

The Mandrakes.

The coffin was heavier than Pallor expected.

Their shoulder blistered beneath it. Fingerlike splinters slipped through their overcoat, paring skin. Carefully, they nudged it into a more comfortable resting place. Pallor lurched forwards, the foot of the coffin almost falling with them. The timbers groaned. Pallor tensed, quickly glancing at their companion. Hal carried the head of the casket. He cut an enviable figure. Unbroken. Dense as the forest surrounding them. Pallor was more of a wilted shoot.

“Watch yourself,” Hal hissed.

Hal had doubled over to accommodate for Pallor’s fumble. The seam of the coffin had hit his jaw, leaving a shallow gash across his dark skin. Though, of course, he was not bleeding. Pallor corrected their hold, gently this time.

“Sorry.” Pallor’s voice was feeble.

The leaf litter was frozen underfoot. If not for the moon illuminating the bridleway, Pallor might have thought they were treading on glass. Pallor brushed the frosted lid.

“It’s hard to walk with this.”

It was a job made for six, though they numbered only four.

Hal was leading the way. A man and a woman, neither of whom Pallor had ever met before, kept the other side aloft. Neither had spoken a word since they had met at the mouth of The Green Wood. They were thick and silent as the oaks around them, neither seemed keen to get well acquainted. From their eyes, Pallor could tell they were human. It would be better, Pallor thought, not to learn their names.

“Bear with it. We’re not far now,” Hal replied, picking up the pace once more. The others grunted, hefting the coffin as Hal led them deeper into the wood.

Mist spilled off the trees. It stuck to their footprints in the mud like silvered limbs. With each jostle of leaves, the moonlight bent into elbows and knees.

“We have ghosts,” Pallor mumbled, pushing aside a branch with their free hand. It snapped back and hit Hal in the side.

“Gods, you are remarkably good at getting me injured.”

“It’s my specialty,” Pallor replied without humor.

“Do not waste your talents on *me*,” Hal added, leading Pallor through an archway of curling branches.

“Save them in case someone sees us.”

He was irritable tonight. More so than usual. Pallor nodded, then remembering Hal could not see them, replied.

“Anything you need.”

Pallor spoke with a sincerity that made Hal’s shoulders twitch.

Pallor had only one thing in common with the nameless pallbearers. They did not know where they were going. It seemed redundant to ask. Knowing would not change the destination. If the others were suspicious of Hal’s motives, it did not show. Pallor assumed the promise of coin had lured the pair this far. Sure enough, Hal carried a bursting purse at his waist. Pallor had no such mercenary desires. Instead, they walked dutifully in step, letting the earth creep into their boots and take root between their toes.

They walked until the moon had risen right over their heads. Nocturnal flowers craned their necks towards the light, unfurling their yellow faces. Those whose stalks could not quite reach the light had gently decomposed into soft mulch.

It was a disquieting beauty. One that was hard to appreciate with a coffin breaking their backs.

“Stop,” Hal ordered quietly.

Pallor halted, making a discerned effort not to jostle the coffin.

Over gasps of wind, they could hear something cracking through the underbrush. Footsteps ahead. Hal made a quick motion with his hand. The world split like skin beneath a scalpel; Hal’s fingers dragging with the precision and speed of a master surgeon. Chlorophyll green wept through the blue night and Hal began the delicate surgery of setting the world back into place.

He stitched branches from the surrounding trees into a lattice, obscuring their pathway. He urged the brush to grow into a quiet wall. No less alive than the forestry around them, no less real. But entirely under Hal’s control. In seconds, the wide forest path had been remade into a thicket, obscuring them from view, aside from a small peephole in the branches. Pallor could see through it, though he knew Hal had ensured that those on the other side would be unable to look back.

Pallor let their gaze drift, just for a moment, to Hal.

They both wore black overcoats and high-neck shirts. And if Hal turned to face them, Pallor knew his eyes would be ruined and resemble their own. But that was where the similarities ended.

He was a head taller than Pallor at least (it made carrying the back of the coffin all the harder.) No scars marred the dark luster of his skin. No lingering injuries had him struggling through this task like an invalid. Pallor might have resented him if they weren’t of the same ilk.

From beyond the newly formed thicket, Pallor heard footsteps. Two women walked past their hiding place. Both were short and hunched, with lanterns held high and keys jangling at their belts. One carried a heavy-looking spade. The other a misshapen rucksack. It mussed her braided hair, which had bunched up around her neck.

“Bone Thieves?” Pallor whispered.

Hal shook his head, almost imperceptibly.

“Witch Finders.” He added, “From the Abbey.”

The women moved with almost as much purpose as Hal had. Stopping occasionally to turn in place and survey their surroundings. When their lamplight hit the thicket, the braided woman squinted curiously. She was staring right at them, not that she had any way to know as much. She took a step closer and Pallor’s breath quickened. These people were trained to seek out the esoteric. Surely, she could see them through the leaves. This forest was sprawling and Pallor was certain these women were but a few of many prowling the area.

They clenched a fist at their side.

“Do not act in haste.”

Hal turned just enough to catch Pallor’s eyes.

