

Shadow Town part 1

Émilie

Sitting behind Colin in the bathroom, I try to get a comb through the haystack that passes for his hair.

“Ack, geez, quit pulling so hard. You’re tearing so much of my hair out, you might not need to cut it when you’re done with that thing.”

“Oh, stop whining Colin,” I reply, running the comb through again. “If you’d do this yourself occasionally it wouldn’t be full of knots.”

He shoots an agitated glare at me in the mirror.

Like a child.

Cranberry is perched on the faucet, brushing her own hair with much more care than I’m giving to Colin’s. “We could give him dreadlocks,” she suggests. “No need to comb those.”

“No,” he replies flatly.

“Too much work,” I say.

And it would look even worse than his current predicament, but this isn’t about style, it’s about ensuring Colin is unrecognizable. All I have to do is make him look hygienic.

A particular rats-nest proves impossible to pick apart and he winces as I tear it out.

Removing the comb, I discard a clump of blond hair attached to it. “Tell me about this place we’re going: Shadow Town.”

“I don’t know too much,” he begins.

“Didn’t you say you’d been there?” I raise an eyebrow.

“Near there. Green Meadow’s a pretty big city and that’s only fifty or so miles north downriver. Shadow Town is a component of their domain the same way Wheatrice is to West Bay. Similar crowd goes back and forth between the two.”

“So, what do you know about it?”

Colin gulps. “It’s like the Feyworld version of the Florida Everglades. Besides that, nothing good, and a lot that creeps me out.”

“Oh, *do* go on!” Cranberry cheers.

“First of all, I’ve never heard of a town being that close to a never-zone. It defies all sense, and Shadow Town is nestled into a corner between this steep plateau called Swandive and a scary-ass swamp named the Black Copse.”

“Ahh, yes, Swandive. Charming place,” Cranberry muses.

“Yeah, charming. If you call a swiss-cheese of unexplored caves charming,” he grumbles.

I finish combing and take a pair of scissors from the vanity. “That can’t be too bad can it? Isn’t Wheatrice within a mile of the Wyrwood?”

“A few miles,” he corrects. “This place is so close, at a certain time of day Swan Peak literally casts a shadow over it. Hence the name.”

“*Oui*, that really is charming.” I begin trimming around the back of his head. “I bet whoever is holding onto the shard is a charmer too.”

“Yeah, sure. Anyway, the other thing I know about Shadow Town is that according to some conversations I had in Green Meadow, the people that live there are, and I quote, ‘idiot swamp rats’.”

Cranberry giggles. “So much for their charms.”

“Naw, that bit’s probably not true,” Colin says with a wave of his hand. “Meadowers are pompous fucking tools in general.”

“Noted,” I say.

That is where the Alliance got its start after all, so they must be.

The conversation stalls momentarily as I continue to trim down his hair. After a few minutes, when I’m almost done, Mai appears in the doorway. She saunters over to the vanity and slides a bottle of modern, ostensibly high quality black hair dye across the counter.

The label is ringed with golden text, written in both English and French like most haircare products these days.

“When you said you were going to go get us some hair dye, I thought you meant from somewhere in Eldfaire, not using your magic to go to the human world,” I say, examining the bottle.

“Hair dye isn’t common here. I’m sure I could find some, but it would be a tiny bottle in some neon color most likely. Pixies like to do highlights, and they’re the only Fey that is likely to dye their hair at all.”

“Why change our hair color, dear? It’s always so pretty how it is,” Cranberry subtly boasts.

“Case in point from the Sprite in the room,” Colin jibes.

“Also, I couldn’t resist.” Mai lifts her other hand and sets a six-pack of soda on the counter, the glass bottles clinking together.

“Is that Root Beer?” Colin cheers.

I watch in near disbelief as Mai chooses to open one by effortlessly bending the metal cap with her thumbnail.

What Solarie are capable of continues to amaze me.

“What is... root beer?” Cranberry blinks.

Mai grins and pours some into a shot glass and hands it to the curious Fairy.

We share the fizzy sodas and finish dyeing Colin’s hair amidst significant protest from him before packing our bags at last for the long journey ahead.

“Good luck,” Mai says, before shoving us through the door.

The place we appear is coated in a low fog, the dark grass and wet mud taking on a drab aspect in the afternoon gloom. The wooden buildings look like something out of an eighteenth-century frontier painting, their cracked timbers illuminated in the glow of the lights from indoors.

As promised, a tall shadow hangs over the village, looming from the west like an angry god. My eyes follow it to the infamous Swan Peak overhead, it's as sheer as the Matterhorn and twice as jagged. The origin of the mountain's name is easy to figure out, bearing a polygonal edge like a fowl extending its neck.

