

Prim Walks The Road

Chapter 1 - The Faster Way

Prim walked the road. She had been walking for aeons; for so long that time passing had lost its weight. She had walked ragged and tattered so many shoes and boots and sandals and wrappings that she had lost count. Not that she had been counting in the first place; footwear came and went. To Prim, time had become but another step to walk past. Once that had happened, she trod on. She had the road ahead of her and the road in her back and the road under the soles of her feet, and so she strut on, bare-footed and ever-marching, bent towards the horizon and accustomed to the dirt and dust between her toes and the callouses and cuts and blisters and bruises in her skin and all the other gifts which the branches and stones and rocks under her feet kept giving her.

Thusly making her way, she once came across a scene of awesome, gasping devastation. For miles around, rock and stone were split in mad anger, grass and trees burnt to black ashes, rivers evaporated in their beds. Earthshaking clashes thundered through the air as two gods swung their swords and spears at each other in the distance. Prim could barely make out where the road went, so terrible was the devastation of their battle. Yet Prim trod on diligently, as best as she could.

The road ultimately took her closer to the fighting gods. As she approached them, Prim finally recognized the two blood-lusted ones as Ys-Aesma, the Black-Skinned and Every-Hungry, and Un-Janta with his golden bell around his neck which rang in fearsome clarity with every step he took. Engrossed in combat, the two were in their summoned war forms, donning countless heads and eyes and ears, yet none of them paid little Prim any heed as she neared. Nevertheless, Prim greeted them politely and bowed, as was custom, for there was no finer daughter.

“Who goes there?” bellowed Janta with his back turned to her between ragged breaths and swings of his mighty swords at Aesma.

“I am Prim, who was the slave of Hansa and is now the slave of the road,” said Prim.

“What do you want, godling? Can you not see our battle rages fiercely still?” Janta barked, his caustic spit spraying from his mouths and dissolving everything it touched under painful hisses.

“I see it well, Preem Janta,” said Prim, “but you obstruct the road which I must follow. I wish but to pass.”

Janta turned just enough so he could see her and spat. “Be gone, silly girl! I’ve no time for you!” Then he swung one of his many arms at her to swat her away as a horse’s tail would swat at an irritant fly and returned his attention to Aesma, who had been attempting to stab him several times as he spoke at Prim.

Prim was no stranger to violence, for she had served black bread and ajash to fifty thousand mighty travellers in her father’s house and had listened well to their tales of plight and conquest and battle. But her ears had been just as open to those secrets spoken in her father’s house slurredly in the depths of the night and the bottle. Hence Prim knew well of the nature of violence and the arts of annihilation. Inhaling deeply before Janta’s arm had even reached her, with a single strike she dismantled him into ten thousand pieces and exhaled. It is said that it took Janta’s servants one thousand days to put him back together thereafter.

Observing this deed cut a deep impression on Aesma, for at that point she had been combatting Janta for seven days and seven nights without gaining nor losing ground, whereas it took Prim but a single strike to conclude it. As battle-worn as she was, Aesma the Insatiable was incessantly possessed by a starving red jealousy and a ceaseless black hunger for dominion. That was well-known. The very instant she beheld Prim, as the small goddess cleaned Janta’s blood and bits and pieces off the palm of her hand on her vela, Aesma’s boiling blood desired to conquer her. But having seen Prim’s prowess in the universal art, Aesma knew she couldn’t best her in combat and she understood that her conquest must proceed in a different manner. So she released her war form, shrinking to her small ashen-black self with

her crimson red tongue and licked her lips before greeting Prim back politely, as was custom.

“What brings you here, Pree Prim, daughter of Hansa?” said Aesma, catching her breath, the fire in her lungs burning in her neck and the pulse of her heart beating in her ears and toes.

“I’m walking the road,” said Prim.

“Where are you going, then?” asked Aesma.

“To the end of the road,” said Prim.

“What’s there?” asked Aesma.

“I don’t know,” said Prim.

“Then why go there?” asked Aesma.

“I must see what’s there,” said Prim.

“That sounds stupid,” said Aesma.

“I don’t think so,” replied Prim quietly.

“Can’t you leap there?”

“No,” said Prim. “For I do not know where to leap to.”

Aesma looked her up and down from head to toe as a lion looks at a lone meerkat and licked her lips again. “You’ve rid me of this nuisance,” she said, kicking whatever remains of Janta lay around, “so as my thanks, I shall show you a faster way. Come.” She took Prim by the hand and pulled her from the road into the wilderness, and Prim followed her willingly, for if there was indeed a faster way, she was curious to see it.

Soon they arrived at a roaring river of ice-cold glacier waters, far too wide to cross and with no nearby bridge in sight. Just as Prim was to suggest following it downstream, Aesma struck the ground with a terrible might and opened a deep hole, too deep for its bottom to be graced by the lights above. The river’s waters fell into

the depths of the hole and left the riverbed further down where the stream should have been dry and the fish therein wriggling in suffocation.

