

The Alchemist's Apprentice

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Nov. 2025

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Ab Ovo

“Listen to the bowls, hear them sing.” The alchemist Castor pulled his apprentice closer to the bowl bubbling before them. The alchemist’s apprentice, Artezo, peered into the bowl as he listened to the gurgle of the substance.

“The thickness, hear the bubbles popping – see? The viscosity is much too thick!” The master said with a shout. The dark velvet curtains blocked all outside light, only the row of lucent bowls guided the two around the room. The master pulled his apprentice by the arm to the next bubbling bowl.

“Listen, listen.” The grey-bearded master whispered.

Artezo put his ear by the bowl of yellow gurgling goop.

“What do you hear?” The master asked.

“Popping, but a bit quieter.” Artezo replied.

“Ah. Yes. But listen... the pops – they are quieter, but the duration – pop, pop, pop – is quicker than the last.”

P-op. P-op. P-op.

Artezo became elated and fearful in the presence of these experiments. He had been Castor’s apprentice for over two decades. During that time, his master had risen from a practicing physician to physician of the Royal Court. On nights when the moon and stars aligned, Artezo and Castor frequently returned to Castor’s old shop and dove into the practice of alchemy. Restorative medicines, insightful teachings, and joyful creations were all part of the process, but so were explosions, caustic liquids, and poisonous vapors.

“Come, come.” The master pulled Artezo again. They moved through the room to a short hallway. Two sturdy shelves on either side were cluttered with vials, bowls, and bottles containing bones, horns, herbs, liquids, minerals, bits of skin and scales, and roots both dried and living. They passed the shelves and descended a flight of stairs to the storefront. They walked to the window and looked out at the celestial bodies overhead. When the timing was right, the master pulled his apprentice back up the stairs to the room with the bowls.

“The solution continued to bubble as we were away.” The master said, directing Artezo’s attention to the bowl, “How can we be certain the solution is progressing?”

“By the color, the smell, the taste, the sound, and the texture.” Artezo recited.

“Yes. But we had combined what we needed, the stars are aligned, why do we see no gold?” The master furrowed his brow. He turned his grey eyes up to Artezo; one could not tell if they were soft as rainclouds or hard as steel.

“I don’t know.” Artezo shook his head.

The master stood up and pulled Artezo to the back room. The curtains were drawn, but a thin veil of grey seemed to cover the empty shelf and the large Ardabil rug in the room. The master took a seat on the rug and the apprentice sat before him. The apprentice shifted a little, looking to the master for some sign of what was next, but was met only with a pleasant gaze and a subtle smile.

“The solutions we are making,” The master began, “Are not just the work of Earth, but of Heaven. We mix together these ingredients, but allow processes inside and outside the bowls to work through the solutions. Sometimes these processes work using forces much greater

than ourselves, making the results unpredictable. Sometimes it takes little effort to control the outcome of a process, and we are left with exactly what we desire...”

With this Artezo felt a quiver through his spine.

“Watch as we practice true alchemy.” The master rolled his eyes back and turned his head upward. A puff of air escaped his lungs and he collapsed. Artezo bolted from his seat to the master’s side. He checked the Castor’s pulse and felt nothing. He jumped up, rushed from the room to fetch a coroner, a guard, anybody. But as he passed by the bowls a glint caught his eye. He turned to see the second bowl no longer emitted light, but reflected it. Artezo walked to the bowl and looked in. The solution had been transformed into a solid lump of gold.

Ab Initio

Castor’s funeral was extravagant. The King and most of the Royal Court were present wearing their finest black dress. Music was sung by a choir of twenty boys and girls. Banners ornamented with the Rod of Asclepius and St. Luke were set around the churchgrounds. Many bowed their heads as the priest gave the sermon.

As the coffin was lowered into the grave, a few eyes glanced at Artezo. Being the only court-appointed servant with red hair, many circulated rumors that Artezo used devil magic in his practice. His master had often kept him hidden away as he delivered remedies to the court.

For a time Artezo continued to serve as the Royal Physician in his master’s place. But shortly after Ottokar II’s indoctrination, he received a letter asking him to depart from the castle at once.

Artezo packed his things – his chemises and tunics and the lump of gold his master had produced – and departed from Prague the same day.

He mounted his horse and headed west. The path was flooded by a recent rain but not too deep for his horse to cross. When dusk approached, he stopped in a small village. The priest outside the monastery gave him a hard look. He glanced at the man and continued to the inn. Inside, he paid for a room for himself and a stable for his horse. The next morning he ate a small meal, ensured his horse was fed, and filled his canteen before continuing on.

He repeated this cycle for several days, lucky to not have encountered any bandits on the road. His days of travel drew him weary. His eyes were sleepy and his ass sore from riding when he entered a small village one late night.

In the shadow of the moon, Artezo could see the village had only a couple dozen homes. An inn's sign was illuminated by a torch and he tied his horse to the hitching post out front. He ran his hands across his face where a short beard had grown before making his way inside the inn. It was empty and dim, save the flickering light from a few candles. He went up to the counter and hit the bell twice.

Ding Ding.

After a short while, a young girl came up to the counter.

"Yes?" She asked. The girl looked no older than ten, with blond hair wrapped in a tight weave falling below her shoulders.

"I'd like to rent a room." Artezo said.

"Certainly. Would you care for supper?"

Artezo felt himself famished. "Yes, certainly. Perhaps something for my horse too?"

“I’ll tend to that at once. Please sit, we have porridge ready.”

“Thank you.”

The girl ran back to the kitchen. He found a place at a far table in the dining area and set his pack to his side. He ran his hands through his muddy hair, pulling away his hand covered with grime. As he was wiping it on his napkin, the girl carried over a bowl of porridge and a hunk of bread.

“I’ll set to feed your horse. Is there anything else?”

“I beg, is there a barber in town?”

“Mama is an excellent barber. She can see you tomorrow.”

“Excellent.”

They negotiated a price for the barber, meal, and room and then Artezo dug into his food. He ate heartily, savoring the simple grain pottage. When he had finished he left the bowl on the table and found his way to his room. He fell asleep as his head hit the pillow.

The next day he awoke feeling refreshed to the fullest. He got out of bed and stretched, then checked his belongings. Everything was there. Walking into the dining room he found the girl sweeping and sunlight pouring through the windows. A few other lodgers were sitting around the tables.

“Hello sir, would you take a meal?” The girl asked Artezo.

“No, thank you.” Artezo replied.

She nodded. “Shall I get mama to do your barbering?”

“Yes, that would be excellent.” Artezo said, taking a seat. Soon, a woman dressed in a bright green dress with dark blond hair came up to him. She looked to be in her middle age and maintained a statuesque gait as she strode towards Artezo.

“Hello sir. You’ve requested a haircut?”

“Yes.” Artezo replied.

“Prefer a usual style?” She asked, placing her barbering kit on the table.

“Clean shaven.”

She took a glance at Artezo’s hair. “You’re red.” She said.

“Yes.” Artezo replied.

“Haven’t seen many reds before. You say a clean shave?”

“Yes.”

“And the beard?”

“Leave it.”

She motioned for Artezo to pull his chair by the end of the table. She removed from the box a bowl, creme, a razor, and scissors.

“Head back if you will.” She said, tilting Artezo by the jaw. She took a cloth soaked with water and scrubbed Artezo’s hair. As she started cutting, she asked: “Coming from afar?”

“Yes. From Prague.” Artezo replied.

“What brings you here?”

“Just passing though.”

