

In Cappadocia

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We have arrived in Cappadocia and we see nothing but dry hills. The people there are hidden, the general said. Dark and invisible against the night. They blur into the caves. Their bodies turn to rock and their voices to sand and their whispers creep into our ears as we walk alongside our armored mares, too nervous and skittish to carry us.

I plunge the butt of my spear into the ground as we march. Unfamiliar stars shine above us and reflect pale silver light in the bronze of our shields. In our ears, there is a thumping. It is only the sound of us. Leather rubbing leather, brass ornaments tinkling on saddles and reins, worn boots in the grit, our footsteps uneven and unsure. Our breath is coarse and thin with fear and we all know we are walking into a ghost town. A ghost country.

Formations of rock, shaped like cloaked figures, tower above us. Their shadows are lined with moonlight as they stand sentinel to what lies below. Carved into the ground beneath us is a vast hidden honeycomb of cities. We have been told the earth below hides a subterranean civilization of armed men, their teeth and swords gleaming and sharp.

A hiss of fearful whispers creeps through our regiment: *The men below are monsters. They dig into the ground with clawed hands. They kneel at the foot of a strange stone cross, worshiping a deity once dead, then alive. The soldiers below are waiting. Waiting with a*

thousand ways to slice great and silent stripes into our throats.

When a silver cloud crosses before the moon, the light changes and we can see the seemingly shifting, shadowed entrances in the cliff face. In an instant, I think I see the sparkle of eyes or metal or both but then it is gone. Dust blows from the tall stone towers, these unnatural formations of rock, and I breathe it in. It burns my lungs and I imagine this land is cursed or poisoned by the monsters below.

I feel the sand shift below my feet and I jump. It is only sand. My tongue is a dry lump inside the hollow of my head. It scratches against the ridges at the top of my mouth and feels like old, cracked hide.

They are watching even now. I feel their eyes on me, cave-dark and gleaming like pearls. I can smell the nervous, metallic sweat of my comrades dripping off their shoulders and running down their arms.

Steam rises from little holes in the ground—little chimneys—and I as I move closer, I imagine that the steam smells of burnt flesh, of blood, of red, liquid metal. Droplets of vapor settle on my eyelashes. I sniff. The scent is only yeast and grain.

I ache from within. I stand above the city and I crave the bread I smell baking inside the ground. There are rumors that the city below holds twenty levels, that it is fifty-thousand strong, that wine and olive oil and children are all made below the ground in echoing, violet darkness. These cannot be men. Only animals raise their young underground. My own wine, my own bread, my own children were made under the stars. I ache for those stars. I ache for the cool of my home and the dirt of my roads. This place is an impossible spirit kingdom.

My horse strikes the ground with his hooves. A cloud of thin dust rises. I feel the spear in my hand, the pads below my fingers, hard and callused. Once I used these hands to form great, red pots.

I kneel and lay my palm to the ground. A musical vibration travels through my fingertips.

They are marching. Or, they are dancing.