

BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

The Turn of a Card

by

Robert Arjet

Nerissa Natoli trudged through the rain-slick streets of Westmarch, the drizzle making the lights glow eerily in the evening's deepening gloom. Her apprehension was less about the creatures sighted of late in the city than about the unseasonably cold weather, the fog that thickened into rain just long enough to make the streets slippery and treacherous. Her rich wool cloak kept her warm, but the indignity of walking through the rain filled her with bitter resentment.

Just a year ago, she would have ridden in the carriage, attended by servants. Of course, a year ago, the creditors had not yet begun arriving at her doorstep with debts and unpaid bills, all in her husband's name. Ashton was a good man, deep down, she told herself. But gambling and drinking had laid many greater men low, and now he had vanished to fate only knew where, taking the last of the family's treasure with him. She could not find it within herself to hold his weakness against him, but when she stepped in an icy puddle, the sour pit in her stomach churned.

She headed down a residential street lined with ancient trees and elegant manor houses, and thought of the many costumed revels she had taken Elizabeth to on this very avenue—back when there was still money for new gowns. The street had seemed stately then, viewed from the window of a carriage. But the carriage had gone soon after the gowns, and now the trees looked black and malevolent, their old limbs writhing through the mist.

She had kept the horses as long as she could. They were a conspicuous sign of her family's station, and when she sold them, she could no longer make even a pretense of propriety. Walking through the wet streets like a commoner, she silently cursed her

fate and wished once again that Ashton would return, his wealth intact, his weakness conquered. She was not one for indulging in fantasy, but she had little else to comfort her. She would find a way, she told herself. She would not have her sister die an impoverished spinster. The thought was enough to steel her resolve. Come what might, no matter the price, she would find a way.

Turning onto a side street, she saw her destination looming before her like a bleak and rocky cliff. It was, in fact, merely the comparatively modest house of one Vincent Dastin, a prosperous—if vulgar—merchant and moneylender, but in her imagination it towered above her, obdurate and forbidding. She eyed the front door with apprehension. A year ago, she would have sent a footman with her message while she sipped a fine Kehjistani wine in the carriage. Tonight, however, she walked the long steps to the door, dreading the shame of asking—no, begging—for the man's patience.

Nerissa reached the entrance and raised her hand to the knocker. She gripped the cold metal with as much resolve as she could muster, and let it fall against the oaken door, which swung open almost immediately on well-oiled hinges.

"Yes?" asked the plump footman who answered. Nerissa thought his cocked eyebrow a little insolent, but she checked her ire—she was, after all, here to beg for her house, and she suspected that her desperation was evident even to the servants. When she'd learned that Ashton had borrowed money against the family manor, she'd felt that her world had turned upside down. Nerissa had never before known what it meant to be in debt to another, never understood the sickening insecurity of bills that could not be paid, obligations that could not be met. But the house—the house was something altogether different. To lose the house would be to lose their refuge, their

last hope of returning to Westmarch society. Her last hope of one day pulling herself out of the pit that Ashton had dug. Her last hope of ever finding a match for Elizabeth.

Summoning her dignity, she politely but firmly informed the man, "I would speak with Master Dastin." Almost as an afterthought, she remembered that she had not been preceded by an introduction, and added, "I am Nerissa Natoli."

The footman paused just an instant longer than Nerissa thought acceptable and then, to her shock, said quickly, "I shall see if the master is in," and closed the door.

This was really too much. To be left standing on the doorstep like a peddler or a common tradesman was an insult that Nerissa did not know how to bear. She resolved to have words with Dastin about the rudeness of his servants.

In the meantime, she thought back to how she had set out that evening, how Elizabeth had pleaded with her to stay and play at cards, and she smiled ruefully. That girl could be in a burning house and would only have a mind for dancing and gaiety. But in a manner of speaking, the House Natoli was indeed burning around her, and Elizabeth would suffer most of all: she was young and beautiful but absolutely without hope of a marriage unless her dowry could somehow be restored. Nerissa forced herself not to imagine the brothels and gambling dens in which her sister's birthright had been lost, but she could feel herself harden inside. Ashton was a good man, deep down, she reminded herself.

The door swung open again, and as Nerissa prepared to enter, the footman intoned with what could not be mistaken for deference, "The master is not receiving."

Nerissa paused, her foot poised to step over the threshold. Had she heard right? Was this upstart merchant refusing her an audience? Her blood rose to her cheeks, and she knew she must control herself. Making a scene now would only add to her humiliation. Her mother had often said that a gentlewoman could be told by the way she bore a slight, and Nerissa was not going to give this insolent servant—or his ill-mannered master—the satisfaction of behaving in anything but the most gracious of ways. She composed herself, said simply, "Very well," and turned gracefully on her heel.

The cobblestone streets were awash as Nerissa walked homeward, the rain falling in earnest now, the reflections of candlelight and lanterns dancing erratically in the puddles that she tried to avoid. As her anger began to wane, fear and desperation grew in its place. In the shock of the slight from Dastin, she had lost sight of what the affront meant. She had been denied even the chance to discuss a further delay on the debt. A chance to beg for her and Elizabeth's home. As dire as her situation had been on the way there, she realized now it was far more desperate.

Lost in her thoughts, she was startled by a sudden whinny. She looked up, the cold rain pelting her face, and realized she did not recognize the street she was on. Narrow, dark, and twisted, it felt like a damp forest, with unseen creatures lurking just out of sight. Nerissa knew the best avenues and boulevards of Westmarch quite well, but this crooked alleyway was menacing in its unfamiliarity.

She turned, trying to find the source of the noise, and heard it again, along with the rattle of carriage wheels. Cursing the fog, Nerissa looked about her, not sure if she was more unnerved by the unseen carriage or the dingy street. With a jolt, a coal-black horse reared before her, the reins jerked sharply back. Nerissa nearly fell to her knees, but suddenly the beast was calm, and the handler gazed down on her as if nothing had happened.

She wasn't familiar with the handler's livery, but the cut of it was out of fashion by a generation at least. She ducked her head again, the shame of her position burning all the hotter in the face of old, respected gentility, but she turned abruptly when she heard her name.

"Nerissa?"

The voice was elderly, soft, and gentle, but completely unfamiliar. Nerissa approached the carriage's open window, the wooden panel drawn back by a delicate, arthritic hand, and she tried to make out a face in the gloom.

"Yes?"

"Don't just stand there, my dear girl. Get out of the rain. You must be soaked. Nathaniel, open the door."

