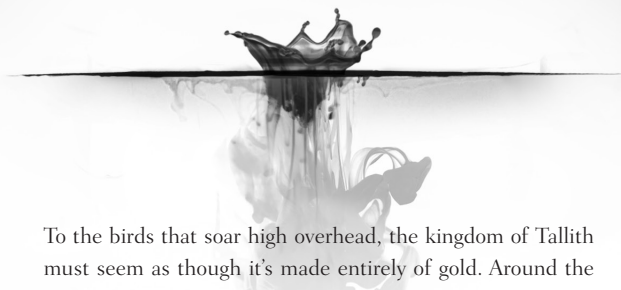


The King of Rats

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 SCHOLASTIC





To the birds that soar high overhead, the kingdom of Tallith must seem as though it's made entirely of gold. Around the coastline the sea glitters, lapping against the pale golden sand like a tongue. Beyond the beaches, beyond scrubland and lush forests, are bright fields of corn and maize, bobbing and swaying in the wind. A blonde woman stands in one of the fields, dressed in cloth the colour of sunflowers. A fat, naked baby sits in her arms, a golden ear of corn gripped in its hand. The villages are built with yellow stone, thatched with amber-coloured hay. Even the paths that wind between the cottages are gold. There is gold as far as the eye can see, all the way up to the castle, where guards armoured in gold plate keep watch over the seven gleaming onion-domed towers that stand like courtiers around the main keep of Tallith Castle.

Inside the castle, every room is filled with the flattering

light that only gold can give: reflected warmth and hope and splendour, from the stone, from the furnishings, from the thousand gilt and glinting details in the paintings that adorn the walls. Even the olive skin of the staff seems gilded as they rush to and fro carrying platters filled with sticky honey-drenched figs, almonds nestling in flaking pastry, and jugs of wine made with grapes plucked from the vine just as they turned golden.

Along the wide passageways, polished candelabras gleam as bright as the flames from the candles they hold. In the throne room, the king sits on a tall golden throne, carved with snarling chimeras, their eyes studded with amber that catches the sunlight. On the king's left stands his daughter, Aurelia, and to his right, his son and heir, the elder of the royal twins by sixteen minutes, Aurek.

They are all the more striking because they are not gold.

The royal twins look as though they have been carved from moonlight: pale skin that no amount of sunlight can colour; tall, slender bodies; ankles and wrists bird-fine and delicate; necks long and graceful. They seem to move a fraction slower than everyone around them, only adding to their ethereal grace. They wear their silver hair long and loose, flowing down their backs; from behind it is difficult to tell them apart. Only their eyes are the colour of honey. Truly they are the heirs of Tallith.

Aurek, of course, will be the one to inherit the crown should the king die, and Aurelia will be heir if anything happens to Aurek – though the people of Tallith know that as

long as Aurelia is around, nothing terrible will happen to her brother. Had she been born first, Aurelia would have been queen, for primogeniture is law in Tallith. Had she been a different sort of child she might have been married off to a noble from another land, to fill the coffers, or to add military support. But with Aurek and Aurelia being what they are, there's no need to send anyone anywhere to keep Tallith secure.

The twins were born with the gift.

No one realized, at first, what it meant when they entered the world with their caul still covering their faces, slipping from their mother with ease, to the gasps of the assembled surgeons and apothecaries. Aurek came first, screaming lustily the moment the veil was torn from his face, small fists beating the air; then Aurelia, silent and watchful, weighing up the world outside the safety of the womb. The discovery of their gifts did not come till later: a chance drop of blood on an iron marble; the gasps of the nannies when it turned to gold, followed by experiments where the royal twins were pricked, over and over, their blood collected until finally it became clear these children were not just royals, but gods.

Prince Aurek sits in the window seat in the south-facing solar at the top of the Tower of Love. It is the tower he's claimed as his own, because it affords him easy access to the kitchens and the stables, and also an excellent view over the part of the courtyard where the maids bathe themselves in small tin baths. His handsome face is sullen, his lips downturned and

pouting. He pulls at a loose thread on his cuff, gold of course, winding it around his index finger until it becomes purple and throbbing, fat like a sated leech.

“I’m bored,” he says to the room.

The room does not reply.

Prince Aurek is unaccustomed to being alone. As prince and heir there is a battalion of servants and tutors and sycophants eager for his attention. There’s usually a girl or two hovering nearby, her fingers waiting to glide snake-like over his skin, her chin tilted upwards so he can claim her lips if he chooses to.

He always chooses to.

Despite having seen only twenty-one summers, Prince Aurek has the appetites of a king and already has eight bastards in the royal nursery. His father is pleased, though he pretends not to be, rolling his eyes with barely disguised pride each time Aurek tells him of another child. The women are cosseted and pampered until the baby comes, then given a fat purse and sent as far from Tallith as possible. That’s what you do with brood mares, the king tells his son. You put them out to pasture when they’ve done their duty; it’s kinder. Aurek has wondered on occasion if the women really are sent away, or whether they are disposed of in a less sunny fashion – but he finds he can’t quite bring himself to care. For him, the thrill is in the chase and the immediate capture. Like a greedy spider, he doesn’t know what to do with his prizes once won, so he wraps them in silks and ignores them in favour of fresher meats until

they disappear.

The children, though, may be of some use. The king and Aurek planned to test their blood from birth, but Aurelia had an uncharacteristic storm at the idea of bleeding infants. Her distress and her threats were so great that the king capitulated and promised to wait until the children were five summers old. If they have the same gifts as their father, they'll be able to use their blood to bring life to clay. They will be natural-born generals of an army of golems that feel no pain, need no food or rest. And they'll be able to turn base metal to gold. If they can do this – if even half of them have inherited their father's abilities – the future of Tallith is assured. And, with Aurelia's gift, it is eternal.

The king would like to see Aurelia married, so she too can have children. He could use more of what her blood can do. But he has to find her a husband who will stay in Tallith, and not try and take her away. That complicates matters.