"Why did you do that?" asked Prim, aghast. She was no stranger to violence, but she had no particular fondness for it either.

"Because I wanted to cross," said Aesma innocently.

"We could've crossed over a bridge," said Prim. "There must be one somewhere. The road will certainly lead past this river somewhere."

"I wanted to cross here," said Aesma. "Where there is no path, make one. Just like this. It is much faster this way."

"This can't be the road," said Prim.

"It could be if you wanted it," said Aesma. "Come, I've much more to show you." She extended her hand towards Prim again and Prim took it, her curiosity having not left her just yet.

It wasn't long until they reached a tall mountain range made of steep, sharp rocks as far as the eye could see and rising high into the skies. Crows and vultures hid in the stones and whichever sparse, dry branches they could find to prey on whatever foolish creatures dared venture uphill to their certain deaths. They said that the mountains were so steep and sharp that not even moss grew there, which wasn't true, but they said it anyway.

Once they stood before the insurmountable rocky slopes, Aesma looked them up and down and then struck the ground with a terrible might and split the mountain clean in two, all the way to the peak, causing a horrific noise and an earthquake that shook the ground for miles, thus revealing a rocky path before them while ten thousand hungry birds took off and screamed their terrible cries in confusion.

"Was that necessary?" asked Prim, beholding the destruction before them.

"When something's in your path, make it not so," said Aesma. "Just like this. It is much faster this way."

“Surely, this can’t be the road,” said Prim.

“It could be if you wanted to make it so,” said Aesma and took Prim by her hand and led them through the path where the mountain had been.

Passing the mountain range, they arrived at the gates of a shimmering city with thick walls and tall gates. Without any hesitation, Aesma led them into the city’s bowels. Following the cobbled streets, she took them past the busy markets and the tall temples shrouded in the smell of incense to the biggest building she could find, which was a palace. It extended for one hundred acres, bursting with servants and clerks and guards and nobles. The palace itself was placed within one thousand acres of beautiful and lively gardens, filled with blooming trees and supple plants and flowers of all colours and songbirds from one hundred worlds chirping their delightful tunes. Tall towers with golden roofs surrounded the palace’s monumental facade, which was holding up a giant dome of glass and silver.

“Halt,” barked the guard at the palace’s gates. “What business do you have?”

“What is this place?” said Aesma.

“This is the White Glass Palace of King Amur Tuk, the Undefeated One, Lord of One Hundred Worlds!” replied the guard. “How can you not know this?”

“Is he rich, this king of yours?” asked Aesma.

“King Amur Tuk, Conqueror of Conquerors, possesses more riches than any other!”

“He must have good wine and ajash, then?” said Aesma.

“King Amur Tuk, the Blue Flame That Purifies Worlds, drinks ten barrels of fine wines each day before sunrise!”

“Perfect,” said Aesma, “we’re very thirsty.” And with a flick of her wrist, she smashed the guard into the wall and headed towards the palace’s entrance before his squashed remains began dripping onto the ground.

“Surely, that wasn’t necessary!” yelled Prim, catching up with Aesma.

“If someone won’t let you walk past, walk through,” said Aesma. “Just like this. It is

much faster this way.”

Prim rolled her eyes, but she took Aesma’s extended hand once more and followed her, for she understood that there was truth to Aesma’s words, just not the one she was looking for.

Entering deeper into the palace, Aesma did the same with each and every guard they encountered, swatting them away to their instant deaths as a horse’s tail would shoo irritant flies. This continued until they reached a mighty hall with thin tall windows and wide columns of polished white marble and platinum. Underneath the hall’s dome of glass and silver, one hundred guards stood in wait, donning heavy plate armour and pointing their spears at them.

“Who are you?” yelled a tall bearded man on the throne behind the guards. “Who dares challenge me, Amur Tuk, the Undefeated One, in my own palace?”

“Are you the king, then?” asked Aesma.

“Are you blind, or merely a fool?” screamed the king.

But Aesma simply leapt past the one hundred guards, grabbed the king by his head and hurled him with all her might through the glass dome above, shattering it into a billion brilliant splinters which fell slowly like snowflakes and throwing the king so far that he was never seen again. Then Aesma sat on the throne and pointed at a servant by the far wall.

“You there,” she said calmly, “bring us bread and wine and ajash. We’re thirsty and weary from our travels.”

The servant, having been a servant all her life, obeyed instantly, for she had been a servant all her life and knew what was best for her, which fretting about who exactly was sat atop a particular chair was not. The existence of a particular chair was, but that’s a tale for a different time. The one hundred heavily armed guards, many born of parents who had been servants all their lives, wordlessly dispersed and assumed their posts again, for they too knew of the laws of violence and what was best for them.

So the servants brought out ajash and wine and bread and one hundred delicacies on golden plates, which pleased Aesma greatly. And Prim joined her side, for she too was quite fond of fine foods and nourishing drink, and they broke bread and ate and drank together.

