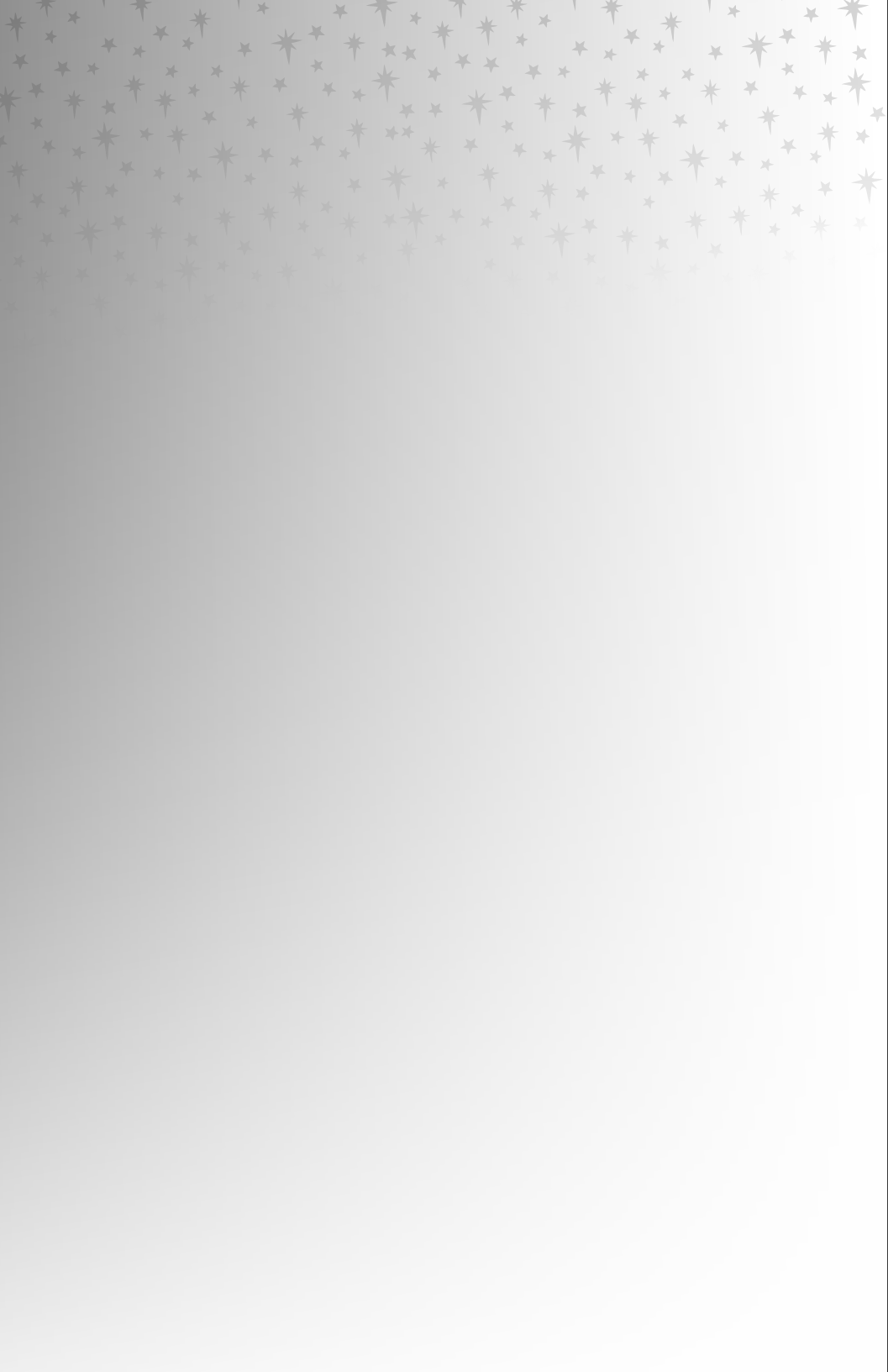


Reading Guide



EREWHON



✧ About the Author ✧



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ELIJAH KINCH SPECTOR is a writer, a dandy, and a rootless cosmopolitan from the Bay Area who now lives in Brooklyn. His first novel, *Kalyna the Soothsayer*, received acclaim from NPR, *Nerds of a Feather*, *Tor.com*, *Foreword*, and *Paste Magazine*, among others. His next novel, *Kalyna the Cutthroat*, is expected in 2024. You can find him at elijahkinchspector.com.




