

Vilma Kadleckova is a Czech writer who has published four books in her native language. She has won the country's prestigious Karel Capek Award, yet is relatively unknown in the West. In September of 1995, Wired Magazine sent Bruce Sterling to Prague. He spent a week sleeping on the couch in the apartment of Vilma and her husband Martin Klima. Bruce decided to help Vilma get published in English.

"Vilma's English is tottering at best," Bruce writes, "but since Martin is a former physicist, he's got fairly strong scientist's English. I know less than zero about Czech and can't even find the proper diacritical marks on /my/ Mac, but on the other hand - we have the Internet! So we're involved in a three-way author/ translator/ interpreter enterprise in which we simply ship drafts back and forth until all parties are convinced that it's something akin to the original story. It seems to me to be a really cool use of the Internet medium and a way to strike a blow for science fiction as a genuinely global enterprise."

Longing for Blood

By Vilma Kadleckova

Translated by M. Klima and Bruce Sterling

The Diary of Ashterat: May 15, 636

I witnessed Hildur's fall. I watched in my Mirror as my sister chose her prey, hunted him down, killed him and drank his blood. She's no longer human. Her pretty mouth has become the bloodstained jaw of a monster. Her eyes glow like two coals. Even I myself have begun to fear her. Hildur, my dearest sister: Why has this happened to you? Why couldn't you stop when there was still time? What agony it is to love you, and yet be unable to help.

Weeks ago Hildur came up with her mad scheme: a plan she thought would finally free us of our fear and our curse. We Taskre women had always pursued our Quest secretly, hiding in our shadows, flitting through the hidden byways of the World Outside. We offered the Potion, and put the Question, only to men we thought were ready: powerful men, ambitious men, men who sought us out. Hildur was weary of our endless years of fruitless magic ritual. Rather than confronting men one by one, she began brewing the Potion by the bucketful.

Hildur wrapped herself in powerful spells, descended in fearsome majesty on a lonely mountain village, and forced all the men there to drink. She left three dozen sobbing widows when she fled that useless massacre. It was far too much death, too much blood, in far too short a time. Her humanity crumbled, her soul shattered. Now she thirsts endlessly for blood.

I hid the slaughter from the World Inside by cloaking the village in deep forest, but I can do nothing for my sister. Hildur is beyond help. She thought she could defeat the conditions of our Quest, and she has fallen beyond any hope of redemption. She has become one of the Beasts.

When all this filth stains my soul beyond all cleanliness, when the evil and fatigue finally bring me down, then I will become like my sister Hildur. I too will long for blood.

The cruelty of this knowledge has broken something inside me. My eyes slide from my all-seeing Mirror to the empty wall. I know that another long siege of insomnia awaits me, gray sleepless reveries crawling and seething with the Beasts of the World Outside. Once Hildur shared with me the terrible labor of enduring those dreams, but there is no Hildur any longer. I can hear the evil echoes of my future, ticking off my remaining days.

What is left of our lives, our time, our world, once we yield to the taste for blood?

I still have quill, paper and ink. I shall do what men and women, wizards and witches have done for ages to beguile the passing time: I will write. I, Ashterat the Taskre, am the eldest daughter of Mennach the accursed. I am the sister of Hildur and Shina, the heir of the Mirror and the Quest. This is the 15th day of May in the year 636 of Harkur. Today I am starting a diary.

The Diary of Ashterat: May 16, 636; the morning

Cinderella burst into my room this morning in her cleaning apron and gray kitchen smock. She jerked aside the curtains, flung open the casements, her blundering, too-busy fingers snapping the subtle threads of my protective spells. I've grown used to Cinderella. I let her dash about my room, chasing nonexistent dust, singing raucously, peering into every corner. Cinderella loved to know the exact order of everything I owned. I allowed her this. The dumb satisfaction she took in this was stronger than my meager need for privacy.

My foster sister's proper name is Shina, but we have called her "Cinderella" for years. When she was a child, a neighbor-boy once stole her

shoes and told her they were hidden in an ashcan. Shina came home barefoot, a weeping urchin caked head-to-foot with soot and cinders, so she has been “Cinderella” ever since. I have watched this incident several times in my Mirror, so many times that I have lost all compassion for Shina. Perhaps it’s the way that, even as a five-year-old, she was so eager to rat on the little boy. With quivering innocent lips, she demanded limpid and crystalline justice for herself and stern and immediate punishment for him, just as if that were the natural order of the universe. As if the World Inside were her private jail and she held the golden key.

She saw the state of my bureau, and as she cleaned it, silently, she stole a long look at the inky pages of my new diary. My sleepless night of scribbling. I want no one to read my diary – not yet at least – but I ignored her spying. It didn’t matter. Cinderella is illiterate.

Cinderella stuffed some papers aimlessly into a drawer, then turned to me. “You’re so pale, my sister. Couldn’t you sleep last night?” She has a sweet and solid little voice, like a young nanny singing lullabies. I cannot imagine her as a true Taskre princess: screaming into the midnight storm, trembling with ecstasy, casting spells of ravagement like chill blasts of lightning, slapping the face of Night with her head flung back and her neck bent like a snake’s – not my dear foster sister Cinderella. She and I, we have no blood in common. Despite our differences, I liked her, more or less. Maybe because of our differences.

“Have you seen Hildur, Cinderella?”

“She won’t let me in her room. She says she’ll kill me if I won’t stop knocking. She won’t eat the breakfast I made her.” Her eyes filled with hot wounded tears. She was young and childish and mutable, her emotions like weather in spring.

I laughed and told her to bring me Hildur’s breakfast as well as my own.

The Diary of Ashterat: May 16, 636; the evening

This afternoon another fool tried to break into the World Outside. I had to rush to Forest Mansion to stop him. When I broke him free of it he was flung violently across the floor in the Mansion’s hall. He tumbled like a rag doll, and was lucky not to be slashed to ribbons by his own drawn sword.

This fool was a nobleman. The Forest had torn his mantle and his fine lace and left burrs in his hair and beard, but the eyes in his dark face were wild and lively.

I liked his face, so I tried to tell myself that he was only lost. There are many Crossroads in the Forest and even wizards sometimes miss the subtle hints that they are crossing boundaries between the worlds. If a traveler were weary, if his march had been long, he might cross a border without knowing it. If I found people stuck in Uncertainty I could usually ease them out, back safely to the World Inside; then the little bouts of chaos and strangeness in their brains would seem nothing worse than odd dreams. They'd see no Forest Mansion of course, but perhaps they'd see some crumbling woodsman's hut, with a picket fence of human bones and a black cat sunning on the porch. A stony pagan altar, all the bloody litter of old sacrifice overgrown by ivy. Will of the wisps dancing. They'd see harmless conceits and fantasies.

If they actually saw me, then of course I had to ask them the Question. I would let no one leave my presence without posing the Question. But sometimes they refused the Question. And if they left Uncertainty alive, then they would generally forget all about the experience, once they were safe again in their World Inside.

Those who travel through and past Uncertainty are far less lucky. They discover the real Forest: the snap and jerk of branches, fanged mouths grinning in the leaves, roots that writhe and live, flowers that blink and stare. They suffer a lethal weariness, surrounded by a Forest that shakes with hunger for the necromantic power in their human blood. The deadly Forest of the World Outside. The Forest is vastly older and stronger than any human being. Despite this, it is astonishing how often people will still attempt to fight it.

Only men of great vitality, intelligence and will could get as far as the Forest Mansion. Of course this made them valuable to me. I would ask them the Question, and men of their sort would always answer it. And in this way, I had killed every one of them.

My nobleman sprang up lithely, sword in hand, alert. He had made it from the Forest to the Mansion and now we were together in a hall, with green brocade chairs and tables of inlaid pearl. He stood breathing hard for a few moments until the flush left his face and then he sheathed his sword and bowed to me.

When he rose our eyes met.

"Is this all illusion?" he said.

"If you don't believe it, touch me," I said.

I was no longer in my bourgeois dress. When I had entered Forest Mansion the velvet ribbons of the city style had vanished, so my hair hung

black and wild. My striped city skirt and samite corset had become a loose green robe, trailing veils the dusky color of leaves in early fall. Olivine bracelets. Gold and emerald necklace. Green is my color from time beyond memory. I have a weakness for green.

