

An oil painting of a person with long dark hair, seen from behind, standing on a rocky bank and looking across a stream. The scene is set in a lush, green forest with trees and flowering plants. The lighting is soft, and the overall mood is contemplative. The text 'A STRANGE PENANCE' is overlaid in the upper right quadrant, and 'CASSANDRA BYRNE' is overlaid in the lower right quadrant.

A STRANGE
PENANCE

CASSANDRA BYRNE



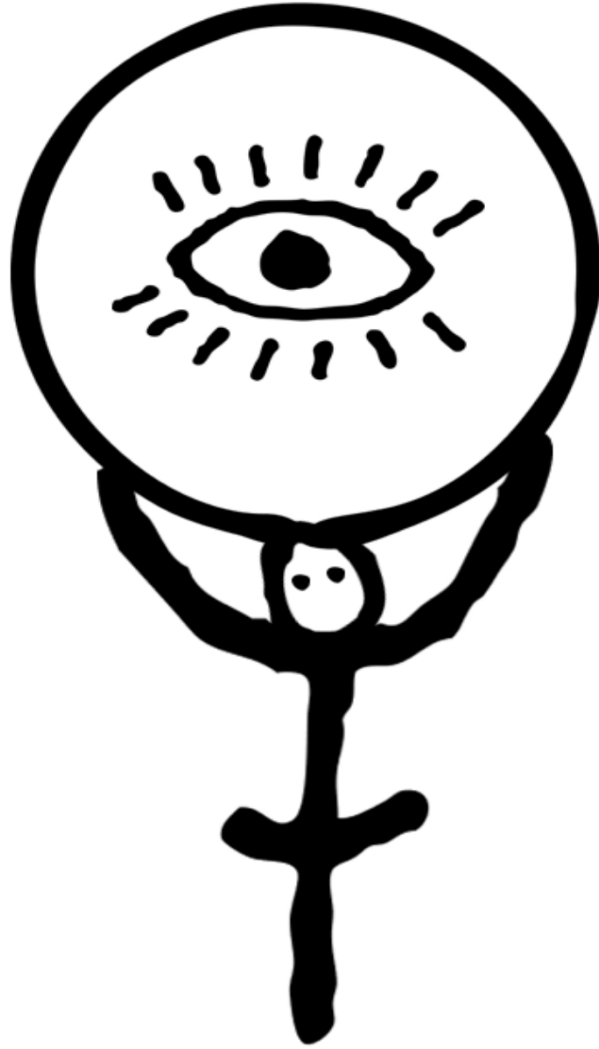
A STRANGE PENANCE

BY

CASSANDRA BYRNE

COVER ART

PARRIS RYAN



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All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without permission from the author or publisher, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law. Before proceeding beyond this page, you are advised to call upon the Many-Eyed Mother (depicted above) for protection from eldritch entities, ghosts, and the all-devouring wrath of the hungering stars. She offers herself freely, without expectation or attachment (which is what it means to love).

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By the time Sebastien turned forty, he knew better than to look at books. They stirred up all manner of emotions in him. Still, he couldn't help himself. His mother, an aristocrat's bastard, taught herself to read while working as a maid in her father's home. When he was a boy, she sometimes brought one home to read to him at bedtime. Most nights he waited for her at the window, then ran to door like an excited pup, praying she'd have a new one in her pack. Sebastien never cared that they lived in poverty—not while his mother's voice could carry him off to other worlds. Worlds of feast and plenty, where happy endings were always assured.

Then she died. Winters grew cold. The books ended up in the fireplace, and when he dreamt, he no longer dreamt of better worlds. Instead, he saw her face; glassy-eyed, cheeks drawn, bones showing through skin. At the end, to his little boy's eyes, she looked like a monster.

"I'm not dying, Sebastien," she'd told him on her deathbed. "I'm becoming something else. I'll still be with you when I'm gone."

But she wasn't. She died and left a wound in him. Went somewhere else and left him all alone. From that moment forward, there lived a great gaping hole in his heart that led to all the warmest, happiest, saddest memories in his life. He could not bear to look inside it. Not unless he got to drinking—and that never ended well. He managed the wound for years, until one night in Volgstadt when he ran afoul of a preening, jack-toothed scholar with a bulging pack stuffed to the seams with books.

Sebastien glowered as the cherub-faced scholar stuffed his mouth with pies and jabbered on and on until his voice scratched and tore at Seb's ears. Too much drink. Too much choler. And that howling wound inside him, hungry and angry and waiting.

One minute Seb was tending the fireplace with a poker, the next the scholar lay mangled on the ground, his jaw splintered off its hinge. Teeth clattered across the floor like a ring of faerie stones. A woman screamed and a half-dozen men jumped up to restrain Seb before he could finish the job. Gods, he wanted to finish the job.

Not Seb's best moment. Not his worst, neither.

The greycoats came. A grim-faced, humorless buck named Hilstrom put Seb in irons and brought him up on charges. Two weeks later a pox-nosed judge declared him guilty from the bench. Seb couldn't read the papers they made him sign. All those lines and scratches looked like sorcery to him. Words could bind a man, or else transport him. He saw his mother in them, and remembered that paper could lead to other worlds.

"Three years," the judge declared, hacking and coughing as he scarfed a jelly pounder down his gullet. "Three years of service, Mr. Pitt, to make amends for the damage and sorrow you have wrought. Our city of Volgstadt will make something useful of you—or see you dead in the process."

Seb took it as a challenge. Not as hard a sentence as he expected. Room and board and a clean slate waiting at the end of it. Better than the rope or the mines. He signed, and the bailiff handed him off to an iron-jawed sergeant with salt-and-pepper muttonchops and a military mein.