★ Book Discussion Questions ★

These suggested questions are to spark conversation and enhance your reading of *Kalyna the Soothsayer*.

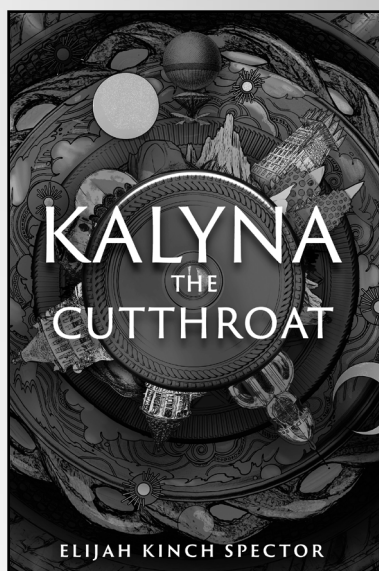
1. Discuss the theme of storytelling in the book. How does Kalyna tell stories to advance her goals? What stories do you think Kalyna believes about herself? What are some of the stories the Tetrarchia tells its citizens?
2. Another major theme of *Kalyna the Soothsayer* is ethnic identity. What are Kalyna's identities? How do you think these identities inform the choices she makes throughout the book? How did your own identities (ethnic and otherwise) influence the way you experienced the story?

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3. Which parts of Kalyna's personality—self-critical, calculating, paranoid, cunning—are a result of her family upbringing, and which are from the reality of her life in the Tetrarchia? How do you think Kalyna's personality and worldview help and hinder her throughout the story?
 4. At the end of Part Four, Kalyna decides not to escape and instead to stay in Rotfelsen and attempt to save the Tetrarchia. What do you think *really* keeps Kalyna in Rotfelsen? Do you believe Kalyna's stated reasoning for her actions, or is she under the influence of other motivations?
 5. Kalyna describes herself as a liar, but which characters are truthful in *Kalyna the Soothsayer*? Which are trustworthy? What is the nature of "truth" as a concept in Rotfelsen?
 6. When Kalyna and Chasiku first meet, in Part Three, Chasiku describes her family's experience of soothsaying. How do you think Chasiku's family would perceive Kalyna's family? If they were to meet, how do you think the two groups would interact? Why?

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7. The cover of the book depicts multiple possible futures for the Tetrarchia. What do you think will become of the Tetrarchia after the events of the book? How would the prophesized fall of the Tetrarchia play into your theories, if at all?
 8. Do the Bandit States and Loasht remind you of any real-world countries? Nations can have many different types of relationships with each other; what are some variations you've seen in our world? Do those between the Tetrarchia and its neighbors remind you of any other examples of international relations?
 9. Why does Prince Friedhelm work so hard to keep a king on the throne of Rotfelsen? Does Rotfelsen need a monarchic government? What would happen to the Tetrarchia if it didn't have kings and queens?
 10. If you were the author, what would you like to see happen in the sequel? Are there any places you want to see more of? Which characters would you want to read more about?



✧ Excerpt from ✧



Keep reading for an excerpt from
the next book in the Failures of Four
Kingdoms series, *Kalyna the Cutthroat*.





How I Left Abathçodu, with the Help of Farbex the Good Donkey

“Get moving where?” I asked breathlessly as Dagmar began to push me down the street, away from my pursuers. My pursuers who had been my neighbors for nearly a year.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Away. You’re the smart boy.” Her Cöllüknit was halting, but did the job.

“Why—?” I took a deep breath and tried again. “Why are you here? I’m glad to see you, of course, but it’s been three seasons.”

She moved into the next intersection, looked down every street, and then seemed to pick a left turn at random.

“Thought you could use some help,” she said. Then, suddenly, she stopped so abruptly that I bumped into her. She rounded on me. “You *can* pay?”

I blinked. “I . . . What will you do if I can’t? *Un*-save me? Throw me back to them?”

“No. No. But we will go our separate ways.”

My mouth went dry. I must have looked very strange, standing in the middle of the street, slowly licking my lips as I stared fervently at nothing.

"I can pay," I said. "If we can get my things."