"The road is long and dusty," said Aesma finally and swallowed the fragrant meat she had been chewing on. "It offers little in the ways of comfort. Is this not better?" And she poured ajash into Prim's emptied cup.

"It certainly is pleasant," said Prim and sipped of the ajash, remembering how the travellers in her father's house had claimed it to restore one's flesh and spirits. "But I'm not sure that this is the right way."

"It is the right way if you want it to be," said Aesma.

"I don't know whether I want it to be," said Prim.

"Are you not fond of good food and drink, then?" said Aesma.

"I am," said Prim.

"Why should it be wrong, then? Why not want it?" said Aesma.

"The road calls for me still," said Prim.

"Has the road not led you here?" said Aesma.

"No, you have," said Prim.

"But the road has led you to me first," replied Aesma, "so that I may lead you here. Can it be wrong, then?"

Prim contemplated this for a moment. Then she said, "It could be, but it also could not be. I don't know just yet. I'll only know for certain once I reach the road's end, of that I am sure."

"Foolish girl," said Aesma. "If you want something, take it. Just like this. It is much faster this way."

Prim gave it a thought, and finally said, "It seems to me, Pree Aesma, that your

wisdom is much concerned with fastness. Why is that?"

"That's because I nurture and listen to all my hungers," said Aesma and emptied her seventy-seventh cup of wine. "To sate them is urgent, that is their nature."

"Are you a slave to your desires, then?" said Prim.

"On the contrary," said Aesma. "I am their master and their conqueror, which is why I can feed and nourish them so skilfully. It won't do to make them wait, will it? And my desires are many," said Aesma and placed her hand on Prim's thigh, "for so many of YISUN's creations are so lovely to hunger for. They too need their urgent tender attention." Then she leaned to whisper into Prim's ear, "Consider a taste of them, Pree Prim, a small bite of their sweetness perhaps, or a tiny sip, just enough to wet your lips, and you may find that there is more than one road to follow, more than one hunger to sate."

"I am aware of that," exhaled Prim.

"Good," said Aesma and smiled, taking Prim's hand with a starved look in her eyes. "Then come. I'm yet to sate my hungers, as I suspect are you. Come and have a taste of the other roads and feast as much as you like."

And Prim happily took her hand, for she too was quite fond of the tender sweetness of a lover's touch and hot-blooded Aesma's invitation had pleased and tempted and starved her greatly. Thus Aesma led them into the kingly bedroom and they made love for three nights and three days.

In the early hours of the fourth day, wide awake while Aesma still lay asleep in bed between silken sheets, Prim stole away from her clawed embrace. Then she donned her vela and her greatknife and made for the door when the creak of its old iron hinges woke Aesma.

"Where are you going, Prim?" Aesma asked sleepily.

"To the road," said Prim.

"Why?" asked Aesma.

"I must see what's at its end," said Prim.

"Girl, have you learned nothing?" said Aesma.

"I've seen that the faster way leads to comfort and pleasure," said Prim, "but not to where I'm supposed to go."

"You remain willingly the slave of the road!" said Aesma.

"Yes," said Prim. "I need to see its end."

"You have indeed learned nothing," said Aesma and shook her head. But in her heart, burning hot with scolding red jealousy, Aesma saw that she had failed her conquest and that she was not to take the road's place in Prim's heart, at least not yet, and so she said, "So be it," already plotting her next scheme.

At last, Aesma rose to bid Prim farewell and embraced her before their ways parted, as was custom between lovers, and Prim welcomed her in her arms. Holding her tightly, Aesma sank her two-hundred and seventy-seven sharp teeth into Prim's neck, breaking into her skin and leaving a bleeding bite mark on her left side. Startled, Prim pushed her away and held her hand against her fresh wound.

"What did you do that for?" she asked, aghast.

"I have nothing else to give you to remember me by," said Aesma innocently and licked the blood off her lips.

"You've given me plenty," said Prim, looking at her wound's blood on the palm of her hand.

"Yet not enough," said Aesma.

"I shan't thank you for this," said Prim and stormed out the door, and it stung Aesma a little. It is said that she destroyed the entire city in less than a day to vent her rage.

But Prim knew none of that, for she had walked away without turning around, and so she soon returned to the road.

Chapter 2 - Primaurast

Prim walked the road. She had been walking for aeons; for so long that time passing had lost its weight. She had walked ragged and tattered so many shoes and boots and sandals and wrappings that she had lost count. Not that she had been counting in the first place; footwear came and went. To Prim, time had become but another step to walk past. Once that had happened, she trod on. She had the road ahead of her and the road in her back and the road under the soles of her feet, and so she strut on, bare-footed and ever-marching, bent towards the horizon and accustomed to the dirt and dust between her toes and the callouses and cuts and blisters and bruises in her skin and all the other gifts which the branches and stones and rocks under her feet kept giving her.

