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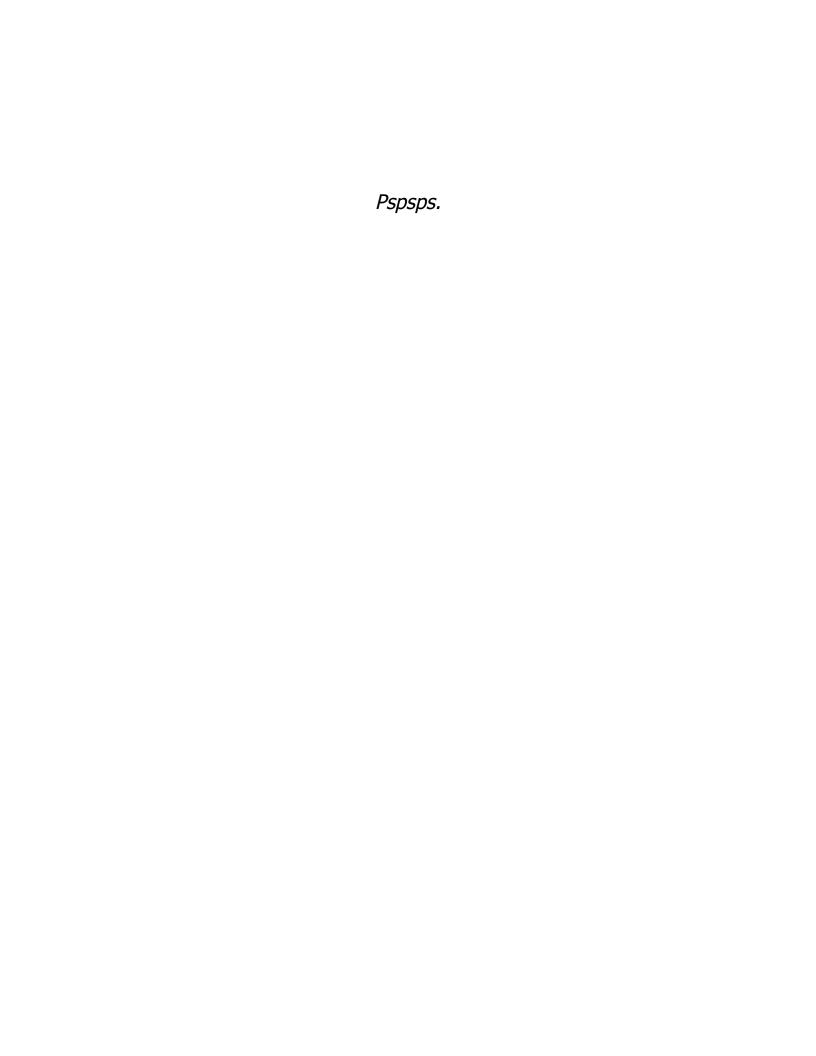
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GLOSSARY

DEOFOL

From Old English (OE) *dēofol*, "devil." Animal familiars used for communication, companionship, and counsel. Deofol are not chosen; they manifest early in childhood as a juvenile form of the animal in question and grow alongside the child. Their physical form may be nebulous or detailed, depending on the summoner's control of seith.

PLATT'S POX

Named after Epilotte Platt, a Haelan who first described the disease during an outbreak a century before this story begins. Platt's Pox is a viral infectious disease characterised by large, weeping sores. It most frequently occurs in children between the ages of one and twelve. Encephalopathy is a serious, and unfortunately common, complication, requiring Haelan intervention to reverse.

SEITH

From Old Norse *seiðr*, "magic"—though Aurienne Fairhrim would tell us that any magic, studied thoroughly enough, is science. Everyone can use seith for basic applications such as summoning their deofol, using a waystone, or powering up seith capacitors. Advanced study of seith requires initiation into an Order; mastery requires a tācn.

TĀCN

From OE *tācn*, "sign, symbol, evidence." A brand seared into the palms of full members of a given Order. The branding mechanism opens their seith system to the world and allows exponentially greater flow and manipulation of seith.