“Ah! Are you a poet?” She exclaimed, looking into Artezo’s eyes.

“No.” Artezo replied.

The woman went back to her work. “We have been blessed by some poets in the past.”
She said.

“I imagine that’s quite exciting.”

“Certainly.” She smiled, “Have you a trade?”

“Medicine.” Artezo said.

“Medicine?” She stopped cutting.

“Yes.” Artezo looked up.

“What pleasant news! It’s rare we get a physician in these parts. Our physician passed away a few weeks back. We’ve been grieving, and medicine has been hard to come by.”

“Pity.” Artezo replied.

“Yes. We have a woman in town, Margo, she fell ill soon after our physician passed. A delirium of some sort. I’m sure her family would pay handsomely for any remedy you could make.”

Artezo was surprised at the request, but replied: “I can see what I can do.”

“Wonderful. You could even have access to the physician’s shop, if you haven’t the supplies. I’m sure the village wouldn’t mind.”

“Certainly.”

“What good fortune! I’ll direct you to them when you’re ready.”

Artezo and Teresa exchanged small talk. He learned that she and her husband had purchased the inn four years ago on their immigration to Bohemia. Her husband passed shortly after and now she manages the inn with her daughter Aliea.

The soothing sensation of Teresa's hands cutting his hair and the smell of the creme put Artezo at ease. When the haircut was over, he was roused by Teresa putting away the supplies.

"All done. Allow me to get you a looking glass." She said. Then, giving him a pass with her eyes, added: "I must say, you look quite handsome."

Artezo blushed as she walked away. When she returned with the glass he looked into his reflection and saw someone he didn't recognize.

"Looks good?"

"Yes. Quite."

A Priori

Artezo walked to Margo's house. He looked out at the fields surrounding the town, seeing little men scattering seeds in the dirt. He walked along the dirt path between the timber-framed houses to Margo's family's door. Artezo knocked and the door was opened by an elderly man with broad shoulders and a grey beard.

"Yes?" He asked, his voice gruff. He eyed Artezo with suspicion.

"My name is Artezo. Teresa told me your daughter is sick. I may be able to help."

"Ah. Yes. Please, come in. My name is Thomas," Thomas was not a lean man, but his muscular build was evidently depleting itself in his old age.

Inside several crosses hung above a burning firepit. The room was small and fabrics were piled in every corner. Thomas led Artezo to the back, where a woman was tending to a girl in bed.

“Elizabeth,” Thomas said, “This is Artezo, he is here to help our daughter.”

Elizabeth looked up. She had dark hair and her eyes were downturned with grief. She quickly stood and held Thomas as Artezo walked to the bed. He bent down and examined Margo. Her skin was nearly pale, she looked up to Artezo with fevered eyes but couldn’t utter a word.

Artezo went to Elizabeth and Thomas. “She’s very ill. But perhaps there’s something I can do.”

Thomas and Artezo went to Teresa’s, where they were led to the physician’s shop. Teresa unlocked the door. Inside, Artezo scanned the assortment of supplies on the shelves. Vials and bowls of plant and animal materials and minerals filled the shelves. He found himself moving into the back room, where bowls of all shapes and sizes were cleaned and stacked. Two mantles and a furnace sat on a workbench.

Artezo looked through the shelves, recognizing all he needed. He took the ingredients to the mortar and began creating a powder out of various herbs, barks, and mineral oils. It took no longer than a half hour.

“This should help your daughter.” Artezo said, handing Thomas the vial, “Give her a spoonful mixed with water, twice in the morning and once at night. Keep it stored in darkness.”

Thomas grasped the vial. “Thank you, Artezo.” And he ran out the door.

Teresa and Artezo left the shop. Teresa locked the door and said, “Thank you, Artezo.”

“It was my pleasure.” Artezo replied.

As Teresa walked back to the inn, the sunshine prompted Artezo to go for a stroll. He looked up at the large castle looming in the distance. The dirt-paths wound between the thatch-roofed houses. Various people sat outside the timber-framed buildings, gazing at the stranger walking past. Artezo passed by the blacksmith and the man looked up from the forge.

The blacksmith was a large man, with two hulking arms. Artezo felt a shiver of fear as the man gaze penetrated him. Artezo bowed his head and made his way back to the inn.

* * *

The next day, he met Thomas at the inn. “Margo’s health has much improved.” He said.

“I’m glad to hear that.” Artezo replied. He and Thomas idly chatted, learning that Thomas was a retired merchant from Prague. They traded some tales from the city before Thomas went on his way.

Several days passed, and Artezo’s mind grew dull. He was considering his next steps when the door to the inn flew open.

“Artezo, please, come quick!” Thomas was standing by the door. Artezo bolted from his seat and joined him. As they paced to Thomas’s house Thomas explained: “Just yesterday she was feeling quite well, but this morning she’s worse than before!”

When they entered the room, Margo was lying on the bed in torment. She could hardly find the energy to speak. Elizabeth was by her side, clasping her hand. Artezo checked her pulse, breathing, and temperature.

“There’s something that might help, but I admit, it won’t be pleasant.”

“Anything.” Thomas replied, Elizabeth looked aghast.

Artezo returned to the shop. He took some rhubarb, buckthorn, and hellebore root from the shelves. He combined them in the mortar into a fine powder and dissolved the concoction in alcohol.

At Margo's bedside, Artezo fed her two tablespoons. Within ten minutes, she was vomiting into a bucket by her bedside. Elizabeth held her hair and her father rested a hand on her back. When she was through, she laid back on the bed. Artezo prompted her to eat and drink what she could; Margo fell into a deep sleep.

"What's happened?" Elizabeth asked.

"She's expelled the black bile. Her body needs time to recover. When she awakes, take her for walks in sunlight three times a day. Feed her only oats in cow milk and lamb sweetened with basil – avoid cabbage and lemons."

They followed Artezo's instructions, and within a week, Margo was deemed well.

* * *

It wasn't long before another member of the town became ill. Artezo was sitting at the inn, reading through a text, when he was approached by Thomas, Elizabeth, Teresa, and a couple he didn't recognize.

"Artezo, do you have a moment?" Teresa asked.

"Yes." He set his book aside, "What is it?"

"The Březinka Family has had accident. We don't want to trouble you, but we were wondering if you might take a look."

"Certainly."

“We’ve spoken as a town and want you to take this.” Teresa handed Artezo the key to the physician’s shop.

“You mean...?”

“Yes. You can stay there from now on. Use whatever supplies you need.”

“We had a meeting last night at the monastery. There were some dissenters, but the majority voted for you to remain in town as our physician.” Thomas explained.

“Okay.” Artezo nodded.

“Good,” Teresa said, standing. “Thomas and Elizabeth can take you to the Březinka’s. When you’re finished, don’t forget to come back and pay your bill!”

Artezo couldn’t help but smile.

* * *

A few weeks passed and Artezo was walking from a house call to the inn for dinner when he caught the blacksmith staring at him from afar. Artezo quickly turned his head to the ground and made his way to the inn. Inside, Teresa brought Artezo a plate.

“Say, Teresa,” Artezo began.

“Yes?”

“Who is the blacksmith here?”

“That would be Flisk, why?”

“He seems to have an eye on me.”

“Ah. Yes. His son died not long ago. He’s been drunk since. I’d avoid him if you can.”

Artezo nodded thoughtfully, then dug into his meal.

* * *

Each day, Artezo grew more accustomed to his life in the village. He appreciated the visits to the inn for meals, the shouts of the children playing in the streets, and the various requests for tonics, powders, and salves.