Beyond the shadow, an eddying stream cuts the town in half. Moss hangs from the railings of the shoddy wooden bridge that crosses it. The trickling water flows north, some smaller forks dividing off east past the village into a shadowy network of mangroves that can only be the Black Copse.

I carefully remove the magic compass from my pocket and check it. The needle points east.

"It's that way." I point and take a step towards the bridge.

Colin grabs my arm and stops me. "Wait. We have to be inconspicuous. Can't go straight to looking for it."

I nod.

He turns to Cranberry. "Stay invisible the whole time we are here. Having a Fairy with us is a little suspicious."

She lands on my shoulder and gives him a wink before disappearing completely.

"What now?" I ask.

Colin shrugs. "Follow my lead."

Colin walks down the central thoroughfare of the town and I follow close behind, some of the cabins have wooden signs hanging from the cedar tiled roofs, denoting various shops.

A man sits cross legged in a rocking chair on the covered deck of one such building. His green cotton pants end in frayed tatters and his torso is bare except for a sleeveless leather vest only part way buttoned, exposing his hairy chest.

The long, dry blade of field grass between his teeth bobs surprisingly little as he talks. "Lookin' fer something?" he asks us.

"I think I've found it." Colin points up at the sign dangling between the deck posts. "General store?"

"Mhmm. 'S what it says."

There's an awkward pause before the man stands up and heads for the front door. "Yer comin' in or not?"

We pass through the entrance, and a rickety, spring-loaded screen opens outwards ahead of the main door then slams behind us.

The modest shop, like most general stores, has about everything we aren't looking for. Especially true since I can't even tell why Colin wanted to go in here. The back wall is lined with jars of pickled foods, very few of which are cucumbers. Another, larger jar on the counter is filled halfway with reddish strips of jerky. Behind a glass pane in the counter numerous tools of questionable craftsmanship are on display. The side shelves around the rest of the store are not particularly sorted, being stacked with all manner of fare, very little of it being of human world craftsmanship and certainly not Fairy make. I'm not sure what they use for currency in Shadow Town, although the inventory convinces me the answer is that they don't at all.

Shuffling ahead of us across the cracked floorboards, the back of the man's leather vest shows an emblem I recognize from a TV show. A hooded grim reaper with a scythe handle shaped like a modern rifle.

"Is that a 'Sons of Anarchy' cut?" Colin asks.

"Yeah, brother. Not fer sale though 'course. I appeared in Feyworld with it on, right into this ol' mud hole."

"Right," I say. "What was your name again?"

"I'm Dale. Say ma'am, yer gotta bit of an accent, whereabouts from? If ya don't mind me askin'."

I wonder if he's aware of the irony.

"France, my name is Charlotte." I shoot a glance at Colin.

Colin pauses. "Garrett."

"So what can I get fer you, Garret and Charlotte?" he asks, badly muffing the pronunciation of my new alias.

"I don't suppose clean water is going to cost me?" Colin asks.

"Naw, it ain't. 'S a well down the road. Path, I should say. Ain't much of a road here."

I raise an eyebrow. "Wouldn't that draw dirty groundwater from the swamp?"

He shakes his head. "Yer a sharp girl, but nope. Swamp's table stops at the stream. 'S an aquifer deeper than that though, well dips into that. Clean water."

"Kay, we can get that on the way out," Colin says. "Is that giardiniera on the back wall?"

"Only have the spicy kind."

"Is there another kind of giardiniera?" Colin shrugs. "How much for that?"

How American.

"Ten dollars."

Colin pulls a clinking coin purse out of his pack and counts out ten round tin coins. He slides the pile across the counter and Dale passes a jar of the pickled hot peppers and finely cut vegetables to him.

I hide my surprise at the smoothness of the encounter. Perhaps Colin was understating his familiarity with the area.

“That’ll do for now. There’s an inn somewhere around here right?” Colin asks.

“Small one. Not many folks come down here, Meadowers’ve got sticks up their asses and everybody else believes in the stories they make up about the town. Shame really, I like this place.”

“I mean, the literal nine-o’clock shadow is a touch menacing,” Colin points out, shouldering his pack once again.

Among other things.

“It’s good shade. Gets hot down here ya know.” He taps the jar on the counter.

“Gator jerky is free if you’re interested.”

I twist the lid off and take a piece, nodding in thanks.

“Inn’s down the road too. Path.”

We exit the general store and make for the well.

A few yards beyond the door I speak quietly and without turning my head. “How did you know what they use for exchange, let alone get the coins?”

He snickers and waggles one of the round metal pieces, the tails side showing a cluster of daisies. “These are meadow dollars. Green Meadow currency, made of tin, and extremely easy to counterfeit. As soon as I saw Shadow Town was marked on the map, I knew we might have to go there so I asked some Sylphs to ‘mint’ a sack of them for me.”

“In exchange for what?” Cranberry whispers.

