

The wind was blowing strongly, and the sky was hidden by dark gray clouds. It wasn't snowing yet, but it was just a matter of time. It was still the fall, but in the mountains, it was already freezing.

“Stupid North, stupid winter, and stupid mountains ! I hate cold, and I hate wind !”.

It was very rare to see people in the North Mountains, and even more rare to see a stranger, especially during the cold season, which lasted about half of the year.

The caped man, trying to protect against the cold north wind, kept walking. He was hoping that he could finally find the cave before the nightfall. He had been walking in the mountains for five days, because with the slope and the forest without well-defined paths, it was impossible to ride a horse there. He didn't know exactly where he was, nor where was the cave he was looking for. People had given him some indications to find it, but nothing precise enough. Moreover, some indications were inconsistent. He only knew that the cave was somewhere in a forest in the mountains.

Something drew his attention, in the rock : the entrance of a cave. It wasn't the first cave he found, and, like each other time, he hoped that it was the good one. He entered. There were no signs of a human presence. No doubt about that, nobody was living here, it was just one of the many caves in the mountains, not the cave he was looking for.

He left the cave. It was quite late. The night was going to fall in about one or two hours. He hesitated a while. The cave could be a good place to stay for the night. He didn't want to sleep out with the cold and the wind. He could continue to search and come back later, but since he didn't have a lot of time for that, it wasn't worth it. Moreover, he had been walking for the whole day and he was tired. He finally decided to sleep there and went back to the cave to put down his bag.

Before having a rest, he had to collect some wood in the forest, in order to make a fire. While he was at the entrance of the cave, he saw the silhouette of a woman, walking in the forest. She seemed to be dressed in white. Given that there were very few people who lived in the mountains, she had to be the one that he was looking for. He took his bag back and followed the woman.

He tried to stay at a distance from her, so as not to be seen. It was quite difficult not to lose sight of her, because it was somewhat dark, and with the trees, it was even more difficult to see far.

He succeeded in tailing her for a quarter hour, and then he didn't see her anymore. He cursed himself for having lost her. It was the best occasion of finding her cave, and he had let it go. He still tried to find the cave : maybe she had just come in, and that was why he lost sight of her. He looked for the cave but he couldn't find it. He decided to give up for the evening, and to try again the very next day. After all, he already knew that he wasn't so far from his goal, and it wasn't

so pressing to meet her.

As he turned back, he noticed something brown on the rocks, which didn't look natural. He went near of it. It was a curtain, and it was hiding the entrance of a cave. This time, it was sure that it was the one he was looking for.

He opened the curtain and entered, bending down his head to not bump into the ceiling.

The cave began with a small corridor. There were candles on the walls, so it wasn't dark. At the end of the corridor, there was a small red rug, and another curtain, which one was red, with black and orange patterns. He looked at the patterns, and recognized magical symbols. He smiled : he had found what he wanted. He opened the second curtain.

Behind it, the cave widened into a room, which was decorated as a real house, with warm-colored drapes hanging on the walls, mats on the floor, and lots of candles throughout the room, which provided a flickering yellow light, in perfect harmony with the warm colors of the drapes and the mats.

There also were lots of shelves on the walls, on which there were strange and mysterious items : spell books, vials containing various liquids, every ingredient needed to make all sorts of potions, different stones, crystal balls, and everything to practice magic.

At the center of the room, there was a low wooden table. The feet had been sawed off to make the table lower. Because the table was low, there was no chairs around it, but there were lots of cushions to sit down which were of colors of fire, mainly orange and red, like about every decorative thing in the room.

Behind the table, sat cross-legged on cushions, was the woman dressed in white from the forest. She looked young, she had to be less than twenty-five years old. He had heard about her, but imagined that she was at least thirty. It was very rare to see a magician that young practicing magic alone, most of the times young magicians only helped their masters. About five books were opened on the table, she was reading one and taking notes. Her white bag was also on the table, and she was taking herbs out of it, classifying them and putting them into different jars.

When the man entered in the room, she looked up. She was quite surprised to see someone there, but she assumed that he needed some magical item, or that he wanted her to help him. She didn't remind his face, he seemed not to be from one of the closest villages. "He must need something really important to come here during the winter" she thought.

