

Chapter Two: Night on the balcony

A golden field rubied by his blood.

Voices crying out unintelligibly.

The last breath escaping as he slipped down into the welcoming darkness of death.

These were his last moments among the living.

In that darkness terrible shadows of emptiness waited for him. Ravenously they fell upon their prey and carried him off to their prison of woe. There, bereft of the eternal reward of the departed, he knew only torment.

They dined joyously on his misery. It sated their appetite for cruelty and malice.

Unrelenting pain overwhelmed him and banished from memory all that he had once loved. Yet, even as the anguish threatened to engulf him, a voice called out from beyond the veil that separated his prison from the realm of the living. A voice wracked with suffering cried out for release.

A measure of joy filled him then for he knew that voice and the person to whom it belonged: Timpkin. Memories of laughter and friendship and the succor of family came flooding back to him as he saw his chance for deliverance.

He reached out to Timpkin, but the veil separating them could not be pierced. It did, however, possess minute fissures through which his consciousness might pass through. Cautiously, lest his tormentors discover his ploy, he perfected his art until he managed to slip into the blurred fields of Timpkin's dreams.

From there he guided Timpkin, spreading bread crumbs along the path to salvation. It was dangerous, for eyes whose attention was best placed elsewhere watched him. This made progress slow but in time Timpkin pieced things together and found that the puzzle led to Halin.

Now only one more push remained. One more visit and Timpkin would surely find the goal. All he had to do was watch and wait; it did not matter how long. After all, what was time to the dead?



Dinner had been sumptuous. The bounty served at Oak Brow's table tonight had so masterfully satisfied every appetite that no one left wanting for more.

Each meal in the great home had this distinction, for some of the finest chefs in Halin crafted their art in her kitchens. The Ifins of Oak Brow dined daily on exquisite buffets packed with succulent food and decadent deserts; all expertly arranged into a delicious cornucopia.

Bellies full to bursting from the latest epicurean delight, Timpkin, his younger brother Hoffer and Linnet retired to one of Oak Brow's southern balconies. High above the ground, they found Halin suitably attired in its evening finery.

Night had draped her shadow across the land. From her dark folds the lights of Halin burned softly in the gloom. Glittering jewels, stretched out as a net upon the water, they only added to the mystery and promise of the evening.

The cool night air danced gently in the treetops; its invisible fingers stirring the leaves above. Tickled by the gentle caress they responded by serenading the Ifins with rustling music.

Linnet and Hoffer sat in comfortable high backed chairs while Timpkin leaned against the balcony railing and looked out on the Treeburgh. Little conversation passed between them as the boys labored with digestion.

Hoffer cooed away to a tiny, fluffy bundle tucked up onto his lap while Linnet sipped from a mug. From several feet away, Timpkin could discern the herbal scent of tea rising from Linnet's drink. It mixed pleasantly with the cool aroma of the forest.

"There is nothing sweeter than good Bringdonworry Tea on a spring evening," said Linnet, closing his eyes contentedly. He set the mug down on a little wooden table situated between the chairs.

Hoffer's ears perked up. "Oh, let me have some," he said as he reached for the mug.

Without opening his eyes Linnet expertly took it away. "No, get your own." He placed the mug in his lap.

Hoffer, perturbed by the rejection, grumbled to himself and returned to the little bundle in his lap. Linnet, having nothing more to say, appeared to doze off.

From where Timpkin stood he could see the course of Brininook River as it left the darkened confines of Briurdun Woods and swallowed the diminutive Willoweth River. The joined waters, silvered by moonlight, slithered eastward across the face of Halin.

Nearly three miles downstream, Brininook lovingly opened its watery arms into a wide bowl where its undulating current slowed considerably. There in the middle of that expanse sat the warren of Riverhome, whose tree homes grew right up out of the river's surface and towered above the sparkling water.

Further downstream, Timpkin caught sight of three small boats, gently lit by lanterns, floating eastward along the river's course. Lazily they trekked in single file as they slid past the border of Sarrofeld Warren whose homes drew up to the river bank.

A slight thump sent weak vibrations along the balconies' floor. Timpkin paid it no attention. His focus was fixated on the progress of the boats.

He watched as they came upon the reed choked carpet of Rushdindle Fens. At first their lights twinkled as the fingers of Rushdindle rose up around the boats. Then they faded completely into the high murky reeds.

Another thud vibrated the balcony.

"Give me that."

Timpkin's ears twitched at the sound of the commotion but he continued to ignore it.

