

SISTER SHIM AND THE PRIESTESS OM

We send our most holy to wreak miracles, and our best monsters to protect them on the long walk back.

I sit in the frontmost pew beside Brother Elia, sharing a bottle of wine with him. He is filling my second glass. The sleidr have been groomed and fed, and there is little else to do until dinner. It's an exceedingly pleasant Fall day. Orange and yellow leaves have blown in through the archway, and the smell of them fills the air. Brother Elia hands my glass back to me. I give it a little raise towards him before having a sip. The wine has an almondy taste, which I'm ordinarily not a fan of, but it seems to complement the cool Fall breezes, the stirring of the little leaves that have made their way into our holy place. Not to mention, Brother Elia came a long way bringing this bottle back, and so even if I didn't care for it—though I do—I would likely not mention distaste aloud to him. Nobody is in the pews besides us. He leans back, head facing the ceiling, eyes closed.

"It's good to be home," he tells me. "The work abroad was worthy, but the day to day bolsters one's soul."

"You still haven't told me of the trouble you were attending to."

Still facing the ceiling, he swirls his wine glass. "I suppose I ought to, Sister Shim." He sighs. "Where to begin, where to begin..."

This was his third time being whisked away by a priest or a priestess for work abroad. He has a very conspicuous wound on

his forehead now: a slash, with many blisters great and small surrounding it.

It is a cool day, and I realize that his forehead is shining with sweat.

From my bandolier, I flick out a dagger and whirl it at the ceiling. The blade strikes one of the many colorful strings which hold things up there—broomsticks, dustpans, pitchforks, shears, unlit candles, bouquets of flowers. In this case, I have snapped the string holding up a clay vase filled with water. It falls towards my lap. When it arrives at me, I catch it. I hand it to Brother Elia.

“Al sai,” he says: *Thank you* in the holy tongue. He lifts the vase to his mouth and has a long drink.

He and I became followers at the same time. I have yet to be called away once. On most days I accompany the priests and priestesses on walks through the city.

Before Brother Elia has decided where to begin on the tale of his journey, and as if beckoned by my thoughts, I hear the clacking of a sleidr approaching over the ceramic floor, and I perk up in my seat and turn. Coming up the aisle is the priestess Om. She glides like a leaf on her six legs, two hind, four fore. The footprints she leaves behind glimmer just as her black, oily coat.

She comes and plants her chin on my knee.

I smile. “Shall we walk?”

As soon as I say walk, she lifts her chin off of me and prances for the archway, black shimmering coat waving with each step.

“Tell me all when I return,” I ask, setting the remainder of my glass on the pew.

“Of course,” he says with a smile, eyes still closed, head still lolled back, facing the ceiling. He has another long drink of the water.

As I walk up the aisle after the priestess Om, I draw a length of red ribbon from a trouser pocket. The priestess Om waits for me under the archway, wagging as she faces the courtyard outside. I tie one end of the ribbon around my wrist. I tie the other end loosely around her neck. When I’m finished with the knot, I pat her side and she begins walking at a fast pace, and I walk quickly to keep up.

To the south there is a garden with a pond which she often likes to visit. To the north one would eventually arrive at the gate out to the countryside, where the priestess Om would be free to be untied and run to her heart's content. In an unusual choice, the priestess Om leads me straight away across the courtyard, towards the road leading east, towards the market district.

Distinct from the city's other districts, the market district has no tallstanding buildings, and few that are more permanent than a wooden stall. It is akin to a miles-across colosseum, stuffed with tents and tables. As we walk past a cloister of seafood stalls, the priestess Om keeps her nose to the ground, following the trail of a scent. She spends quite some time sniffing the side of one fish vendor's booth. The vendor eyes us disapprovingly, but soon has customers to attend to. Once the priestess Om is satisfied with her sniffing, she moves onwards, and I follow.

We proceed through an immense tunnel out of the marketplace and arrive at a road to the king's palace, and I realize that this actually might be what I had resigned myself to no longer hope for.