Thusly making her way, she once came across a knight mendicant sitting in the grass by the road.

“Ho there,” he greeted. “Wherefore such hurry, girl? The day is young and the road long. Where one should idle and partake in blessed youth, thou nearly runnest!”

Prim greeted him as well, as was custom, and replied, “I must proceed, Master Beggar. It is as you say, the road is long and I’m yet to reach its end.”

“The road shall go nowhere, girl,” said the knight mendicant. “It shall be there on the morrow and the day after just as well. But these fields won’t, not if thy feet carry thee away.” And he waived his hand over the wide emerald grasslands surrounding them as if to make a point.

“They are beautiful indeed,” said Prim. “The grass is tall and supple and the wind caresses its blades in gentle waves. But it cannot grip firmly this heart of mine, for I’ve seen many like them before. I’ve been walking the road for many years now.”

“And there shall be many more like them,” the knight mendicant nodded, “yet none quite as these. Behold,” he spoke and pointed to where Prim had just come from.

Prim looked and indeed saw that where the blood off the soles of her feet had soaked into the fertile soil behind her, thistles now bloomed merrily.

“Today, these fields burst with life,” said the knight, “yet none stay. All who pass hurry down the road’s length as fast as their feet carry them. But same as thy feet may carry thee from these growths, so may time. Why not take a rest, girl, whilst the grassen blades yet remain upright? The road shall wait for thee eagerly.”

Prim thanked him, for there was no finer daughter, and considered it. She looked at the road extending in front of her, its unseen end stretching infinitely past the horizon. Then she looked back to where she had come from, and the road stretched indefinitely in that direction too. Then she looked at the thistles blooming underneath her feet and stinging her like a babe screeching for a mother’s attention. Then she gently rubbed the left side of her neck and looked at the sun and saw that it hadn’t reached the zenith yet. So Prim stepped off the road into the grasslands, lay down on the soft soil and grass, and basked in the sunlight.

Long after the knight mendicant had left to beg his daily meal off passing travellers, Prim still lay stretched out in the grass and the sun. Growing weary of the heat, she sat up and looked around only to find more and more grass as far as her eyes could see. So she searched under ten thousand stems, lifting and turning each of them carefully until she found the husk of a great beetle the size of her thumb, bereft of life and glistening ruby red in the sunlight. She picked it up and pulled a single blade of grass from the soil with great care so that its roots remained intact. She then wrapped the plant around the bug’s corpse and covered it entirely with the blade of grass. Then she squeezed it between the palms of her hands so tightly it compressed into a hard-shelled seed, as tough as diamonds and as sharp-edged as volcanic glass. Finally, with a tiny puff, so tiny that not even the ants could hear it, she breathed life into it and observed her work on the palm of her hand with satisfaction.

Prim then dug a hole a foot deep and planted the seed. She covered it with soil and watered it with her spit and sweat. And since those lands were so fertile as few others, she watched a tree sprout before her that very instant. It grew twice her size with a trunk wider than she could stretch her arms and bore plump fruit which shimmered ruby red in the sunlight. Satisfied, Prim sat down in its shade and partook of the sweet and sour fruit.

But it wasn't long until a terrible thirst gripped her, for the sun's heat had parched her. So Prim left her tree and its shade, wandering deep into the grasslands and straying far from the road until she reached a river. She folded her hands and bowed deeply, for there was no finer daughter, and asked the river politely for some of its water. The river, knowing well of Prim and her gentle ways, obliged eagerly and split in half so it could keep flowing where it had to but could just as well follow Prim to her tree, where it gathered in a lake for it could not bear to depart far from her. Prim drank deeply from the river's waters, and they rejoiced in each other's company.

The very next day, the first traveller stepped off the road to rest in the shade of Prim's tree and drink from the river's waters. Soon thereafter, a second and a third wanderer joined them, carried by weary feet and carrying stories from afar. The tree bore many a fruit, much more than any of them could eat, and so the ruby red glimmerings fell as they ripened; and as their soft flesh decayed and the insects and critters consumed it hungrily, they laid bare the hard-shelled seeds within them; and they sank into the soil, whereupon new trees grew in short time as the land was exceedingly fertile. Thus an orchard of ruby red fruit had sprouted at Prim's side in a single day.

The following day, when the rain and the wind found those lands, Prim the Ever-Diligent built a modest shed out of the trees' wood to shelter them from the elements. Then she gathered some white rock and ground it to a fine powder and mixed it into the wet mud, and it made good mortar. Then she went out and fetched smooth river stones and with the mortar she had made, she built a small fireplace and a small chimney to keep them warm and dry; and they were content and rejoiced in each other's company.

Thereafter, new travellers greeted her daily, hoping to rest their weary feet and to bathe in the gentle river streams and to tell their stories from afar. And Prim welcomed them heartily into her hut, which she didn't think of as hers. Yet the travellers thanked her for welcoming her into her home, as was custom.

"It is not my home," said Prim.