“Nothing really. It was practically a favor.”

“Fey don’t do *favours* for no reason,” she hisses. “What did you give them?”

“Like, four strands of my hair. Why?”

Cranberry giggles. “I hope you weren’t planning to die of old age, because you gave them four years of your natural life. They wanted it for enchanting power, probably.”

Fey don’t do favours.

I furrow my brow. What’s she doing then, I wonder?

“I don’t think I’ll last that long anyway.” Colin lowers the bucket into the well. “At this rate I’ll be violently dead by thirty.”

I scoff but say nothing.

Colin finishes filling up his canteen and takes a very deep drink of the bucket before dumping the rest back into the well. He nods towards the inn and we move on.

It’s a cramped building for its function, the single door opening mere feet from a staircase leading up to the rooms. A front desk is set into the back wall perpendicular to the shoddily nailed steps. Like all of the structures in the town so far, everything is made of cracked, unpolished woodworking and foggy glass. The shadows stretching out from the single lamp on the counter remind me of how late it’s getting.

A middle aged man with a raddled tophat sits behind the counter with a similar lax repose to our initial encounter with Dale. This person has a shirt on at least.

"Is this the inn?" I ask.

"Yeah it's-" the man begins to reply, before descending into a fit of hacking coughs that he directs to the floor. "Sorry, yeah, more of a hotel. Did Dale-" He coughs hard several times. "Dale point it out for you?"

"Ah, yes." Colin hesitantly replies, "Are you okay?"

"I just got the curse, that's all. Dale likes to say it's an inn, to be fancy or whatever." The man extends his pinkie and mimes drinking from a teacup. "I don't got beer or food, so it's just a hotel. Figured he was the one that pointed you over here then."

"Excuse me," I say. "The *what?*"

He looks at me quizzically. "Hotel?"

"Curse?" I blurt out.

"Oh." He hacks out a phlegmy cough into his elbow. "That's what we call the bug going around, since it's been making its way long enough to get a name. Doesn't kill nobody, but the damn thing makes you cough up a storm. I'd stand well away," he adds, perhaps not noticing that we already have our backs flat against the wall.

"O...kay," Colin begins. "Can we get a two-person room you haven't been in whilst contagious?"

He tries to laugh but just ends up coughing harder. "Yeah, yeah, I got a few. So are you two, uh, an item or what."

"No. No, we're not," I quickly snap before Colin can add the opposite answer to our lies. "Why?"

"Relax, lady." He coughs. "Just needed to know if you'd prefer the room with a queen bed or two twins is all. It's eighty a day."

"Eighty, are you fucking kidding me?" Colin snaps.

He shrugs. "Better than getting eaten by Wheverwarves."

Colin makes a guttural noise from the back of his throat as he shoves a pile of coins across the counter.

"Hey," the man says. "Between the curse, the erm, *scenery*, and the shit those Meadowers say about this nice town not too many folks come down this way. Gotta make my living somehow." He tosses an old-fashioned key to Colin.

I anticipate a rebuttal from Colin, but he just hurries upstairs, and I follow.

Halfway up the steps I stop and release a sigh. "Why's it called the curse?"

Another fit of coughing precedes his answer. "Meadowers made that up, then it caught on. The name makes sense though. The disease has been in town for literally years and every time we think it's going away everybody gets sick again." He leans forward in his chair. "Almost like the town's *cursed*."

I shake my head. "There's no such thing as curses."

Shadow Town Part 2

Émilie

Colin closes the door behind him and swiftly locks it.

Becoming visible, Cranberry buzzes from my shoulder to the top of a cracked dresser.

“You heard that last tidbit, right?” I confirm.

“Uhuh. What the fuck!” Colin hisses. “The town is cursed?”

“Cranberry, there’s no such thing as curses, right?” I ask. “No magical effect that you know of?”

“Not that I know of, dear, but maybe you should be focusing on the shards right now?”

“Right, right.” I pull out the compass and hold it out for the others to see.

The needle still points east, towards The Black Copse.

“I say we sleep through the night and worry about chasing that tomorrow,” Colin suggests, tucking into one of the straw beds. “It’s too dark already.”

I lie down facing the wall on the opposite one and fold the fur covers over my head.

There is no such thing as a curse.

I wake up to the sound of a hacking cough.

Colin tumbles off his bed into a kneeling position, expectorating repeatedly into his elbow. He takes a wheezing breath and braces on the nightstand. “Émilia, I think I caught it. I’ve got the cur-”

“Do not call it that,” with a pointing finger, I cut in. “Regardless of what these superstitious hillbillies have named it, it is a pathogen.”

“Okay.” He reaches for his canteen full of well water and drinks deeply again. “What do you want me to call it then?”