THE TĪENDOMS

From OE $t\bar{t}en$, "ten," + $d\bar{o}m$, "jurisdiction." The collective name for ten petty kingdoms vying for control of an archipelago in the North Atlantic Ocean. The porosity of the borders between the Tiendoms depends on the political climate; when war looms, as it frequently does, waystones are shut down and borders are closed.

WAYSTONES

From OE *weg*, "road, path; freedom of movement," + stone. Waystones are tall, rune-engraved menhirs placed along a network of ley lines called the waystone graticule. They are the most common means of travel in the Tiendoms. They are frequently found next to pubs, which are responsible for the upkeep of the waystones. The waystone graticule is controlled and managed by the Leyfarer Order.

CONTENT NOTES

The Irresistible Urge to Fall for Your Enemy is an enemies-to-lovers romantasy featuring an assassin and a healer. It contains elements that may not be suitable for all readers, including graphic violence, on-page torture, on-page deaths of minor characters, swearing, brief sexual content, medical content including fictional diseases affecting adults and children, and depictions of sick children in a hospital-like setting. Please read with care.

For further information on the Orders and a pronunciation guide, please refer to <u>this page</u> and <u>this page</u>, respectively. Finally, this novel is set in an alternate UK. British English is used throughout.





IRRESISTIBLE BASTARD MEETS IMMOVABLE BITCH

Osric

t wasn't until Aurienne Fairhrim that Osric learned eye contact could hit like a knife. She stood, upright and austere, in the confines of a daguerreotype, pinning him with black-bright eyes.

"Her?" asked Osric.

"Yes, sir," said Physicker Fordyce.

"Must it be her?"

"You really haven't a choice, sir."

Osric dropped the daguerreotype. It landed on his desk, from which vantage the woman's penetrating gaze found a new victim and perforated the ceiling. Also ornamenting Osric's desk unpleasantly were Aurienne Fairhrim's curriculum vitae and a list of publications verging on the infinite.

"She's one of the Haelan," said Osric. "Her Order won't work with mine. She'll refuse as a matter of principle."

"She may, sir," said Physicker Fordyce. "You asked us who *could* heal you—not who would."

"Don't be cheeky."

"No disrespect meant, sir," said Fordyce. "The Haelan Order's members are matchless healers, and Aurienne Fairhrim is herself

unsurpassed among them. She's a phenomenon when it comes to the seith system. If she declines—"

"Of course she'll decline; she's a Haelan."

"—then Physicker Shuttleworth and I will do our utmost to slow the degeneration."

"How long have I got left?" asked Osric.

Fordyce glanced at his colleague. Osric waited for the latter to say something of use, but Physicker Shuttleworth merely looked frightened, had a panicky spasm, and choked on his own saliva.

Fordyce found his courage among his colleague's sputters. "It's difficult to predict with any sort of accuracy."

"Answer me," said Osric.

"At our best guess, three or four months before your abilities begin to dwindle significantly, sir," said Fordyce.

"Dwindle significantly," repeated Osric.

"Yes, sir," said Fordyce.

"I'm going to lose my seith."

"That is, unfortunately, one of the likely outcomes, sir."

"I can't lose my seith," said Osric. "You know what I am."

Yes, the physickers knew; it was why they were on the verge of pissing themselves. They both nevertheless confirmed it with vigorous nods towards Osric's boots.

"You're a member of the Fyren Order, sir," said Shuttleworth. "P-perhaps you could envisage an early retirement?"

A brutally stupid question to which Osric replied, "Do you know how Fyren are retired?"

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"Er—no, sir."
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"Death."

"Ah."

"Bit of a problem, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"I must say, this outcome is a disappointment, given what I paid the two of you," said Osric. "Your illness is—really, it's quite unfortunate—not treatable, per se," said Fordyce. "It's a degenerative condition with no known cure."

"The Haelan are the greatest healers alive," said Shuttleworth, who had recovered from his suffocation to blind Osric with this luminous insight.

"Aurienne Fairhrim really is your best option, sir," said Fordyce. "If anyone can help you, it's her."

"She's my only option, if you and your colleague are to be believed."

"Erm—yes."

Having concluded that the physickers would be of no further use, Osric dismissed them. "I'm sure I can count on your discretion with respect to my condition."