Dagmar looked thoughtful for a moment, tapping a long finger against the side of her nose.

"Do you . . . erm," she began. "Do you speak Rotfelsenisch?"

I shook my head, and then offered, "I can *read* it decently."

Dagmar groaned and stared off into space, as though she would read the words she needed there. She said something that was certainly a Rotfelsenisch oath or insult. There was still shouting in the distance, and it sounded as though the chorus was growing.

"Do you have," she began again, "anywhere safe you can wait? A friend or, ah, ally?"

I thought about this, as the voices clamoring for me got louder. Dagmar did not seem particularly worried, which I took as proof that we were, for now, safe. I felt like a child relieved that an adult was now here to fix everything, though she was younger than me.

My one-time friend, Manti Dumpling Akram, was of course right out. He may have truly thought that bringing me to the local authorities would have helped me, but his thoughts and intentions did not matter to me anymore. Certainly, I could hope that my terrified flight had shaken his resolve—perhaps even shaken his trust in the fairness of authority—but I was not about to turn right around and ask for his kind of "help."

I wondered whether Crybaby Vüqar, a fellow scholar, would protect me out of professional courtesy, but of course he'd been Akram's friend long before he'd been mine. Besides, the Tetrarchic citizens I'd met, even when they were being friendly, were quicker to see the differences between themselves and outsiders than any similarities.

"Think faster, smart boy," said Dagmar, as she grabbed me by the collar of my jacket and dragged me around a few corners, into an empty yurt. We were at the base of a hill covered in yurts like friendly little mushrooms, right where the wooden buildings ended in this part of town. Dagmar deposited me onto a stranger's bedroll.

"What would you have done if someone were home?" I asked, feeling surprisingly mild about everything.

"No one is," she replied, standing by the entrance. "Lucky them."

Would the librarians help me? I had become familiar with a number of them, and perhaps those who spent all day buried in old texts would better understand the historical context of my current situation. Or, as the guardians of the Library of Abathçodu's system, integrity, and order, they would prefer that things go back to the way they had always been. Either way, I had never discussed much with any of them outside of searching for books. That was the way of the Library.

"Find the Loashti!" came from outside. It sounded like the person yelling was running right past us and up the hill.

Dagmar grumbled something at me in Rotfelsenisch, which I assumed meant "hurry up" or similar. At some point she had silently drawn her sword.

I remembered the temporary, and clandestinely placed, statue I had seen some months ago, "Alimjun the Feckless Grocer Ejecting Me from Her Store, as Rendered in Twigs and Curtains," and wished I'd known the name of its sculptor. Perhaps that person would have hidden me, purely out of spite for that grocer, my landlady.

"Maybe Doctor Eldor?" I finally asked.

"Sure," Dagmar hissed.

"Do doctors in the Tetrarchia have any . . . *code* about how they help people? Perhaps that supersedes the government's wishes?"

Dagmar's passable Cöllüknit broke down at that question, so she stared at me as though I had babbled curses and mysterious Words of the Gods. Backwards.

"Let's try Eldor," I sighed.

"Sure," she repeated. Then she peered out of the yurt and beckoned to me.

The bottom of the hill was quiet now, and I did not even hear yelling in the distance. Had they given up? Had the whole city been roused against me, or just a small, angry aberration? Perhaps there were even competing groups, and Akram and Vüqar were leading the faction who wanted to keep me "safe" in official custody.

Whatever the case, I felt safest with Dagmar and her sword. She was not bothered by my being Loashti, because she hardly ever seemed bothered at all.

I managed to get my bearings and lead us to Doctor Eldor's without incident. The streets were mostly quiet now, which, given the bustling school and its merry students, was worrying. It was dark, but not that late yet.

When we arrived at the same small wooden building where Akram and my "friends" had, the previous summer, attempted to trick the learned doctor into "reading" my many tattoos, Dagmar flattened against the wall next to the door. I knocked.

Eldor opened the door slowly, cautiously. She was a stout, gray woman who always looked inquisitive, and warm candlelight radiated from behind her. When she saw me, she stopped opening the door, and left it halfway.

"Is it an emergency?" she asked. "Did they hurt you?"

This moment of seemingly genuine worry, even if it was purely professional, made tears come to my for the second time that night. I very pathetically wiped them away on my sleeve.