“I do not care. Anything but that.” I pull a rag out of my pack and toss it at him. “Tie that around your face as a mask. There’s no sense in both of us getting it.”

“At least it’s not deadly,” Cranberry comments.

“Small comfort. *cette ville est effrayante.*” I throw my pack over my shoulders and belt on my sword. “Let’s go get the shards and ditch this place.”

Cranberry flies up to my shoulder and goes invisible just as I open the door. We head back into the lobby where the hotel’s proprietor has returned to his chair behind the counter, or perhaps never left it. Colin coughs into his mask several times going down the stairs, not bothering to cover it with his elbow as well.

“Ah, you caught the curse already?” the man exclaims.

“Yes, he did. No thanks to you,” I reply, continuing to stride for the exit without looking at him.

He straightens up. “There is a cure, if you’re interested.”

My hand on the doorknob, I stop in my tracks. “There is? Why are you still sick?”

“It’s more of a treatment. Doesn’t last long, and it’ll cost you.”

“Of cour-” Colin is interrupted by a mutual storm of coughing. “...Of course, it will. Better than nothing, I guess.”

I narrow my eyes at the man. “Where?”

He points east. “Talk to Sally. She’ll probably be out by her boats on the swamp dock. Tell her you wanna see the doc and she’ll take you out there. She’ll charge too though.”

I exchange a glance with Colin. “Your doctor lives in the copse?”

The man rubs his chin. “Yeah... not far out though. Still a creepy fella, reclusive, wears a mask all the time and talks kinda funny like one of them medieval witch doctors. His stuff works every time though, so we don’t question it. He’s been here a long time too. Built a big house on a little island out there.”

“Riiiiight. Let’s go Garret.”

I’m halfway out the door as the innkeeper calls out one last thing. “And if Sally charges you anything more than four dollars, tell her Ted said she’s a greedy bitch.”

The people here are unbelievable.

We cross the bridge over the stream and Colin pulls me close enough to whisper. “I’ll bet you anything that the doctor has them.”

“Oh, you think?” I hiss. “Just do not do anything too ambitious yet, we have to get out, not just get them. Let us find out where they are now and come back to steal them later.”

The swamp docks are a modest arrangement of damp plank walkways barely above the waterline. The film of pond scum across the water’s surface climbs up the warped posts like creeping mold. A small fleet of rowboats float motionlessly on the still water, which is sightless to the bottom.

True to tale, a woman is at work on the docks mending a net.

“Are you Sally? We’d like to see the doctor,” I say as we approach.

She looks up, a pair of smudged plastic sunglasses obscuring her expression. “Curse?” she replies after a moment.

Colin breaks into a fit of coughing.

“Take that as a yes,” the woman goes on. “I’ll take you to see Dunwich alright, cost you six dollars though.”

“Uhh...” Colin trails off.

“Ted said to erm, call you a-- I mean to say you’re being greedy. If the price was that high,” I report without expression.

Her lips curl into a snarl. “Well tell him Sally said he’s a hypocrite next time ya see him. It’s four if you shut the fuck up the rest of the way.”

“Fine by me.” Colin shovels the coins out of his pocket and climbs into the nearest rowboat.

I follow and Sally unties the single mooring before jumping in with us.

The Black Copse lives up to its name. A shadowy forest of black barked mangroves that rise out of the dark water. The surface of the water is seldom visible beneath floating mats of algae and duckweed. Floating driftwood is common and Sally steers us wide clear of it. Before long, our destination comes into view, a low island with a wooden house not unlike the structures in the town proper. The house is multi-storied, and significantly larger than any of the dwellings previously seen.

Rich Doctor.

Instead of approaching directly, Sally steers wide left. I give her a curious look.

“Gator.” She points at a shape protruding out of the pond scum.

A ripple moves over the algae as the shape, now apparent to me as a long reptilian snout disappears under the surface.

She maneuvers safely to the island and rams the boat into the shoreline. The keel slides up the mud and sticks fast.

We disembark and march up the steps of the raised deck while Sally pulls the boat fully ashore. “Don’t bother knockin’, just go in,” she says.

The door leads directly into a sort of cluttered office, a wooden countertop at the far end laden with books and binders. The left wall is taken up by racks of jars and crates containing herbs and other strange looking things.

I furrow my brow. That’s unusual, keeping all of the medicine out in the open like that.

We cross the unoccupied room to the counter. I reach for the bell but before I can ring it a door slowly opens outward.

The doctor ambles into the room, passing into view like the circling shadow of a vulture. He wears a firmly buttoned black trench coat with a high collar. The top hat pressed down over his forehead together with a white ibis mask and dark tinted goggles make his face totally invisible. Ted did mention that he had a mask when describing the doctor. I was expecting something less elaborate.

His breath is audible above the leathery flexing of his gloves. “How can I... help you?” he rasps.