Though Brininook and its passengers were lost to him, Timpkin's mind wandered along their way and saw what awaited them. The reed walls of Rushdindle encroaching on the river banks. Grass looming dark and tall on either side. Sealing them off from the outside world and leaving behind only night shrouded greenery and black swirling water.

"Let go of me!"

Thud.

If the boats continued in an easterly manner then the pastoral lands of Farmenden, whose rural families were already adrift in slumber's playground, awaited them. In Timpkin's mind, however, their course tonight laid to the south, where passing along the shoulder of Picton's woodland isle they would come upon the eastern leg of the Southern Stairs.

"Ow! You bit me!"

A resounding crash, followed by another thud, rang out and startled Timpkin from his private thoughts. He turned and immediately met a scene of complete chaos. A downed table, a smashed mug and two chairs littered the floor. And, in the midst of it all, Hoffer and Linnet were locked in a scuffle.

“What are you two doing?” Timpkin demanded.

Neither combatant answered him; their attention focused solely on one another.

Hoffer, flat on his back, had his arms protectively curled around a small ball of white cotton. Linnet stood over him, running his fingers over a patch of torn fabric on his left sleeve. He aimed a withering gaze at Hoffer.

Timpkin looked down and felt a pang of embarrassment at the sight of a patch of torn fabric lying at Linnet’s feet.

“Give me that,” Linnet said as he grabbed for the bundle of cotton. Hoffer rolled away, stopping only when he came up against one of the upended chairs.

Linnet grabbed again but Hoffer’s little legs shot out and caught him midsection. This staggered the larger Ilfin as the air exploded out of him.

He took two steps back, holding his stomach. A look of surprise evidenced on his face. That surprise quickly matured into anger.

Linnet leapt at Hoffer and they both tumbled into a strange contest. Hoffer pushed Linnet away. Linnet, using his longer arms and greater strength, tried to get his hands on Hoffer.

“No!” Hoffer shouted, straining to hold Linnet back. “I found him and I’m going to keep him.”

Linnet pressed down harder. “You thick headed stump. You can’t even tell that’s a girl.”

“Well, I can tell you this...” Hoffer grunted as he pushed back against Linnet, “There’s a lot more of them where *she* came from.”

Enraged Linnet frantically grabbed for Hoffer’s prize. The younger Ilfin’s face reddened as he fought against Linnet’s advances.

Timpkin knew someone would be seriously hurt if this continued. Grabbing Linnet by the shoulders, Timpkin spun him around so that they stood face to face.

Hoffer, seeing his reprieve, wasted no time. Leaping over the chair, he sank quickly down behind its wooden frame. “Don’t let him go,” he said from the safety of his hiding place.

Timpkin didn’t bother a glance at his brother but kept his attention focused on Linnet.

“What are you doing?”

“Me?” asked Linnet, as if he could not believe the idiocy of the question. “What about him?” He pointed a thumb in Hoffer’s direction. He missed Hoffer’s rude responsive gesture peeking out from behind the chair.

“I’ll get to him in a moment,” said Timpkin, not allowing Linnet to change the subject. “Right now I want to know what happened.”

“Fine,” started Linnet, “I’ll tell you what happened. I was happily sipping away at my tea when suddenly I noticed that your brother had this repulsive...thing in his lap. Of course, I demanded that he give it to me right away but he refused. The next thing I know he takes a bite out of me then rips my shirt and upends the chairs...”

“Oh! You’re such a liar!” Hoffer popped up from behind the chair and fixed a withering gaze on Linnet. “Don’t listen to him Timp...”

“That’s enough out of you, Hoffer.” Timpkin stopped as he noticed Hoffer had his arms wrapped around a mysterious bundle. It wasn’t completely concealed, however, for he could see patches of white peeking out from between Hoffer’s arms.

Filling with stern authority, Timpkin said, “Hoffer, show me what you’re hiding.”

Hoffer quickly vanished back behind the chair. From the wooden seat issued a soft but defiant, “No.”

“Right now, Hoffer,” said Timpkin, his patience shortening.

Silence.

“Come out from behind that chair,” said Timpkin.

“No,” Hoffer mumbled.

A fire ignited within Timpkin and he charged the distance separating himself from Hoffer. Forcibly sliding the chair aside, Timpkin saw his brother sitting on the floor, huddled over his prize. Hoffer had his back to him.

“Hoffer, look at me,” said Timpkin.

