

Content Warnings

Content warnings typically consist of a list of kink tags so readers know what sort of fantasy they're stepping into. But, *Pure* requires two sets of content warnings because, in addition to sex and kink, there are unerotic features of the story that readers might find unpleasant.

Pure takes place in a grisly medieval fantasy world where illiteracy abounds, politics are deeply hierarchical, life is traumatizing, especially for children, and the plague threatens civilization. These qualities are not intended to be arousing in themselves but to make the core events of the story feel more significant for the characters. I did my best to relay as few details as possible in these parts because my overall intention is to write erotica, not grimdark fantasy. But, I needed to share enough so the reader would understand where the characters are coming from. So, here's what you'll need to look out for:

Erotic Content

Belly expansion by cumflation

Breast expansion

Male penis and testicle growth

Lactation

Femdom seduction

Graphic descriptions of male/female intercourse and oral sex

Non-Erotic Content

Allusions to domestic violence

Feudal intrigue

Trauma from underage sexual experiences—which are *not* described, just alluded to

Ideologically sensitive themes involving experiences with organized religion

Pro-choice themes

Descriptions of people suffering from the plague

Pure

by TrebleCleffy

Part I: Nigredo

Tristessa was checking her fishing nets in the stream when the bird, Kilah, told her of their approach: two horses, three men.

They appeared atop the sunlit hill, rode down the shaded, muddy path, crossed the bog over the narrow causeway and stood on the tufted grass in the yard of her house amidst the towering, wild cypresses and murky pond water, thick with bright, green scum. Tristessa was waiting for them.

It was rare for a party of only men to visit Tristessa out here in the swamp. Almost always, it was a young woman, perhaps accompanied by a mother or aunt or big sister or a big brother. Three men. It certainly meant trouble. But, trouble for who?

Kilah twittered in Tristessa's ear. *Can't you make them go away?*

She stood in her olive green skirt and red cloak, unhooded, arms crossed beneath her breasts with Kilah perched atop her shoulder. Her auburn hair was tied back in a white coif and she wore a heavy waist belt with a rough hewn black stone mounted in the center. The stone was only a bauble. Nevertheless, she drew herself up on the heels of her boots, brandishing the stone the way men sometimes brandished their scabbarded weapons. Let these men think she was a hair's breadth from unleashing some menacing act of sorcery on them.

The lone rider was older than the pair on the other horse and Tristessa soon recognized him: Piot Rutgers, mayor of Hyle. He was near fifty now, by Tristessa's guess, and bore the literal and affectual girth of provincial authority.

Hyle was two leagues away—the closest town to Tristessa's home. Tristessa visited the place when business was particularly good and she had spare money enough to get drunk at the local tavern and stomach enough not to mind the smell of vomit and greasy bodies.

Of the pair of men on the other horse, Tristessa guessed the one with the reins to be Piot's son—she had never known the young man's name. The boy who shared the saddle with him might also have been a son of the mayor, though the resemblance was not apparent.

Piot Rutgers dismounted from his horse. He took a few cautious steps toward Tristessa, then stopped, four paces away. He gazed at her with small, bloodshot eyes. His brow was

broad and bald up to the crown of his head. He cleared his throat and spoke. "Well met, woman. I am—"

"Mayor, Piot Rutgers," Tristessa in her typical, seething tone. "Well met. What brings you?"

The man grunted irritably. He pursed his lips. His gray-streaked beard twitched. "It seems, you yet owe Lord Garvin eighty pieces of silver for that donkey you bought off him last fall."

Tristessa stifled a laugh. "Lord? Is that what he calls himself now?"

A crease cleaved Piot Rutger's brow. "Pray tell, crone, did I say something amusing?"

"Do I look like a crone, Mayor?"

"Bless my soul, woman, whatever magics you've conjured up to keep your face smooth for so long, I'd wager you've lived in this swamp long enough to *be* a crone. But, never mind. Which will it be: crone or wench?"

"I am neither."

"Whore," suggested Piot's son. The young man was bareheaded, tall and unshaven. His dark hair was scraggly. He wore mail, slightly rusted, and at his side dangled a very mediocre-looking broadsword. He giggled at what was apparently his idea of a funny joke.

"Try me, boy," said Tristessa to him, "and, we'll see which of us is the whore."

Piot's son's eyes bulged with fury. He opted to dismount, but Piot Rutgers waved him back. "Not now, Aelrin. Not now."

As this was going on, the boyish one who sat behind Aelrin, tilted out from behind his companion and raised a crossbow at Tristessa's heart. He was shorter, skinnier and paler than Aelrin. Almost beardless too. A young man, perhaps, but he hadn't been one for long. If Aelrin's sword was mediocre, this little man's crossbow was worse. The wood was rotted and the sinew string looked ready to snap and rob the poor fellow of an eye.

Nevertheless, Tristessa did not like it when men raised weapons at her. "Mayor, tell your whelp back there if he doesn't point his miserable bow elsewhere, I'll put his bolt somewhere he'll never part with it."

"I'm not a whelp," the boy protested.

"She talks like a whore, da," Aelrin tittered.

"Enough," growled Piot. "Sigor, put the bow down. We're talking."

With a sour face, the boyish Sigor lowered the weapon.

"Now," said Tristessa. "Out with it, Mayor. Surely you didn't ride a league out from Hyle for eighty pieces of silver."

Piot grunted, gazed at the ground, shaking his head and muttered, "nay." He'd been avoiding Tristessa's gaze through most of the conversation. It was simply the way townsfolk usually were around Tristessa. Stories of the reclusive woman who lived in the swamp and never aged abounded for miles. None of them were entirely true. Only some of them were entirely false. In any case, there was no special power in Tristessa's eyes. Piot rubbed his brow in frustration and then very nearly looked Tristessa in the eye as he said: "things do not look so good for Hyle. Entire families have fallen ill in less than a fortnight."

Tristessa laughed. "The pestilence! That's why you three are here. You're hoping I can save you."

Piot took a step closer. His voice dropped very low. It was obvious he did not entirely wish to say these next words: "But can you do it, witch?"

Witch. Tristessa wavered whenever she heard the name. She didn't like it because it wasn't true. But, Tristessa doubted the extent of the word's untruth would matter to Hylians

"Can I save you all? Perhaps. Do you have something to offer for the trouble?"

"I didn't come here speaking of eighty pieces of silver as a jape," said Piot. "If indeed, you manage to lift the pestilence from Hyle, the town will come up with the money to forgive your debt. That is the offer I propose."

Tristessa screamed with laughter. "For eighty pieces of silver! For that, you want me to save your entire town."

"We'll have no further reason to harass you here," said Piot.

"Worry not. I am more amused than harassed."

"Can I chop off her head and gets it over with now?" said Aelrin.

"Aelrin, shut your mouth," Piot shouted. The mayor turned back to Tristessa. "Please, reconsider, woman. However it may arrive at your door, we bring you business. If this pestilence keeps up, in half a year's time, there could be little town left. It would be a poor affair for you."

Tristessa gazed into the mayor's small, averted eyes. The words she spoke next were long and measured. "It seems to me," she said, "it would be a matter of some embarrassment if the Mayor of poor Hyle offered a town's ransom to the 'witch' who lives in the swamp, even if your sad little lives all depended on her 'magics'. You wish to coerce me so you don't have

to *propose* anything. So, I put it to you: so what if Hyle falls under the scourge of disease? Towns come and go. I help only those who make me an offer. A *real* one. *Make* me one or be on your way."

Aelrin affixed Tristessa with a bitter look. "Are you going to just let her talk like that, da? Don't forget, whore, you're talking to the mayor of our town, and—!"

But, Piot waved his unruly son to silence. "It's the only offer I have to make, woman," said Piot. And now, with palpable relief on his face, the mayor turned around and went to his horse. "I feared this meeting would go no better. Alas, some of us are still in good health. In a day's time, we will be back to collect that debt you owe. You'd best have the money on hand, or it's trouble you'll have instead."

And for a moment, it seemed the meeting would end there with Piot's empty threat.

But then, the boy Sigor spoke up. "She don't look much like a witch, though."

"Well, she is," growled Aelrin.

"She's too pretty to be a witch," said Sigor.

"It's cuz she's pretty you knows she's a witch," said Aelrin. "S'all a trick, anyway. Soon as we leave this place, all that pretty'll melt off and she'll be cracked and saggy."

"Have you seen it like that?" said Sigor.

"No. She's clever. She'll never show it."

Tristessa ignored Aelrin. She was studying Sigor. There was more than a shred of curiosity in the boy, not a quality the people of Hyle had in measurable supply. He was still an idiot—everyone in Hyle was. But, if he could be relieved of that stupid weapon, the boy might be a *useful* idiot. Unlike his two companions, he had a fresh face. His hair was a blazing mop of red and he wore a gray tunic and blue breeches. His eyes were keen and curious.

Something stirred in Tristessa, something she had long ago thought had been put to rest. Yes... a deal might yet be arranged. There was indeed one cure for the pestilence whose success was virtually guaranteed, if the alchemy was done exactly right. This alchemy, however, could not be created by Tristessa alone. Perhaps she could make a good thing of that...

"Mayor," she said.

Piot Rutgers paused, his foot in his horse's stirrup.

"It can be done, but I will need a man."

"What?" said the mayor.

"I can save your bloody town. And, I'll do it for eighty pieces of silver. But, I need an assistant."

Aelrin burst out laughing. "You did it, da! Twisted the bird's wing 'til she gave it up."

Tristessa ignored him. Her gaze was locked on the Mayor, who seemed newly troubled. "What...what *man* do you speak of?"

Tristessa pointed to Sigor. "He'll do."

Aelrin looked stupefied. "Wh—me?"

"Not you. *Him*."

The mayor looked at the boy, then cast Tristessa a dark look. "That's my nephew, Sigor."

"He can stay here," said Tristessa. "He has to be a good boy, though."

"I'm not a boy," Sigor protested.

Piot's gaze cast across the swamp. "What in blazes do you need my nephew for?"

"You ask me to do a monumental task in little time. I need his hands." She needed his *other things* too, but that was not worth mentioning.

"I have servants," said Piot. "I can send them. They'll be here by eventide."

"I don't like your dirty, old servants and I don't want them here. I like your nephew Sigor better."

Piot fell silent. By the look on his face, he'd have been happier if Tristessa had simply let him ride off empty handed.

"This is bad, da," said Aelrin. "She'll cook Sigor up and eats him."

"I only need him while the remedy is underway," said Tristessa. "Then, he can go back to Hyle. He'll have all his parts attached and he'll be alive to tell of it. I swear it on my dead mother's grave."

Sigor's pale face was paler now. His gaze swiveled between his uncle and Tristessa.

Aelrin dismounted, handed the reins to Sigor and went over to Piot, waving his arms in the air. "Da, we don't needs this old bird's devil magic. Father Tamblyn sent word for help. Let's get the eighty pieces and be done with it. Sigor's family, and—"

The whole time Aelrin spoke, Sigor's gaze was locked with Tristessa's. Tristessa's mind was made up. She would *have* this boy.

"Can you save my mum?" said Sigor, at last.

"Aye," said Tristessa. "If we're fast enough."

Sigor gazed long and hard into Tristessa's eyes. It had been a very long time since anyone had. Her returning gaze did not waver.

"Alright, I'll do it," he said at last.

Piot and Aelrin turned to Sigor. "Er...d-do you mean that, Sigor?" said Piot.

Sigor swung a leg over Aelrin's horse, slid to the ground. "I'll help her 'til the town is well," he said. He handed the reins back to Aelrin and approached Tristessa.

"Sigor, you're dumb as rocks," cried Aelrin. "She's charmed you."

"Not charmed," said Sigor over his shoulder.

"Da, we can't just *let* her—" Aelrin complained.

But, Piot's brow was now pressed together in thought. "Might be for the best, though," the mayor grumbled. "I like it better if one of us is here to watch her sorcery."

"I'll make sure she does it proper," said Sigor.

Tristessa wanted to clap the boy over his head for that bit of insolence, but she let it go. There would be plenty of time for that sort of thing later. She said to Piot, "my remedy will come in a fortnight, as I said. And, don't worry about leaving him with provisions. I'll see he's taken care of."

But now, Aelrin handed his horse's reins to his father and tramped over to Tristessa.

He came in close, their faces inches apart. Tristessa could smell the ale stink on his breath as he spoke. She hated it, but did not allow herself to flinch or back away.

"Now, you listen, witch. I don't likes you and I don't likes you taking Sigor, even if he can't swing a sword to save his life. And it's not cuz of the magic I don't likes you and it's not cuz you're a whore. It's cuz you think all us in Hyle are turds 'neath your foot. Mark me, if anything happens to my cousin, I'll shove my sword down that whore's throat of yours."

"I'd like to see you try," said Tristessa with a vicious grin.

"And," Aelrin continued, "if you gots witch magic to save you, then I'll do this." Aelrin's hand swooped in the air. Kilah evaded his grasp and fluttered in arcs around the two of them. The blackcap perched once more on Tristessa's shoulder. It blinked at Aelrin. Undeterred by his failure to seize the bird, spittle arced from the man's chattering teeth. "I'll find this here bird." His pointing finger curled into a trembling fist. "I'll find 'im and I'll crush 'im so tiny I can picks my nose with him."

Tristessa's words were pure bile. "If you try to hurt Kilah," she said, "you'll regret the day your 'da' here so much as wet his cock in your mother's hole, ere you came into this world."

"Enough," said Piot. "Let's be off, Aelrin." The mayor wanted to be away from Tristessa as soon as possible.

Aelrin scowled at Tristessa. He spat at the ground and strode back to his horse.

"Tell mum I'll be back in a fortnight," said Sigor, waving.

"Aye. Keep well, boy," said Piot. "We'll be back here in as long too."

"You won't," said Tristessa. "I'll come to you. And, I'll bring the boy with me—if your son minds himself."

And with that, the mayor and Aelrin rode back up the causeway and left Sigor and Tristessa alone in the swamp.

Fweet—fwee-wee-weet! Rweeeeeee! Fweet, Kilah tweeted, very loudly, into Tristessa's ear. *Why is this one staying here? He will only make trouble for you.*

* * *

"Now," said Tristessa to Sigor, "as long as you're fed and bedded here at my house, you will do as I say. You *will* do as I say, or I'll send you running home and you'll have to tell the poor, sickly folk of Hyle this deal is off. Do you understand, boy?"

Sigor looked at Tristessa like he was trying to spot a rabbit in a cluster of underbrush. He glanced at Tristessa's house, which was far bigger than most of the houses in his village.

"Are you a lady?" he said.

"Lady enough for you, anyway. But, I'll twist your ear if you address me as Lady Tristessa. I have no use for your titles. It is Tristessa. Tristessa now; Tristessa when I breathe my last breath. Say it, boy."

"Tristessa?"

"Good. Now, come with me."

Tristessa led the way up the stony path to her door. She opened the door for Sigor, but the boy was busy studying the clay and stone façade of the house. "Not even a crack," he marveled. The peasant houses of Hyle were poorer, with gouged sections, sometimes plugged with animal hair, sometimes left exposed.

"Aye, aye, it's beautiful," said Tristessa. "Get inside."

Tristessa took Sigor by his baggy sleeve and yanked him into the raftered interior of the hearth room. There were benches, stools, shelves mounted on walls, barrels, wicker baskets, a pile of neatly stacked firewood and latticed windows on the exterior walls that permitted a wealth of sunlight in the mornings and late afternoons. In the middle of the room, a bricked ring enclosed a firepit with a cauldron, hanging from a tripod.

Sigor stopped at the hearth and looked up. Above him was a hanging piece of string. Sigor's gaze followed the string up to the high-suspended ceiling, where a hole piped out beyond the roof. The late afternoon sky was visible through the aperture.

"You got a hole," he said.

Tristessa scoffed. "Yes, boy, I have a hole. Several, in fact. This hole is called a *chimney*. I suppose you poor, miserable Hylions never even heard of such a thing. Have you?"

"Chimney," Sigor muttered to himself.

"When you Hylions start a fire, your smoke blackens your ceilings and chokes your lungs. And then, you wonder why it is you all get sick and die so young."

"What about when it rains? Doesn't it get wet in here?"

Tristessa set her fists on her hips. "When it rains, I pipe the water into my trough for my baths."

"What about when it snows, or gets cold?"

"Then, I shut it," said Tristessa. She pulled on the string. It yanked a lid and closed the aperture, hiding the sky.

Sigor looked up at the closed chimney and down at the firepit several times over, awestruck. "Well... what if you want to open it again?" The boy was more amazed with each passing second.

"I push the chimney open with a very long stick," said Tristessa, her tone heavy with exasperation. "Boy, you must have an endless store of foolish questions for me. But, it would

take a lifetime to teach you how it all works. You come from a cloistered bunch of plain-minded country folk. Even the things you Hylians do best, you do poorly. Remember that when you see things here you can't grasp. I will explain what I need you to know. The rest, you will leave to me. Understand?"

Sigor nodded, though he looked a touch crestfallen.

"Good. Now, come this way. I'll show you your bed. Tristessa led him to a corner of the hearth room where a wooden stairway ascended, turning once, halfway up, and reached a tiny room at the top with a narrow window that looked out from the side of the house over the swamp. A straw mattress took up most of the floor space.

"You sleep here, boy."

"That's for a princess to sleep on," said Sigor, amazed, no doubt referring to how well stuffed the mattress was.

Tristessa sniggered. "Then I supposed you're a princess, boy. But it's where the women who seek out my services rest after I treat them."

"Treat them?" said Sigor, dumbly.

Tristessa shook her head. "I would blame that last bit of stupidity that came out of your mouth on your backwoods learning, but I'm quite sure even half the people in your tiny village know what I refer to. Ask them when this pestilence affair is over. Now, enough about your lodgings. Come with me."

Tristessa led the way back down to the hearth room. There was a door on all four walls. With her back to the front entrance, she pointed to the door on the left. "That is where I sleep. You are not to go in there, under any circumstances." She pointed to the door on the right, which was open. "And, that is my laboratory. It's where I work—where both of us will work."

"That's where the witch stuff happens," said Sigor.

Tristessa ground her teeth. No, she would not have visitors calling her that. She took Sigor by the ear. "*That* is one word I expect never to hear out of your mouth again, boy. I'm sure you've lived most of your life hearing a witch lives in this swamp. I am no witch. I am an alchemist. I don't conjure spirits. I harness the power of nature and refine it into essences that suit my will. There is nothing mystical or blasphemous about it. Even one as foolish as you could do it with proper training. You will see soon enough, boy, because you're not here to watch me. We're going to do this together. You and I."

Sigor's teeth were clenched, his eyes wincing as Tristessa pressed her fingers harder into his ear. "Alright, alright. Not a witch," he said. "Let me go. Please." She released him. Sigor rubbed his ear. "You didn't have to do that," he muttered.

"Say the word *witch* again in this house and I'll do worse," said Tristessa. "You'll see the laboratory later. For now, come this way."

They went out the back door to the outside. They stood on a wooden porch that looked west out over the pond, now radiant in the setting sun with bright green clumps of algae gleaming with fiery brilliance. The shallow waters were edged and frequently pierced with the trunks of the tall cypresses. Hanging vines and strands of ivy dangled from them like curtains.

On the porch was a pair of stools, some empty jars, a workbench and a large, wooden tub. A full grown man could squat in that tub and his shoulders would just clear the rim. It was covered with a blanket of shaved cowskin. Tristessa swept the blanket off onto the floor. The tub was filled with fresh rainwater from several days ago.

"Take off your clothes and get in," said Tristessa. "You're not helping me in the lab until you have a bath. I'll bring you fresh clothes."

Sigor's face was stricken with bewilderment. "I bathed four days ago," he protested.

"Four days ago may be good enough for your mother or your priest or a peasant girl who wants to lick your maypole. It's not good enough for me. I can smell you, boy. I can smell you just like I can smell every one of you Hylians from as far away as I can throw a pebble. You people get yourselves caked in dirt and dung and spittle. When you eat, you wipe the grease on your clothes. You carry *everything* around with you. It's disgusting and it has no place in my laboratory. Alchemy works by *separation*. Separating dirt from fingers, sweat from skin, smoke from homes and spirits from bases. It is separation from beginning to end. That is why, every day, you will bathe head to toe before you set foot in my laboratory. And, if you forget this and enter my laboratory dirty, you will scrub it down to the last finger's width before we begin our work. Kilah!" Tristessa whistled a high note. The blackcap swooped down from above and landed on the edge of a stool next to the tub.

Tristessa said to the bird, "this boy is to clean himself, head to toe, with soap until he's fresh as a daisy. Watch him and if he does any poorer than I do each morning, you're to tell me."

The bird cocked his head in a manner that Tristessa knew was affirmative. Tristessa picked an object off the porch and handed it to Sigor, who seemed less sure of himself with every passing minute. The object was gray, hard and had a rough texture that gave friction at the caress of a finger.

"What's this?" said Sigor.

"It's soap," said Tristessa.

"It doesn't smell like soap," said Sigor.

"You *think* that because I make my soap with oil instead of animal fat. I don't bathe in my *food* like you town peasants. Now, off with those clothes. You won't be wearing them again, not until wash them, too."

Sigor sighed. He took off his boots, slipped off his tunic, his breeches and his braies and stood naked before Tristessa and Kilah.

And now, Tristessa studied the boy's lanky limbs, the knife's edge of his hip bones, his small pectorals, the jagged intervals of his vertebrae, his lithe neck, his childish face, his bright, pink lips. His penis was flaccid and dangled in a wispy tuft of dark, red hair. His skin was pale and fresh like a well cooked chicken, with freckles on his shoulders. Even Tristessa's own skin was a darker, warmer hue than this wiry little creature.

"How old are you, boy?" said Tristessa.

"My mum says I was born nineteen winters ago."

Tristessa cocked an eyebrow. "Not *too* young boy then, are you?"

"I said before, I'm not a boy. I'm a man."

"You're well younger than me, yet. Younger and stupider. For my purposes, you're a boy."

"Well, how old are you?"

Tristessa shot a sly face at Sigor. "Take a guess."

Sigor's eyes cast about in uncertainty. "Twenty-five?"

Tristessa grasped Sigor by the chin and inched his face closer to hers. "You are very nearly right," she said. "And also, very wrong too."

"Wossat mean?" said Sigor. But already, Tristessa had released him and turned on her heel to go back into the house.

"Take your bath," she said, and tossed a bathing rag in Sigor's face.

Tristessa entered the laboratory. Nearly half the room was occupied by a work table in the center. It was piled with her most useful things: alembics, calcinators, burners, flasks, jars, vases, metal and marble tools. Three books always had their place on the table: The

Corporalis Mutatio Tractatus, *The Elementis Essentiae* and *The Physica Kai Mystica*. All three were stacked, one atop the other, always on a corner of the table with space to spare to crack a book open. The rest of Tristessa's books sat on a high shelf in the corner, many of them uncracked for years.

A furnace stood at the far wall beneath one of the laboratory's two latticed windows. All other wall space on all sides of the room was high shelves, stocked with bottles, flasks, boxes of rocks, jars of herbs, preserved parts of animals—of humans, too.

Tristessa closed the door, took a nozzled flask from a nearby shelf, dribbled cleansing oil on her palms and rubbed them together. Then, she went to the bookshelf and withdrew from it one of her oldest books: *The Lunares Alchimiae Vitae*.

This book was of singular significance to Tristessa. It was the one that had changed her life for good. For that reason, Tristessa suspected she would never crack it open again. To do so felt like an inspection of one's own corpse, years after death.

But, the book had its uses. There were many ways to heal an affliction. Herbs, dietary adjustments, sealing the sick off in a barn... But, to save an entire town from the pestilence in one fell swoop, to heal every man, woman and child...for that, she needed the feminine vessel.

Tristessa flipped pages until she found the desired article: *On The Transmutation Of The Feminine Vessel*. She read all three pages of the recipe. Then, she started up the furnace.

Tristessa was removing jars and chests from her shelves and setting them in a collection on one corder of the table when a voice said, "'ello?"

Sigor was calling from beyond the door. "Are you bathed?" Tristessa called back.

"Head to toe."

She went out into the common room to find Sigor, fully nude, dripping wet, teeth chattering and grasping his crotch in his hands.

"Well, why aren't you dressed?" said Tristessa.

"Into what?" said Sigor.

Ah, of course. She'd forgotten Sigor's change of clothes. "Wait here," said Tristessa. She slipped past Sigor, crossed the hearth room to her bedroom, closed the door behind her and threw open a black chest where she stored her odds and ends.

Tristessa returned to the common room bearing a black tunic, fresh braies, yellow breeches and leather shoes. "These will fit, I wager," she said. She watched as Sigor put them on. A smirk grew on her face as it became apparent she was right. "Well, that's lovely on you. Best take care of those clothes, boy. I doubt you've looked finer in your life."

Sigor studied his puffy sleeves. "Do I look like a rich man?" he said.

"Like a man. Just, a man. Now, come."

Sigor's gaze cast up, down and around the laboratory. It was clear enough that the boy had never seen such a place before.

He took a step and Tristessa halted him. "Hold out your hands," she said.

Sigor did so and Tristessa dribbled the cleansing oil on his palms. "What's this?" he said.

"To keep your hands clean. We're here to purify substances, not corrupt them. You'll apply that to your hands and face every time you come in here."

Tristessa led the way to the far end of her work table and slid a vessel, a holed ladle and an empty bowl in Sigor's direction. "Everything in that jar, I want you to put it in the bowl."

Sigor removed the lid and began to spoon out little clumps of dried, purple tissue. "What's this? It smells like dried pig liver," he said, his nose wrinkled in revulsion.

Tristessa scoffed. "Leftovers," she said. "Don't act so disgusted, boy. You had a whole one of those of your own when you sat in your mother's belly. I'm sure you were grateful to have it at the time."

"Eh?"

"Finish the tasks I give you, boy. The sooner we get it into the furnace, the less of the smell you'll have to endure."

Sigor shoveled the meat chunks out of the jar. They were shriveled and crossed with veins. Some were more pink in color, others more gray. The poor boy looked about to retch.

As he worked, Tristessa filled a crucible with salt.

"That's all of it," he said, and stepped away from the gory bowl.

