

Horoscope House

Abrim walked down the street, his new suit perfectly tailored. Trousers were always hard to find with his long legs, but the prize for this job would be more than enough to cover the expense. This was Abrim's first big grift, but he was well overdue for a new set of clothes.

It was late spring, cool after a recent thunderstorm. The village Abrim stopped at to get the suit was abuzz with the promise of summer around the corner. The farmers were finishing planting season, but the festival at the end of the week was a beacon of joy after a long month of seeding. The tailor invited Abrim, but he knew he had other business to attend to. The dirt road wound through the woods, thick foliage providing a shady canopy that glowed green. The wind passed through the trees, scattering birds as they chattered to one another through the branches. A pair of blue jays chased each other down the road and drew Abrim's gaze to the witch's cottage.

The simple house had dark wooden boards on the side with a red tile roof that matched the chimney, exhaling white smoke like clouds. A garden outside was starting to bloom, pale pink and vibrant purple flowers that danced in the wind, tempting bees and butterflies to sip the nectar. As he got closer to the cottage, Abrim started to see evidence of the witch's magic, an outdoor cauldron filled with rainwater and dozens of spirit catchers hanging from the eaves. The simple charms were an arm's length of twisted together branches braided with vibrant ribbons, flowers, and bird feathers. Abrim told himself the movement was nothing but the breeze, though stories of evil spirits caught in the twigs made him shiver as one grazed his shoulder before he knocked.

"Just a moment," a woman's voice called. Abrim waited outside, avoiding the swinging branch braids. The door opened and a young woman with dark brown hair down to her waist looked up at him. He thought the witch was naked at first glance, but in the time it took to blink, he realized her dress was light peach that matched her skin. The witch looked up at Abrim and raised her brows. "Can I help you?"

"Ah, of course. My name is Drem Veradin. Are you the Covenless Witch?"

"Most people call me Makeer. What can I do for you, sir?"

"I have some concerns regarding your recent...inheritance. May I come in?"

"I suppose," Makeer said, motioning him inside. "Is there a problem?"

“Somewhat,” Abrim began. The interior of the cottage had strings of plants drying from the ceiling and smelled of lilac and juniper. There were two bookshelves on either side of a large, easy chair in front of a low, wide table. One bookshelf was almost completely covered with crystals and herbs, while the other was stuffed full of grimoires and scrolls. The low table had a rune circle etched into the oak wood: symbols for the Seasons and the Cardinal Rivers around the ring. Abrim looked up from the witch’s table to Makeer, who looked at him, expecting an answer to an unheard question. “I’m sorry?”

“You said there was a problem?”

“Ah, yes,” Abrim said, clearing his throat. “I’ve been chosen to represent the Coven of the Remorad River.”

“Represent—?” Makeer frowned. “Sweet goddess, you’re a damn lawyer...”

“I’m afraid so,” Abrim smiled a little.

“I’m sorry, it’s just...why would any coven resort to a lawyer?”

“It’s about the house,” Abrim said. He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a folded letter with a very convincing seal of Remorad River. “They’re claiming that you are ineligible for the inheritance.”

“You’re joking,” Makeer said. “Damlin Brone inherited this house without issue and I inherited it from her under the same contract.”

“The Coven of the Remorad River says that she was not allowed to grant it to you. Damlin Brone was of the Summer Coven, but you are not bound to any coven.”

“I fail to see where that becomes a problem. Damlin Brone was of the Summer Coven, but she was the last witch of that collective before she died. I was her apprentice, but she told me not to take any oaths. Horoscope House needs a witch who is not bound to one group and their interests.”

“And therein lies the problem.” Abrim broke the seal, unrolled the scroll, and put on a pair of small glasses. “The Coven of the Remorad River feels that—as Miss Brone felt no one coven should control Horoscope house—you should not be singularly entitled to this power. It’s your interests rather than any collective.”

“You must be joking...”

“I wish I was.”

“So, what are their demands?”

“They want you to release ownership of Horoscope House and it will become contested between the remaining Covens.”

“Did they all agree to this?”

“A majority consensus, yes,” Abrim said. “I don’t know the specifics. If ‘lawyer’ doesn’t suit you, think of me as a messenger.”