The younger Ilfin turned to his brother. Hoffer’s eyes shined like glass for all the tears they held. “Don’t take this away from me too,” he whispered as he hugged the bundle tight. His eyes were wide and pleading

This startled Timpkin into silence. Hoffer’s plea, the words he used, stung Timpkin. His mood softened before he even realized it.

Slowly, Timpkin sat down on the floor, right in front of his brother.

“Hoff,” Timpkin started again, his voice softer and more compassionate, “let me see what you’re hiding.”

Hoffer’s face filled with distrust. He tried vainly to wipe his tears on his shoulder but it simply didn’t work.

“It’s alright,” said Timpkin. He reached over and dried Hoffer’s eyes with his shirt sleeve. “I understand.”

Hoffer sniffled a little but said nothing.

“I’m not mad at you...*and* I won’t hurt whatever it is you’re hiding...I promise,” said Timpkin.

Hoffer warred internally over his next decision. Timpkin could see it in his face. Then reluctantly, he opened his arms. There in his lap was revealed a white puffy sphere, not much larger than Timpkin’s opened hand.

“C’mon, show yourself. It’s okay,” said Hoffer, gently coaxing his prize.

To Timpkin’s astonishment, the ball quivered. More amazingly still, it was breathing.

Slowly it unraveled, revealing first a long bushy tail wrapped nearly around the entire whole. Enormous round eyes, soft and brown, appeared next. They sat just above its elongated snout, capped by a bright pink nose.

In a moment four spindly limbs sprouted from the rounded mass. Each one ended in four suction cupped tipped digits.

One last shiver and the little creature called a Pushkin was revealed. Its large rounded ears, not all that dissimilar from the Ilfin that held her, twitched.

“That’s right,” said Hoffer. He reached into his pocket, produced a golden cracker and held it out before the Pushkin. “Here, have some dinner.”

Greedily, the Pushkin accepted the offer and started its consumption.

Hoffer cradled the Pushkin against his chest. It happily chewed on a cracker, pausing at times to sniff the air. Crumbs littered the little creature’s chest and speckled the milky white fur with bits of yellow.

The creature seemed completely at ease, unaware of its role in the unfolding melodrama. Its large ears twitched as they listened to the chorus of the night.

Timpkin reached over and gently rubbed the Pushkin’s exposed belly. He smiled as his fingers moved through the velvety fur. Never had he felt something so soft. Forgetting

the cracker, the Pushkin's eyes closed in response and it began a light murmuring sound, almost like a purr. The soothing quality of its timbre made Timpkin smile.

"They look harmless enough," said Timpkin as he looked up at Linnet.

"Harmless! Just the other night they cleaned out an entire pantry," said Linnet. "Little monsters ate everything."

"You're over reacting," said Timpkin.

"Hardly," said Linnet. "Sure, one of them is not worth a bother, but you team them up and suddenly you have an unstoppable horde that eats everything in sight."

"Well," said Timpkin, amused by the situation, "You are a menace aren't you." The little Pushkin's tail reached out and wrapped itself lazily around his wrist.

Timpkin gently poked her furry tummy with his finger, causing the Pushkin to wiggle about playfully and forget its feast. The cracker fell from her paw, bounced off Hoffer's knee and landed on the floor.

"You made her drop her dinner," said Hoffer, his voice tinged with accusation.

Timpkin reached down and retrieved the cracker. He returned it to the Pushkin's eagerly awaiting paws. She happily resumed her feast. Jowls fluttering, she finished the last remaining bites and began licking the crumbs off her fur.

Her tail relinquished Timpkin's hand. Lazily it swished around in the air, hitting Timpkin in nose more than once.

Linnet stood there, watching the whole thing, his apparent irritation growing every second. When he could hold it in no longer an annoyed moan escaped his lips. "I suppose you'll want me to run off and fetch it a nice saucer of cream?"

"Her," said Hoffer, adopting a calm and proper tone as if he was correcting a child; all the better to goad Linnet. "Remember, it's a girl."

Linnet's self control broke down. "You know perfectly well what I meant."

Rounding on Timpkin Linnet demanded, "Make him tell me where he found her—I mean it—I mean that thing."

"Why won't he tell you?" asked Timpkin. He stopped playing with the Pushkin to rub his nose.

"Because he knows I'd toss them out and fix it so they could never get in again."

“I won’t let you do that,” said Hoffer. He hugged the Pushkin closer to his chest.