The physickers stammered out a few yeses.

"My steward will see you out," said Osric. "Give us a moment."

Fordyce and Shuttleworth bowed low before exiting Osric's study. They placed their hats upon their useless heads and scuttled out towards the reception room.

Osric called for his steward. "Mrs. Parson?"

Mrs. Parson and her white-streaked bun popped round the doorpost. "Yes, sir?"

"See to it that neither of those physickers remembers this visit."

"Of course."

Osric held the daguerreotype of Aurienne Fairhrim up for Mrs. Parson's inspection. "Here's my apparent saviour. What do you think?"

Mrs. Parson grasped about at her bosom until she found her spectacles. She perched them on her nose and peered at the image. "She looks lovely."

"She looks like a means to an end," said Osric.

Mrs. Parson tapped Fairhrim's high-necked white dress. "One of the Haelan?"

"Yes. Sanctimonious to the core, no doubt. Aurienne Fairhrim is her name."

Mrs. Parson eyed Osric over her spectacles. "If she's a Haelan, she won't help you."

"Obviously," said Osric. "However, she is, apparently, a Phenomenon. And I'm in need of a Phenomenon, Parson. How shall I convince her to assist?" He turned to a looking glass, inspected the finest cheekbones in the Tiendoms, and said, "Seduction?"

"I don't think you'd manage it," said Parson.

"You offend me, madam."

Mrs. Parson, who was annoyingly sensible, said, "She's a Haelan. She'd sooner walk into the Thames than help you. Perhaps we can equip you with a plan B. And a plan C."

"B for Blackmail, C for Coercion?"

"Amusing, sir," said Mrs. Parson, though she did not look amused.

"Very well," said Osric. "Equip me. Do a spot of investigating on Aurienne Fairhrim. Find me a bit of leverage. Bribing, extortion, threats to life and limb—you know. The usual."

"Very good, sir," said Mrs. Parson.

"That's sorted, then. After you've seen our guests out, could you fetch my daggers for tonight's sparring session? The Moulineaux pair, if you would."

"Of course, sir."

Mrs. Parson left. Osric flexed his hands. The numbness was spreading; it had started at the nape of his neck and now followed his seith system down, past his shoulders, and, in prickling tingles, into his fingers. Osric had thought little of it until he'd begun to notice corresponding fluxes in the flow of his seith, at which point he had summoned the physickers. Their diagnosis lay heavy upon him: seith degeneration. In common parlance, seith rot.

Would it be wiser to make up some excuse to avoid this evening's spar with his fellow Fyren? He never missed a spar. It

might raise questions, and Osric couldn't afford to raise questions at this rather delicate juncture.

Mrs. Parson brought him his daggers. Osric strapped them on, plastered a roguish grin across his face, and went to the waystone.

He supposed it couldn't hurt to go. With the numbness spreading as it was, it literally couldn't hurt.



IT TOOK MRS. PARSON A few days to return to Osric with the results of her investigation on Aurienne Fairhrim. Osric considered himself an expert when it came to intelligence gathering, but Mrs. Parson, with her network of serving girls and charwomen, was a force in her own right.

She knocked on the door to Osric's study with a conspiratorial air. Osric waved her in.

"Findings on Aurienne Fairhrim." Mrs. Parson pulled a wodge of paper out of her apron. "My half grand-aunt's daughter's third cousin works in the Haelan kitchens."

Osric did not attempt to work out Mrs. Parson's genealogical Möbius strip. He fanned the papers out on his desk. "And? What have we discovered? Has Fairhrim got any family we can use? Any debts we can acquire? Kidnap? The situation is growing desperate."

"There is some family," said Mrs. Parson. "Father from the Danelaw, mother from Tamazgha. Both presently in London. No debts to speak of; she's rather well-off. Kidnap would, of course, always be an option."

"A classic," said Osric.

"May I tell you what I think?" asked Mrs. Parson.

"Say on."

"Given the nature of the task, you might prefer her to be cooperative," said Mrs. Parson. "I've discovered that the Haelan Order is in pursuit of funding. They're seeking a substantial amount for one of their research endeavours. You've heard of the Platt's Pox outbreak?"