Pallor’s hand was already dripping with sickness. The kind which would cause even a woman as hardened as her to crumple. At Hal’s command, they let it dissipate. Like water rolling off a leaf. It left a film of sweat on their fingers.

The Witch Finder holding the shovel grunted. Words too low for Pallor to hear. The braided woman moved back to her side. They trudged across the leaf litter. The pair were quickly swallowed by the darkness, leaving only the orb of their lantern visible until that too was snuffed.

When their only company were the settling sounds of the forest, Hal dismissed the thicket. Wiping away the greenery until it was almost back to new.

They emerged from the tree cover quickly after that.

The forest gave way to a creeping hill of well-kept grass, fully exposed to the night sky. It was a far cry from the brush they had spent the last hour traipsing through. The breeze was a welcome reprieve. But Pallor's unease lingered. Without the constant ambiance of the forest, it was difficult to ignore the creak and shift of the coffin.

They pressed on. Pallor's body burned with the effort of climbing. But they steeled, determined not to stumble a second time.

When they finally crested the hill, Pallor saw the world laid bare before them. Stars knit into one another, vast shimmering lakes hanging above the region. The ground was black, treetops so thick that they swallowed whatever light dripped from the sky. Even the lanterns of the distant townships were lost amongst their leaves. The only break from the wild landscape were the crooked dual spires of the Abbey, which sat a little way south of them. The only bastion of humankind, against the invasive wood.

It looked as though the building had once fought valiantly against the wilderness. But now it was suffocated on all sides by foliage. It would not be long, Pallor thought, until those needle branches pierced the windows, the walls.

This clearing was bare of any human-made structures. Only Witch Finders and Bone Thieves dared journey so deep. Here, their only true company were the mushroom circles which climbed like foot falls up the hill. And the quivering tree that stood petrified on the brow. It spun towards the sky, leaves blowing as light as silk on a wheel. Hiding in the shadow of a sturdy branch, Pallor marked a patch of turned earth. Freshly dug, and waiting for them.

With a single heave, they placed the coffin onto the ground. Pallor thought the thud might have been enough to grab the attention of the Abbey. But the lanterns remained unlit.

"They won't disturb us," Hal said as he knelt towards the softened earth.

"If those Witch Finders come back there's no hiding here."

Hal sighed.

"It's a good thing I know what I'm doing then." He dug his fingers into the earth, disturbing the topsoil. He pushed until he was wrist-deep in the dirt then pulled back, lifting two previously buried shovels with him.

"Get to it." He ordered the humans. The woman grabbed the shovel eagerly but the man, all at once, seemed far more hesitant.

"Didn't think you'd lead us to a fairy hill." his voice was low and buttered.

Hal blinked at him.

"Is that a problem?"

The man shrugged.

"With that show of magick earlier, some might suggest you're working for the wrong sort." his grey face split into a smirk, "Would be a shame if word got to the Abbey that you were charming humans in The Green Wood."

Hal leaned against the handle of his shovel, eyes digging right through the man. Pallor could sense the shift in his demeanour.

Pallor bristled. They would not waste this chance. Not with Hal watching so intently. They moved slowly, positioning themselves between the man and the tree. Pallor hovered a hand over his nape, not quite touching.

From above, the branch began to wilt. It withered and dried into a soft pliable rope. Pallor moved as it fell, letting it wind up their arm. Coiled like a snare. They tried to be quiet, but a branch snapped beneath their heel.

Before the man could turn to look. Hal raised his voice.

“You expect me to pay for your silence?” He scoffed, then threw the shovel at his feet. “Last chance.”

The man rolled his eyes defiantly, then kicked the shovel away.

Fool.

The rope whipped around his throat. Before he could so much as lift his hands, Pallor grabbed the loose end of the snare and pulled. His head snapped back, far enough for Pallor to see his pupils burst. Then Hal raised his arm. Pallor could kill the branch, but only Hal could set it back in place. Slowly, the tree reanimated, drawing the trapped man up with it.

The scream had not yet left his lips when Hal filled his mouth with leaves.

By the time the branches stilled, Pallor could hardly tell where bark ended and flesh began. The only sign the human was hanged above them at all, were the slow but steady drips of fresh blood which watered the grave beside them.

Pallor leaned down to pick up the discarded shovel and started digging

Before long, Pallor and the woman were waist-deep in the earth. She was eager as ever, unperturbed by her companion's demise. Pallor noticed the hungry looks she spared the coin purse at Hal's waist. As if she were exempt from such a deadly fate. She had already seen far too much. That much coin would pay her silence for a month, if that.

But Hal had chosen not to share with Pallor precisely how his loose end would be tied. They only hoped that Hal would call on them again when the time came.

As Pallor clambered out of the grave, they found themselves kneeling right beside the coffin. Even now, undisturbed against the ground, Pallor could hear a noise coming from within.

More than just the timbers groaning.

“Hal... They're still alive in there.”

Hal quietly reclaimed his place at the head of the coffin, leaving the woman to lift the other side.

“Yes.” He dug his nails into the wood, leaving half-moons in the rime. “That's precisely the point.”