The handler leapt down with deferential grace, and the door swung silently open to her. Nerissa thanked him with a superior nod and stepped into the carriage, too puzzled to feel her shame, and frankly quite thankful to be out of the rain.

As she eased herself onto the wooden bench, her eyes began to adjust to the gloom, and she made out a plump, wrinkled face, an abundance of white curls, and a body shrunk by age to almost child-size. She racked her brain for the woman's name, but could produce nothing. Not the slightest glimmer of recognition for this woman who obviously knew her and who, unlike increasingly significant portions of Westmarch society, was willing to extend a hand of kindness to her.

"I'm dreadfully sorry," she finally stammered as the woman gazed upon her with benevolence, "but you seem to have me at a disadvantage. I cannot for the life of me remember where we've met."

The woman smiled indulgently and patted Nerissa's chilled arm with a hand that felt like dried parchment. "Not to worry, dear. We haven't met, so I'm not surprised you don't remember it." She smiled more broadly as Nerissa's bafflement spread across her face, and continued. "I'm a very old friend of your family, and I've been keeping a bit of an eye on you."

Did she wink? Nerissa couldn't be sure. But her breath caught in her chest as she suddenly imagined the woman to be a long-lost dowager aunt with a small fortune to lavish on Nerissa and Elizabeth. She was instantly appalled at such a thought, but with disaster looming so near, anyone who looked remotely like a savior was someone to be handled with the utmost care.

"Keeping an eye on me? Then—then you know..." Nerissa trailed off with a tactful wave of her hand, indicating her family's spiral toward penury, best left unspoken in polite company. The old woman gave the barest of nods.

"Yes, dear. I'm afraid I do. And as odd as it may seem..." Here, she gazed out the window at the driving rain and paused before she finished with an oddly disconcerting fixity in her eyes. "I may have a solution to your, shall we say, situation."

Nerissa struggled to keep her face a polite blank, but her heart leapt in anticipation. She was still baffled by the old woman's identity, but now the prospect of her being a savior was both real and immediate. She chose her words carefully.

"A solution?"

"A *possible* solution, dear. That is, well... Do you play cards?"

Nerissa thought this a rather inopportune non sequitur, but nodded in the affirmative. In fact, she was well known across Westmarch as one of the sharpest hands in the city. She had never succumbed to the gambling fever as Ashton had, but she had emptied the purses of more than one social rival in a "friendly" game of Destiny or Wild Geese. Did the old woman know that? Was she challenging her to a game? Nerissa hardly knew what to think. Ashton had wagered against the family property and lost; could she win it back in the same way? She felt almost giddy with the possibility, but merely smiled and said, "Yes. Yes, I do play cards."

Stepping from the carriage at her own gate, Nerissa noted thankfully that the rain had ceased. In fact, the clouds had scudded from the sky, and thousands of stars shone down upon the night-clad city. She turned back suddenly, catching the door before it closed.

"I'm dreadfully sorry, but I still don't know your name."

"Oh, how foolish of me. I never did tell you. My name is Carlotta."

"Very well, then, Carlotta. I shall expect you tomorrow evening. Are you certain you won't dine with us before we play?"

"Very certain, my child. I prefer to dine alone." And with that, she closed the door, slid the wooden panel shut, and the carriage lurched away into the street.

Her head spinning, Nerissa climbed the steps to her front door. The old woman was probably sitting upon a small fortune and just looking for an excuse to share it with Nerissa and Elizabeth. Of course, the game was just a polite fiction, a social nicety to avoid the appearance of charity. Or perhaps Carlotta was in earnest, and was more interested in a high-stakes game of cards than in Nerissa's well-being. *So be it, then.* She had certainly heard of—and seen—more eccentric behavior among the old and wealthy of Westmarch. If Carlotta wanted a game, Nerissa was more than willing to provide it.

The next evening, as the gloom of twilight gathered about the house, Nerissa hovered anxiously in her private chamber. What if Carlotta was as daft as she seemed, and completely forgot about the appointment? What if it was all a cruel joke of some sort? What if...?

Nerissa stiffened her spine and forced her nerves into submission. She looked around the room: the best of the remaining furniture, a pair of polished oil lamps

burning brightly, a cart with nearly the last bottle of Kehjistani wine and two cups, and of course, on the dark, gleaming table, a deck of cards.

Nerissa had chosen these cards purposefully, adorned as they were with the Natoli family crest. She liked to feel that if she was playing for the future of the House Natoli, then she could at least choose cards that represented the stakes.

And, yes—the stakes. Nerissa looked again at the velvet-covered box that she had laid beside the cards. Within it was every last piece of jewelry she could muster, a fortune to a commoner on the street, but a small stake with which to attempt the redemption of her family's riches. Nerissa knew that she would have to win, and win repeatedly, to put the family on an even footing once again. But she could not afford to win so quickly that she scared the darling old crone off. No, this would require finesse, delicacy, and care.

"Nerissa! Look!"

Her thoughts were shattered and she jumped with a nervous start as her beaming sister bounded into the room. Elizabeth was covered head to foot in what appeared to be great flapping leaves of crimson, umber, and orange. Nerissa recoiled from the sight, but managed a slight smile to match the joy that lit Elizabeth's round, glowing face. Though she couldn't help occasionally resenting Elizabeth's seeming obliviousness to their growing plight, Nerissa also couldn't help being entranced by her sister's beauty and sheer vivacity. She would be perfect for any number of Westmarch gentlemen, and at least a few of the lesser nobility, if she only had a sufficient dowry. But the dowry went to pay Ashton's debts, and now Elizabeth faced a long and lonely life, or worse—a match to some ambitious commoner who would buy

his way into the Natoli family name. Nerissa shuddered at the thought and tried to keep the smile on her face as Elizabeth leapt around the room in some sort of cavorting dance.

"Do you see? Do you see what I am?"

Nerissa restrained herself from the acid-tongued replies that came to mind, and settled on an indifferent, "I don't know... A court jester?"

Elizabeth seemingly stopped mid-leap to gaze in pure bafflement at her sister. "A jester? Do you take me for a fool, Sister?" She tried to look severe but broke into a smile and giggled an appealing arpeggio of laughter, twirling around Nerissa, nearly knocking her off balance. "The Lancasters' revel is in two weeks, and for once I can finally go again."

She gripped Nerissa by the shoulders with the earnest joy of a child, hoping to make her dull, unimaginative older sister understand. "You say I can't go because we can't afford new gowns. But Madam Lancaster says this time we must all make our own costumes! So I shall go!"