Likewise, the town grew accustomed to Artezo. After Artezo took up residence in the physician's shop, people dropped in on the pretense of browsing to probe Artezo with questions on his life and trade. At first, he found himself choked up over his memories of Prague and thoughts of his master's absence. But soon, he became at ease as he got into a routine. In the morning, he would awake in his small bedroom and meet the sun by opening the shutters. He took inventory of the contents of the shop. He swept the furnace, secured the joints on the still, and cleaned the bowls, vials, mortars, and pestles. When customers began entering the shop and asking for remedies, Artezo made quick use of his inventory, often having the remedies prepared by the same day.

His savings from Prague seemed nearly unlimited in the small town of Louvice, and the small income he garnered from remedies was more than enough to support his shop. In the afternoons, he would often dine at the inn where he was met with cordial warmth and hot meals. He watched a boy named Irving becoming fast friends with Aliea. Artezo smiled when catching the two running off to talk in secret.

* * *

The smell of dinner filled the inn as Artezo entered. It was a Sunday, and several dozen people were seated around the tables. Artezo took an empty chair at the long table and Aliea brought him a glass of water.

"Mother keeping you busy?" Artezo asked.

“Yes. It’s been so busy.” Aliea groaned. “She asks me to help with chores, but then there are more chores after!”

“Well, maybe this will help.” Artezo took a handful of honey candy from his pocket and handed it to Aliea. She looked eagerly at the candy and thanked Artezo.

“Be sure to share some of that with your friend.” Artezo said, glancing at Irving.

Aliea curtsied and ran off to the kitchen. Soon after she and Teresa were bringing out plates of food to the customers. After everybody was served, Teresa brought out two plates and sat with Artezo.

“How are things at the shop?” Teresa asked.

“Business is slow and steady.” Artezo replied, “That reminds me, I’ve been running low on a few supplies. Do you remember who supplied the physician’s inventory?”

“I believe the last physician got most of his materials from Ryland. He lives in Hroznětín, the next town over – not too far by horseback.”

“Excellent.” Artezo toasted with a bit of pork on a fork.

Teresa went to clean up the plates. Artezo drafted an inventory request letter to Ryland. Once he had set it on Teresa’s countertop for delivery, he heard the door burst open. Flisk stumbled in, his large arms holding tightly to a bottle.

“Devil!” He shouted. Spit flew from his mouth as he pointed an accusing finger at Artezo.

Everybody turned to watch Flisk stride up to Artezo. Before Artezo could react Flisk grabbed Artezo by the shirt. He saw his bloodshot eyes and heard “Devil!” before being dragged out the door. Flisk threw Artezo onto the dirt and shouted: “You’ve killed my son!”

Artezo's confusion lasted only a moment before a heavy boot crushed something fragile in his torso. He yelped with pain.

Several kicks came before the men could pull Flisk away. Artezo heard Flisk shouting in drunken agony as his consciousness slowly blacked out.

* * *

When Artezo awoke, he recognized the walls of the inn. He had been tucked under a blanket on the bed. He lifted the covers but found his strength failed him. He felt the pain coalesce through his torso. Artezo lay awake only for a moment before drifting off again.

He awoke to the sound of the door opening. A doctor stood in the doorway. He had a brown curly beard and many lines on his forehead. He wore a long robe and a royal blue cap. He caught Artezo's eye, and smiled. "Is now a good time?" He asked.

Artezo could nod his head a few centimeters. He did and the doctor came up to his side. He introduced himself as Philip from the next village over. He offered Artezo a sip of water, then checked his eyes, ears, throat, pulse, and breathing.

"You lost a great deal of blood." The doctor said, scanning Artezo's wounds.

"Oh." Artezo said.

"You're lucky to be alive. Your lungs were impacted in the fight. Two broken ribs pushed right into them. But they appear to have caused minimal damage."

Artezo nodded as much as he could through the pain.

"You'll be in bed for quite some time. The owner says you'll stay here for the time being – you must be good friends."

"Yes." Artezo replied.

“I’m going to redress your bandages now.”

Artezo felt the physician take off and reapply several bandages across his body. When he got to the ribs, Artezo groaned. The physician let out a small chuckle. “Yep. That one will hurt for a while. Like I said – lucky to be alive.”

When the doctor had finished, he placed a series of vials next to Artezo’s bedside and told him how much to take at what times. Artezo asked what they were made of and the doctor said: “Remedies. This one will balance your black bile, this one your yellow, and this one will give you more blood.”

“What are they made of?”

“Can’t say. A physician in the city made them. I just know they work – if you take them as directed.”

“Could you find out for me?”

“Perhaps.” The physician wavered, “There are many more calls I have to make – I can’t promise anything.”

“Okay.” Artezo replied.

* * *

Elizabeth, Thomas, Margo, and Teresa came to visit Artezo as soon as the doctor left. Elizabeth gasped and swooned, nearly fainting, as she saw Artezo lying in the bed. Thomas held her steady. Margo’s eyes welled and she could hardly utter a word. But once the initial shock had passed, they came to sit by Artezo’s bedside.

“How are you?” Teresa asked.

“I’m fine.” Artezo replied.

“Damn that Flisk!” Elizabeth shouted.

“Take it easy, Elizabeth.” Thomas said, placing his hands on her shoulders. He turned to Artezo: “That man has more brawn than brains. I’m sorry we couldn’t stop him sooner.”

“He said I killed his son.” Artezo said.

“Pay him no mind.” Teresa said, “His son has been ill for some time now. He died around the time you came into town. He is deeply superstitious.”

Elizabeth and Thomas looked aside, Artezo’s hand rose to his beard.

“Is there anything we can do?” Teresa asked.

“No.” Artezo replied, “The doctor will be back tomorrow. I’m just happy you came.”

“We’re here for you.” Elizabeth said. “You can count on it.”

* * *

What had plagued Artezo more than the constant ache of his wounds was the powders the physician had given him. They were filled with floating bits of impurities and made him sick to his stomach. Finding no recovery despite the doctor’s promises, Artezo decided to make a few remedies of his own. He asked Aleia to fetch some ingredients from his shop.

Aleia would search among the shop and bring Artezo minerals and herbs to inspect for verification, only to be sent back for corrections. He sent her back two or three times to find a single ingredient. Soon enough, Teresa called her away for chores and Artezo nestled up in bed. Irving came not long after.

“Aleia said you needed help getting things from the shop.” Irving said.

“Yes, do you think you can help?”

Irving shrugged. Artezo gave him a list with descriptions and, in a quarter of an hour, Irving returned with everything he requested.

“Fantastic.” Artezo said as Irving placed the containers of ingredients and mortars by Artezo’s bed.

“There were a few similar powders to the quicklime, but they were more like sugar or barley powder.”

“Yes. Exactly.” Artezo began mixing the various powders in the mortar and began grinding with the pestle. He felt a great pain through his side as he crushed the powders together. Irving was standing by his side.

“Would you mind?” Artezo asked, offering the mortar.

Irving began crushing the ingredients. He fumbled with the pestle at first but gradually found a rhythm. When the ingredients were combined, Artezo made a funnel from a scrap of parchment and put the powder into a vial.

“Thank you Irving, this should be a great help.”

Irving nodded and ran off. The next day, he was back at Artezo’s door.

* * *

“Crush about a pea sized amount of this and the other powder together, then... Have you ever boiled water?”

Irving nodded.

“Good. Boil this in alcohol for ten minutes. Keep the mantle flame low – it will boil much quicker than water.”

Irving ran off. He returned an hour later with a full flask.