"You're Pitt, right? Sebastien Pitt?"

"Folks call me Seb."

"I'll call you what I like, sunshine. My name's Wertham, and you belong to me now. Bound property of the 43rd Expeditionary Army, intended for the Kingdoms of the Sun and the city of Salette."

Sebastien's brow furrowed as he tried to make sense of that.

"Salette? East somewhere? That right?"

"Yeah," the sergeant snorted. "East somewhere. You got family? Anyone should be notified you'll be absent forthwith?"

"No."

"Mm. Alright." The sergeant pursed his lips, pleased by the answer. "You gonna run if I let you have the night?"

Seb thought about it. Maybe if he had a book. A book, and someone to read it to him. He could fall asleep to the sound of their voice and he'd wake up somewhere else far, far away.

"Where would I run? What would it matter?"

"Alright." The sergeant fished a key from his hip. "Take the night." Wertham wagged the key in Seb's face, undoing his irons. "Enjoy yourself. Have a drink, but keep your nose clean, and show up in the morning. Careful what sort of thoughts you let in, right?"

Seb nodded and rubbed his wrists, uncomfortable. "What are we doing in Salette?"

"We're gonna burn it," the sergeant replied matter-of-factly.

"Burn it?"

“That’s right. To the ground. And then we’ll take whatever isn’t nailed down.”

“Strange sort of penance.”

“It’s a strange sort of world, Mr. Pitt. See you on the morrow.”



The expedition mustered the following morning on Westerling Field. Sebastien listened as Wertham read off the assignments. Baggage train. Sebastien found himself in the company of bluecoat laborers, and compellents like himself. They drilled for a week, learning to set and strike the camp. Seb made friends with a sharp-eyed, weasel-faced man named Ptolemy Grinch, whose long, flat nose looked to have been broken a dozen times.

“What’d they pinch you for?” Seb asked Ptolemy one morning.

“Sticky fingers. A bad habit, I’m afraid.”

“Must not be a very good thief.”

“I’m an excellent thief. It’s what comes after I’ve not got the hang of.”

“Oh?”

“After my last score I found my way to the Penny Markets to look for buyers. Spotted a likely lad walking arm-in-arm with a beautiful woman and offered to sell them a piece for a fair price.”

“And?”

Ptolemy gave a cluck of his tongue and smiled ruefully. “That likely lad, beardless as he was, turned out to be a captain of the watch—and that beautiful woman—?”

"Yeah?"

"Sister to the man I burgled."

Seb couldn't help but laugh. "Bad luck, that."

"Bad luck, perhaps, or fate. What about you?"

"Staved in a man's face with a fire poker."

"Did he deserve it?"

"What's it matter? It's what he got."

A week later, the expedition departed. A strange tightness clutched at Seb's chest as he passed through Southgate and across the bridge to the Ostern Highway for the first time in his life. On the other side he ran to a ditch, bent over, and emptied his stomach onto the dirt.

"You alright?" Ptolemy asked, casting a worried glance toward the footmen assigned to keep an eye on the compellents. "Gotta get back in line."

"My stomach. I don't know, I'm..."

"You're shaking."

Seb held up his hands and looked at them. He couldn't stop shaking. He looked back at Volgstadt and began to cry.

Ptolemy's face softened. "You've never been outside the city before, have you?"

"No."

"It's alright. You'll be back before you know it."

A thousand thoughts jockeyed for position in Seb's mind, like racing dogs before the bell. A sea of familiar faces flooded past him. Midge and Sal, who always saved a loaf of honey-soaked bread for him. Black-Tooth Henry, who sang outside Seb's window on summer nights while grilling up fresh-caught hornmellet or snappers plucked from the depths of Shitwater Watch. *Three years.* Henry would likely be dead by the time Seb returned.

What are mornings without the bells of Pensmark Cathedral? Or afternoons without the snap of dogs and trumpets at Westerling Field? Seb could not imagine an evening without the riot and laughter of the Penny Markets, or the raunchy promises of the pretty men and loose women who worked the Penstrasse, Chipper's Nook, and Prowler's Row.

Will I still be me? Will Volgstadt still be Volgstadt?

His stomach heaved again, and the footman watching Ptolemy and Seb lost his patience. "Back on the line! Not losing two of you on the first day." The soldier collared them and yanked them back into line on the caravan train. "If you're gonna throw up, do it as you go. You can walk and vomit at the same time."

Volgstadt faded into the distance. The Ostern Highway spread before them. A sea of green rose up on either side, fields of flowers in pink and teal and clouds of butterflies moving between them. As they walked, Sergeant Wertham or one of the other footmen set a cadence with a mix of military songs countered by the bluecoat's foremen, who favored union rhymes and old Volgstadt standards.

Some weeks later, on the road near Treiffelberg, they found a towering bonfire. Silver and gold glittered at its base, and a pile of

iron glowed at its heart. Amongst the branches of the trees lining the side of the road, men and women hung by their ankles from winding vines, skinned and left to sway.

"Handiwork of the Prince-in-Spring," said Ptolemy, a note of feverish exultation in his voice.

"Faerie folk did this?" asked Seb.

"Yes, waking from their winter's death. See how he dressed them?"

Crowns of white and yellow flowers were sewn into the brows of the flayed folk, and spring blossoms garbed their skinless limbs. Bright pops of color on a sea of bone and dripping scarlet.

"I didn't think faeries were real."