Prince Aurek sighs, peering out of the window. One of the serving maids, Selene or Celeste, he forgets her name – or never knew it – has been told to meet him here after the midday meal. He slipped the note into the bodice of her tunic the previous night. A new addition to the staff, he'd watched her during the meal, sucking duck grease from his fingers slowly, one by one, making her blush. He'd liked the way the rose-coloured stain had started beneath her neckline and travelled up along her throat before coating her cheeks. So he wrote the note on one of the scraps of paper he always carried with him, and pushed it down between her breasts

as he passed her. Very few of the female servants have not received one of Prince Aurek's notes. And none has ever refused his company before.

The courtyard below is quiet, no swish of skirts hurrying to the tower to meet him, and he frowns, swinging his long legs down from the cushions that line the window seat, heedless of the dirt his boots have left on them.

He walks moodily out of the room, his fingers dragging against the stone walls as he makes his way to the rope bridge that is his route back into the keep. All of the towers are linked to the keep, and each other, by a series of suspended bridges that only the royals and courtiers may walk upon. Servants, staff and commoners must walk below. Aurek spends hours strolling between the towers, allowing the citizens of Tallith to look up at him as he passes. But today when he glances down he fancies he sees scorn and amusement in their eyes, the suggestion that they know he, the crown prince of Tallith, was spurned by a serving wench.

He'll have the girl whipped, he thinks. It will go some way to soothing his ego to see her stripped to her petticoats and then lashed. He'll make sure he stands in front of her, will have someone hold her head up so she can see him as she's beaten.

He crosses the bridge, feeling cheered, when he stops dead.

Ahead of him, paused in the act of nibbling the ropes and staring at him as though he were an oddity, is a large brown rat.

Aurek takes a step forward but the rat holds its ground, its nose twitching. He takes another step but still the beast refuses to get out of his way. Aurek has never seen a real rat before and he doesn't know whether to be curious or frightened. The rat has no such confusion. It watches the prince with black, unblinking eyes. One of its ears has been torn off, and recently – the blood is still wet. It's only when Aurek pulls a jewelled dagger from his belt and throws it that it moves. It hisses angrily and skitters across the bridge as the knife misses, clattering to the ground below. It stops and looks back at Aurek before disappearing into an impossibly small gap in the wall.

Aurek forgets all about the maid who rejected him. He crosses the bridge into the keep and marches to the throne room where his father sits listening to petitions. He waves away the herald and strides up to the king, taking his place at his right. Aurelia already stands at her father's left. When the petitioner, a minor lord from the cut of his tunic, bows and scrapes his way out of the throne room, Aurek bends to his father's ear.

"I believe I just saw a rat," he declares.

"I told you," Aurelia says with some satisfaction. "Now will you believe me?"

Although they look almost identical on the outside, Aurek and Amelia are opposites in every other way. So when Aurek demands that they begin a hunt for the rat immediately – that they take the tower apart if need be – Aurelia rests a hand on her father's shoulder, her face full of concern.

The king turns to his daughter. "What do you counsel?" he asks, earning her a glare from her brother.

"We wait," she says simply. "I love rats no better than my brother, and I do not like the thought of them inside the walls of our home, but it would have happened sooner or later. The ships go to and from the port so often now that it was only a matter of time before rats came to our shores. Let us hold back from extreme action and allow nature to take its course. The stable cats will solve this problem. Should any other rats venture between our walls, they will remember the taste of this rat's blood and hunt all the harder for its kin."

The king gives his daughter a searching look. "Very well. We will let nature take its course."

Although he's tried to love them equally, Aurelia has always been the king's favourite child. She's so very like her mother. His loves his son deeply, but he sees too much of himself in Aurek. And whilst Aurelia can't make gold, she can make something more valuable. A drop of her blood, added to water, creates an elixir that heals wounds and illnesses. If taken daily, it stops time itself. With the elixir, he could remain king for as long as he wishes. For as long as he needs to.

Aurek, it seems, has not realized this yet.

It appears that Aurelia is right. The following morning, the kitchen staff, wrapped tightly in their blankets on the floor of the larder, and under the long table that spans the kitchen, are awoken by the shrieks of the scullery maid. Rising to

box the maid's ears for waking her, Cook finds herself weak at the knees at the sight of the decapitated rat on the kitchen floor. She aims a quick slap at the girl and then tells her to clean it up. The scullery maid does so, sobbing all the while at the cruelty of cats. She thinks of them as friends, feeding them the scraps that no one else wants. How could they be so ungrateful as to leave a headless rat in her path?

But the stable cats must truly despise the scullery maid. As the weeks pass, she cleans away the bodies of so many rats that she's stopped crying about it. She sighs, resigned to the task, while across Tallith, men, women and children do the same. What once was an act full of horror is now as commonplace as emptying the messpits or cleaning out the pig-pen. Aurek smirks nastily at his sister every time a new complaint is brought to the king, but the king takes his daughter's word seriously. If Aurelia says nature will take its course, then he will allow it to.

He advises each home to purchase a cat. He has his scribes write up edicts proclaiming food is to be cleared promptly away once a meal is finished, to be stored in locked chests and boxes, not left in bags on shelves. He demands all holes are filled, gaps in walls boarded up. Pets and livestock are to be fed under watch, not left alone with their food. He will soon show the rats they are not welcome, and they will go back to where they came from.

The rats become bolder the hungrier they get. When the sacks of grain they had in such plentiful supply disappear, they use their teeth to gnaw holes in the locked chests.

When these are removed and hung on ropes from the rafters, they turn their attention to the livestock, biting chickens and ducks, new-born lambs and puppies. Their attempts to survive make them increasingly ruthless, until one morning the king is woken by his son, screaming that a rat has bitten one of his bastards on the cheek.

This is the final straw. The king cares little for an attack on his pantry but greatly about an attack on his treasury, and that is what the rats have done by biting one of the children who may have blood that makes gold.

Aurek was banking on that.

The king chastises Aurelia for not warning him that rats will bite children. Aurelia is tearful and filled with remorse. Had she imagined that would happen, she says, she would have agreed with Aurek from the start.

This pleases the prince, who has never forgiven his sister for holding more than her fair share of their father's love. Although they were close when they were young, sharing that eerie bond that occurs when children swim together in the womb, able to talk without words, to know where the other is without being told, to feel their sibling's pain as though it was their own, after their mother died, Aurek decided his sister was competition for his father's love – a contest he should by rights be the unchallenged winner of.