She leapt away and struck a pose. Nerissa steadied herself and checked to make sure the arrangement of cards and wine had not been disturbed.

"The theme of the revel is 'Time,'" Elizabeth intoned in mock seriousness. "Now can you guess what I am?"

Nerissa brought her attention back to the girl and looked her over. Upon closer inspection, she could see that Elizabeth was half-covered in scraps of parchment and

cloth pinned carefully to an old brown gown. She did want to humor her sister, but now was not the time for guessing games. "A tree?"

Elizabeth dropped her pose with a sigh of exasperation and shook her curls at Nerissa. "No, you great pudding. I am autumn. Can't you tell by the leaves?" For a second, Nerissa saw the hint of genuine concern in her sister's large brown eyes, the faint uncertainty of a girl who was, after all, wearing last season's gown hastily adorned with cast-off pieces of parchment and gauze. Nerissa's heart melted, and she threw her arms around Elizabeth.

"Of course I can. You are the very picture of autumn. You shall be the talk of the evening."

"I shall!" Elizabeth spun out of Nerissa's arms with an imperious gesture, then giggled. "Oh, thank you, Nerissa. Now I really must get back to cutting out leaves. Maurice is helping me, but they do take ever so long to make."

And just like that, she was gone, flitting out of the chamber like a spirit. Nerissa sighed and found that she was no longer tense or anxious. She picked up the deck of cards and began to shuffle idly. As much as Nerissa cared about the house, Elizabeth was the great weight that lay on her heart. Recovering enough of their fortune to marry her sister well would ease her mind more than anything else, and lift the shame that daily visited her over Elizabeth's diminished prospects. *A good marriage for Elizabeth*, she thought, and she ground her teeth with impatience. It was hers for the taking, and she intended to take it tonight.

"Oh, no, my dear. I'm afraid I no longer take spirits at all." Carlotta waved away the offered cup of wine with her tiny hand, and Nerissa returned it to the table, a little disappointed. Sometimes alcohol provided a slight edge, but Nerissa hadn't counted on it. She had her wits about her; she was alert, ready, almost eager for the game to begin.

"At my age, you know, well... certain things simply must be given up." Carlotta grinned knowingly, and Nerissa politely chuckled in response, although she really had no idea how old this strange woman was. Merely that she had passed "ancient" some time ago, but had not yet arrived at "dead."

"So." Nerissa smiled. "What shall we play? First Light? Destiny? Wild Geese, perhaps?" Nerissa secretly hoped for Wild Geese, as she was particularly adept at the rapid bidding and counter-bidding of the Kehjistani game. But she was prepared to play any of them, or for that matter, any game her guest might suggest.

"Oh no. Wild Geese is far too fast paced for me. I prefer something simpler. Very simple." She nodded her head as if in agreement with herself, and Nerissa waited to hear the game. She began to feel the tension rise again and took a sip of wine.

"But first," Carlotta rasped, her hands gripping the head of an ebony cane that seemed far more than necessary to support such a frail body, "the stakes. We must discuss"—and here, she appeared to harden slightly, to contract in upon herself in some unnatural way—"the stakes."

Nerissa finished the cup of wine and fumbled it back to the table. She picked up the velvet box, displaying it proudly, and opened the top. The contents glittered. "I

have my jewelry," she replied with as much dignity as she could muster, "and some of these pieces have been in my family for generations. This one, for example"—and she lifted out a filigree comb of spun gold with a single large sapphire—"was given to my grandmother on her wedding day. Or this," she said as she carefully withdrew a stiletto, the sheath dotted with three rubies, "was kept by my great-uncle when he was at court. It's really just a showpiece, but he fancied himself quite the soldier." She laughed self-deprecatingly but found herself in an unsettlingly steely gaze from Carlotta. She returned the knife to the box and waited for the old woman to speak.

"No," the crone breathed, her eyes never leaving Nerissa's. "No, I think we should play for more... significant stakes." She waved away Nerissa's stammering objection with a tiny movement of one hand. "I think we should play for the most significant stakes of all. What, my dear, would you want more than anything else in this world?"

Nerissa hesitated, unsure if the old woman was mad, jesting, or something else entirely. Was this her way of offering to pay off the family debts altogether? Nerissa's head swam with the possibilities.

"Before you answer, mind that you be careful what you ask for. The things we want often have a way of turning themselves against us." Carlotta smiled, and Nerissa realized with a flash that this was a test. Of course. The old woman wasn't just offering to take care of the debt; she was testing Nerissa to see what she would say. She crafted her answer meticulously, as if it were the heartfelt longing of a loyal wife and not a calculated economic decision.

"I would see my dear husband, Ashton, return. Sober, reformed, and with all his wealth." She tried to make the last sound like an afterthought instead of her most desperate desire.

"Very well, dear. And in return? What is your most valuable possession? What has always been at your inmost core and is yours alone to give away?"

Nerissa, who fancied herself rather quick at riddles, almost burst out with, "My heart," as the obvious answer. But the thought of this decrepit old thing claiming her heart nearly made her laugh out loud.

Instead, she considered the odd gleam in Carlotta's eye and hesitated again. What would be the best answer? It came to her, and she favored Carlotta with an ingratiating smile of indulgence, as one might give a child who was asking for a treat before dinner.

"I would have you choose, of course. Against my deepest desire, I wager anything of mine which you would have."

"Done," Carlotta shot back, almost before Nerissa finished. The sharpness of her agreement startled Nerissa, and the hardness in her eye seemed to deepen to a metallic spark for just an instant. Or did it? Nerissa caught herself and poured another cup of wine. This old woman was playing tricks with her mind. Or, more likely, sheer stress and anxiety, coupled with the breathtaking prospect of paying off the family's debts, were simply agitating her nerves. She looked closely at Carlotta and saw nothing but doughy-soft cheeks and the deeply etched lines of a plump face accustomed to smiles and laughter. Nerissa chided herself for thinking evil of the

woman. A little off-kilter she might be, but this was her soon-to-be savior, a harmless elderly eccentric, and if she wanted to play for imaginary stakes before bestowing her fortune on Nerissa and Elizabeth, so it would be. She would sing nursery rhymes and play pat-a-cake if that was what the old fool desired. So long as there were gold and silver at the end of it.

"Very well, then." Carlotta reached out for the cards, deftly cutting them with one hand. "It shall be a simple game. I shall draw a card, and then you shall draw a card. We shall continue until each has three. Then we shall reveal our cards one at a time." She nodded to Nerissa as if questioning whether she was following. "By the end, whoever holds the highest card wins."