“Do you even know the power of Horoscope House?”

“I’ve heard rumors and stories, yes.”

“Then perhaps I should show you, so you understand.”

Abrim set his glasses aside and licked his lips. “It won’t change anything. My assignment is my assignment.”

“Humor me...” Makeer explained. She walked over to the easy chair and waved a hand towards a wooden chair across from her. Abrim sat in the open chair and looked at Makeer.

Makeer looked up at the ceiling, vaulted ceilings looming up above them. The house seemed to exhale, wood groaning and the flames in the fireplace died down to embers. Even though the birds still sang outside, the interior of Horoscope House got darker. The high ceilings started filling with smoke, spontaneously forming like storm clouds. As the darkness gathered above them, stars sputtered into existence.

“When I was a little girl,” Makeer sighed, not looking away, “I would spend hours looking up at these stars. Damlin used to tell me all the stories in the constellations. She wasn’t supposed to, but I kept asking questions: wandering questions, she used to call them. She and others had spent lifetimes in Horoscope House trying to master the art of divination. This is no simple house. And I will not be bullied into abandoning it, Abrim Straut.”

Abrim’s head snapped down to Makeer. She closed her eyes calmly, like a jungle cat confident that she had cornered her prey. As the lids opened, Abrim saw the stars flickering in her eyes. Makeer looked back up at the stars and a flare made Abrim look back up again. One of the stars caught his attention and he was quickly transfixed by it.

The star blurred his vision and Abrim saw himself sitting in an extravagant dining room, fat

and richly dressed. He was older with greying hair and lines of worry shaping his face. The Abrim of the future was frantically rushing around a mansion, huffing and puffing as he collected valuables in his arms. He rushed towards a staircase, but approached the side, pushing a secret door open. Dropping a golden bowl on the stairs, Abrim locked the door behind him and clambered down the stone steps. The old man pushed the golden bowl with his foot, denting its surface on each step as it rang down the stairs. He pushed open another door with his shoulder and entered a cavernous stone room. Placing the valuables on a table, Abrim rushed back to the door and pushed it closed.

In the stone cellar, Abrim moved to the table and ran his fingers across the gathered gold. Taking a massive goblet, he sipped a dark red wine and scowled. The torches on the wall crackled and wavered in the stone tomb. His hands shook as he touched the gold, his fingers running along the dented edge of the beautiful bowl. One of the torches flickered and Abrim's eyes shot up towards it. The room shook and the torches started going out one by one.

Abrim's breathing quickened as darkness closed in around him. Outlines started appearing in the shadows, grave figures with their hoods pulled over their heads. As the room darkened further, Abrim felt more of the beings appear, getting closer and closer as the darkness closed in. Only a single candle on the table cast any light in the room. Abrim shook and focused on the gold in front of him. In the bent surface of the bowl, reflections of the figures grew closer to the remaining flame. Two appeared behind him and one bent low by his ear.

“Did you enjoy it while it lasted?”

The other figure leaned forward and blew out the final candle, plunging the cave into darkness. Abrim screamed and felt hands on him as his heart stopped.

Abrim fell on the floor of the Horoscope House, scrambling backwards and panting. Makeer was still sitting in the chair, almost bored as the Horoscope House groaned. Abrim watched the witch as she slowly blinked. Light started to come back into the room, the dark spirals of the indoor sky dissipating as if in a strong breeze. Abrim stumbled up to his feet, keeping his eyes on Makeer as he got his bearings back in the house. When he finally had enough breath to speak, the fireplace seemed to come back to life and fill the room with warmth. “What was that?”

“A possibility...something that hasn't yet come to pass. There's still time to avoid it. Did you

think you could cheat the witch of Horoscope House? Arrogant. But planning to set the covens against each other to control it? You are a man with a death wish.”

“You planted that. It’s a fake fortune. You’re a trickster!”

“I don’t control the house...I am its keeper. If you keep on this path—as you intend to—you will turn every witch in a thousand miles against each other. There will be a Grand War that will consume the covens. In the end, there will be only one common enemy: you. Every witch will turn against you when they find out about your scheme. I admire you for uniting the covens, but it will destroy you, Abrim. There will be a short period of wealth, but now it will be forever tainted by your fear. You will die rich, but at what cost?”