Artezo held up the flask of medicine. “Good work. But see the bits floating around? That means the alcohol didn’t dissolve everything completely.”

“Why’s that?” Irving asked.

“A couple of reasons; either the alcohol was not hot enough, or too much of the powder was added.”

Irving dropped his head.

“No worries Irving, the solution should work just fine. Run it off to Václav if you will.”

Each day following, the townspeople saw Irving making rounds from Artezo’s shop to the inn. Irving’s parents were the owners of a moderate-sized farm. Although Irving’s father, Gerald, never learned to read, he saw the power of literacy each time the tax collector came to his door. He swore that his son would have a powerful position as a councilmember in the city. After a successful harvest, they were able to hire a laborer. After a second successful harvest, they expanded their lot, hired a second laborer, and found a tutor for Irving. After his morning lessons, Irving put his books aside and ran to the door. As he grabbed his coat, his father stopped him.

“Where are you running off to in such a hurry? Haven’t you got lessons to finish?” Gerald asked.

“I’m going to help Artezo, all the lessons have been finished – I promise.” Irving said.

“Artezo? The physician?”

“Yes, he’s teaching me medicine.”

Gerald rubbed his chin, “Medicine?... Well, physicianship could be a fine job.”

“Artezo’s got his own shop and everything.”

“He makes a good deal then? Lots of customers?”

Irving nodded.

“Well then, be off!” Gerald helped Irving with his coat. “Put your nose to the grindstone and who knows what’ll happen – you may even serve in the city one day!”

With that, Irving ran off.

* * *

Flisk never returned to blacksmithing. He was found dead ten days later, sitting in his chair surrounded by empty bottles.

Artezo’s strength gradually returned over the following fortnights. He began taking full meals and short walks around the inn. When his health improved, he took his cane to the streets. As he stepped outside, the cool air and sunlight shook him with joy. In time, he was well enough to return to his shop.

Convalēscit

In the mornings Irving came to Artezo’s shop and took over the routine jobs. He swept the floors, cleaned the mantle and distiller, and crushed the various bones, shells, and minerals into powders. During the slow periods, Artezo taught Irving from the medical texts.

Irving followed along, when Artezo would have him repeat a process he would do so with few mistakes. On occasion, when he forgot, he would think for a moment, lift his head up, and remember the next step. Artezo soon had him mixing basic remedies to cure pains and wounds.

The first house-call Artezo brought Irving to was for Matěj's son, Jan. Jan had come down with a fever a few days after receiving a cut on his leg. Artezo showed Irving how to evaluate the patient's health by checking their pulse, feeling their temperature, and listening to their breathing. Artezo pointed out key features of Jan's cut – the redness, the swelling, and the heat. They walked back to the shop, and Artezo explained how Jan's condition was caused by a buildup of yellow bile.

“Then we must remove some of the yellow bile?” Irving asked.

“That would be how it seems, but increasing or decreasing the humors only does so much. What we want is to ease his body so that his humors can begin to balance on their own.”

“How do we do that?”

“First we must cleanse the body of evil, which we do by liberating the wound with hot vinegar. Then, we trap wellness in the body with a common solution of garlic powder dissolved in honey.”

A few hours later Artezo and Irving had a salve to bring to Jan. They scoured the area with hot vinegar, causing Jan to cry out in pain. Then they applied the poultice of honey and garlic.

The next day Artezo and Irving returned to Matěj's. The splotches on Jan's leg had reduced slightly, but not by much. Matěj asked: “Will our boy be well?”

“Give him cooling foods – mints, lettuce, and fruits. Apply ice to his forehead and the wound every couple of hours.”

As they walked back to the shop, Irving asked Artezo if the boy would recover.

“I simply cannot say.” Artezo replied, “The practice of medicine relies on factors outside of our control. We can only apply what we know to the situation, and allow the healing process to take its natural course. Jan’s health is as much in the hands of himself, his parents, and the universe, as it is in our remedies.”

Irving asked Artezo all sorts of questions about the remedies they had used serving Jan. Whether they could use quicklime, ash, or onion to quell the splotches. Artezo looked at the boy and for a brief moment felt a tinge of nostalgia. He remembered sitting at his master’s feet, hearing the miracles of medicine, and trying to understand the complex processes involved. Now, as he taught what he knew, it seemed to contain no magic at all. Yet, Irving’s alert and curious attention reignited his love for the practice.

“Onion?” Artezo asked, “Perhaps...”

* * *

Years passed and times were joyous for Artezo and Irving. The days were filled with knowledge without end. They enjoyed gratifying suppers at the inn, and spent much time with Teresa, Aliea, Thomas, and Elizabeth.

Soon, Irving seemed to know all the remedies for cuts, infections, and fevers. Artezo took a step back from his work and spent many late nights observing the stars. It wasn’t until late one night, Artezo peered into the heavens and saw the bright orange glow of Jupiter and the dim light of Saturn nearly aligned. The memories of his alchemical trials with Castor flashed in his mind. He took a long look at the sky.

The next day, Artezo purchased a cart. He and Irving hitched the cart to Artezo’s horse and they rode along the dirt path through the fields to Ryland’s shop in Hroznětín.

When they arrived, it was afternoon and the laborers were sitting on stools on the porches outside the tavern. Artezo asked them where they could find Ryland. They said if he wasn't in his shop, he was out in the woods.

"Could be out there a while; he's an odd fellow." A stout man said from behind his mug.

They went to Ryland's shop and knocked. A voice came from behind them: "How can I serve you gentlemen?"

They turned to see a man dressed in a dusty red tunic, two large sacks draped over his broad shoulders. He swung the sacks down with ease and looked at the strangers.

"I am Artezo, from Louvice. This is my apprentice, Irving."

Ryland stepped forward with an extended hand. "Glad to finally meet you. I thought our arrangement was good, no?"

"I have a few requests that I'd rather not go by courier."

"Ah." He said, "Come inside then."

Artezo followed Ryland inside and asked Irving to watch the horse. Ryland poured himself a glass of water and sat at the table across Artezo. "What is it I can do for you?" He asked.

"I'm looking for a couple of different metals, quicksilver, vitriol, alum, sulfur..."

Ryland took a look in Artezo's eyes, then stood up from the table and walked to a nearby shelf. He took down a map and unfurled it on the table.

"These are the nearest mines. As I'm sure you know, most of the product is controlled – going straight to Prague Castle. I know a few miners who would be willing to sell on the black market, but it isn't cheap."

“Of course.” Artezo replied.

“Alright.” Ryland rolled up the map. “Then give me the list again.”

* * *

The next day, Artezo sent a request for several books via courier from the city. He knew the bookseller, and for a generous fee, included requests for several books on alchemy and astrology. Each night he went out to map the stars in the sky.

One night Irving stayed late and found Artezo outside his shop gazing up at the stars.

“What are you doing?” Irving asked.

Artezo glanced at Irving and offered him to sit. “See that cluster in the sky? That’s Leo.”

Irving listened as Artezo pointed out the cosmic bodies and described their relationship to the Earth. Artezo spoke of the phases of the moon – waxing and waning, the bright lights he called planets – Jupiter, Venus, and Mars, and the immense energy they had over the Earth. Irving looked up at the bright lights, unsure of what to say.

Ryland came to Luhovice a week after their meeting. He came to Artezo’s shop where Artezo and Irving were preparing a few basic ingredients.

“Ah, Ryland.” Artezo said, coming to the door.

“Hello Artezo.” Ryland said, taking his hand.

“You’re well?”