"Oh, yes, very real indeed. It's different away from the city. The farther you get from civilization, the stronger the old gods grow. The Hungering Stars. We'll see them soon enough. With fewer prayers, it's easier for them to answer when people call. Maybe these folk wronged someone they oughtn't have and someone prayed for the fey to punish them. Of course, maybe it was them that prayed, and this is how the stars saw fit to answer."

"It's forbidden to pray under the sight of the stars," said Seb.

"It's only forbidden for poor folk. The rich do what they like. That's because there's power in saying what you want. Demanding it and dealing for it."

Seb did not sleep well that night. Howls in the distance. Sergeant Wertham set what seemed like half the camp to stay on watch and ward off mischief from faerie folk and button men. An uneasy night, full of shadows and bonfires and stories of second-hand horrors.

Seb's legs ached from the journey. His arms were sore from the labor. In a few short hours it would be dawn and he would need to strike the camp and begin the day again.

The night sky unfurled above him, a convulsion of violent, apocalyptic color. Emerald knots and streaks of sapphire, swirling in contention with ice-blue whites and ichorous yellows. The constellations of the Faerids and the Daevols, vying for dominance. The Hungering Stars. The living gods of the night sky.

His heart caught at the sight of them.

I want a book, Seb prayed. I want a book that I can read. One I can curl up in and be safe inside. He thought of his mother. How nice she smelled, how tall and pretty she looked when she came home each night. The way his heart leapt at the sight of her and how the long dark strands of her hair got tangled up in everything.

This was not a new prayer, he realized. He'd been saying it for years. He'd been saying it that night at the tavern, when the preening scholar arrived with his bulging satchel. Seb's brow furrowed, and he touched for the briefest moment, a memory of worlds-that-almost-were.

Maybe I could have asked him to teach me to read? Maybe I could have—he struggled with the thought—maybe I could have protected him from people like me, and he could have taught me. What a foreign idea. He wondered if perhaps the stars were trying to answer his prayer even then. If they'd heard him that night in Volgstadt and sent the scholar in his way.

I'm sorry, Seb thought. To the stars or the scholar, he wasn't sure. *I didn't know.*



Green turned to rock, and rock to sand. The Ostern Highway ended abruptly at the cliffs by Ottersvauld, and Seb's heart leapt into his throat. A stark landscape stretched before him, beautiful for the breadth of its desolation. Ferocious winds whipped across the badlands, stirring up writhing sand dervishes in their wake. Words formed in the frenzy of their movement. Although Seb could not read them, his heart swelled and his forearms pricked up with gooseflesh at the sight.

He shook his head in disbelief. "I never imagined—"

"*Rhaath Sevatra.*" said Ptolemy Grinch, joining Seb at the precipice. "The Sands of Sorrow. Not a bit of green for miles at a stretch. A wonder anything can survive in such a place."

"There are cities out there?"

"Oh yes. The nine cities of The Sun Kingdoms. Ancient when the first stones of Volgstadt were carved from the mountains."

A memory tugged at him. Painful and red. His mother's voice, and a book of histories. He followed the thread back to its source. A yellow and black book, a wasp emblazoned on its cover. "Queens. They're ruled by Queens, but they're not—"

"—not human," Ptolemy agreed, nodding sagely. "No. I met a man who said he witnessed one of their coronations. When the old queen dies, her priests snatch up all the girls under the age of eight and test them. Feed them some sort of jelly they gather from ancient hives out in the desert. Most of the girls die on the spot. Some go mad. One—only one—*changes.*"

"What do you mean, 'changes?'" Seb asked him.

"I don't know. Not human. Not all the way at least." Ptolemy shrugged. "Changed. Some sort of monster."

They stood in uneasy silence, looking out across the badlands. Seb thought of his mother. The way death changed her.

I will die out there, Seb realized. Even if I live, I will die. He thought again of the scholar, jaw unhinged, teeth strewn across the floor. *Perhaps that's for the best.*

It took three days for the full body of the 43rd Expeditionary Army to muster along the heights of the Ostervauld Cliffs. Only then did Seb understand the scope of their undertaking. An enormous tent-city rose up for miles around, and a sea of strangers flooded in to fill it. Soldiers, of course, but hunters, laborers, cooks, and crafts-folk as well. A bulwark to supply the army as it crossed the badlands.

Three weeks to prepare for the crossing. Engineers and laborers repaired and expanded the system of pulleys and lifts used by trade caravans to traverse the cliffs. Hunters decimated the populations of local wildlife in an attempt to fill so many hungry bellies. A company of soldiers dug a five-mile trench to bring in water from a nearby lake.

Even after a lifetime working in construction, Seb never saw anything like it. In the evenings, he drank and he wandered, astounded by the ramshackle sprawl. A city of wagons and canvas. A game of dice in the dark. A lantern-jawed woman humming tunes as she strung clothes up on a line to dry. Above, the hungering stars waxed brightly, twisting in a riot of color.

One fateful night, Seb found himself in the company of two bluecoats and a bottle of bitters from Port Sorrow. The three were long past the point of madness when Ptolemy stumbled into the tent clutching a roll of parchment in his right hand. His grin was a bit too broad for Seb's liking.

"What've you got there?" Seb asked, eyes narrowed. "You look like the cat that swallowed the canary."

"A map," said Ptolemy, bursting with excitement.

"And just where'd you find it?"

"Some officer's tent. He left it lying out unattended. Thought I'd keep it safe."

"Couldn't have satisfied your curiosity with a quick peek?"

"Sticky fingers, Seb. Can't help it, I'm afraid."

At the mention of the map, the bluecoats roused themselves from the haze of alcohol and opium. Sour Todd, a broad-shouldered brute of a man, and Tom Whistler, a graybeard all covered in tattoos.