"Put it here," said Tristessa, indicating a bench beside the furnace.

"Anyway, what's that stuff for?"

"Half a minute," said Tristessa. She spooned the chunks of meat onto the salt layer of the crucible, then covered it. She fetched her best pair of tongs, clamped the crucible and opened the door of the furnace. The orange blaze inside huffed heat into her face. She placed the crucible inside.

Tristessa closed the door and turned to Sigor. "That *stuff*," she said, indicating the furnace, "has traces of iron in it."

"Iron?" said Sigor.

"Aye, like your tools, your belt buckles and your chainmail. Iron. But the corpuscles in the iron of that meat have a property no other sort of iron possesses."

"Like what?" said Sigor.

"Motherhood," said Tristessa with a little smile.

The work drew on. The meat cooked down to ash. They let it cool, then Tristessa made Sigor grind the ash down to powder with mortar and pestle. Tristessa dumped the ash in a porcelain vessel of vinegar where it grayed the liquid. Then, back into the furnace it went. It came out bone white.

They dried, heated, cleansed, combined their metals with sulfur and then mercury. Some processes they repeated several times over.

Dusk set in. Tristessa made Sigor light the lanterns and they worked in soft shadows and the radiant reds of the furnace.

The glow of a quicksilver moon pierced the lattices of the laboratory windows and Tristessa drew in what felt like the first complete breath since the day began. Night was Tristessa's time. Her shoulders slackened, the tension they'd held all day now replaced by a cool, permissive ache. She no longer scowled at Sigor, or felt the urge to ridicule him. Here, in the grace of moonlight, Tristessa found patience and persistence.

The same was not so of Sigor. The boy couldn't stop yawning and, soon enough, he mounted a stool and drifted off, making feather light snores. Tristessa considered awakening him with a smack on the back of the head—but, no. Best let the boy catch a little rest while he could. He would be of more use later.

When Sigor came to, Tristessa was drawing yet another crucible from the furnace. She brought it around to the table and, with practiced dexterity, turned the tongs to empty the crucible's iridescent contents into a clean, white bowl.

"S'it time for dinner?" Sigor murmured, rubbing his eyes.

"Nearly," said Tristessa. "First, we wait for our metal to cool."

"What have we been doing all day, anyhow?"

Tristessa ignored him. She hovered a hand over the liquid metal. Still very hot.

"Like, how's a metal to stop the pestilence?"

"We're not just making metal," said Tristessa. "We're making a vessel *out* of it."

Sigor looked up and down the laboratory. There were flasks, vases and pitchers everywhere. "Looks like you got enough vessels, anyway," he said.

Tristessa made a sly face. "No vessel is more precious than this one will be. You just watch, boy."

The metal soon cooled, but it lost none of its viscosity. Tristessa opened a small chest and drew out something. "Catch," she said, and tossed it to Sigor, who caught it despite his faded attention.

"Wossis?" said Sigor.

"Take a look and tell me yourself."

He examined it. "It's a ring," he said. "Silver, looks like." He tried it on. It was too big for his finger.

"Very good. Now, give it back here."

Sigor returned the ring and Tristessa brought it to the bowl of liquefied metal. She dropped it in. Then, she gathered a small pair of tongs and fished for it in the opaque substance.

It took a dozen tries. Finally, Tristessa had it. She drew the ring up slowly and allowed the excess metal to dribble off it. What was left on the ring was an iridescent glaze that ran around the edges and filled the middle of the ring entirely in a translucent film. She plucked the ring off the end of the tongs and held it between thumb and forefinger.

"Doesn't it need to dry or somefin'?" said Sigor.

"It will never dry," said Tristessa. "Not unless we were to corrupt it, which would be a very unfortunate mistake."

"What's it do?"

Tristessa shot Sigor a look. "Watch," she said. She stuck one tip of the tongs through the ring. It emerged out the other end. She drew the tongs out and showed Sigor the ring again. There was no hole in the iridescent film where the tongs had pierced them.

Sigor squinted at the ring. "W-what?"

"Now, watch this," said Tristessa. She stuck her little finger through the ring. The iridescent film wrapped around her finger, fitting tighter than any glove. Her skin was still visible under the pink and green sheen. She drew her finger out. The finger was clean, not a trace of the film. "It wraps living things," she said. "Unliving things pass right through it. Now, this." She stuck a forefinger and thumb into the ring and pried it apart. The ring *stretched* around her finger. She stuck more fingers through and splayed her hand. The ring widened as big as a saucer. The band was thinner from being stretched, but no less tough as a result. Tristessa pulled the ring down her wrist. The film was webbed between her fingers. It clung around her knuckles. She waved the filmy hand at Sigor, whose face by now was ashen.

"This...this is sorcery," he said.

Tristessa drew her hand out of the ring. It shrank back down to the size of a ring. "Don't be stupid, boy. You saw what we did today, step by step by step. Did I summon spirits? Demons? Did I wave an artifact in the air? Did I kneel down and pray to some god?"

Sigor still looked troubled. The boy evidently feared he'd been ensnared into witchcraft. Tristessa set the glimmering ring down on the table. She approached Sigor, snatching *The Lunares Alchimiae Vitae* along the way and set the book in front of the boy, tapping the text of the recipe. "See? We did all this, to the letter. You could do it as well as I."

Sigor's eyes dropped to the open page, then they looked back up at Tristessa, as if they were suddenly hung with weights. He didn't want to look her in the eye. He was deeply uneasy.

At first, Tristessa thought the boy was simply evading her gaze the way stupid townsfolk usually did. But then, she realized, that wasn't it. The way his eye had slid over that page like a stone on a sheet of ice... "Can you read, boy?" she said.

Sigor looked away. He seemed suddenly years younger than his actual age. "Father Tamblyn taught me to read some of the psalms when I was small. He said I was good at it."

Tristessa drew in a long, slow breath. What in the seven hells had she been thinking? No one in Hyle could read, save their drunk of a priest. "W-well," Tristessa muttered, now evading Sigor's gaze, "you'll have to trust me then. We did exactly as the book told me."

"I believe it," said Sigor.

Tristessa swallowed and found her voice again. "Do you cook fish, boy?"

"I'm good at it," said Sigor, reinvigorated now to speak of something other than his poor grasp of reading.

"Today's catch is in the little barrel by the fire. Everything you need is out there: knife, cutting board. Gut the fish and start a fire. You're finished in here tonight."

Sigor trotted around the table and paused at the laboratory door. "Aren't you coming?"

"I need to store this metal we transmuted. I'll be out soon enough. Dinner, boy."

The door closed behind Sigor. Tristessa's mind traveled back to when she was thirteen and all writing was rows of lines, curves and dots on the page. Where would she be now without a mind tuned to extract the knowledge of fellow alchemists? Surely destitute, prostituted or dead. What a pitiable boy...

Tristessa waited half a minute to be sure he would not come back in.

Then, she took the filmy, iridescent ring and lifted her skirts. She pulled down her undergarments and slipped the ring inside herself. Deeper...deeper...until it was fully in. Tristessa let out the breath she'd been holding and slipped her finger out.

As the recipe said it should be, Tristessa couldn't feel the ring inside her at all.

* * *

While Sigor cooked, Tristessa extinguished the furnace, sealed the new metal away in one of her best vases and threw the used tools in a tray to take to the stream tomorrow for cleaning.

It turned out, Sigor was not boasting when he said he was good at cooking fish. The trout Tristessa caught in her nets did not go to waste. Sigor had even found Tristessa's chest of spices and filled the hearth room with the mouth-watering savor of saffron and black pepper. He did, however, forget to open the chimney. Tristessa had to intervene and show him to use the rod to pop it open. "Smoke is never welcome in my home. Don't forget it, boy."

Tristessa told Sigor she would be right back and stepped out of the house. She went around the side and unlocked the doors of her wine cellar. From the basement, she retrieved a jug and, as she was shutting the doors, Kilah alighted from somewhere above and found his familiar perch on her shoulder. "Oh, Kilah, dear. I suppose you're hungry, aren't you?"

I woke up too late. Missed the worms, Kilah whined. Tristessa went back down to the wine cellar and retrieved a satchel of dried berries.

Tristessa, Kilah, jug and berries returned to the hearth where Sigor was laying the blackened trout on the trenchers in the glimmering light of the fire.

Tristessa took off her boots and sat, undid her sweaty coif. Her auburn hair fell over her brow in a way that caught Sigor's attention.

For the first couple minutes of dinner, Sigor watched as Tristessa left pinches of dried berries on her trencher and allowed Kilah to peck at them from his perch on her knuckle.

"Your fish'll be cold," said Sigor.

"Not too cold, I'm sure," said Tristessa. "Poor Kilah doesn't usually eat this late."

"Nor I," muttered Sigor. The boy was gobbling up his fish faster than a pack of wolves tear into a fresh elk carcass.

Once Kilah was full, the bird flapped his wings and ascended to the darkness of the ceiling.

"Where'd it go?" said Sigor.

"Up the chimney," said Tristessa. "Kilah sleeps in the branches, like all birds."

"Heavens," said Sigor.

Tristessa took her first bite of the trout. "You cook decently, boy."

Sigor gave Tristessa a somber look. He was grateful to hear it.

"I've a question, boy," said Tristessa.

"Hmn?" said Sigor.

"What did your uncle, the mayor, think he was doing, piling you on his son's horse with the poorest crossbow I ever saw?"

Sigor wrinkled his brow. "I'm good with the bow. I help my cos' and uncle in quail season."

"I don't quarrel with your aim; I quarrel with the bow. It'd be better as firewood."

"It's the only one I got, anyway." Sigor gazed into the shadow of a far corner. In a lower, slower voice, he went on: "Uncle didn't pick me first. Noll was coughing up blood in his house and Ragnall had a headache from the drink last night and told my uncle to fuck off. Uncle decided, at least I can aim."

"But, why send weapons at all? Did old Piot really think he could frighten me with a sword and a rotten old crossbow?"

"Erm...yes?"

Tristessa shook her head. "The simplicity of you countryfolk never ceases to astound me."

Sigor averted his saddened eyes to the hearth. Tristessa uncorked the jug and took a swig. Then, she offered it to Sigor.

"What is it?" he said.

"Berry wine. From the bushes that grow here in the swamp."

Hesitant, he took a swig. His face tensed up, then slackened. "S'all right," he said, handing the jug back. "I like it better than the ale Milosh serves, anyway."

"I'd had the pleasure. Your tavern keeper doesn't know when his ale has gone sour. Or else, he doesn't care."

"I don't like ale anyhow," said Sigor.

"I've another question for you, boy. Do you *like* Hyle?"

"Eh?"

"Hyle. The town. Do you bloody *like* it?"

Sigor's gaze wandered. He looked dazed. It was clear enough, no one had ever asked him such a question before. "It's...it's where I live. Where I always lived."

"Aye. But, there are other places in the world."

"Other places is other places. Hyle is where I live."

"Are you afraid of the pestilence, then, boy? Afraid it will vanquish your poor, little town?"

"Yeah. Who isn't?"

"Would it make you sad if many of them died?"

Sigor hesitated. "Some of 'em. I'd be sad if my mum died. My sister too, even though she's a whore."

Tristessa took a long swig from the jug. "You needn't worry," she said. "We'll have the means to save them."

Sigor nodded at the floor. He rose to his feet. "Well, I'm off to bed," he said.

"Wait," said Tristessa. This was it. Time to claim her reward for saving a town of miserable, stupid peasants.

Tristessa took a final swig of the wine, corked the jug and set it on the floor. She rose and cleared a space beside the hearth. Then, from a wall shelf, she fetched a rolled up bearskin from the eastern lands she'd once bought from a traveling salesman. She unrolled it on the cleared floor.

Sigor was puzzled. "You said, I sleep in the bed upstairs," he protested.

"That's not what this is for," said Tristessa.

Under Sigor's widening eye, she undid her waist belt and dropped it on the floor. Her white blouse, her olive green dress, her white shift, all of it joined the mounting pile.

Tristessa was down to her chest cloth. She slowed her movements as she untied the garment and then held one end of it in a partially extended hand. It slipped down her chest like a windswept banner, running off a branch. Her naked breasts, each a weighty handful, stood out in the warm, flickering glow of the hearth.

Sigor was awestricken, his breath shallow.

Tristessa pressed her knees together, teasing Sigor with the pillowy squish of her bare thighs. Her hips swayed in the firelight. She took a step closer to him.

"You're going to have me, boy. Here, on this bearskin. Sleep can wait."

"I-I'm not a whore," Sigor stammered.

Tristessa took a step closer. Their noses were inches away. Sigor was only a bit taller than her. "Good," Tristessa hissed. "Because, I won't pay you for this."

Sigor looked deeply uneasy. Tristessa caressed his cheek.

"So frightened. Come, now. You're a big boy. You *must* have lain with a woman."

Sigor nodded. He reached out and held a lock of Tristessa's auburn hair, rubbing it between his fingers.

"Who was it, boy?" Tristessa whispered in his ear. "Tell me."

"Eda," Sigor muttered. "Milosh's girl."

"The tavern wench?" said Tristessa. "She was your first?"

"Two springs back," said Sigor. "We did it a lot, for a little while."

Tristessa laid her hands on Sigor's shoulders. "What happened to her?"

Sigor looked away into the shadows. "She...she has my brother's baby now."

Tristessa grinned. "Overtaken by your own brother. Even for a lowly peasant boy like yourself, I suppose that might have stung a bit." Tristessa laid her hands on either side of Sigor's face and spoke in sharp, careful syllables. "I'm better than your plain-faced tavern girl. More beautiful, smarter. I know of things her poor, little brain couldn't imagine. I see you like she never could. I can please you, boy. If your brother saw you now, his envy would doom his bleeding soul."

Sigor's tunic tented above his legs. The boy was sturdy as a healthy man of nineteen should be.

A question formed on Sigor's face, but his eyes showed reticence to speak it.

"What is it, boy?"

"W-why me?" he said.

Tristessa ran her hands up and down the sides of Sigor's face. "Because you, boy, are the handsomest, gentlest soul that miserable town ever produced. It had to be someone. I *chose* you."

"For what?"

"For your village. To complete the coagulation, I need your seed inside me."

"Are we...having a child?"

Tristessa clutched Sigor by his tunic. "Boy. There will be no child from this union. Now," Tristessa put her arms around Sigor and pressed her lips to his ear. "Take these rags off."

Tristessa helped him. His belt, his tunic, his breeches, his braies—they all joined the pile.

Sigor's penis, which was tiny and limp earlier today when he stood beside the bath, was now nearly a handspan in length, and thick as the fat end of a hardy carrot. His balls, which hung like a necklace earlier were now tight and puckered.

They kissed. Sigor's hands were shy, so Tristessa laid them on her breasts. He squeezed them and his rod hardened still more, the swollen head drawing a line up Tristessa's flat belly. Tristessa giggled. "That's it, boy. I like you big."

She stuck her tongue into Sigor's mouth and grazed his. Then, she slipped her tongue down Sigor's chin, down his neck and collar. She stopped halfway to nibble on Sigor's peck, which elicited a gasp. Then, on her knees, she worked her way down the boy's abdomen until her face was warmed by Sigor's engorged cock. She kissed the shaft, then the head. She tucked her tongue beneath the rod and teased Sigor, pushing it up again and again like a cannon on an axel.

Sigor groaned. Tristessa clutched his pulsing shaft and squeezed him. "Not yet, boy. We're not ready."

She dragged Sigor to the ground by his penis and pushed him on his back. She straddled Sigor. The boy took her breasts again and jiggled them in his hands.

"Yes, boy. Play with my bubbies while I get myself ready."

In one hand she kept an iron grip on Sigor's penis. She could feel his heartbeat through it. With her other hand, she fingered her clit, wriggling her middle finger against the sensitive tuck of flesh.

Tristessa tested her cunt and was surprised by its wetness. It usually took her longer. Had the feminine vessel inside her, primed this cunt for quicker pleasure? She rose on her knees, inched forward and pressed Sigor's cock head against her clit. Then, she rose higher and held the rod in position. Wetness and hardness found each other. Tristessa wiggled her bottom and took in Sigor's meat, inch by inch.

"Mmmmmng," moaned Sigor.

Tristessa's lips salivated around his girthy shaft. It had never been this easy before. Never!

Tristessa's bum landed on Sigor's thighs. She curled over him. This was around where it always began to hurt. Tristessa had to know where that point was, to find the angle that would negotiate that line between pleasure and pain. She braced herself against Sigor's chest and, very slowly, rose.

She gasped. This was it. This was where the cock head pressed her like a battering ram and made her grind her teeth. Only, this time, it didn't. There wasn't any pain at all. Where she was tight and defensive, Tristessa was now loose and pliant.

The feminine vessel was surely intervening. She couldn't feel it, but she could feel its work inside her, a skilled messenger, hashing out terms between new allies.

It was unbelievable. There simply wasn't any pain.

Tristessa rose until she was vertical, her bum still pressed hard against Sigor's thighs. She held his entire length inside her—and it was alright.

Tristessa giggled.

"Wos' funny?" said Sigor, who clearly suspected Tristessa's laughter was at his expense.

"I've got all of you in there, boy." She laughed and wriggled her body, dancing on Sigor's cock. Sigor gripped her thighs to steady her, but he could not break Tristessa's glee.

"Eda...when we did it like this, with her on top and everything, it hurt her."

Tristessa grinned. "Aye, boy. That's what it is to be a woman. Even God's greatest gifts are laced with pain. But, not for me. No, not for me." She cried out laughing and bucked her hips, sliding up and down on Sigor. Then, she curled over him and gripped handfuls of his hair and doused his face with kisses, still working her hips.

He felt so warm, inside and outside her. His chest was like a furnace. His cheeks were red. The way his eyes begged her to be kind, be gentle...she had to remind herself not to sympathize too much with him. He was, in the end, a lowly, illiterate peasant boy with a nice face. But, oh! Whatever it was—the feminine vessel, his sturdy cock or something in his soul—he felt exactly right. Pure.

"Mmmnnn..." she muttered. Heat clouded Tristessa's brow. The pleasure was like pressurized substance in a sealed jug, growing wilder, faster.

Until, the jug cracked.

Tristessa gasped. Moaned. Dug her fingernails into Sigor's shoulder and writhed.

It came. Sensation blasted her, like a flower spitting up a geyser of pollen.

She slumped over Sigor and sought her breath.

"Well," she gasped. "That...that was fine. Very fine. Mmmn...now, for you, boy. What do you need? Tell me."

"I-I...I never did it inside a woman before."

"Hm. Never dropped your seed? Why?"

"I came close, but I couldn't."

"You *can*, boy. Anyone who can get this hard inside a woman *can* do it. You're a bit afraid, I think."

"M'not afraid," Sigor protested.

"You are, boy. Come up." She lifted Sigor upright, put her legs around him and held his face against her breasts. His rod stiffened inside her. "Is that it, boy? Do you like my bobbies?"

Sigor began to buck his hips too, now.

"Lick them, boy. It's alright." Then, she rubbed her bobbies in his face. He went on bucking his hips. He gasped. The boy was close.

"You've been a good boy, today. Be good for me now."

Sigor's arms clutched Tristessa tight. He rested his chin on her shoulder and gasped. His fingers sank into her shoulder blades. He threw his head back. His penis went rigid. "Ah! Oh, god's mercy..." That was when Tristessa felt the feminine vessel for the first time. It closed around Sigor's cock head like a pair of interior lips, drawing wine from a jug.

Absolutely nothing ran down.

They laid naked on the bearskin for a time. Their sweaty bodies cooled in the dying light of the hearth. Sigor laid an arm over Tristessa. For a minute, Tristessa remained there, flummoxed. She turned on her side away from Sigor, spoiling his embrace, but she pressed her bottom against his body. He really was warm and it felt nice.

In time, she rose, picked up the wine jug and took a hearty sip. She threw a final log into the fire and took a seat. "Do you play an instrument, boy?" she said.

Sigor rose to a seat and hooked his knees in his lanky elbows. "Well...I can work the lute alright."

"Oh, really?" said Tristessa.

She did not hesitate, did not even bother to put on her clothes. She stepped out of the house fully naked in the dark with nothing but her key chain and tiptoed around to her cellar door.

When she returned, she stood before Sigor with a soft grin, her privates lost behind the oblong bulk of a big lute. The thing was dusty and spattered with white stains of unknown origin, but, even as long as it had sat in her cellar, the thing was fully intact.

She set the instrument on the bearskin next to Sigor. "Play for me," she said.

"Uh...you mean it?"

"It pleases me to hear music, boy. I don't know how to play anything."

Sigor gathered up the instrument and ran his fingers around its fourteen strings. "It needs a tuning," he said. "Some of these strings are very loose."

"Then, tune it."

Sigor's hand traveled up the instrument's neck to the bent back head and fiddled with the pegs, working the strings all the while. Tristessa watched him with rapt eyes between sips of wine.

After much fiddling, Sigor's delicate fingers began to pluck out clusters of notes.

As the music came, Tristessa was cast back into the city. She was still very young back then. Almost a girl. She would slink through the streets at night, keeping to the shadows to stay away from carousers and muggers. From every corner, it seemed, came the notes of lutes and pipers and singers and in exactly the right moments, when she was sure there were no footsteps behind her, no cruel hand to grab her wrist and wrestle her into the darkness, there was safety in that music.

She had hated the city, but those vanishing moments of nocturnal kindness almost, *almost* made it okay.

"Can you sing, boy?"

Sigor swallowed uneasily. "Um...a-a little."

"Sing, then."

"I'm...I'm not very good. My sister says I sound like a bird."

"I like birds. Sing."

"And, I don't know the words to many songs."

"Sing one you know."

Sigor cleared his throat, began to play further down the frets in a sort of sweet dirge.

Sigor sang.

He didn't sound like a bird at all. It was the voice of an angel.

Part II: Albedo

Tristessa tossed about on her wool mattress and tried to bury her face in her pillow from the encroaching day. It didn't matter how late she stayed up—and she had been awake very, very late last night—the day still filled her body with dread. She turned over. Her chest hurt.

Tristessa groaned, flitted open her eyes and glanced around her room. She sat up. There was a dull ache in her right breast. She looked down at her body and muttered, "By God's blood, look at me now."

Her breasts had grown. They were bigger now than the largest apples that came out of the orchards of the southern kingdoms. She grasped them in her hands and gaped at their roundness, the way they filled her cupped palms. Her nipples were larger and darker.

She gave her right breast a careful squeeze. Pain pulsed just beneath her puffy nipple. "Haaaahhhh," she hissed, gritting her teeth.

Tristessa rose. In a corner was a pitcher, a quarter full of distilled water. Tristessa gulped down the water to soothe her parched throat, then held her right nipple over the pitcher and pressed the breast between finger and thumb, doing her best to massage it and ease the pain.

Droplets of milk beaded around her nipple, thickened and, finally, trickled into the pitcher.

Tristessa worked at her breasts like this for a time. The pain lessened. Unfortunately, the best she could do was fill the very bottom of the pitcher in a layer of milk and she was already drained.

Not enough. Not nearly enough. Tristessa put on her gown and went out into the hearth room. The day outside was already quite mature. There were things that needed doing. But...ah, right. The boy was here.

Before she left the room, Tristessa took a teardrop-shaped vial that she always kept at her bedside. She opened it and withdrew something very very tiny—and swallowed it

She climbed the little stairway to Sigor's bed.

Sigor stirred at her approach, his eyes still clamped shut in the darkness. Only a small, slitted window by the stair provided any light in the dim space.

Tristessa slipped off her gown and climbed under the covers with Sigor.

"Hmnn?" Sigor mumbled.

"I need you again, boy," whispered Tristessa. She grasped around in the covers and found Sigor's cock. He was already hard, it being morning.

"Mm...wos'...wos' happening?" said Sigor.

Tristessa got in closer. She kissed Sigor beneath his closed eye and as the eyelid popped open she gave him a saucy grin and closed his cock in the meat between her thighs. "Swive me," she said.

"Awready?" said Sigor, blinking.

"Aye, boy. Don't you want it?"

They went at it. For a time, Sigor couldn't quite reach the apex of pleasure, but then, Tristessa mounted him and sat upright. "Is your bubbies bigger?" he said, squinting in the dim light.

"Hah. Indeed." She arched her back and dangled her heavy breasts over Sigor's face.

"They're bigger because of you, boy. You did this. Does it make you proud? They might get bigger. I just need a bit more of your seed, boy."

He was closer now. She could see it in his face. Tristessa raked her breasts over Sigor's face. She even stuffed a nipple in his mouth. He bit her lightly. It felt nice.

"Nnng...nnnnng!" Sigor cried out and spilled his seed into Tristessa. Once again, no runoff. The vessel had taken every drop.

They ate a breakfast of dried berries and nuts and then Tristessa sent Sigor off with instructions to harvest berries, check on the fishing nets and feed Bartholomew, her donkey, which she kept in a little stable a short distance downstream. Meanwhile, Tristessa cleaned yesterday's alchemy supplies, refilled her bird feeders, changed the water in her bath barrel and bathed.

Tristessa was out watering her garden when the pressure in her breasts returned. She stopped her work and dashed back to the house, her wobbling chest steadied in an arm.

Her breasts had grown more now, nearly to the size of small cabbages. They now bulged slightly between her splayed fingers and heaved against her wrists with surprising weight. *I'm a grotesquerie now, she thought. But then, what of it? If the boy keeps hard inside me, what concern is beauty?*

She found the pitcher and milked herself.

This time, she made a bit more. The milk came out in steady streams into the pitcher.

But, it wasn't enough. The pitcher was barely a quarter full. This amount of milk would be enough for a baby, even a particularly ravenous one. But, a whole village? In a fortnight, she wouldn't produce enough.

Sigor returned to the house with two pails, one of berries, the other of fish. Tristessa was beside the hearth, an alchemy tome in her lap and a stack of books at her side.

"I suggest you take a nap, boy," she said. "After that, get in the bath and then meet me in the laboratory. We have work to do."

"It's the lord's day, inn't it?" said Sigor.

Tristessa scoffed. "The lord's day. Your village is sick and dying and you're worried about the lord's day. If your house caught fire on the lord's day, I suppose you'd wait until the next day to put it out. Your bloody salvation can wait a week, boy. This is our duty. Take your nap and do as I say. I need your mind sharp enough to hear directions in the laboratory."

