

Michelle d'Evangelo's Journal

I may have made a terrible mistake. After Charles broke things off, I flew into a rage and slashed up my paintings of him, shattered the goblets he had gifted me, even hurled his ring down a well – a matter I regret, as I could have sold it to pay rent this month. My rent money went to some degree on wine after that. My recollections grow blurry as to the details. I believe I first aimed to spend my time on the company of men who would allow me to forget Charles' rejection, then grew sick with want of vengeance. I know not who whispered to me the name of Fingersnap, a woman who had developed a reputation as a solver of unsolvable problems in her short time in town, or how to get to her. My recollections grow sharper upon visiting the cramped, dim shop she inhabited, still open to visitors in the dead of night.

She seemed almost the picture of a kindly old grandmother at first, hunched, cragged and worn by age, if perhaps a little heavy on the warts, with skin black as fresh coal, violet eyes and gleaming ivory teeth. She had two younger women with her that she referred to her daughters, though one must surely have been adopted and the other had been spared her mother's looks – though if she were their mother and not their grandmother, she had borne late for a human.

The first, the younger, was a pale, wretched thing, ill-favoured in her looks and perhaps thirteen years of age. Her hair was brittle and white, her skin as rough and struck with warts as her much older mother, and she seemed to flinch at the slightest touch, as if any contact with her skin brought her terrible pain.

The second had dark skin as her mother, a deep brown rather than coal-black, but in the prime of her life, perhaps twenty four and one of the most beautiful creatures of the opposite sex I have ever seen. Compared to the warm, simple shawl of her mother and her sister's rags, her dress was fine cotton and in fashion for the region. She seemed to have great disdain for her adoptive sister.

Fingersnap made me an offer I thought ridiculous at first. In my drunken state I began to laugh at her proposition until she snapped her fingers, true to her name, and a thing of night terrors came upon me! A huge black dog seemed to leap from the very shadows themselves and thrust me to the ground, snarling and slavering, its fangs a half-inch from my throat. Only when she snapped her fingers again did it relent and before my eyes seemed to fade into wisps of smoke and shade. It was only then I realised I was dealing with some manner of powerful sorcerer.

She offered me a pact and in my terrified, half-sober state, I was willing to listen. If I were to steal a set of scrolls for her from Charles' own quarters in the cathedral, marked with a peculiar symbol – a triangle within a square within a circle – then she would grant me the power to wreak my vengeance upon Charles with but a touch.

Only in the haze of this morning do I recall accepting her bond and her weaving some manner of violet thread about my wrist in acceptance. The thread is gone, but it is almost as if I can feel it still there. I am tempted to simply forget the whole thing, but when I close my eyes I can still feel the hot, wet breath of that hound, its pressure upon my chest. I fear I shall have no choice but to fulfil the bargain.

After much wringing of hands, I did it. I spent a day considering the matter – well, wringing my hands in truth. I made sure of a long visit to my Ferozian barber (such a handsome chap, and such strong hands on the massage) to pick me up and spent some time in the coffee shops that are becoming such a rage in Port-au-Salz, but before long I resolved myself to the task. After picking up my new doublet from my tailor, I made sure to properly perfume myself and presented myself the very image of contrition, there to beg Charles to take me back. I rather think the scoundrel enjoyed dangling the possibility in front of me before he finally denied it. Still, I took the opportunity to slip into his study when we were interrupted by a deacon and was very nearly caught before I found the scroll case in question. They seem rather ancient affairs, and no wonder. Loans from the Regnal Library in Tyre, it would seem! I suppose I should be embarrassed for how much trouble Charles would get in over them going missing, but I truly do not care. I made sure to shake his hand on the way out, as one last “peace offering”, and was glad to see the end of him. I noticed no obvious change to Charles as I left.

I returned to the shop, but no sign of Fingersnap. I was all set to leave when the younger of the two daughters, the pale and wretched one, emerged from the cellar along with some curious acrid smells. She took possession of the scrolls from me and warned me not to return. I asked of her when this curse should take effect and whether I had anything to fear. She gave me a curious look, and I swear the ugly thing almost seemed to be viewing me with pity, the nerve of it. Then she smiled and assured me that I would see definite results within three days and that I would be quite immune to the curse's effect. She repeated her insistence that I take my leave and I was all to happy to do so.

By the Regent! The most dreadful news from the cathedral. Charles was discovered in his chambers, turned to stone! I had not thought

No matter. It is done, whatever regrets I may have. I can put this whole business behind me. Who would trace such a thing to me, after all? I am only too glad I shall never have to see those women again.

Disaster! The wretched hag Fingersnap tricked me! Not only Charles was turned to stone, but also my barber, my tailor and three of the coffee shop owners in town. I fear it is only a matter of time before this strange curse claims me also. I must use what hours I have to seek out all those I was with on that fateful day and track them down, to warn them or at least to witness them.

Just as I think things cannot get worse, they do. Every person I touched on that day has become stone. Even people I simply met and shook hands with, or those I knew well, even a flower girl I bought a rose from has become petrified. Worse still, I did not meet that girl or buy her flower until the day after I shook Charles' hand. Does the curse affect me even still? I must wear gloves and keep from other people. To think that I must sit alone in my studio and await the end. Opium. Opium will ease my passing.

I yet live. It has been five days now, cloistered in my studio and I have not touched any living soul in that time. It seems the wretched girl spoke true, though her truth was chosen carefully. I was indeed not affected by the curse itself, merely some carrier for this pale, hard

death. Perhaps, if I am careful, I may pay someone to purchase food and drink for me without touching them. I can make preparations to leave.