I was too fey for any woman of the World Inside, and I knew only too well how I must appear to this poor man. He was pale and staring and afraid. Also, charmed.

“Lady, they were wrong to call you terrible and cruel,” he said. “You are beautiful.”

The flattery of human men means no more to me than some babble of brooks, a rattle of aspen leaves, the rustle of windblown grain in some farmer’s field. But I liked his clever face. It occurred to me that I could spare him. I could lead him away from the Mansion, away from the Forest, away from the World Outside. I could choose not to trouble him with the Question and the Potion and the matter of his death. That idea seemed quite wonderful, but I am the heir of the Quest, and my moment of willfulness passed and the Quest seized my mind and steeled me to my duty.

“Lend me your hand,” I said.

“Will I die the moment I touch you?” he said, but he put his palm in mine. I led him through a wing of Forest Mansion. He was truly amazed to walk beside me and still remain alive. I could feel his thoughts, clear but trapped inside his head, just like bees in cast glass. He was a very intelligent man, rational and unexpectedly sharp, but this fateful moment had paralyzed his wits. Once he had scoffed at fairy-tales and superstitions, doubted the very existence of the Forest and the World Outside. Now he was musing listlessly about Lady Death – Lady Death and her green sleeves. He was not far from truth when he thought that Lady Death and I look like sisters.

I led him into the great chamber with the clock. I had not been so far into the Mansion in a long time, for I dreaded thinking of my cursed father Mennach, sleeping in that clock. The curtains were drawn and the stale dust-heavy air filled our mouths and lungs with bitterness. Every surface was thick with filth. I opened a cabinet of thickly grimed unshining ebony and retrieved a shining goblet and a gleaming carafe with a cut-glass stopper. I put the goblet in his hand.

The ticking of the clock filled the whole chamber with its murderous rhythm.

It was a tall clock in an ebony casing with columns of malachite and a pendulum of purest gold. The works and the casing were aswarm with tiny sculpted figures, with wicked eyes of glimmering ruby. These were the golts, my father's goblins, who had helped him in his conquests and his final battle. I wondered if I would see the figures move today.

The traveler was entranced by the jeweled hands on the sunken mosaic of the clock's face, the face that is also my father's face. The pendulum rocked and clicked many times before he came to comprehend. When the truth dawned on him, he faltered and sweat gathered on his high and noble forehead. He looked at me in silent question.

"My father... has nothing in common with time," I said slowly. "Enemies imprisoned him in this clock through an act of treachery which is better not to recall."

He nodded. He said nothing gauche or stupid, and I found this admirable. I admired his tact, and his narrow lovely face, and his sparkling eyes and that strong lithe body. Before dawn I would call the golts to help me bury that body, in the much-turned earth beside the Forest Mansion. Sorrow and desire warred inside me like burning waves.

He knew well enough what was happening to him. He was obviously literate, and had read the old stories, even if he had never believed them. That was why he offered me no violence; he surely know no mortal weapon could harm a woman like me in a place like this. In a moment he would recall the legend of the Question, and then he would make up his mind about it.

It all struck him just as I had thought it would: first the shock, then the dawning curiosity, and finally, a kindled lust for his share of the power of Mennach and his daughters.

"Yes, you could do that," I told him in response to his silent thought. "You might become the great traveler between the worlds, a Lord and Ruler both here and there. One drink from this carafe and you will know if it's possible. You will taste a strength and power unmatched by anything in the World Inside."

He turned his face as if struggling to hide his thoughts, but I could feel ambition torturing him. It was like standing next to a flame.

"If you drink this and somehow live," I said, "you will have enough power to command that clock. In that case, the clock will never strike, and the creatures inside it will gladly do your bidding. But if you can't command them, that clock will strike the midnight and the potion will curdle inside you and kill

you. Decide now." I paused for a tortured moment, then blurted it out: "If you don't dare to drink, I will let you go home. I can lead you safely outside the Forest."

The Question had been put, and I turned aside to give him silence for his answer. Two kinds of men came here from the World Inside. Both kinds were smoldering, restless, and haunted with longing. Some few did manage to leave, and I was never sorry to see that kind go, for I knew they were useless to me. The others, the best men of their world, stayed and tried. They knew that the lost opportunity would haunt them forever, so they tested their luck – and they died.

Every death left another little stain of darkness on my soul.

"Fairy of the wood!" said my nobleman. "Let me try a bit of this wine of yours."

"It's a very bitter wine."

"Let me drink, woman. Mere taste is beside the point."

I had hoped for something else, but expected nothing less. I filled his goblet to the rim. His hand never trembled. I admired the lovely polish of his well-tended nails.

"Tell me your name... please," I murmured. I never asked their names.

He laughed and tugged a little golden medallion from beneath his shirt. "Lady, you may know my name here – when I die!" The fool had no intention of dying.

He emptied the goblet at a draught.

The clock ticked on. The eyes of the golts grew red and shiny. Indifferent to my sorrow, they emerged from the clock and slowly and darkly struck the midnight.

The Diary of Ashterat: May 17, 636; the morning

Cinderella came to my room as I was smearing on my lipstick, and she made a face. A merry laugh, a little superior smile. The natural consequence of her chastity and virtue, prevailing over my louche and decadent vanity and caprice. Yes, she was still a virgin, and I was no virgin at all. She never used cosmetics and I never failed to paint my face. She slept the sleep of the just and righteous from every sunset to every sunrise, and then she found me in the morning powdering the bags beneath my eyes.

Sometimes I envied my cindery sister Shina – especially after a night like my last one, full of tears.

“You need to try this,” I told her. “Use a decent mascara for once, pluck your brows, pay some real attention to your hair. The way you look, it’s no wonder you’re still called Cinderella.”

“I like the way I look,” Shina said quickly. And I saw myself in her mind’s eye: a blank-eyed, weary creature grasping at youth. But she was so wrong. I was ageless. Far beyond young or old. My face was smooth and unlined, the skin of my throat and breast sleek and dewy, hands small and elegant and utterly unspoiled by honest work. Not a single gray hair. All the doing of my father’s potion, gulped down so long ago.

Not my eyes, though. My eyes had seen too much, changed too many times. Old.

I gazed again into my Mirror as Cinderella cleaned my room. She hurried to my writing desk. My diary has become a nagging torment to her dumb curiosity. Oh, that curse of Mennach! That same obnoxious and all-too-human curiosity. It has dogged me always. The world of human beings, the Inside World, was made too small for them. Small like a breadbasket. The hands of the old weaver had whipped their world into being from the lithe strands of wicker, but with the passage of time the little world-basket grew dry and rigid and lost all flexibility: those were the fates of human beings, their customs, their constantly repeating errors. And the wicker basket itself knew nothing of other baskets, or of other and darker bread.

There was nothing I could do to change the World Inside. It had been young once and I had been young once, and even then I had not been able to change it. Now its rules were firmly set, bringing me nothing but duties and subjugation.

I was silent and let Cinderella do as she pleased. Curiosity... I should write here about the golden medallion of the too-curious nobleman. But I do not want to remember the medallion. Nor do I want to remember that face, because then I will be sorry that I did not kiss it.

His gold medallion was embossed with three sprigs of lavender. Nothing more. Lavender is a lovely herb, but the symbol means nothing to me.

The Diary of Ashterat: May 17, 636; the evening

My sister Hildur had retreated to the gloominess of Moor. She traveled through the treacherous sumps to a stone hut she had built just over the border of the World Outside, her cheerless and windowless little fort. There she crouched and waited while her skin grew translucent, while her fangs grew sharper and her eyes began to glow. Wings wrenched themselves from the skin of her back and grew thick and supple. She flew at night to haunt the World Inside and gather blood and strength.

I might have endured all this, except for one thing. My sister Hildur failed to recognize that anything about herself had changed.

I managed to cross the Moor by a more-or-less visible path and warily approached her stone cottage. I peered through the open leather flap of the door. Hildur squatted sullenly in darkness, leaning against a damp granite wall stained with nitre. Our eyes met and within her mind I saw a bottomless emptiness.

At the sudden unexpected sight of me, a chasm of hunger split her open like an earthquake. I knew instantly that I should never have come to see Hildur in her lair in the Outside World. It was very dangerous; it was a terrible mistake.