“We'll hunt and kill them all,” Aurek growls.

The courtiers nod their heads. Aurelia stays silent and Aurek thinks it's because she has been cowed, proven wrong,

and therefore defeated. He allows himself a smile at his victory.

A month later Aurek and his band of rat-killers have destroyed sixteen rats between them, the stable cats thrice that number. In that time some three hundred rats have spawned new litters of mewling, hungry mouths, each litter between seven and fourteen rat-kittens. In another five weeks many of these have reached maturity and are breeding themselves. Six months after Aurek first saw the rat on his way out of the Tower of Peace, there are eight times as many rats in Tallith as there are citizens. Rats run openly along the poles that hold up the golden curtains in the palace. Rats dare to run under the tables in the great hall during feasts. Prosperous, bountiful Tallith is paradise: food never runs short, and predators are few and far between.

It is when the king wakes one morning and realizes the pleasant, delicate fingernails on his chest do not belong to his late wife, but to an especially large, skewbald rat that he decides enough is enough. He knocks the rat across the room and bellows for his council to convene at once.

The girl who lies in Aurek's bed in the Tower of Love tries to cover herself when the knock comes at his door. The prince looks at her in disgust. He shouts to the messenger that he will be there anon, then he demands that she continue with her task.

Aurelia is sitting in her window in the Tower of Wisdom, watching the sea in the distance. She rises when she hears footsteps on the stairs, opening the door without waiting for

the knock. She has been waiting for this summons, preparing for it. It has left an ill feeling in her stomach, a sense of dread, inevitable and consuming. It's too late, she thinks to herself. Too late. But what is too late, she cannot say.

They have come from across the sea. It has taken them forty days and nights, the final three of which have been racked by a storm so powerful that the holy man aboard the ship blesses every sailor and passenger, and offers them sacrament, even if – especially if – they do not believe. Whether the gods take pity on the ship, or whether its crew are better or luckier sailors than others, the storm passes, the ship rights itself and, on a beautifully clear summer morning, the rat catcher and his children sight the port of Tallith.

They make for a breath-taking tableau, the rat catcher and his children. Their skin and eyes are dark silk, in contrast to velvet paleness of the Tallithi royal family. They stand tall and slim, their hair pulled away from their faces, woven tight against their skulls, emphasising their long, high cheekbones. Their eyes are framed by an impossible amount of dark lashes that brush their eyebrows when they open their eyes wide with amusement as the king offers them gold in return for their work. Their generous lips quirk when the king pledges palaces and servants to them, lips that, on the face of the rat catcher's daughter, Aurek finds his eyes drawn to again and again.

She is, without question, the most beautiful woman he has ever seen, and desire for her makes his stomach squirm

as though he's swallowed a nest of live eels. She, for her part, keeps her gaze locked on a spot just above his head; no demure downward glance for her, no submissive dip of her chin. His gaze travels her body as his father and hers bargain the price for Tallith to avail itself of the rat catcher's services. He notes the tone in her arms, the promise of muscle there, and the proud set of her shoulders. Here is a woman worthy of his attentions; here is one worth pursuing. He wonders how long it will take for the rat catcher to do his work; whether he'll have time to seduce her.

For the first time in his life, as his eyes roam over the stubborn tilt of her jaw, he wonders if he'll be able to seduce her. Whether he'll be desirable to her.

"We have no need for your gold," the rat catcher says, his voice deep and clear. "Nor your palaces or jewels. We're wealthy. We want for little."

"Then why come?" The king's annoyance is clear. "Do you plan to help us out of the goodness of your hearts?"

"I said we want for little, not that we're saints," the rat catcher smiles. "There are things we lack. Like you, I have two children: a son and a daughter, strong and beautiful. I cannot let them go until I can be sure they've found their equal. Especially my daughter, you understand. A man cannot give his jewel to another man's son unless he can be sure the boy is the strongest, the bravest and the best she could have. You must surely feel the same? Could you give your daughter to someone who you did not see as a brother in honour?" He lets his words echo around the great hall

and the king smiles. He understands, and what's more, he approves. Anyone can see the rat catcher, despite his title, is a man of money and power. It would not, he thinks, be so dishonourable for Aurelia to be wed to his son. And because the rat catcher's son is not a prince, a lord, with land of his own to govern, the king can insist that the couple – and their children, with their potential gifts – remain at Tallith castle.

He glances briefly at his daughter, whose eyes are fixed on the ground, the model of a virtuous woman, before he looks back at the rat catcher.

“All I want for my daughter is that her husband is worthy of her and that she believes him to be someone she can respect, perhaps even come to love,” he says.

The rat catcher smiles. “As I said: for her to have the strongest, the bravest and the best.”

“Do you believe your son to be that?”

“I do,” the rat catcher says. “You must think the same of yours?”

The king gives a curt nod.

“Then we have an accord,” the rat catcher smiles. “I will rid your country of rats, and you shall marry your son to my daughter.”

The king's head is tilted back, a split-second away from nodding, when the voice of the rat catcher's daughter breaks the spell, causing him almost to slide from the throne as his bones turn to liquid with the horror of what he has almost agreed to.

“What?” says the rat catcher's daughter.

“What?” the king echoes weakly.

Aurek says nothing, for once having the wisdom to keep his mouth shut as he waits to see how this will play out.

“You would use me as a wage?” The eyes of the rat catcher’s daughter blaze as she turns to her father. “You would sell me to that milksop?”

“Mind your tongue!” Aurek breaks his silence, angry red blotches blooming on his cheeks.

The rat catcher’s daughter turns her fiery gaze on him, cowing him and inflaming him simultaneously. “I am not coin to be used in a transaction,” she says as she looks back at her father.

“You’re damned right, you’re not.” The king finally finds his voice. “The woman my son marries will be queen one day. Aurek is the heir to the throne of Tallith. He cannot marry a commoner. However lovely,” he adds with as much tact as he can muster. “I had thought you meant to take my daughter as wife for your husband, and I will consent to that. What’s more, I will allow your son a place in this castle as a prince.” The king looks expectantly at the boy.

“I think not,” the rat catcher says. “My son is promised to another.”

“But you said you couldn’t allow your children to be wed unless it was to the best,” the king reminds him.