What was this? Nerissa was more certain than ever of the old woman's dotage. This was no game of skill; this was mere luck. Was she to gamble her family's remaining fortune on the turn of a card? Everything about Carlotta had suggested that she was looking for an invigorating game, but this was no more than a foolish bet on random chance. Still—she was the one with the fortune to dispense or withhold, and Nerissa was going to do everything in her power to humor her.

"High card wins. Certainly." She gestured for Carlotta to draw a card. The old woman nodded her head gently, the snow-white curls bobbing slightly, and reached forward to take a card. Nerissa followed suit, and soon each had three cards face down on the table before them. Without a word, Carlotta turned over her first card.

"Oh, drat," she muttered, and giggled like a child. The card was the three of crowns, not likely to win the game. She stared at Nerissa with eager eyes, her hands bunched in her lap. A little unnerved by her ardor, Nerissa turned over her first card,

anxious to get the game over with so that they might get down to the real business at hand, and revealed the twelve of serpents. Not a bad card at all.

Carlotta whipped over her next card, the seven of serpents, and looked up at Nerissa again with those burning, eager eyes. Nerissa hesitated; there was no thinking to be done, no strategy, but still, she did not like the idea of blindly flipping cards until the game was over. She deliberated between her two remaining cards and finally turned over the eight of lions.

She relaxed slightly. This was foolish. A foolish game, foolish stakes, and a foolish old woman, but the real game—the real stakes—could not be more serious. Nerissa considered how to make her next move after the game was over. She had always been skilled at reading the faces and judging the behavior of her opponents, and she scrutinized Carlotta now as the old woman's hand hovered over her last card.

Nerissa gasped involuntarily when she saw the empress of crowns. That would be hard to beat. Carlotta looked up from the card, a gleam that bordered on the predatory in her eye. Nerissa drew back, then composed herself. What madness was this? Here sat a darling old woman, poised to bestow a fortune on her family, and here Nerissa was, treating this game of imaginary stakes as if it mattered. She laughed, and smiled at her benefactor. "Well, you certainly have the advantage now, my dear. Let's see what I can come up with..."

When Nerissa saw the empress of stars, she felt a palpable wave of relief wash over her. Carlotta merely clucked her tongue and immediately gathered herself together and rose. Nerissa didn't even have time to suggest a second hand before the

woman had excused herself and left the chamber. Nerissa chased after her, half-frantic that she had somehow offended her or missed her chance.

"Well played, my dear. I shall show myself out." Carlotta didn't even look back over her shoulder, and Nerissa tried to keep the pleading tone out of her voice but failed.

"One more hand, surely? You almost had me there. Perhaps a cup of Kehjistani white? Or a—"

"I told you already, dear. I don't take spirits. But I shall call upon you tomorrow night, if you choose."

"Oh yes, certainly. Most certainly. I shall—"

"I said, 'if you choose,' my dear. So consider your choice carefully before tomorrow evening." And with that, she was out the door. Nerissa shook her head. This quarry was going to take more cajoling than she had thought if she was to be persuaded to help the family. The woman seemed an open book, but Nerissa expected there was much yet to learn.

Standing on the front steps, watching the carriage depart, Nerissa realized how cold it had suddenly become. A bitter, damp chill seemed to cut through her, although the evening had been temperate not an hour ago. And that fog again—it appeared to well up from the ground like a living thing, drawing itself together for some malevolent purpose.

She turned back eagerly to the warmth and light of the house—and perhaps a cup of wine—when her thoughts were interrupted by a heavy, grunting shuffle, quite different from the soft creaking of Carlotta's carriage receding into the distance. Nerissa strained her eyes to make out details among the shifting and swirling tendrils of fog.

She cocked her head in annoyance as a large cart slowly coalesced out of the mist and lumbered its way into the courtyard, a driver hunched over like a troglodyte in the seat. What tradesman would be making a delivery at this time of night? And calling at the front door, no less. Did he think that because she had fallen on hard times, simple rules of propriety could be dispensed with?

"Madam Natoli, if it please you?" The heavysset commoner climbed down from the cart, pulling a folded parchment from his belt.

"Yes, I am Madam Natoli. What exactly are you bringing to my house at this hour?"

"Well, I'm afraid it's your husband, ma'am."

Nerissa felt her knees buckle as she made out the rude wooden casket in the back of the cart. Maurice rushed to her side, and she leaned upon him, her breath suddenly caught in her throat.

"Ashton? Is... dead?"

The man looked up at her, concern and pity on his hardy face. "Oh, by the fates, you didn't know? I'm awful sorry, then, ma'am. I wouldn'ta wanted to let you know like this. T'ain't right, it isn't."

He handed the parchment to Nerissa, who took it in numbed fingers. She searched for something to say, anything to break the breathless agony in her chest. "What— what of his possessions? Where are they?"

He scuffed his boots on the steps and shook his head. "Well, then, he's got everything he owns with him, doesn't he? 'All his wealth, a burial shroud,' as the saying goes."

Nerissa felt the color drain from her face, and the man looked about anxiously. "I'll just bring him around back, then, shall I?" He turned to climb into his seat. Nerissa nodded her silent assent and watched the cart wheel out of the courtyard toward the back of the manor. She realized she was still holding the parchment. She unfolded it and tried to make it out through the tears stinging her eyes.

The crabbed writing was difficult to read, but Nerissa could tell well enough what it was: a delivery bill.

Elizabeth, for once in her life, was inconsolable. Perhaps some sense of the depths of their misfortune had finally come home to her with the news of her brother-in-law's death. She had been a favorite of Ashton's, who recognized a kindred spirit in her gaiety and childlike embrace of life. Now, she sobbed so relentlessly that Nerissa was forced to rise from the morass of her own grief and tend to her. She brushed away the tears and thought of what might cheer Elizabeth. "Don't forget the Lancasters' revel, my sweet. You must still finish your costume. Why don't you find Maurice and have him help you cut some more leaves?"

Elizabeth had nodded and trotted off, leaving Nerissa to her brooding thoughts. She knew too much of demons and witchcraft to write this all off as a mere coincidence, but she was at a loss to explain it in any way that made sense. She felt a fool for imagining such things, but then, such things had certainly been reported in Westmarch recently. For an instant, panic rose deep inside her—this witch, this crone, had killed her husband. And now she was bringing poor Elizabeth into the bargain. What wretched fate could she—?