"Not yet," I whimpered. "Will you let me hide here?" My voice cracked. "Just—just for a little while?"

Eldor only hesitated a moment, but in that time I fancied I saw a thousand calculations and emotions cross her eyes. Then she opened the door.

"Come in. It isn't illegal to harbor you, yet. Just frowned upon."

I rushed in, and Dagmar appeared behind me, like a looming Death Spirit with her sword a pale glint angling out of her cloak. She followed me in before Eldor could fully react.

"Who is that?" she asked, as Dagmar kicked the door closed.

"My protector," I said.

Eldor nodded at the bare blade. "And that is for . . . ?"

"You, had you turned him down," said Dagmar, as she sheathed her sword. It did not sound like a threat, just a fact of life.

Eldor, in most classic Quru fashion, asked no further probing questions. She led us through the small front room of her home, which was where she treated patients, complete with a small couch and a number of strange instruments. I had been here, not long ago, when my throat had swollen up at the advent of spring. Eldor had given me some concoctions for drainage that had me feeling human again in a few days, which was lovely, but a bit slow compared to many Loashti medicines.

Off to the side of Eldor's office, there was an open door into her husband, Big Rüstem's, workshop, where we could see piles of hay and cane, plaster heads for temporary statues that had not yet been constructed, and small models no more than a foot high. Dagmar craned her neck for a closer look at the artist's domain.

Meanwhile, Doctor Eldor took us into a different, smaller back room, which contained a low table, with sitting pillows on the floor, a multicolored lamp hanging from the ceiling, and wall shelving stacked high with jars. She closed the door and sat on a pillow; I joined her nearby. Dagmar put her left boot on the face of the table, leaning forward, resting her left elbow on her knee and dangling her hand idly. That this was extremely uncouth could be read in the slight curl of Eldor's lip.

I could now see Dagmar's face fully in the light from above, refracted through red, green, blue, and yellow glass. The sellsword looked just as I remembered from the previous summer: a lean, pale face, with brown eyes searching suspiciously even while she seemed unbelievably calm. She was less sun-burnt than she had been, and I think she had a new scar: a nick below her jaw.

"Only one exit," she said.

"Either you trust me, or you do not," said Eldor, looking up at her. "In here, if anyone comes to the door, they will not see you. If Rüstem's workshop door was closed, it would make them suspicious."

"Just saying," replied Dagmar, shrugging. She leaned down further and shoved at my shoulder in what was meant to be a friendly fashion.

I nearly screamed in fear and imagined pain. Shaking, I gripped my own knees tightly and attempted to will myself into stillness. Dagmar gingerly removed her hand.

"So, smart boy," she said, "where is your . . . um . . ."

"Things?" I offered.

". . . money," she finished, at the same time.

I stared down at my knees, took a deep breath, and tried again to be still.

"No . . ." I gulped, then tried again, closing my eyes. "No money if you don't get my books." It was not courage—only the thought that going through all of this *and* losing my Commonplace volumes would be too great a calamity.

“Yes, yes, I’ll get your *things*. I just forgot the—” another Rotfelsenisch curse, “—Quru word for ‘things.’ Why must such a simple word have six syllables?”

Eldor opened her mouth to answer, but I shook my head at her and she decided against it.

I, with Eldor’s assistance, spent some time trying to give Dagmar directions to my rented yurt behind Alimjun’s shop. Eventually, we laid it out on the table in a makeshift map fashioned from piles of some powdered root from a nearby jar. Once it was clearly visible to Dagmar, she understood the way immediately.

“And when you smell fermented peppers,” added Eldor, “head toward the scent.”

“Why didn’t you *start* with that?” sighed Dagmar.

She finally removed her foot from the table, and then shook herself out of her cloak. Underneath, Dagmar was wearing thick leather trousers and a blue blouse, billowy with a number of small red feathers sown into it. The specks of red rippled as she rolled up her sleeves. Dagmar’s arms were long, wiry, muscular, and absolutely etched with scars: they were nearly as covered as mine were with tattoos. Some of those scars were still red, and Eldor widened her eyes at them.

“It gets cold up here at night,” I said. It was a stupid thing to say.

“Cute,” replied Dagmar. Then she was gone.