"Where do you live, then?" they asked.

“Here,” said Prim. “For now, at least.”

“Then surely this must be your home,” they said.

Prim contemplated this and saw that they were right. Instantly she grew deeply ashamed, for she had welcomed guests into her home but had no black bread nor ajash to greet them with, as was custom. So she dropped to her knees and apologised profusely.

“Rise, Pree Prim, and worry not,” they said. “It is not thine to give what you do not possess; none present are insulted nor maltreated, so rest at ease.”

“But it is custom,” Prim lamented. “And I do not know where to find grain nor ajash here.”

“If it is grain you want,” said a traveller, “then you must plough a field and grow it. If it is ajash you desire, then it is a distiller you seek. The ruby red fruit your trees bear shall do marvellously. You could find both these things on the markets of any town.”

“Alas, I cannot do that,” said Prim and gently rubbed the left side of her neck, “for I fear the road. Once I feel it under the soles of my feet again, it shall carry me away from here, never to return. The road is long and stretches across aeons and calls for me evermore to see its end.”

“Then I shall do it for you,” said the traveller. “Bring me two bags full of this excellent fruit of yours. I shall carry them to the nearest town and trade one for grain and the other for a distiller, so you may bake black bread and brew fine ajash as is your desire.”

So Prim filled two linen bags to the brim with the ruby red fruit and the traveller took off with them the very next day. He returned seven days and seven nights later, pulling a cart full of grain and a distiller in it, but he also brought ploughing tools and farming tools and a saw and an axe and nails and plates and pots and cups and cutlery and even four sheep.

“Forgive me, Pree Prim, for burdening you with more than you have asked,” he

spoke, “but your fruit sold at a high price, much higher than I had foreseen. Travellers passing through town before me had spoken highly of your crop, asking feverishly to partake of more. Yet none of the townsfolk had ever heard of it, and so could not sate their guests’ hungers. Therefore, the townsfolk eagerly and costly traded for but a taste of the ruby red flesh, and it was as good as the travellers had told, so word had spread quickly and I traded well for them.”

“A hundred blessings upon you,” said Prim, for she didn’t know any better, “this shall make my duties so much easier.”

And so they began ploughing the fields and lighting the fires to burn the spirits and when the grain had grown, Prim ground it between two flat river rocks and made black flour. The ajash they brewed she poured into barrels of burnt wood to age it finely; and so she finally could greet her guests properly, as was custom, and she was content and they rejoiced in each other’s company.

As travellers came and went each day, it wasn’t long until Primaaurast (for that was what they called Prim’s humble stead) became known well in the nearby towns and villages. Some of the more courageous young men and women had stepped bravely onto the road and ventured out to see the famed fields and orchards of ruby red fruit of Primaaurast for themselves, and Prim welcomed them all and built a bigger shed and finally a house to let her guests reside in the dry and the warmth, away from the road, so they may rest their weary feet and tell their tales.

When the young men and women indeed saw the trees of ruby red fruit and the supple fields of grain, as the travellers had spoken of, they marvelled in their beauty and their sweet, fresh taste. And Prim welcomed them all, for what little she had was plenty to share, and so they came and built houses to live in and sheds for their livestock and they brought more farming tools and fishing nets and made Primaaurast their home, and they rejoiced in each other’s company.

Soon thereafter a blacksmith came as well, seeking out her fortune in life, alike the other young men and women who had made the journey, and she brought cold iron and heavy hammers and an anvil and built a forge to make tools and nails and to shoe the horses of the travellers on the road and to mend the broken wheels of their carts. And Prim welcomed her heartily too.

Thusly Primaurast grew little by little into a lively village. It wasn't long until the first children of the village were born, and Prim blessed them with health and beauty, for she didn't know any better. And they tended the orchards and the livestock and they ploughed the fields and they sowed and reaped with each season and they drank from the river and they fished in the lake and they were content and rejoiced in each other's company. And Prim thought that the call of the road had finally left her bones and spirits, at least for a bit, and gently rubbed the left side of her neck.

When not much later Primaurast's children had children on their own, and their children had children on their own, more and more houses were built for all of them to live in. Then they built a bridge over the river so they may cross the waters easily and build their homes on the other side as well. Then they built docks for travellers and traders arriving by the river to anchor their boats and they made space for markets between the footpaths and houses and they cobbled the streets with the river's stones so that the carts' wheels wouldn't get stuck in the mud. And when the bandits first came, they fended them off; but when the soldiers came, they built a wall with high towers to defend them. And so Prim watched in satisfaction as the town grew rapidly into a bright lively city of its own, and they were content and rejoiced in each other's company, and Prim became even more certain that the call of the road had finally left her bones and spirits and gently rubbed the left side of her neck.