I cover my mouth as Colin responds by immediately coughing heavily.

“Ah, you have the curse, I suspect?”

I nod. “We heard you have a cure?”

“Only a treatment as yet. I continue to gather data and search for a medicinal solution to the curse.” His voice has a strange, breathy ring to it.

Something makes me seriously doubt his research is very scientific, or is making much progress.

“Why do you wear that mask?” I ask.

In a rehearsed motion, he rubs his forefinger and thumb together. “I am a practitioner of traditional medicine and healing for... maladies. So, I have taken the form of a traditional healer, long lost to history.”

“Uh huh. How much does your treatment cost?” Colin ushers him onward.

“Patience, patience, my friend. The research must be conducted, though the charge will not be expensive... you have my word.” The doctor places something shiny on the countertop, a small hand mirror with a carved wooden frame and handle. He gathers a selection of the books and a binder underneath his arm, then motions Colin to another door. “Please follow me into the examination room.”

Colin heads for the door and I follow but the doctor stops me with an outstretched arm.

“Wait outside, please,” he says.

I open my mouth to argue but Colin waves at me. “It’s fine, Charlotte,” he says and then quickly mouths *look around*. Before the doctor can turn around.

The door closes behind them and the office returns to silence. I survey its cluttered space. I doubt the shards are anywhere in this room.

I slide the compass from my pocket; its little brass needle points directly towards Colin and the doctor.

That might not be the only place they are...

Three doors. One goes outside, one to the exam room and the third one, which the doctor appeared through, hasn’t been opened yet.

Striding over to it, I carefully push it open. The portal swings without a creak, allowing me to creep through into a long hallway.

“Will you be wanting my tremor aura?” Cranberry whispers.

I nod and her power ripples through me across the floor. The faint vibrations of Colin and the doctor shifting their feet in another room and the gentle rocking of Sally lounging on one of the deck chairs outside pulses through the floor as I sneak to the door at the opposite end.

Cautiously, I turn the doorknob.

Merde. Locked.

I grit my teeth and kneel to look through the keyhole. The space beyond is a sunlit inner courtyard. There are no flowers or trees, only rows of planters and pots growing heavily pruned shrubs of the same plant. Dark purple splotches speckle the broad green leaves.

Strange garden.

Checking the compass again, the needle points directly ahead of me into the courtyard. I furrow my brow once again.

He has more than one shard, and he’s keeping them in multiple rooms. Getting all of them is going to be tricky. I turn around and return to the office, carefully shutting the door behind me.

Just as I wonder where to go next, my eyes fall on the mirror he had placed on the counter. Something seems off about the reflection, showing an image far different from its surroundings.

Cranberry tugs on my hair as I pick it up and turn the surface opposite my face. The image falls away into a greyish-black void. It has an unfathomable depth like a clear night sky. A swimming fog that draws my eyes into it, and I can't help but be mesmerized by the illusion.

Time passes. I can't tear my eyes away. The room stretches and blurs.

Cranberry rakes her nails down the side of my neck. Even then I don't react. Can't. I keep staring into the inky void. Something rolls down my cheek. A tear?

Barely visible, I sense Cranberry flying from my shoulder and pulling the mirror out of my hand.

It feels as if a pair of tweezers have been forced into each pupil, grabbing hold of my retinas and tearing them out. I scream in pain and collapse onto the floorboards as the entire room is absorbed into the same pitch void.

I try to crawl, to feel my way around the floor as Colin and Sally rush into the office. My vision has completely gone.

"Ém-- er, Charlotte! Are you all right?" Colin demands, putting his hands on my shoulders. Cranberry doesn't seem to have been noticed by either the doctor or Sally, who make no mention of the Fairy, and she isn't sitting on my shoulder anymore. She must've gone invisible sitting still somewhere else in the room.

"I can't see, I can't fucking see!"

"Calm, calm," the doctor reassures. "This condition-- it is curable."

"Calm? Curable condition?" I spit. "*Fils de pute*. It feels like I have been gouged with a scalpel!"

Colin gently turns my face with a hand on my cheek. "Christ, she's bleeding from her damn eyeballs."

"What's wrong with her, doc?" Sally asks.

"She must have stared into the scrying mirror too directly," he explains without a hint of urgency.

"The *what?*" I hiss.

"It is no matter," he starts. His nonchalant tone in that weird, breathy voice sends a wave of rage through me. "Merely an enchanted object which allows one to look far afield. Foolish to look at oneself with it however."

"How long will I be like this?" My hackles rise.

"Hours if you continue to ask questions, minutes if you follow me into the examination room. As I said, this condition is cur--"

"Cure me. Now." I stumble to my feet, extending my arms and shuffling randomly until Colin grabs me by the shoulders and forcefully guides me into the exam room.