"Hello. Don't stay at the door, come in please."

He took some steps to the center of the room.

“Good evening. Er... Maybe should I introduce myself... My name is Rhyk, and I come from a kingdom quite far away from here... I guess you are the famous white magician Aeya, aren't you ?

- That's me. May I ask you why did you come here ? It is not really pleasant to travel all over the mountains during the winter, and my cave is quite difficult to find.
- Well... I need help from a magician, and in my country, few people are competent in magic. I knew that there were good magicians in this kingdom, and I heard about you. You are said to be one of the best magician in the area.”

Aeya shrugged her shoulders. She didn't like being considered as one of the best magicians in the kingdom. She thought that she still had lots of things to learn, and that she still needed experience. And, even if she didn't like the idea of ranking magicians, she could give the name of a dozen of magicians better than her.

“I don't know if I'm one of the best, but maybe I can help you anyway. Please, sit down, and tell me what you need”

Rhyk sat on the cushions, thinking about how to explain the situation in order to get help from her.

“Well... as I said, I don't come from this kingdom. I live in another kingdom, across the sea. At the moment, we have some trouble. The King is dead and there are problems with the succession of his family. I fear that there could be a civil war, or something, in the next few months. I'd like to know a little more about the future, and if it is possible to avoid that. Could you help me ?

- I think I can. But first of all, I need to say that it is always possible to change the future. My crystal ball will give you some indication of what the future *can* be, not what the future *will* be.”

Aeya stood up and took one of the crystal balls off the shelf. She closed her books to make room on the table and put down the ball.

“Please, place your hands on the ball...”

Rhyk followed her instructions. Aeya took a vial and poured two drops of liquid on the crystal ball, which made it cloudy. She looked at the ball for a moment and frowned.

“I'm sorry, but the future of your kingdom seems very dark. I can't see that very precisely, but evil-minded people want to take the control of your kingdom. There could be trouble for a long

time. If the family of the late King can't come to an agreement, a civil war between the different camps is probable. And the evil-minded people will try to take advantage of the situation to get the power over the kingdom.

- So... there will really be a civil war...
- Not necessarily. The future is not written in stone, it can always be changed.
- Of course... but I don't think that an agreement between the candidates to the succession of the King is possible. So the most important may be to prevent evil-minded people to get the power. But could you be more precise about the civil war ?
- Not really. I can't even say if this civil war will really happen or not. You know, crystal balls can show important events that may happen, but are not really precise. I also have other way to read the future, but I don't think that they could give something really precise about this possible civil war.
- What are these other ways ? Maybe they could tell something important too, couldn't they ? It may be a bit selfish, but I would also like to learn what is going to happen to me, to my family and to my village.
- Well, it may be possible... The cards could answer your questions about your relatives, and if it's about you, I may read your palms.”

Instinctively, Rhyk moved his hands away from the table. He didn't want Aeya to read his palms, the risk of being revealed as one of the evil-minded people was too important. He looked at her, hoping that she hadn't noticed anything.

“Actually, I'd like to learn a bit more about what is going to happen to my village, and to my family. I have a wife and two sons, and I don't want that something bad happens to them. We don't live in the capital but in a little village, so, even if there is a civil war, there won't be so many consequences for our village... at least I hope so... And even if you tell me that there also will be trouble in my village, at least I will know that I'll have to move.

- In that case, my tarot can help you.”

Aeya put her crystal ball back on a shelf. Then, she looked for her tarot cards, which weren't there.

“Sorry, it's not really tidied up, but my cards must be on one of these shelves!”

She moved some cartomancy books and finally found her deck. She sat down again and held the deck to him.

“Please shuffle the cards, and give me two of them.

- The first two of the deck?
- Not necessarily. Choose any two cards, and give them to me, but of course don't look at the cards before.”

Rhyk complied and Aeya took the two cards. She also took the deck and turned the first card. Then she looked at the cards for a moment and thought, playing with a tuft of hair.

“Well, I don't think that you need to worry about your family. The cards tell me that your wife and sons will be safe... but... they seem to be worried, and I don't see anything about you... I think they worry about you...”