"A map, is it?" asked Sour Todd. "Lay it out. Let's have a look."

Ptolemy rolled it out across a low table, and set a lantern on a hook to illuminate it.

"Is this us?" the graybeard murmured, fingering a charcoal 'x' upon the map. "We're not even halfway there."

"And the easy part behind us," said Grinch. He traced his finger along a route from their position to a city, and then another, and another. "Only then, the long stretch to Salette."

Sour Todd's fist came down hard on the table. "A year to make that journey. Eight months if we're lucky."

Tom Whistler rubbed his chin, unhappily. "Not what I signed up for. Not at all. We should run."

"Tonight. While we still can." Todd growled. "Once we're on the sands, we'll be stuck with no way out. We could make for the mountains and camp on the far side of the lake. It's a straight shot to KuscheInstadt from there."

"And get there by winter?" asked Ptolemy. "Better to bake in the sun than freeze in the cold."

"All this goddamn talk," Seb snapped, finally joining them on his feet. "You all know what happens to anyone that runs."

The men exchanged a knowing look. Sergeant Wertham kept company with a group of trackers tasked with rounding up deserters. Of those that tried to run, none to date got far. Wertham always brought them back and made a show of taking fingers and toes as payment for his trouble.

Whistler drew a line along the map. "Perhaps we wait until Corbeau. Steal some supplies. Make for Elisee, then Maisonville. From there, west to KuscheInstadt."

None of the names meant anything to Seb. Alien, terrible sounding places. None certain. None home. He snatched the map off the table, crumpled it into a ball, and pocketed it. All this goddamn talk. Prattling on like that scholar.

"No one's leaving," Seb hissed, though it might have been the alcohol speaking through him.

Sour Todd and Tom Whistler stared at him, red-faced and fuming. Ptolemy sank back from the table, eyes flashing between each of the three men.

Let them try it, Seb prayed. Gods-that-be, let them bloody try it. He took a long draught from the bottle of bitters.

“What’s wrong with you?” Todd snapped, stepping forward to give Seb a hard shove. “Give me that map.”

Without thinking, Seb caught Todd’s hand by the wrist. He felt the wicked turn at the corners of his lips, and saw his own monstrous smile reflected in Todd’s eyes. He twisted Todd’s wrist, lunged, and brought the big man’s face down savagely on the corner of the table. The bluecoat let out a sharp, ragged cry and slumped, twitching, to the ground.

Seeing blood, Tom Whistler didn’t hesitate. The graybeard pulled a knife from his belt and came on fast. Seb felt it sink into his palm. *What sweet fire!* A kind of agony that made him feel alive. Seb snapped his head back and struck Whistler with a vicious headbutt, and another, and another. And then the knife came loose and the two men were grappling on the ground.

The bluecoat wrestled Seb onto his back and clambered onto him. Seb tried to grab hold of him, but his blood-slicked hands made it impossible to get a grip. Somehow, the graybeard clawed back his knife. A bright flash in the candlelight as he brought it down for the kill.

The knife never came. It stopped short. Tom Whistler lurched to his feet, eyes wide with shock. Ptolemy stood behind him, trembling. As Whistler turned, Seb saw what happened. Another knife—this one

planted firmly in the bluecoat's back. The old goat took two steps toward Ptolemy Grinch, and went down.

"You alright?" asked Ptolemy, offering Seb a hand.

"Yeah," Seb muttered, climbing back to his feet. "Why'd you help me?"

"You're my friend."

"I'm not—"

Before he could finish his sentence, the canvas flap at the entrance to the tent opened, revealing Sergeant Wertham, clean-shaven and sober-eyed. A pair of shaggy mountain hounds flanked him menacingly. The sergeant surveyed the bloody scene before him, judgment hanging in the air.

"Imagine my surprise as I stroll through camp tonight—" he began at last, "—savoring the evening air and what few moments of peace I get—to be disturbed by the sound of cracking bones and this disordered mayhem." The sergeant's eyes hardened. His voice lowered to a growl. "What's the meaning of all this?"

"They stole a map," Ptolemy blurted, lying boldly. "They planned to desert and asked us to come. We refused. When we took the map, they attacked us."

Wertham entered the tent warily and signaled to someone behind him. A young, blonde-haired woman in leathers knelt to examine the two bluecoats. When she rolled Sour Todd over, he left half his face behind.

Looking at Wertham, she shook her head.

"Where's the map now?" Wertham asked.

Seb drew the crumpled parchment from his pocket and handed it over wordlessly. Wertham looked it over, folded it neatly into quarters, then tucked it into his belt. The sergeant cast a long glance in Seb's direction. "Not very talkative, are you sunshine?"

"Never been much for chatter."

"It happened as he said?"

"More or less."

"Ah," said Wertham, his dark eyes twinkling. "There it is. *More or less*. You think I don't remember you, Ptolemy Grinch? Or you, Mr. Pitt? I think if I went digging for more I might find a reason to hang one or both of you. Nevertheless, two bodies is enough work for the evening—and by hell or high water, I will find a use for you. If it is violence you men crave, you shall have it."



A night of shovels and loam at the edge of camp. Seb felt the alcohol run off him in his sweat as he and Ptolemy dug a pair of graves. Sergeant Wertham watched them from a nearby stump, chewing a stalk of long grass. More than once, Seb wondered if the grave he was digging was his own—but when the sun came up, Wertham helped them put the bluecoats in the ground. The sergeant said a few words over the two men, then spat as if to seal them in place.

"Right," said Wertham, casual as could be. "That's them sorted. Now for the two of you."

