

You have stumbled into the autobiography of Hadwin of Rynnar.

The quill held between my fingers is rather extravagant; the noxious ink spreads itself quite well.

Toward the east, I see the spectacle that is the execution of Aena of Reemond. Her husband turned ash minutes ago and her tears boil so soon. She is mother to a boy of fifteen and a girl of twelve. They visited me yesterday. I entertained them until the collectors came. I wouldn't pity them and grant myself absolution.

It is said that history is written by the victor. You, the reader, will know whether I won simply by what reputation I have. History is a difficult thing to write, especially when you do not have the hindsight of judging progeny. The philosophers of Cornea say: "The one who runs astray covers costs for the mishaps of the journey." I ran astray, and so your each sin will be, in part, mine to bear. You should know who I am.

I was born to beautiful, good people. Their knives touched no throat, they stole no one's food, and they tried to raise their son to be a good-natured person. Whenever my voice became command, I remembered how my father and mother taught me, and only then did I utter a word. I take more pride in this than those aristocrats do in their bloodline that reaches back to a god who raped a miller's daughter.

I pushed the edge of the rag into the crevasse of the polished Asyan stones. I rubbed it to and fro in grudging determination. “In between these, there’s the most dirt and uncleanness,” she had said. The rag reached a junction. Then I rubbed it right and left. I rubbed it until I panted and my muscles hurt—and the morning chill was told to leave me.

The stone that held *understanding* was cold and rough today. I caressed the surface. This is where the mouse’s body had been, its blood a deep puddle, insides spewed out, and organs crushed. It was as still as stone, as dead as a creature killed by me. Scholar Meana had praised me for getting rid of the pest. My thoughts tingled with some strange guilt.

The massive ash door swung open and flanked the woman who stepped inside. Scholar Meana appraised me with weary eyes. Her thick and furry robes were etched with the same dizzying geometric patterns as the door. I glanced away and began mopping properly. The door creaked, the view into the wordhouse diminished, and then it closed with a thud.

I pretended not to gawk as she stalked to the waiting-chair beside the window and lowered herself with the stiffness of an old woman. Both the whiteness of the chair and of the robes’ patterns gleamed under the fledgling sunlight.

“Make sure it’s clean,” Scholar Meana said.

“Yes, Madam,” I replied, and began mopping yet again.

“The Holder of Rye will be displeased if the Guests do not hold the utmost regard for our wordhouse,” she added.

I nodded. I resumed my motion. Soon, I had crawled to the other end of the vestibule and back. My hand wandered to a stone below the desk. A warmth flowed into my right hand. The minute peaks and valleys engraved into the stone bit me as I ran my palm through the one that held *n*—. What did it hold? It was warmer than the tremulous rays of the sun—and it grew. I removed my hand.

“I see what you’re doing,” Scholar Meana said.

I flustered; warmth truly surrounded my body.

“It’s *naive*,” she continued. “Feel the one to your left.”

I stretched my arm enough that the tip of my index finger touched the stone. I jerked my hand back, in the way that one pulls away from hot things, but it was cold to the touch, and gave off a sense of hollowness, like it drained away my things. Scholar Meana’s face was undisturbed and a little smug—the latter calmed my racing heart.

“Death of naivete,” she said. “Sometimes you ought to read two stones, sometimes three, sometimes more.”

“But,” she added, and her expression went grim, “do not presume to handle cells that are not yours to handle.”

I bit my tongue, unsure, but chastened.

“I will overlook this, but you should see what happens to one who steals words. They’re flogging one today. You should go look.”

With shaking, nervous hands, I groped for my rag, but she spoke first, “Go. Now. After that, take the day off. This vestibule is all you can access till the Guests come, and it’s already clean as it gets.”

I kept still.

“Go. Let’s say you worked hard and finished your quota early. See the whipping.”

I rose to my feet and put the rag in the corner which was meant for such things and headed outside. I found myself comforted by sunlight, but soon, winter met my face, and I shivered again. I walked along the long side of the wordhouse, atop dewy grass, and barely outside the shade.

The clearing was to the west of the wordhouse, toward the meadows and Rummung. The first of the crowd had started gathering, but I could tell it would be a wait. I did not approach. Rather, I stayed put, pretending to be occupied in some other business. Who even were these people who would go see a man being beaten? Were they all here by some order of their masters?

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The morning sun hung stark and clear in the sky without a word spoken against the chill. The wind harassed my body, and armed with only my thin, ragged shirt, I shivered. I did not know it then, but violence tends to draw people, so I assume the crowd also included people from nearby dwellings. There were thirty or so, give or take.

The man was thin and sinewy. He bent over the beam, half-naked. His face was rather long and had a stubble.

There was another one pacing around as if he was in a hurry, but of course, he was only pacing around. All I remember about him is that his nose was absurdly large.

“Hear me,” the Punisher bellowed. A gust came from the east and raised a thousand grains of dust into the air. “This man will be whipped for theft and overreach. That is to say, this man opened Lady Hybin’s letter. You get what you do. That’s what they say.”

The crowd broke into murmurs.

The Punisher produced a thin rod that was still far too thick. He steadied himself. He arched back his right arm. The crowd grew silent so that a wholly different kind of noise could fill the air.

I am perhaps too different now to who I was then to properly describe the event as I saw it then. There was some blood, some gasping, and far more crying. Now extrapolate from that what you will about what it felt like to me.