- Oh my god... Does that mean that I will take part in the civil war ? But I never took part in any war, and I don't really know how to use a sword.
- It's up to you to change the future. You have one advantage, you have some information about what may happen. You can try to change it, if you don't want it to happen. The future is always in motion.
- Yes, I know... But I guess, if I'll have to fight, it will be for my kingdom. Of course, I'd prefer not to fight, but if I'll have to, I won't flee. If I have to change the future, and if I have to fight, I'd prefer being stronger. It must be possible to find something to make me less vulnerable, or stronger, or something. In that case, I could fight and win... for the good of my kingdom.”

Aeya frowned. The more this man spoke, and the less she trusted him. He wanted to be stronger and to fight... Of course she was young, but she wasn't totally naive... She thought about how to deceive him. First she had to be sure that he was evil, and for that, reading his palm could be a good idea. Moreover, it would give her some time.

“Maybe you'd like to know a little more about your future. I mean, if you are really going to have to fight, and why, and if you could avoid that.”

Rhyk noticed that Aeya didn't trust him anymore. He hoped that she couldn't read his intentions in his palms, even if he didn't believe it.

“Why not ? If it can help me, of course I'd like to know more.

- For this, the tarot won't be helpful, moreover it's impossible to read the cards two times in a row. But I can read things about your future in your palms. Could you please give me your left

hand ?”

Rhyk slipped off his gloves, taking this time to think about how could he get a potion from her, once she would have discovered his goals.

Aeya took his hand and looked at it, which confirmed what she feared. This man was one of the evil minded people who wanted to take advantage of the problem in succession. She tried not to show him that she knew, but the tone of her voice and the expression of her face had changed.

“Well... Your palms says that you are going to take part in the civil war and that you...”

She hesitated. She didn't know what to say. She would have liked to make him believe that she trusted him and then, she could have given to him a false potion. But it was now clear that she didn't trust him and she had to find something else.

“What did you see in my palm ? Please, tell me.

- Well... I saw that...er... I saw that I don't want to help you anymore. Leave my cave, please.
- Why not ?
- You know very well why. You're not trying to help your kingdom ! You don't care about peace or about the good of your kingdom ! You're one of the evil people who are trying to get the power !
- Evil, evil... that's just a word. Good and evil depend on the referential... It's better for the kingdom if I have the power than if the family of the king makes a civil war to know who will be the king, isn't it ?...
- I won't help you. Leave !, she shouted at him
- Come on... I'm sure we can come to an agreement. I have quite a lot of money, and if I get the power over the Kingdom, maybe you could have a good position... I need your white magic, and maybe you'd like to have an important position in my Kingdom, or to be rich.”

He took his purse in his cloak and held it out to her. She stood up. She was pointing at the door, and her hand was shaking, because of both fear and anger.

“Leave ! I don't care at all about your money or about power ! I won't give you any help !”
She was still shouting.

He also stood up, slowly. Unlike her, he was still quite calm, and was not speaking very

loud. He shrugged his shoulders, showing her he wasn't impressed nor frightened by her shouts.

“What are you going to do ? Your magic is not aggressive. You can't do anything against me... Wouldn't it be better to help me ? If you give me some help, I'll give you something in exchange, it's honest, isn't it ? Just think... you call me evil just because my definition of “good” is different from yours... Just accept my definition and help me...”

He folded his arms and looked at her, waiting to see what she was going to do. She reached out her arm, trying to catch something to attack him or maybe to defend herself. Seeing that, he immediately took his wand in his cloak, pointed it at her, and said some words in an ancient language. She tried to protect herself against it, but was not fast enough : the spell hit her.

She fell down and felt something strange and frightening. It was like if each of her bones was shrinking. She couldn't make the slightest move. She also felt a tail being formed and a fur growing. The spell had to be a metamorphosis in some animal. She wanted to look at her paws in order to see what she looked like and what animal she was becoming, but she lost consciousness before.