“And so it is. He is betrothed to a princess already. A witch princess from the northern lands.”

“If you knew what Aurelia is, you’d laugh at this witch princess,” the king tells him. “For my daughter has gifts better

even than witchcraft. What my daughter can offer beats any spell.”

Aurelia, who until now has remained statue-still beside the throne, feels a blush climb her throat. She chances a glance at the rat catcher’s son but his eyes remain on the floor. Her eyes flicker to the side and she spies the rat catcher’s daughter, examining the room. When her gaze lands on Aurelia it slides straight off her almost instantly, as though she were nothing more than another piece of furniture.

“My son’s betrothed,” the rat catcher continues, “is the daughter of a great sorceress queen. She is more than a princess, even one such as your daughter.” He inclines his head respectfully towards Aurelia.

“Even so,” the king says, “your daughter cannot marry my son.”

“Why not?” The rat catcher looks at the king.

“B-because...” the king stammers.

The rat catcher raises an eyebrow as he waits.

“Because I’m the daughter of a rat catcher,” the girl says, her voice ringing across the room. “And that means I’m not worthy. He’ll marry his daughter to us because she’s not destined for the throne. But his son... No one but a princess must rule alongside him.”

The king lets out an involuntary bark of laughter. “His wife won’t rule alongside him! My wife did not rule alongside me! She will bear his children, the future rulers of Tallith.”

“And my daughter is not good enough for even that?” says the rat catcher softly. “My son would be good enough to give

his seed to your second child, but my daughter not enough to receive and nurture the seed of your son? What kind of madness is that?"

"Tradition," the king blurts. "Protocol and history. My son must marry a princess."

"Why?" asks the rat catcher and all of the room stills.

Why? Aurek asks himself. It isn't as if his bride will need to bring a vast dowry, or the promise of peace, or an army if needed. He can give all that to Tallith single-handedly. It is not that he wants to marry the rat catcher's daughter – or anyone, for that matter, not yet – but it occurs to him that she would be an interesting wife, more stimulating than an obedient and timid one.

Why? Aurelia asks herself. Why can she be married off as a part of a trade and yet it's unthinkable for Aurek to be used so? Is it because he's heir to the throne and she isn't? Or perhaps it's something baser and more ludicrous. Perhaps it's because she's female. Yes, she thinks, for why else would both men in the room be offering their daughters and withholding their sons. She looks down at the rat catcher's daughter again to find this time she is looking right back at her. And to Aurelia's surprise, she sees pity and solidarity in her expression. One woman silently speaking to another. Sympathising.

The king looks at the rat catcher, who stares placidly back, his chin raised just high enough to make his question a dare. But the king of Tallith has been king for a long time, and his father and grandfather were kings before him. He

carefully wipes his face clear of expression, the same way a face clears before a person falls asleep, and waits.

Finally, the rat catcher bows. "I think perhaps I cannot help you," he says slowly. "Forgive us for wasting your time. We will make haste to the docks and return with the boat we came on."

"You must feel free to stay here," the king says, and Aurek's eyes glint with hope. "You've travelled so far, why not stay until the next ship comes. Rest and take advantage of my country? It would be a shame to have come all this way and see nothing of Tallith. There is no trick to it; you will owe me nothing."

This is not the whole truth. The king hopes that if the rat catcher and his family stay, the bounty of Tallith will seduce him where his words have failed, and that rat catcher will change his mind about accepting Aurelia for his son.

The rat catcher knows what the king intends; this is not the first royal he has had to bargain with and is unlikely to be the last. Matching his son with the daughter of the sorceress queen took months of skilled negotiation, days and hours of subtle word play. The rat catcher has learned from the very creatures he hunts that patience is the best weapon in any arsenal. He will have his daughter wed to prince Aurek. He can feel it, in his blood.

"You are most generous," he smiles. "I understand that there will be another ship three months from now. Might we avail ourselves of your hospitality until then?"

"With pleasure," the king says, snapping his fingers.

At once two servants enter the room, their eyes widening with hope at the news the rat catcher will be staying. “My guests,” the king says. “Settle them in the Tower of Courage, afford them every luxury and courtesy they demand.”

The servants bow to their king and gesture for the rat catcher and his children to follow them. All three bow to the king and his children as they sweep from the room.

“Tell me, Father,” Aurek says softly as the doors of the great hall close behind them. “Did you place them in the Tower of Courage because the infestation is worst there?”

“Naturally. He’ll be a tough nut to crack,” the king says. “But he’ll at least want the tower clear if his precious son and daughter are to sleep there. We’ll have that done for free, if naught else.”

“You believe he will not give in?” Aurek asks cautiously.

The king rises and looks at his son. “What do you think?” he says, with amused irritation, and leaves the room. Aurek follows.

Aurelia remains behind, standing in the statue-still way that is such a part of her, her gaze distant. The servants clear the room around her, used to her oddities, and it is not until the shadows are long across the floor that she stirs and takes her leave, her expression thoughtful.

Later that night, many hours after the moon has risen, Aurek is back in his seat in the Tower of Love, trying to think of ways to get the rat catcher’s daughter out of the Tower of Courage and into his bed – or himself into hers. The idea of

not having her is impossible. To find out if her skin tastes as delicious as it looks, it might even be worth marrying her. He shifts uncomfortably in his seat and pours himself another glass of wine, before throwing the empty carafe at a rat that is trying to edge into the room.

Aurelia is sitting in the window seat of her room in the Tower of Wisdom, and she too is thinking of the rat catcher's daughter. She wants to know what kind of land it is that makes girls who stand up for themselves in such a fashion, who blaze and rebel and speak from the heart. She wants to know how the words of the rat catcher's daughter would taste on her tongue. She feels the tendrils of want twine around her innards, and they whisper of freedom. Of choices. When she doesn't immediately push them away, they wind a little tighter.

The king is lying under the gold metal cage that is fitted over his bed to stop the rats clambering over him as he sleeps. He doesn't like the cage; it makes him think of what it must be like to lie inside a coffin, which in turn reminds him of his age. He must ask Aurelia to make him more elixir. It keeps him handsome, and virile, manly and mature, a man to the boy his son is. Perhaps it's time he took a new wife... As he drifts off to sleep, trying to ignore the scraping of tiny claws on the metal that protects him, he wonders whether the rat catcher would give his daughter to him to wed. She would be queen, the most any girl could aspire to, and leave Aurek free to marry someone more fitting. He thinks of the girl, of her flashing eyes and her temper, and smiles to himself.