“Yes. Here is everything you requested.” He handed Artezo a package. “You know,” He continued, “It makes me feel a bit odd providing these materials... How can I be certain you’re using them for the common good? I may not be much of a Christian, but in my heart I can not justify someone serving the devil.”

Artezo laughed. “If I served the devil, I’d certainly have my fill by now.”

“Very well.” Ryland smiled. “Just thought I’d ask.”

“Will you be staying in town for a while?” Artezo asked.

“No, just passing through. I have many more deliveries to make.”

“Then I’ll see you again.” Artezo shook Ryland’s hand.

“Likewise.” He said, and was out the door.

* * *

They started their first alchemical experiment as the moon was transiting across Venus. As they prepared their supplies, Artezo explained the difference between medicine and alchemy.

“Although we are making an elixir to cause good health, this is not as simple as curing a specified ailment. You see, medicine cures wounds – imbalances in the humors. When we make a medicine you can think of it like an arrow hitting a target. We seek a solution to a problem. When we practice alchemy, we are creating something that has no goal. We only ask for that which will bring the greatest good.”

Artezo guided Irving through the process. They took a number of ingredients, many of which they had used in their medicines.

“We add in an alkali of salt, it dissolves through the mixture as clouds fade in the sky. The trees, their roots dig deep in the earth, we add the powdered bark of a tree. See how the solution thickens, making it heavy.” Irving followed Artezo as he placed the bowl in the mantle.

Artezo said, “The earth, as it is now, is full of energy.”

They added a bit of gold, alcohol, minerals, herbs, blood, and beef marrow.

“As we have created the solution, we took what the earth had given us. We gave it the lustre of gold, we gave it the sturdiness of the trees, we gave it the warmth of the sun.”

Irving watched Artezo take the solution from the mantle with a pair of mitts. Then Artezo poured the solution through a funnel into a vial and handed it to Irving. As the vial touched Irving’s palm he felt its warmth.

“See the green hue?” Artezo said, “Notice how it resembles grass after a morning dew. And the viscosity, just the same as blood. The smell is of the Earth, sweet and musty.”

Irving studied the elixir. “What will we do with it?”

“Use it, give it away. It does not matter. Tomorrow we shall make another.”

* * *

Irving was manning the counter. He was making a list of which ingredients affected the body in which ways and how their combinations influenced their strengths and side-effects. Suppertime came. Irving was packing up his things when he heard the door open.

Artezo listened from the back room as Irving greeted the customer as ‘sir’. He found it unusual considering Irving knew most people in the town. Artezo heard heavy boots tread across wooden floors and a muffled, gruff voice from the customer. Artezo stood to investigate when Irving poked his head into the back room. “Master Artezo, you’re needed up front.”

Artezo placed his book down and walked into the front room where a man was dressed in a black leather coat. A black beard burgeoned from his chin and two thick eyebrows matted his forehead.

“How may I help you?” Artezo asked.

“My boy.” The man said anxiously, “He fell off his horse in the woods. His leg is badly injured and he’s banged his head.”

Artezo instructed Irving to grab the medical kit.

“Was he awake when you left him?” Artezo asked the man.

“Yes, he yelled. But he was drifting off.”

“Then we must make haste.” Artezo instructed Irving to grab another vial and they hastily left the shop. They followed the man to the woods behind the inn. As they walked, Artezo held Irving back a bit, signalling him to be cautious. After a few minutes of walking they heard the soft whines of a horse through the trees. The horse came into view a moment later next to a boy propped up against a tree.

The boy was unconscious. His tunic was torn at the arm and the leg. Artezo leaned down to check his head, he found blood clotted in the boy’s hair as he shook the boy.

“What are you doing?” The man stepped forward.

“His head’s been rattled, We need to keep him awake. If he goes to sleep, he may never wake up. Irving, fetch the sal ammoniac from the bag.”

Irving dug through the bag and Artezo checked the boy’s breathing and pulse. He took the container of sal ammoniac and held it under the boy’s nose. The boy’s eyelids fluttered open. He stirred in panic, but his father came down to his side. Artezo held him steady, instructing him to breathe. The boy relaxed seeing his father. Artezo told him to keep breathing and stay awake.

Artezo inspected the boy’s leg. It was badly bruised, but not broken. He took some water from the bag and cleaned the cut on the boy’s head. It wasn’t very deep. He applied a

poultice and dressed the wound with a bandage. “What’s your name son?” Artezo asked the boy.

“Tyrel.” The boy replied.

“Good. Keep yourself awake. Can you move your leg?”

Tyrel shifted the weight in his leg.

“Good. Rest up now. Keep yourself awake. Talk to Irving here.”

Artezo waved Irving over and instructed him to keep talking with the boy. Artezo packed up the remaining supplies. Artezo told the man that Tyrel should be fine as long as he could remain awake until nightfall, then asked where they were staying.

“We’re staying here.” The man said, looking around the forest.

“There’s an inn not too far from here.” Artezo replied.

“I’m sorry but we have no money. I’m afraid we can’t pay for your services.”

“No problem. Come with me to the inn. We’ll see if there’s a space – it will be better for the boy.”

Herold gave a solemn nod, “As you wish.”

Herold took the boy in his arms and followed Artezo and Irving to the inn. Artezo met Teresa at the counter. Artezo offered to pay for the bed but Teresa refused. Herold set his son to rest and met Artezo and Irving in the dining room. Teresa came by and dropped off three bowls of pottage.

“Thank you, miss.” The man said.

Teresa nodded and sat down at the table.

“Perhaps I should introduce myself.” The man started, “My name is Herold.”

He shook Artezo's hand, then offered it to Irving, then to Teresa.

"What brings you to Louvice, Herold?" Teresa asked.

"We're passing though, headed south to the battlefield."

"You're soldiers?" She asked.

"Not in the fighting sense, but I'm good with my hands and so is the boy. We help where we can."

"Dangerous work, isn't it?" Artezo asked.

"Yes, but we who serve shall be saved."

They ate their pottage and Herold turned to Artezo. "Where did you live in the city?"

Artezo felt a tinge of surprise. "How did you know I was from the city?"

"It's not any one particular thing. It's in your air."

"I served in the Royal Castle."

Herold nodded. "I once met a man who worked in the castle. Would you like to hear my tale?"

Artezo, Irving, and Teresa looked at one another, then turned to Herold and nodded.

Herold started: *"When I was just a boy I had no concept of the kindness of strangers. You see, I was born in a town not far from the city. When I was but five or six, my parents lost their jobs as laborers in a wealthy landowner's field. We took a trip to the city, and they left me at the door of a church. I sat waiting on those church steps for my parents to return when the evening service ended. People flooded out, passing right by me. It wasn't until nightfall that the priest came out. He looked at me and sighed. As he was locking the door, he said he had nothing to offer, that God had*

abandoned me. I watched him walk away. I hoped and prayed for my parents to return all night. I must have fallen asleep, because I woke to the priest shooing me away.

“My first day alone, I did not feel any shame nor torment. Simply the feeling that I was indeed on my own. I found my first meal stealing a loaf of bread from a market stall. A man saw me and shouted out as I ran away. I ate the bread in a dark alleyway. I went on to find that my meals would be hard to come by as long as I was a thief. I lived many nights cold and hungry, but never begged, never asked for help.

This went on for years. Then one day, I saw a merchant in the marketplace. I had known the regular merchants for what they stocked and how well they watched their wares, but this was a man I had never seen before. On his table I saw all sorts of entrancing jewels. Blue, green, orange, translucent. They were like nothing I had seen before.