After a few minutes, I got up to inspect Eldor’s jars. She watched me quietly, and seemingly dispassionately, from her seat on the floor.

“Are you a doctor of some kind?” she finally asked, as I gazed at a jar of dried mushrooms. “Or a scholar of healing? I would be very disappointed if *now* I learned that you had been a fellow doctor, or whatever the Loashti version is, and we had not discussed it.”

“No, no. I’m not. May I smell these mushrooms?”

“Yes, but don’t take in too much vapor.”

“I am a scholar,” I continued, “of folklore and—Ooh, what a smell!—ritual, and the like.” Now was certainly not the time to say that I studied curses. “Many of these are used in ceremonies I have studied.”

I could positively hear Doctor Eldor raise an eyebrow at this.

“Loashti sorcery?” she asked.

“Why would I study that in the Tetrarchia, Doctor?”

She made a vague noise of labored assent, which turned into a noisy throat clearing.

"I only mean," she said, "that is why people here fear you. Loashti sorcery."

"And what, pray tell, is Loashti sorcery?"

"Well, if they knew, they might not fear you!"

"Loasht," I said slowly, "is much more virulent about stamping out what it considers to be 'sorcery' than the Tetrarchia has ever been."

She made a thoughtful, but not at all assenting, grunt. I went back to fawning over her collection.

I got the feeling that, regardless of my area of study, or my origin, mine was simply a *personality* that Eldor would never have liked: chatty, fanciful, and argumentative. And yet, she was protecting me while Akram, who did like me, had not. He may have thought he was, but that was beside the point.

I next browsed Eldor's collection of preserved cacti, and we had a nice, long silence, until she said, "They are not bad people you know?"

"Who?" I asked. I still faced the jars, but no longer saw them.

"The people here," she said. "In Abathçodu."

"I am sure some of them are bad and some of them are not bad," I replied. I did not turn to face her, but scrupulously inspected labels. "Just like anywhere."

"You know what I mean."

"You mean, the people who were chasing me through your streets—"

"Yes."

"—because of some faraway change in policy—"

"Yes."

"—that no one here can fully articulate—"

"Yes!"

I had never heard her yell before, so I quenched whatever I had meant to say next. I took a deep breath instead.

"They're scared," she said.

I wanted to tell her that *I* was scared. That I was alone in a foreign place, hunted by those with the luxury to be "scared" in packs. To chase down and overpower the unimportant, isolated, powerless scholar who "scared" them so. But said none of that. Instead, I walked back over to the table, sat down on a pillow, and looked at her.

"All right," I said, "they're good people. They are just scared. What do you wish me to *do* with that knowledge?"

"Just—don't judge them too harshly."

"I hardly see how my judgements of them will matter."

"I respect you," said Eldor. "You are clearly learned, and it must have taken great courage to come study here in the first place."

I sucked my teeth audibly.

"And so," she continued, "I wish you to have a little mercy in your consideration of my neighbors, given their context."

At least ten possible responses came to my mind, but I imagined each one would have made Doctor Eldor angry, sad, or more argumentative. I wanted her to keep sheltering me, but I could not bring myself to concede that I was in any place to give "mercy." How did my opinion of the people chasing me through the streets matter?

Thankfully, after a short silence between the two of us, Dagmar returned.

My mercenary savior now *sat* on the face of the small table, with her dirty boots on the floor. (She almost stepped on a sitting pillow, but I saved it.) Her sword was sheathed, her elbows rested on her thighs, and she was sweating and breathing hard. In front of her, on the floor, sat one of my packs.

"I grabbed all I could." She winked. "I hope it was the right yurt."

It was. Inside were some Quru clothes, most of my money and valuables, every volume of my Commonplace Book not back in Loasht, and a few of the other books I had brought with me. Not all, but I wasn't going to be picky: my own volumes contained all I'd recorded of my research thus far, alongside anything else that caught my eye. Dagmar had not brought, however, any of my glass bottles or dried gourds, which contained not only the sorts of ingredients that Doctor Eldor had so much of, but also what I used to keep my skin and hair as soft and beautiful as was possible in this dry climate.

Also in the pack were a few library books, as of course Dagmar had not taken the time to pore over what was mine and what was borrowed before throwing things in the bag. These I left with Eldor to return.

"And please do," I added. "I won't have it said that I stole your books, besides."