The palace stands atop a hill, the base of the hill fenced off, the slopes of the hill a multitude of hedges and gardens. The priestess Om leads us to a small, nongrandiose gate in the fence, manned by a guard with a well kept beard and an eye missing. He sees the priestess Om approaching and opens the gate for us. He nods and wishes us a good afternoon as we pass by, and closes the gate behind us.

The priestess Om stops. I come up to her and untie the ribbon from around her neck. She shakes and then darts forward, running up the hill to a patch of purple flowers. I follow after her, untying the ribbon from around my wrist as I go.

When I arrive, she is sniffing the purple flowers. She sniffs the underside of one for a time, intently, and slowly works her way around the petals until sniffing the upper side. With a final big inhale, she moves over to another flower, and smells it just as closely. When she is finished with this one she bites it off, chews it a bit, and swallows. She progresses slowly along the side of the flower patch, passing by many flowers, eating the

occasional one. When she has eaten five, she walks up the hill a little farther until arriving at a patch of long strands of grass. She eats this grass indiscriminately, and soon, she is heaving. She vomits, leaving a pile of yellow slime on the ground, which contains long blades of grass and purple flower petals. I go to the vomit, pick out the flower petals, and eat them.

When I have chewed and swallowed, I look at Om. She is panting, mouth drawn back in what looks like a smile, though she is nervous. I look around. The world is undulating. Parts of reality are slipping off of other parts. Things melt. I feel the priestess Om gently take my hand in her mouth. She pulls me. I follow. We walk down a hill into the melting world. When we arrive at a figure by a gate, I try to look at him to see if he is the same guard, but it is difficult to say. The world no longer looks like much, and he is no exception. A smudge of a human form. If I concentrate I can see his shining armor, his spear, but the idea of recognizably seeing his face is laughable. The wind blows, and I am nearly knocked back by the smell of him. He reeks of human sweat. The smell of the leather in his armor is overpowering, the smell of the copper and the steel mere afterthoughts. I am not even that near him, but I can smell his unwashed hair, his breath that is a mixture of onion and mint. I feel Om brush past my leg, continuing forward down the melting, blurry hill. I follow after her. The guard, whether or not he is the same guard, opens the gate for us. We proceed through melted canals of streets, her feet clicking on the ground with each step, my footsteps producing light thumps. I follow after her form, and after her scent. She had been beautiful before, with her sleek black coat, her expressive whiskers and long ears, her multitude of legs. I am delighted to find that she is beautiful again, with the scent of her fur drenched in the electric tingle of black magic, her breath smelling of the cooked rabbit that we feed the sleidr, but more deeply of the scent of her yellowed teeth, her gums, her tongue, her lungs, her throat, all healthy and well, all good, all sleidr, all Om. We find our way out of the city rivers and into the ocean world, and Om jumps in, and I follow after. I have seen her and many other priests and priestesses swim in a lake before, but had never known sleidr to put their heads under. She does, and I follow after, down into

the ocean, where I am surprised to find I can still smell, still breathe. I can no longer see, but I no longer feel I am missing much for it. I follow after the smell of Om's coat, and in time, I realize what we are following. Within me I hold the knowledge of the scents of five flowers, as distinct as five paintings by five masters, as distinct as the faces of my five closest friends, as distinct as five letters, as distinct as five numbers. We are following after the first one that Om ate to give to me. It was in the king's garden, but there is another, an entangled pair, somewhere far away, that we are swimming to.

When we arrive at it, we emerge from the world ocean. I lay heavy on the ground, splayed out, exhausted. Om walks to a flower bed and sniffs a patch of purple flowers. I look around, realize the current ineffectiveness of sight, and instead take big breaths in through my nose. Inhaling, we are surrounded by a multitude of grass, and there is corn growing here nearby. Exhale. Inhaling, there are chickens here, their waste so overpowering I'm surprised it hadn't come to me first, for now I can't ignore it, and everything else I smell is tinged with it. Exhale. Inhaling, there are horses as well, goats, sheep, and a small number of humans. Exhale. Inhaling, the scent of the humans is nearest, most present in the air, and we are in a flower garden just outside of their house on a farm. Exhale. Om lies down beside me. Nestled together, we sleep through the night.