My first thought was how I could steal them. I saw the man talking to customers but he was always pointing back to his wares. He must have seen me, I don't know how, but he looked to where I was hiding and beckoned me over.

“I see you're interested in my wares,” he said to me.

“Yes.” I replied.

“What would you do with something like this?” He asked, holding up a clear gem.

“I don't know.” I replied, “But I'd like to have them.”

He bid me to come see him as the market was closing. I was able to steal a few pieces of salmon from the old widow's stall for lunch and ate it raw. As the activity dwindled, I went back to the man's stall. He was folding up his table and packing up his wares. He bid me to follow him. We went down an alley that was commonly known for destitutes to frequent. I had knowingly avoided

this place for all of the times I had been grabbed and shouted at. He came to a doorway and knocked. A peephole opened and he gave the man a password. The door opened to a dark, damp cellar where several men and women were scattered about. Smoke filled the room, and sounds of groans and moans filled the air. Some men were at the table, working industriously on mixing powders, others were talking to the air. We went to a back room, where there was a man hunched over at a desk.

He wore thick glasses. He was turning over one of the gemstones in his hand, scraping it with a chisel. Specks of blue covered the table's surface.

"Geraldo!" The merchant said. "This boy is interested in our wares."

"Is that so?" Geraldo turned. He ran his eyes over me. He was a hideous man. Boils covered his face and his features were thick. I stood there in a fright. I did not know what these men intended for me, but Geraldo waved us over. The merchant pushed me from behind to the table.

Geraldo showed me how he was cutting the gems. He showed great skill, as if he had done it thousands of times. I looked at all of the blue and green crystal shards scattered across the table. They showed me how to use the chisel, but the day was done. I was told to come back tomorrow. They would put me to work, but would give me gems in return. I showed up early the next day, pounding on the door. The peephole opened and the man looked down at me.

"Don't you remember me?" I said.

He slammed the peephole shut and I pounded again. I must have kicked at that door on and off for hours. People began to stir in the alley. Hungover from drinking late in the whorehouses. They started eying me. I knew I couldn't stay long, but just as I was about to leave, the merchant came strolling through the alley. He swaggered slightly as if not yet awake, and seeing me broke into a grin.

"He returns!" The merchant jeered.

“Where were you?” I demanded.

“I was sleeping.” He sneered. He pounded on the door and gave the password. I was certain to listen this time. A phrase I’ve long forgotten, not that either of you would be interested.

“We went into the back room where Geraldo was simmering a pot of coffee on a boiler of some kind. He nodded with a deep grimace and in a moment poured two cups of coffee for the merchant and I. I took a whiff and handed it back. He told me to leave it on the table – I might want it later. He pushed aside cluttered objects on the bench and bid me closer. I came up to see jars of metals and liquids. He showed me how to mix them together to create the gemstones. I mixed them with only a rag to cover my face. The fumes burned my throat, nearly suffocating me in the dark cellar. But, in a day of work, Geraldo and I created a whole tray of gemstones. Geraldo told me to come back tomorrow. I asked for payment, but he said that he had done all the work. ‘Come back tomorrow. If you can remember the process on your own, you’ll get paid.’

“So I came back the next day, after having gone through the steps in my head all night. I gave the doorman the password and went to the back room. Geraldo was still sleeping so I went and woke him up. Upon waking he flew into such a violent rage I thought he would beat me. Instead he shoved me over to the bench and told me to get to work. That day I made my own tray of crystals, just as Geraldo had made with me the day before. When he and the merchant inspected my work at the end of the day, they were pleased. I was rewarded with two small chunks of blue gemstone, which I shoved in my pocket. I walked through the city streets clutching at the gemstones and went straight up to the salt-pork vendor. He had always kept a close eye on his wares. I had never tasted his meat before, although the smell drove me towards his stall many times.

I offered the gemstones in exchange for a pound of salt pork. The man laughed right in my face. He told me the gems were worthless, not worth more than a shard of glass. I shoved the gems in my pocket and cursed the salt-pork vendor. I tried my luck at three other stalls before finding an old woman who traded me a half loaf of rye for one of the gems. I sat on a doorstep eating the loaf, thinking how I had been robbed.

As I slept that night, a night colder than had come in many weeks, I found in myself a violent rage. The thought of being cheated by those men drove me back there the very next morning. I knocked at the door and gave the password. The watchman opened the door. It was early, so everybody was asleep. I crept to the back room and gathered all of the supplies I could. I made my way back to the door and the watchman gave me a look. Once he realized what I was doing, he made a lunge for me. I swung open the door as fast as I could and ran down the alley. He didn't chase me, but I knew that I would no longer be safe.

"It was not until the next day that I came out of hiding. I kept a lookout for the merchant or Geraldo. In total I had gotten two jars of metals, and a jar of the liquid, but had no boiler, nor the tray or hammer. So I went in search of a fire to use and something to act as a pan. I didn't know what I would do once I made the gemstones, only that they could be sold. But as I went in search of fire, a man stopped me. He had a large grey beard and wore noblemen's clothes. I remember most his grey eyes — one could not tell if they were hard as steel or soft as rainclouds."

"The man asked me what I had. He said he might pay me for what I was holding, so I showed him the jars. He took one look at them and shook his head. I chided him as he walked away, telling him the jars could create gems from magic. He told me that magic was not made through shiny

things, and that shiny things were not the purpose of magic. I looked down at the jars in my arms and knew then they were worthless.

“I asked if he might take the materials anyway. He seemed to consider it for a moment, then said he may be able to find some use for them. He handed me a few copper coins and left with the jars. I never saw him again.

“I went straight to the market place, my stomach rumbling. I was sure to look out for the merchant or Geraldo. But as I walked into the square, I saw only happy people. People engaged in conversation, people laughing, children running around. For a moment I scorned them, wondering what made them so happy while I was miserable. Then I felt the coins in my pocket. I saw that the people weren’t after me in any way. They hadn’t tried to harm me. They had only tried to protect themselves from the angry child who had been stealing their bread and clothes.

As I walked through the marketplace that day, I heard the message from a passing crier. I heard that God is our shepherd and protector, he will always help those who help themselves, and that in his grace, we need not want. Since that day, I have never had to steal to eat. And I have never gone a day without honest labor.”

At the end of Herold’s story, the sky was tending to dusk. They said nothing for some time. “A gripping tale.” Teresa replied. She took the bowls and Irving too took his leave. Artezo sat with Herold and they chatted into the night. At one moment, Herold asked: “The beard, is that natural or an accident?”

“You mean the color?”

“Yes.”

“I was born with it. So a bit of both.” Artezo chuckled.

“Does it cause you any trouble?”

“A bit of trouble, but a bit of fortune too.”

“Oh?” Herold asked, “How so?”

“My father was a high ranking member of the clergy. He had deep fears of being labeled as an associate of the devil.”

Herold nodded, taking a sip from his mug.

Artezo went on. “My parents forbade me from going outside or working. Often at nights I would escape through my window. My greatest pleasure was to spend my time on a patch of grass and wildflowers and watch the stars. Then one night, I simply didn’t return home.”

“Where did you go?” Herold asked.

“I took to the streets on the other side of the city. I must say I wasn’t cut out for it. By my third night, I had run out of food. I tried to beg but was given nothing. I was too old to be a charity case and many scorned me for my hair. I slept in an alleyway that night, hungry and cold, thinking only of returning home. Then a man wearing noblemen’s clothes came by. He offered me a piece of bread for a few locks of my hair. I was distrustful, but he extended the bread to me. I took it and allowed him to clip some of my hair. As he left, I called out to him: *Why did you want my hair?* He turned to me and said: *Because it’s beautiful.*

“The next day I saw him in town and followed him back to his shop. Eventually he allowed me to become his apprentice, beginning my life as a physician.”