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My parents were farmers. If I got to say that about myself, I would be proud—but I can hardly say that about my parents themselves. They grew recreational plants—if the term is familiar to you—for the Rylands who consumed some and sold the rest. It was honest work, and I dare not doubt the very real ache that must have settled on their muscles after a day of working. And yet, well, my thoughts are conflicted. They did what they could do. Ultimately, their work was channelled into the endless pits that are nobles, but perhaps the same can be said for all of us.

We lived in a shack perhaps a mile away from the manor at the edge of the North Forest. I will admit, at times, I was envious of those who lived in the comfort and warmth of the servants' quarters. The shack was old and dilapidated. It barely kept the rain out of our heads and let all the cold in.

That night, I was perturbed by the events of the day. Strangely enough, it was the mouse that snatched my thoughts. Mice gnawed on words and fed on grain, and I would curse its name each day. "The mouse's brain is too small," Scholar Meana had said, "It cannot have a soul," and yet, the blood, the crushed insides and organs, and the feeling... no, knowledge that I had committed an irreversible act—they assailed me. My thoughts tingled that very night, just like this, just like I was being assailed now. The tingling was strong. A mouse is a mouse, but a man is, well, bigger—a real person! Something felt wrong in my head, and I didn't know why. Guilt? Regret? I hadn't touched the man, god forbid done anything to harm him. What could I even have done to rescue him? Did he even deserve to? Ridiculous.

The night soothed me at that moment.

Here, the night became alive. The darkness was her thick, dark hair, which was adorned by a thousand stars. The thin, crescent moon was her earring—and though she only wore one, the radiance showered us. She opened her mouth, and she hummed, but it was the crickets who made the sound.

I do not say this to sound dramatic. I loved the night. She was my angel and my friend, my lover and my god. Memories of nighttime in the shack were soothing and I mean it. It means more to

me than you imagine. It was beautiful. You, too, must have something you love—something that twists your heart in all the wrong and right ways.

Let us not digress from the narrative. We sat around our stove. My father was across from me, and my brother to his left. I think he was somewhat sick that day. We shared that wordless silence that comes from knowing too much about each other's lives and hence having nothing to talk about. My mother lowered the metal pot into the fire and sat beside me.

"Who are the Guests?" I broached.

"They're guests in the estate," my mother replied.

"But who are they? I heard they were lizards in human skin. Rolf said they were children of a serpent and could poison people. And—"

"They're only people, people who make words." She smiled.

"What does it mean to make words?"

"They write. Like the books you see in the wordhouse. Golver Ryland will buy those words from them. New books, I mean." She smiled wide this time.

"How can you buy words?"

"Like you buy any other thing."

"But words are—"

"Words have value too," my father interjected. "Say you are in a forest. Words about which plant you can and cannot eat is as valuable to you as food."

"That's a great example," my mother agreed.

He looked away. "That's also why today Rudolf got the beating for *theft*. You must have heard of it. He stole Lady Hybin's words when he opened her letter."

A weight began pulling on my guts.

"But... eat this plant, don't eat that plant, it can't be property. The plant exists in the world. The world cannot be your property." I retorted.

"Did you go and study those plants yourself?" my father said. "No, they did the work. Words are their property."

Even as a child, I knew when I had lost, even if I didn't admit it. My father was a strange man: lively, blithe, jovial—and yet he somehow knew these serious things a miran never needed to.

My mother left to tend to the baby which was now crying (that would be Leofe). When she returned, I asked her to tell a story. She picked an interesting story, and I doubt it was by coincidence.

Her voice was beautiful in ways you might not understand. It was not like the King's singers, not melodic, not pulling, not gripping, but it was loving, and her voice was soft and gentle. It told me she was my mother.

"There was once a prince called Arian," she said, "He was kind and gentle of heart, yes he was, but had not seen things that were mighty and small. He lived his life in a castle you see, so one day, he said, 'I shall venture forth, my people's plight I will see, and toil I will, so that I bring peace!' Back then rulers had words given by Lonara, who bid them look after his people. They would speak, and their words would be. So Arian spoke his words and came a horse, strong white and bright. He rode the beast till a farmer he did see. 'Why do you cry?' he asked, and the farmer said, 'I cannot till my farm.' Arian spoke his words, which brought forth some gold. The man did not want gold. Arian rode the beast till a woman he did see. 'Why do you cry?' he asked, and she said, 'No one will marry me.' Arian spoke his words, which brought forth a ring. He smiled and said, 'Offer your man this ring.' 'There is no man who will take me,' she cried. Arian rode forth yet again till a hermit he did see. 'Why do you cry?' the hermit asked, and Arian said, 'I cannot help my people,' then recited his tale. The hermit laughed. He said, 'I can help you. Give me your beast, your ring, and your gold. Arian did. The hermit rode forth with the Prince. The ring, he slid into the girls' finger and said, 'I will take you.' The horse, he gave to the farmer and said, 'Till your soil with this beast.' The gold, he took for himself. When Arian spoke his words, nothing would be. This is how wordless rulers came to be."

That night, the hermit came to me in my dream. The old man wore a thick, ruffled beard. His clothes were ragged, but he spoke with the elegance of one educated. A certain yellowish glow emanated from the ground, and it cradled the world we were in. There was no heaven or earth. His eyes were narrow and focused with intent. When he looked, it was to look, and not merely because his eyes were open.

He bent to look at my eyes head-on. From his fists he produced a red bead, which he then placed into my unsure left hand.