Sigor set the pails down and went up to his bed.

Tristessa flipped through her books for a time, then gave up. She was tired and couldn't focus. She tied on her coif, took her wine jug, drifted out to her back patio and took a seat on a carved and sanded tree log she used for a chair. It was the peak of noon now and the day was warm.

Kilah swooped down by her feet and looked up at her with fast-blinking eyes. *You drink that stuff earlier all the time*, he tweeted.

"I need it today," she said.

I heard you last night. You sounded very odd. The other one, too.

"I haven't had a good fuck in quite a long time."

You don't seem very happy about it.

"Oh, my cunt is happy enough. But, the alchemy is most dissatisfying. It won't save a bloody village. Not unless every man within two leagues lines up outside my house and fucks me, one by one. Which I am not in the mood for."

Isn't the boy here to help you? Why isn't he doing anything?

"He's—" Tristessa began. And then, a new thought crossed her mind. She stood. "I-I need to have another look at my books," she said.

Good day then, said Kilah. The bird swooped away on his little gray wings.

The feminine vessel would only produce as much milk as the seed it ingested would allow. Tristessa needed more seed. Fucking more men was out of the question.

But, fertility was not only a feminine property. How had it not occurred to her sooner?

She spent the afternoon pouring through her books until she found the page she was looking for: *On The Seed Of Masculine Fecundity*. The page ended with a sentence warning that the fruits of such an alchemical process should be used sparingly, *For the man may find himself too ripe for the act of conceiving a child*. It was perfect.

She awoke Sigor and made him take his bath. The furnace was running hot when Sigor entered the laboratory.

"What are we doing, anyway?" said Sigor.

"We're making a seed," Tristessa replied.

"A seed? Like, the kind you put in the ground?"

"Aye, boy. But this seed is rather different from your barley and your wheat."

Sigor looked at Tristessa blankly. "Just, follow along with me, boy," she said.

"But...I-I want to know. You say we're just following words in a book, right?"

"If I have to explain everything from the beginning, we'll be stuck here an age. It took me years of apprenticeship to do this. You have a fortnight." And then, Tristessa hesitated. Was it wise to discourage the boy's natural curiosity?

She turned, opened a small chest, took something out and set it on the table under Sigor's nose. It was a hunk of gold, no bigger than a man's molar. "See this, boy, we need to purify and masculate this little bead of gold. First, we need to dissolve it in the right acid."

She passed a small jug, a jar of salt and a bundle of wood ash to Sigor and told him to mix the two in certain proportions. He uncorked the jug and immediately averted his face.

"God's mercy," he cried, "it smells like piss."

"That's because it is, boy. Not mine, mind. It's a man's piss. We need it to make one part of our acid. And, you'll be adding something to it yourself before all this is done, so get that solution ready."

After an hour of work, Tristessa joined Sigor's acid solution to another. She handed the new acid bowl to Sigor as well as the fragment of gold. "Here's what you're going to do, boy. Take this out to the back of the house, put that piece of gold in it and leave it there. Do *not* touch

the solution. You'll dearly regret it if you do. Check on it by sundown and if the gold isn't completely dissolved, you'll have to add a bit more acid."

"Why out back?" said Sigor. "Why not here?"

"This process sends things into the air, things we shouldn't breathe if we value our good health. Now, go and do as I say. We have more work to do."

As it did yesterday, the setting sun bathed the laboratory in oranges and yellows. Tristessa wiped her brow and leaned against the worktable.

"I still don't know what we're doing," said Sigor.

Tristessa sighed. She gazed at the wood floor and said, "Yggdrasil, the Tree of Life, lies at the heart of all creation. It has male and female branches. Some say there are branches that are both sexes at once. Regardless, with a little gold, we can summon a male branch, and then, our work continues."

"Summon it?"

"Yes, boy. Summon."

"Then why are we destroying the gold out there?"

"It's not getting destroyed. It is taking a temporary form. It will be gold—gold as you know it—again before the day is done. It never stops being gold."

"It's like ice and water, then?"

Tristessa sniggered. "Not exactly. But... that's not so far from the truth. It's just a bit more complicated with gold."

"What's so special about gold in all this?"

And, at this, Tristessa laughed. Sigor was smarter than he himself perhaps. "I have no clue, boy" she said. "Ask a traveling merchant. Ask your priest when he petitions you for alms. Ask Yggdrasil itself. Ask any alchemist—other than me, of course. Every alchemist has an idea about the power of gold. They'll all tell you something different, but every one of 'em'll give you some sort of theory or postulation or aphoristic babble. You ask me, gold is a load of bollocks that goes back to the primeval age, a divine joke, perpetrated by God himself, on mankind. Alchemists are bloody fools." She glanced outside. The sun was a dial of crimson fire over the cypresses of the swamp. "Anyway, check on that gold, boy. It should be ready for us."

Sigor returned with the bowl. Nothing of the gold hunk remained. The liquid inside was a deep orange red.

"Perfect," said Tristessa. She set the bowl of acid gold in front of her and added a splash of water. Then, she drew from another solution and added it to the acid, one drop at a time. A black ring appeared at the top of the liquid. The liquid's blazing orange darkened to amber, then, as she added greater amounts, to a muddy brown.

"Why are we changing the gold to this if we're just changing it back?" said Sigor.

"We need to be sure every bit of what's in our gold *is* gold," said Tristessa. "If there's silver, copper, zinc—anything else, our seed may not be pure enough to reach the planes of the divine."

Tristessa made Sigor light the candles as night fell. With great patience, Tristessa was still adding solution to the bowl. The liquid was a disgusting black now, virtually solid.

"We're ready," she said, and brought the bowl to a tall bottle. With an iron funnel, she dumped the contents of the bowl to the bottle, then shook the bottle vigorously. She set the bottle on the counter and unsealed the top compartment. Held in a mesh was a sort of gold-brown substance that had the consistency of dry dirt.

"Hand me that crucible," said Tristessa, pointing.

Sigor brought the crucible in front of Tristessa. She poured the gold-brown inside, then stuck it into the furnace.

"Alright then," said Tristessa, wiping her hands. She graced Sigor with a sly look. "Now, for your big contribution."

"My...contribution?" said Sigor.

Tristessa fetched a small, clean bowl and handed it to Sigor. Sigor accepted it, puzzled. "Now," she said, "you're going to unsheathe that lance of yours and rub it 'til your seed comes out. Mark my words: every drop must land in this bowl."

Sigor was stuck dumb. "Y-you mean it?"

Tristessa put her fists on her hips. "I'm not one for jests. I mean everything I say."

That was not *quite* true, but it was true enough.

"Can...can I lay in bed and do it? That's usually where I—"

"No. This room is clean. Your seed must come out in a clean space. You can set your clothes over there."

Sigor was flushed. He set the bowl down and took off his tunic, his undertunic, his braies. He perched on top of a stool and began to play with himself with one hand, the bowl clutched in the other.

Tristessa watched the boy. His shaft gained a finger's joint of length but was still semi-soft. He looked at Tristessa guiltily. Tristessa removed her smock and her sweat-stained coif, went behind Sigor, put her arms around his chest and notched her chin on his shoulder. "Do you need help, boy?" she muttered in his ear.

"Mmn. Perhaps," Sigor muttered back.

Tristessa took off her dress, her gown. She untied her chest cloth, freeing her fattened breasts.

She was still behind Sigor. The boy was harder now, even though his eyes were not on Tristessa's naked body. She embraced him again and ran a tongue up his neck to behind his ear. Goosebumps raised on Sigor's neck. His breath got heavier. Tristessa ran a hand down his chest and belly and fingered the base of his shaft. Sigor let her take over. She tugged at his swelling penis and squeezed his balls. Sigor's rod thickened in her grasp. She crept around Sigor, still stroking him, and kissed his face. She wriggled her plump breasts in front of his face and stuck a nipple in his mouth. She put a hand behind his head and pulled his face closer into her chest. With her other hand, she felt his shaft, thick and tight against her palm.

Tristessa dropped to her knees and looked up at Sigor. The boy was flushed redder than ever. They were making progress. "Do you like this, boy?" she gripped Sigor's penis and jabbed the tight red head into her breast, bubby fat pillowed around it. It was warm against her skin.

"Mmmn...y-yeah," muttered Sigor.

"What about this?" She lifted her breasts and squeezed Sigor's manhood between them. The head popped out in her cleavage, but all the shaft was lost in there.

Sigor's mouth opened as if to say something, but all that came out was a throaty groan.

She mashed her breasts against his rod, enjoying not just Sigor's warmth but also the squishy feel of her breasts against her hands and the ever stricken look on the boy's face.

"And this?" she said at last, and put her mouth over Sigor's cock head. She sucked. Between sucks, she grazed the underside of the boy's penis with her tongue. Tristessa took more of him, pressing her lips into his hard meat."

"Ahhhh...oh...oh God's mercy," Sigor huffed.

Tristessa slid her mouth down over Sigor. She felt his warm flesh in her throat and had to remind herself not to swallow. What a funny sensation. Her eyes were getting watery.

"Ohh...oh, fuck!" Sigor cried.

She pumped her whole mouth, back to front, over Sigor's cock.

"Ah...ahhh! Oh, Tris-Triste—"

She pulled off him.

"I'm—" he said. He didn't need to say more.

Tristessa angled the little bowl under his saliva-glistening cock head. His penis twitched. Sigor groaned.

Pearl white seed ran into the bowl, covering the bottom in thick opacity.

Sigor pumped a several splashes of it into the bowl. Not a drop was wasted. Finally, the boy crumpled on the stool, breath heaving.

Tristessa stood, bowl in hand and petted Sigor's head. "Very good, boy. We're almost done tonight."

She let Sigor recuperate on the stool while she checked the furnace. The gold glowed with fiery incandescence.

Tristessa readied her tools. This next part of the process would take flawless precision and timing. Some years ago, she had the subtle touch for maneuvers like this. Did she now?

She drew the crucible from the furnace with the tongs and held it just above the bowl of Sigor's seed. She told Sigor to stay back and poured. Not quite all of it, but most.

Immediately, Tristessa set the crucible down, dropped the tongs, took up a metal rod with a hooked end, poked a deep hole in the gold clump which was immediately filled with Sigor's sperm when she withdrew the tool.

The gold was cooling fast. She had only seconds to work with. She turned the seed-filled lump of gold an entire rotation over so its aperture pointed up. Then, she picked up the tongs again, held her breath and brought the crucible horizontal and angled it just over the

spermy gold. The molten gold was the perfect temperature now. It oozed out in a slow trail and Tristessa steadied it over the hollowed clump in the bowl. Sweat moistened Tristessa's brow. From the nearest corner of the table, Sigor was watching too.

The gold landed. Tristessa streaked it across the lump's aperture.

She had done it. Encased Sigor's sperm in a shell of perfect gold. Its shape was gnarled, but that didn't matter.

She set the crucible down, the tongs down. She braced herself against the table and caught her breath.

"Erm... what now?" said Sigor.

"Now, we give it time to cool," said Tristessa. She sucked in a long breath and looked down at her work. Then, she walked over to a shelf and took a large glass. She flipped it and set it beside the bowl. "When this runs out, I'll bury it." She turned her gaze to Sigor at last. "You can go off and make us supper."

Tristessa extinguished the furnace and pattered about in the lab for a time. When the hourglass ran out, she took the bowl and a pair of tongs and left the room. She breezed past Sigor who was lighting the hearth and stepped outside. She lit a sconced torch by her door, set the bowl and tool down on the grass and found her shovel at the side of the house.

She brought it into the light of the torch and dug out a tuft of grass, leaving a shallow gouge in the earth. She emptied the bowl into the hole. The gold-shelled seed glinted in the torchlight.

Tristessa was about to bury it but remembered at the last minute that she had forgotten the most important thing. She hurried back into the house, past Sigor who was trying to tell her dinner would be ready soon, and into her room where the teardrop-shaped vial stood on a narrow table by the window. She brought the vial outside, dropped to one knee beside the hole, opened the vial and reached inside. Between her forefinger and thumb came a pinch of red stone dust, nearly as fine as sand. She sprinkled it over the seed. In the tiny puddle of Sigor's sperm, the stuff looked like sumac sprinkled on a fried egg. She shoveled the dirt back in the hole and patted it flat.

The poor boy. He had no idea most of the real alchemy in the recipe had occurred long ago with the transmutation of this red dust. The golden seed was only the last step in the process.

* * *

A day passed, and then another. Tristessa and Sigor did no alchemy in that time. They cleaned Tristessa's tools, her bowls, jars and flasks, and left them on a tray by the laboratory door. Tristessa instructed Sigor how to harvest turnips, carrots and beans from her garden. The boy was eager to learn, happy to keep his hands busy. The suppers he cooked were better each night. Tristessa breasts continued to make small quantities of milk. These she stored in a plugged jar.

Twice a day, each day, Tristessa and Sigor fucked. Tristessa feared they did it too often. She was getting too much out of the boy. She had underestimated the depth of her appetite. She had to remember: it was all temporary. In less than a fortnight, the boy would go back to Hyle, make a few babies with a plain-faced peasant girl, herd sheep, hunt quail...die of sickness at age fifty-one. It was how things went in the world. There was no sense holding onto him.

But, Tristessa could not help relishing the boy. Her heart quickened every morning at the recollection that she wasn't alone in her house. *He* was here.

Of course, she would never tell any of this Sigor. Best to keep the boy in his place. Put him down with a few harsh words, a cold look, when he seemed too inclined to enjoy himself. He was lovely and gentle and curious. Best to get as much out of him as possible, then nurse whatever wounds came upon his departure. She wasn't a woman in a story who died of a broken heart over lost love. She had her wits, her alchemical craft and her pride. All else went to dust, eventually.

On the morning of the third day since she planted the seed, Sigor rapped on Tristessa's bedroom door. She threw on a gown and opened the door.

"It grew," he said.

"Mmm. What?" said Tristessa, rubbing her tired eyes, now affronted by the brightness of the hearth room.

"The branch," said Sigor.

Tristessa drew in a breath. "I'll be out soon" she said, and shut the door.

In little time, she was outside with Sigor. A dark branch with resplendent, yellow leaves thrust out of the ground from the dirt pile Tristessa had left three nights ago. From the ground up, it divided out in one, then two, sturdy twigs. Amidst the tufts of golden leaves at the end of each twig were white flowers with frilly petals and yellow filaments.

Tristessa dropped to a squat and studied the thing. The Tree of Life had deigned to lend one tiny part of itself to this world. A male part. She looked over her shoulder at Sigor and said, "I have to harvest this branch now. It won't survive here long. This world is too corrupted for it. In the meantime, make us breakfast, boy."

Tristessa fetched a knife and a pail from the house and cut every flower from the branch. There were seven in all. She dropped the flowers into the pail and brought the pail into the house. There, she took a mortar and pestle from the tray of cleaned tools.

On her back patio with the mortar and pestle, Tristessa ground the flowers, beating them into shreds. Her hands trembled. The fount of fecundity was at her fingertips. Sigor could scarcely imagine...

Tristessa joined Sigor by the hearth. He was heating a porridge. When he was done, Tristessa shooed him away from the fire and mounted a pot of water over it. The pot had a spigot.

They ate while the water simmered. When it steamed, Tristessa removed the pot from the fire and dumped roughly a third of the contents of the mortar inside. She didn't dare go further. If the book was to be believed, one flower from the tree of life would have *profound* effects indeed. This would be more than two. Tristessa's heart fluttered.

"What's that you're making?" said Sigor.

"It's called a *tea*. And, it's for you to drink."

"Me?"

"Yes, boy. Must I say everything twice?"

"What's a tea?"

"In the lands far off in the east, they drink tea all the time. Add leaves or flowers or cut up roots to boiling water and let it sit. The water tastes a great deal more interesting that way."

"Why do I have to drink it?"

"Because, our work isn't done. We are very close to producing the panacea that would save your miserable town from the pestilence, but we need to produce it in greater amount."

"Panacea?"

"You ask a lot of questions, boy. It's tiresome. Eat your bloody breakfast."

They ate. Tristessa filled a flagon with the tea from the pot and handed the steaming vessel to Sigor. Sigor raised the flagon to his lips and paused. "It's too hot," he said.

"Then, give it time to cool. But, you must drink all of it."

"What's it going to do?"

Tristessa scoffed. "It'll make you more of a man than you ever dreamt possible."

"What?"

"Just drink it, boy. It's no poison. Just the opposite, really."

Sigor drank. First in sips. Then, as the tea stopped steaming, in gulps. "It's not bad," he said.

"I certainly wouldn't know," said Tristessa. "I haven't had *that* tea. I never will. That tea is for men."

"What kind of tea do women drink?"

Tristessa laughed.

Sigor began to look unwell. His sips slowed. His face was flushed. He slumped and bent his head over his flagon.

"Are you alright, boy?"

"I feel...strange."

"Drink the rest," said Tristessa. "I won't ask any more of you today once that's done."

Sigor choked down his tea. Upon his final sip, he looked up at Tristessa with bleary eyes. He fell to one side. The empty flagon hit the floor with a dull ring.

Tristessa helped Sigor to his feet and guided him up the stairs. He practically fell into the bed. His breath was heavy. He trembled. Tristessa tossed a blanket over Sigor and left him to rest through the effects.

She took a bath. Then, she brought the remainder of the crushed flowers into her laboratory and fortified them with salt. She couldn't be sure the flowers would keep their effects over time, but if they could at all, the chances were better if they were kept dry.

Hours passed. From her patio with a wine jug, Tristessa watched the blazing sun set over the watery, mirror images of the cypresses in the pond. She was tense. Her breath was short in her throat. She was impatient to see the fruits of her labor.

Could a little part of her have been worried for the boy? Tristessa took another gulp of wine and told herself that was nonsense. He may as well have been the most perfect man in the world. He was still an ordinary mortal soul: illiterate, simpleminded and savage at heart. Hopeless, like all the rest—like herself, if she was to be honest.

Kilah joined her and she fed him his dried berries as dusk set in and bathed the swamp in slate gray and shadow. She went inside to light the hearth.

Tristessa had just finished cooking a fish and turnip stew when Sigor's footsteps landed on the stairs. He rounded the doorway and appeared in the dim light in his white undertunic.

Tristessa could tell by his twisted brow that the petal tea she had made him drink early that day had certainly done *something*.

"Feel better?" said Tristessa.

The boy didn't answer. He staggered toward the hearth where the light was thick. He dropped to his knees with his side turned toward Tristessa, looked down at his lap and peeled back the hem of his garment.

Tristessa leaned in, hoping to get a look herself but the boy was careful not to let her see yet.

"Oh, God's mercy," he cried. He shook his head.

"What is it? Show me, boy."

"I shouldn't have listened to you," he said. "Shouldn't have drank that damned devil's swill you put in my hands."

Tristessa stood to have a closer look, but Sigor turned into the light before she took a step.

He was naked under his undertunic. And, snaking from his loins was the thickest, longest, meatiest penis Tristessa had ever laid eyes on. And, god almighty, it was flaccid!

With a face of abject disgust, Sigor put a hand underneath it. His palm was filled with an enormous pair of balls, near the size of apples.

Tristessa's eyes and mouth widened. She had done it.

Tristessa cried out in glee. She was so elated, she forgot her dignity and got down on her knees and crawled toward Sigor to have a closer look. She was giggling.

"By God's bones, what's funny about this?" cried Sigor. "You've deformed me!"

She beheld Sigor's swollen manhood up close. Flaccid, it was beyond a handspan long and thicker than a sword hilt.

Tristessa took Sigor by the shoulders and shook him. "I've done it, boy!"

"What in the bloody hells *have* you done, even? You've turned me into something horrible."

"No, boy. I made you *better*."

"You're mad!"

"Reason has escaped you, boy. This is exactly what we need."

"This is witchcraft! It's—"

Tristessa seized Sigor, holding his face between her hands. "Listen to me: do you want your village to die? Do you want your mother and sister to perish in pestilence's grip? Our bodies hold the keys to save them. We have everything we need."

Sigor did not seem to be listening. His eyes were huge, his teeth clenched in fury.

"Very well," Tristessa shouted. She rose to her feet and took Sigor up with her. "Since your anger robs you of to good sense, I'll grant you one boon, you stupid fool." She was shouting now. She drew back from Sigor, threw off her coif and pulled her hair back from her face. "Go ahead and strike me. Across the face. I'll let you do it once. Just once, for your entire, miserable life. Since you're so eager for it."

Sigor was frozen. His eyes were huge.

"Well? I'm waiting for it, boy. Be a bloody man and show me you've got it in you."

The rage faded from Sigor's face. The boy was distraught.

For some time, Sigor and Tristessa were locked there in the flickering oranges of the hearth. In the glint of his eye, Tristessa could find no part of him that wanted to strike her. Finally, Sigor cast his gaze down at the floor.

"Well?" cried Tristessa, though she no longer knew why she was shouting at the boy.

"I don't want to do it," said Sigor, his face still averted.

"Why not?"

"My...my dad did it to my mum every night when he was still alive. I-I hated it. I..."

Tristessa bared her teeth at Sigor. "Then watch, boy."

She put a hand out to the hearth, stooping down to extend it to the fire.

"No," cried Sigor. He grabbed Tristessa's wrist to stop her, but Tristessa pushed through his grasp.

Her hand lay in the open flame, tendrils of bright yellow licking her fingers.

The fire caught on her hand. She drew it out.

Sigor gazed in horror. He looked around the room, no doubt for a pitcher of water.

"Watch," shouted Tristessa. She held her hand close to her face. Her palm was on fire from the base of her thumb to the knuckle of her forefinger. She could feel the merciless heat. There was even a touch of pain.

Tristessa blew it out. Then, she held the hand up for Sigor to see. Where the skin was red and about to blister faded. In moments, the hand was healed.

"You see, boy? Doesn't a witch *burn*?"

Oh, he saw. He was more frightened than ever now. He staggered back.

She advanced toward him. "By alchemy, I am ascendent. Whatever God you imagine your creator to be, boy, I am surely closer to him than anyone you've met. Closer to him than your poor drunkard of a priest. That town has stuffed your head with superstitious rubbish. I will not say it again: I know the way to save your village. Not by prayers, sacraments or sorcery. Through knowledge alone. The choice is yours: shall I save them or leave them to die? In the end, it makes little difference to me."

Sigor seemed about to faint or fall dead. He dropped to Tristessa's feet like a sack of flour. "Very well," he muttered at the floor.

A tormented quiet set in. Only audible was the croaking of the frogs out in the swamp and the crackle of incinerating wood in the hearth.

Tristessa gazed down at Sigor. For reasons she could not articulate, she hated herself now. She drew away from him. Unsure of what else to do, she checked her stew. "Anyway," she said, "dinner's getting cold. You should eat, boy. You'll need your strength."

"Aye," muttered Sigor, though he remained still.

Tristessa filled a bowl of stew and set it beside Sigor. With reluctance, he lifted the bowl to his lips and sucked the broth.

"There's...no need to take it so hard," said Tristessa, after an indeterminate period of uncomfortable silence.

"Perhaps," Sigor whimpered. The boy sounded like a kicked puppy.

"What's got you all miserable, boy? Tell me."

"I look horrible," said Sigor.

"You don't."

"I do," said Sigor. "And, women will hurt when I'm inside them."

Tristessa set her used bowl on the floor and crawled over to Sigor. "You won't hurt me, boy," she said. "You can't hurt me. Didn't just see the flame catch me?"

"I still couldn't fit," said Sigor. A little sob broke his speech.

"You'll fit in me, boy. I bear the feminine vessel. I can widen and lengthen to your size." She drew in close to his ear and whispered: "let me show you."

She slipped a hand under Sigor's tunic and found his flaccid meat. She wrapped her fingers around it. There was a pulse as the appendage thickened slightly in her grasp.

Sigor was now looking at her, still wounded but with a shred of hope in his eyes. She drew back his tunic and exposed the 'horrible' thing.

Tristessa grasped Sigor by the near-ripe apple of his left testicle. She lifted it just off the floor and stroked it with her thumb. It was heavy and smooth and she enjoyed the weight of it. "You have so much seed, now," she marveled. "You're not horrible at all, boy," she said. "You're lovely. As lovely as you've ever been, but better. If no other woman can fit you, they don't deserve you."

Sigor's breath was heavy and labored. His penis had thickened to the size of a small rolling pin. Tristessa wrapped her fingers around it again. Her forefinger and thumb barely touched.

"Let's be rid of these wretched clothes," she said. She helped Sigor out of his undertunic. He lifted his arms to help.

Tristessa laid out the bearskin rug and told Sigor to lay there and touch himself while she undressed.

Sigor did as he was told, his large penis swelling longer and thicker at his strokes. By the time Tristessa was fully naked, the boy was near as long as a dagger and thick as a pike. "Uhhn... it's... it's too much," Sigor grunted.

"Save it for me, boy." She stood over Sigor, dropped to a squat and took over his work, running her hands up and down the velvet smooth skin of Sigor's enormous cock. She kneeled, pressed a head the size of a fig to the hood of her vagina and rubbed both together under her palm. Then, she ran the lips of her vagina up and down the smooth ridge of flesh at the upper side of his shaft. There was an expectant look in Sigor's face now. He thought she was about to let him in. Ha. Tristessa slid back and bent over, tracing Sigor's rod up her body until it was right in front of her face. Sigor gave her a disheartened look and she giggled. She wrapped the fingers of her right hand at his base, then wrapped her left hand just above the lower one, then released his base and wrapped her right hand above the left. Only then did Sigor's head peek out in the curl of her fist. "You're three handfuls now," she marveled, and stroked Sigor up and down, tracing the sinuous, bulging path of his most prominent vein. She opened her mouth wide to take him in. It was like stuffing the meaty end of a chicken leg in there. Tristessa closed her lips around it and took it a few inches in—she didn't dare go further— and sucked. A watery squeal came out of her lips as her cheek sank down on Sigor.

"Uhhhh... I-I can't hold it—"

She slid him out. "Not yet, boy. Hold your—"

"Ahh!" he cried. She felt the contraction of his pelvis in her grip. It was coming.

Tristessa clamped her mouth over Sigor's head and tensed her throat so she wouldn't choke.