Rhyk sighed. Of course, he could now take anything he wanted in the cave, but he didn't have a lot of knowledge about white magic and he didn't know exactly what would be interesting to take. He looked all around the room. The shelves were mostly in disorder. There were lots of books, and also lots of bottles and vials containing various liquids. Some of them were probably containing potions which could interest him, but which ones ? He looked more closely at the bottles. Most of these ones had a label explaining what was the liquid inside. He smiled. It was so easy, she never had thought that anyone could steal her potions. He began to look at the labels in order to find something interesting.

There were really lots of bottles in the room, and the labels were not always easy to read. Some were written in ancient languages, on others, explanations were quite long. After one hour, Rhyk had looked at less than a quarter of the bottles, and had found only two vials containing something that may be interesting for him. And he still had to look at the books... It would take quite a long time to do that, and he was tired. He decided to have a sleep. Before, he thought about Aeya. Maybe he should put her in a cage or something, or she would be able to escape. Finally, he didn't do anything : with her new body, it would be really difficult for her to do something against him.

When she regained consciousness, she was in the middle of her clothes. She tried to get out of it. It was quite difficult : she wasn't used to controlling her new body, and she didn't even know what animal she was. After a while, she managed to coordinate her moves and got out of her clothes.

She looked around her : she was still in her cave. Rhyk was also there, sleeping. She first thought that she could attack him. She looked at her paws : she had claws. But he was bigger and stronger than her now, and she could coordinate her moves with difficulty, so she didn't do anything. She also knew that he wanted potions from her. She could have broken some bottles, but it would have mixed some potions together, which may not be something very good. Taking some potions with her was not possible either, because she was too small and needed her four paws to walk.

She tried to think about something else to prevent him from taking her potions, but couldn't find anything. She didn't know what to do now. She had to leave before he woke up, otherwise, he could prevent her from leaving.

Her master lived in the forest, she had to go and see him. He was probably the only one who could maybe help her. She got out of the cave. It was night, but fortunately, she had good night vision. She also seemed to be not too sensitive to cold, thanks to her fur. At the least, there were some advantages of having been changed into an animal !

Now, she had to find her master. She hadn't seen him for months, and she didn't know exactly where he was living, because he often moved from one place to another. But she had to find him quickly, because she didn't want Rhyk to come back to his kingdom with her potions and take the power.

The last time she had seen her master, he was living about half a day's walk away northerly from her cave. She began to walk to the north. She still had difficulties walking, but after a while, it got better, and she was even able to run. She didn't know yet what animal she was, she thought she was probably a big cat, or a fox, or a raccoon, or something like that. She didn't have time to ask herself what she was exactly. The main problem was that she didn't know what she was supposed to eat. She was hungry, and if she had to hunt, she was going to be hungry for a long time. She continued walking, hoping to find some roots or fruits to eat, and hoping that the animal she was could digest it. Finally, she found some apples. It was not a lot of food, but it was enough, because she was a small animal. After that, she felt a lot better, and kept walking.

She was not used to walk in the forest at night. It was quite frightening. She could hear other animals, maybe some of them were predators. As a woman, she wouldn't have been afraid, but as an unidentified small animal, who didn't know how to protect herself with her new body, she was. She saw an owl hunting a mouse. It was quite reassuring, because she was big enough not to be a prey

for owls. She tried to think rationally. There were not reasons of worrying. She probably had no predators in the forest. Only two animals could have been her predator. First was the wolf, but as far as she knew, there were very few wolves in the forest, so there was few risk to see one. Second was the man, and her master was one of the only men living in the forest.

Thinking to this, she thought to another problem. She wanted to find her master, but she didn't know what was going to happen when she would actually meet him. Of course, he wouldn't harm her, he never killed animals. But would he recognize her ? And how would she explain the situation ? Maybe he could metamorphose her back into human, or at least understand her. But it was not sure at all.