A pair of irons landed at Seb's feet. His stomach turned. Wertham's hand rested at his hip, upon the hilt of a long knife, and there was something playful in his eyes. A test. He shared Seb's taste for violence. Seb picked the irons up and clapped them on without protest.

“Good choice, sunshine.”

Next came a winding trail along the Ostervauld Cliffs. Noisy pulleys and rickety lifts filled the air with clank and clatter. All were loaded with supplies from the expedition above, bound for staging grounds below. Along the trail Seb saw a pair of blackbirds in a thorned tree, and a wake of high-collared vultures gathered round the carcass of a mountain lion. He returned their dead-eyed gaze as he passed.

At the bottom of the cliffs they found a makeshift encampment nestled in a circle of stones, far from the staging grounds. An odd collection of scoundrels were gathered round the fire’s dying embers. A hulking brute of a man with cauliflower ears and cracked spectacles plucked at the strings of a lute. Nearby, two well-muscled, broad-jawed women, indistinguishable save for their scars, fixed saddlebags to a donkey.

As the three men approached the camp, they were greeted by a dark-haired man in green and gold whose cloak marked him as one of Treiffelberg’s elite rangers.

“Mr. Shrift,” said Wertham, clasping the man’s hand warmly.

“Sergeant.”

“Is Lord Volmarke about?”

“He’s out and about. Should return shortly. Brought him a gift, have you?”

“Something like that.” Wertham stepped aside and motioned Seb and Ptolemy forward. He introduced them as he unfastened their irons. “Sebastien Pitt and Ptolemy Grinch, you have the privilege of meeting Harlaan Shrift, master of the 43rd’s scouts.”

“Gents.”

Wertham unceremoniously dumped a sack with the two men’s belongings onto the ground. “Mr. Shrift is Lord Volmarke’s second. From this day forward you’re part of their command, where you shall trouble me no more.”

“No more tents?” Seb asked, an eyebrow up.

“No more tents, Mr. Pitt! You’re scouts now. Think of it as a promotion. You’ll be blazing a trail for the 43rd across the Rhaath Sevatra.”

Harlaan Shrift squared up with the two of them, appraised them both, then offered each a hand and a draught from his waterskin. His hands were a match for Seb’s own, calloused, knotted with scars, and leathery to the touch. “Welcome to the sands.”

In the days that followed, Seb found himself at ease amongst the misfits assembled under Lord Volmarke’s command. The twins, Phoebe and Veda Nikolaicha, rarely left each other’s side. They murmured constantly to one another in the thick accent of Helsgrad’s mining clans, and found misfortune a source of humor. Harlaan Shrift, the ranger, did not speak much. When he did, it was to offer insight into the Rhaath Sevatra. He showed Seb and Ptolemy how to find roots and herbs in the shade of cracks and crevices. The brute with cauliflower ears, Gregor Simms, recited poetry in the evenings, or else sang sweet and melancholy tunes.

And then there was Volmarke himself. A man of sharp words, but generous with his laughter. Seb took careful note of the blood-and-brass ring Volmarke wore upon his middle finger. It marked him as a member of Volgstadt’s disgraced aristocracy, crushed in the Ostermark Rebellion. With honey-blond hair and green-blue eyes, the lord looked far too posh to survive the badlands. In spite of that, he seemed immune to the journey’s rigors. Ever alert, and always on the move. Restless with energy even after a long day in blistering heat.

Each night Volmarke wandered off from the others, knelt, and prayed under the sight of the stars. Something about the pretty lord reminded Sebastien of a well baited fish hook. Dangerous, yet impossible to ignore. Volmarke caught Seb staring more than once.

Weeks passed, and the wonders of the Rhaath Sevatra unfolded around them. Great swarms of jellyfish called night drifters floated high above them throughout the day, and descended upon the sands each night. They combed the desert for burrowed prey with barbed

pseudopods—lizards and such. It was only Harlaan Shrift's shrewd eye for campsites that kept the scouts from their grasp.

Other terrors waited. Fields of parched, cracked earth, where geysers of toxic gas scorched the flesh and stirred visions of other worlds. A clacking, slithering beast came unseen one night, and dragged the twins' donkey off into darkness. The beast did not flee far before it began to feast. For hours they listened to the crack and pop of bone and gristle. In the morning Seb found splintered bones not far from camp, marrow sucked dry.

One night as Seb lay sleeping, the presence of a delicate hand upon his shoulder startled him. He reached for the dagger at his hip, but stopped when he saw Volmarke's face. With one finger to his lips, the lord bid Seb remain quiet. Seb followed Volmarke's gaze to a nearby ridge. There, a shaggy creature cut an intimidating silhouette against the blazing bone and yellow stars of that night's sky. It was not alone. Three more joined it on the ridge.

Maybe they prayed for dinner, Seb thought darkly, and the stars delivered us to them.

Casting his eyes about the camp, he saw that he and Volmarke were not the only ones awake. Gregor Simms snored loudly, pretending to sleep. His eyes were fixed squarely on the creatures upon the ridge. Harlaan Shrift's hand rested on the haft of his spear, and the twins held their picks close to their chests. Even Ptolemy Grinch, wild-eyed with fear, fingered the hilt of the same knife he'd used to kill Tom Whistler.

"Stay close to me," Volmarke whispered.

"Yes, my lord."

"No lords in the desert, Pitt."

The beasts crept closer. They slid down from the ridge of the dune with easy, silent grace. They paused at the bottom of the ridge, then edged forward. One bent low over the twins, sniffing at Phoebe. All hell broke loose. Veda sprung up behind the beast and brought her pickaxe down, lodging it in the creature's back.

Impossibly, the creature did not go down.