They sit me down on some kind of table. Totally unaware of my surroundings, I hear drawers being opened and a vial unstoppered.

"Lay down," the doctor instructs.

Desperate to find out what this quack has to offer as a cure, I lay face up on my back. The table has a strange, fulfilling warmth. The surface is clearly wooden, yet it's like a granite stone baking in sunlight, filling me with a tingling comfort.

"Keep your eyes open," he says.

A painful splash lands in one eye, I blink, and my vision returns, briefly seeing double as Colin and the doctor fade into view before he pours it into my other eye and a moment later, the images slide clearly together.

Although cross eyed, I was definitely seeing out of both eyes before he used the dropper on the second one. I wonder what to make of that.

"Any other dangerous enchanted items you would like to warn us about?" I growl.

"You should not touch what you do not own," he rasps through the mask.

I scoff loudly, slide off the exam table and sweep out of the room.

After a brief, awkward second, they quietly follow.

In the office, Colin turns to the doctor. "Right, how much is the charge?"

"Seventy."

Colin blinks. "That's mighty rich there for something you insisted would be inexpensive."

He shakes his beaked head. "The treatment for the curse costs only five as I naturally have it in great supply. My cure for total blindness however is difficult to come by and much more costly to obtain. I cannot afford to dispense it cheaply."

"Even when you were the cause of the condition?" I snap.

"I did not tell you to look into the mirror. Curiosity killed the cat, in this case."

"That's-" I begin another retort.

"Hold on, can we confer a second here?" Colin cuts in.

"Of course." The doctor nods.

Colin pulls me aside.

"This is ridiculous," I insist. "In the human world he would be entirely liable for my injury."

"Yeah, but that's not what we're here for," he whispers. "And besides, we're being swindled out of *counterfeit money*, so who's really getting owned here?"

I grind my teeth together. "Fine! Pay him!"

Shadow Town Part 3

Émilia

Back in the hotel room, Colin sits opposite me. "Why would he have a whole garden growing a single plant?"

"Probably some kind of herb for his supposed 'treatment'. Whatever that stuff is he's growing buckets of it." I swat at a mosquito.

"That could be," Colin replies, giving his chin a thoughtful scratch. "I didn't see any leaves, but he gave me a weird potion to drink. Tasted awful. Made me sit on the table while he went through a ton of questions too. Took his damn time with it."

I growl. "Of course, the medicine has nothing to do with the cure. It's the shards. I would bet anything they are stuck to the bottom of that table."

"You're right," he says, pulling his canteen from his bag. "The doctor's a fucking quack."

"He is not a quack, he is a *fraud*. There is a difference," I correct him. "He doesn't know how to cure anything, and he left that mirror there specifically for me to pick it up and get hurt."

"Speaking of..." Cranberry chimes, making herself visible on the nightstand. She's peering into the scying mirror at a wide angle, studying the reflection with smug attention.

"How did..." I gape.

"Wow!" Colin exclaims. "Way to fuckin' go, you little thief."

"Colin, am I really stealing?" Cranberry smiles. "This lovely mirror was enchanted to see things both near and far by your very own grumpy librarian, Pinerose." She tilts it back to reveal a symbol carved into the wooden frame, an insignia like a pinecone and a Spanish dancer's rose.

"What?" He scowls. "Pinerose made that... awful thing?"

Cranberry turns the mirror back over and looks into it. "If you know how to use it, which I do, it'll let you see most things. There's a well in the doctor's garden, just like the one in the village, for example."

"Pfft. Too lazy to go to the village and get water, huh?" Colin unscrews the cap on his canteen.

What did that shopkeeper say about the well? That it drew from an aquifer deeper underground than the swampwater?

Colin raises the canteen to his lips.

The doctor has a well going under his house just the same, and a garden full of leafy shrubs being harvested for...

I lunge across the room and smack the bottle out of his hand, causing it to bounce on the floorboards and spill water everywhere.

"Émilia, what the hell!"

"It's poisoned." I grab a handful of his shirt and shake him.

Cranberry giggles. "Oh, silver thorns! A twist?"

"How is it poisoned? I took that water straight from the well in the village and I'm positive no one has touched it. Plus I already drank from it once!" Colin replies with a raised eyebrow.

"Don't you get it? The well is poisoned! Those plants must have some kind of toxin that makes people sick. The 'curse' isn't a disease at all. Everyone in this village is drinking poisoned water!"

He shifts back. "You think he's poisoning the well?"

"I'm sure of it," I continue. "You drank that well water and hours later you were coughing badly. I haven't drank anything but the water I brought with me, and I'm fine."

"Wait, hold on." Colin furrows his brows. "Wouldn't everyone in the village become immune to the poison eventually?"