She tried to stop thinking about future problems and to focus on the main problem : finding him. She almost knew where was the cave where he lived last time she saw him, but since he could have moved, she had to look for clues of human presence. He could live anywhere in the forest, in a cave or in a hut. She had been walking fast and running for quite a long time, and the sun was about to rise. She was not too far from where her master lived. She slew down, in order to be able to see possible tracks of presence : leftovers of a fire, roots cut, or anything. It was probable that, even if her master was still living here, there were not any tracks of his presence. She began to look into each cave if he was there. Finally, she arrived at the cave where he lived a few months before and entered . Unlike Aeya, his master had no furniture, no interior decoration, few magical items, few books, and it was not that easy to guess that a magician was living in his cave. At the entrance of the cave, there was no sign of his presence, and she thought that he had moved. But at the back of the cave, there was a small room, in which there was a fire not totally extinguished, and a blanket folded on the floor as a bed. Aeya's master, though, was not here, but since he lived there few months before, and very few people lived in the forest, she was certain that he was still living here.

Now, she had found where her master lived, but since he was not there, it was not totally useful. She hesitated about what to do. She could kept looking for him, or stay there and wait for him. She didn't know when he was going to come back. Finally, she thought that, since the fire was not extinguished, he was not gone for a long time, and she decided to wait. Moreover, she had been running and walking all night and she was very tired, so she decided to sleep.

“Wow, a raccoon is sleeping on my bed ! That's weird ! What are you doing here ?” Aeya was awoken by the voice of her master. She tried to answer him, but she couldn't speak. She tried to explain that she was Aeya with signs, but it seemed that he couldn't understand. Then she had an idea. The ground was in trodden earth, so she could write her name on it.

“Are you writing something?” asked her master in joke. “I know raccoons are smart, but I've never seen a raccoon who can write yet... Wait... you actually wrote something ! A..e...y...a ...

Aeya ? Do you mean you are Aeya ?”

He seemed surprised, but not so much. Aeya nodded.

“I'm glad to see you. But, last time, you looked more like a human, and less like a raccoon !
What happened ? Wait... you can't speak, can you ?”

Aeya said no with her head.

“Maybe I can do something for that. Just a moment.”

He tried to find some items in his bag. He took a little vial, and some flowers that he put in the vial, changing the color of the liquid inside. Then he poured some of liquid on her.

“You're lucky ! I had just what I needed for that. Now, you can speak, so tell me what happened.

-Really, I can ? she tried to say. Wow ! It works !”

Aeya's master listened to her story.

“Well... and what I am supposed to do ?

- Err... I don't know... First, I don't want him to go back in his kingdom and take the power, and secondly... I'd like to be transformed back into a human.
- Transform you back ? I'm sorry I can't. I don't know what was his spell, so I don't know how to cancel it. About him... we can try to do something, but it's probably too late now. I guess that on each of your bottles, it's written what is the potion inside. It won't be difficult for him to find what he wants. If you want to do something, maybe you can help other people of his kingdom. But, before, be sure they're not other evil people ! Do you know what are the potions that he can have taken ?
- Well... I think I have several potions which can interest him. I have lots of potions which can improve different abilities. I don't know what he is going to take if he wants to take the power.
- So the only potions you have will improve his abilities. It may help him, but it won't guarantee him to take the power. It's not too serious...
- Wait. I think there is something more serious ! One of my potions is a lot more dangerous, I think...”

Rhyk, after a night of sleep, started to look at the potions again. Few of the potions were helpful. He had found something to improve his force, and something to improve his mind. These two potions could have helped him a lot, but he kept looking for other potions, in case there was something better to find. After two hours, he found a little vial. The label was saying that the one who would drink this potion would be considered as a god. He read the label several times. It was

far beyond his best expectations. He laughed. With this potion, not only could he get the power over his kingdom, but probably also over other kingdoms.

“A potion which make that someone becomes considered as a god you say ? Did you find this potion in one of my old books ? asked Aeya's master, smiling.

- Yes... you seem not worried about that. If he is considered as a god, I think he won't content himself with only his kingdom...
- I think you didn't translate everything in this book. The book where you found that is a very old book. It comes from a land, well beyond the mountains, from my land. In the Borelian tribe, which is my tribe, people used to venerate the nature. And their gods were animals. But not any animals. They were raccoons...
- Raccoons.... What ? Do you mean... ?
- Yes... If he takes your potion, he will become a raccoon too... and since he thought that metamorphosing you into a raccoon was a bad thing, I think that raccoons are not gods in his kingdom !”