Her fanged mouth snapped open with a screech of hatred and she sprang on me. We wrestled on the muddy floor, Hildur going for my throat. The transformation had made her much stronger than I had realized; she was crushing me with terrific blows of her bony knees and winged elbows. I could not tear loose. Finally I wrenched my left hand free and jammed it into Hildur's mouth. Her jaws clamped shut and I heard more than felt the cracking of my own crushed bones.

Hildur fell limply to the earth, flopping, gluttoned. It was very rich blood. She was gagging with ecstasy. Vampires were almost defenseless when they fed. Pain rose up my arm like a fiery wall as I struggled to shriek the syllables of a spell of binding. The pain overwhelmed me for a moment, but when I came to, Hildur was lying there motionless. I pried her jaws apart and freed my trapped and bleeding hand.

I worked on my bleeding hand for an hour, long enough to knit the flesh and bones, if not my other, sadder wounds. Then I let it be and turned to Hildur.

She would sleep for centuries.

I made her a heavy coffin from dark granite – magic, magic for everything. The lid I sealed with the strongest spell I knew. Symbols that a witch could use only two or three times in a lifetime glowed upon Hildur's tomb. They were the only gleam of light in that dark house.

The Diary of Ashterat: May 18, 636

Today I healed my wounded hand more thoroughly. Deep scars still show. I had an argument with Cinderella about a fox.

Shina often brings animals to Bourgeois House. Lost alley cats, mongrel dogs, mice, and injured birds. She used to feed the local pigeons, especially the turtledoves, which then gathered in vile swarms on the eaves of our house, befouling everything and making obscene cooing noises. Nothing gave her greater pleasure than to comb out the starved hide of some mangy cat, filling her smock with shed fur and hopping fleas. Hildur and I never found it easy to explain to her how deeply and sincerely we detested these habits of hers. Sister Shina loved her little animals with a deep compassion. Our kindly Cinderella.

Earlier today, out to gather mushrooms, she found a weak and sickly fox wandering stunned through the meadow. She brought it home in her basket. Luckily my protective spells recognized the danger and refused all entrance to the animal. I found Shina weeping bitterly, trying to shove her crumbling basket through a window.

“Please, please let us in,” she cried. “Little Fox is hungry!”

I opened the basket and saw the animal's muzzle white with slobber, its eyes gone murky with hydrophobia. The eyes stared up at me with vague animal hope. Hope for Lady Death.

I ordered the eyes to go blank. “Don't hurt foxy!” Shina screeched.

The little beast of the Inside World did not struggle with the death I sent it; it lay down gently and almost seemed to smile. I wish I could write the same for the beasts of the World Outside....

Shina shuddered with outraged horror as the furry body slumped to the bottom of her basket. Perhaps she'd never realized how easily I can kill.

She started to sob and moan.

I flung the infected basket into the middle of our back yard and unleashed a sheet of flame at it. The flame cremated the poor creature in a black gout of smoke and a burst of burning meat; in a matter of seconds the foulness was only harmless cinders.

“Why did you do that, Ashterat?” Shina howled, smearing her tears with her sleeve. “You don’t love me! You don’t love anything or anybody!”

It occurred to me then that I ought to marry Cinderella off to someone.

The Diary of Ashterat: May 22, 636

Two long nights, almost without sleep.

I dreamed of the Beasts, as I had expected. Long ago I trained myself to sleep lightly, to spring to wakefulness at any sign of danger. It seemed a clever idea at the time, but then the Beasts came to my dreams and my nights became a long series of duels. Whenever I dream, many people of the World Inside suffer along with me. Whenever I wake, I can sense those other people wracked by their own nightmare Beasts, gone breathless and trembling with terror – at these echoes from the dreambattles of their Taskre guardian. Everything that struggles to get Inside – the mossy quivering limbs of the Forest, the slimy bubblings of Moor, all the Outside Beasts and creatures, from places both named and nameless – they cannot enter the World Inside without first slithering through the dreams of the children of Mennach. Since Hildur now slept beneath her stones in the Moor in the World Outside, that meant that my dreams alone bore the whole burden for the World Inside.

My despair and the loneliness drove me to visit my mother. Shilzad had not left her sickroom in ages. She had deteriorated ever since her sad mésalliance with Shina’s father, her second husband. Perhaps she had pitied him, a widower with a small girl – she had lived with him, even married him, and yet never put him the Question. Shilzad had, of course, outlived her weakly human husband for years. Nothing was left of her once-great powers now but the blackened, shriveled webs on her sickroom’s ceiling. She lay hollow-eyed and staring on the white wooden bed her second husband had built for her in Farm House, and that we her daughters had carried here to Bourgeois House, and she lay there for years and she waited for death.

I understood my mother’s weariness, that spiteful impatience that had forced her into the absurd and ill-judged remarriage and then into this queer parody of old age. If we Taskres did not end in blood, then we ended in driveling foolishness. I could not believe that my mother would manage to die at all easily.

Shina always opened her stepmother’s windows first and hustled about the sickroom every morning. Despite her tender care, the room still hung thick with dank rags of magical blackness. Shilzad’s gaunt face and thin lips

dominated the gloom. She had not eaten for years, starving herself in a vain attempt to win the graces of Lady Death. Her wrists were deeply slashed, but no blood ever came forth. Her shrunken gut was awash with potent poisons that had signally failed to kill her. These dramatic gestures were simply not enough.

My mother had missed a golden chance to die long ago, and now she was cursed by immortality.

“So, you want to talk about Hildur now?” she whispered hoarsely. “I know all about you and Hildur, Ashterat. She came to me and she offered me a cup of blood. You and I both know what happens once a Taskre girl has sunk to that.”

Her voice was as frail as an echo, and still it froze my bones. The counsel of her madness was like some ugly parody of her past maternal wisdom. Why had I come here? To seek consolation? From her? For me? I must be losing my mind.

“Hildur’s past helping anyone anymore,” I told my mother. “The World Outside will learn this, and then it will concentrate all its efforts against me. It will try to break through me to ravage the World Inside. I’m the last bearer of Mennach’s Curse. My dreams will be more terrible than any I’ve ever seen. I’m the last guardian of the gates now. I’m left alone.”

The weight of my responsibility overwhelmed me at that moment. I was left alone. Maybe I went to see my mother just so I could tell her that, just so I could write this sentence in my diary: I’m all alone.

The Diary of Ashterat: May 21, 636

The royal entourage entered our town at dusk: a herald with the king’s flag, royal men-at-arms in uniform, king’s huntsmen, noble courtiers and their servants... and a prince of Harkur. They were returning home after a long hunting excursion. Only bad luck could have brought them to our city, a place too modest to support a royal visit.

As they passed through town I crossed my fingers and I spat out a Word, and the prince’s fine white charger slipped and broke its leg.

The prince took a servant’s horse, but as they tried to leave town, clouds clotted overhead and the heavens broke loose and all the water on Earth poured down. Lightnings chased each other and thunder roared unceasingly. My masterpiece of weather magic. They were drenched at once. They sought the

town's best inn, and found the place as it always was, hopelessly damp, dirty and riddled with bedbugs. They sent servants out in the darkness and rain to search the city's more prominent houses for help and hospitality, but the rooms they were offered were cramped and poor, with or without the bedbugs, while the best breed of horse our town can manage is a brewery cart-horse. The city's wealthiest bourgeois simply refused to answer the servants' hammering at their gates. In the midst of this thunderstorm, the townsfolk were sleeping very soundly. Likely they were sleeping all the better because I myself was still awake.

Eventually their aimless wandering in the dark and downpour brought them to Bourgeois House, as I had known it would. I had the guest rooms already made up, and my stable even boasted a spare horse. A true beauty of a horse, with shining groomed hide and glossy mane and a noble head. He was black as coal, black as unclean magic, but he had been my pride once.

It was almost midnight when the royal party arrived, bringing their prince. The prince I needed for Shina.



I welcomed them in the hall beneath the staircase. From the outside, my Bourgeois House looked deceptively modest. For this night, and for the day to follow, its dimensions stretched far into the World Outside. Bourgeois House was immense, cavernous. I always wonder whether guests will notice this discrepancy. So far, they never have. They cross the borders between worlds without a single glimmer of conscious recognition.