Doctor Eldor nodded sagely.

As I handed her the last one, *The Miraculous Adventure of Aigerim*, Eldor stopped just short of taking it. I looked down and saw a splatter of fresh blood on the cover. Eldor looked up at Dagmar.

"What?" asked the sellsword.

"They are just *scared*," Eldor repeated, as though Dagmar had been present for our conversation. Or as though I directly controlled her.

Dagmar grinned. "They are now."

Eldor trained a withering look on me.

I readied myself to leave, and Eldor insisted that I keep the stained copy of *The Miraculous Adventure of Aigerim*. I didn't want to waste space on a light, romantic adventure—which was, crucially, not light to *carry*—but I was beginning to wonder what might set the doctor off and cause her to throw us to her neighbors.

"So," said Dagmar, "how do we get you out of town?"

"I . . ." I gaped. "I thought you had a plan?"

"I don't know the city," she said. "And I'm not much of a planner."

"It's still dark," said Eldor. "Maybe you can sneak out?"

"Someone will be watching the borders," said Dagmar.

"Abathçodu doesn't really have set borders," I added.

"Well," the sellsword replied, "*someone* will be *somewhere*. And I can't cut through everyone."

Eldor's eyes widened, and her jaw clenched. Dagmar did not seem to notice.

"There must be a way we can sneak out," muttered Dagmar. "What are those . . . uh, silly statues all over the place?"

"You mean, the statues my husband makes?" said Eldor.

"Yes, exactly! Those daft things of sticks or mud or hay that break, or go tumbling down the mountain, if you so much as look at them."

Eldor pressed her lips together, choosing not to justify the artistic life of her home. I must admit that I that moment I felt more of a kindred spirit with the doctor, and with the city that was persecuting me, than I did with my brutish, indelicate savior. There is a lot to consider there, another day.

"Maybe we can do something with them," said Dagmar. She mumbled for a bit in Rotfelsenisich, and then added in Cöllüknit: "What would that one do?"

At the time I did not know who "that one" was, nor even their gender, thanks to Cöllüknit's single, universal pronoun.

“Doc,” said Dagmar, “which cliffs offer the softest landing?”

“Well . . .” began Eldor.

“Wait . . .” I tried.

“You know,” Dagmar continued, “with a lot of, um . . .” she mimed something unintelligible. “With a lot of little bumps rather than a long drop. Preferably with some nice thickets as a cushion.”

“A cushion?” I asked.

“But not too soft!” added Dagmar. “Some sharp bits would be good. Bits that catch and cut down on the . . . the ah . . .” She mimed some more.

“Momentum?” offered Eldor.

Dagmar nodded and looked relieved.

According to Dagmar, what “that one,” whoever they were, would have done was mad, senseless, and dangerous. But it was also the only idea that anyone offered.

And so it was that Doctor Eldor, Big Rüstem, and their “large assistant” (Dagmar in a cloak and hood) trudged through Abathçodu carrying a new work of the artist’s. This statue was of hay, held in by some of the hoops and planks of an old barrel: it depicted Farbex the Good Donkey, a popular character beloved for his jolly rotundity. Big Rüstem spent the whole way grumbling that anyone who got a good look would be disgusted at how bad a job he had done—but of course this was because he had thrown Farbex together at the last minute, with myself bundled inside the friendly animal’s straw guts.

What a terrifying ordeal this was. I was encased in a prison weak and pliable enough that I fancied I could be seen and heard, but stiff enough that I could not move. The beloved Farbex had been chosen to give me lots of padding, but the reason I needed such was particularly ghastly.

From what I could hear, many residents of Abathçodu did see Big Rüstem’s statue of Farbex, but none saw it very well. They were all quite busy looking for a Loashti sorcerer.

After some particularly harsh and violent words from a passerby, I heard Dagmar whisper, so quietly that I’m sure no one else could hear her: “Don’t cry now.”

It must have looked like she was speaking into merry Farbex’s much celebrated rump, and that image did stifle my tears.

Once the statue of the Good Donkey was planted in its spot, Doctor Eldor's large, clumsy assistant bumped it.

"Oops," said the large, clumsy assistant.