Sigor's whole body shuddered. Seed spurted into Tristessa's mouth, bathing her tongue in warm, salty goo.

She was about to swallow when another load shot into her. Her cheeks puffed.

"Oh, God's bloody mercy," cried Sigor as another gob of seed blasted the top of Tristessa's mouth. She braced herself against gagging.

He spurted a few more times, flooding Tristessa's mouth in his seed. Finally, it ended.

Tristessa pulled off Sigor and swallowed. Swallowed some more. She went on swallowing until she could press her tongue against the roof of her mouth without seed oozing between them. She gasped. She'd been holding her breath for some time.

She had swallowed Sigor's seed. Would it reach the feminine vessel like this? There was certainly nothing to account for it in the recipe.

Tristessa climbed over Sigor's naked body and gave him a light, playful slap across the cheek. "You were supposed to wait for me, boy."

"I couldn't!" he said. "But...I-I..."

"What? What is it?"

She felt Sigor's rod swell against her belly. He wasn't spent.

"It's strange," said Sigor. "I don't feel very tired."

"No, I suppose you don't," mused Tristessa. She reached down and fondled his jewels. "With apples like these, you could stuff my face thrice over, I'd wager. Well, none the worse for me."

She straddled him again, wriggled his cock in her hand until it was fully firm, rose on her knees and began to take him.

The lips of her vagina stretched wide around him. It almost hurt. Almost. Somewhere back there, the feminine vessel was helping, opening her like a daisy. There was exactly as much slack as there needed to be. "You're a very big boy, now," she muttered.

An inch down. Another. She took him right up to the barrier. Tristessa huffed. There was still an inch or so left.

She tested it, Sinking back a tiny bit and a tiny bit more...

"Oh, bloody hell," she cried, and sank down on Sigor until her arse was pressed against his legs.

They remained suspended there for a time. Tristessa was afraid to move, afraid even a twitch would bring unbearable pain. But, there was none. She let out a thick, heavy breath. "S-see, boy?" she panted, "I told you. I can take you. You...you're not too big for me. The vessel protects me."

Her plodding thoughts were then broken: a tingling sensation ran down Tristessa's chest. She yelped, lurched forward.

"What's happening?" said Sigor.

"I don't—" But then she did know. Her breast surged in her cupped hand. Pressure built. Her nipple hardened against her palm.

Tristessa gripped each breast in a hand. They were growing before her eyes.

Sigor squinted up at her. "Is your bobbies growing?" he said.

"You have to ask, boy?" She spread her fingers around mounting flesh. Small cabbages no longer, Tristessa's breasts wobbled on the shaky platform of her palms. Fingertip-size nipples quivered in the air.

Sigor's penis thickened a touch more inside her. The boy was enjoying this.

Tristessa let them fall. They bobbed against her ribs. They were halfway down her torso now. When she arched her back, they parted slightly. When she hunched, they fell together in collective jiggles. The pressure inside them mounted.

"Well then," Tristessa sighed. "It seems, it doesn't matter whether I swallow your load or you pump my hole with it. It gets back to the vessel all the same."

She began to buck her hips, taking Sigor's stone-hard manhood in tiny thrusts.

"They're giant," cried Sigor.

"Yes, and fucking silly. I hope it satisfies you: you've made a monstrosity of me as well."

"I don't think so," said Sigor.

"Oh, is this really how you like a woman to be? With great, big udders?"

"Aye?" said Sigor, as if answering in the form of a question would save him from reprimand.

"Show me, boy. Show your passion for these bobbies."

Sigor reached up and squeezed one. His touch felt good.

She pumped up and down on Sigor while he played with her breasts. He squeezed, stroked, pressed his thumbs against her nipples. For a moment, she played with her clit. Then, she pulled Sigor up and smothered him. He groaned. A twitch ran up the height of his penis and shuddered against the slicked walls of Tristessa.

She was close. She rode him up and down in more purposeful strides. Tristessa braced herself against Sigor's shoulder and sent a flurry of undulations down her breasts. She squinted her eyes and opened them again.

Joy burst inside her belly.

"Fuck." She screamed it in Sigor's face. Her body contorted anew at each wave of orgasm.

She wasn't even done yet when Sigor clutched her hips. She blinked haze out of her eyes. "Do it, boy. Give it all to me. She rose slightly on her knees to offer Sigor an inch of room. He braced his feet against the floor and thrust into Tristessa.

"Oh, god," he cried. Hot seed poured out of him. He tossed his head side to side, gasping.

But Sigor's seed did not stop coming. It ran hot and fast into her. She could feel the vessel take it, every drop.

It ended. Sigor sighed. His hips fell to the floor. Then, his eyes popped open and he cried out once more.

Another flood of seed. How much did the boy have to give?!

Tristessa set a hand against her belly. To her shock, she felt a bulge.

The vessel, it seemed, had no bottom. It would take everything. "Curse it, boy. You fill me like a bloody jug."

"I can't help it!" he yelped between gasps.

Tristessa curled over Sigor and put her face against his neck and beheld the odd sensation of her belly filling as Sigor's torrent died down. He had half a dozen more squirts before he was fully drained. Tristessa gave him a weary smile. She pulled off Sigor and clutched her bulging belly. She looked two months with child. "Look what you've gone and done to me now," she said.

"Wasn't my idea," Sigor muttered, looking away.

Tristessa was about to give the boy a snide reply, but the same tingling as before ran through her breasts.

"Bloody hell," she said, and grew.

* * *

Tristessa awoke in sweat and pain. The ache in her breasts was unbearably sharp now. She turned over on her bed and stared into the rafters. Early morning filled her slitted windows with dusky blue halos. She was stupid last night and didn't bring a pail to bed with her.

Her belly was flat now. Her breasts, on the other hand, were roughly the size of her own head. And swollen now, with bulging dark nipples.

She rose, gritted her teeth at the ache and clutched her breasts against her chest. She staggered across the bedroom and threw open the door. Paltry light revealed only muddy shapes and shades in the hearth room. She advanced to the far wall—and tripped.

Her hands caught her fall and tossed her on a shoulder. Though they took less of the impact, her huge breasts heaved to the floor with a momentum all their own. The pain was like a hammerblow across the chest. Tristessa cried out.

Her feet had gotten caught the bearskin. Stupid. She should've rolled it up and put it away last night.

Shuffling footsteps sounded from the stairway and Sigor appeared at the doorway, as naked as she was. "What's wrong?" he said.

"Ngh. I'm about to bloody burst is what's wrong," groaned Tristessa.

"Burst? From what?"

"From w—" Tristessa was about to lambaste Sigor for his stupidity, but then she remembered: she hadn't told the boy about the milk. Why not? Making milk was the entire point of this venture, with the feminine vessel and everything. Why keep such a crucial detail from the boy? Oh, yes...because it was embarrassing. Tristessa had never lactated—and had been glad for it. She had always found the sight of newborns feeding on their mothers ghastly. Of course, she knew the feminine vessel would cause her to do so, but she had hoped to keep this part of the process away from Sigor's eye. "Um...a-anyway, it's nothing, I..." Tristessa started to say.

Sigor fumbled around by the front-facing wall.

"You...you can go back to sleep, I don't—"

Sigor rose, flint and steel in hand and struck fire. He lit the torch on the sconce.

"You could've saved the fire, I'm quite alright," Tristessa protested.

Sigor squatted beside her. The silhouette of his huge cock arched down and grazed the wood floor with its tip. His massive balls hung only an inch or so higher. "What hurts?" he said.

"Nothing hurts, I just fell. I—*nnngh*." She crumpled up on her side. "I...I need a pail."

"A what?"

"A *bucket*. Alright?"

"Oh." Sigor rose, rounded the extinguished hearth and then returned to Tristessa's side, pail in hand. "What you want with this?"

"Nothing. Go away."

Sigor huffed. He set the pail next to Tristessa and went upstairs.

Tristessa sat on her knees and set the bucket on her lap. She lifted a head-sized breast and began to massage herself from areola to nipple. White drops beaded on her breast and began to wet her fingers and from there, trickle into the pail. She squeezed and, for a second, got a more consistent flow of milk running in little arcs. She squeezed again—and her breast slipped from her slickened grasp and bopped the pail. The bucket fell with a clatter and a stream of milk ran across the floor.

"Oh, bugger all," she cried.

Again came Sigor's footsteps. He peered around the doorway. "What's the problem?" he said.

"Nothing. Go to sleep, boy."

"Who can sleep here when you're bangin' buckets around and shouting oaths?" said Sigor. He stepped into the light of the torch and peered at the trickle of fluid running from the bucket. "What's that?"

Tristessa opened her mouth in hopes that a sharp reprimand, or perhaps a savvy diversion, would pour out of it, but she was too tired and in too much pain for wit. Instead she muttered, "it's...it's milk."

"Milk?"

"Have you still got ears on your head, boy? I say, it's bloody milk."

"Have you got a cow somewhere?"

Tristessa laughed bitterly. "Yes, boy. Yes, I've a cow somewhere. It's me, alright? I'm the cow. It's my milk. And, it hurts."

"Are you with—"

"No, I'm not with child, boy! It's the feminine vessel. It's that and your seed. You did this to me. And I can't lose a drop because this is what's going to save Hyle." She set the bucket on her lap again and began massaging her nipple.

"Oh, stop it," said Sigor. "That's no way to milk a bloody udder."

"Oh, and you're master of cows, now?"

"Better 'n you, anyway," said Sigor. He was over by the back door, picking things up.

"What is it you think you're doing?" said Tristessa. She looked over her shoulder. Tristessa had an old workbench she used as a shelf for jugs. Sigor was laying all its contents on the floor. He stooped over and up came one side of the bench. It scraped along the floorboards as he dragged it around the hearth.

He centered the bench in front of Tristessa. "Put your elbows up 'ere," he said.

"My elbows?" she said.

"Like this." Sigor crossed his arms just above the elbows and held them out.

Tristessa sighed and braced her arms against the bench as Sigor had demonstrated. Her breasts dangled with a weight that would have been unimaginable to Tristessa only a day or so back.

Sigor slid the pail beneath her, sat on the floor on the opposite side of the bench, leaned down and, under the bench, took Tristessa by the breast. He clutched her nipple in his palm and kneaded it with his fingers.

"S not doing anyth—", but Tristessa stopped short as the milk trickle came, fiercer than ever. The drops pinged and made hollow notes in the bucket.

Sigor's alternated between tugging her nipple and caressing her breast. At first, Tristessa bit her lip and tried to think about the scent of musk, but Sigor's touch was gentle and persuasive and Tristessa had to close her eyes and clamp her mouth shut so Sigor wouldn't catch her relishing it. "Y-you have experience with this," she muttered.

"When my da was still alive we had a cow. We called her Eula. I was the one who milked her every morning 'cos my brothers wanted to sleep and my mum couldn't stand the smell of her."

"Well, I'm not a cow," said Tristessa.

"Right," said Sigor, snickering. "Not a lady, not a whore, not a witch, not in pain when I stick it in you, not in pain when you catch on fire, not a cow, either."

"Oh, are you having fun jabbering my words back at me, boy?"

"You're nothing I know anything about, is all."

"I'm an alchemist who lives in the swamp. What does it look like I am?"

"That doesn't mean much. I still don't know much about you. 'Cept you're not a cow and you're raining milk."

"Is...is it really that much milk?"

"For a person? Aye." He gave Tristessa's left teat a final tug, then scooted the bucket under her left breast.

"Mmm," Tristessa cooed. She didn't mean to.

"What?" said Sigor. "You like it, or something?"

"L-like it? You think I *like* being your bloody cow? I—" But as she spoke, Sigor took Tristessa's breast and rolled it up on itself. Before Tristessa knew what he was doing or realized her nipple was pointing back at her, Sigor squeezed.

A spurt of milk hit Tristessa in the eye. "Ah!"

Sigor laughed.

"You bloody bastard." Tristessa attempted a swat at Sigor's head but Sigor ducked away from it. He was still laughing.

"That was very rude, you know," said Tristessa.

"Do you like it the other way, then?"

"Shut your idiot mouth, and...and get back to it, boy."

"As you say," Sigor giggled.

"And, stop laughing. I'll have you know, we can't afford to lose this milk."

Sigor made a half-hearted attempt to suppress his laughter and returned to Tristessa's milking. He cleared his throat. "What's so special about this milk, anyway?" he said.

Tristessa sighed. "It's our panacea."

"That's the word I didn't know," said Sigor.

"It means, a remedy for all sickness, all disease. It's a wellspring that encourages life itself. When the people of Hyle drink but a tiny cup of this, they'll be on their feet and hardy in a day, if not sooner. Their rashes will fade. The pestilence will be eviscerated. They'll be horny as rams too, for that matter. Wouldn't be surprised if there's more pregnant bellies in a month or so."

"God's mercy. Won't be just me then," Sigor muttered.

"What's that you're saying now?" said Tristessa.

"I'm saying... these bull balls you gave me got me hard as an axe half the time. S'like when I was smaller and they were starting to fall. Half a thought and I'm poking my own belly button. Barely got a wink of sleep last night."

"Oh, you poor, poor boy. Are you saying you were up late all night with your flag hoisted and no one about to look at it?"

"Mmm," said Sigor.

Tristessa grinned. "Were you thinking of someone?"

Sigor's eyes momentarily looked away from Tristessa's milking and met hers. He looked back down. "So, what if I was? Is that so funny?"

Tristessa reached under the table and grasped around on the floor. "Are you hoisted now?" she said. And then, she found it. The warm, pulsing meat of Sigor's head. She gave Sigor a saucy look. "Ah, there we are. You are bloody well hoisted."

Sigor scrunched up his face as if trying to bear his own sheepishness.

Tristessa giggled and released him. "Just drain me out, boy. We'll be at it again after breakfast."

Sigor did not look at Tristessa then, but he did smile.

Tristessa let out a sigh. Sigor's ministrations were working wonders on her right breast. "And, uh..." she cleared her throat. "It-it does feel alright. What you're doing there... I mean."

Sigor's smile widened to a grin. "Anything for my sweet Eula."

"Oh, shut your gob."

"Aye."

* * *

Since yesterday when she grew Sigor's cock, Tristessa either found herself post-coital and exhausted with a belly bloated on Sigor's seed, achy with breasts engorged after the vessel had absorbed his seed or horny for another good ramming. Whichever way, her usual pattern of keeping herself busy past sundown around the house was not feasible. It was

made worse by the fact that she now bore breasts each roughly the weight of a chicken. She was only able to put an hour into caring for her garden before she was weary and longed to sit. Sigor dutifully took over. He tended the fishing nets, swept the floors, made all the meals. Upon Tristessa's instruction, he even went into the basement and checked on her fermenting wine jugs.

When he was busy, Tristessa sat on her patio with Kilah, watched the pond and stitched a new pair of braies that would hold all of Sigor's manhood. For the time being, he made do with a wrap that Tristessa fastened around his waist.

They had fucked after breakfast and fucked again before dinner. In theory, Tristessa's breasts should have grown or shrunk in proportion to Sigor's loads. More seed meant more bobbies; less meant less. But the shrinking was a slow process. After a few celibate hours, her breasts might creep up to her solar plexus only to be foiled by another ramming, which pushed them out past Tristessa's navel. In general, they were getting bigger, not smaller. At some point, there had to be a limit. Sigor could only pump so much seed into her, after all. But, they hadn't reached that point and by dinner time, Tristessa's breasts plopped in her lap and, mercifully, made sitting less of a chore for her back.

Sigor cooked fish in a pot of cabbage and leek while Tristessa watched him and took sips of berry wine. Sigor even took a few sips of his own. He'd drunk only sparingly the last few nights. "I like it better now," he said.

"I despised it when I made my first batch," said Tristessa. "I drank it only to be drunk. Then, I found it acceptable. Now, I bloody crave it. Not the drunkenness, but the taste."

"Some things is like that, I suppose," said Sigor.

A long, comfortable silence proceeded from the exchange. The sweet grass fragrance of saffron filled Tristessa's nostrils. Blessings be, the boy knew how to season food proper. Sigor drew the pot off the fire and served Tristessa a bowl.

"Where'd you learn to cook?"

"My mum made me help her since my sister was too young and da was always busy with Hugh and Ivor. She told me to cook with my nose 'cos I had no eye for amounts."

"Hugh and Ivor—your brothers?"

"Aye."

They ate in silence for a short time, until Sigor spoke: "Did you ever find the philosopher's stone?"

Tristessa nearly dropped her dinner on the floor at that. "W-what do you know about that, boy?" she stammered.

"Well...not much. Father Tamblyn said at service one time that the alchemists are after some prima materia or whatever it was he called it. Said they were foolish heretics thinking they could harness the almighty's power or some such. Said they thought a philosopher's stone could cheat death and turn dull metals into gold."

Tristessa chewed a particularly savory piece of trout as she concocted her response. The evening had been going so well. She hadn't even had one nasty thought, and now Sigor had to bring up the wretched *stone*.

But, perhaps the night was still salvageable. She would have to extinguish the subject quick, though. Tristessa cleared her throat. "On this matter, your Father Tamblyn and I may be in some agreement. Alchemists, in their quest for the prima materia, *are* fools. Their venture is one of hopeless vanity."

"Uh..."

"What? What is it boy?"

"So, what about you not getting burned by the fire? You said it was alchemy that did it."

Of course Sigor would ask that. She had marked his intelligence since the day he rode into her swamp on Aelrin's horse, and *still* she had underestimated Sigor. There was too much curiosity burbling underneath his bumpkin speech. "I'm sorry, boy. You're not capable of understanding about that."

"Why not?"

"You're just bloody not. Alchemists have their secrets." It was a miserable evasion, utterly transparent. But it would have to do. "Now," said Tristessa, "if you have any foolish questions for me, I suppose you ought to ask them now."

Sigor looked at the wall. He was not happy to have been so deflected. He pondered for a time and then said, "well...how'd you end up 'ere?"

"Where?"

"The swamp. This house. How'd it happen like this?"

Tristessa breathed a sigh of relief. *This* was a question she could answer.

"What I'm about to say is not to leave this house. You understand? For both our sakes."

"Alright."

"I did a favor for Ulrich."

"The Earl?"

"Yes, boy, Lord Ulrich, the Earl of these lands. I was living in Grunshire at the time, a few leagues west of here. He came to me because of...an indiscretion on the part of his son. The little weasel had crawled into a certain lady's bed one night and found her...most willing. You know the rest."

"She was burdened."

"Aye. When such things happen to a lord, or a lord's son, the choice is threefold: there's either a bastard, a very hastily arranged wedding, or..."

"Or, what?"

"Or, the lord hires a few rogues to seize the lady while she's on the road and be sure she never makes her destination."

"Aye."

"But, all those were most inconvenient for Lord Ulrich, in this case, because he had certain political aspirations for this son and because the mistress was a lady, not peasant rubbish like the lot of us. The lady's family was certain to sue for marriage if they found out. A marriage would ruin Ulrich's plans. He had a different one in mind for his son. And, Ulrich had wits enough to realize, an assassination of a lady would be a *very* unfortunate chance to take. So, he came to me. Not only was I to unburden the poor girl. I was also to make it impossible for any soul to know she had been swived by a man."

"You can do that?"

"Oh, *yes*. But not for a few pieces of copper, I wouldn't. Any time a lord comes to me, I exact payment equal to their station. The peasant girls, on the other hand, practically rob me blind with the paltry sums I take from them. They don't know their own fortune.

"Anyway, I told Ulrich I would do it. The girl would be unharmed, and no clergyman inspecting her would see a trace of her lost virtue. Not from this encounter, anyway. The whole affair would be whisked away, like sprits from Sal Ammoniac to the flame. But, he was to do me a great service, both for my own service and my silence. He was to build me a house in a place of my choosing, to my specifications. And, he was to tell all his vassels that I am to be left in peace, undisturbed unless cause was unavoidably due."

Sigor's brow furrowed. Tristessa knew what he was thinking. "Yes, boy. At best, your uncle the mayor was hoping to unnerve me with a debt of eighty pieces of unpaid silver. In truth, he wouldn't dare harass me, or let his foolish son do the same. He knows too well the political thumbs that press him down, even in times of crisis."

"Then...then, why do this at all? Why help Hyle? I didn't hear you ask for money."

Tristessa looked away. The boy should've been able to reach the truth of that matter by now, but the answer still evaded him. Well, Tristessa would help him get there no further. She simply said, "perhaps I am...more sentimental these days."

At this, Tristessa set down her empty bowl, tucked her legs beneath her and massaged her enormous breasts under her blanket.

"How do they feel?" said Sigor.

"Like my ducts are bleeding full. How else would they feel?"

"Is it time for milking?"

"No," Tristessa sighed. "It'll be a while yet. And, I don't know how we're going to manage when the time comes. My poor bobbies are too large to hold over a pail now."

Sigor's face grew thoughtful. "Well...what about those steel trays you have?"

"Have where?"

"You know, in the laboratory."

"Oh, those," laughed Tristessa. "Those would be useful. Sadly, neither of us have bathed today."

"But...it'd just take an instant."

"No. An alchemist who pollutes his sanctum has himself to thank for the impurities he produces."

"Well, then, take a bath."

"A bath now? It's far too late."

"Says who?"

"I don't take baths when the sun sets. I take them when the sun rises. Besides, there's a draft in the air outside and I'll get cold."

"What if the water were hot?"

"You're going to heat water now, just so I'll get in a bloody bath, just so I'll fetch a tray inside the laboratory?"

"Aye."

"That's foolish. We'll find another way to milk me."

"It's the best way to collect it all and not spill any. Let's do it proper."

"You're a very silly boy."

Sigor stood. He hung a pot over the fire and began filling it with the water jugs.

"Ey, what are you doing, boy? Stop it. Sit and rest. You've done enough for one day."

"Mmm. I don't think so. You're getting in the bath."

"I won't, boy. It's silly."

"I'll play the lute while you soak up."

Tristessa's mouth dropped open. She gazed at Sigor in utter perplexity. The boy was *that* serious!

Sigor went out the back door to light the torches. When he came back in, Tristessa still wore that stupefied look on her face. "What?" said Sigor when he saw it.

Tristessa burst out laughing. "W-well, if you're going to make a bloody princess of me, I won't stop you. But, you'd better add salts to my bath or I'll forget to thank you for it."

"Salts?" said Sigor.

"Yes, boy. When I hope to enjoy a bath and not just clean myself, I add salts."

"Well, alright."

In only as much time as it took Sigor to bring a pot of water to a boil, Tristessa sat in the tub on the patio, hugging her knees against her huge breasts. The water was murky white with the salts and her ducts no longer hurt. Her breaths drew out longer and longer. Sigor sat behind her, lute in hand, and began to play his chords as she gazed out on the pond that mirrored the stars above.

"Why are you like this?" she said.

"What?" said Sigor.

"You're very eager to please me, boy. Why?"

"Dunno. S'what people say about me. Always trying to make mum happy, my sister happy and whoever else happens to be nearby. Even if I don't especially like 'em, I'd rather they be happy."

"Not everyone wants to be happy, you know."

"Aye. People call me a fool."

"But you still do it?"

There was a pregnant pause before Sigor answered. "Aye."

"What is it *you* want, boy?"

"*I* want? Dunno."

Tristessa gave Sigor a look over her shoulder. "Everyone wants something, boy. Come out with it."

"Save the town from the pestilence, I suppose."

"I already knew that! That's obvious. What do you want for *yourself*, boy?"

Sigor did not answer for a very long time. "To know stuff, I suppose."

"Know *stuff*?"

"I'm an...an ignorant peasant boy, as you say. I...can't change being a peasant. But, I don't feel like I *needed* to be ignorant. Every Lord's day, Father Tamblyn tells us how ignorant and foolish we are that we can't see how God set our life's courses to test our souls, or somesuch. And, I always wonder why he won't tell us *about* it, since he's so sure."

Tristessa chewed on this remark as she soaked, rubbed soap suds over her breasts and took in the lilting chords of Sigor's lute.

"You're right, boy," she said at last.

"Mmm?"

"No one needs to be ignorant, whether they're low-born or not," she said, and said no more after that.

Curse the boy. If he kept softening Tristessa up like this with the baths and the salts and the bloody music, she might lose all sense and tell him things that would indeed pull him a long

way from the ignorance he found distasteful. She would be a fool, a shameful, miserable fool, to share such things.

She felt more foolish by the hour.

Part III: Citrinitas

Two days passed.

Tristessa stirred. Her face was chilly. She nestled deeper into the warmth that wrapped her back, butt, breasts, shoulders, even stuck out between her thighs. Hot breath blew against her right ear and she was warm again. She drifted.

Her eye flew open. She was not in her bed.

She screamed.

"What! What is it?" cried Sigor.

Tristessa pushed herself up on an arm. Something tugged between her legs.

"Nnng," went Sigor

Tristessa opened her legs. Sigor's penis was there, the penis she had grown with the tea, only a handful of days earlier. Why was she gasping?

She rubbed her temples. They were moist with sweat. Her breasts felt like flour sacks, hanging from her neck.

"Are you quite alright?" said Sigor.

"I...slept out here," she said.

They had laid entwined on the bearskin rug the last night. Now, it was morning.

"We fell asleep," said Sigor.

Tristessa gazed around the room, bathed in the ashy blues of morning and absently said, "aye."

She stood and went off to her room.

"Ey, where you going?" said Sigor.

It couldn't be. It couldn't be that she had fallen asleep in a man's arms. Tristessa slept alone. She always slept alone. The common room was for fires, eating and fucking. It was no place to sleep. There had to be separation. It was separation or chaos. Separation, come death or judgment day.

She dropped into her bed and huddled up under her covers. She was shaking.

This wasn't fear. After all, it was Sigor. She couldn't picture the boy so much as kicking a rat. This was something else. Tristessa couldn't summon up a specific memory of it, but she knew she had broken some promise she had once made to herself, years ago. Fucking was just fucking. You fed your loins and that was that. You didn't sleep in the same room as them. You didn't fall asleep in their presence. You certainly didn't sleep in their *arms*, where they could do whatever they wanted to you.

What was that wretched boy doing? He was dissolving her. Like ashes in water; all her solidity, broken down until Tristessa did not start nor end. However innocent the boy was about it, he was still acid; merciless, utterly thoughtless in his cruelty.