I stood by the window in my goldworked green samite gown, the best dress a bourgeoisie like myself could be expected to afford. My hair was laboriously styled and my scarred left hand was safely hidden in my long lace cuffs. Shina, who was the basic reason for this whole masquerade, was not in the room. Stunned with awe and reverence, she was hiding behind a door watching the proceedings through a keyhole – torn between gross curiosity and the terror that a courtier might suddenly discover her lurking there in her mouse-gray linen dress.

The prince was the last to enter. He strode through a line of respectful courtiers and threw back the rain-soaked hood of his mantle. My knees went weak. In the darkness and rain and in all my spell-castings and Mirror-scryings, I had not taken time to properly study his face. He was no older than Shina. His eyes were like two black opals. Like the night sky at the farthest rim of the World Outside. More beautiful, more harmonious, more charming, if anything, than the face of his older brother, the Crown Prince. The Prince who was named Lavendul.

The hunting party had no idea what had happened to Lavendul. They had lost him on their hunting expedition, and they cheerily assumed he had returned to the capital alone. They were hoping to meet him at the royal palace in Arkhold. Meanwhile Lavendul, poisoned dead at my hand, was rotting under the loam at Forest Mansion. The younger prince was named Rassigart. I hated my Mirror for never properly showing me his face.

“My friends call me Astra,” I said. “Welcome to my house.” I took a jug and poured him wine, with my own hands.

The Diary of Ashterat: June 11, 636

When they left, they took my black horse. They did not take Shina. The arrogant fools took no notice of poor Shina at all.

In the nights that followed, the Beasts attacked me with unparalleled ferocity. I was worried for Shina’s safety, and I fled to Forest House to fight them in my dreams. I avoided my Mirror – my face looked like stone, like a sandblasted, storm-blasted rock. My cheeks were ashen, my eyes dull as some dying animal’s. I went to sleep with a dagger beside me and every morning I pulled myself from bed, far past the edge of exhaustion, harried almost to madness by the bloodthirsty hounding of the Beasts Outside. It was very difficult without Hildur. I would stagger from Forest House to Bourgeois House in a mud-stained dress with my hair full of twigs and pine needles. My wounds were worsening and I had no power left to heal myself.

There was only one possible ally left to me – my father, The Sleeper in the Clock. I did not want to pay the price it would take to beg my father’s help. Instead, I propped myself up, drinking special potions. My mouth and tongue turned a leaden blue from sipping vile concoctions of jirmen rind and cockatrice eggs. Sooner or later I would sell my soul for an hour of decent sleep.

“You really need to rest, dear sister,” Cinderella advised me sweetly, and I snapped and told her the truth: “I may not sleep! I’m not allowed that.”

Shina's life was an utter mess now, with her undying stepmother and wretched foster sister, but I had no time or care to spare for her. Worse yet, she had fallen utterly in love with Prince Rassigart. She grew bright-eyed and dreamy and soulful, and neglected the housework to stare idly out the balcony windows, into the street, into my Mirror, her head in the clouds. I surprised her once trying to blacken her eyebrows with a little chip of charcoal from the hearth. I felt so sorry for her that I couldn't bear to make fun of her.

If I'd had more power, I'd have conjured her up a ball gown and dressed her to kill. As it was, I gave her money and told her to buy a roll of fine velvet and find herself a decent tailor in the town. She couldn't do this. Something about this was too much of a challenge for her, too fraught with some strange humiliation.

I wanted Shina out of the house. Let her marry somebody. If not some prince, then anyone – any half-decent fool, as long as he lived far away. Fine romantic longings were all well and good, but if I fell apart here, she would certainly be ripped to pieces.

Finally I realized it was no use trying to protect Shina from the truth anymore; girlish virgin or no, she had to be made to understand. I grabbed her wrist, tugged her into my room and flung her into an armchair.

"Listen, Shina," I said, voice trembling with anxiety, "you know about the town. And Forest House. And Bourgeois House and Farm House. But you've never really seen the World Outside."

"Is it far away?"

"No. It's very close. It's getting closer. You could walk out into the World Outside the way you walk out into the street. It could happen by accident. It could happen to you any time. You mustn't think of it as being far away any more. Think of it in a different way now. Imagine it... imagine you are sitting wide awake in a brightly lit room in Bourgeois House and outside it is night and an absolute flood of wolves and bats is pressing up against our windows. Nothing can happen to us while we keep the doors and windows closed. But if anyone opens a gate...."

Cinderella nodded, wide-eyed and pale. She was more afraid of me than she was of the truth, but that didn't seem to matter much. Just as long as she was properly afraid.

"There's something we have inside us that pulls in all the Beasts of the Outside World, something they must have, something they lust for. That's why they squeeze up against our windows and they slink and they wait and they

smell out even the tiniest crack or crevice that will get them into the house of light. They want something they don't have, something they can only get here. You know what I mean, don't you, Cinderella? I mean the blood."

She shrieked and put her hand to her bare throat. I held her other hand, squeezing it hard enough to hurt. "Calm down. I'm not a vampire. If I were, you'd have died long ago."

She accepted that, nodding. She sat in the armchair and listened obediently.

"We are Taskres," I said. "There are Beasts in the World Outside and human beings in the World Inside, and then there are people like us. People who can travel the worlds. Gatekeepers. Mennach my father was our King, but he fell long ago to the treachery of the monsters Outside, and he left two daughters and no son. After that every Taskre wanted to be the strong king. They tore themselves apart in stupid rivalries and meaningless clan quarrels, and now we are all that is left. We're not entirely immortal, you know. There are ways to destroy us."

"So who keeps the gates now?" Shina murmured.

"Whoever is left," I said. I had lied to her about Hildur. I simply told her that Hildur had eloped with a lover. Sometimes I showed her forged letters supposedly sent from Hildur, which of course Shina couldn't read. Dazed with infatuation with the Prince, Cinderella had swallowed this story whole. It was a nicer story than learning that your older sister had been transformed into a leathery monster longing endlessly for blood. That was not the kind of story that Cinderella could hold inside her little world of goodness, order, and sunshine. A world where morning always came to sweep the shadows back.

"I hope you're listening to me, Shina," I told her. Then I handed her a vial of yellow glass. "Pay attention, because this is important. If you find me some morning with my throat torn open, this is what you'll have to do. Break this vial and sprinkle this powder over my face. You get Mother onto her feet – do whatever you have to do – and gather up whatever you can carry, any precious things. Take weapons with you. Close the shutters of Bourgeois House, lock the doors tight, all of them. Then run away, the farther the better. Anywhere. A big city would be good. The capital maybe. Anyplace far from the forests and the moors."

There was a long silence. "Did you understand me?" I said gently. Cinderella looked up suddenly, as if snapping out of a trance. With unexpected vigor, she said, "Maybe it's just not like that, Ashterat." She yanked her hand from my grip and slapped the arms of her chair. "Ashterat, this is a chair. It's

furniture! It's always been here in our house. This is a town, it's just a normal little town with real people in it. These terrible beasts you're talking about, how are they supposed to get in here with us? Are they coming down our chimney? Are they jumping on us out of the closets?" She giggled, then grew very tender and serious. "Sister, you need more rest. You look so tired these days. It can't be healthy."

She knew absolutely nothing, but she was right about the sleep. If I don't sleep properly, I'll go mad.

The Diary of Ashterat: June 13, 636

I managed to survive for thirteen days.

Lately, the attacks have been weakening. I'm simply outlasting the Beasts through sheer determination. Last night I managed to sleep soundly for almost a full third of the night, for the first time since Hildur's fall. It helped me so immensely that I can hardly describe it. It beat back the killing apathy that had turned my life into dumb endurance. Today is almost like a convalescence. Now I can write a bit in my diary. I have been reading poetry, the old Harkur songs I love. I put a few things in order in the Forest Mansion. I even put on my veil and went shopping in the market with Shina, but their idea of velvet is decidedly inferior.

Word in the market is that Lavendul is still missing. He never returned from the hunt and they all believe he must be dead. They aren't wrong. Rassigart will be the new crown prince. They say he is looking for a bride.

The Diary of Ashterat: June 27, 636

A letter with the king's seal!