She shook her head fiercely. What mattered was that the old woman would be returning tonight, and Nerissa needed to have her wits about her if she was to arrive upon the fortune she knew could be hers.

"Madam? Madam? A guest..." Maurice was clearly unprepared for Carlotta to simply stride through the door when he opened it, and he trailed after her like a confused puppy, wringing his hands and calling out in the loudest voice he could bring himself to muster when addressing his mistress.

Nerissa roused herself from the bench where she had been contemplating Carlotta's arrival, and strode out to the balustrade overlooking the entryway and the grand staircase. Maurice still followed Carlotta, who mounted the stairs with far more vigor than her tiny frame suggested, her ebony walking stick striking sharply on each marble step. "Show her up, please, Maurice," Nerissa replied reassuringly, knowing with certainty that Carlotta needed no showing. In fact, the old footman would be doing well to catch up with her by the time she reached the chamber. But that was the type of polite fiction upon which gentle society was built.

After the briefest of pleasantries, Carlotta gripped the head of her walking stick in both hands and leaned forward in her chair. "And so, my child. The stakes..."

She let the word trail off like an indecorous proposal, and Nerissa steeled herself. She had given great thought to tonight's stakes. She stiffened her spine, laid her hands carefully in her lap, and spoke slowly and precisely, like a prudent schoolchild reciting a lesson. "Again, I wager anything of mine which you would have."

"That which has always been at your inmost core and is yours alone to give away?"

Nerissa simply nodded her assent. "For my part, I wish a dowry for Elizabeth. One sufficient that any gentleman in Westmarch might marry her."

"Done."

Nerissa was taken aback by the sharpness of Carlotta's voice. And that gleam in her eyes... Was "hungry" the right word? No, but it did seem that the old woman's rosy-cheeked vigor had declined into something more like a crabbed determination. It did not suit her well, and Nerissa found herself disturbed by the extent to which Carlotta's demeanor had changed.

Carlotta silently reached out and, with one hand, cut the cards with an efficient grace. She glanced up at Nerissa, and the bright, almost feverish light shining in her eyes—nestled so incongruously in that wrinkled, doughy face—brought a surge of panic to Nerissa's chest. She looked away and bit down hard on her tongue to distract herself. Carlotta drew a card from the top of the deck.

Nerissa took her card and placed it before her. Carlotta did the same, and then each woman repeated the act until they had both drawn three cards. The silence hung heavy in the room. Carlotta finally reached out and overturned the eleven of lions, then looked up at Nerissa expectantly. Nerissa had a momentary urge to sweep the cards from the table, but she forced it down. Praying that her hand would not tremble, she chose a card at random and revealed the archangel of crowns.

"Oh, my goodness. What a lucky draw." Carlotta smiled and clucked her tongue in mock annoyance, but Nerissa was certain she heard genuine and vigorous displeasure in her voice. Nerissa was nearly sure to win now, and she relaxed. The only question was how to negotiate the exact size of the dowry once the card game was over.

Carlotta overturned the nine of crowns, and Nerissa answered immediately with the three of serpents. Carlotta hesitated for the first time that Nerissa could remember, her hand hovering over her last card.

"We could call it a draw," she suggested, her eyebrow arched, her voice honeyed. "What with the stakes so high, it would only be fair to give you one last chance to back out."

Nerissa was certain now that the woman was daft. With the second-highest card in the deck showing, Nerissa could virtually not fail to win. Why would she call it a draw? And who backed out of a card game before the turn of the final card? Horror seized her, and she wondered if the old woman was reneging on the stakes altogether. Perhaps she was in as much debt as Nerissa. Perhaps she never had a coin to bestow on the family, and this was all a mad game of hers. Perhaps...

But perhaps not. Nerissa would see this farce out to the very end if it promised even the slightest hope of marrying Elizabeth off. She returned Carlotta's smile of benevolent politeness and waved the idea away with one hand. "And deprive you of the chance to win? Never. You might have the archangel of stars there as we speak."

Carlotta looked down at the card as if she was considering the possibility that the deck's archangel of stars was truly beneath her fingers, then snapped the card over with such force that Nerissa jumped.

The two of lions.

Both women laughed, a well-practiced titter that trivialized awkward moments and reassured those present that decorum had not been irreparably breached. But Nerissa could feel tension drain from her body like a vile liquid, and Carlotta's free hand clamped around the head of her walking stick with a fierce grip. Her shrunken fingers hovered over the card, as if there were a way she could flip it again to produce a different result.

"Oh, my dear Carlotta. I'm afraid you gave me a bit of a start..." Nerissa began, but once again, the woman stood up briskly and made her way out of the room without a backward glance. Nerissa followed her, unsure exactly how to broach the subject of the payment of the dowry. She finally decided that if Carlotta meant to welch on the bet, there was nothing to lose, and if she meant to honor it, Nerissa was obviously going to have to bring up the topic before Carlotta made it out the front door.

"Yes, well, then, Carlotta. We should discuss—"

"No."

The single word trailed behind the departing woman like a foul vapor, and Nerissa gasped. Carlotta wheeled on her as she reached the door.

"No, we should not discuss. You—you, Madam Natoli, must consider the stakes. And if you wish me to return tomorrow, I shall. But we shall not discuss."

And with that she was gone.

Nerissa watched the carriage clatter away into the night with a heavy heart. Had it all been in vain? Was this the last she would see of Carlotta, and had her fortune just been a cruel delusion? Nerissa clenched her fists. A dowry for Elizabeth. That was all she wanted. If everything else was taken from her, she could still show her face, knowing she had secured a life of comfort and beauty for her sister, who really had little to recommend her but her beauty, and no preparation for a life of anything but comfort.

She stared out into the darkness, half expecting a dowry to visit itself upon her like some miraculous apparition, and she shook her head and chided herself for such foolish fantasies. Carlotta was gone; Ashton was gone; the game was over; and Elizabeth would be forced to marry a vulgar commoner, if she could find even that. Nerissa mulled over her options and decided that another round of letters to the various creditors, begging their patience, could do no harm, and besides, she could think of nothing else to do at this point. She gave a last look out into the gloom, then turned back into the house and closed the door behind her.

"Maurice?" she called out, and the elderly footman appeared from around a corner.

"Yes, madam?"

"Fetch a lamp to my study. I have letters to write." She heard the bite in her voice and regretted it. Maurice was loyal to the end, and she should not let her disappointment turn into bitterness toward him. "Thank you, Maurice," she added, and he acknowledged this rare familiarity with a gracious nod as he shuffled away down the hallway.