Thus Primaurast thrived for many years and became well-known for its hospitality and its ruby red fruit, which they put on their flags and banners and their soldiers' uniforms. But Prim, thinking herself finally fully content beside the road, noticed every now and then a pull in her toes and a fire underneath the soles of her feet appearing. This she could not explain. The more the cobbles of the streets cooled off at night, the hotter they burned her feet. When the city was asleep in the darkest hours, the winds pushed her to the city's outskirts and her toes pulled her even further outwards.

One such night, when she let herself get carried away to the rim of Primaurast's borders once more, the sounds of temple bells and gongs heralding the third night of Primaurast's late mayor's wake crept up on her from behind and embraced her

with their cold, sticky fingers, which lingered for but a moment. It was when the shuddering touch left her that Prim slowly began seeing what she had averted her eyes away from: That all who had followed the road into her life eventually also left by the same means shortly. Some travellers stayed in Primaurast but for a few hours or days, whereas others were born here and within a blink of an eye they died of old age, which was an intolerable condition that the true mortals, Aesma's Mistake, suffered. One way or another, they all left as they came.

The following morning, barely even one or two hundred years since Prim first planted her tree, Prim found herself at one of the markets of Primaurast, looking around and seeing thousands of busy people and traders and shoppers and travellers going about their business in haste and in leisure, yet she saw not a single face of theirs she recognised and she saw not a single soul that had been sitting with her under the trees with the ruby red fruit, back when there was just a single tree and a hut in this place they now called Primaurast. It was true that all she saw knew her well by name and by face indeed, but none of them knew her as she had welcomed guests into her hut with no black bread nor ajash to offer.

Then Prim looked at the cobbles under her feet and her gaze followed the streets into the distance. She couldn't see their ends for all the people and animals on them and all the buildings between them. Then Prim looked again and saw that there was indeed no end to them. And then Prim finally saw that the road she had so firmly believed to have left had in truth twisted and turned its snakelike shape while she hadn't been watching, distracted in her attempt to stand beside it; now it led straight through Primaurast, firmly under the soles of her feet as she stood there.

Seeing the mistake she has made drove a cold spike of fear into her heart, but Prim shook it off quickly and sighed a great sigh of relief as she understood that it would make no difference whether she stayed on the road or off it; it would always find its way under the soles of her feet, as it was meant to be, whether she pursued it or not. So she gently rubbed the left side of her neck, raised her head, and went home, where she donned her vela and her greatknife and departed from Primaurast by the road, leaving her door unlocked.

And so Prim returned to the road once again.

Chapter 3 - The Dead City

Prim walked the road. She had been walking for aeons; for so long that time passing had lost its weight. She had walked ragged and tattered so many shoes and boots and sandals and wrappings that she had lost count. Not that she had been counting in the first place; footwear came and went. To Prim, time had become but another step to walk past. Once that had happened, she trod on. She had the road ahead of her and the road in her back and the road under the soles of her feet, and so she strut on, bare-footed and ever-marching, bent towards the horizon and accustomed to the dirt and dust between her toes and the callouses and cuts and blisters and bruises in her skin and all the other gifts which the branches and stones and rocks under her feet kept giving her.

Thusly making her way, the road led her into a range of green hills and formidable mountains, upon which tall evergreen trees grew. Birds flew and nested between their branches, critters scuttled between their roots and fallen foliage and deer and foxes hid between the barks as they scrounged for food. The mountains' peaks reached so high that they were permanently covered in ice and snow. The road led Prim not uphill, but through the snaking valleys cut between the mountains by rivers, and so she followed it into the depths of the mountain range.

On the eighth day of this section of her journey, Prim entered a wide and quiet valley. None but birdsong and the howling winds, combing through branches and swaying the needles of the evergreen trees, accompanied her. Trotting diligently along the road, as she had done for aeons, Prim passed by a tall pine tree on whose branches an ashen-black raven with red eyes was perched. She eyed the raven for a moment and then bowed and greeted it, as was custom.

"Greetings," spoke the raven. "What brings you here, traveller, where there is no sentient being but me within three days of flight?"

"I follow the road," said Prim.

“To which end?” said the raven.

“To its end,” said Prim.

“That is a mighty long journey,” said the raven knowingly.

“Maybe,” said Prim. “I shall see once I get there.”

“Why not stay and rest here for a bit,” said the raven, “where we can partake of good company? I have been waiting here for so long, I do not remember when I last spoke to a talking soul. I would much welcome the change!”

Prim gently rubbed the left side of her neck and nodded, for she had concluded that this was as good a resting place as any, and it was near the road, so she sat down in the tree’s shade and the raven flew down too.

“You travel alone?” asked the raven.

“Yes,” said Prim.

” ’tis a long road to walk alone,” said the raven.

“Maybe,” said Prim. “Sometimes, I encounter companions for brief segments of my journey, but alas, we always part ways eventually. The road takes us all to different places.”

“Have you been travelling long, then?” asked the raven.

“I think so,” said Prim. “It’s hard to tell sometimes.”

“Does your family not miss you?” asked the raven.

“I have none,” said Prim. “Not since my father died. That’s when I first stepped onto the road.”