The absurdity of it made me laugh aloud: a royal invitation to a ball at the capital, of all things. Rumor was right; the prince is formally hunting for a bride. The news had Shina in ecstasy. Now I have to invent some way to get her into the palace. The invitation wasn't for her. It's for me. I was a bit uneasy to see Prince Rassigart's apparent lasting interest in "the Bourgeoise Astra," a woman not his social equal in a town that is far from wealthy. But it was all caused by the horse, naturally. I used my Mirror to check the last few days at the Palace stables. There was Rassigart, displaying his coal-black steed to some swarthy foreigner in a spangled cloak. The court wizard went over the horse, gesturing counterspells. It would take a far better wizard than some court

functionary to break my magic, but the very attempt was proof of Rassigart's suspicions.

Did he want to lure me to the capital? Was the Palace a trap for me? The curse of Mennach – I was very curious. It would be a fine deed to match Cinderella with her Prince, but I was suddenly painfully curious about the Palace. Why hadn't I gone to the Palace before? Obviously the luxury and wealth of court life in Arkhold would be a natural lure for strong, ambitious, power-hungry men. Maybe the man I'd been waiting for endlessly was already some courtier in Arkhold, wasting his life and talents when he could be the very man to take my Question, drink my potion and survive to transform himself.

I fell back in my armchair, struck with thought. I could go to Arkhold, enter the Palace, talk with all the beaus of the ball. Chat with the prince himself, or even confront his swarthy wizard. Perhaps I would fill some glasses before the night was out. I did not fear their paltry human tricks and magics. The worst they could do to me was as nothing compared to the Beasts Outside.

The only complication was Shina herself. I could not put her in danger; she could only be safe at the court ball if no one knew of our connection. I could make her swear to avoid me and show no recognition, but she was far too naive to maintain any good pretense.

Then I laughed. It was very simple. Cinderella would certainly avoid me if she thought she was going to the ball against my will.

The Diary of Ashterat: July 15, 636

I shouted: "King of the Taskres! I, Ashterat your daughter, would speak with you."

The ruby eyes of the golts gleamed in the candlelight. The pendulum faltered and was still. My voice trailed into silence. Mennach had been trapped when I was only a child. He has never spoken since. When they deformed his body they also stole his voice. Because he could not speak, I always spoke to him in ceremony. With official court formality. Also, I am very afraid of him. My father, the silent idol in his ebony altar.

I placed a terra cotta cup in front of the silent clock and removed the scarf that covered it. "Here is your price, dread king! I crave the boon of two nights' peaceful sleep before my journey to Arkhold." I stepped back, and I let him silently feast.

He might have helped me of his own free will, my father, but he had no such free will. They broke his will long ago, and since they were too weak to kill him, they trapped him inside the clock. He has become a wish-granting machine. His price: royal blood. The greater the demand, the greater his price. Only royal blood will do: that is part of Mennach's curse.

Once we used Shilzad's blood, then Hildur's or my own. The choices were narrowing. Perhaps the "royal blood" of the house of Harkur would do. I cursed the evil chance that had brought Prince Lavendul here, and had him die in this very room before the clock, unknown, unrecognized.

The Diary of Ashterat: July 18, 636

Preparations for the journey. Shina pleading with me, sobbing, losing her temper. I finally silenced her with a mild little spell and locked her in her room to keep her out of the way.

I created a ball gown for her from an exquisite violet-blue velvet, striped in gold. Veil, jewelry, gems, and crystal slippers. A vial of blue perfume, rouge for her cheeks, lustrous black for brows and lashes. I soaked her scarf in aphrodisiac, leaving nothing to chance. Then I hid all these gifts.

I myself wore green.

For Shina, a splendid carriage with four white chargers. My carriage was green with black chargers. Shina wouldn't need a forged invitation. It was simpler for me to enchant the guards at the gate.

Finally, I needed agents to release Shina from her locked room and give her all these gifts when the time was ripe. Nothing simpler – I called some golts from the Outside, fellows of my father's golts in the clock. I bound their mischievous minds, their piercing teeth and their lust for blood with a strong secure spell. To spare Cinderella the shock, I cast upon them a guise that made these nasty goblins resemble her beloved little animals. Every true Taskre knew how to use golts properly, when needed.

Then I went to bed and in exchange for my cup of blood I slept for thirteen hours straight.

I woke up beautiful.

The Diary of Ashterat: July 19, 636

A thousand wax white candles burned in crystal chandeliers and gilded wall sconces. Flames glittered in the courtiers' eyes and jewels. The ballroom was a museum of exquisite court couture, and mannered gestures, and weak, epicene faces. I waited breathlessly for Shina. I was sure of one thing: she outshone any of the female aristocrats.

A captain of the royal guard approached me. His arrogant swagger and ambitious squint made him a sure candidate for the Question tonight. He spoke from behind a cupped hand. "His Highness Prince Rassigart seeks a private audience with you, Madame Astra." I trembled at the thought of a possibly shattering confrontation with the Prince. I was here in all my power, with the dread power of Mennach's curse.

The Captain led me to an iron door in an obscure corner, and to the small room beyond. He ushered me through the door and he closed it at once, from the outside. It was deeply gloomy in the room, but my eyes adjusted swiftly.

There sat the Prince. He was not dressed for a ball.

He wore a plain white shirt, his collar conspicuously open. The window to a garden hung open behind him, chill and glimmering. His hair was starry with night-dew and the air hung heavy with the damp reek of clay from the garden. I felt tension burning along his nerves, his will locked like steel to keep the fear at bay.

"You wanted me to come," I said bluntly. No court niceties here. To treat him as my equal was an honor, not an insult, and he knew it.

"That horse you gave to me is not of flesh and blood," he said, with equal bluntness.

"Is it a worse horse, for that?"

"No. It's the best horse I've ever had. Finer than royal stallions of the most exalted bloodlines."

"Why be unsatisfied, then?"

He rose and came toward me. Either he had very good eyesight, or he knew every inch of this dark little room by heart. "I'm very satisfied," he told me slowly. "Everyone agrees that I must be satisfied. My brother is dead and nothing can keep me from the throne." Anger rose in his voice. "I'm very satisfied! Except that I never wanted any of this!"

His anger was real enough, but he had no discretion. He was as young as my Shina, and nearly as naive. I laughed silently and placed my hands on the bare slopes of his neck and shoulders.

“But Rassigart! What has your brother’s death to do with my horse?” I said, and my voice sounded sweet even to my own ears. He was shocked to have me touch him and stepped back quickly, letting my hands fall.

“I asked my good friend Gallengur to investigate certain doings in your town,” he told me sharply. “A vile creature that attacks lonely houses at night, and ambushes travelers after dusk. Victims found with their throats slashed and not a drop of blood left in them.”

I shrugged. “I’ve heard such rumors, too.”

“They are not rumors, madame. My man Gallengur has seen some of the corpses himself.”

Gallengur must surely be that southern wizard, I thought. I made a mental note to add brave Gallengur to my list of candidates for the Question. I should have tracked Gallengur more closely in my Mirror. Perhaps he’d seen Hildur and tracked her himself – though not back to Bourgeois House.

The prince – full of brave curiosity and reckless of consequences had followed those rumors in person. Perhaps Rassigart would have come to my town even without my lures. Why had he not brought his pet wizard with him? My thoughts raced ahead – of course, the court wizard would have been searching for Lavendul. Searching many days and nights, with all his craft – until he had proved that the prince, dead or alive, was no longer in the World Inside.

I glanced at the Prince’s bared throat and smiled gently. So that was it! He had linked Hildur’s attacks, his brother’s disappearance, and my horse, and he had reached his own conclusions. The young Prince was courageous – or thought he was. He was merely reckless. To needlessly place himself in such personal danger was not the work of a statesman. This was no mere vampire he was trifling with. He needed a lesson in fear.

I gestured in the darkness, and a binding spell caught him. He lost his voice, his hands.

“If Gallengur is right – and he is,” I told him slowly, “then this creature you describe could be very near.”

He grew tense, his worst suspicions confirmed. He tried to break free – cry aloud, draw a dagger, ring the bell he had cleverly placed on the table. He only swayed in place, an icy chill gripping his flesh. His muscles knotted; he

tried his best, but he moved not at all. I saw him grow pale as he realized the full extent of his helplessness.

“This is what you wanted, isn’t it?” I said, with poisonous sweetness. “To lure a vampire into your trap? That was a naive plan, my Prince. Despite all your fine precautions, wasn’t it stupid and reckless to leave yourself alone with her – in the dark?”

He struggled hard with the spell, concentrating now on reaching for his dagger. His hands would not obey his will. His mouth was sealed.