"Vaguely," said Osric. "I don't keep up with street urchins and their diseases."

"This particular disease may offer scope for you to strong-arm a Haelan into healing you," said Mrs. Parson.

"Bless the pestilent children, then," said Osric. "What's the required amount?"

"Twenty million thrymsas."

"Bugger me sideways."

"As I said, sir—substantial. The Haelan are in discussion with funding councils and the kings and queens of all of the Tiendoms in pursuit of the capital, but they've met little success. It seems everyone shares your apathy towards the street urchins, the poor things. But if you were to offer the amount, perhaps Haelan Fairhrim could be persuaded to set aside her natural antagonism to one of your Order."

"Bribery it is," said Osric. "Good shout."

Mrs. Parson looked doubtful. "Do your coffers hold twenty million?"

"I didn't say we were actually paying her."

"Ah."

"Proceed with the offer. Let me know how you get on."

Instead of trotting off to accomplish her task, however, Mrs. Parson remained in front of Osric's desk. "If I may make another suggestion, sir?"

"What is it?"

"Aurienne Fairhrim is well protected." Mrs. Parson shuffled through the documents until she came to a series of floor plans. "She lives in the Haelan fortress at Swanstone. She has rooms in the compound itself. To further complicate matters, Swanstone is patrolled by Wardens."

"Wardens? I *hate* Wardens. Colossal bell-ends, every one. Why have they got Wardens at Swanstone?"

"I'm told the Haelan and Warden Orders have some sort of agreement," said Mrs. Parson. "Healing for protection, and vice versa."

"How many Wardens have they got at Swanstone?" asked Osric.

"Three or four at any given time."

"That's a bloody inconvenience." Osric observed the map of Swanstone's grounds. "I see now that approaching Fairhrim with this bribe might require someone with a particular skill set."

Mrs. Parson nodded. "A bit of skulduggery wouldn't go amiss."

"One of my specialties, as it happens."

"Quite."

"Right," said Osric. "Where's my cloak? I'm off to bribe. And if Fairhrim refuses, I shall proceed with kidnap."

"A classic, sir,"

"What's the nearest waystone to this Haelan fortress?"

"Closest pub is the Publish or Perish."

"Excellent."

Cloaked up, gloves on, and hair attractively tousled, Osric set off to the waystone.



AT SWANSTONE, DUGGERY WAS SKULLED.

The Haelan Order was headquartered on an island at the frigid arse-end of the Danelaw. The white fortress of Swanstone, with its snow-tipped battlements, seemed to scowl defiance at Osric as he approached. Mrs. Parson was correct: Aurienne Fairhrim was well protected. She and her Order were literally ensconced in ivory towers.

Osric waited until dusk began to lengthen shadows before making his approach. The fortress itself worried him less than the Wardens. Infiltration was one thing; infiltration with Wardens present was another. Their Order specialised in defence and the violent dismemberment of intruders. They were an exceptional foe for a naughty Fyren here to bribe a Haelan.

However: Osric was exceptional, too.

He took the shadow-way up the ramparts and tucked himself between the wings of an enormous stone swan to observe. He spotted the hulking figures of Wardens—two of them below, two upon the ramparts with him—gleaming in armour. There were also a dozen Swanstone guards on patrol. One of the Wardens on the ramparts had her lightshield on, bright between the chinks in her armour. A shadow-walker like Osric wouldn't be able to get within stabbing distance of her.

But today—rare thing—Osric had no intentions of stabbing anyone. He was here to play nice.

A few white-clad Haelan crossed the courtyard below. To Osric's eye, the entire place suffered from an extreme of the aseptic: dry, functional, pure. Even the snow, arranged in fine lines by the wind, seemed intentional in its placement, and sanitised.

Below the snow, the courtyard gleamed with protective wards. Thick, glowing lines of the Wardens' seith crisscrossed the flagstones as they patrolled.

Osric watched the Wardens pace out their rounds for an hour before venturing forth. Then, taking exquisite care to avoid the shifting wards, he melted into the darkness at the foot of a battlement, and glided from shadow to shadow until he had made it into the fortress proper.

It took him two hours, but he triggered no wards, and didn't kill anyone.