In the morning, we resume our journey, diving back under. We continue on, five flowers, a day for each. We are not the only ones who swim. It is a populous ocean with schools of hares and termites. Above are the light thumps of millions of footsteps on the water's surface, packs of wolves, dens of foxes, colonies of mice. Each acre of forest, a city district. At the final flower, as I emerge from the ground, I feel a sadness, for my sense of smell has dulled to near uselessness, and my vision is restored, and the world is all solid again.

We are standing on a mountainside, somewhere cold. The sky is red with morning light. Down the mountain, there is an endless expanse of fir trees, broken up only by other mountains that rise too high for the firs to grow on. It feels a bit strange to me, remembering how crowded the forest was as we passed

under it, and now seeing not a soul from this vantage where we can see so far. A lone plant is nearby us, its single purple flower drooping. I look to my side, and find the priestess Om. She wags and barks at me. I kneel and hug her, rub her, bury my nose in her coat and take a big sniff. Up this close and with enough concentration, the scent is at least an approximation of what it was before, at least enough to know that it had been real, the other world that the priestess had shown me.

“Lead the way,” I tell her.

She does.

We go around the mountainside, traveling down a ridge, then up another, my shoes crunching the snow underfoot. When we arrive at the crest of the ridge, I see the landscape beyond us and gasp. For miles and miles, as far as I can see from the mountainside, the world is charred black or in the process of burning. I look back at the expanse of forest, and forward at the expanse of inferno coming to claim it. The sky is not red with morning light. The sky is a reflection of a world engulfed.

Om continues forward down the next ridge. I follow after, but she turns and barks viciously at me, snarling. I am startled in the immediate moment, but I intuit that she is speaking practically, not emotionally: showing me a drop of venom so I will not dive into a sea of it. I stop where I am on the ridge. She continues on alone.

When she has reached the bottom of the next valley, she stops, sniffs the ground, and then raises her face to the sky and bellows out a howl. Even from afar I can feel my inner ears vibrating at the volume, and then underfoot, I can feel that the mountain is trembling. She howls and howls, and then all at once, lightning erupts from her and blankets the expanse of the mountaintop above us. She stops howling, the lightning goes away, and the mountaintop which once held snow now holds an immense conical lake, ready to flow outwards.

Om turns and sprints down the mountain valley, keeping just ahead of the flood that is rushing down after her. She makes it down to the forest and disappears into it, and the water follows after. I watch from the mountainside all day as a new river is carved through the forest, cutting off the burning land from the unburnt. By evening, Om has made it to the next mountain. I

faintly hear Om howl, and I see lightning flash over this mountaintop too, bringing water down its side, drawing a complete river to stand between the mountains, a barrier for the fire.

I set off down the mountainside, and follow the river all night.

As the morning sun is rising, I arrive at a clearing in the forest. In the center, there is a sleidr, splayed out on her side, asleep. Her coat is a patchwork of white and light browns, and has no gleam to it. I approach her. I bury my nose in her side, and inhale deeply. This is her. Her tail begins thumping against the ground as she wags. I nestle in beside Om, and we rest all through the day and night. The magic is drained from her coat, but she is still a swift hunter by her corporeal merits alone, and she presents me with rabbits throughout the day. I get a small fire going, and cook them for us. Aside from eating and sleeping, we pass the time sitting around, her sniffing the air, me petting her as I try to discern what the priestess smells. Sometime in the night, the inferno arrives at the river, and the river holds, and the fire burns through its remaining fuel and is gone, leaving an immense realm of charred ground behind it, but now finished, at least.

I tell the priestess Om that she has done well, and she appears pleased.

The next morning, we begin the long walk back.