The monster howled, barked and shifted its weight. A heavy blow sent Veda through the air, across the campsite. As Phoebe scrambled to her feet, another creature lunged for her. It took her face in its clawed hands and bit down hard with sharp canines. Her screams mingled with the sickening crunch and pop of splintering bone.

As the rest of the scouting party leapt to their feet, the creatures reacted with surprise. Gregor Simms and Harlaan Shrift took one quickly—a precision strike from the tip of Shrift’s spear caught the beast in the neck. It turned, roaring and gurgling, blood spraying from the wound, took three steps toward the two men, and fell to its knees.

Volmarke dashed across to Phoebe’s side. Her screams reached a fever pitch as it lifted her from the ground. Seeing Volmarke, the monster turned and took a wild swing at him, releasing her. He slid low, beneath the blow, and slashed open the backs of its legs, blade finding sinew and tendon. Sebastien reached for the first weapon that came to hand—a heavy sledge for driving stakes into the ground. With the creature’s attention fixed on Volmarke, Seb lined up a heavy blow aimed for the knee.

Cracking bone. A primal howl. Seb roared back at it, and brought down another blow, workmanlike. No more noise from it after that.

Volmarke hunched over Phoebe to check on her. Seb looked on with horror. Still alive, but badly wounded. She blinked in confusion, eyes bloodshot, orbital bone fractured—a pair of holes gouged in her cheek where the beast bit down on her. Volmarke pulled her to her feet and pressed the military pick back into her hand.

“On your feet, soldier.”

Another four beasts clambered across the ridgeline and made their descent. Ptolemy, Simms, and Shrift held a line together. Ptolemy with torch and dagger, Simms and Shrift with axe and spear. Phoebe, face mangled, staggered across the camp and pulled her sister up.

Whatever considerable advantage the creatures possessed in brute strength, they held little appetite for pain. They gathered noisily at the base of the ridge, barking and howling. Unwilling to give ground, and too cowardly to seize it. An uncomfortable standoff ensued.

“What do we do?” Simms barked, glancing toward Volmarke.

Before he could reply, a hulking specimen appeared at the top of the ridge. It slid down the dunes, and lesser creatures parted so it could pass. The beast surveilled the scene before it, familiar intellect evident on its face. *Her face*, Seb realized. Mother to the pack. Her eyes lingered on the sight of the mangled corpse at Seb’s feet and she threw back her shaggy head and loosed a low, mournful howl.

All at once, the beasts surged forward.

Madness, Seb thought. *This is madness*. He stumbled backwards toward the campfire.

A backhand from the pack leader sent Ptolemy’s torch spinning off into darkness. Shrift’s spear darted out, but another beast caught it by the haft and snapped it like a twig. A backhand to Simms sent the big man sprawling as if he were a gnat to be swatted off. Deprived of his spear, Shrift pulled the long knife from his boot and grappled with the beast.

On the left, Volmarke and the twins held fast. One of Volmarke’s hatchets tumbled through the air, end over end, and caught the pack leader in the shoulder. Enough to get its attention. Seb watched the two square up—the pretty lord with his fine and slender frame, against the hulking fury of the sands, all power and rage. As Volmarke leapt to Shrift’s defense, the pack leader snatched him out of the air, raised him high by the neck, and roared again.

Somehow, it felt familiar. Sebastien felt as if he were looking back in time, to the inn in Volgstadt and that poor scholar he’d made a mess of. Would that be Lord Volmarke’s story? A fine red ruin, and a circle of teeth?

Sebastien found his footing and roared back. Primal and deep. He beat his chest in challenge, and held his hammer high. “Me! You

fight me!”

The pack leader’s eyes found him. Flashed to the corpse of its mangled mate. It bared its canines.

“That’s right,” Sebastien growled, thumping his chest again. “I did that.”

Volmarke dropped to the ground, gasping for air and Sebastien menaced forward, sledge held at the ready. He felt the choler rising in his body. Above, the night sky churned above them. Ribbons of bloody scarlet formed eyes amongst the stars upon a broad slate of whites and yellows. Bone, gristle, and blood. The Einvars. A butcher’s sky.

You best be watching, Seb swore to them. I will make you such an offering. I will kill this beast and carve my name in its chest and you will answer all my prayers.



For all the strangeness of the sands, fame felt stranger still. Tales of that night spread quickly. All around the expedition’s campfires, people whispered of the sand-beasts and their leader, and the conscript who killed it. The bluecoats who would have seen Seb hanged a few weeks earlier now claimed him as an honorary member of their labor unions. Volmarke’s scouts now treated Seb and Ptolemy as brothers.

Sebastien worried Volmarke might resent the story of his heroics, but the young lord’s thirst for glory appeared unburdened by ego. From that point on, Volmarke kept Seb close. The two men often took watch together, sometimes joined by Ptolemy, trading songs and stories in quiet voices as the violent constellations of the sky boiled and burned above them.

Seb liked the way the fire danced on Volmarke’s face.

Months passed. By day they blistered, by night they froze. A campfire is a strange place to call home. No walls or ceilings, and on the sands privacy meant danger. Odd, in such a place, to find family

for the first time in so long. Nevertheless, amongst Volmarke's scouts, Seb felt safe.

When the 43rd Expeditionary Force neared the city of Solzen, Volmarke, Sebastien, and the other scouts were given leave by the masters of the expedition to enter the city before the expedition's main body. A vast brass-and-stone metropolis burning like a torch on the horizon, built upon the banks of a wide, slow running river. Metal filaments woven through the architecture glittered in the sun. Seb's breath caught at the sight of it.