All was spinning and falling, bouncing and cutting, terror and pain. Finally, I lay curled up in my hay prison, not even attempting to free myself. Hours later, I was wrenched out of whatever thicket I had ultimately landed in, and then Dagmar eviscerated poor Farbex, freeing me.

"No more lazing about," she said, throwing down my pack. "Is anything broken?"

"I don't know," I said as I tried to stand. It took three attempts, but I managed. I was bruised and shaken, with my clothes torn and my skin lacerated all over. Certainly, neither of my arms felt as though they were quite correctly fitting in their sockets, but they could move, at least.

"You seem whole." Dagmar clapped her hands loudly and grinned. "Looks like the burs and spines of the famed Quru stinkbrush did their work well!"

"At least," I sighed, "I was in there so long that I can't even smell it."

"How lucky!"

"Oh yes."

"Then let's go, smart boy!"

"Where?"

"Away. Then we figure out the rest."

I nodded numbly, for I was numb all over, and followed Dagmar down the steep rocks. It was morning now, and Quruscan's springtime sun was just peeking over the mountain in pink lines. I could smell the flowers around us, and even hear chirping and movement nearby. There was no path here, just gnarled beige trees, low gray brush, and blooms of every color I could possibly imagine. When I looked behind me, the cliff face above was such that I could not even see Abathçodu.

"So, how did you know to come save me?" I finally asked, after we'd walked for perhaps an hour.

Dagmar, in front and cleaving the brush with a long dagger, grunted back, "I saw that things are going bad for some Loashti. Remembered I dropped you there." She shrugged. "Thought you might need help."

“Going bad how? I still hardly know myself.”

“What I heard,” she explained, “was that Loashti with papers in . . .”—she seemed to be grasping for the words—“pink, robin’s egg blue, orange marble, or lime are not Loashti. Ex-Loashti. Outcast aliens.” Dagmar kicked over some sort of small dirt mound that must’ve been a creature’s home. “I knew some people here would take this chance to . . . oh . . . you know . . .”

“Act upon their worst impulses regarding the Loashti?”

“Yes! I think. My Cöllüknit is still not . . . great. But it’s easy to make Tetrarchics turn on Loashti.” She looked back at me and grinned. “Not everyone is as reasonable and tolerant as I.” She winked.

“What a pity,” I murmured in Zobiski.

To her credit, Dagmar did not demand to know what I had just said in my native tongue. Whenever I would speak in that, or Loashti Bureaucratic, she acted as though I had said nothing. I did the same when she let Rotfelsenisch words hack their way through her throat.

Dagmar seemed to hold no great animus toward Loasht, or indeed anybody. She was even-handed and nonplussed with everyone—and also willing to kill everyone. (Or most everyone.)

“Do things in the Tetrarchia,” I asked, “usually change so suddenly after every Council of . . . well . . .”

“‘Barbarians’? Say it if you mean to say it.” She cut her way through another thicket. “But no. I’ve guarded Prince Friedhelm at . . . five or six Councils? Usually nothing happened that would . . .” She lapsed into Rotfelsenisch.

“That would change day-to-day life?” I offered.

“Close enough.” She shrugged, her back still to me. “That is, until the last one I attended. Sort of. Since then, things have been much more . . . ah . . .”

“Fluid?”

“Yes.”

“When was your last Council? Were you there when the Blossoming started last year?”

“No, no. Year before.”

The vines on a tree began to writhe on their own, seemingly in anticipation of Dagmar and her dagger. Instead of cutting at them, she went around, and motioned that I to do the same. I dutifully did so, and trudged after her in silence for a few minutes.

“Wait,” I said. “How did you know my papers were pink?”

“Went through your . . .”—another Rotfelsenisch curse—“. . . *things* while you slept.”

“Of course.”

“‘Things,’” she muttered. “What a word to—”

“You do know I have less money than when you last went through my belongings, yes? Those were savings. I’ve been studying in Abathçodu, not doing paid work.”

“Smart boy,” she tsked, wagging a finger over her shoulder at me, “I *last* went through your things was when I retrieved them five hours ago.” She destroyed a bush that puffed out dust as some sort of useless defense against her, causing her to cough. “Besides, work has been slow for me lately—not many blood debts or duels in Quruscan. I am not sure why I’ve stayed.”

She finally cut our way to a path, and made a cry of joy, before spitting loudly on the ground. The path was small and winding, but it was something. We began walking side-by-side.