Nerissa stood a moment in the entryway of the house, loath to actually sit down to the task of begging creditors for yet another extension, and decided there was no rush; she wouldn't be able to write until Maurice arrived with the lamp anyway. She felt curdled, tightened, and cornered, like an animal held at bay by hounds. She wondered if she just remained motionless, if she just didn't move, whether she could somehow put off the inevitable.

The knock at the door was so soft that Nerissa thought she'd imagined it at first. Then it came again, louder, more insistent. Her heart leapt, and she forced herself into composure. There was no reason to suspect that this had anything to do with her childish fantasy of a magical dowry, and no reason to believe it would turn out any better than had Ashton's return. She moved to the door as the knocking sounded again and, dispensing with protocol, decided to open it herself.

The boy at the door hardly looked capable of making such a racket, but he tipped his hat to Nerissa and ducked his head when he saw her, and produced a sealed letter from his pouch.

"As it please you, ma'am, a letter for you." She took the proffered letter and noticed the elaborate seal pressed into the wax that, along with a length of black silk ribbon, held the folded note shut. She offered a coin to the boy, but he fairly recoiled. "Beggin' your pardon, ma'am, but I'm not to take payment. Been paid already, haven't I?"

Nerissa smiled at his earnestness and held out the coin again. The boy raised his hands as if to ward it off, and Nerissa's smile faded. "No, ma'am, please. I have me orders." The boy was clearly in fear, and he backed away, keeping his eye on the coin as if Nerissa might somehow thrust it upon him against his will. Who had sent the child with such dire imprecations? What an odd thing to do. She tried to laugh it off, but her voice caught in her throat and would not come out.

Closing the door behind her, she examined the seal. It was a coat of arms, but one she was not familiar with. Someone from beyond Westmarch? Who could possibly have business with her...?

Dread climbed up from the pit of her stomach as she realized that she had no idea where Ashton had been these many months, and no way of knowing whom he might have borrowed money from. There could be yet more creditors, ones with family names behind them. Ones willing to send a letter a great distance to claim what was owed them...

Frustrated with her overactive imagination, Nerissa broke the seal and untied the ribbon. She opened the letter and read it, first with apprehension, then with curiosity, and then with trembling hands and a lighter heart than she'd felt in months.

A dowry. The impossible had happened. A dowry for Elizabeth. Nerissa blessed Carlotta and whatever angel in the High Heavens had sent her, and called out her sister's name.

"Elizabeth! Come here at once!"

Her voice sounded foreign, indecorously loud, almost startling in the quiet house. She read the letter over again, and there could be no doubt. This was the promised miracle. She had wagered everything and won the only thing she truly cared for.

"Nerissa, dearest, whatever is it?" Elizabeth came trotting down the staircase, clad in her ridiculous autumnal gown, leaves flapping and trailing behind her. Nerissa noticed that some even fluttered in her wake, dislodged by her haste, and giggled at the thought of Elizabeth losing her leaves like a fading autumn tree. She caught herself, disturbed by the idea somehow, and bestowed her most gracious and benevolent smile upon her worried sister.

"Elizabeth, we have had some very good news. Apparently, the viscount"—she looked again at the letter to be certain of the name—"the viscount Delfinus is a distant relation of ours. He has unfortunately passed away." She tried to make her face grave, but it was hardly worth the effort. "But before he died, he set aside funds for his youngest unmarried relations."

She paused to let Elizabeth peal with joy, but the girl merely stared at her, waiting for her to explain.

"A dowry, Elizabeth. You have been provided with a dowry. And a generous one at that."

Elizabeth squealed and clapped her hands like a delighted child, bouncing up and down in her glee. For once Nerissa did not see fit to try to constrain her sister's outburst. Her months of scraping, saving, and begging had finally paid off. Elizabeth was to be married, and all of Westmarch society would see Nerissa Natoli hold her head high once again.

"A dowry! I shall be married properly, to a gentleman." Elizabeth pirouetted, her leaves rustling madly. Nerissa restrained the urge to chide the girl—this was, after all, a moment of triumph. Let the child bounce and flit about if she had to.

"Maurice!" Elizabeth fairly shrieked. Nerissa winced at the volume of her sister's call, but before she could say anything, the girl had grasped her hands and was chattering at her, joy shining from her face.

"Shall he be a soldier as well? Captain Donne is said to be looking for a wife, and he is quite a handsome gentleman. Or a courtier, perhaps? Raymond Haston danced with me half the night at Madam Whittington's last season, and I think he fancies me. And Celeste says that there are several gentlemen from Entsteig coming across the gulf for Madam Lancaster's revel, and there's sure to be a suitable one among them..."

Nerissa nodded vaguely at the girl's chatter. There would be time for choosing a husband soon enough, and she smiled over Elizabeth's shoulder at Maurice, who

hobbled as quickly as he could toward them, concern on his face, carrying the lamp in one hand.

"Oh, I must tell Maurice at once! I must—Maurice!" Elizabeth spun away from Nerissa with such force that she nearly collided with the old servant, who reached out a hand to steady the girl. Elizabeth stumbled away, her foot caught in the raveled hem of her gown, and grabbed desperately for the man's arm. She seized it, pulling him off balance, and the lamp crashed to the stone floor, flaming oil pooling between them.

Nerissa screamed and then caught herself. Elizabeth and Maurice stepped carefully away from the fiery puddle and looked to her like startled children. She tried to think, but for a long instant, the dancing flames mesmerized her. Then she snapped at Maurice, "A broom. Fetch a broom and beat the fire out." The old man hobbled off and Nerissa glanced around to see if anything flammable was near the blazing oil. She returned her gaze to Elizabeth, who fairly shuddered with excitement and fear, and Nerissa forced a smile onto her face. "It's all right, Elizabeth. Everything's going to be..."

She trailed off as her eyes followed the curl of smoke downward to the hem of Elizabeth's costume. One of the parchment leaves was smoldering, and as Nerissa watched, it burst into a tiny, bright, writhing flame. The fire raced across the parchment leaf and leapt to another, and before Nerissa could break the trance, a half-dozen were ablaze. She screamed in earnest now and hurried around the flaming pool just as Elizabeth looked down and saw the blaze for herself. Before Nerissa could reach her, the girl howled in pure terror and bolted away from the burning oil, fanning the flames into a conflagration that covered half the dress. Nerissa chased after her,

but Elizabeth was in full panic, dashing down the hall ahead of her sister, screaming wildly. Nerissa caught her finally and held her, the heat beating against her face, Elizabeth thrashing violently to get free. Nerissa slapped at the fire with her hands, but it only grew, sparks swirling up around her. Elizabeth cried in pain as the flames blossomed in her hair, and wrenched herself away from Nerissa, who seized the dress and pulled with all her might. The old seams came apart, and the dress peeled off of Elizabeth, who collapsed on the floor. Nerissa leapt to her, beating out the flames in her hair, sick to her stomach from the smell of burnt flesh.