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The following morning the king pulls out all of the stops to impress the rat catcher and his children. Breakfast is a lavish, luxurious affair: bowls of honey oozing from fresh honeycomb to slather on to hunks of soft bread that belch steam when they're torn apart. Tiny cakes flavoured with roses and violets, sprinkled with sugar and candied petals. Fresh fish, caught that morning and roasted with garlic and onions and oil. Fat tomatoes bursting their juices. Brown eggs with yolks as golden as the crown that sits on the king's head as he smiles at his guests, urging them to eat.

The rat catcher leans forward to serve himself when a rat drops on to the table from the chandelier above. It makes off with the very piece of bread the rat catcher had been reaching for, and he smiles as the king turns crimson. "They're bold, your rats," he says, picking up another piece of bread and wiping it around the honey dish.

"That's why we called for you," the king says too sharply before he remembers himself. "Have you thought any more on my offer?"

"Have you on mine?"

The king is about to mention himself as a prize for the rat catcher's daughter, but something in the way his own children are looking at him stops him. "I feel as I ever did," he says finally.

"As do I," the rat catcher agrees. "So if your majesty wishes us to leave..."

The king shakes his head gruffly. "You are my guests for

the next three months,” he says as he pushes his chair from the table.

The rat catcher and his children spend that first day exploring Tallith. They refuse an escort and seem immune to the stares and mutterings of the people. They assume it's because of their dark skin and ignore the eyes that follow them. The father draws his daughter to his side, preparing to defend her. Then a small girl darts away from her mother, racing across the dusty courtyard in a faded pinafore dress and tugging shyly on the skirt of the rat catcher's daughter.

“Thank you,” she says quietly, so quietly the rat catcher's daughter has to lean down and ask her to speak again.

“For what?”

“Coming to save us.”

The girl runs away again and folds herself in her mother's skirts. When the eyes of the rat catcher and his children turn to the small crowd gathered around the girl and her mother, they all bow their heads. The rat catcher and his family turn to leave, but the citizens of Tallith will not let them, instead pressing gifts upon them: sweet, perfumed oranges, candied plums, and bread studded with nuts and fruit. Children offer up their favourite toys, women blow kisses and look at the rat catcher from under thick lashes. As the rat catcher and his family hurry back to the castle, refusing all offerings, the crowd begin to applaud and cheer, the joyous sound ringing out long after the gates are closed behind them. They lock themselves away that night, all three of them staying in their

own quarters, wondering what they have unknowingly agreed to by staying in the castle, and what the cost of it might be.

It soon becomes apparent that infestation of Tallith is much worse than they could have imagined. The rat catcher has seen only two infestations to rival this one, both of them when he was a boy in training, and he is shaken by the hold that rats have here, in such a relatively short amount of time. As the king predicted, the Tower of Courage is cleared of rats overnight, and the number inside the castle walls diminishes daily, but the rest of the country languishes under the plague. A whole village near the mountains sickens when rats urinate into the well at the centre of the square. Many die, including children and the elderly. The food stores are tainted, and for the first time in written history, there will be shortages of grain over winter. The constant gnawing weakens buildings, causes collapses and accidents. The rats are winning.

After that sole excursion out of the castle, the rat catcher and his children remain within its confines, spending their time in the gardens and olive groves, whispering amongst themselves. Separately, Aurek and Aurelia haunt their steps, both of them watching the rat catcher's daughter. Their presence seems to annoy the rat catcher's family, particularly his son, who scowls when he sees them.

Each morning at breakfast the king asks again if the rat catcher has changed his mind, and by way of reply, the rat catcher asks the king if he has changed his. The atmosphere as they dine grows chillier by the day, the array of the food

less extravagant: the bread coarser, the fish less fresh and fried too long in grease. After the first month the king stops attending at all, too busy placating his frantic subjects. He has forgotten his plans to offer his own suit to the rat catcher, instead asking only about his son. The message arrives with the rat catcher each morning on a scroll. The rat catcher's answer remains the same.

It is the final month of the rat catcher's sojourn in Tallith. He and his family have spent the last two weeks hidden in the Tower of Courage, and plan to remain there until they have word that their ship is ready to depart. In the time they have been here, the death toll has risen to the hundreds. They can no longer use the castle grounds: the mere sight of them crossing the bridges between the towers is enough to send the citizens into a violent frenzy, baying for their blood.

The Tallithi are furious with them now, their hatred a fug that settles over the castle. How dare they come? How dare they eat Tallithi food, drink Tallithi wine, while the people die of disease and sepsis, all born from the rats. Mutterings begin that the rat catcher sent the rats; after all, it's known his son refused beautiful Aurelia's hand. It is whispered that his betrothed, some sort of sorceress, with blood-gifts of her own, cursed the country with the rats and sent her lover's family to pretend to aid them, only to wait for the country to fall so they could steal it.

The rat catcher's daughter hates to be cooped up, and longs to leave this wretched, golden place. While her brother

writes to his fiancée, receiving regular letters by return, and her father reads, keeping to his rooms, she works hard to amuse herself. She spends her time exploring the tower, climbing into the eaves and disturbing the birds there, going through every room, mentally cataloguing the things she comes across.

She finds, to her surprise, that as well as the bridges between the towers, that there are tunnels too. A half-forgotten door in the bowels of the Tower of Courage is easily shattered by a few kicks. The air beyond smells musty and stale, but also exciting. New. She descends into the labyrinth beneath, walking slowly, her footsteps echoing. She opens every door she comes across, marvelling at old wine cellars, storage rooms, even a small crypt where the coffins turn to dust under her fingers. Every day for two weeks she descends and explores the underside of Tallith Castle, climbing every staircase she finds, trying to force the doors at the top of them.

When the last of them gives way, she is not the only one surprised by what she finds.