I shake my head. "It depends on the poison. Some things are impossible to develop immunity to, and they can't become completely immune, only develop a resistance. Even then, their system is still laced with the toxin, which they could even get *addicted* to without knowing it. He's grinding up those leaves and dumping them into the aquifer by the bucket load."

Colin spits. "And then he charges people to cure them, using the fucking shards. Then they keep drinking water and come back for more when they wake up coughing the next day. That son of a bitch."

"Hmm... I wonder what the villagers would think of all that," Cranberry muses with sly smirk.

"That's it," Colin snaps. "We're going back there under cover of dark. We get the shards and some of those plants to prove what he's doing."

"Agreed."

I hold a torch while Colin rows the stolen boat through the eerily quiet swamp. I'm thankful as ever that *Whateverwarves* can't swim. The light would be attracting dozens of them on land. Sitting silent and invisible on my shoulder again, Cranberry uses the mirror to look ahead.

The draping moss and arching mangrove roots extend jagged shadows across the murky water. The deep green surface of the swampwater disguises sightless mystery beneath. It's all I can do not to hold my breath as our boat approaches the doctor's muddy island.

We come ashore and creep towards the door.

Lumbering around the corner, the dark shape of a *Whateverwarve* is drawn to the torchlight. Its mouth hangs wide open as it ambles towards us. Colin shoots it in the forehead without pause. "Snuff the torch," he says, reloading his crossbow.

The door is unlocked and we enter the front office, eyes peeled at the dark and ears combing the silence.

"Shards first," I hiss.

"Agreed," Colin replies and moves for the door to the exam room.

This too creaks open without resistance and we proceed down the hall. Cranberry crouches invisibly on my shoulder, ready for a fight.

I creep over to the exam table and turn it on its side, careful not to make a noise. I light a candle by match and in the dim glow, over a dozen glittering, rainbow shards gleam in the firelight. Each one is held to the bottom of the table by an iron staple. "Colin, help me pry these off."

“I’m afraid I cannot allow that,” a voice rasps from behind us.

We spin around as one, Colin aiming his crossbow while I brandish my sword at the doctor.

“I need them,” he adds, lifting his own crossbow.

“To cure the villagers when they drink the well water you’ve been poisoning, isn’t that right?” I accuse.

The doctor sighs, the avian beak of his mask tilting upwards. “Impressive that you’ve managed to deduce that. I am in need of the money.”

“You’re a fraud!”

A sharp twang splits the air near my ear and a needle of an arrow embeds into the doctor’s shoulder.

Cranberry jumps into flight, unveiling as she hovers in the space between us and the doctor.

He shifts back a step, but does not fall.

“What?” Colin cries out. “That’s an enchanted Sprite arrow, you should be flat on your bird-face, fast asleep right now.”

The doctor chuckles a low, insidious laugh. “If you believe that, you either don’t know what you’re stealing or worse, you are so foolish as to believe I wouldn’t carry some of it on my person. All the more surprising since you have a Fairy with you.”

“Tell me how you got Pinerose’s scrying mirror!” Cranberry demands, her face a snarl.

“She gave it to me, years ago. She was glad to be rid of her enchantments at the time. Would that be so hard to believe?”

“Liar!” Cranberry cries, advancing closer with her sword drawn. “I swear I’ll cut every shard out of your clothes myself.”

“Not so fast.” The doctor lowers his crossbow and pulls a shiny tuning fork from his pocket. A foot long and inscribed with blocky slyf characters down its length, the arcane instrument inspires a disgusted noise from deep in Cranberry’s throat.

“Silver thorns, you wouldn’t!” she growls in her high voice.

“Leave. I will use it,” he states plainly.

“We’re not going without the shards. Hand them over, now,” Colin returns the demand.

“A fair answer,” the doctor rasps. “but that being the case…” He slams the tuning fork on the doorframe and a harsh, tinnitus ringing splits the air. It’s followed an instant later by Cranberry’s shrill scream. She plummets to the ground, rolling back and forth over her wings and covering her ears.

“What did you do?” I demand, staring wide eyed at the writhing Sprite.

“It’s an enchanted tuning fork. Few exist.”

Lunging across the room, I swing the sword diagonally at his face.

He stumbles back and the tip cleaves through the mask, tearing it from his head. His true face is revealed. Tan in complexion, yet covered wholly in disgusting black patches haloed in swollen red and blotches of lighter brown. Melanoma on a scale unimaginable.

I retreat back a step, struggling to keep from vomiting at the sight.

“Jesus Christ, what happened to your face?” Colin yells out.

“Isn’t it obvious?” He turns to me. “You’re a physician, aren’t you?”

“A real one, unlike you!” I sneer.

“My body is overrun with cancer,” he explains. “Not just on my skin. I was near death when I found those precious shards, and so they only suppressed the affliction. They can never cure me.”