“You’ve positioned your guards, and ordered them to rush in with your first call.” I laughed at him. “But now your tongue is stiff. I know about that dagger up your sleeve. Why don’t you pull it out and brandish it? What’s the matter with you, Rassigart? Your soldiers are only a few feet away! If you have any clever new stratagems, you’d better try them quickly. You haven’t much time left.”

Maddened by his impotence, Rassigart shuddered with the effort to move. In spite of that, he had not yet panicked, and I admired him for his strength of will. In the end, though, I knew I would be able to break him. He was still master of his fear but he had never known slow and deliberate cruelty.

“You’re bound like a fly in the web,” I whispered, moving to his side. “Whatever may happen now, you can’t stop it.”

In the silence I could hear the frenzied pounding of his heart against his ribs. I put my hands inside his shirt, through his open collar, and felt his self-control shatter at the caress. Sweat ran down his chest.

I drew both my thumbnails down his neck, from earlobe to collar bone. Then I did it again. The slow touch terrified him more deeply and intimately than any threatening word. It was the worst moment of his young life. I felt him cursing me within his mind as he prepared to die. He was suffocating. Almost blacking out.

I grabbed his arms and shook him violently. “Prince Rassigart! Wake up!”

He gasped for air, the deadly terror ebbing.

“If I were what you thought I was, you’d be dead now,” I said, in a new voice. “But you’re still alive, as you can see. There is no danger.”

Feebly he tried to brush me aside; the binding spell was leaving his flesh. I snapped my fingers and the unlit candles in the room leapt into flame. Light showed his face, gone haggard in a few moments. By the curse of Mennach, but he was young. Only seventeen. Younger than I by centuries.

I helped him to his chair.

He would not dare to question me any longer. And I had already learned much from his indiscretion.

He was limp and silent. Too long. "Touch my teeth, if you don't believe what I tell you," I offered sweetly. "They're only common teeth." He looked up, eyes blank and wet, and I saw then that I had crushed him. He was like withered leaves inside. For the moment, his spirit was well and truly broken. There was no one he could tell about this experience, no one he could confess to. The humiliation was too deep and too personal; to tell other men about it would only invite mockery. It was just between the two of us now, a dark liaison. A secret act of bondage and cruelty. It was a permanent bond.

"It's time for the ball," I said. "Call your valet and dress yourself properly."

He stood up without a word, shaking violently. I was sorry for the lesson I had given him, and I leaned toward him, careful not to touch him. "After this," I said, "other creatures of darkness will have a harder time with you. You should know that, at least."

He said nothing, but staggered out the door. He waved aside the waiting captain and three armed guards.

"You're too young, Rassigart," I hissed at his back, so the others could not hear. "When you're older we will meet again."



Shina glowed like a sapphire in a golden ring. Adoring gazes followed her every move as she made her way through the ballroom toward the throne. I stepped aside into shadow, and watched as she made her best courtesy toward the King. It was quite easy to influence the King. When I was through with him, he sincerely believed Shina to be a baroness from the West, a distant relation from some cadet wing of the family that had never really existed.

Then the Prince arrived. He was deathly pale, but I doubt that anyone noticed. Still more a boy than a man, he was nevertheless impressive, and the courtiers, as one, bowed low in respect. I did the same.

The dancing began. Subtly, I guided the steps of Shina and the Prince until they were face to face. When their eyes finally met they were both astounded by the grace of Providence that had somehow, against all odds, united them here. Rassigart was charmed by this candid young ingénue, and Shina had already adored the Prince for weeks. When the music resumed she slipped at once into his arms, a vision in blue against the gold and black of his royal mantle. Nothing and no one would separate them now – at least, not for the rest of the night. I let the lovers be, and went about my own grim business.

Five men died quietly that night. Every useless death stripped away more of my false hopes and left me shriveling with despair. The brave Captain of the Guards was first to fall, followed shortly by Gallengur, the canny wizard of the South. The moment my Question was made clear to them, the courtiers grasped for the cup of power with deadly eagerness. Five men in a single night! Even my own endless life could not make up for so many shortened ones. But how was I to know what man might pass the test? Somehow, some man must be strong enough to survive the transformation and protect the World Inside from the threat of the Beasts. I would gladly die myself, to find that answer.

As I skulked sorrowfully back into the ballroom, I almost collided with Cinderella. Her veils flapping, she was dashing up the wide staircase to meet her Prince on the terrace. In her eagerness she looked neither right nor left, until she was suddenly brought up short, face to face with me. She went ashen, for she was here without my permission.

Rather than do anything reasonable, she panicked at once, turned on her heel and stumbled off down the staircase. Her skirts impeded her, and she lost a shoe. She didn't bother to pick it up, but instead snatched off her other crystal slipper and used its sharp heel to chop her way through the crowd. This gaucherie won many a pained, unfriendly look for the King's young relation from the West. The false identity scheme wasn't working, so I took a moment to wipe the memory from the King's royal mind. If Shina had to flee, it was better that she not leave too many traces.

Cinderella dashed through the guards – still stunned with enchantment, they conspicuously failed to notice her – and jumped headlong into her carriage. The golt coachman whipped up the golt horses, and off they went.

Somewhere, a clock happened to strike midnight. There stood the glamour-struck Prince, perplexed, clutching the abandoned shoe, staring after his chimerical beauty, who had fled without a single civil goodbye. He was as memorable as a painting.

The Diary of Ashterat: July 20, 636

Shina was meek and hushed next morning, dreading a good scolding. A mild chiding did seem in order. "You've charmed the Prince," I told her. "You quite spoiled the rest of the event for him when you ran away. He wouldn't look at another woman all that night. If it weren't for his royal duties as host, he would saddle up his best horse and come straight after you." This chased the worry from her face and put her into hours of erotic daydream. I sent her to her room. It was time to move the house.

Moving the entirety of Bourgeois House was no elementary spell and the preparations for it consumed the whole day. I chose another, suitably obscure city, hundreds of miles away, as our new locale. The Mirror found me a suitably neglected and decrepit building, an outer shell for the inner contents of Bourgeois House, including Cinderella, Shilzad and myself. For form's sake, and to allay the alarm of our new neighbors, I sent along a luggage-cart manned by golts.

When we were gone, there was nothing left of our old Bourgeois House but a shell of empty walls – precisely what Rassigart discovered, when he arrived that evening on an exhausted horse.

I watched in my Mirror as he stood in the yawning doorway, trembling with weariness and rage. The abandoned walls were utterly featureless, because we had taken even the paint. No ceilings left either, not so much as a rafter, just the unnatural slopes of an unsupported roof. The whole interior of the building had been erased like a pencil drawing.

"You won't escape me, sorceress!" the Prince howled at the echoing walls.

I laughed at him, from behind my Mirror. "It's you who won't escape," I said aloud.

The Diary of Ashterat: August 8, 636

My mother died tonight.

I was uneasy all evening, sensing sometime momentous about to happen. Joy, terror.... It was my presentiment of Shilzad's death: her final decay, her liberation.

I heard her rise from her bed in the middle of the night. No, not hearing – rather, a feeling deep inside me, light as a cold breeze. It broke me from my usual uneasy dreams and I awoke and unbuckled my armor. I always slept in

armor now. It made the cushions of my bed seem as rough as horsehair rugs, but I had to sleep with proper safeguards. The waking world was a cozier place for me, so I put aside the night's breastplate and my daggers.

I slipped silently into the hall, looked toward my mother's room, and saw her standing there, in the open doorway.

The long starvation had stripped her of all femininity; she was Lady Death now, white shroud, gaunt skin that bound a skeleton in leather. Black rags hung from both her hands, dangling like cobwebs from the dry, unhealed, unfestering wounds in her arms. I was amazed to see her on her feet.

She walked down the corridor, face set, eyes blank and rigid. She stepped into a closet, opened a chest. I heard her nails scrabbling at the wooden lid, the leathery crackling of her skin.

She was choosing a dress. After another moment she rose with a shining wad of fabric under her arms, all mixed with the dangling rags. Then, with one leaden step, she moved directly into the World Outside – and I followed her.

In an instant we were at the Taskre Palace – or rather, its ruins. It was night here.

I had not been here for ages. The Palace had fallen during my childhood, in an orgy of looting and burning, and what memories I had of it were bitter. The walls were empty, gems long gone, paneling stripped away, marble floor shattered and covered with filth. To think that once this had been King Mennach's Grand Hall.