Aurek, who has always been restless, is almost frantic these days. With the rat catcher's daughter never leaving the tower, and too many maids either scarred by illness, sickening, or fled, he is constantly bored. His father is chained to his desk, seeing advisor after advisor, and growing thinner and greyer by the day. Aurelia keeps to her own tower, rarely even attending meals. His attempts to gain access to the Tower of

Courage have been rebuffed with increasing rudeness. With nothing to occupy him, Aurek has, unthinkingly, spent the last two weeks working.

He has commandeered the ground-level rooms in the Tower of Hope, and barricaded the windows, lighting the room with candles and torches. He refuses all offers of aid from the servants. He locks the door behind him when he enters and then works from dawn until long after nightfall.

It is not gold he makes, deep in the belly of the tower, but golems: small homunculi barely five inches high that he animates with his blood. He makes and destroys a dozen a day, trying to find the commands that will instruct them to slay the rats. They attack him, or each other, or else do nothing, and he smashes simulacrum after simulacrum, crushing some underfoot, throwing others into the walls. But he does not give up. When he masters control of them – and he will – he plans to make an army and send them into the rats' own nests to kill them, young and all.

On the table, a rat sits in a cage, one ear torn off, watching him with malevolent eyes. He found it in his rooms one day, picking through the remains of a chicken carcass a careless servant had not cleaned away. He recognized it instantly – recognized that tattered ear, that insolent gaze. When it ignored him in favour of its meal, Aurek removed his cloak and threw it over the creature, chicken and all. He fought to subdue it, received bites he later had to ask his sister for elixir to treat, but he captured it. He locked it in

an old hummingbird cage and peered at it through the bars. When it hissed at him, yellow teeth bared, he hissed right back. As soon as he finds the right commands to give his golems, he will have this rat killed first. Then he'll have it skinned and make a coin purse from its pelt.

He will save Tallith with his golems, he decides. Forget the rat catcher, and forget his daughter. He will be their saviour. He will be their hero.

It is immersed in this work that the rat catcher's daughter finds him when she bursts through the old door at the far end of the room.

Aurek starts when she enters, lashing out and knocking the homunculus he was working with to the floor, cursing when it shatters. "I almost had that one," he says.

The rat catcher's daughter stares at him. Gone is the sleek, pampered prince, almost doll-like in his delicacy. Before her stands a man, his white hair tied back from his face, his shirt sleeves rolled up to reveal muscular arms. He is covered in dust, dried clay and ink, a smear of it on his left cheek. This new Aurek arouses her curiosity, a feeling that grows when he looks away from her – after all those days of watching her, he looks away – and returns to his work.

"What are you doing?" she asks.

"Your job."

He begins to fashion another golem from a pile of clay, his deft fingers pinching out arms and legs, and she steps closer, closer, watching him. He spares her a quick, irritated

glance and then continues. She moves closer still, until she stands by his side, staring as he manipulates the clay.

“I’d forgotten about the tunnels,” he murmurs. “We used to play in them when we were little. How long have you been using them?”

“Two weeks.”

“And have you found anything that interests you?”

She does not reply.

Aurek is aware of her closeness, can smell the sweet almond scent of her skin, and is not immune. But he’s both annoyed with her for not wanting him and anxious to peacock his talents for her, so he keeps working until the clay takes on the crude form of a man. He ignores her gasp when he pulls his knife over his palm and drips blood on to it, taking a sip of elixir as the blood sinks into the clay and the golem begins to move.

“Magic...” the rat catcher’s daughter breathes as the cut on his hand seals itself. But she’s not looking at Aurek. Instead she watches the golem.

“Alchemy,” he replies.

At that she looks up at him, and find herself pinioned by his golden eyes, not wholly sure why they repulsed her before. “So this is the real reason your father thinks you too good for me?” she asks.

Aurek shrugs and they both look back at the golem. Aurek picks up his writing stick and dips it in the ink, scrawling a miniature command on a tiny fragment of parchment. He presses it into the chest of the golem and the rat catcher’s

daughter holds her breath as it's absorbed.

"The trick is finding the right words," Aurek murmurs as the golem rises unsteadily to its feet. "I have to keep the instructions simple and clear."

"What did that one say?"

"Rise," he says. "I have to train them slowly. Tell them to wake, then rise. Then walk. One step at a time. Eventually, I'll find the command to make them hunt and kill the rats, seeing as your father won't."

He is impressed when she doesn't flinch, or blush, or apologize, waiting instead for him to continue.

"The longer I have them, the more they can do – but the harder they become to control. They can learn too much." He smiles ruefully and shows her the underside of his left wrist. "You can't see it now, but two days ago one took my own knife to me. I wasn't specific enough with my order to kill." He shrugs. "But I learnt."

"Why can't I see it?"

"See what?"

"This supposed wound."

Aurek looks at her and snorts. "I'm not the only one whose blood gives gifts."

"Your sister?" the rat catcher's daughter guesses. She grabs for his palm and pulls it to her, studying it, her dark brows rising when she sees it unmarred. "Alchemy," she says softly.

Aurek says nothing, looking back at his golem. It stands on the table, doing nothing.

“Can you make it dance?” the rat catcher’s daughter says suddenly.

Aurek looks at her, then at the golem. “I’d have to teach it to walk first,” he frowns.

The rat catcher’s daughter looks at him, then smiles. Aurek smiles back.

That afternoon, they teach the golem to walk, then dance. They teach it to hop, and jump, and almost to cartwheel. The rat catcher’s daughter laughs and Aurek laughs with her, saddened only momentarily when it collapses mid-turn and smashes apart. The golem ruined, they pause and the air is heavy with something both sweet and sour.

“Can I come back tomorrow?” the rat catcher’s daughter asks finally.

“Yes, please,” Aurek replies.

He watches her run from the room, closing the old door behind her. Interesting, he thinks.

She returns the following day and watches him work. Then again, and again. Each day they stand a little closer together, their eyes lingering on each other’s a little longer. She brushes dust from his shoulders. He gently touches her hips and moves her aside when she’s in his way. By the end of the week he is standing behind her, chest pressed to her back, his hands around hers as he helps her to fashion a golem of her own, though it still takes his blood to bring it to life. It sits up when Aurek commands it to wake.

“What now?” he asks the rat catcher’s daughter. “What is your command?”