“Wait.” I shake my head. “If you need the shards to stay alive from cancer, why are you using them to extort victims of your farcical curse?”

“Can you imagine the pain I am in?” the doctor wails, his voice a high whine. “The tumors invade my organs, my lungs, my bowels! Pain suppressing medications, I buy them in bulk. Even if I could run this business legitimately I would never make enough coin to buy my way out of my chronic pains.”

“*Fils de pute!*” I growl, my teeth bared like a snarling dog. “You’re lower even than the *extorquer* I originally took you for. You are a coward.”

Slowly shaking his head, the fraud responds. “You would not say that if you could feel what I do every day.”

Colin scoffs. “You’re so content with this act you’ve been putting on that being accused of being exactly what you are doesn’t even seem to offend you.”

He straightens up his cancerous form. “Only the poorest magician takes offense at the suggestion his tricks are mere sleight of hand.”

“Shitty analogy,” Colin snickers. “Give me one good reason not to shoot you.”

The ‘doctor’ smirks. “Because I will not die, and when I return fire, you shall.”

Colin falters, his crossbow drooping.

Still holding her ears and twitching on the ground, Cranberry sobs in pain.

My heart brims with hate as I look up at him. “One way or another, I will end you.”

The door flies open and people burst into the room. Dale first, followed by Ted, both of them wielding shortswords and then Sally with a lit torch in her hand.

“We done heard enough already,” Dale proclaims. “You been playin’ us for fools Dunwich!”

Alarm, perhaps even fear, comes over the doctor Dunwich’s diseased face for the first time. “Nonsense, these thieves are here to steal the cure from the town! Seize them!”

“Nice try.” Ted tisks. “We’ve listened from behind the door from the beginning. The curse is poison in the well! Who would’ve thunk it?”

“You followed us?” Colin asks.

“Yeah, course,” Sally replies. “Spotted y’all sneaking outta the hotel at night. Mighty suspicious, but I guess it turns out we’re all on the same side here.”

I breathe a sigh of relief. The possibility that our sneaking around will still be held as mischief now seems less likely.

Ted turns to me. “Listen, whatever you folks are here for, you can take it and go. Far as I’m concerned, it’s all fair since you discovered this mis-doing on our behalf. That is what you’re really here for, am I right?”

Colin and I share a glance then respond in unison. “Yes.”

Dale smirks. “What’re yer names, really?”

“I am Émilia, and he is Colin.”

“And where’re ya from, really?”

Colin tenses, but he answers truthfully. “West Bay.”

The three of them seem unbothered by the revelation. “Thanks fer being honest,” Dale says.

Colin squints. “That’s not an issue for you? That we’re technically your enemies?”

“Nope.” Ted shrugs. “Would never have been. We haven’t played a part in that fella Klaus’s war. Don’t care for it.”

“Can we get back to the task at hand?” Sally interjects.

“Yes, I’m sure you’re all eager to do away with me,” Dunwich says.

“Oh, you have no idea.” Cranberry lifts off the ground and brandishes her blade at him. “But first, tell me how you got the shards. And Pinerose’s stuff. The truth, or I swear on my wings I’ll make you feel even more pain than you’re used to.”

He grunts. “I may not look it, but I am well over six hundred years of age. Just as the shards have staved off my illness, so too have they lengthened my lifespan, and prevented aging. I met Pinerose soon after her...” His eyes drift across the room. “Fall from grace. I was kind to her. She gave me all of these things as gifts.”

“Fall from-- Cranberry, what is he talking about?” Colin demands.

She ignores him. “You manipulated her tragedy, you... scum!”

“Cranberry?” Colin repeats.

“Not now!” she snaps, and drifts towards the villagers. “Please, let me kill him.”

Ted shakes his head. “No can do. Now that we know he’s been playing us for fools for years... you can have what you came for, but his fate’s in our hands.”

Dale steps forward. “Say, if his cancer is as painful as he says I think it’s mighty fine we take his... shards or whatever, give them over to these folks and wait till he dies of that!”

“No...” he mutters.

A grin spreads across my face. “Deal.”

The next day, we begin our long trek back to West Bay. The townspeople in Shadow Town graciously agreed to keep our presence there a secret.

As we march down the muddy road north of town, Colin speaks up. "Cranberry, what happened to Pinerose?"

She sighs. "If she did not tell you, Pinerose did not want you to know. And I understand why. It's a subject of serious embarrassment, so as her friend I can't divulge it."

"What could Pinerose possibly be embarrassed about? She's lovely..." Colin protests.

"Just leave it alone, please," Cranberry insists. "Do not ask her about it. All I will say is that there's a reason she doesn't enchant anything new anymore, so I can see why she got rid of everything but the printing press."

There's something dark surrounding all of this, and I'm growing more worried I'll never find out what it is...