I stayed in the shadows behind my mother, flitting from column to column, pressing myself against them. Her skeletal body was silhouetted in the moonlight of a glassless window. Then she spread out the bundle in her arms – a queenly robe of the finest armelin. Nothing but holes now, rotten, threadbare, but what else could be expected? She threw it over her bony shoulders with the grace of a monarch. A golden circlet gleamed in her taloned hands: the tarnished crown of the Taskre Queen, unseen for countless decades in the bottom of that chest. The symbol of Taskre majesty had once looked so lovely on her raven tresses; now she fitted it to her hairless skull. She bowed to the silent applause of long-vanished courtiers, with infinite dignity.

The Queen my mother had arrived at her final rendezvous. Now I saw another presence. Just for a moment. A deeper darkness in the shadow, emerging from the depths of night, arms spread in welcome. A rippling shadow in a cold draft of wind, a bodiless phantom. Both cruel and merciful. Another woman. Lady Death.

The two Queens embraced one another.

Shilzad died without a struggle. She fell slowly, and the circlet crown jolted free and rolled off into the ruins. And then I heard, from no direction at all, a terrible voiceless cry from the Sleeper in the Clock. A howl from the abyss, a wail of grief for the woman lost to him so long ago.

The Diary of Ashterat: September 26, 636.

I have not written in this diary for many days. I haven't the patience to write in my diary when my life has no crisis. Nothing important, nothing remarkable.

I have watched in my Mirror as envoys from the court of Harkur have been methodically scouring the entire countryside. Carrying the crystal slipper.

I've seen them try the slipper on the feet of countless women. There's nothing particularly dainty about the size and shape of Cinderella's feet, but I created that slipper for her alone. No other woman alive can succeed in wearing that slipper. Because of this, I know that the royal envoys will reach this place, in due time. I calculate it to be about the middle of October.

The Diary of Ashterat: October 13, 636

It seems my calculation was off by a few days. The envoys have been very industrious and are half a week early.

They arrived this afternoon and proceeded directly to the city square. There they bellowed out a royal edict and demanded that every woman of marriageable age gather in the square at six o'clock. Then the envoys retired to a tavern.

They still fulfill their duties in all respect and obedience, but the long routine of fruitless search has apparently dented their morale a bit.

I gave Shina a lovely new pair of gleaming pearly stockings, and left her happily scrubbing her feet in the kitchen washtub. As for me, I am going to retire in good order to the Forest Mansion.

The Diary of Ashterat: October 15, 636

I don't know why I changed my mind and insisted on witnessing their meeting. My presence in the royal palace could only provoke the Prince.

Perhaps he would explode in terror or rage, and I would have to flee and move Bourgeois House once more. Despite all these forebodings, I found myself almost as eager for this meeting as the blushing lovely Mademoiselle Young Bride.

It was evening when we arrived at Arkhold. We were housed in the Palace as the chief envoy went to carry the happy news to the Prince. I wore a heavy green veil, which I never put aside, and the servants took me for Shina's mother. Certain men might well have recognized me from the ball, but those men were dead.

We met for a supper and tête-à-tête, the Prince, Shina, and I.

The warmth of their reunion was a bit cooled by proper etiquette. With a chaperone present they did not dare to embrace. Rather than kissing, they talked – at great length, and on the Prince's side, very ornamentally. The Prince was shining-eyed and reverent and Shina blushed like a ripe strawberry. The thought of these two virgins at their wedding night made me smile behind my veil.

When the Prince addressed me formally I was forced to unveil myself. He stared at me as if I were a ghost, or his own death. Indeed, I might be both those things.

"Your Highness's kind greeting touches me deeply," I said. "I am Esther, Shina's foster sister." I thanked him for his kindness. I thanked him for his invitation. I thanked him for the honor done my family: words, words, words. It was going to be a very long night.



Shina, exhausted by excitement and the long journey, fell asleep at midnight. The Prince and I were made of sterner stuff, and soon afterward I received a discreet royal billet-doux demanding an immediate audience with Rassigart, if I had "any trace of honor." We met in the dark of night at a small, out-of-the-way Palace room, very similar to the last one. Carelessness was obviously Rassigart's dominant trait.

"Astra, how is it that you dare to enter my Palace once again?"

"I've never dared that, Your Highness. I've always been invited here. By you."

"I invited the girl who lost her slipper at my ball. I never asked for a sorceress!" He rose threateningly, his eyes blazing, but I did not bother to bind him with a spell. He was already bound, for I was Shina's sister, and to denounce or attack me as a sorceress was to lose his beloved.

I shrugged. "It's not my fault that Shina is my dear relation."

"I can't believe she is any such thing. You must have murdered her parents to become her evil guardian. What terrible thing did you do to them?"

I laughed in his face. "You'll be a weak ruler, Rassigart, for you can't control your passions. You're in no position now to succumb to some passing fit of pique. How much abuse do you think you can heap on me, before I demand my honor and satisfaction?" I frowned at him. "Now sit down, shut up, and listen to me. Shina's father is long dead, he was mortal and he died of a cancer, as mortals often do. Shina's mother died very young. My mother married her father despite the best we could do to dissuade her, and now my mother is dead as well. I'm all the family she has left."

"That's a strange set of changes, Astra. If Astra is indeed your name. Is it Esther now? Are any of these aliases real?"

"My name is Ashterat," I said patiently. "There were four of us: my mother, my sister Hildur, myself, and Cinderella – that is, your darling Shina. Hildur is gone now. She fell to the lust for blood, as your man Gallengur so cleverly discovered."

"Hildur," he said. "I've heard that name before."

"One presumes that Your Highness has read that name. In the Golden Codex of Arkhold. Try to recall your lessons in the Legend of Mennach."

He turned his hack on me, for a long time. When he faced me again, all his anger was gone. Instead: open loathing. "So you've chosen to toy with me, Taskre princess?" he said. He was full of icy control now, with a murderous edge. "You chose to torture me because, unlike yourself, I'm a human being. Merely some human being." His eyes were cold. "You disgust me."

He stepped nearer, trembling with revulsion. "The legends all lie! You don't match your glowing reputation, Ashterat. You Taskres claim to protect us from the World Outside – well, who ever asked you to? It's a sham, a confidence trick – just a way to remind us humans of our impotence. You're not our guardians, but our exploiters. You hold yourselves above us, and you think yourselves too fine for us, and you toy with us." He locked eyes with me. I

shuddered to see the changes roiling within his mind. His hot and righteous anger hammered at his soul like a smith's work at an anvil. Tempering formless metal into a blade. In a passing flume of mental sparks I saw the last of his childhood vanish.

"You don't speak!" he shouted. "Believe me, you'll never see me afraid of you again! Kill me if you think it will please you – an act that will make you even more loathsome than we already know you to be. If you have any conscience at all, your crimes should drive you crazy."

"Then let my conscience kill me, and don't interfere with what I must do."

He seized me by the shoulders and brought his face very close. "Ashterat, during that ball there were five men murdered! All of them my dear friends – or, at the least, the Crown's trusted servants. I know very well who killed them! Wherever you walk, there are corpses. Do you expect me to simply watch that happening? Are you laughing at me?"

"You're consumed to know my secrets, Prince. Five men dead, and yet you don't ask me why. Why! The reasoning behind it."

"Can there be any reason for such crimes?"

My face grew taut. Of course there was a reason. It was my Quest. My Quest, now weighed against the happiness of my only living sister. A conflict I'd hoped to avoid, that now yawned before my feet like the gate of Hell.

Of course I could have asked Rassigart the Question. I could have put the Question to him during the hall, slipped that same cup into his hands that five dead men had grasped and gulped from so eagerly. Somehow I had managed not to think of Rassigart, somehow I had hidden him in the recesses of my own mind, and through that mercy spared him.

There were excellent reasons to spare Rassigart. He was the last Crown Prince; if he too were lost, the death of his father the King would plunge the country into dynastic warfare. And my Cinderella loved Rassigart so much. And I did not want to kill this angry and careless boy, because I had a weakness for him. The curse of Mennach! The same weakness that I had for his brother.

Immoral weakness. Shameful weakness.

Compassion was treachery to my Quest. All men were equal before the Question. Suppose that Rassigart were the man. How many other men would die needlessly in his proper place?