“What about your lovers?” asked the raven, and licked its ashen-black beak with its long red tongue.

“I’ve loved a few,” said Prim, “but alas, we always part ways eventually. The road takes us all to different places.”

"The road took you into their arms, too, did it not?" said the raven.

"It did," said Prim.

"It may have been wise to stay there," said the raven. "Take my advice, girl, there's nothing at the end of that road worth journeying that length on your own. You'd do better to step off it sooner rather than later."

"Maybe," said Prim. "But maybe doing better is not meant for me. I suspect I shall see once I reach its end."

"There may not be one," said the raven. "Heed my words, girl, I have flown for many days and many miles in my time. But I'm yet to see or hear of such a thing as the road's end."

"Then I shall find out," said Prim, "in due time."

"Ah, time," said the raven, nodding knowingly. "Beware of time, for it is a heartless, cruel beast; a rabid torrent which swallows without baring a single fang nor claw."

Prim pondered this for a brief moment and finally said, "I don't think so. I've not seen it be as clandestine as you tell it. There are always signs of its arrivals and departures for those who know where to look."

"You know where to look, then?" said the raven.

"I think so," said Prim. "Time has taught me."

"It may not have taught you well enough," said the raven. "Come and let me show you in its stead." And it spread its wings and flew into the woods, away from the road, and Prim followed it, curious to see what was to be seen there.

The raven took them uphill, where the trees thinned out and great rocks emerged from the grassen ground. Not much later, it perched on a stone, which had been visibly cut into its shape by hand a long time ago. But the stone's surfaces were smoothed and worn by years of exposure to the elements, and lichen grew boldly across it.

"Behold," said the raven, spreading its wings as if to make a point, "what was once

a great city. It held houses and streets and towers and temples and palaces back in its day, and travellers from afar came to rest and tell their tales and trade with merchants. Billions of souls had been born and had lived and had died here. Great kings and poets and scholars passed through here. Now it is but rubble, buried deep underneath dirt and rocks, no two stones atop each other as they ought to be.”

Prim looked and indeed saw but a handful of stones betraying but traces of their originally intended arrangement, which was now long lost in years long gone. Instead, they were covered in thick layers of dirt and earth and short grass and moss and branches which mighty winds had carried uphill when the rage had taken them. Not even the fiercest battles could have annihilated a city so thoroughly.

“What happened to it?” asked Prim, observing solemnly.

“The greatest calamity of all,” said the raven, “time. As quickly as the city had grown, so it had eventually rotted to its death as time had its way with it. They say that when the city was built, it was built on wide plains and that a river had flowed through it. They say that all these mountains around us have grown only after the city’s demise, as the lands themselves have shifted and folded over aeons.”

“Why show me this?” asked Prim, dismayed.

“Because you need to see, girl, the heartlessness of time. It takes even the ground underneath our feet from us. Eventually, the cruel beast that it is shall take all, in one way or another. It is thus better to take before it is taken from you.”

It was at that point that Prim had stepped on something sharp, which stung her like a babe screeching for a mother’s attention. She picked it up and saw that it was a small seed with a shell as hard as diamonds and with edges as sharp as volcanic glass.

“What was this city’s name?” she asked quietly.

“Primaurst, I believe,” said the raven, but Prim already knew.

“Did you do this?” asked Prim with a trembling voice.

"I couldn't even if I had wanted to," said the raven. "I am but a bird. I have no such powers."

"Enough, Aesma!" yelled Prim. "Tell me truthfully: Did you do this?"

Aesma grinned her toothy smile as she turned back from the feathered form she had assumed. "I didn't," she said calmly. "I wanted to, but I came far too late. Time had taken it first; the city was dead and buried long before I even thought of seeking to destroy it."

Prim fell to her knees and cried bitterly, for as she had known time, it was something that happened around her, not away from her. But now she saw that it had indeed torn away from her grasp and annihilated Primaaurast with its orchards of ruby red fruit and fields of supple grain mercilessly and thoroughly. She had never thought never to see Primaaurast again, that bright city that had grown and changed around her so rapidly, even if everyone she knew there came and went as quickly as a tide. She would've returned eventually, Prim had so foolishly believed, once she had reached the road's end, perhaps, or perhaps even earlier. But now she saw that time was indeed as cruel a beast as Aesma had said it to be, and that it mercilessly took all it wanted and never returned a single thing, just as it had taken Primaaurast from her twice.

"If it weren't you who destroyed it," Prim sobbed finally and looked at Aesma, "why remain here?"

"I waited for you," said Aesma. "If you want to be found, stay in one place. Just like this. It is much faster this way."

"What do you want from me, then?" said Prim.

"I nurture and listen to all my hungers. You know well I desire you still," said Aesma, her infernal greed burning in her eyes.

"You have come to taste my blood again," said Prim and gently rubbed the left side of her neck.

"I have," said Aesma and licked her ashen-black lips with her long red tongue.