She couldn't let it happen. Never.

Well, he'd be gone soon. Yes. Then, everything would be safe.

But, not before she fucked him again. Now that she had promised to save Hyle, it was a duty. She *would* fuck Sigor, probably another twelve or twenty times, and she would bloody well like it, too. Damn him.

She had set a trap for the boy only to ensnare herself far more completely. Only God, the nasty, old bugger, could've contrived such wicked machinations for poor Tristessa.

Tristessa huddled in her bed until the shakes slowed and she was overcome by hunger—and an impending need to milk herself. She put a grain of the red dust on her tongue, swallowed it with a gulp of water and returned to the common room where Sigor still lay, eyes searching the ceiling, no doubt for answers about why his host had suddenly gone mad.

Tristessa kept her distance from Sigor that day. She refused to let him help her with the milk and fumbled with her nipples over the steel tray by herself. She sent him out to feed Bartholomew, check the nets and harvest her cabbages. A steady rain had picked up that morning and she knew it was unkind not to allow the boy to wait until it passed, but she needed to be alone.

She sat on the patio, her seat pulled back against the house where the roof extended over her head and kept her mostly dry. She watched the pond, engorged by the rain, and thought so hard, her mind was twisted up like a bundle knot. She began to get a headache.

The day was choked with dreary cloud and drenched colors. It seemed likely that she was hungry but she didn't want to eat.

Every possible outcome was horrible. Perhaps Hyle would be saved and Sigor would return to his home. Well then, Tristessa would be alone again. Alone used to be perfect. It wasn't

now. But, if Sigor, miracles be, should stay here in her house, Tristessa would lose her mind. Either he would destroy her with that wretched, inexhaustible *decency* of his, or she would destroy him with her bitterness.

How could the boy be so naive? She had scolded him, berated him, pressed him into servitude around the house. He was supposed to hate it! He was supposed to flounder home and tell his family and friends what a vicious tyrant was the weird hag who lived in the swamp. But he accepted each task, each reprimand, with equanimity. She had even enlarged his manhood to a grotesque size.

Bloody hell. Where had she gone wrong?

Tristessa's torrid reveries were interrupted by the flapping of wings. Kilah swooped under the roof and perched on the patio planks by Tristessa's side. He tilted down and shook the rain off his feathery hide.

"What in the seven hells are you doing out in the rain, Kilah?"

Fweet fweet—Hungry, said the bird.

Trisessa fetched a pouch of dried berries from inside, returned outside and helped the blackcap to her lap where she set a few berries at a time on the hem of her skirt for Kilah to peck at.

Is the other one gone?

"Only for a little while," said Tristessa.

You're different now.

"My chest is bigger."

You make more lap shadow. But also different elsewhere.

"What do you mean?"

When you look at the pond, you no longer look at the pond.

"The pond? What are you talking about?"

You don't really look there. You look inside yourself—like humans sometimes do.

"Oh. I...I'm not myself lately."

I have a message.

"From who?"

From the birds and squirrels and spiders. Can't miss what they're saying.

"Well, I didn't hear it. What do they say?"

They say, the sage is near. He wants to speak with you.

"The *sage*? Already? I saw him only four years back."

Maybe he is angry.

Tristessa giggled. "For what? Much respect as I have for the sage, he is not my master. He has nothing to scold me for."

I carry messages when I hear them. It is not for me to know things.

"Where is he?"

A morning's journey. I'll take you to him if I am fed along the way.

"Tomorrow, then? If the rains let up."

As you like. But I need to be reminded.

Blackcap birds remembered the locations of their nests, prime spots for food and certain calls. It was not in their nature to remember *plans*.

What could sage want with her? Tristessa had only met him three times in her life, and on each occasion, his aim was only to check in and offer guidance. Did he know something about what she'd been up to over the last week? If so, he was moving with shocking speed for a creature of his sort.

Well, half a day's travel could be a welcome escape from her predicament. She would have to drain her breasts early so as not to waste the daylight. Alas, the thought of leaving Sigor alone in her house for most of a day made Tristessa strangely sad. God's bones, where had this foolish sentimentality come from?

There came the sound of shuffling through the reeds and Sigor appeared halfway up the pond, swinging a heavy pail from his arm, head bowed against the rain.

All at once, Tristessa forgot herself. She waved to the boy, then climbed down to the little path that circumnavigated the pond to meet him. His matted red hair was dark as garnet stone and his white undertunic clung to his skinny trunk like a second skin.

Sigor's pail was full nearly to the top with fish. Bless the rain. They would eat well the next few days. She took the catch from Sigor and looked the boy over with a mix of guilt and frustration. "Why didn't you bring a hat or a covering, boy? You're bloody soaked now. You'll catch cold." Tristessa knew that was a ridiculous thing to say. Wandering around alone in the rain was not likely to catch Sigor a cold. Colds happened when greater numbers of people clustered together. Not that the boy was likely to know that. Alas, stupid things were pouring out of her mouth all the time lately.

"You didn't say I could wear your hats," he pleaded.

"Uh...w-well, anyway, that's enough keeping yourself busy for the day. You'd best come inside and warm up."

She put an arm over Sigor's shoulder and hurried him into the house.

* * *

Tristessa stuck close to Sigor the rest of that day. She swept the common room and lit the hearth barely past noon. Normally, Tristessa would have fretted over the senseless waste of firewood, but that didn't seem to matter today. She had Sigor remove his clothes and dry himself by the fire and for a long time, held his head in her lap and stroked his rain-soaked hair.

"Are you alright?" he said at one point.

"Aye. Do I not seem so?"

"It's like...you won't bear me being nearby in the morning and you won't bear me being away now."

Tristessa laughed nervously. "We work in the morning and rest in the eve. What of it, boy?"

"If you say so," said Sigor.

"Would you...prefer it were otherwise?"

"No. I'm just...lost."

"Perhaps I could be clearer." Tristessa bent over Sigor. Her huge breasts mashed into his forehead and her lips found his. Their tongues met and tasted each other. Like friendly fencers, the tongues sparred, first in quick jabs, then in long, searching strokes. She glanced down Sigor's body. His penis, once pouring over his hip, was stiffer now, still cocked to the side like a flagpole in mud. Still kissing him, she ran her hands up and down Sigor's bony

trunk and was struck by the way his protruding ribs terminated in the soft concavity of his belly. "You're so thin, boy."

"I can never hold onto weight like Hugh and Ivor. Mother said, if I don't eat proper, no girl would have children with me cuz I look like a corpse. But, I tried to eat more and nothing changed. Jus' got full."

"Well, speak not to me of children, but it's just as well. Rather lay with a corpse than a bloody bear, is what I say."

Tristessa shed her chemise, lay against Sigor, her breast flopped over his ribs, and fondled his huge, stiffening rod. She squeezed the shaft and the head swelled up. It looked like a huge, long mushroom. She giggled.

"Why's it funny?" Sigor complained.

"It's not funny. It's just odd."

"You laughed."

"If I thought it was funny, would I do this?" She sat up and gave Sigor's swollen head a gentle peck.

"Mmm. Dunno. Maybe I could decide if you tried that again."

Tristessa grinned. "You're a rascal." She ran her tongue from mid-shaft to head and kissed it again. She was about to do more when a pang of discomfort hit her and she groaned.

"What is it?"

"It's the milk. I've still got more."

It figured. Sigor hadn't filled the feminine vessel since late last night and she had already drained herself once today, but Sigor's loads were prodigious and it seemed it now took multiple drains to get through all that seed. Her belly still bulged like she was three months with child. Her breasts were heavy, her nipples hard and sensitive.

"Well, let's get you taken care of," said Sigor. He rose and fetched the tray.

Sigor was ready to milk Tristessa and Tristessa was about to let him, but after a few quick tugs, the milk began to dribble out of its own accord. Then, it began to spray and the streams began to ricochet out of the tray and onto the floor. Tristessa had to aim her nipples straight down to keep the spillover to a minimum.

"This is wretched on my arms," said Tristessa, who had to lift her upper body on one arm and use the other to aim her nipples.

Sigor fetched the bearskin. "Get on all fours," he said.

"What?" said Tristessa.

"You know...on hands and knees. Like a baby or a dog." He got down on the floor, imitating the act.

Tristessa followed Sigor's lead and crawled over the tray to keep her sprays inside. It worked. Very little milk spilled.

"Here, lift your knees," said Sigor. He slid the bearskin beneath Tristessa's legs. Tristessa sighed in relief. "Thank you," she muttered.

Sigor giggled.

"What? What's funny?"

"Nothin'"

"Boy, you'd better tell me. I won't guess."

"It's the first time you thanked me for something."

"What?"

"You didn't thank me for anything. Until this."

"Wh—I-I bloody did thank you!"

"For what?"

"For the bath—a few nights back. Didn't I?"

"You didn't."

"Hmm. I...didn't thank you once—for anything?"

"Only just now."

Tristessa didn't know what to say to that. She felt like an admonished child. But, Sigor did not seem resentful. If anything, he was cheerier now. He laid a hand on Tristessa's buttock and pet it. The feel of his fingers on her body made Tristessa gasp. She glanced over her shoulder at Sigor. Sigor withdrew.

For a long, tense moment, they looked at each other.

As had happened several times today already, Tristessa was at a loss for words. Why? Up until now, she always had a cutting phrase to slash, poke or cajole the boy. But, now, the only words she could think of were something she didn't actually *want* to say: *don't touch me when my back is to you, boy. I hate that.* The words hung in the air like a spirit in a sealed vessel, and for some reason, Tristessa didn't actually feel the force of them now.

But, this was wrong. Sigor was only to touch Tristessa upon her invitation. He had never dared before.

"Did I do wrong?" said Sigor, finally.

"N-no...no, boy," she sighed, swallowed. "If...if you want to touch me like that...well, get on with it."

"Really?" said Sigor.

Tristessa drew in a deep, shuddering breath. "Y-yes."

Sigor ran his hand from Tristessa's buttock to her lower spine. All the while, her milk ran into the tray in little streams. Goosebumps raised on her back and she began to sigh. The boy caressed her hip and inner thigh. A flush heated her cheeks and her breath drew thick and heavy. Sigor leaned in and planted a kiss on the small of her back. Tristessa had to remind herself not to coo.

It was not supposed to be this way. She was supposed to act *on* Sigor. Not *receive* him. What sorcery had the boy enacted on her that she now melted at his touch?

A voice in Tristessa screamed at her, told her she was a wretched fool and his humiliating game needed to stop.

But...she couldn't. She couldn't tell Sigor no. It...it felt good. Why not let the boy continue? It was just his hand...

She looked back at him. He was kneeling at her side and, between his pressed thighs was the huge, adjoined sack of his balls. His penis was propped up against them and stuck out in the air like a third arm. It was fully erect and raised on the side with that colossal vein.

Tristessa looked at Sigor, face flushed and drawn. She didn't dare allow herself to say anything, but perhaps she could plead with her face. She opened her mouth and for a brief instant, bared her tongue in a show of hunger.

Sigor got the message. With a hand pinned to Tristessa's haunch, he shifted behind her. He traced behind her buttock and found her slit. He ran a curious finger up it and Tristessa helped him find her properly with her breath and when he was right there, inside her hood, she gasped so he wouldn't stray.

With one hand, Sigor worked her. With the other, he stroked her backside.

Tristessa wanted to hate it. It was dirty, wrong, impure. But, with every stroke, every touch of warm skin, it only felt better. To her everlasting shame, she found herself pulling back against his hand to get more vigor from his touch. She must've looked like a wretched dog, with her stupid mouth hung open.

Sigor's penis brushed her inner thigh. Fear shook her limbs.

The last time something like this had happened was...no. Don't think of that.

She looked back at Sigor once more. There was no malice in his eyes, no relish of control. Just that cautious, ever curious face of his.

He wouldn't act without Tristessa's say so. But, how could Tristessa ask him for it? It was bad enough to receive, but to beg first? The thought made her want to vomit.

"If...if you're thinking of it, then just bloody *do it*, boy." Tristessa said those words and winced. She didn't want to provoke him that way, but what other way was there? In this world, you were either a doer or a done-to. There was no *asking*, not if you valued your dignity. Only *taking* and being *taken*.

Sigor let out an exasperated huff, and for a few seconds, Tristessa feared he would simply back away. But, he did not. He held Tristessa steady by her hip and guided himself into her. His head was already wet and it found a wetter partner in Tristessa.

His thickness split her open. She sucked in a heavy breath as Sigor's head slipped in and out and slicked her walls with their juices.

He was still gentle. He ran his fingertips over her hips and over her bottom as he eased deeper inside. Tristessa squeezed her thighs closer, not so much to stop him, but enough to taste his absurd girth. Sigor slid deeper. Tristessa groaned.

Milk shot from the ducts of her wobbling, hanging breasts and drizzled into the tray. It was over halfway full now. Tristessa had to brace her arms so she wouldn't spoil her aim with too much jiggle. Occasionally, a stream ran free and dotted the floor with white flecks, but most of her bounty landed safely. The boy knew what he was doing back there.

Sigor gripped Tristessa by the groin and sent another inch of his length through. She felt him near her belly and got herself dizzy trying to conceive all that *Sigor* inside her. Now, his stuffed balls grazed her, post-thrust. Her face was hot. Her eyes popped open and squeezed closed, again and again as Sigor slid into her.

He pushed in the rest of the way. Sigor's swollen balls rubbed the hood of Tristessa's clit. They stayed frozen like that for a time. Then, Sigor withdrew...and returned.

She couldn't hold it in any longer. She burst out in a great, throaty groan.

That was it. She had lost all deniability. But, did it matter? She was as wet as the inside of a grape. Sigor had to know how wretched and dirty she was now. In a way, she was relieved. There was nothing to defend, just the feeling of Sigor stretching her out from lips to cervix.

The tingle of an orgasm struck. Sigor thrust. He moaned. She joined him. The tingle grew to a buzz. Sensation flooded her loins. She wailed.

"Oh, God's mercy," muttered Sigor. He went rigid inside her.

She tossed her head and shook, no longer mindful of where her milk sprays went off to. An errant stream splattered the back of her hand. Release was here.

Tristessa screamed. For a second, her body seemed to merge with everything around her. This was no mere orgasm. It was something purer. There was nothing to compare it to.

Sigor came. Tristessa's belly began to fill. Tristessa's hand went to her abdomen. It swelled into her palm. And then, stopped.

"Nnngh," went Sigor. Oh, bloody hell, that was only his first volley!

Another geyser of seed ran into Tristessa. Her gut swelled rounder.

And then came another, and another, and another...

They hadn't fucked since last night. And, with the immense production induced by the tree flowers, Sigor was filling Tristessa like a wineskin.

"Ohhh...God...," Sigor gasped. He had spent his last into her.

Tristessa's milk was down to a trickle. A good thing too, because the steel tray ran nearly full.

After the whole thing was done, Tristessa wept. She tried to hide her tears from Sigor, but she no longer had the strength to shield herself.

"Ey, what's wrong? Why you crying? Was it not good?"

Tristessa had no answer. Sigor held her against his bony chest and she bawled like a starved child.

* * *

The next morning, Tristessa rose early to meet the sage. She drained her breasts, bathed and dug through an old chest in her bedroom. It was not cold out, but the murky, gray day bore a breeze that could make you think otherwise. From the bottom of the chest, she withdrew a yellow cloak.

"You look like a pile of gold coins," said Sigor when she set foot in the hearth room in the cloak and shared a breakfast of nuts and dried fruit with him.

"It's a city garment," she replied. "Draws too much attention on the roads. But, I won't be on the roads today, so it doesn't matter."

"Where are you going?" said Sigor.

"Not far. I'll be back no later than sundown."

"What's this all for?"

"I need to see a friend."

"I didn't know you had friends."

Tristessa scoffed, but her laughter was at her own expense. After sex yesterday, she felt like a cracked walnut left out in a rainstorm—washed out and robbed of nutrients. She couldn't find her temper, not even to scold Sigor for prying. There was no basis for pride. Not anymore. Perhaps the sage, in his wisdom, could restore a spark of it. But, then again, that didn't sound much like a thing the sage would do.

She put on her traveling boots, filled a satchel with small rations and, before she set foot outside, remembered something. From her room, she retrieved the vial of red dust. Of everything in her house, the vial was the one thing she could never leave there. It was infinitely more precious than gold.

Finally, on a whim, Tristessa kissed Sigor goodbye as he was dressing to tend the garden. *It's like we've been shacking up for years*, she thought as she set foot outside.

She whistled thrice. Kilah swooped down and took perch on her shoulder.

"Which way is the sage?"

This way, tweeted Kilah. He leapt off Tristessa, swooped off to the right, swung back and found her shoulder once more.

They crossed the causeway over the shallow waters and turned south along the bank.

Tristessa's boots carried them through the thick grasses and bent ferns, over gnarled, fallen trees and clumps of mud, still damp after yesterday's rain. The air was moist and thick with the scent of wet bark.

Why do you move slowly now? said Kilah.

"My breasts got many times bigger and they're heavy and sensitive," said Tristessa.

Is that why you seek the sage?

"No," said Tristessa. "I have...other concerns."

If my breast slowed me down, nothing would concern me more. The owls could eat me.

"That's all because you're a bird."

What concerns a human more than being slow?

Tristessa considered this question for some time. "Other humans," she replied at last.

The wild cypresses of the swamp thinned out and the land grew harder and drier under Tristessa's feet. The swamp fell behind and they emerged in a yawning, green field that sloped down with the river and terminated in a braid of overlapping hills, some of them dense with forest. The morning sky was a moody, gray sheet that had begun to break up in the east where the mountains stood.

Tristessa crossed the field and climbed into a thicket of young oaks. There, they rested a short while and Tristessa fed Kilah, as promised. The sun occasionally found its way through the parting clouds and cut into the forest with rays and shadow.

An hour passed. They were now in a much older forest, cleft with little streams and pillared with oaks as wide as a door. As Tristessa scaled a steep hill, Kilah twittered in her ear: *he's up there.*

"I'll have to ask you to be elsewhere then," said Tristessa. "This conversation is only for us."

I'll look for bugs to eat. But, you have to promise to bring me back with you. I'd be exhausted having to fly back all that way.

Kilah flew off and Tristessa heard a trickle of running water. She reached the summit and found a narrow stream. A few paces downstream, a grassy clearing was guarded by aged oaks and suffused with sunlight.

There, Tristessa saw what appeared to be a smooth, round rock. But, it was the sage.

Beyond recorded history, there have been secret societies, people brought together by common needs, interests or circumstances beyond conventional society's reckoning. Certain beings, for instance, come together out of the common experience of having defied the odds of time. Through sorcery, spiritual ascendance, artifice or divine bestowal, these beings each found a way to live far beyond a natural lifespan. They meet every so many years, sometimes in pairs, sometimes in groups, to share stories, wisdom and mutual guidance. Tristessa was a recent initiate, an infant relative to the collective's time. That made almost any other member a sage to Tristessa. But, there was only one sage she knew at all, and he was quite old. Perhaps someday, he would introduce her to others. That was not to happen today, though.

Of course, not all members of this society were *human*.

Tristessa stepped into the sunlight, kneeled at the sage's side and withdrew from her satchel a gift, a twined bundle of mustard greens from her garden. She untied them and set them before the sage. Up close, the sage's back was speckled with gold dots that looked like a painter's passtime and blazed in the sun.

At one end of his sturdy, domed back was a scaly shaft. From it, a snout extended. It sniffed the mustard greens, and carefully bit an end of the leaf.

"You spoil me, child," said the turtle in agonizingly slow, careful words, between bites. He looked up at Tristessa. He was about the size of a small buckler. His skin was dark and his face was dotted with the same yellows as his shell, though the dots converged along his wedge-shaped face and extended into stripes down his upper lip. The turtle craned his neck to look up at Tristessa and blinked his orange eyes.

"When did you get here?" said Tristessa.

"It has barely been any time at all. I asked a good friend of mine to take me up these hills and leave me. Perhaps, I will stay, a year or so. I do like this spot."

Tristessa smoothed her skirts over her thighs. "I heard you wanted to see me."

"Indeed," said the sage, and he looked up at Tristessa as if he expected her to know the reason why. Finally, he said, "a monk—one of us, mind you—learned, in one of his daily

trances, that someone from this realm, nearby, plucked a branch from the life tree. When I heard this, I thought it sounded like the work of an alchemist."

"And, you suspect the alchemist was me?"

"I would suspect it of very few alchemists. No mere alchemist can reach the life tree. But, as we both know, you're much more than that."

"You're wrong. I am a mere alchemist and nothing more."

"There is proof that you speak an untruth, child."

"And, that is?"

"It's that you now speak to me."

Tristessa turned her gaze to the stream and laughed.

"And, I grow surer of my suspicions regarding the life tree, still," said the sage.

"Nevertheless, it is good to hear you laugh."

"Very well. It was me."

The sage tilted his head side-to-side as he spoke. "Oh, child, do you realize how meddling of this sort disturbs the spirits of the upper realms?"

"Have you a guess how many small branches are on the life tree?" Tristessa replied.

"A thousand, thousand, thousand, thousand, times nineteen. Or, so it more or less was the last I'd heard it recounted."

"The spirits of the upper realms cannot be harmed by the loss of one branch. Can they?"

"Alas, they'll be chattering about this aberration for months. All our monk and spiritualist brethren bring their concerns to me. And, every time I have to remind them, spirits often have nothing more interesting to do than fuss about trivialities. It all gets very, very tiresome to hear, child."

"Will you ever cease calling me *child*?"

"Hmm? Oh. Please, remind me your age."

"In years? Forty-three, as of last winter, I reckon. This body, however, is probably barely twenty-six."

"Hmm. Yes, well, when there is a century or more behind you, remind me again and I will no longer refer to you as *child*. At this time, you are as fresh as a daisy to me. May I ask *why* you harnessed the life tree's power?"

"It was necessary. I'm trying to save a village."

"Hmm. From a raid or the pestilence?"

"Pestilence. I needed the life tree for an...ingredient."

The sage tilted his head in the direction of the stream water just beneath him. "I hear you have taken a certain companion into your house. Would he have something to do with your 'ingredient'?"

Tristessa seized up. "Where did you hear that?"

"The birds have been chattering about it since I arrived here. I did not go digging for that information, child."

"Then, why in God's name do you bring it up?" said Tristessa, an edge of panic in her voice.

"I bring it up because I want to help, child. You may remember what you said the last time we spoke."

"What? What did I say when we spoke before?"

The turtle made a funny sound, which Tristessa then realized was him clearing his throat. "I have a house in the swamp now and I intend to stay there alone as long as this age lasts, or until I die.' Those were more or less your words."

Tristessa swallowed uneasily. "He is only a visitor."

"*Only* that?"

"Are you insinuating something?"

"Perhaps, but you misunderstand my intention, child. I don't wish to make you excuse yourself. I only wish for you to tell me what's in your heart."

"Why?"

"Because...call it a turn in my tummy, but I sense things have begun to change for you. I suspect you ought to tell *someone* about it. I have no designs on you, except to better ensure your prolonged happiness. You must believe you can trust me."

Tristessa inhaled. She noticed the tension in her body that wavered her breath.

"V-very well," she said, after a painful, long silence. Tristessa's gaze fell to the grass and small stones and the trickling stream water as she spoke. "He's helping me save his village. That was my stated purpose, anyway. The truth is, I care very little for the people of Hyle. It was him I wanted. I had an appetite for a man and he was the only one I'd seen in years who I could stand to look at, to smell, to speak to. I had a way to meet both our needs. And, the best of it was, I didn't even have to admit to wanting him. Our union was part of the alchemy."

"But, something went wrong?"

"Aye. I expected to lose that appetite for him once I'd had a belly full. A few nights together and, surely, I'd long for my solitude once more. But, it hasn't happened. Every day, I only want more of him. I even—" An involuntary swallow choked off Tristessa's voice.

"Tell me, child."

"I'm doing things...with him. Things I promised I'd never do again. Things I was once forced to do. I-I don't understand why. I *despise* it when a man touches me uninvited. Does me like I'm a bleeding goat. It's disgusting," her voice form this last word with a throaty hiss. "But, when he's around, I-I crave it. I've lost all reason to this boy. I'm losing *everything*. Every part of me I can take measure of soon enough slips away into his hand. And he doesn't even know. I don't understand it."

The sage considered this in silence for a time. "You speak of loss," he said at last. "But, is anything truly lost for you? You have your safety, your home. Perhaps this *loss* is none other than a reclamation of things that were once lost *to* you."

"Like, *what?*" growled Tristessa.

"To give oneself to another freely is not to lose oneself."

Tristessa shook her head. "It's foolish. Utterly stupid."

"Is it, really?"

"There's no sense in it. He returns to his village in a few days. And, even if I could still see him, he will grow old and die and I will have nothing to give myself to but a rotting corpse."

And now, the sage chuckled.

"What's funny?" cried Tristessa.

"Many in our disconnected assembly have precisely the problem you speak of. They must watch their loved ones, their children, their grandchildren, and so on, age and fall ill and

die. It is a deeply painful thing. But, you did not achieve long life through divine favor or through rigorous travel to the astral planes from deep meditation. You are an alchemist. Through sheer artifice, you live beyond your natural time. If any among us could guarantee the prolonged life of not only herself, but someone she holds dear, I'm sure you could. If you want this *boy* to remain at your side, why don't you simply *make* it happen?"

Tristessa heaved a sigh and found a sob at the end of it. She drew up her legs, hugged them and buried her face in her knees. "I...I can't do that, either. If-if I did that..."

"Yes?"

"My passion for the boy would die. There would simply be too much of him. I require the nearness of his death to value his life."

"So, you still covet him."

"Aye," said Tristessa. And now, she was weeping as she clutched her legs tighter and tighter to her huge breasts.

The sage's voice drew out slower than ever now. "Listen, child. Passion dies. In the stories, and sometimes even in life, it dies a wrenching, violent death that devastates the impassioned, even kills them in turn. It is far better, I think, for passion to go quietly, like an old tortoise who drifts off in his sleep and never wakes. When passion goes peacefully, there is, sometimes, something that remains alive. Something that can be carried on into the future."