"I'll tell you everything," I said, and every word was like wormwood in my mouth. "I'll tell you what I told those five dead men, and many others besides, and your noble brother, too."

I shrugged free from his hands. Then I seized him myself, and with a terrible strength I dragged him with me to the World Outside.

When we arrived at length at the chamber with the clock, I gave Rassigart the goblet.

The Diary of Ashterat: October 21, 636

The celebration started yesterday and it will go on for five days straight. This royal fete will find permanent records in many places besides this, my diary. Harkur hasn't seen a wedding of this size and extravagance since 558, when Rassigart's great-grandfather tied the knot with a Southern princess. All this splendor looks very deliberate: to erase the bitterness of Lavendul's death, and to obscure the humble origins of the chosen bride, all at one magnificent stroke.

I had a chance to say farewell to my sister, to wish her the best of luck. I did not imagine I would have any chance to speak to Rassigart again. But he sought me out himself – and found me, alone, before my Mirror.

"What's this?" he said with scorn. "Princess Ashterat the Taskre, at her toilette? With her finery, trinkets and face paint?"

"Do you imagine that everything human tires me, O Prince?"

"I would have thought that centuries of life would have given you a bit more depth," he said spitefully, and shut the double doors behind himself. He walked across the room to confront me.

"I prefer the darker palaces of the World Outside," I told him. "It's true, I tried to seek real wisdom once. I read old scribblings on damp leather and yellowing parchment and crumbling rolls of papyrus. I've had a very long time to spend at learning, and I've read almost every work, major and minor, of the world's philosophers... but Rassigart, there is nothing to all that. It's all pretension and fraud."

"So you say."

"So, I came back to worldliness. I love beautiful dresses and exotic perfumes and I love to do my brows, to paint my lashes. I love to touch the flesh of naked men. I love a wild ride in darkness and the taste of cold rain on my face, even if it means I have to change my gown and re-do my coiffure

afterward. Can you understand that? In a few centuries I grew very tired of everything that you think is eternal and wise. The only things I truly value now are frivolous and superficial.”

His thoughts bristled with shocked disapproval and he waved his hand dismissively.

“It’s very strange that a clean and decent girl like Shina could share the home of a creature like you.”

“We didn’t discuss philosophy and I never bothered to instruct her in decadence!” I said, and I smirked. I stood in front of him and searched his face. How had he managed to do it? How had he survived the temptation that had killed Lavendul and Gallengur and so many others?

“I’d like to have you jailed or executed,” he told me, with cold deliberation. “If it weren’t for Shina, I would do that without a qualm. After the wedding Princess Shina will dwell in my Palace and you will leave at once for your usual den of iniquity. It is my order that you should never meet her again.”

It happened just as he wanted it.

I didn’t bother to wait for the end of the celebration. I left today. One long step to reach the Forest Mansion. From there, to Bourgeois House. Weary with searching. Now, forever alone. I was less than honest when I praised the advantages of my feminine vanities. I had diversions fuller and more satisfying than merely human pleasures. And pains and sorrows also greater than human.

Pondering our encounter in Forest Mansion, I hit upon the strange core of young Prince Rassigart: shy yet domineering, passionate but prudish. He was like someone I had missed for centuries. All of that lost to me now.

He simply refused to drink the potion. He laughed in the frozen face of Mennach and he took up the filled goblet I offered and he dashed it to the floor. It shattered there into hundreds of pieces.

The Diary of Ashterat: Undecimber 3, 644

What a strange sensation to page back over this diary again, after more than seven years!

The windowsills are heaped with winter snow, the fire crackles in the hearth, I’m muffled in a blanket and reading these pages. Seven years, but I am still Ashterat the Taskre, unchanged. What difference could a mere seven years make to me? I am no wiser, scarcely any older. Years of struggle and worry

bring one no greater balance or insight. People may believe that suffering brings wisdom, but they ought to know better. All it brings is early senility.

The attacks from the Beasts Outside have continued, sometimes fierce and frequent and spoiling all my nights. At other times, almost like a long weary truce between us. It has been like this for eight years now. I have survived it, but it has not made me more beautiful.

I retrieved my neglected diary yesterday, because of a presentiment. I knew somehow that the tale told here, after a long interregnum, would continue in some epilogue. And I was right. This evening, a carriage and four royal horses brought me Cinderella again, for the first time in seven years.

Pacing back and forth in the room where she'd once lived – though in a different city, of course – she brought life and movement to my unearthly stillness and solitude. No one has been dusting in Cinderella's room, and the golden laces of her courtier's silk gown stirred up years of filth. Her innocence has faded, and so has her fragility and freshness, but they've not been replaced by what I expected for her: domestic contentment, matronly sensuality. She has an injured, fretful look, a face stiff with vengeance and enmity. She has given King Rassigart two daughters. Daughters only, no proper heir apparent. Court life has not been easy.

As we talked, she tapped her golden slippered foot impatiently on the floor.

"He's filled the Palace with riffraff," she said bitterly. "Debased cronies of his. Village idiots. Common harlots! Alley cats and mongrels and vermin! How can I bear it, Ashterat? I can't stand another moment! No one shows me the proper respect."

I remembered the day of Shina's sweet pity for a rabid fox and I had to marvel at the depth of the changes within her. Perhaps it was wiser to marvel at myself: stale, changeless, unmarked by any passion – petrified deep in the amber of time.

"Why demand so much respect, Cinderella? You're just a pretty little bourgeoisie."

Her lips went thin and pale. "Never again call me Cinderella! Never!"

"Maybe I'm right to remind you of the truth."

Shina's hands went limp. Suddenly she was like a child again: a temperament like April weather. Mouth gone bitter with disappointment, her face was a mask of deep sorrow. "Oh, Ashterat! They remind me of that every day."

Her life was difficult, but I couldn't rouse myself to pity her. Instead, I wondered what the passing years had done to her consort, King Rassigart.

The Diary of Ashterat: March 6, 644

Three months have passed. Shina cannot keep herself away from me.

She was thinner now, her cheeks gone hollow, face full of strain and some deep and thoughtful interior struggle: a unique experience, for her. She'd been driven here to me, almost against her will. I knew the moment I saw her shifty eyes that she had come to me with a purpose.

She wanted something from me, something only I could give, and she was trying to work up the courage to demand it. Our conversation, if you could call it that, was full of pauses and uncertainties. Life had carried us so far apart that Queen Shina and I had nothing to discuss.

Finally she broke out: "Ashterat! I can't live by his side any longer. Give me a poison!"

"Poison? For you?"

"No." She smirked. "For the King."

If I refused her, she would try something else. Lady Death has countless faces for humanity and to find a method to kill is not difficult, even for a Queen.

But if I chose, I might leave some small hope for the King. For the King, if not for Shina.

I found a vial for her and I filled it to the rim with the Potion.

The Diary of Ashterat: March 9, 644

He was older now, the age Lavendul had once been, and he had not forgotten the dark bond between us. It brought him to Bourgeois House.

A storm was raving this night, not any storm of my doing. It was a storm with the taint of the Beasts Outside, full of baffled fury. I saw him skulking past my window, lit by a flash of thunder, and I opened the gate to let him in.

He was drenched, his dark hair plastered to his forehead. He wore no hooded mantle, this time.

"Shina is dead!" he told me. "When I survived the poison, she drank it herself, and it killed her. Why did you spare me so long, Ashterat?"

"Because you refused it."

"I really refused to drink?" He was unbelieving.

I laughed at him. We slipped together into the World Outside. To Forest Mansion, to the room of the clock. Everything veiled in dust. "Strike the midnight!" I screamed at the clock.

But the clock did not strike.

Rassigart raised both hands in a gesture of power, and beneath his steady gaze the ancient wood of the clock cracked and gave way. The mosaic face shattered, and the machine fell into a heap. I watched, without moving, without trembling, without fear. Within the shattered debris I thought I saw a pale shape rising upward, as thin and formless as a sigh of relief.

The new King – the Taskre King! – turned toward me.

His mind was ablaze with strange and terrible light. I could not bear those glowing eyes. His hands on my flesh were like two coals. He pressed possessive, icy lips on mine, and I knew he was not human any longer.



I will not write in my diary any longer. I do not need to write any more. Other people will write about us now. They will tell our story nonetheless.

But they will never dare to tell everything.

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