his arms. Roots tore from the ground, and I cried out in pain.

"Get her out of here," the sorceress said. "Take her back to her father. That's all that's left for her now." And with those words she banished me from your citadel forever.

I cannot return to my father. I cannot let him see my corruption. This much mercy I still have, though it tears at me to perceive it.

Grass dies where I walk. Still with each step roses bloom, petals red as the blood that thorns tear from hooves and feet.

My lover stays by my side and refuses to leave. In my strongest moments I tell him to return to his wife, but he will hear none of it. Once faithless, in my infirmity he finds an excuse for valor and for loyalty. I will break his heart, I will drink all that is good from him, and still he chooses to stay.

Near the border of my father's holdings we stop to rest. "I can't," I murmur. I rest my head against Parlan's chest, and he strokes my hair as though I am still beautiful. Does he not smell the stench of death that clings to me? Or am I still sweet to him, like roses on a funeral bed?

"What is it, love?" he asks me.

"I can't go back to my father. I don't want him to see me this way." I shiver. I am always shivering now.

"Where do you want to go? Anywhere, I'll take you, we'll find a way, just tell me."

"You should go home."

"I won't leave you, Rosalaia."

I know where I want to go. One gift that demon spirit has granted me. He's told me where to look.

My voice is sweet, pleading, and poor Parlan has no way to know my intent. "Away," I whimper. "Away from all of this, away-across the sea, as far as I can get."

"Of course," my lover says. Of course. He could say nothing but. I have no right to ask this of him. But then, I suppose it is his fault for choosing to stay.

I have always been like this, charming, manipulative, deceitful. Petal and thorn. I have always been the perfect consort for you.