Oh horror! Regent, what have I done! Dozens now have turned to stone, scores! Yet many of these are in parts of the city I have never frequented. Furthermore, nearly all the staff of the cathedral have become stone now. I can only conclude that this same curse I carry must be passed on to all those I inflict in turn, a cruel magical plague. I shall leave town tonight, before it is too late.

(Many of the intervening passages are quite dull, relating to a quiet life in the country, taking occasional painting work but mostly avoiding people.)

A shadow of my past has returned to me. The milkmaid came to deliver my order this morning – I take care as always never to meet another living soul without the gloves and heavy scarf that offer them protection – and brought news as she came. A halfling community near the woods south of Treachery was struck by a terrible affliction of deathly wails, screaming as banshees before the sickness burnt itself out, killing almost every person there. The gossip among halflings is that a survivor escaped, blaming themselves for the tragedy, claiming to have brought the plague upon their town in vengeance upon a spurned lover. The milkmaid clearly believed the stranger mad from grief, but I pressed for details. The survivor is staying in a village not ten miles from my remote cottage. Their tale is too close to my own, I must know. I will set out at once.

Berri Bimbleberry's tale was everything I feared. She had heard of an old woman with powers in the woods and sought her out to avenge herself upon her lover. Heading deep into the woods, she had found an old woman with night-black skin and a great hound. Fingersnap.

Fingersnap had offered her the revenge she sought in the form of a blue egg, to be broken near her spurned lover. In exchange, she demanded Berri bring her something – a corpse, washed up on a remote beach on the eastern coast of Suul, to be found within a week and brought back as intact as she found it. Berri had borrowed a team of dogs and ridden hard, finding the secluded cove she was given directions to. Within she found the half-eaten corpse of an elf, missing its legs and one arm but with a bloated if somewhat intact upper body. She retrieved the body and purchased a vat of vinegar, into which she pickled the corpse, then returned to Fingersnap with the body.

Of course once she returned she discovered that not only her lover but her whole village had been struck by this wailing sickness, while one of Fingersnap's daughters – the handsome one – retrieved the corpse and mocked her by pointing out that she had received exactly what she had asked for. Everything else was simply "a bargain".

It seems that Berri has emerged from her own bargain with Fingersnap less cursed than I, for she is no carrier of the sickness herself. I made a gift to her of several hundred crowns, a healthy portion of my remaining savings, since she may at least make use of it in the cities in a manner I might not. She bade me farewell, thinking upon a new life far away from this, perhaps taking up toymaking.

I found it. Southwest of Treachery, deep in the woods. There are few landmarks to point the way – due west from the rock with a scowling face, south-south-west from the tree shaped like a grasping hand, straight on from the pit until you reach the cottage. The cottage itself is a mask for her real lair, dug into some ancient foundations from an earlier time, a dim and wretched dungeon.

I crept into the lair, hiding from the creatures within, fearful that great hound would find me again. By the Regent's grace, they did not hear me enter. I came even into their inner sanctum, where those three were gathered around a poor and pitiful form. The wretched girl was older now, no more favoured of look than before, but standing taller and no longer flinching as she once did. The handsome one was showing the tell-tale signs of one who has changed from using make-up to accentuate their youth to one who seeks to use it to cover the first signs of age. Unlike the rough garments of the younger woman, the handsome one still wore finery, bizarre as it seemed in this ill locale. Fingersnap herself seemed the same, coal-skinned and violet eyed, neither a day older nor younger than before. Now, however, she stood tall rather than hunching, and I saw that her weakness of before was but a feint. What had once been the kindly eyes of a grandmother were twisted by a cruel glee, her viciousness and lack of restraint now etched into every feature.

Between them, upon a great stone slab, was a pale-skinned elf chained to the stone by his one intact limb. He showed signs of torture and alternated between sobs of despair and incoherent rage at his captors. Fingersnap and her daughters seemed to be engaged in an interrogation, though I caught little of what they said and none of what came before I arrived. It seemed she wanted to find something, something he had knowledge of. Her promises of death seemed not to affect the elf, until she swore that she would burn and grind his body until it was ash, then mix the ash with clay and bury it in the ground, upon which he shook with mortal terror. Even so, he seemed unwilling to reveal whatever he knew. Next she informed him that his body would never be healed, never be repaired – she swore she had ways to ensure his limbs would stay gone. Then she held up a black bag and offered him a bargain. He seemed to recognise the bag and at once became disgusted, horrified but strangely hopeful.

Before I could discover more, I was myself discovered. The youngest gagged the elf and all three of these creatures rounded upon me. I was set to run when that chilling growl came from behind me and I knew that hound's teeth were but inches from my throat. I could feel its breath upon my neck.

They offered me a new bargain, to keep my life. I had come to ask them to bring the curse upon me to an end. They agreed to do such, if I did something for them. I will not write of that here, for it disgusts me and I have no intention of carrying it through. I would have let them kill me, if I did not believe I needed to make it known to others what I know. I swore also that I would never speak of what I saw to another soul. So I have not – I have written it here instead. If any discover my writings once I am gone, know the truth of Fingersnap and her daughters.

Pain. Terrible pain such that it is hard to write. Once I wrote I intended to break the contract but it began. It will last the rest of my life.

Opium. My old friend. Take me to sleep. One last time.