"It doesn't matter," Trisessa cried, her voice choking. "If the boy knew me, knew *all* of me, he would know better than to spend the ages at my side. I-I can't do that to him."

"Are you absolutely sure that's true, child?"

"My borrowed time is only borrowed time. Even at my best, I am silver beside him. He burns too brightly. If the boy knew his own worth, his and mine, he would stay away from me. He *should*."

"You are no longer being sensible, child."

"Nay. But, you asked for the contents of my heart."

"Indeed, I did," said the sage.

A long silence drew out as Tristessa hid her face in her knees and wept.

"I have one more thing to say, child. And then, I must eat and rest."

"What is it?" muttered Tristessa.

"We who defy nature and achieve life beyond our allotted time cannot afford to fool ourselves for long. An ordinary man, who knows not the contents of his own heart, will soon die and be little the worse for his ignorance. But, this is not our fate. As the years go by, our blindnesses come back to us. We must reckon with them, or else our longevity soon becomes a source of torment. This is why I put out word that I wished to speak to you, child. I've seen, too often, those poor souls who extended their lives and extended their suffering too. I don't wish that for you. It is not my concern what you do with this *boy*. I only wish for you to treat yourself with love. Alas, love does not covet. It only gives. That is all. I wish you well on your journey, child."

And now, the sage rotated on his legs until he again faced the mustard greens.

But, just before he began to eat, the sage turn to Tristessa and spoke again. "You know, for as long as you alchemists have been around, I never took your postulations very seriously. The idea you people could forge a pure, originating substance that would deliver long life and at the same time, salvation for your very soul—it all sounded like the drivel that very smart men, philosophers and such, lose themselves to prattling on about for the rest of their days. I confess, child, after speaking to you today, I now begin to wonder if I was wrong."

Tristessa shot a glare at the sage's shell. "*Wrong?*" she cried. "What in the hells are you talking about? Alchemy *is* drivel. It's all a bloody lie! You were right! You were always right. How could you be wrong now, after speaking to *me*? Aren't I proof enough?"

But, the sage was done talking. He took his slow, careful bites of the mustard greens and said no more.

Tristessa dried her face. She left the sage's place on the hill, called Kilah to her shoulder and went home.

* * *

The next couple days were a struggle. Tristessa still took pleasure in Sigor's body, his nearness, his cooking, his voice when he sang for her. But, she felt like an open wound around him. She was all twisted up inside and had frequent headaches.

It became increasingly clear what Tristessa had to do: tell Sigor everything. Let him see her for the horrible stain she was. What Sigor saw might frighten or disgust him, drive him away. But, if so, so much the better. It would be easier, then, to let the boy go. Let him return to his town and leave her. Tristessa would be sad then, but satisfied with the truth's confirmation.

This was what she *ought* to have done. But, her heart was craven.

It was all so strange. Tristessa *knew* fear. She had lived half her life in it. Her dreams still, from time to time, conjured memories of terror. But, Tristessa couldn't remember the last time fear was so *present* in her life. Curse the boy. Thanks to him, she had something to lose. It was ruining her.

The third night after she had visited the sage came. After supper, Tristessa found herself curled up on the floor in Sigor's arms, both of them naked, her bum pressed against his huge cock. The hearth light was weak. It cast a small halo where they laid. Tristessa's breasts were bigger than any breasts ever had a right to be. They pillowed on the floor, well bigger than Tristessa's own head. She couldn't look down without her chin sinking into soft, pillowy flesh. Sigor stroked her belly, which lately had grown to a size she could no longer hide beneath her clothes. It bulged from solar plexus to abdomen. She looked five months along, though her tummy was soft where a true mother's was often hard. It seemed odd, as women usually came to Tristessa's home to *lose* their distended bellies, that she herself now had one. With *their* help, she reminded herself. Tristessa had rued the thought of bearing a child, even when she was quite young. She still did. But, in Sigor's embrace this bulging belly was somehow alright. Even nice, if she didn't think *too* hard about it. Sigor's seed had filled the feminine vessel up so full lately, she now lactated four times a day and it still wasn't enough to deplete it before they fucked again.

"I been thinking," muttered Sigor.

"Mmm. Thinking, boy? Is that what you're doing lately?"

"Yeah. What's wrong with thinking?"

Tristessa gripped Sigor's hand on her belly. "I like it when you *do* things, boy, not think them. Thinking is far too much work.

"You're always thinking, though," Sigor replied.

"Aye, but I'm tired of it. These days, I just want the thinking to go away."

"Can I ask you a question?"

Tristessa scoffed. "Didn't you hear me, boy? I'd sooner fuck that rod of yours again."

Sigor sighed.

"Alright, out with it, boy. What's your question?"

"I'm thinking," Sigor paused, swallowing. "I'm thinking you did find the philosopher's stone."

Tristessa shot a furious glance over her shoulder. "*That* nonsense is what you've been thinking about?"

Sigor was silent for a long pause. "Aye," he said.

"And, you want to know if it's true." Tristessa rolled out of his embrace. She took a seat on the floor near the window where her wine jug was at and pulled out the cork.

Well, the boy asked. Best get it over with now.

Tristessa lifted the wine jug. Berry wine filled Tristessa's mouth and puffed out her cheeks. It was more than she could swallow at once so she took it a bit at a time. She ended up coughing.

"You alright?" said Sigor.

Tristessa couldn't answer between hacking coughs for a time. "No, boy. You asked me a terrible question. I am not 'all right'."

"Well, sorry, I—"

"Shut up and I'll tell you about the so-called *philosopher's stone*. But, if you don't like what I have to say, it's your own bloody fault. I'd just as soon have spared you this tale." Tristessa rose to her feet, turned and looked out into the velvet darkness beyond the window.

She was silent for a long time.

"Tris—," Sigor began.

"I was twelve years old when I lost my parents and my town. My father was a magistrate. One day, raiders from the east came. My mother hid me away under the floorboards. They slaughtered the whole town and set it aflame. When I emerged, the house was on fire and my father and mum were laid on the floor with their throats cut. Even the sight of them was not as bad as the sounds I'd heard above me, minutes before. The house was on fire and I had to break a window to get out of it.

"Our town was a few leagues out from the city of Oxnard. I drifted there, penniless and alone. The next two years, I spent on the streets. I begged, stole... Sometimes, when I was lucky, the churches gave me a pile of hay to sleep on and scraps of food. Mostly, I remember the hunger from those days.

"There was a man who lived in Oxnard. An aging alchemist. He would sometimes hand me a crust of bread on the streets, but it was not a gift given out of pity. He would ask me to do things for him. I ran away at first. But, the hunger always caught up to me.

"The alchemist's art had brought him a share of wealth. He had no titles, no wife or children. No artisan skills. Alchemy alone had kept him fed, kept a roof over his head. I began to dream of possessing a craft like that—one that would save me from the corrupting deals and charities of others.

"One day, I came to the alchemist's house and made him an offer. He was to teach me his craft. Everything he knew. He had to swear to it. I knew how to read. My father had taught me before he died, even though girls are supposed to have no use for letters. If the alchemist did as I asked, I would do whatever he wanted."

Tristessa took another gigantic swig of the wine, set the jug on the floor and gazed out the window. The hearth's light was so scant now, one Sigor's torso could be made out. Their faces were lost in darkness.

"There isn't enough wine in this world to make me drunk enough to recount the things he made me do. They were horrible and disgusting. I quickly grew to hate him. But, he honored his word. He let me assist him in his laboratory. He discoursed me on the books—those he understood, anyway. By the time I was seventeen, I was working in his lab, alone. I was doing all his alchemy for him. I read the books myself at that point. It dawned on me that I was beginning to understand alchemy better than he even did. I knew what the other alchemists were saying in those bloody books. He only followed recipes. I *understood* them, from the roots.

"That was around when I began to dream of the philosopher's stone. A pure substance, free from mortal depravity. A rock that preserved youth, made crops spring from the ground, granted communion with the animals... my imagination ran wild. The great coagulation—the envy of every alchemist that ever was.

"But, the alchemist could only accomplish the process with a pure heart. If the alchemist achieved the process physically, he must also be purifying himself. Physical and spiritual purification are two sides of the same coin. At least, that's what the books said. I believed them. After so many years of hunger, pain and degradation, my heart was stained black. There was no kindness left in me. The philosopher's stone gave me hope. It wasn't that I wanted to live forever, though it certainly wouldn't have troubled me to do so. I was beginning to believe I could find salvation in the art and cleanse my dirty soul.

"The old alchemist grew sick and crippled and I took care of him so he had no pretext to get rid of me. He was too withered at that point to make me do things I didn't want to. And, his

infirmity gave me more time in his laboratory. I worked endlessly. I failed so many times, but I was undeterred. Forging the philosopher's stone would be my life's work. I would produce it or die trying. Either would do for me. The only point was to keep moving forward."

It was then that Tristessa burst out in a wicked laugh. For a time, she couldn't speak through her cackling. "And-and then, one day, by accident—by bloody accident!—I did it. I produced a substance that had exactly the properties the alchemists had spoken of. I swallowed a few tiny dust specs of the stuff and do you know what happened? All the scars on my poor, wrecked body disappeared that very night. I felt strong and vigorous like I'd never been before. I awoke the next day and was shocked to discover I could understand the speech of the rats that ate the waste in the alley outside the alchemist's house. I could *talk* to them!

"But, my blessings were mixed, even then. Because, I knew in my heart this substance I had produced was no salvation. The coagulation was supposed to cleanse the alchemist—or else the alchemist would have to cleanse himself. Either way, he would be cleansed of all impurities, leaving nothing but love in its wake.

"But, there was no love in my heart. Something had gone very, very wrong. My corrupted soul should not have been able to produce such a substance so soon. It was an abomination. For a time, I didn't believe I had produced a real philosopher's stone. It had to be some trick. But, I was able to produce more of it, and still more. Even if I had arrived at it by accident, the process became clear. I knew what I was doing, step by step.

"Then one day, I stopped ovulating and I realized what the substance I had produced actually was. Like everything in this wretched world, it was a tradeoff, a surrendering of one thing for another. If I kept swallowing bits of the stone, I would indeed prolong my life. But, the life of any child I might produce would be sacrificed for it.

"But, oh, the stone can prolong life for quite some time indeed, boy. When your grandchildren's grandchildren are old and gray, I wager I will still look like this. Entire ages will pass before me. Some days, I can almost feel the hastening of time, all around me, while I stay rooted to the spot.

"The alchemist soon died as I knew he would and I made off with as much of his things as I could carry. I left Oxnard and traveled to Grunshire where I made a small home for myself. You know the rest.

"There is no philosopher's stone. There is a thing that looks like what the philosopher's stone is supposed to look like, that does many of the things it is said to do—at least to an extent. But, it is no divine substance. At best, it is on a rung only a step higher than

mankind's place on the ladder of being. A little brighter, a little cleaner, perhaps, but still impure. Like everything else around us.

"And, my soul is stained to this day. My heart is charred with wretchedness. It's a good thing I can talk to the animals, because they are the only things in this world that offer me some happiness and acceptance for my lot. It's the reason I live among them. I despise people. Honestly, boy, when I think of all the villages and cities in this world, nothing gives me so much pleasure as when I remember that, one day, all those miserable, cruel idiots out there will die, and I—I'll still be here.

"There is no solace for me. There's nothing in the churches, in all the nonsense the clergy prattle. Oh, I believe in God, boy. Make no mistake. Only God could have wits enough to play such a joke on a poor girl who only wanted to save her soul. It would have been far kinder of Him if He had not revealed the bloody philosopher's stone. If I had died, young and exhausted, still trying to achieve the coagulation, I'd have died happy and with purpose. Instead, I prolong my life only to spite mankind. My deepest wish is to see them all go, by disease, by war, by judgment day. Whatever. I only hope I may bear witness."

Tristessa turned to Sigor and it was only then she noticed how drunk she was. The hearth had been snuffed out but she could hear Sigor breathing. She took a wobbly step towards him and began to laugh. "What do you think of me now, boy? I suppose you find me bloody awful. Worse than anyone you met, I'd wager." She dropped to the floor in shrieking laughter.

It was an eternity before Sigor spoke, but finally, his voice emerged in the darkness. "You can't be all bad."

"If you think that, you're a bigger fool than I took you for," she drawled. Her laughter had emptied out.

"What about the things you do for the women who come here?"

Tristessa's words slid together clumsily as she spoke. "Mmn. I do that f-for a price. Effen when the price is low, you mussn't think I do it out of kindness, boy. I don't wishsh to see more children in this...world. They...they will either do evil or else evil will be...done to them."

"I don't believe that's all. You must have some feeling for the mothers. Don't you?"

Tristessa slumped over her outstretched legs. The room was teetering. "Mmm. Their suffer...ing is real, yes. It gives me some...peace to see it put to rest an' all. But, wha' of it, boy? Iss only pity."

"You really think there's no hope," said Sigor. He wasn't asking a question.

"Nay." Tristessa got on her hands and knees and crawled toward Sigor. She couldn't see him, but she could feel the heat coming from his naked body. She found his knee and grasped it. "Of course," she said, "sss-somehow I don't ff-eel that way ab-about you. If-if you died, I would be...sad. Yes. I s'pose there-s a little spot in my heart for you."

Sigor rose and broke from Tristessa's grasp.

"Oi, where you going off to, boy?"

Sigor didn't answer. He tiptoed around the hearth and then returned to where Tristessa was. He kneeled beside her and Tristessa was relieved to be touching his body once more.

A wave of nausea ran up Tristessa's belly. She threw her arms around Sigor's waist and laid her head on his naked lap and closed her eyes against the swaying room. Sigor's monstrous penis was pressed to her ear. It was flaccid and felt like a warm, little pillow.

It was then that the notes of the lute began to echo in the instrument's wooden frame over Tristessa's head. It was a somber piece, liturgical perhaps.

"Why're you sssso bloody good to me," she cried. Tears ran down her nose and sank in between her cheek and Sigor's thigh. "Why don't you hate me, boy? Can't you see, I'm no good at all? Can't you?"

Perhaps Sigor was asking himself the same question. The thrumming strings of his lute were his only reply.

Part IV: Rubedo

The final day of Sigor's stay came and went. The next morning, Tristessa rose at sunrise, drained her breasts and took the feminine vessel out of her body. The ring came out, trailed by its filmy sack, still bearing a clump of Sigor's seed, about the size of a walnut. The stuff spilled to the ground and made a small mess.

Her breasts immediately shrank. By a count of ten, they were back to their original size. Tristessa stood and found herself light and supple on her feet.

She put on her travel boots and yellow cloak and went down to the cellar. She had a chamber, deep under her cellar floor, where she kept the milk cool in a tub of water.

They were stored in jugs. Only the milk in the oldest jugs were spoiled. The rest of it smelled fresh. The feminine vessel didn't produce milk that lasted forever, but it was hardier than any cow's milk.

She went up to Sigor's room and shook him awake. "Come, boy. I need your help loading up the cart. We must get these jugs to Hyle. The longer we wait, the sooner they'll go off."

Sigor squinted at her. "You're different."

"Aye. My bubbies are small again. I no longer need the vessel inside me. Certainly not for traveling. We have the cure we need."

Sigor blinked, puzzled. Then, a thought seemed to strike him. "Well...what about me?"

"What?"

"My...my bloody penis. Can't you make me smaller?"

"You don't have a vessel inside you. It's not the same."

"Isn't there some way to—"

But, Tristessa wasn't ready to talk about this subject. She'd thought about this very topic the other night and realized Sigor's unwieldy manhood might afford her some advantage. But now was not the time to exploit it.

"We haven't time for this, boy. Didn't I say, I need your help loading the cart? Come on."

Sigor helped Tristessa haul the jugs outside. Then, she sent Sigor to fetch the donkey, Bartholomew, while she retrieved the little cart she had left at the side of the house. Sigor returned with Bartholomew. They loaded up the cart with the jugs and tied the jugs down with rope.

"Get your clothes on, boy. The ones you came here in. If you wish to return to Hyle, that is."

Sigor went back into the house. Tristessa gave Bartholomew a quick meal, then hanesed him.

I like him, said Bartholomew.

"The boy?"

The one who feeds me now.

"Aye. He's a good boy."

I think I like him as much as you. Maybe more.

Tristessa wrapped her arms around the donkey's head, caressed it and thought of Sigor. It had stung just a bit when she had told him to get his clothes *if* he wished to return to Hyle—and then the boy went and did it. Likely, the boy had not picked up the hint. Perhaps he didn't even know Tristessa wished him to stay.

Even now, after she had bared every part of herself to the boy, she could not fall on her knees and beg at his feet. If she knew it would make him stay, then she would do it. But, if Sigor refused, the loss of her final shred of dignity was a blow she could not take.

Perhaps there was some other way to persuade him...

Sigor emerged from the house in his gray cloak and blue breeches. Tristessa asked his help saddling Batholomew up. They hitched the cart to Bartholomew's saddle. Tristessa climbed onto the cart and got up on the little wooden perch that looked over the donkey's gray back and scraggly crest. Sigor handed her the reins, took Bartholomew by the harness and slowly led him down the causeway, across the swamp.

The cart's pair of wooden wheels squeaked and the seat rocked under Tristessa.

It's heavy...so heavy. Must I? whined Bartholomew

Tristessa cleared her throat loudly to get Sigor's attention. "We're taking the long way. Around the hill," Tristessa called out to him. "It's been too long since Bartholomew has been on an outing. He needs time to break into it."

They turned left when they reached the end of the causeway and trekked through leaves and dirt along a slow incline. The ride was teetery and bumpy and several times, Tristessa nearly fell off the little wagon. Once she saw the eastern hills on her right, they veered in that direction and trundled back in search of the road. The long way out of the swamp

might have cost them half an hour, but Bartholomew was moving more persistently now and they would get to Hyle well before sunset.

They rejoined the road and the bumps, teeters and jostles were much improved. The swampland faded and soon they were surrounded on both sides by the gray trunks of alders. Sigor no longer had to tug at Bartholomew's harness so he fell back and walked alongside the cart at Tristessa's side.

"Eh...boy?"

Sigor looked up at her with his bright, gray eyes. "Hm?"

"Have you...would you...? Mmm..."

"What is it?"

Tristessa gulped, took a few quick breaths. This was her moment. "I...I think you should stay with me."

Sigor furrowed his brow. "When?"

Tristessa laughed uncomfortably. There was no turning back now. "When?" she repeated. "All times. My home should be your home."

Sigor made a face Tristessa couldn't read. It was somewhere between awed and abashed.

"You can have the room upstairs. You said, it was the nicest bed you'd seen. Well, it's yours. The only time you'd have to relinquish it is when I have a visitor who needs to rest there. And...you'll eat well. You already know, my home is well disposed to fetch us meals. I...I suppose we'll have to see about this winter. I might not have provisions enough for two...uh...but, there's still time! We'll come up with some sort of plan."

Sigor looked down the road ahead, still wearing that unreadable face. So, Tristessa continued: "And...ah...you said it yourself, you don't love most of Hyle. Well, you don't have to be around them all, you know? You could simply stay with me. "And...erm...well, I wouldn't mind having the help around the house anyway. It would be no trouble, boy. Really..."

Tristessa's voice kept catching in her throat. Her tongue was weak. She didn't like this. Where was all her composure and self-assurance, where was the iron conviction that drew words from her mouth like blood from a wound? She needed it, now more than ever.

"And, you know, boy. If you were to live with me I could teach you your letters. It'll take some time, but time is one thing I have a great deal of. I'm pretty sure you could learn to

read. If you work very hard at it, you'll be able to read anything. Not just the psalms, you know. All of it. You said you wanted to know stuff. Well, you can have knowledge, boy. You needn't be ignorant all your life.

"And...erm. Besides, if sentiment takes you, you could always pay Hyle a visit. It's scarcely more than an hour's walk. You won't be far."

Sigor's brows were furrowed. He seemed uneasy. Tristessa couldn't be sure if it was skepticism on his face. Perhaps she had to make her case more forcefully.

"Anyway, boy, I don't know how you expect to get along in Hyle now that your manhood is thick as a pork sausage. Seems to me, most of the women there will scream in terror or laugh at you. You'll have a more suitable match in me. You know it's true."

Sigor turned to Tristessa with a face that looked truly hurt and shame shut her mouth.

They went on in silence for some time. Far too soon, the trees thinned out and gave vantage to the grassy plains. The road twisted rightwards at the angle of a tree branch and the trees fell away completely.

There, down a gently sloping plain was the cluster of buildings wound around a tiny plaza that was Hyle. A tributary from the Draven river snaked across the land and fed into the town. The only two structures of any significant size there were the church and the inn. Even these were not much to speak of, just some simple stone formations with steep, shingled roofs. The church had a steeple with a bell no bigger than a two year old child. The rest was hovels with crumbling sides and roofs sagging after many rains.

Tristessa gathered her courage. "Well, boy?" she said.

"Mm?" said Sigor.

"What do you think of my proposal? You did hear me, I'm quite sure."

Sigor sighed. "I...I don't know."

Tristessa swallowed uneasily and uttered, "why?"

Sigor looked up at her. Then, his gaze fell to the donkey at his side. "This donkey and that bird 'a yours, you're very good to them. Maybe I am ignorant, but I got a keener mind than they do, I reckon. Still, you never tell them they're foolish or ignorant or they ask too many questions or say the wrong things."

"What's your point, boy?"

Sigor gave Tristessa a deeply sad look. "Sometimes, when I'm near you, I wish I was one of them."

Tristessa did not know what to say to that.

She had been a fool, a wretched idiot. She wanted to say something, make some sort of promise to the boy, but...perhaps there was no fooling Sigor. She couldn't make him believe in the wisdom of her offer. He would make whatever choice was best for him. And, by the sound of it...

A pit opened up in Trisessa's belly. She was nauseous. She wanted to crawl under a rock.

Shorn of words, Tristessa said nothing more as they approached the town

Hyle was surrounded on all sides by plains, plots of farmland and sparse trees. Cows grazed on the grassland and some plots were dotted with sheep. Still, the town stood nearly shadowless and stark in the afternoon sun. As they approached, figures and dogs came into view on the dirt paths that ran around the tiny plaza.

As they got closer, the smell of human settlement hit Tristessa's nostrils, that horrible, greasy mingling of rot and dung. It was far worse in the big cities than in a tiny town such as Hyle, but you didn't have to suffer much of that stench to be seized by the urge to turn away. Tristessa immediately wanted to be drunk so as to mind it less.

They rolled into the plaza and were greeted by a crowd of glaze-eyed peasants—mostly wimpled women and bareheaded children. You didn't have to look for long to know the pestilence had arrived. Many of them clutched handfuls of irises, roses, poppies and daffodils. Some of them had sores over their arms and faces, white, pink, purple or black. A longer look around Hyle made it clear: this crowd were some of the town's healthiest. Many more remained huddled against the houses in rags, shaking with fever or else gazing at nothing like idiots.

A small crowd drew together and converged on Tristessa, Sigor and Bartholomew's path. *Bloody hell*, thought Tristessa, *the wretched fools don't even know they're spreading the pestilence between them.*

One woman cried, "'ey, it's Sigor, he came back!" as if the boy's return had been in doubt.

Tristessa halted Bartholomew at the periphery of the tiny square and Sigor helped her down. In little time, the crowd of diseased peasants were a spit's length away. They were reluctant to come much closer. It was a thing Tristessa was familiar with, though never accustomed to. They avoided her eyes, diverting their attention to Sigor who, they clearly

hoped, would answer all their questions so no one would have to directly ask anything of the preternaturally pretty witch who lived in the swamp.

"Where've you been?"

"Are you hurt?"

"Is there a remedy?"

Neither Sigor nor Tristessa had time to respond before a woman in a periwinkle tunic with a handful of poppies cut through the crowd and closed the distance. She grasped Sigor by the shoulders. There were tears in her eyes. She embraced him. She was vaguely familiar to Tristessa, but she couldn't recall when she had seen the woman before.

"Ah...I'm alright, mum. Don't worry, I'm alright..." said Sigor.

Queasiness took Tristessa as she watched them. There was still a bit of youthfulness in Sigor's mother, even a touch of beauty in her fleshy face. Tristessa knew immediately, in years at least, she was older than this woman. Yet, she had been fucking her son like a jack rabbit in heat. Perhaps there was indeed something *unnatural* about Tristessa—a truth she had been hiding from in her little swamp.

Tristessa broke from her reverie when she noticed the woman's sleeve as it fell down her bare arm. There were sores trailing up it—no doubt to her armpit. Tristessa had nothing to worry about. A body that could withstand fire hardly had a pestilence to fear for. But she worried for Sigor who would be no more protected from his mother's poppies than she was.

"Is everyone alright?" said Sigor.

Sigor's mother was too busy weeping to answer, but another woman spoke up: "Not so well. We lost old Peotr and Nura and Gamlie had to bury their youngest the other day."

"Is Sheera alright?" said Sigor to his mother. Somehow, Tristessa knew he was talking about his sister, though he had never told Tristessa his sister's name.

"Oh, Sigor, she...she's in with fever and a terrible headache now," said Sigor's mother.

"Can I see her?"

"She doesn't want anyone to see her, Siggy. Her skin is...oh, it's...it's in a poor state. Siggy, where have you been? We were so worried."

"I was—" but Sigor was cut off by the approach of a few men, among which were none other than mayor Piot Rutgers and, greasy, hateful Aelrin who beheld Tristessa with a menacing scowl.

She suspected Aelrin was at least a little disappointed to find Sigor alive and well. He had been robbed of his pretext to 'shove his sword down the witch's throat'. Tristessa smirked at Aelrin and his face darkened all the more.

"Everyone back. Out of the way," shouted Pilot Rutgers waving in the air for the crowd to give space. They fell back, but nothing would part Sigor's weeping mother from her son. Piot ignored the boy, came up to Tristessa and gestured for her to join him back by the cart, out of earshot of the others.

"Well, woman," Piot muttered in a confidential voice. "Did you...?"

"Aye, mayor," said Tristessa in a near whisper. "I have what you need. It will heal the town. But you'll need to act fast."

"What would you have me do?"

Tristessa let out a sharp sigh, She grabbed the blanket on the cart and flipped it back, exposing the jugs. "You feed them this. Every man, woman and child should have a mouthful. They'll be well within a day."