Abrim swallowed and looked back up to the high ceiling. The wooden beams curved up and over, like the rib cage of a great beast that had swallowed Abrim whole. He looked back down to Makeer, but she only sat with her legs pressed together and her hands folded on one knee. Abrim fell to his knees and pleaded. “I won’t steal anymore. Never again, you have my word!”

“That’s an impossible task and you know as well as I that you’ll be picking pockets within a week. No, I have a different path for you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your attempt to take Horoscope House is one fate. You have a future littered with possibilities, but so many of them end in a war between witches. Targeting the powerful can be noble, but setting them against each other for your personal gain is a death sentence. You can never scam the Covens...or any individual witch.”

“But the Covens are the power of our world! Governments, authorities...the kings defer to the Covens!”

“You can’t look for power. You need to find the corrupt and those who would otherwise be like you. The government, the authorities, and even kings have their moments of weakness.”

“I’m a forger—a pickpocket! How am I supposed to challenge men who don’t play by the rules like Covens?”

“Rules and Written Rules are different,” Makeer said. “It will take hard work, but there is a path I see before you. Abrim Straut: Gentleman Thief. They used to be in every city and every country, but the practice has died out. There’s a plan for you that brings them to prominence from

the shadows.”

“This was my first try at something like this,” Abrim smiled weakly. “I’ve never even owned a proper suit before.”

“There is room for improvement, but experience leads to great prizes. Not gaudy manor houses with treasure lining the walls, but in name and deed. There is a path where the Gentlemen Thief’s Guild rises again. With you at the head, it could do very well. And you’d do better than trying to cheat witches with such simple scams. Coven vaults are deep, but there is no depth like a witch’s hatred. It won’t be a dragon’s hoard, but you will be happy with your comrades.”

Abrim stood and dusted off his coat, exhaling to settle his nerves. A future in wealth had always been his goal, but the Gentlemen Thief’s Guild was once on par with nobility. A counterbalance to the cruelty of currency by stealing from those who had too much and never harming those who needed more. There were stories of Gentlemen Thieves, revered by the people and beloved for ages. Abrim had never seen himself as a hero.

“I...I don’t know if I can.”

“You need to promise me this,” Makeer said. For the first time in the conversation, the tone shifted from gentle to something more venomous. “It’s not only your fate that will spin from this choice.”

“What do you mean?”

“I can only show you the futures that belong to you. That is a rule of the house. Yet, there is a path that leads the Gentlemen Thieves to prominence once again. And a time of peace. What the Gentlemen Thieves become is up to you: avengers or mischief makers, tricky or stealthy. There is an incredible future laid out for you, Abrim. You have ambition, but it needs direction. Let this be your guide.”

“Peace from thieves...” Abrim mused. “Any chance you can tell me what I have to do for that?”

Makeer looked up at the rafters of Horoscope House and shrugged. “Seems that’s all we have for today. I would suggest heading north. The town of Stel has no local den of thieves to compete with and could prove to be a good place for recruiting.”

“I don’t have any money. I spent it all on this suit.”

“Then let that suit, your wit...and a bit of luck, be your weapon. After all, you thought it would be enough to fool a witch with the gift of divination. Surely, you could pull that trick on someone more susceptible?”

Abrim chuckled a little. “Yeah...I guess it could work better on someone without the future in their favor.”

“The future is in no one’s favor, Abrim. It is only the choices we make. The wiser your choices, the better: good or bad belongs to the past and present. The future is impassive.”

Dusting off his trousers, Abrim adjusted his coat. “Stel, you said?”

“Less than a day’s walk.”

Abrim nodded and turned towards the door. Before touching the handle, he paused and looked back at the witch. “You knew all this would happen?”

“I was confident enough. Horoscope House only shows us options, never the certainty. There’s no power that could do that beyond the scope of wizards too insane to be human.”

“Then I guess you don’t know if I’ll be back?”

“I can assume you’ll be back,” Makeer said, relaxing into her chair. “Friend or foe? Only time will tell.”