Massive beyond even Volgstadt, yet dwarfed by the desolation of the badlands.

"Solzen," Volmarke said, bringing his horse to heel as the scouts crested a final dune. "On my right, Sebastien."

They kicked their horses to a trot. Sebastien could scarcely imagine the tastes and sounds that waited for him within those walls. His mouth watered at the thought of salted pork, fresh fruit, and the bite of bitters and ale. The city's main gates remained unbarred and only loosely guarded. Sebastien's eyes wandered up the walls as they passed.

Insects everywhere.

A thousand faces stared back from above—alien-eyed wasps and insects etched on every surface in loving detail. Even the gates themselves were carved in their likeness, glittering green-and-gold in the firelight of torches. The people of the city were people, like any other. Rich and poor. Some in flowing robes and fine silks, others wrapped in tatters.

The smells. *Oh, the smells.* Sebastien's belly growled, and a ravenous hunger overtook him.

"What do you know of Solzen?" Volmarke asked Sebastien.

Sebastien risked a glance. He found it hard to look Volmarke in those blue-green eyes. "A little. Wild nights full of dancing. Festivals of fire. Witches for queens. My mother read to me when I was little."

Volmarke laughed incredulously. "You're a reader? I wouldn't have pegged you for that."

"Not me. My mother. She died before she could teach me."

"Ah," said Volmarke, a touch of sadness in his voice. "You were young?"

Sebastien nodded. "Five, I think, or six."

Volmarke clucked his tongue. Still pretty, despite the scars earned in the badlands. "I lost my mother young as well. The poxy flush. Not supposed to talk about it. Father doesn't like to be reminded that we're mortal."

"I don't talk about it much neither."

"World's full of tragedies, Sebastien, made all the more tragic by our silence."

"I prefer to drink my tragedies away."

"How has that worked for you?"

Seb barked with laughter. "Not well, my lord."

Volmarke cast a sly grin toward Sebastien. "Perhaps tonight you'll allow me to show you a few alternatives to salve that pain you carry with you. And my name is Edmund—I told you, there are no lords in the desert."

They spent the night at The River's Edge, a posh establishment filled with wealthy travelers from all corners of the world. Music filled the air. Scantly clad men and women served up gargantuan aphids and boiled caterpillars, whose delicate flesh tasted as sweet as anything from Volgstadt's Penny Markets. Each time Sebastien reached for a glass of wine, Volmarke—Edmund—deftly intercepted him.

"Not letting me drink?"

"I promised alternatives. I want you sober."

"Alternatives?"

The lord leaned in and Sebastien noticed his lips for the first time. Soft and inviting. His heart caught. "Come on," said the lord.

"I'm not—"

"Come on," Volmarke repeated with a laugh, pulling Sebastien to his feet. "I've got a surprise for you."

Volmarke led him up two flights of stairs to a room overlooking the glittering waters of the Solezette. There, in a canopied bed, upon the finest silk-and-crimson bedsheets Sebastien ever saw, a book waited for them. The sight of it sent a wave of excitement and nausea through him.

Strange sounds carried from the window. Songs of this distant land, unlike the ones he grew up with. Queer and throbbing, all drums and a chorus of alien instruments.

The stars writhed in the sky beyond.

Volmarke began to read. Voice low and rich, full of passion and mischief. Certain and sure. He did not stumble over words the way Sebastien's mother did. Seb crossed the room, called by the silk of Volmarke's voice, and sat uneasily upon the bed.

I have tumbled through some door into another world. Where is this place? How can this be real? I don't deserve this. In his mind's eye, he saw the scholar, bloody and broken, teeth scattered upon the floor.

The thought made him angry.

"Why?" Seb snapped, cutting Volmarke short. "Why all this for me?"

Volmarke set the book down, considering him. "I see you, Sebastien Pitt. I know what you are, and I don't care."

And for the first time, Seb saw Volmarke as well. Not a pretty, honey-blond lord out of place in the company of murderers, but a kindred spirit. Scars and anger and a boiling rage equal to Seb's own, somehow tempered and refined to deadly focus. And somewhere, behind it all, a scared boy watching memories of his mother transformed by plague and death.

"All my life, I wanted out. Away from my father. Away from everything. You understand that, don't you?"

"I don't deserve it," Seb muttered. "I don't."

"Maybe not," said Volmarke, moving closer. A hand upon Seb's cheek. A kiss. "Maybe neither of us do." The anger fled from him, replaced by hunger. "But we'll take it anyway, because we can. And when we go back to Volgstadt they will rain laurels on us."

"I don't want laurels."

"What do you want?"

Seb's voice cracked. "You. This."

"Then have me. Life's too short to want something and not take it."

Another kiss, and another. Volmarke stripped off his shirt, and pushed Seb back onto the bed with one firm hand. Stronger than he looked and burning like the high heat of the badlands. Seb melted underneath him, sinking into the fine silk sheets of the canopied bed.



Two hundred days to cross the Rhaath Sevatra and settle in the shadow of Salette. After its arrival, the 43rd Expeditionary Army encircled the city, cut off trade, and laid siege to it. A hundred trebuchets cracked and whined from dusk to dawn. Great rocks thundered on the city's walls to no effect.

Seb missed being on the sands. Tempers flared as the siege dragged and infighting broke out amongst various factions of the expedition. Unhappy bluecoats agitated for early return to Volgstadt, whilst mercenaries hired in Solzen and elsewhere seemed content to draw a salary so long as the city's walls remained intact. Volmarke's scouts were no exception. Phoebe and Veda often bickered and drank, while Simms and Shrift disappeared for days at a time without word or warning.

Even Volmarke simmered as if he might boil over.