The little creature, having finished its feast, fished through Hoffer’s pockets in search of more food. Hoffer laughed when the Pushkin’s efforts proved fruitless.

“You forgot a pocket,” he said as he produced another cracker from a hidden pocket. The Pushkin grabbed it and greedily resumed its feast.

“Hoffer,” said Timpkin, drawing his brother’s attention back to the present situation. “Tell Linnet where you found him.”

“*Her*,” said Hoffer. He glared at Linnet.

“I’m serious,” said Timpkin. “Tell Linnet, now.”

Hoffer’s face clouded over as the storm of his defiance swelled.

“I won’t.” Hoffer stood up, looking ready to bolt. The Pushkin, surprised by the sudden movement, dropped its cracker and nearly tumbled out of Hoffer’s grasp. “They haven’t hurt anyone and Linnet just wants to turn them out so that he can feel important.”

“Hoffer!” said Timpkin, embarrassed by his brother’s behavior. “Apologize now.”

Looking downward, Hoffer offered a meek, “I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry too, Linnet,” added Timpkin. “Hoffer tends to get a little carried away at times...”

“No,” said Linnet, raising a hand to stop Timpkin. “He’s right.”

Linnet took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“The events of today left a rather bad taste in my mouth. So, I decided to show my family that I could be useful by doing something of importance.”

Linnet paused to look over at Hoffer’s find.

“When I saw that Hoffer had so unwittingly and metaphorically laid such an opportunity at my feet, I couldn’t help myself. Those furry moochers have been a problem for years. I thought that if I could get rid of the Pushkin infestation that my parents might see that I’m not worthless. I just want them to be...”

Linnet gave up and sat down at the edge of the balcony. His arms rested on the railing as his feet dangled over the edge.

“Linnet,” said Timpkin. “You’re being far too hard on yourself.”

“Please don’t” said Linnet. He hung his head until it rested on the railing.

Linnet’s request had been so soft that Timpkin wasn’t sure at first that it had come from him. The message, however, was clear and Timpkin knew Linnet well enough to leave it alone.

Seeing no point in pursuing the matter, Timpkin set about straightening up. “Look at this mess,” he said as he started cleaning. “Honestly, you two couldn’t have simply talked this whole thing out.”

Timpkin started putting the chairs back in place when he noticed a single thin branch snaking its way down from Oak Brow’s canopy. Its movement was as fluid as if it were made of water and not wood. Towards Linnet it came.

Green leaves, moving like flat fingers, quivered in anticipation of contact. The branch touched Linnet lightly on his shoulder.

“Don’t you try to cozy up to me,” said Linnet and he rudely shrugged the branch away. “I’m very upset with you. How could you give me up to my parents like that?”

Linnet turned and frowned at the dejected branch. It drooped in mid-air, conveying the appearance of sheepish guilt.

“The sad branch bit won’t help you,” said Linnet.

The branch drooped a few inches lower but Linnet would not be moved.

“Go away. I don’t want to see you.”

As sad as any spurned pet, the branch retreated back up into the canopy. Half way into its ascent it paused and turned back to Linnet.

“I said go,” said Linnet, without hesitation.

The branch vanished back into the mass of fluttering leaves and swaying wood.

“Linnet!” said Timpkin, unable to believe what he had just seen. “That was so cruel!”

“I’ll tell you what is cruel,” said Linnet. “Starting tomorrow, I’m to spend the next few days helping my mom prepare for the festival, which means I will be toiling from sun up to sun down. Probably be covered in blisters before the week is out.”

“Your parents were pretty upset, huh?” asked Timpkin.

“Very,” said Linnet. “They yelled a lot, of course. ‘How could you embarrass the family like that? How could you be so irresponsible? Why don’t you help out more around here?’ You know the classics.”

“I’m sorry I got you in such a bad spot. I feel terrible,” said Timpkin. He felt even worse for not insisting on standing by Linnet when his mother hauled him away earlier today.

Linnet shrugged it off. “No, it’s alright. I’m just as much at fault. Besides, whatever pains I might suffer I will consider sweet purchase to your bout with the Badger. I have never seen anyone run him down the way you did.”

A small chuckle escaped Linnet but it did not appear to relax him.

“They’re right, you know,” Linnet continued, his voice lowered. “I should help out more around here. I don’t lift a finger to do anything, do I?” He seemed to direct this conversation to himself.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, Lin. Here, give her a little pet,” said Hoffer, offering up the cotton furred Pushkin. “I promise it’ll make you feel better.”