Herold nodded. “Sounds like we’re not so different.”

“Yes. We rarely are.” Artezo replied.

They sat in silence for a few moments, then Herold stood.

“We’ll want to depart early tomorrow. Thank you, Artezo, for all you’ve done.”

The two embraced. By dawn the next morning there was no trace of Herold or his son.

Interim

As the years passed, Irving took over most of the physician duties needed in town.

Artezo continued to instruct Irving as new illnesses and difficult diseases arose, but found his attention turned to alchemy. Soon Irving began exploring the texts on his own, and began asking questions Artezo was unable to answer. Artezo decided to contact Ryland, and the next week said to Irving: “I made arrangements with Ryland. You’ll visit him in Hroznětín and he’ll teach you botany and herbalism.”

“Master?”

“Your ambition to understand the materials we use for medicine are beyond my grasp.

Ryland is the most educated man to teach you.”

Irving nodded.

“You will leave tomorrow; you may even take my horse.”

“Thank you, master.”

The next morning Artezo handed Irving a small satchel. “This is for Ryland. There are a few basic remedies to save for in his town, an elixir to improve his sight, and a note for him to read.”

Irving took the bag and affixed it to Artezo’s horse.

“And this is for you.” Artezo handed Irving a second satchel. Inside was a small pad of parchment, a quill, an inkpot, a wax tablet, and a stylus. “Take note of anything that seems important, I’d be interested to hear what you learn.”

“I’d be delighted.” Irving beamed.

“Good.” Artezo nodded, “I’ll see you on your return.”

They bid each other farewell. Irving rode Artezo’s horse down the northern road to Hroznětín. The sun was high and the fields of wheat waved as he passed. On his arrival, Ryland stepped outside his shop, wearing a sleeveless red vest despite the cold.

“Irving, good to see you.”

Irving dismounted Artezo’s horse and shook Ryland’s hand. “Likewise.”

“Let me help you with your things.”

Ryland led Irving inside and went through the materials Artezo had sent with him. He put aside the vials of medicine and the elixir and tore open Artezo’s note. He read it quietly, then looked up to Irving. “Your master certainly has a lot of faith in you.”

Irving blushed.

“Now now, don’t be bashful – I’m sure it’s well deserved. Let me show you what we’re getting into.” Ryland put the supplies away and came back to the table with a large map. He unrolled the map on the table. It was done in ink on a large piece of parchment. The river, fields, and forests surrounding the town were clearly defined. But what was most extraordinary was the level of detail. Fine writing littered nearly every between the drawings and along the margins.

“We’ll begin by exploring a few key areas.” Ryland started, “There is a meadow within the forest itself. And another area known for producing extraordinary medicinal value. I’ll also show you the garden.”

“We’ll take time to investigate the specific plant and mushroom species in the area. There are several species of interest that grow in different parts of the forest. Then we’ll learn how to preserve the plants and mushrooms for medicinal use.”

“There are a few areas outside of town I’d like to take you too. But we’ll get to that in time. Are you hungry?”

“Sure.” Irving replied.

The two had supper. Ryland showed him around the shop and Irving admired the diversity of medicinal ingredients Ryland prepared. When it grew late, Ryland showed Irving where he could sleep. A small mat filled with feathers was laid out for him with a coarse blanket.

The next morning Ryland told Irving to prepare for a long day. They dressed in their outerwear, and brought along two satchels filled with ceramic containers. Ryland led Irving to the outer perimeter of the forest and they dove in through the trees. The forest quickly became dense. To Irving it looked the same in every direction, but Ryland tunneled through as if he were following some internal map. They arrived at a small meadow, no more than twenty feet in diameter, inundated with wildflowers and tall grasses. Ryland sat with Irving on the boundary.

“See here,” Ryland said, “This area had two distinct properties. It is an area that is unshaded by the trees, and it is downhill from the river, creating a sort of pocket. In the event of a heavy rain, this area becomes flooded.”

“Is there anything of use here?”

“Not really. Flowers and grasses mostly. The flowers serve no medicinal purpose, the grasses can feed some animals.”

Irving took a note on his wax tablet. The two made their way deeper into the forest. They came across a brook.

“This is just a runoff from the river. In times of flooding this can become quite wide. Look along the edges, see the stones are covered in moss. But come further along.” Ryland led Irving to the end of the brook. A large patch of dirt was moist with dozens of sprouts growing from it.

“See here. Life begins when three things are present – good soil, sunlight, and water. The sprouts that grow here are fed by the river. They receive what sunlight passes through the canopy, and the soil is excellent in the forest. They are of great medicinal value.”

Irving bent down and investigated the sprouts. He picked one from the soil and twirled it in his hand.

“Let’s collect as many as we can while we’re here. Later, I’ll show you how to preserve them.”

They collected all the sprouts from the brook’s end and put them into a container and in the satchel. Then they made their way back to Rylands. They crossed through the forest, the

sun now dropping away from the zenith, the cracking of twigs under their feet, the crunching of leaves, and the scent of wood and flowering herbs infused them.

* * *

Irving stood with Ryland in his garden. Several rows of plants grew in lines; others hung out of pots or grew along trellises. Ryland showed Irving several species with cool, hot, dry, and moist properties. He showed Irving how each of them grew, how much water it took, how much sunlight they received, down to the composition of the soil.

“For most people, regular dirt is good enough. But as we are creating remedies for people, we must guarantee our plants are as healthy as we expect our patients to become. Take a handful of the soil, smell it.”

Irving bent down and picked up a handful of soil. He raised it to his nose and took a deep inhale. It was musky, with a cold, dark, earthy texture.

“The best dirt is not one plain singular smell.” Ryland said, “It is a vast array of all scents, arising from the process of decomposition. We fed the earth with the things that have died so that new life may form. Look in the dirt, you’ll see shells from eggs, scraps of vegetables, and you won’t see the powdered minerals interlaced with the soil. All of these work to provide vital nutrients to the plants. They provide sturdiness, growth, and abundance.

Ryland bent the stem of a nearby plant and it sprung back into place.

“It’s been a long day, why don’t we have some supper?”

Irving tucked his writing tablet back in his satchel, “That sounds great.”

Ryland prepared them a meal of parsnips, carrots, onions, turnips, and herbs in a broth thickened by flour. When the meal was finished, Ryland and Irving cleaned the dishes. As

Ryland passed Irving a soaked dish to dry, Irving asked: “What made you want to become a herbalist?”

Ryland chuckled. “I suppose herbalism always called to me. When I was young, I spent a lot of time in the forest. I’d often explore deep in the woods, resting and talking with the plants and trees.”

“What did they say?”

“It was not so much in words, but in how they are. Each tells its own story without a single word. The shape or color of a certain flower or tree seems to spark an idea in your mind. Then there’s the joy of being in the forest – the scents, the texture of the ground, and the unity with other animals.”

“Do the plants still speak to you?”

“Every day.”

After Ryland bid Irving goodnight, Irving brought his parchment before the candlelight.

“Today we learned of the composition of soil...”