The mayor furrowed a brow at the cart of jugs. "What is it?"

"Milk, mayor."

"Milk? From a cow?"

"Does it matter, mayor? It'll put an end to the pestilence."

Piot grunted. He set his hands on his hips. "You didn't tell me I was to feed milk to the whole town."

"You'll have to ration it to be sure everyone has some."

"And...and *how* do you propose I get them to drink it?"

Tristessa's mouth popped open. Was the mayor serious? "How?! You bloody tell them to do it. You're the mayor. These people are dying. If someone offers them a chance to live, won't they take it?"

The mayor raised an eyebrow at this. "Mmm. It may not be as easy as you say. They won't all easily accept medicine from...well..."

"A witch," breathed Tristessa.

Piot's only affirmation was a testy stare, not quite at her eyes.

Tristessa let out a wracked sigh. "Anyway, mayor, I've made good on our bargain. The rest is your—"

But then, Sigor came to Tristessa's side, his mother trailing behind him. "'What's happening?" said Sigor

"The mayor tells me the town won't drink the remedy," said Tristessa.

"Well...why not?" said Sigor.

"I mean no unkindness," grumbled Piot.

"What's all this?" said Aelrin, stepping into the growing circle.

"Uncle, they have to drink it," said Sigor. "They'll bloody live!"

"Drink what?" cried Aelrin. "You mad, Sigor? Fallen for this wicked bird's tricks now?"

Piot shot Aelrin a look. "Shut your mouth."

"Uncle, we need to show them," said Sigor.

"Show them what?" said Sigor's mother.

"Well, I'm going home," said Tristessa.

"Wait," said Sigor.

"What? What is it, boy?"

Sigor turned a desperate face to Tristessa. "Can't you...can't you stay and help us finish this?"

Tristessa's gaze passed over the mayor, the mayor's hateful son, the deeply suspicious glower on Sigor's mother's face. Tristessa wanted to run. She wanted to be far away from here. But then, she turned to Sigor. The boy needed her. She sighed. "Mayor, send me someone willing. I'll prove the milk heals. If it happens for them, the rest of town will follow, won't they?"

The mayor took a deep breath. "Aye. Save one, I suppose we'll save the lot."

"Well, who's gonna lap up this bloody witch's brew thinkin' it'll *heal* 'em?" growled Aelrin.

"Sheera," said Sigor.

"What?" said Sigor's mother.

"Mum...mum, listen. I have to talk to Sheera, I..." the boy took his mother aside, out of earshot of Piot, Aelrin and Tristessa.

"Uh...well," muttered Piot, "perhaps it's best you stayed the night at the inn. We'll need time to sort this matter out. Milosh certainly has a room for you. I'll talk to him."

Tristessa let out a deep sigh. The town of Hyle was the last place she wanted to be. But, for the day, apparently, she was bound to it. "I'll need help unloading my cart," she said. "And, a place for Bartholomew."

"Who?" said Piot.

"The donkey."

"Ah. Aye, Milosh has a little stable."

"Whoever it is you find for me to heal, have them come to the inn."

Piot nodded and bade his son to lead Bartholomew in the direction of the inn, but Tristessa refused the help. She led Bartholomew herself across the square to the bland, stone building that was Milosh's inn and tavern. At least this was one place in Hyle Tristessa could stand—with enough ale in her belly, anyway.

Piot entered first to speak to Milosh. A few minutes later, the mayor emerged with the tall, stocky, bearded figure of Milosh behind him. Milosh's sleeves were rolled up to his thick biceps and he too had the sores. But, he seemed sturdy and not seized too badly with fever. Upon the mayor's request, Milosh and Aelrin unloaded the jugs from Bartholomew's cart and carried them into the tavern. Tristessa brought Bartholomew around the inn to the little stable where an old, skinny horse was the only tenant. She unharnessed the donkey, hobbled him, gave him a gentle pat on his head and left her cart off to the side of the inn.

The mayor and his son were gone when Tristessa entered the tavern. She took a seat at a vacant bench.

"Bless my soul," Milosh's husky voice thundered behind her. "How fare you, woman?"

Tristessa did not look over her shoulder at him. "Dreadful, Milosh. I need a drink and I left my coin at home."

"Then, it's your lucky day, woman. The mayor said he'd cover your drinks and board this evening. His son was not happy to hear it, but...heh. I s'pose he's hoping you can actually do something for this ailing town."

"Well, it's his lucky day too, then. I can."

Milosh's deep, thrumming voice fell to nearly a whisper as he said, "Truly?"

Tristessa was not in the mood to indulge Milosh further. "Just...an ale, Milosh. I beg ye."

Milosh let out a gruff exhale. "Coming up."

Tristessa was two ales in when Sigor arrived. Under his arm was a woman in heavy blankets, shivering in the warmth of day. She was too weak to stand on her own and Sigor was putting in a genuine effort to guide her across the tavern floor.

At his heels came Piot, Sigor's mother and Aelrin, still wearing his scowl.

Tristessa rose. Sigor brought Sheera—for the sickly woman could be none other than his own sister—and sat her at the nearest bench where she slumped against her knees, panting. As she did so, the shroud over her head slipped off. Her fingers were black. Raised sores trailed up her wrists, her arms. They got bigger the higher up they went. They even came around the back of her neck. Her face was shiny with sweat. She wheezed and groaned. "Wh-what 'm I doin' 'ere, Siggy?" she whimpered.

"We're going to help you," said Sigor.

"I still don't like this, Siggy," said Sigor's mother.

"Mum, please. Sheera needs this."

Sigor's mother cast an uneasy glance at Tristessa, then her gaze fell to the floor in resignation.

Tristessa instructed Milosh to open one of the jugs and fill it only as high as his finger from the tip to the first knuckle. Then, she got down on one knee and brought the cup to Sheera's lip.

"You have to drink this."

"What's it?"

"Life itself, girl. The rest of your life lies at the bottom of this cup. Drink."

Tristessa had to press the cup against Sheera's face and tip it, but the woman choked it down. Then, she fell back against the table, groaning.

"That's it?" said Sigor.

"She needs to rest now," Tristessa replied.

"When will she be better?" said Sigor's mother.

"Soon," said Tristessa.

"That's all it takes? That little?" said Milosh.

"Aye," said Tristessa. She turned to Piot. "Make sure it lasts. Everyone gets some—you understand? The rest of you must drink it as well. It doesn't matter if you're fine and fit today. You've all touched the pestilence. It'll seize you by tomorrow. The next day if you're lucky. Drink the milk now so that doesn't happen."

Sigor hauled Sheera out of the tavern, his mother close on their heels, leaving Tristessa, Milosh, Piot and Aelrin.

"Now," said Tristessa, "I'd like to leave. If you lot will excuse me, I'll—"

"Woman," said Piot. He was still evading her gaze. "I must insist you stay the night. I have to be certain your...milk does what you say."

"And doesn't turn poor Sheera into a snail, or somethings," said Aelrin.

"I have a room ready for you upstairs," said Milosh.

"I'll be down here. Watching so's you don't slip out," said Aelrin.

Tristessa sucked her breath in through her teeth. So, she was to be a prisoner in Hyle. Her hands closed into shaking fists. She looked the three men over. Milosh, big and burly, Piot, fat, grizzled and tough, Aelrin, dark and spiteful. Their shared purpose in keeping her here was on all their faces. "You men," she said, "cannot keep me here."

"I wish to settle this matter peacefully," said Piot, in a deeply patient voice. "I only ask that you stay here, so we can be sure you've done as you said."

Tristessa wanted to fight. She wanted to spit in their faces, claw a way past them, make for the door. After all, she wasn't easily injured. And yet, and yet...

A weary sigh escaped Tristessa's lips. No. She didn't have it in her. Not now. She was weak. Not body-weak—spirit-weak. Her inner flame which typically roared and burned white hot, was low and dying and needed another log to rekindle, and there was no log. She had wits enough to get away, maybe, but not the will. Tristessa stared at the floor and cleared her throat. "In that case, I am to be undisturbed until morning."

"Aye," said Piot.

Then, she approached Piot and said in a very low voice, "there will be consequences if anything happens to me. You know it, mayor."

Piot turned his eyes far from Tristessa. "I'm well aware," he muttered.

She turned to Milosh. "Take me to my room. I expect a bed to myself tonight."

"Aye," said Milosh, turning for a wooden staircase that ascended the tavern's sidewall. "This way."

Tristessa laid on a saggy, wool mattress in a room of bare stones and darkness, save the light of a lone, narrow window.

She thought of the faces.

Even riddled with disease, the women wouldn't look her in the eyes. She could render in her mind their hateful murmurings. Did you see her? Still so young, so pretty, even after all these years. It's unnatural.

And, she had taken one of their own, a good, Hylan boy—the mayor's nephew, no less!—for what, none of them knew. Surely, it was no act of kindness on the witch's part.

And, no. It wasn't.

She thought of Sigor's mother's face, helpless and worried sick for her missing son. You only had to see the way she held Sigor tight and wept to know he was her favorite child. In a roost otherwise of womanizers and whores from a cruel husband, this poor woman had somehow birthed a boy with the mark of eternal innocence. But she, the nasty witch of the swamp had snatched him away.

It was not entirely untrue.

And then, there were the scornful faces of Piot and Aelrin...forced by wretched circumstance to make some sort of deal with a weird, ageless crone with freakish powers. A demoralizing devil's bargain, certainly. No, the witch would not save a dying town, not even for eighty pieces of silver. She demanded more. Their own flesh and blood, no less. Were they wrong to distrust her when she returned to the town, bearing a supposed cure? Alas, the boy was alive, but even so, was there really any kindness in the witch's heart? Any reason to believe she would cure the sick and dying if she could?

Perhaps not.

Most of all, Tristessa thought of Sigor. He had volunteered—volunteered!—to be the witch's pet. With nothing to gain but the possible perseverance of his town, he had laid himself at the foot of the hated witch. An uncertain fate, all to save his mother and sister from death. Still, more: he suffered her admonishments, humiliations. She had made him *sing* for her, as an occupying pillager makes members of an imprisoned family sing for their amusement while drinking their wine and making a bonfire of their things. She had seduced him, bedded him—deformed him with cruel magics. All that, and still, somehow, he had found it in his heart to show her kindness. Did she deserve such kindness—from *him*?

The sky grew dark and still, Tristessa did not sleep. She longed for her own bed, which was far more comfortable than this wool monstrosity. She missed her life in the swamp with nothing but a vegetable garden, some fishing nets and her jugs of fermenting berry wine to trouble her.

But, most of all, she longed for the warmth of Sigor's arms. Tristessa hated herself for wanting more of the poor boy. Hadn't she put him through enough? Oughtn't she leave him be, by now?

Sleep never came.

* * *

When the murky blue of early morning cast feeble light on Tristessa's bed, she dragged herself up and thought for a good, long while. For the first time since she'd rode into Hyle, Tristessa was beginning to think clearly—when the cotton fuzz of sleeplessness did not cloud her mind.

She dressed, washed her hands and face and was just about to leave when someone knocked on the door.

It was Piot Rutgers. And, with eyes narrowed like hoods, he was looking at Tristessa.

"Mayor," she said.

The mayor cleared his throat. "I spoke to Martella this morning, and—"

"Who?"

"Martella. Sigor and Sheera's mother."

"Aye?"

Piot turned his gaze to the stonewall at his left in hesitation. "Apparently, Sheera's headache eased and she slept well. Now, she's on her feet and eating."

"Well then, do you believe me about the remedy now?"

The mayor's eyes centered on Tristessa once again. "I...I haven't seen someone that bad off with the pestilence coming around again. When it's as bad as that, there's only one way to go."

Tristessa crossed her arms beneath her breasts. "Not anymore."

"Aye."

"You will have the town drink the milk, won't you?"

Piot looked at the floor and nodded solemnly.

"Remember, mayor, everyone must drink it, including yourself, whether you show the signs or not. The milk will only keep a few days. But, drink it when it's fresh and you'll all keep a good while longer."

"This...this better not be some trick."

"No tricks. Only life."

"Mmm. Well, I suppose we can let you go. I..." Piot looked around as if in search of some diversion from saying what it was he was about to say next. "I...I thank you, woman." He turned, strode down the narrow corridor, stopped partway and looked back at her.

"Consider your debts paid on that donkey."

After she'd freshened up, Tristessa went down to the tavern and found Milosh. He was wiping used tankards with a rag.

"Ah, the lass who saved poor Sheera," Milosh called cheerily across the room.

Tristessa approached the burly innkeeper. "You heard," she said.

"Won't be too long before everyone has. They'll be lining up outside to save themselves, I'd reckon."

"I suppose that's for the best," said Tristessa.

"And, what can I do for you? Consider your drinks on the house today."

"I know you get shipments from down south. Have you a case of sherry in your cellar?"

"Aye. If it's sherry you wish for, it's sherry you'll—"

"Has any of it spoilt? Turned to vinegar?"

Milosh's bushy brows narrowed at Tristessa. "Eh...likely. There's always one or two jugs of it gone off when I get a case."

"Well, that's what I want. Sherry vinegar. I'll take your most spoilt bottle."

Milosh gave her a blank stare. "Truly?"

"Aye."

Milosh grunted, went off to the corner and threw open a hatch door. He climbed a ladder down to the cellar. A few minutes later, he reemerged with a jug in hand. He set it on the table next to Tristessa. It was plugged, but with a rotted cork and she could tell by the piercing scent it was what she needed.

"Will this do?" said Milosh.

"Aye. Thank you for the trouble."

"It's no trouble. I'd have thrown the stuff out anyway. Can't I at least serve you an ale?"

"Nay, not today. Just the vinegar."

"If it pleases you."

"It does. I must be off." She took the jug and left Milosh's inn. Milosh's mystified stare followed her out the door.

Tristessa strolled around the dirt grounds of Hyle where dogs barked and people nursed their fevers and sores. No sign of the boy. But then, she spotted Sigor's mother, hanging damp clothes on a line in the shadow of a small hovel with cracking exterior walls. What was her name...

"Martella?" Tristessa called. The woman turned. She began to take a step back from Tristessa and then and then hesitated. She still clutched her poppies, though they were much withered since yesterday.

"Erm...eh...good morning!" she muttered to Tristessa, her fleshy face twitching with unease.

"Is Sheera well?"

Martella took a deep breath. "Uh...aye. She's been resting for hours. I...eh...I think her spots are smaller too."

"She'll pull through, then."

"Aye." Martella swallowed. "You did a good thing for her. Just like the last time."

"The last time?"

"Uh..." Martella's gaze dropped to the ground. "I...I brought her to you...four springs back, I'd say. She...uh...well, the father wasn't a very nice man, and...we didn't want him to know, and..."

Tristessa's mouth fell open. "Oh." So, *that* was why she remembered seeing Martella's face. She had not recognized Sheera though. But then, the girl was so defaced by sores, her visage was unlikely to spark a memory.

"A-anyway, can I help you?" said Martella. She clutched a damp cowl in one shaking hand and the poppies in another.

"I'm looking for the—uh, Sigor. Is he here? I just want to speak with him."

"Uh...he was up late by Sheera's bedside and fell asleep on the floor. I left him to rest, but I'll...I'll go see about him now."

Martella scurried into the little house. A few minutes later, Sigor emerged, blinking in the sunlight and rubbing sleep from his eyes. When he saw Tristessa, he smiled.

"Sheera's looking better today," he said.

"Aye. I heard."

Sigor's smile grew wider. "You did it."

Tristessa swallowed uneasily. "You were the other half of the deed, boy. It was both of us."

"Well, I didn't know a bloody thing about the alchemy. It was you that did most of it."

"Ah...boy, may I speak to you in private? For a little while?"

Sigor nodded. Tristessa led the way past several houses until they were out on the grassy plains in the shade of a larch tree. Tristessa leaned against the trunk, clutching the bottle in her hands and beheld Sigor, only a pace away from her. She could take one step and kiss him. Perhaps he wouldn't object. But, that would be foolish. She took in a deep breath and spoke. "Boy, I wish to apologize."

"For what?"

"For being so...adamant about what you do with your life. The truth is..." she gulped, took several quick breaths before she could get out the next thing. "The truth is, it would be a mistake for you to live with me."

Sigor squinted. "Eh...why?"

"Because...because you deserve better, boy. I'm a hateful, wretched, old creature, destined to live well past my time and be scorned and feared for it as long as it lasts. All the while, there simply isn't enough love in my heart for another person. I-I wish it were otherwise.

"I didn't make that remedy to help anyone. I did it so I could lay a claim on you. I needed a reason to seduce you and one presented itself perfectly. If it were otherwise, I expect your sister would be fast approaching death now.

"The truth is, I do nothing that doesn't work to my benefit. It's how it's been since I was a little girl. If you were to live with me, you'd soon know it to be true. All your kindness would be wasted on me. This wretched spirit would visit misery on you daily. You saw enough of that in your time with me.

"And, I cannot offer you children. In truth, I suppose I could stop taking the philosopher's stone for a while and bear one or two, but I made my choice about that long ago. I have no desire for them. Perhaps, I might come to love them, but it'll only be worse then. In the end, mothers and children are all separated by death—whoever's comes first. I experienced one side that once in my life. I refuse to experience the other.

"I really have nothing good to offer you. Anything I could offer would be a mixed blessing, at best. You needn't learn to read or live a very long life to be a better person. I see you, boy. You're perfect, just as you are. A pure soul. Life treats you unkind and there's still love in your heart. I *want* that. I wanted it more than anything. But, even with the philosopher's stone in my belly, it's more than I can offer."

Sigor looked pained. "Is...is that really so?"

She nodded. A tear threatened to spill out and fall down Tristessa's cheek. She didn't let it. She looked down and remembered. "Ah, but there is one thing I *can* offer you." She held the bottle of sherry vinegar up to Sigor.

With a somber face, Sigor took the bottle, "What is it?"

"Vinegar. Drink a thimble of it, each night, mixed with water. It will diminish the effects of the life tree flowers. Give it three weeks, I'd say. Your poor, overgrown manhood will be back to normal by then."

Sigor's eyes grew wide. "Y-you..."

"Aye. I tried to trick you. I regret it. Now...I must go." She stepped out of the shade of the larch and strode in the direction of the town. Then, she stopped and looked behind her. Sigor still stood under the tree. He held the bottle of vinegar and stared at Tristessa, every

bit as curious as he'd ever looked before. "I hope you'll forgive me for my trespasses on you someday," she said. "But, if you can't, I...I understand. Goodbye, boy."

Tristessa didn't look back again. She went immediately to the inn, released Bartholomew, mounted his harness and hitched the wagon to him. She offered the donkey a short stroll across the yard and then climbed aboard the empty wagon.

The sun had scaled well into the sky by now. It would be past noon before she arrived home.

She was nearly out of town when she ran into Aelrin. He sat on an old stump, picking his nose. He was now in a plain shirt and breeches. No armor, no sword, nothing but that grouchy face and spiny beard. He had to be hungover too, judging by his squinty eyes and the way his face was averted from the sun. "Oi," he said, gruffly.

Tristessa slowed Bartholomew' "Well?" she said.

"They says Sheera looks better today."

"So I've heard, at least three times already."

"I s'pose that was all right, what you did."

"I'm sure you surmise, I had my own reasons for doing it."

"Anyhow, I still don't likes ye. I don't likes what you done to Sigor, even if he is alive, still. I bet it was something nasty, whatever it was."

"In that case, we agree on one thing," said Tristessa. "Anyway, I'll be gone. You needed trouble yourself with my presence any further."

"Well...anyhow, I won't spit the ground this time."

"How kind." She spurred Bartholomew past Aelrin and traveled up the road.

Is he gone? said the donkey in a profoundly sad voice that seemed to know the answer anyway.

"The boy? Aye."

Why? I liked him.

"I do too. That's why. That's bloody *why*."

Tristessa returned to the swamp.

* * *

How strange it was to be home in her swamp now. It felt as if the place were a home for someone Tristessa no longer knew. She still tended her garden, fetched catches from her fishing nets, fed Kilah who was looking a little fat these days, and drank in the evenings. But, the routine now felt like donning a chemise whose fabric was worn raw from too many rains. It didn't feel right anymore.

Each morning, she awoke to the thought Sigor was resting upstairs, and then remembered. Damn the boy. He had left. No. She left him.

How was it that the boy's two week stay had so accustomed Tristessa to a different life in a place she had lived for years? When she was on her patio, she nearly saw him hike back from the creek with the catch from the nets. When she went to fetch the bedding from upstairs, she nearly saw him curled up under the blankets. At night, when she was crumpled up on the floor in a drunken stupor she nearly heard his fingers on the strings of the lute that now lay off against the back wall with no hand to claim it.

She even missed the feminine vessel, though it had made her breasts huge to the point of grotesquery and shackled her to regular milkings each day. The thought crossed her mind to put it back in herself, just to remember more full...but that would only make the sadness worse.

Three days passed after her return...four...

On the morning of the fifth day, Tristessa woke with a fire in her loins. She rose, sweat streaked and desperate.

The day was hot. Summer was coming to full bloom now. Tristessa took a spare blanket and went outside in nothing but a pair of sandals and her chemise. Crickets raked the air with the bowing of their wings. The stink of algae from the swamp was thick and offensive.

Tristessa strode out past the fishing nets until she found a very old cypress with a huge trunk that spread out in dozens of folds. She laid the blanket down next to it, sat, threw off her sandals and fell to her back. She gazed up at the branch-tangled sky and touched herself.

She tried to pretend she was not imagining Sigor, hovering his manhood, inches from her sopping slit. It was no good. Tears joined the ecstasy of her climax. When she was done, she laid there a long time. Anyhow, it felt good to cry, good to remember her own pleasure...

Tristessa still felt a weight on her heart when she returned to the house, but at least the desperation was less intense now.

* * *

A week passed from Tristessa's trip to Hyle.

She was a short walk south of the house, by the marshes where the berry bushes grew. She had two buckets, nearly overflowing with fresh berries for wine when Kilah swooped onto her shoulder.

He's back! He's back again!

Tristessa flew back to the house so fast, she nearly lost her footing several times. She came up along the pond, panting, buckets in hand and found Sigor across the causeway in her yard. He had a small sack slung over his back and his shirt was red. He was pacing about. It was clear by his uncertain shuffling that he'd knocked on Tristessa's door and got no response.

Tristessa called out to him. He turned.

They gazed out across the pond at each other.

"What are you doing here, boy?" said Tristessa.

"I..." Sigor cleared his throat. "I'm not a boy."

Tristessa started at Sigor long and hard. "You're right," she said, finally. "Not a boy. You're Sigor."

"I been thinking..." Sigor hesitated.

"What? What is it?"

"You was lying."

"Wh-about what, boy—um, *Sigor*?"

"You said you had nothing good to offer. You was lying. Whole town is all healed up after your milk. It's almost like a pestilence never happened."

Tristessa tittered. "The milk doesn't even cure disease. It just makes people healthy and strong. Their bodies do the work fighting off the sickness."

Sigor looked at Tristessa like she's just made a point so irrelevant, he could barely believe she thought it was worth mentioning. "Wouldn't have happened if it weren't for you."

"I didn't do it for nothing. You of all people must know."

"I realized last night, I don't care why you did it. The town was sick and now it's not."

"I'm not a saint."

"Well, I don't know any bloody saints. But, I know someone who saved my sister and probably my mum, too. On Sunday, Father Tamblyn said it was all nonsense. He said, 'never believe in a witch's tricks. The lot of you are saved from the pestilence because the lord saw fit to give you all a second chance. The fiends and knaves in the cities never got that chance because they're unpardonable sinners. Never mistake His generosity for that of a witch,' and so on. And, half of everyone seemed to agree with him—or at least acted like they did. The other half didn't say a thing. Now, uncle says it was a bit of good luck that most of us survived, but he's still raising the eighty pieces of silver for your payment. 'So the witch doesn't go bothering us asking for it,' he says. Liars and fools, all of them. It was *you* that saved us. Maybe the lord did it too by putting you here in this swamp near us, but, either way, you did it."

Tristessa set her pails of berries on the ground at her feet. "That's right. I did. You did too. Did you come all the way here, just to tell me that?"

"N-no," said Sigor, his vigor suddenly broken by reflection.

"Why are you here then?"

"Eh... like I said, I think you was lying when you said you had nothing good to offer."

"I'm a liar too, now?"

"Aye."

Tristessa crossed her arms. "I wasn't lying when I said I would never have children. That's the one thing I've been sure of since I was a little girl."

"I don't care. Hyle's full of liars. Half 'a them shouldn't be mums or das either. They just make more liars and fools."

Tristessa had to laugh. "It's worth it to you? Living here?"

"Only if you take back what you said about nothing good to offer. And... and, I want to learn the letters. And, the alchemy too."

Tristessa nodded. "Of course."

"And, I need to see my mum and sister, at least every season. They'll be mad if I don't come back."

"You shall visit them as often as you like."

"And, one more thing. You was wrong about me. I'm no pure soul. When I was a boy, there was one night. My da was drunk an' after roughing up mum, he went out to have a piss. I threw a rock at him and got him in the back of the head. He went down, and for three days he was ill and couldn't see straight. Never knew it was a rock that did it to him. And, I never told anyone."

Tristessa could not hide her grin. "Oh, you naughty one," she said. But the drawn, distraught look on Sigor's face made her forget her wryness. This was clearly an event that had weighed on Sigor for quite some time.

"I should've confessed it to Father Tamblyn a long time ago," he said. "But I didn't. I still haven't neither."

"It's alright. Your father wasn't a nice man."

"But, I want to be treated nice. At least, as nice as you are to the donkey and the bird. But...if you got nothing good to offer, I s'pose I can't hope for that."

Tristessa sucked in her breath and broke into a dash. She slammed into Sigor—he let out an *oof*. She threw her arms around him, pressed her head against his chest. Warm tears soaked into his ruby red shirt. "I'll treat you nice, Sigor. If I can, I will. I take it back."

Sigor's arms warped around her. "I don't want to make you be nice," Sigor muttered. "'Ey, why you crying?"

"I need your help," she whimpered.

"W-what do you need?"