Linnet scowled at the offering. “Get that thing away from me or I swear Hoffer I’ll fling it over the rail.”

Hoffer recoiled in horror. “You won’t do any such thing.” He clutched the little animal protectively against his chest.

“Of course he won’t, Hoffer,” said Timpkin. “Just leave him be.”

“Well, I’ve had enough fun for tonight,” said Linnet as he stood. “I’m heading to bed. Got to be up and out before sunrise. I’m joining my mom to harvest leaves in the northern woods. Timpkin, you want to come?”

“No, thank you,” said Timpkin. Then he was struck by a marvelous idea. “But, I can see an opportunity for Hoffer to make up for his astoundingly bad behavior this evening. Hoff, tomorrow you’re going to help Linnet.”

Hoffer’s head snapped around so quickly that Timpkin was afraid it would fly off his neck.

“What?” Hoffer.

A notorious practitioner of oversleeping, Hoffer’s displeasure over this information was apparent.

“I don’t want to go.”

“He doesn’t want to go,” added Linnet, displaying an odd united front with his onetime enemy.

“Well, he doesn’t have a choice,” said Timpkin. “He either helps you tomorrow or, in the morning, I send him packing for home.”

Hoffer started to object but one look from Timpkin stopped him.

“I’ll go,” Hoffer murmured.

Linnet sidled up next to Timpkin.

“I don’t want him along,” Linnet whispered. “It will be a nightmare.”

“Linnet, I need some time to myself without having to watch after Hoffer. Please, just take him along with you and I’ll be eternally grateful,” said Timpkin.

“Alright, I’ll take him,” said Linnet, his voice colored with annoyance. He started to walk towards the balcony exit when he paused and turned back around to Timpkin. “But, I make no promise that I’ll bring him back.”

“Fine, with me” said Timpkin, a smile ornamenting his face.

Linnet and Hoffer walked towards the balcony door, each one eyeing the other. They both drew up short when they reached the exit at the same time.

“You go first,” said Hoffer, his voice full of suspicion. “I want you in front of me, where I can see you.”

Linnet rolled his eyes in annoyance and disappeared through the door.

Hoffer turned, said goodnight to Timpkin and then followed after Linnet. The Pushkin popped up over Hoffer’s right shoulder and waved its little paw in a goodbye to Timpkin. Soon it and his brother were gone; on their way to a soft bed and a restful sleep.

Calling after them, Timpkin said, “Goodnight.”



The dream always started the same; a sleeping fancy of sunshine and green hills. Tessel lived. He and Timpkin were together again and walking through the fields of Halin.

It was a scene from many years ago. Tessel proudly identified the various sights of the countryside, giving Timpkin his first glimpse of Halin.

At this point the dream diverged from its normal course as from afar Timpkin espied a peaceful grove. Wordlessly it called out to him, drawing his attention to its full lush trees and plush lawn.

High above the leaf laden crowns stood a beautiful treeholm. Its wooden edifice a mask of familial pleasantries.

An odd sense of the familiar clung to this place. Timpkin did not know how but he was certain he had been here before.

Timpkin turned to his brother to ask about the home and saw Tessel smiling at him. The warmth of Tessel's countenance was sincere and reassuring.

He tried to speak but Timpkin found that he could not talk. A crushing weight rendered him mute. Frustrated, he tried to force the words out but stubbornly they would not come.

All emotion suddenly faded from Tessel's face. His eyes became lifeless. When he spoke it was in a cold, empty voice.

"Release me."

A gray fog rose from the earth and wrapped Timpkin in a blanket of noiseless murk. Tessel vanished, swallowed by thick opaque billows. Timpkin searched desperately for his brother but after what seemed hours of aimless wandering he gave up hope.

Winds rose up around Timpkin and tore back the deep curtain of mists, revealing the familiar grove. Where sunshine had once played amongst the treetops now there was only ruin and shadows.

An old, uprooted treeholm walled one side of the grove with a tangle of roots and dead branches. Tessel's hidden presence resounded here.

"Release me."

Timpkin awoke with a start. His heart racing as the cold words still resounded in his ears.

As the cobwebs of sleep cleared, Timpkin's thoughts filled with the last image from his dream...the grove. A growing need to find this place filled him with desperation. Tessel was reaching out to him from there but the reason remained beyond Timpkin's grasp.

In that wooded company laid the answer. Somewhere in the recesses of his memories was hidden its location.

Then, mystically, the answer crashed down on him.

The painting in the Hall of Ancestry...