“No,” she growled under her breath, “I know why I’ve stayed.” She sounded disgusted with herself.

“Why?”

Dagmar’s back straightened and her eyes widened.

“Did I use Cöllüknit?” she asked.

“You did.”

“Huh.”

We were quiet for some time as we moved downhill along the path. Dagmar kept looking around to see if we were followed, or anticipated, but we seemed to be alone. I mostly tried to not think about how hungry I was becoming.

“Do we know where we’re going?” I asked eventually.

“Rather,” she said. “We’re looking for ziplines to the steppe. Down there we’ll find a place that may contain a person I know.”

“Dagmar, that could mean almost anything.”

“Look,” she said, stopping and turning toward me, “did you like falling down the cliff in a roll of hay?”

“Of course I did not.”

“Well that was the best *I* could do. I told you I am not a planner. I am a stabber. But I cannot stab your way back to Loasht. You do want to get back to Loasht, don’t you?”

I hadn't even considered it. I had been so caught up in escaping Abathçodu.

"I don't know," I said. "If I'm no longer Loashti, can I even go back?"

That last part only occurred to me as I said it, and suddenly I was overwhelmed with a feeling of impossibility, of the insurmountable.

"You can if we sneak you in," said Dagmar.

"Is the whole Tetrarchia is now hostile to me?"

"You'd have to ask the whole Tetrarchia."

I moaned, and realized how parched my throat was. I would die here in the Tetrarchia, hunted and despised I would never again see the lands of my forebearers, who had been forced to become part of Loasht, and were now, it seemed, being forced to sever themselves from its embrace.

"I suppose I have to go back," I said. "See if this is all some bureaucratic *mistake* the Academy can fix for me." It seemed unlikely, but the Loashti Academy had sheltered my kind before. "And if not, to find my family and . . . figure out what all we can do next."

"So, that's a yes to getting back into Loasht?"

"I suppose?" I croaked.

"Then you need someone wilier than I," said Dagmar. "I know what I am, smart boy: a blunt thing you point at what needs killing. You need a planner, like I said. Someone who is, you know, tricky like. Erm . . ." She added something else in Rotfelsenisch, before adding, "Do you know what I mean?"

"Not really."

"A cutthroat!"

"Don't *you* cut throats?"

"Well, yes!" She threw up her hands, angry at our inability to communicate. (But not, thankfully, angry at *me*.) "But you need someone... someone 'cutthroat' in the way they do things. The way they use things. And use people."

"No scruples?"

"Yes."

"A scheming manipulator?"

"Exactly!" She gestured broadly toward me. "Thank you!"

I nodded to show her I understood, although I was confused. And worried.

"What you need," she said, "is reason I stayed in Quruscan so long. She'll figure this out!"

“Oh. Good.”

“Yes, yes,” Dagmar continued, beaming at me. “Not a scruple on that one. Not the ghost of the father of a scruple!”

I stared down at the path and felt as though I would faint.

Commonplace Book, excerpt from My Wondrous Travels, Vol. 2: Outside Loasht by Dust in the Air is . . . whose full name is lost to history. Copied down, and later translated from Loashti Bureaucratic to Skydašiavos, by Radiant Basket of Rainbow Shells.

There is simply no reason to visit the Tetrarchia for one who is not a merchant, or a dragoman escorting a merchant. Its wonders—such as the great rock of Rotfelsen and the congested forests of Masovska, home to a temple even older than Loasht—are so normal to the locals that they never think to treat them as attractions. They are such a simple group of peoples that they fail to understand how strange their lives and homes are.

What’s more, for a merchant, such as myself, there is hardly ever a reason to go beyond Skydašiai. I had hoped that, in visiting the other three Tetrarchic kingdoms, I would find stranger textiles and produce, new dyes or spices; but perhaps their only great accomplishment is how seamless and easy trade within the Tetrarchia is. In this one way, perhaps, Loasht could even learn from them (Loasht is, of course, much larger). Anything interesting that can be bought in the Tetrarchia can be bought in Skydašiai: at a slight markup, yes, but you will save much by avoiding travel through inhospitable lands.

Honored Reader, you may take it from me, who was traveled to all of the farthest places: there is simply no reason to visit Rotfelsen, Masovska, or Quruscan.

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