Only Ptolemy's spirits remained high. Always a bounce in his step and a jaunty tune on his lips. His sticky fingers frequently appeared with something fancy in them—and while the rest of the expedition struggled to stay fed, the thief began to develop something of a paunch.

Seb found that quite suspicious. One day, after Ptolemy left, he went through the man's bags carefully and took stock of it. Fine rolls of silk. Fresh figs. Even jewelry. Nothing of the sort one might come by honestly around the camp.

He gathered up a few choice items and went looking for Volmarke. He found the lord in his tent, half dressed, with an open bottle of wine beside him. Without a word, Seb dumped Ptolemy's loot onto the bed.

Volmarke lifted a jeweled hairpin and examined it. "What's this?"

"He's got a way in."

"Who?"

"Ptolemy."

Volmarke's blue-green eyes dulled by wine, guttered for a moment before sparking brilliantly to life as he processed this new information. "Gather the twins. Find Simms and Shrift. Tell no one else."

"And you?"

"I'll talk to Ptolemy."

Hours later, they gathered by the river's edge, with the walls of Salette looming in the far distance. A makeshift altar smoldered with a burnt offering along the riverbank. Volmarke's face was painted

with ash, and he wore a suit of blackened plate. Volmarke motioned wordlessly to Ptolemy, and the little man stumbled forward and began drawing in the mud with a long stick. "I found an old tunnel that leads from the riverbank into the basement of the old palace. It was repurposed at some point and turned into a library now. Nothing but dusty old books and near-sighted scholars."

Volmarke laid out his plan. "We will enter through the tunnel. From there, we'll split up. Sebastien, Ptolemy, and myself will set fire to the library. Simms and Shrift will head out into the streets along with the twins to set fires throughout the city. I've notified the leaders of the expedition of our intent. They are preparing for for an assault upon the walls once the fires are lit."

"How do we get out?" Simms asked.

"We don't. Once we set the fires, the main body of the 43rd will attack. We must each find a place to hole up. When the 43rd breaches the walls, link back up with the main force once it's safe."

"A tall order," said Simms. "Even with the fires, it's far from certain they will breach the walls."

"Mm," said Volmarke. "That's why I requisitioned these." He set a large satchel on the ground carefully, then drew out three small wooden casks. The first of these, he pried open with a knife to reveal a pair of green glass bottles with wicks. The twins laughed darkly at the sight.

Shrift raised an eyebrow. "What's that?"

"*Pyralous*," said Volmarke. "Fire flower. A special mixture procured from the foundries of Streissberg, waiting for the proper moment.

You are to split up, place it near the western and southern gates, and then detonate it." He looked to the twins. "You've worked with this before, yes? In the mines?"

They nodded, their faces grave.

"One of you will go with Shrift, the other with Simms."

No more words were needed. Ptolemy led them to the tunnel, fresh and fertile with decay. Simms and Shrift fell in behind Ptolemy, while the twins carried their delicate payload with a kind of reverence. One cask, Volmarke saved for himself, and kept tucked beneath his arm.

As they entered, a stream of rats scurried past toward the river's edge. Sebastien wondered if the stars somehow warned them of the hell coming for their city. His mind raced with thoughts of the library and carnage to come. All those books burnt. The scholars maimed and mangled. He could hear teeth clattering about in his brain.

"Strange sort of penance," Seb said at last—remembering his conversation with Wertham at the courthouse, still unable to make sense of the world.

"Is that what you're after?" Volmarke asked. "Penance?"

"All I wanted was a book of my own. I prayed to the stars."

"Well—we are headed to a library. I'm sure we can find you a souvenir."

"Doing this— isn't it wrong? Won't this make us monsters?"

Volmarke pulled Seb short and brought him in for a kiss. Heat and frenzy, and something soft underneath it. The lord's eyes glittered with mischief, blue and green like the writhing skies above the Ostern Highway. "The world's full of monsters, Sebastien. All of them

as beautiful as they are terrible.” His eyes turned tender. “You know what I prayed for?”

“What?”

“Someone to stand by my side and endure the hell of life with me. Someone to explore and wander with. I prayed for you, Sebastien Pitt. Maybe we’ll be monsters—but we’ll be monsters together.”

“We’ll be together?”

“Always. You and me and all the books we can carry.”

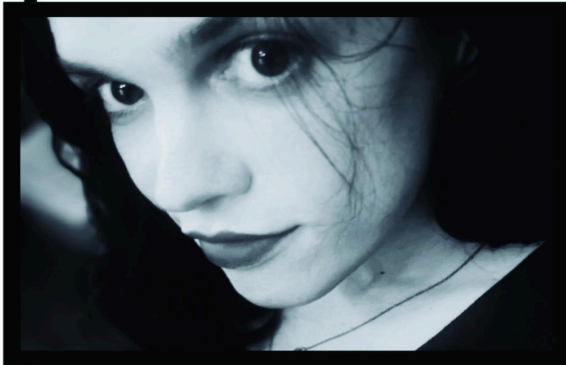
Sebastien’s heart seized and he felt that growling chasm in his chest open up. *I don’t deserve this.* A great rage filled him and for a moment he thought it might spill out into the world; a nameless, ancient anger began to boil over and he saw his hands on Volmarke’s throat and thought he might choke him to death. Then Volmarke’s hands were in Seb’s hair and his kiss was on Seb’s lips and all the rage fled out of him until only love was left.

A happy ending, Seb thought. There is no punishment. No penance. No sense to be made of it. There is no moral to my story.

Sebastien pondered the madness of the moment—and all moments yet to come—and prayed his story would end there.

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