Nerissa had immediately sent Maurice for the healers, and to her eternal gratitude, they had not only come, but come quickly. They had labored over Elizabeth for hours, and they had saved her life, but not her beauty. Her face was marred by sticky red welts, which the healers told her would eventually resolve into scars. Her hair had been shorn, the scalp half covered in wet, gaping sores and charred flesh. One eye had been ruined, the brow dipping grotesquely over the empty socket. What was left of her lips twisted into an anguished, mocking sneer.

Nerissa had sat by the bedside until dawn, when the ointments and medicinal draughts had finally allowed Elizabeth to pass into a fitful slumber, and she had thought about her mistake. She had taken the old woman too lightly—that much was obvious—but more than that, Carlotta had undone everything Nerissa had tried to achieve. The dowry had been as much for her as for Elizabeth, she realized, and she ground her teeth in frustration. If it were only her, she would never see that horrid woman again. She would retreat into gentile poverty and lick her wounds, but she

could not bear what had happened to Elizabeth. Carlotta had used her desires against her, and Elizabeth had suffered terribly for it—and would suffer the rest of her hideous life unless Nerissa could somehow undo what had been done.

Twice she had gambled for the wealth she desperately craved, and twice something terrible had befallen those close to her. The old witch was not going to trick her a third time. A cold and bitter certainty came over her, and she knew what she had to do. Tonight, Nerissa would be ready for her. Tonight, she would raise the stakes. And yet tonight, it would not matter if she won or lost.

Maurice peeked out through the chamber's heavy drapes and gazed at the street below like an elderly hawk. He blamed himself for what had happened to Elizabeth, and while Nerissa had done her best to reassure him, she could not tell him the truth behind the horrible accident. So he took up his new post like a soldier in the field, and he watched the street for the carriage they both expected. If he found it strange that Nerissa was entertaining guests and playing cards on the heels of two tragedies, he did not say so.

Nerissa forced herself not to pour another cup of wine and considered, once again, Carlotta's impending arrival. The thought had come to her that she did not *have* to play another game with the old creature. She could turn her away from her door. But that, of course, would not be necessary; she knew that Carlotta would only arrive if

Nerissa wished her to. And she knew that Carlotta would arrive without fail if that was what Nerissa wished.

She listened to a distant clock toll the hour out over the town and shuddered. She wondered what decrepit warren the woman had crawled out of, and it occurred to her that what had happened when she won at cards would likely seem mild compared to what would happen if she lost. Whispered tales of bloody hearts ripped still beating from victims' chests came to her, but she pushed the grisly images aside; Carlotta would soon be here, and Nerissa needed her wits about her. The old woman was like some sort of demon who could be called up by the mere utterance of her name. Nerissa silently mouthed the syllables, imagining that she was summoning a loathsome, foul spirit from a festering pit.

"Madam," Maurice croaked, "there she is."

Nerissa's smile of amusement froze into a grimace of sour determination. "Very well, Maurice. Let her in." Nerissa leaned back in her chair and contemplated the cards again. Twice now they had won for her, and yet she had lost more with each game. But tonight would be different, she thought, and she poured herself a cup of wine. Tonight, if all went according to plan, it would not matter that this was almost the last bottle in the house, she mused as she rolled the spicy drink around her mouth. Of course, with this—this witch, or demon, or whatever the woman was, she could not be sure that things *would* go according to plan. But she was resolute. She had committed herself, and now it was time to see the game through. Stationing Maurice at the curtains had been her first move in the new gambit. She was not going to be taken by surprise this evening.

However, instead of the knock at the door, Nerissa heard the hard staccato clatter of that dreadful ebony cane on the marble floors. Maurice couldn't possibly have hobbled down to open the door that quickly, and in fact, she had not heard the great oaken door open at all. Yet Carlotta was in her house, already scuttling up her stairs, coming closer with each insistent crack of the cane upon the steps.

Nerissa listened to the noise mount the staircase and then approach the chamber, Maurice shuffling after it. Carlotta fairly stormed into the room, and Maurice announced, "Madam Carlotta," rather pointlessly.

Nerissa very deliberately did not rise to meet her guest. She sank deeper into the chair. She sensed that Carlotta was as hungry for the game as she was, and had decided to let the old woman pursue her this time.

Carlotta gave no indication that she had registered the slight, but Nerissa knew social politics too well to be fooled. The old woman sat down with a grunt, her hands gripping her cane. Nerissa finally raised her eyes from the cards and smiled a tight, artificial smile at her.

"Wine?"

Carlotta smiled back, her teeth barely showing. "Thank you. No."

The women stared at each other, and Nerissa assessed Carlotta, no longer the rosy-cheeked dowager she had first met in the carriage. The cheeks were sunken, the lips cracked, the teeth... sharper somehow. A light of desperate, ravenous hunger gleamed from her eyes, and it occurred to Nerissa that the past nights might have been hard on the ancient creature. She had exerted herself to bring grave and horrible

suffering into Nerissa's house and had taken nothing in return. Nerissa took another sip of wine, allowing the silence to hang in the air. Her mother had taught her it was a dreadful mistake to ever let your adversary know how much you wanted something—a necessity was a weakness, she had told her. Yet Nerissa knew just from the way that Carlotta's shriveled hands wrapped and twined restlessly about the head of her cane that this creature felt keenly the necessity of tonight's game. Very well, then. That would be the lever by which she moved her.

Nerissa picked up the velvet-covered jewelry box and opened it, holding it for Carlotta to peruse the contents. "We've wagered words and promises, but these heirlooms are diamonds and gold. Are you sure you wouldn't rather play for more... substantial stakes?"

Something like panic flickered in Carlotta's eyes, and her jaw tightened for a moment before she smiled obsequiously. "No, my dear. That would never do. If I am to grant you your dearest wish, you must offer me your most valuable possession." Her tongue flicked over her lips with reptilian dexterity, and Nerissa imagined it forked and hissing. She nodded her assent.