She frowns, then takes the writing stick and paper from him. She writes quickly, and then thrusts the paper towards him.

Kiss me, it says.

He pulls her into his arms and thinks, *Finally*. He does not need any further commands from her.

It is sunset when they finally separate, both damp with sweat and covered in dust. Above them, the golem sits waiting on the table, and Aurek feels oddly exposed when he stands, legs still shaking slightly as he pulls his breeches back on. The rat catcher’s daughter lies, looking up at him through half-closed eyes, a lazy smile on her face. He gazes down at her, noting how lovely her form is. He’s pleased with himself, very pleased. And she was just as sweet as he’d hoped she would be.

Aurek has never had a favourite flavour before.

“We should go,” he says. “We’ll be missed.”

A frown crosses the face of the rat catcher’s daughter as she looks at him, meeting his steady gaze, receiving his utilitarian words. “It’s to be like that, is it?” she asks coldly. “You’ve had your fun and now I am to inconvenience you no longer?” She is unashamed of her nudity, her hands on her hips, and Aurek feels his interest stir again. He reaches for her and she steps back, a warning in her eyes.

“No, sweetling. I simply mean we have to be careful,”

he cajoles. "We have to play this right if we want to win. You heard what my father said." She watches him, her expression unchanged. "Look," he continues. "If you want this to end here and now, so be it. But if you want what I want then we have to be cunning."

"And what is it that you want?"

"You," Aurek says simply.

The rat catcher's daughter pulls her dress on slowly, looking at him, assessing. "So I will see you again? Tomorrow?" she asks.

Aurek pulls her into his arms. "Come early," he says, before pressing his mouth to hers.

They don't even pretend to be interested in the golems the next day. Or the next. Or the next. Instead he takes her in his arms, and pulls her to the floor with him. He's forgotten his idea of being the hero of Tallith; what she's offering him is much more to his taste. When she tries to talk to him about their future, he kisses her words away, until the only thing she can say is his name, over and over, as her fists clench in his hair.

"Where do you go, daughter?" the rat catcher asks one morning over breakfast. "All day. Where do you go? I have called for you many times and you have not come."

She has tried to speak to Aurek about what would happen if they are discovered before they are ready, but he prefers to occupy his mouth in other ways. He claims he is addicted to her, he can't keep his hands from her. As she recalls his

touch, a dozen lies form in her mind but not one manages to slide from her tongue. "I spend my time with the prince," she says finally.

Her brother looks up from his food, frowning.

"With the milksop?" her father says. "Where?"

"I visit him."

"I did not know you were leaving the tower."

"You did not forbid me to."

It is the rat catcher's turn to frown. "I thought you despised him."

"I did not know him before."

"And you know him now?" The question is loaded.

The rat catcher's daughter pauses, her hand moving to her stomach. Though less than a week has passed, she knows. Something within her is altering. Growing.

The motion is not lost on the rat catcher, nor his son. The rat catcher slams his hand on the table. "I forbid you to see him again. We leave in two weeks. You will stay in your room until then and I will deal with you when we are home."

"I will not."

"Do not disobey me, child," the rat catcher shouts. "I've heard rumours of a nursery full of his children. And where are their mothers? Is this what you want?"

The rat catcher's daughter flees from the table and barricades herself in her room. The rat catcher pulls a fresh sheet of parchment towards him.

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The King of Tallith is at first surprised to receive word from the rat catcher, and hopeful. But his hopes quickly turn to white-hot fury: selfish, stupid Aurek and his inability to control his lust. The king had still not given up on the hope the rat catcher would do what he had been sent for, but with Aurek laying with his daughter – shaming her, as her father has written – it will never happen.

Then he pauses.

His hands scrabbling to keep up with his mind, he fumbles for a new sheaf of parchment and begins to write.

Aurek looks guilty as he enters the throne room, his eyebrows rising when he sees the rat catcher and his children there, Aurelia too.

“Aurek,” the king booms when he has taken his seat. “You know why you are here. My honoured guest, the rat catcher, tells me you have made advances to his daughter. Is this true? Have you courted his child, knowing nothing could come of it, by my own order?”

The rat catcher’s daughter looks at the table as Aurek meets his father’s gaze. “Yes,” he says. He feels the eyes of the rat catcher and his family on him and he continues, “I have come to care for her.”

He doesn’t look at his paramour, nor at her father or brother, keeping his eyes fixed on the king. “I know you said she might not become my wife, but I ask you why not? Did you not marry my mother for love?”

The king replies so smoothly it’s as though he has

rehearsed it. "You talk of marriage?"

A beat before he replies. "I do."

"And if I do not consent?"

"Then I shall leave with her and her father, and marry her in her homeland. If you'll permit it?" He looks at the rat catcher, whose mouth gapes wide.

"You would leave your place as my prince and heir?" the king asks.

"Sire, I would," Aurek says simply.

"Then you leave me no choice."

Aurek hangs his head as though waiting for the axe to fall.

"If the rat catcher keeps his word and rids the kingdom of rats, I will give my consent and you may wed tomorrow. I will throw the feast here."

Aurek looks at the rat catcher, who narrows his eyes.

"Wait," the rat catcher's daughter cries. "Will no one ask if I consent to this wedding?"

Everyone turns to her, surprised.

"You would refuse me?" Aurek asks, at the same as time the king says "You would spurn my son?"

"Silence," the rat catcher's son hisses, but his sister holds up her hand.

"I told you once before, I would not be bartered or traded like goods."

"But now you are used goods," the rat catcher says slowly, unable to meet his daughter's eye. "Now you have no value."

"Because I gave myself to him?" she stares at her father.

“Because you have more to consider now than just your life,” the rat catcher says. “So do the right thing.” His daughter bows her head. “Your word on this?” the rat catcher says, looking back at the king.

“I give you my word,” the king says. “Kill every single rat in my kingdom, and by sundown tomorrow your daughter will be a princess of Tallith.”

“Wait,” says the rat catcher’s son. “I would like for my betrothed to attend the wedding.”

They all turn to look at him.

“But your bride surely lives many weeks from here? Do you wish to delay for so long?” says the king.

“She can travel swiftly, if I ask it of her.”

The king and Aurek glance at each other, and Aurek shrugs.