“Come then,” said Prim, opening her arms, “and drink your fill.”

“Careful, girl,” said Aesma, inching towards her and trembling to contain herself, “do not tempt me thoughtlessly. My hungers know no end and my stomach no bottom.”

“I know,” said Prim.

As soon as those words departed her lips, Aesma leapt at her and sunk her two hundred and seventy-seven teeth into Prim’s throat. As her fangs pierced her skin, Prim understood that the cruelty of time would not only take from her, but that it could take her, too, if it so wanted, and she felt a little better. As Aesma thirstily drank her blood, Prim saw that the heartless time was cruel to anything it touched with its merciless claws, unequally in equal measures, and that she could grow and flourish and rot in the same way a tree or a city does, and she felt a little better. And as Aesma licked her blood-stained teeth and lips with her long red tongue above her, Prim saw that the cruelty of time was indeed no different from the cruelty of the road and the road no different from time, twisting and turning endlessly and furiously right underneath the soles of her feet. She understood that she was indeed a slave to both equally, yet to master either of them, and that either of them could be mastered as much as a river or a mountain could be, and she felt a little better.

At the same time, the insatiable greed raging in Aesma’s heart fought a vicious battle with itself. Her desire to conquer and dominate the mighty Prim who had slain Un-Janta with a single strike thirsted for more, so much more of her blood, tasting victoriously sweet on her lips. But that desire wrung heavily with her ever-maddening hunger to taste once more the tender affections of the pitiful, pretty little thing underneath her, which she remembered all too fondly in the darkened hours of lonesome nights. Evenly matched, Aesma’s bottomlessly greedy desires battled on rabidly in her heart, and so she removed her teeth from Prim’s neck to look at the lovely figure beneath her and licked her blood-stained teeth and lips with her long red tongue.

“What’s the matter?” said Prim.

"I cannot decide whether to consume you or to love you," said Aesma. "I hunger for both, but can only have one. That will not do."

"Let me decide for you, then," said Prim and placed her hand on Aesma's cheek, which was stained with her blood. Then Prim gently kissed her, and then she gently made love to her for three days and three nights, and she felt a little better.

On the fourth day, Prim released Aesma from her tender embrace and got up, donning her vela and her greatknife.

"Where are you going?" asked Aesma.

"Back to the road," said Prim.

"Why?" said Aesma and stomped her foot into the ground so that the mountains shook. "Why, why, why?" she wailed pitifully, thrashing the ground underneath her.

"I want to see what's at its end," said Prim.

"You daft girl!" screeched Aesma. "Do you still not see there is no end to it?"

"I do," said Prim calmly.

"You'll tread it endlessly, you fool!" whined Aesma.

"That is why I want to go," said Prim. "The first step is a foolish one until the end is reached."

"You'll never get there," hissed Aesma.

"Maybe," said Prim, "and maybe not. The road may yet change its nature. Who's to say it doesn't live and die as a city does? Who's to say it doesn't rise and fall as the sea or a mountain does? It twists and turns and wriggles under the soles of my feet each day, I feel it clearly. So perhaps it shall die someday, too. On that day, I shall like to see it end."

"Half-witted hopes!" barked Aesma.

"Maybe," said Prim. "And maybe I shall grow tired of it someday first. Maybe on

that day I shall finally abandon my road forever. On that day, I shall be dead and the Prim that stands before you no more. Perhaps the road will truly have mastered me then. I shall like to see what Prim I will be at that time.”

“A dead one, you buffoon!” screeched Aesma.

Prim took Aesma’s hands with a gentle, cutting smile. “I shall like to see what Aesma you will be then, too,” she said. “Will you still burn alight with these ceaseless flames of yours? Will you still practice the universal art in pursuit of the fastest way? Will you still welcome me in your arms and your bed? I shall like to see that, too.”

“But I don’t want you to go,” cried Aesma, clutching at Prim’s hands. “I don’t want you to die if not by my claws and fangs! Stay with me and be mine, instead!”

“I can’t,” said Prim in earnest sorrow. “As your will fuels the raging fires in your heart, Pree Aesma, so does mine put my feet on the road. As your will seeks to conquer me, so does mine seek to master the road. I want to go, therefore I must go, as you must wail and rage and curse and destroy and, eventually, seek to conquer me once more.”

Thus Prim bade her farewell and embraced her before they parted their ways, as was custom between lovers, and Aesma welcomed her in her arms, for she knew not what else she could do.

“This time, I shall leave you with a gift,” Prim whispered into her ear. “Wait not for me to find you next time, but seek me out instead. It is much faster that way,” she spoke and kissed Aesma on the left side of her neck, which stung Aesma a little. Then Prim parted from her arms and left. They say that thereafter Aesma had raged for eight days and eight nights, levelling all the mountains she set her eyes on into rubble.

But Prim knew none of that, for she had walked away without turning around, and so she soon returned to the road to master it.