At that, Carlotta broke into a genuine yet deeply malicious grin. "And what shall I wager tonight? What, tonight, is the thing you wish for most?"

Nerissa smiled easily, but her heart beat forcefully within her chest. She had no doubt that this woman would somehow claim it if she lost. She framed her words carefully but cloaked them in nonchalance. "I would only have Elizabeth happy and beautiful again."

Carlotta drew breath to answer, but Nerissa cut her off with a raised finger.

"But, I will play tonight under the condition that Elizabeth also have her happiness and beauty for the duration of our game, until I turn my last card."

Carlotta glared at her, nonplussed. "You would have your stakes before you win them? Nonsense."

"If they are yours to grant, they are yours to take away if I lose." Nerissa smiled sweetly. "All I ask is that Elizabeth have some brief time of happiness and beauty. Unless, of course, you'd rather play for lesser stakes?" She vaguely waved a hand toward the open jewelry box, and Carlotta shook her head, her face torn between anger and anxiety.

"No. Of course not. But you ask too much. You cannot have your stakes before you win them."

Nerissa felt herself balanced on a tightrope of decorum, weighing Carlotta's determination to have her own way against the foul creature's obvious hunger. She smiled with practiced ease and gauged the uncertainty in Carlotta's eyes, the nervous twitching of the fingers, the eager pitch of her shoulders. She was the very picture of necessity, mask it though she tried.

Nerissa stared hard at Carlotta for a long moment, then shrugged her shoulders as if in defeat and indicated the jewelry box again. She cocked her head insolently to one side, daring Carlotta to accept the jewels and baubles.

Carlotta seethed, her teeth bared.

"So be it." She clapped her hands, and Nerissa gasped in spite of herself. For an instant, the lamplight had flickered, and in the shadows Carlotta's eyes had glowed like burning embers. The old woman smiled, triumphant and predatory, and Nerissa fought to regain her composure. Carlotta was even more withered and worn-looking than she had been just a moment ago. But she had never looked more deadly.

Immediately, the patter of bare feet came down the hallway, almost at a run. Carlotta held Nerissa's gaze, the hint of a satisfied smirk twitching one corner of her mouth. Nerissa smiled benevolently, as if regarding a favored guest at a dinner party. Her stomach twisted in a painful knot, but her face beamed with bland goodwill.

The door burst open, and neither woman moved. Elizabeth ran to Nerissa's side, wearing only her shift, her golden tresses loose about her shoulders, her fine features more radiant and beautiful than ever.

"Oh, Nerissa, I've had the strangest dream. It was... it... oh, dear." She giggled, her fingers to her mouth. "I've forgotten what it was."

Nerissa finally looked up at her, turning her head with casual precision. "That's quite amusing, Elizabeth, dear. But I'm afraid I have a rather important guest at the moment."

Elizabeth seemed to see Carlotta for the first time and recoiled slightly. "Oh, I'm so sorry to interrupt. Whatever was I thinking?" She appeared to be at a loss, terrified by the horrid crone but too entranced to break away. "I should... go now?"

The old woman regarded Elizabeth, and the girl shrank back behind Nerissa's chair. "Yes, Elizabeth," Carlotta croaked, her fingers tightening on the head of the ebony cane. "Say goodbye to your sister."

Nerissa's eyes narrowed to slits, and Carlotta grinned with plain cruelty, all pretense of civility gone. Nerissa kept her gaze fixed on Carlotta a moment longer, then turned a genuine and loving smile on her disconcerted sister. "Goodbye, Elizabeth," she whispered, and Elizabeth involuntarily backed away.

"Goodbye," she answered uncertainly, then turned, nearly running from the room.

"Now." Carlotta cut the cards, and Nerissa hesitated, then drew. When the six cards lay on the table, she felt doubt flicker through her again. She forced it down, determined to see this through. She revealed her rightmost card and repressed the excitement at seeing the bishop of stars. Carlotta made a tiny noise of disapproval and turned over the five of serpents. She looked up at Nerissa with rank eagerness in her eyes, and Nerissa had to restrain herself from drawing back.

She reached out, uncertain, then flipped the left card and heard Carlotta's rude giggle. The two of lions wasn't going to help much. Nerissa glanced at the jewelry box as Carlotta's hand hovered over her two remaining cards, finally descending on one.

She positively crowed with delight as she snapped over the archangel of stars. She chuckled and bobbed up and down in her seat, while Nerissa's head swam. The

highest card in the deck. She looked down at her last card, knowing that it mattered not in the least. And yet...

"Come now, dearie." Carlotta didn't even bother to mask her malevolent glee. "Turn it over. Let's bring this to an end, shall we?" Her smile was pure predation, and Nerissa found herself wondering how the old witch took people's hearts. Did she suck them out of their mouths? Rip open the chests with those clawlike fingers? Or simply chew through the breastbones like a hideously oversized rat?

She shook her head to dismiss such horrors and smiled at Carlotta. "Of course, it's not too late to call it a draw. Or to change the stakes..." She picked up the jewelry box once again and fingered the sapphire on the comb, traced the jewels of the stiletto's handle.

"No," snapped the old woman, leaning forward in her chair. "You agreed. You have lost. Now turn over the card and let us finish the game."

"Yes," Nerissa answered, pure steel in her voice. "Let us finish the game." And with a swift motion, she drew the stiletto from its sheath. Carlotta shrieked and raised the cane to ward off the blow, unnatural flame flaring from its handle, but Nerissa flipped the knife and plunged the blade into her own chest. Crimson blood spurted, splashing the cards, and Carlotta recoiled, snarling in animal rage. The bright arterial blood hit the table with gouts of steadily decreasing force, until Nerissa's eyes rolled in her head and she slumped back into her chair. The blood leaked gently now, slowly soaking her brocade bodice.

Carlotta sat still for a long time, her breath coming in shallow pants, her forked tongue licking scaled lips. Her gaze shifted from the cooling corpse to the unfinished game on the table.

From somewhere in the house she heard the muffled patter of Elizabeth's feet and realized, with mounting distaste, that the spell she'd cast on the young woman would last until the game ended. The crone hissed and reached out to flip over Nerissa's final card, but she stopped herself short. The act would be futile. The terms of the game were set, unbreakable.

Until I turn my last card, Nerissa had said.

With great effort, Carlotta rose to her feet, leaning heavily on her cane.

"Well played, my dear. Well played indeed."

She turned her back on the blood-soaked cards and, with slow, painful steps, hobbled
from the room.