“So be it,” the king says. “We will hold the wedding as soon as she arrives. With your agreement?” he looks to the rat catcher, who is watching his son.

“I agree,” the rat catcher says finally.

“Ring the bells!” the king commands. “My son has chosen a bride! Three days from now they will wed. Send word to every corner of the land.”

The rat catcher’s daughter looks at Aurek, who crosses the room and murmurs into her ear softly until the frown melts from her face. The rat catcher rises and shakes hands with the king before they embrace like brothers. It makes a beautiful tableau – save for Aurelia and the rat catcher’s son, who sit sullen and silent. No one mentions the possible child

again. There is no need, with the wedding so close. They'll barely have to lie at all.

The next morning, the rat catcher takes a pipe from his bag and begins to play, marching from the Tower of Courage, through the courtyards of the castle, and down through the streets and lanes of Tallith. From across the kingdom the rats follow, filling the roads with warm, squirming bodies. They follow the rat catcher past the fields, through the woods and across the scrub until they reach the sea. He stands waist deep, playing and playing until the water is roiling with rats, almost bubbling as they swim frantically towards him. He pipes three sharp notes and the rats dive.

When they surface, all the rats are dead.

When the rat catcher returns to the castle, his son's betrothed, the supposed witch princess, has arrived and is closeted with his son. The only explanation is that she was there all the time, unknown to anyone. His daughter is busy with the seamstresses, making her wedding gown. He celebrates his accomplishment alone with half a bottle of brandy and slices of beef so thin he can see through them. He does not feel as though a wedding is approaching. It feels more like a funeral.

The rat catcher's daughter is dressed in blue as she makes her entrance. Aurek stands before the altar in Tallithi military dress, watching her walk towards him. The ceremony is small but ornate: candles blaze; there are flowers everywhere, the

room heady with their perfume. The king beams at the rat catcher when his daughter, flanked by Aurelia, as maid of honour, reaches Aurek and they both kneel. The rat catcher's son stands with his affianced, a small, thin woman with flaming red hair and a pinched expression. Neither of them is smiling.

Aurek is just about to place the ring on the finger of the rat catcher's daughter when the doors are thrown open. A guard rushes forward, something held in his hands. As he gets closer, they see it's a cage. And in the cage is a rat, with one torn ear.

"He lied!" the guard roars, pointing at the rat catcher. "We caught this one sneaking into the wedding feast! Who knows how many more still live! He tricks us!"

Aurek staggers back theatrically as the rat catcher's daughter reaches for him.

"But it's yours," she says. "It was in your chamber. In the cage."

Aurek shakes his head at her as though she is mad.

Then she understands. Aurek has used her. When she fell for his lies and confessed to her father, the king took advantage of it to get what he wanted all along.

She would never have been permitted to marry Aurek.

"I never wanted this!"

Her scream is lost in the cacophony that erupts. The king of Tallith roars at the rat catcher, shouts of treachery and betrayal and treason. The rat catcher's son seizes his sister and pulls her away from the approaching guards. The rat

catcher begs for mercy, swearing he has done his job properly.

The rat catcher's family, including the witch princess, are imprisoned in their wedding finery in a cell that still reeks of rat piss. There the rat catcher's daughter tells her father that she saw the rat in Aurek's laboratory. That she believes he was right. That she has been used. She falls down, weeping, eventually tumbling into a fitful sleep.

When the rat catcher's son whispers to his father what they must do, he shakes his head. "I cannot."

"You don't have to," his son replies, glancing at his fiancée. "We will do it."

The witch princess steps to his side and smiles, her teeth glinting in the dark.

It is agreed finally that the rat catcher and his family will leave, in disgrace, and face no other justice. They are released from the cells, but confined to their rooms until the night before their boat is due to sail, when the king permits them to attend a parting feast. The witch princess refuses, leaving instead for the ship that awaits them. Aurelia pleads a headache and does not appear.

"Despite it all, I would part as friends," the king declares.

The rat catcher says nothing.

"I wish things could have been different," Aurek says to the rat catcher's daughter.

She does not look at him.

"We thank you for your hospitality." The rat catcher's son raises his glass. "To clemency and understanding."

Aurek, his father and the rat catcher's daughter all raise their goblets, before drinking deeply.

It happens within seconds. The king begins to shake and foam pours from his mouth. Aurek and the rat catcher's daughter look at each other and start to cough. Guards rush forward and seize the rat catcher and his son.

Then Aurelia bursts into the room, reaching inside her robes for a vial, pouring its contents into her brother's mouth, then the mouth of the rat catcher's daughter.

There is not enough for her father.

The guards drag the rat catcher and his son from the room, the son cackling wildly, the rat catcher's mouth open in a silent scream.

The king is clearly dead.

And Aurek and the rat catcher's daughter are asleep. Aurelia can see their chests rising, faintly there is a heartbeat. She orders them to be removed to the Tower of Honour, to be cared for.

They don't wake up.

They need no food or water. They sleep. The witch princess, the architect of the poison, has vanished, and the rat catcher's son insists he, and he alone, will bear the punishment, saying it was his idea in the first place. He claims neither his sister, nor his father, knew anything of his plans, so accordingly he is hanged from the bridge between the Tower of Truth and the keep. His remains are still swinging in the wind when the baby is cut from his sister's stomach. She dies soon after.

Aurelia, acting as regent, debates whether to keep the child, but decides in the end to give it to the rat catcher to take away with him. In the months since his daughter fell asleep, he has remained by her side and cared for her, brushing her hair, washing her growing belly. He is thinner now, smaller, his hair a shock of white the same colour as Aurelia's. He takes his grandson and leaves.

Aurek sleeps on.

Aurelia burns through the gold he made, trying to find a cure for his sleep. Her advisors implore her to test his children to see if their blood can make gold, can replenish the treasury.

Not one of them has inherited their father's gift.

Tallith falls. The people revolt, then begin to leave in droves, calling it cursed. Aurelia leaves with them, taking her nieces and nephews. She travels until she has seen no one for a week, and then she stops, claiming the land as their new home.

Aurek sleeps on.

High in the Tower of Love, the last remaining tower of Tallith, he rests on a bier, not living, not dead. He doesn't age, or change, needs no sustenance. He sleeps. He waits.



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