She looked up into his steel, gray eyes. Her lip trembled as she spoke. "I need you to break me open like a bloody egg, Sigor. Do it before I close up again. *Please*. Do it or I'll forget this moment happened. It's too easy to forget. There's too much time ahead of me. Let me give myself to you. I've never done it before. Never believed in it. But, I'll do it for you. I'll do it because...because you'll give me back to me. Won't you?"

"Well..y-yes, I suppose. But...what's all that about breaking eggs?"

She drew up along Sigor and whispered in his ear. "Be mine like you were before. More than before. Be mine and I'll be yours. Every bit of me. I'll break like a wave on your shore."

That last bit was a line Tristessa had heard from the mouth of a traveling bard, and liked, many years ago. It was in her city-crawling days. She wasn't sure exactly why she said it. For some reason, that part of herself now felt uncannily close.

That night, after dinner, Tristessa made another tea with the rest of the ground up flowers of the life tree. The sherry vinegar had worked faster than she had expected and shrunk Sigor down a couple inches. All the same, he was still nearly as long as a dagger.

"You really need this?" he said.

"Right now, aye. I need to go back to where we were before. I-I can't explain it better. It's not about you being big and it's not about me soaking up your seed. It's the whole thing. The alchemy, and you, and me too."

"Alright. Give it here."

Tristessa filled Sigor's cup. Then, she went to her room to fetch the feminine vessel.

He drank the tea. He asked her if it was enough and she told him, truthfully, she didn't know. He drank more. Then, he drank the rest.

Tristessa brought Sigor into her room and fucked him in her own bed. Then, as he began to shiver and sweat, she held him close, her naked body pressed against his back. He drifted in and out of sleep. Then, in the still-dark hours of early morning, he came to, groaning. Tristessa kissed him and blew streams of cool breath against his clammy brow. That seemed to calm him for a time, but then he began to writhe. The life tree, however benign its power, was a lot for a man to take. She felt badly, not just about making him do this now, but for the first time she did it to him too. How cavalier she had been. She hadn't even warned him!

For a time, she watched over Sigor and pat his shivering limbs. His tremors got no better, so she reached under the blanket. Her hand cupped a testicle the size of her own fist. She gripped a shaft the size of a very large cucumber and stroked him. Sigor's groans turned to moans. He stopped writhing. Tristessa slipped under the blankets and drank from him.

By the time she was done, she felt like she'd eaten a very large bowl of porridge. The bulge in her tummy seemed to agree.

Sigor passed out. After some time, Tristessa fell asleep too.

They awoke late in the morning and tossed off the blanket. "Oh, god," cried Sigor. His penis was as long as a forearm, as thick as a wrist. His balls were big as twin sweet onions. His naked body was so skinny and his manhood so large! It was a comical sight, but neither of them were laughing. As he gripped the shaft it swelled into his hand, gaining shape and sturdiness. "I can't do anything with this," he said.

"Nonsense," said Tristessa. "I'll fit you."

"T'ain't possible."

"The vessel will *make* it possible, Sigor." She kissed his brow. "And, look." She guided his hand to her breast, now plump and full in his grasp. Sigor's meat swelled out another inch at the feel of her. "You must remember, you're not the only one who'll be bigger."

Sigor looked away for a second, giggled. "Aye," he said.

They ate breakfast. Sigor was erect almost the whole time. Tristessa felt the early stirrings of her breasts. Her milk was coming in. She paid it no mind. When they were full, she got out a red, woolen blanket from the chest in her bedroom. It was a belonging of the old alchemist, one she used to sleep under in the cold nights in his house. She brought the blanket into the common room and wrapped it around Sigor.

"Come with me."

"Without clothes?"

"We won't be needing them."

Tristessa put only her sandals on and led Sigor by the hand out across the bank of the pond. The day was very warm and stirring with bird calls and the scraping of cricket wings. The sun cast knitted leaf shadows on the ground where they stepped on the dry dirt and grass. They went out past the fishing nets to the huge, old cypress. The spot Tristessa had laid on a few days back was a grassy patch, sentries of ferns on either side. It was shady, and even on a thick, humid day such as this, a sweet breeze tickled the tiny hairs on their bodies.

"Here," said Tristessa. And she was surprised at the croak in her voice. A sob was in close proximity. She felt somehow as though she were standing over a freshly dug grave, about to bid her last goodbyes to someone she knew well, life without whom she could still not quite fathom. She took the blanket off Sigor's body. His manhood hung almost down to his knees, its extension deferred slightly around the fulcrum of his massive balls. It was monstrous, but also beautiful in its own way. She and Sigor together had harnessed the subtle forces of nature and brought about this magnificent distortion of God's supposed intent.

Such was the power of alchemy. So too would be what was to happen next.

Tristessa threw the red blanket on the ground. With the blanket's edge up against the dark folds of the cypress trunk, it looked as though the great, old tree were bleeding out.

Tristessa held Sigor's log close to the head and lifted it so it was horizontal. She was surprised to find it still a bit soft. She angled it out of her way and closed the distance between herself and him. "How are you?" The question was no pleasantry. She had pushed the poor man's body to an extreme.

Sigor was flushed and uneasy. "It's a bit heavy. And, I never been more randy. Not even when I first got hair down there. But..." He looked away.

"Hmm?"

"Erm...all the same, it isn't easy to get hard now."

"I should think not. That's a lot of meat to fill up, isn't it?"

Sigor nodded. "It's was stupid of me to drink the whole pot last night."

Tristessa shook her head and began to slide her hand up and down Sigor's length. "We'll manage. You'll manage. You can trust me this time. I hope you will, anyway."

Sigor's eyes closed and he breathed a sigh. "Aye."

She kissed him, first on the cheekbone, then the cheek, then his ripe, pink lips. Her tongue sought his and found it. He put his hands around her and held her by the shoulders. She gave his meat a gentle squeeze and it toughened in her hand.

Tristessa's knees dropped to the blanket and she came face to face with the thing.

Once, when Tristessa lived on the city streets as a girl, a traveling carnival visited. There was a man among them with a huge, beastly python and, for a few silvers, Tristessa let him wrap his huge pet around her before a crowd. The experience was terrifying, but exhilarating. She remembered the creature looking at her, straight in the eyes. She was helpless, but the thing did not bite. Now, she found herself before a very different creature, whose second head was close to the same size as how she remembered the python's impassive face as it stared her down. Then, as now, her heart shuddered and she had to breathe consciously.

Still stroking the velvety skin with her palm, Tristessa teased the head with the tip of her tongue. The slit might have been big enough to slip her pinky into. She dragged her tongue up the head. With her free hand, she squeezed Sigor's left testicle. It was very warm and impossibly smooth.

"All the seed that's in here," she said, "will you put it in me? All of it?"

Sigor's flush had deepened to a rosy hue. He nodded.

She put her mouth over it. She couldn't even get the whole head in, but she pressed her lips down it and sucked her cheeks around it as best she could. Then, she kissed up and down the shaft.

Sigor began to pant. His log swelled up so thick, Tristessa herself was stunned. Here was a cock as long as her forearm and palm together. Could something so enormous really fit inside her?

Beads of murky fluid began to seep from the tip and slide down the lower range of Sigor's shaft where it dripped to the ground. Sigor was ready.

Tristessa backed up along the blanket to give Sigor room. She looked up at him. She was trembling. He was afraid too.

And, for the first time, the thought came to Tristessa that she wasn't alone. No more advantages or disadvantages. She and he were the same. It was a hard thing to grasp. If they merged, there would be no more of him than there was of her. How strange.

"Take me," she said. "Please."

"I'll try," said Sigor. The man had no confidence this was going to work, but he got down on his knees all the same and guided his monstrous column to Tristessa.

With great reticence, he pushed.

"Harder. Please."

Sigor shook his head. "It's no bloody use."

Tristessa reached down her belly, hooked her fore and middle fingers inside herself. She was wet enough down there alright. She pried herself open like a purse. "Come in."

Sigor entered. It was only the tip of the head, but it was something. About an inch of length.

"We'll start here," she said.

Sigor sat on folded legs and rocked his hips, pressing into Tristessa with little thrusts. He had to keep his thighs apart to give his balls room between them.

Tristessa shut her eyes and focused on that feeling. She wanted more of him. So much more. "Deeper," she said. "Please, go deeper." And, she found she was talking to herself as much as to Sigor.

Sigor pressed in. The head squeezed against Tristessa's inner walls. There was resistance, even a bit of pain. But...

Tristessa gasped. In a flash, her body stopped fighting and another inch of Sigor came through. The pain was gone.

"Are you alright?" cried Sigor.

"Aye. Work me!"

Sigor's hips sent little jabs into Tristessa. It felt nicer now.

"Deeper," cried Tristessa.

Sigor slid half an inch more and her cunt was stuffed with his cock head.

That was when she felt the feminine vessel. It was there, between Sigor and herself. It would do the rest of the work. It would negotiate powers beyond the natural limits of the body. That was its function.

She was panting too now. Sweat matted her brow. Her fingers clasped the folds of the blanket. "More," she cried. "More! More!"

Sigor's face was fear-stricken, but he pushed on. Tristessa felt the ring stretch around him. Her canal slackened, taking more and more. Tristessa wailed with joy. The entire head was inside her now.

"T'isn't possible," muttered Sigor, shaking his head.

Tristessa propped herself on her elbows, gasping. She reached out and clutched Sigor's hand. "Fuck me," she hissed.

Sigor leaned over her and thrust. It hurt a bit—in the most wonderful way. Tristessa's mouth opened and closed. She tossed her head side-to-side. Her breasts wriggled with her quick spasms. This was good. The vessel had opened her just enough and Sigor was there and it was okay. It was exquisite.

Tristessa threw her head back as an orgasm shot through her. She screamed. There was once a time she had promised herself never to scream in front of anyone, ever again. Now broken.

She was breaking. All her hardened features, melting into him. Into both of them together. Sensation filled her limbs. Tristessa groaned, slackened.

"Nnng... Ugh..." Sigor was braced against the ground on shaking arms. He was nearly there.

"D-do it! Don't hold back."

Two quick thrusts and Sigor screamed.

A geyser shot into Tristessa. The vessel drank.

Sigor shook and shot out another massive load, then another. Another.

It kept going. Tristessa gazed down and watched her belly bulge. It swelled higher and higher. She looked two months with child. Sigor kept going and soon she looked closer to three.

Sigor looked drunk, the way his face rose and fell as if riding a wave. His loads fell off, but he was still hard inside her.

"How are you now?" she said.

"Still full in these balls," Sigor grunted.

"Empty them."

"I-I don't know if I can. I'm tired."

"Take it slow."

Sigor did. He rammed Tristessa's cunt and soon enough, she felt herself getting wet again. "Y-you can go deeper," she muttered.

It was so: Sigor sank in another inch. His face turned from red to purple as he fought for strength enough for a second climax.

"Can you do it?" said Tristessa.

"I *want* to," Sigor huffed.

"Breathe. Stay in me and touch yourself."

Sigor ran his hands up and down his log. She felt him stiffen up inside her. Then, he played with his balls. After a minute or more, his eyes grew huge. He cried out.

Another blast of seed shot into Tristessa. The horizon of her round belly thrust higher in the air. It broadened too, gaining curvature between her hip bones and her lower ribs.

More and more, Sigor pumped seed into Tristessa. His eyes were closed and he wheezed, letting out little grunts as he spent another and another load.

Tristessa's eye broke from Sigor as she realized her breasts were as big as small trenchers now. The vessel was turning his seed into breast...and milk. In fact, the pressure had been building for some time.

Now fully spent, Sigor laid his head between Tristessa's breasts and swollen tummy. "I-I can't anymore," he muttered.

Tristessa patted his head. "Stay right as you are. Rest a while."

Sigor remained inside her, though he had softened a great deal. As he rested, Tristessa cradled her huge breasts in her hands and rubbed her nipples between forefinger and thumb. It wouldn't be long...

She felt the milk let down. With a quick flash of aching pain, the first few drops beaded on her nipples.

"Sigor! Drink."

Sigor stirred. "Mmm?"

"I'll make you strong again. Drink me."

Sigor looked shocked at first. Then, he fastened his lips around Tristessa's right nipple as the milk began to flow.

He swallowed. And, as he did, his cock began to swell.

Tristessa held Sigor's head in her hands, her fingers raking bunches of his thick, red hair. "Keep drinking. I'll make you good as new."

And it was so. After many swallows, Sigor's log was harder than ever.

"It's...it's like my balls are all full again and my skin is fresh," he said.

It was now Tristessa's turn to catch up. She was still a bit damp down there, but not enough to give Sigor easy passage. She kneaded her left breast until milk began to trickle down. She tried to push her breast back so the milk would fall to her mouth, but it only made a wet, silly mess.

Sigor had an inquisitive look on his face. "I got an idea," he said. "Let me..."

Tristessa let Sigor drink from her left breast. He sucked for a time, then put his mouth against Tristessa's. Milk flowed from his mouth into hers. She swallowed.

They did this for a while and Tristessa felt herself getting wetter around him.

"I'm ready," she said at last. Her left breast was still dribbling milk but it didn't matter. There would be more of it to come. "Take me again."

Sigor thrust.

Tristessa's mouth broke out into a huge smile, like she had just been reacquainted with a loved one. "Ahh. More! Put more in me."

Sigor slid in. Tristessa told him not to stop, so he continued until he was as far in as he could get. Then, he worked his hips once more, now with rejuvenated strength. Not only rejuvenated: redoubled. He was as strong as a bull. And, so was she.

Perhaps a third of Sigor's length was inside her now. And, it felt wonderful. The vessel took away almost all the pain. As he thrust into her they gazed into each other's faces and shared fear, bliss, wonder. Tristessa's milk trickled down her body and soaked into the blanket. No matter.

They climaxed nearly together and the vessel drank up a fresh load of Sigor's seed.

As her belly swelled, Tristessa pulled Sigor's mouth to her breast so they could start over quick this time. He drank.

She looked about six months along now. Her breasts were big enough for Sigor to plant his whole face in, and he did, kissing and nuzzling them between thrusts.

With so much seed in her belly to soak up, Tristessa's milk flowed thicker. Her right breast, dry for a time, now trickled out as well. Milk was getting everywhere. It ran down her breasts, shoulders, neck... The sodden blanket clung to Tristessa's back as she enjoyed Sigor's quick ramming.

He came again, letting out a thicker geyser than ever. Even after twenty spurts, there was still more.

Sigor drank of Tristessa and continued. Tristessa's breasts were now big enough that she could angle her nipple back and drink from herself. It was sublime, the way strength filled her body with each swallow.

They laughed as they fucked, thrilled to cheat the rules of nature together.

On it went. Every inch of the blanket seemed to be soaked. The ends of Tristessa's hair dipped in milk puddled and curled. Noon passed. Sigor had been fully hard for well over an hour... maybe two. Still, the milk rejuvenated their strength, healed their raw skin, reinvigorated their frayed nerves. Tristessa's breasts were as big as her head. She looked nine months along. Sigor shot another load into her and then another...

She bloated further and looked nine months with twins.

"S-Sigor," she panted. "Deeper."

Sigor made a face. "There is no deeper."

"There...there is for me. There is now, anyway. Do it. Please."

Not so long ago, she might've lost patience and scolded him, but that was unthinkable now. Besides, there was time.

As Sigor pushed, Tristessa laid her head back and breathed. The vessel would allow it. It had to. That was its function.

"I-I can't do it," he grunted.

"Sigor," she said.

"Eh?" said Sigor.

"Just...run me through. I can take you. You don't have to be so gentle. I'm protected."

Sigor swallowed. He clasped Tristessa's thighs and made one big push.

Tristessa's voice rang out as she sucked in a lungful of breath. The ring was widening around him. It let in more and more...

"Oh, bloody hell!" he cried.

"I'm alright," she screamed. There were tears in her eyes, not from pain. "I've got you! Sigor...my beloved, I've got you. It doesn't hurt!"

"Doesn't it?" cried Sigor. "I'm halfway in!"

"Aye! And it's...it's good. It's good."

Sigor gasped for breath. "Y-you promise?"

"Aye. Is...is it good for you?"

"It's...it's warm and...and very very wet."

Sigor had followed his seed right into Tristessa's belly. The essence of motherhood, devoid of any dictate of childbearing. A miracle.

Tristessa rose on her elbows and looked down at herself. Her body was huge now. Breasts swollen fat as pigs. Belly thick as a small cask. And, somewhere in there was Sigor.

"N-now," she panted, "take me again. Please."

Sigor was careful beyond reason still, but Tristessa let him ease into it. He sent tiny thrusts into her, then lengthened them, bit by bit.

A host of new sensations crawled through Tristessa's body. She moaned and sighed as Sigor worked her, now with greater resolve. Her vision went blurry.

As all this happened, Tristessa's breasts swelled with a new helping of milk. The pressure was so much greater now. The vessel could only try to keep up with the overflow of seed. She gritted her teeth, not at anything Sigor was doing, but at the ache in her breasts.

Sigor shot another load. Tristessa's breasts erupted.

Milk flew. It spurted into the air in arcs. Tristessa pushed her breasts together so her nipples went straight up and opened her mouth. Droplets landed on her tongue. She gestured Sigor's mouth to her with a quick hand.

Sigor took another mouthful of milk and said. "How long will we do this?"

Tristessa laughed. She brushed a milk-soaked strand of auburn hair from her brow. "Do you tire of it?"

"No," said Sigor. "But I can't imagine doing this forever."

Tristessa ran a sodden hand across Sigor's face. "Give me all of you and I'll be as near to satisfied as I can ever be."

"Your gut'll be huge. It already is."

"Aye. And my bobbies will be too. Never mind. I'll be your great, big bloody cow for however long. I have no more need for pride. Not with you." Tristessa swallowed. "But," she said, "do you want it? Is it alright?"

Sigor took a deep breath and nodded.

"Let's have it then. Fuck me so full of your seed I can't bloody stand."

The cypress was dark and glistening with spattered milk. Sigor's knees and Tristessa's feet sank into puddles. Milky rivulets ran along the dirt through the ferns.

Tristessa clung to her head-size breasts and did her best to keep the spraying milk out of her eyes as she gasped and moaned to Sigor's lengthening thrusts. How many times had he emptied his balls into her? How many times had the milk replenished them? They would've been worn out and sore hours ago, but the milk rejuvenated everything. Perhaps they really could do this forever.

Tristessa could no longer see over the horizon of her tummy. She could only guess by the distance of Sigor's face how much of his length he was sinking into her. However much it was, it wasn't enough. She wanted him closer, deeper...

"Please," she panted. "More."

"L-like this?" said Sigor, inching in.

"More."

Sigor made a very serious face. He slid in, closer, closer...

A bulge formed at the upper end of Tristessa's belly, just below her breasts. It lasted for only a second. "There," she gasped. "Fuck me at that length."

Sigor began to run her through with very long thrusts that felt wonderful, but took a lot of wind out of him. She made him stop and drink milk and start again. Tristessa now needed her entire arm to cradle a breast in place. They rested inside her elbows, quivering with her shaking body. Her nipples were as thick as thumb tips. The jets of her milk had thickened too, into rod-like streams. They flew high and far and Tristessa tried to keep them aimed to either side so their nook in the shadow of the cypress would not get any damper than it already was.

"Ohh...God's mercy," Sigor whimpered, and he shot a load so heavy and fast, the upper end of Tristessa's belly wriggled at its force. Tristessa shivered as a new burst of sensation flooded her body. After an initial wave, it should've leveled off, but somehow it didn't. It was followed by a second one, more intense still. She tossed her head back and spots danced in her eyes. Another one. She gazed into the cypress branches above.

For some time, her mind went blank.

She came to and felt oddly new and different. Tristessa and Sigor were just names and these bodies were as much one as two and as much nothing as either. They were simply movements, little flames, joined together in glorious purpose.

As Sigor drank from Tristessa once more, Tristessa looked out into the blue sky, woven with thick, billowing clouds, the towering cypresses that watched over the swamp like elders, the creaking of crickets in the late afternoon sun... Everything was gorgeous and perfect and all of her was a part of it. She was no longer separate from it. She was everywhere.

"Nng...I'm going to...," muttered Sigor.

All Tristessa could give him by way of reply was a quick, "uh hmm." She was lifted too high on all this dazzling sensation. Everything around her, flooding her senses. Sigor himself did not seem to be separate but an indelible part of herself. And, everything they did together *was* them, acting as one.

The sun fell low in the sky and bathed Tristessa in warmth. The cypress's shadow had faded.

"Oh, God... Tri... Tristessa, I'm..."

"Mmmm?" Tristessa sighed. She'd been laying in a perfect bath of sun and milk and tingly bliss for what seemed an eternity. To talk seemed very strange.

"I'm... I'm almost all the way in."

Tristessa looked down and was faced with a huge valley of splayed breasts and a heaping, jiggly mountain of belly. Only Sigor's face was visible beyond it. Tristessa looked to one side. The ferns were huge. They might've been half the height of a man. How? They hadn't even reached Tristessa's knees when they'd started.

"H-help me up, please," she said.

Sigor pulled out and took Tristessa by either hand. He grunted but managed to lift her until the weight of her barrel-size belly swung her the rest of the way up. Her pillowy breasts rested on it, streaming rivers of milk down her gut.

Tristessa blinked up at the cypress and looked to either side. The folds of the tree made higher walls now. The branches above seemed to extend impossibly far. And there were other things. A small patch of hyacinths a few paces away. It couldn't be! They were months past hyacinth season. And weren't those berry bushes over by the stream? There didn't used to be... Near that, a young tree now stood high as a man's head. It hadn't been that tall before. Tristessa could've sworn it.

The earth was damp, all the way to the stream. She had poured out enough milk to nourish a thousand plants. Bumble bees swarmed nearby, feasting on a garden of wild flowers. A great cluster of algae thickened beside the bank. The great cypress was huge now. The tallest tree in the swamp now, perhaps.

The milk's blessing, it seemed, did not end with people.

Sigor kneeled at her side. "Are you done?"

Tristessa looked at him. "Mmm." She rolled on her belly and managed to get her hands and knees on the ground, though she couldn't crawl without her belly dragging. Now that she faced out on it, her jetting milk soaked the earth directly. Puddles ran all the way to the stream. She could've sworn she saw tufts of grass lengthen before her eyes

She looked up at Sigor. "One... once more? I want to watch this."

"Watch what?"

"D-don't you see? We're making... life."

Sigor looked out on the swamp, at all the rich hues, incandescent in the golden sunset. "God's mercy," he whispered.

"Aye. Once more. Then, I'll rest."

Sigor got behind Tristessa and slipped in. With a bit of work, he made it through to the interior of the feminine vessel. Then, he pushed further.

Tristessa sucked in her breath as she felt Sigor's balls tap her thighs. "You're all in," she purred.

"Aye," said Sigor.

Tristessa sank down, rocking on her belly slightly. Her chin and elbows squished into her breasts, now large as bed pillows. Her hands pressed the damp earth. Streaming milk tickled the edges of her palms. She was ready.

Sigor thrust. It was perfection. "Oh...oh yes," she purred.

He worked slowly and carefully and worked his full length through Tristessa. She came quick. The orgasm lingered, was soon upended by a second one.

She wanted to close her eyes, but she needed to watch. The berry bushes by the stream thickened. Buds grew out into flowers. The baby tree creaked as its trunk widened and its roots sank deeper into the earth. Hyacinths popped up, one after the other. The grass was huge and rich. The ferns were massive. Even at the far bank, needlerush grew in heavy patches.

Tears spilled down Tristessa's face and mixed with the milk. Nothing good to offer? No. It wasn't so. It never had been.

Sigor ran his hands along the flanks of Tristessa's monstrous, swollen belly. She should've been embarrassed but she loved it. She loved everything. Though her body was heavy with milk and Sigor's seed, she felt light as a breeze. It was as though she'd been carrying around something leaden for most of her life and had suddenly found it gone, like a spirit from a solid. What was it that had dragged her down all this time? She couldn't remember its form, only its burdensome effect. Perhaps she would remember it clearly again sometime, but she would also remember this, when she and he had chased it away.

Another orgasm—the fifth this go around? Sixth?—shook Tristessa and her breasts wriggled at her shudders.

"I'm...I'm..."

"Let it go, Sigor," Tristessa nearly sang, so thick with relish was her voice. "Let it all go."

Sigor's balls slammed against Tristessa's legs. He cried out. Tristessa's belly swelled with the gush of his seed.

A long time passed as Sigor spent himself into Tristessa. As he did so, a final, much lighter, orgasm took hold in her. Like a rose it bloomed, lingered for a moment, and then shriveled up.

* * *

Until well after sunset, Sigor and Tristessa remained at the foot of the now huge cypress. Tristessa lay on her side and Sigor rested his head on her right breast, an arm slung over her huge, barrel-size belly. The blanket was so damp and dirt caked, it might've been beyond saving but the grass beneath it was thick and cushioned their weary limbs against the ground. Even after lovemaking was over, Tristessa poured out milk for hours. There was a small trickle.

At some point, they would have to return to the house—if it was even possible for Tristessa to walk with this belly now. It would take days for her body to use up all this seed. Perhaps weeks. No chance of pulling the vessel out of her body before then—it was many times too big. But, perhaps outside was the best place to be anyway. Not a drop of milk would not be wasted here.

A thought came to Tristessa. There was one more thing she needed to settle with Sigor. She ran a hand along the back of Sigor's head. "Sigor?"

Sigor stirred. "Hm?"

"Do...do you want the philosopher's stone?"

"What?" he muttered.

"Do you want to live longer? Much longer. You only need to swallow one tiny grain of it, each day. But, you know the cost."

Sigor sat up and Tristessa saw the dark outline of his upper body etched in the black-vermillion sky. "Mmm. I dunno. I...I couldn't have children, which might be okay. But...I'd have to see everyone die, wouldn't I? My mum, my sister... Wouldn't Hyle go away before I do?"

"Aye, it probably would."

"But...I s'pose I'd be with you for...a very long time."

"Aye."

"Maybe I'd do it. Do you want me to?"

Tristessa smiled in the darkness.

"If you take the stone, it would bring me more joy than I could tell. But, if you don't, all the same, I'll celebrate every day of your life like a precious gift, even when you're gray and withered. I ask because it's the only choice I still covet from you.

"In the end, it matters not how many years we have left together, for what is time to pure souls such as we?"