* * *

Irving awoke to the faint whack and clatter of woodcutting from outside. He pulled on his outerwear and went out to see Ryland at the chopping block. He heard the *swoosh—whack* and the clatter of the logs tumbling to the ground. Ryland went to grab another log and placed it on the block. Irving watched him swing back the axe and thrust it down again, then sweep the logs to the side. Ryland turned and saw Irving, then dropped the axe on the chopping block. He walked over. His muscular arms and forehead were glistening with sweat.

“Good morning Irving. Help me with these logs would you?”

Irving walked over to the wood pile.

“Thank you, we’ll stack them in that pile yonder.”

They carried the firewood over to the stack against Ryland’s house, then set for a quick meal. “We have another long day ahead of us.” Ryland promised.

Ryland spent the next two weeks teaching Irving how to identify plants for medicinal value. Inside Ryland’s shop, Ryland brought out one of the plants they had collected the day prior. It was a long stemmed plant with thick leaves carrying a white flower with yellow stoma.

“There are several considerations when assessing a plant for medicinal value.” Ryland said. “Primarily, take a look at its overall form. Notice the texture of the leaves, the color of the petals, the aroma of its scent. We compare it to similar plants we’ve seen to form a general expectation.”

Ryland showed Irving how the plant compared to another that grew in the valley, pointing out key differences. Irving reached for the plant, but Ryland stopped his hand. “Hold on now. You never know what a plant can do to you. Some contain very concentrated poisons.”

Irving pulled his hand away.

“We can test a plant’s properties by applying a small amount of it to our skin and observing the reaction.” Ryland clipped a piece of leaf from the plant and rubbed it gently on the back of his hand, then on Irvings.

After a moment, Irving said: “I don’t feel anything.”

“Give it time.” Ryland replied, “It can take many hours for a reaction to occur.”

After a half hour had passed, Ryland turned to Irivng. Irving looked up at Ryland, then felt a tingling sensation on the back of his hand. “Feel that?” Ryland asked. Irving nodded.

“Tingling is a good sensation. That means the plant provides some form of energy – often promising for medicinal value.”

They allowed more time to pass before washing off their skin where the plant material was applied.

“We can now repeat the process for the other parts of the plant. The stem, the flowers, the fruit – the plant’s essences can be distributed in different concentrations throughout their body. Hellebore, for instance, is poisonous everywhere; Rhubarb, however, is energetic in the stalk and poisonous in the leaves.

“Since this plant didn’t create any rashes or harmful effects, we can now try ingesting small portions of it. Then we continue to ingest larger quantities – remaining aware of the effects.”

* * *

Irving mounted his horse. Ryland had told him they were taking a trek to Ore Mountain and loaded the horses with several bags of food, water, and containers. They rode a few kilometers North, passing fields of golden wheat and fields of untamed grass before reaching the base of the mountain.

They went up the switchbacking trail and passed a large mining operation. Pickaxes, mining carts, bundles of wood, hammers, and buckets were lying around where several miners were excavating ores. Ryland and Irving continued to wind around Ore Mountain’s western trail before reaching a copse nestled in a small valley below. They tied up their horses along the edge of the forest, where the trees were cut down to stumps. Ryland took two large

parchments from a sack before he and Irving walked into the thick wood bushling with undergrowth.

Inside, Ryland took the two parchments and unfurled them on the ground. Irving bent by his side and saw each parchment contained a map. The maps were similar in many respects, but had clear differences between them.

“What are these?” Irving asked.

“These maps show the state of the forest. It has every detail one could want – how moist the soil is after a rain, the pathways of water running down the slopes, the amount of sunlight each area gets.”

Irving looked at the maps, then at the forest. “But this isn’t right.” He said, “It says there should be a stream there.”

“Yes. These maps were made a year apart from one another, and almost a year since the last was made. Since then, much activity has been going on at Ore Mountain. The edge of the forest here,” Ryland pointed to the map, “Has been almost entirely cut. The mining activities have altered the flow of water to the area.”

“In many ways, this forest is identical to the one by Hroznětín.” Ryland said, “They are both fed a great deal of water, one by the river, one by the runoff of the mountain, they contain many of the same tree species providing similar amounts of shade. Differences in animal populations create different patterns in the paths through the forest. Where they eat and shit and sleep changes the distribution of plant matter. Some trees become casualties of disease, branches break, new sunlight pours in – all of these differences give rise to two different forests.”

Ryland rolled up the maps and walked Irving through the forest. Ryland appeared to be scanning for something until he came to a bushy plant budding with purple flowers. He bent down and waved Irving over.

“This is a very poisonous plant. *Atropa Belladonna* it’s called. A very small amount could kill a man.” Ryland clipped a stalk of the plant and set it in a container.

“What’s it for?” Irving asked.

“In small quantities, it can relax the muscles of patients in convulsions.”

They made their way through the forest. Ryland pointed out various species and Irving noted them on his tablet. As they came across new plant species, Irving was able to identify many of their key properties without fail. His knowledge was refreshed and reinforced each time Ryland pointed out a detail he had missed.

As it grew late, Ryland and Irving made their way back to the edge of the forest and gave their horses a bit of food and water. They ate a small meal and set up camp for the night.

The next morning, they mounted their horses and rode up to the mine entrance. It was a Sunday, so nobody was working. Ryland and Irving stopped for a moment and Ryland pointed to the top of Ore Mountain. “That’s where we’re going.”

Irving looked at the enormous rise. They started along the wide and steep trail, their horses plodding on. They rode for an hour before stopping to rest, overlooking the valley below. They continued into the second hour, and the third. Dusk began to settle when the trail became level. They rode up to a clearing where they tied off their horses and came to rest. Overhead, the stars were in full display and the moon absent from the sky.

“What are we looking for up here?” Irving asked.

“I don’t know.” Ryland replied.

“What do you mean?”

“I haven’t been up here.” Ryland replied. “It may be that we find nothing of value. Or we may find a plant of incredible healing properties.”

Irving gazed at the dim outline of the Earth below. Then turned as Ryland started speaking.

“Something in you, in me, in Artezo drives us to help people.” Ryland said. “We seek better ingredients to cure the nastiest ailments. We seek more information to provide the best treatment. But the more we seek out remedies and knowledge, the more we forget that we are not the healers – nature is.”

“Then what do we do?” Irving asked.

“We can only do our best and learn as much as we can along the way. For each man, that is different.”

They sat and watched the sky. Irving said: “When I first learned of medicine, I thought that we were truly making the world a better place. I saw people who were ill become well. Some people I thought were surely to be dead came back to life and thrived. Mixing what appear to be simple powders creates extraordinary effects in the body.”

“Yes.” Ryland agreed. “But what Artezo practices, alchemy – that is beyond my comprehension. Something that changes the fundamental nature of nature itself. At times, this scares me. Several physicians I have refused to provide alchemical supplies out of fear of what they might create.”

“Then why did you provide them to Artezo?”

Ryland looked out at the sky. “I truly believe that God bestows gifts and vices to all men. I cannot speak to Artezo’s vices, but in his eyes, I saw that his practice was an expression of God’s gift.”

They sat in silence for a moment, then Ryland said: “It’s late. We ought to get some sleep. We’ll look around in the morning.”

Irving nestled up in a patch of grass. It was an unseasonably warm night, and he fell asleep easily.

* * *

They were awoken by the presence of dawn. The rising sun cast an orange light over the green fields and trees atop the mountain. Ryland was up and organizing his things.

“Let’s start searching, point out anything you haven’t seen before.” Ryland smiled.

They explored the top of Ore Mountain, finding several species of plants and mushrooms to carry back down. When all of their containers were filled, they gathered what they knew to be edible and ate a hearty meal. The sun dropped down and they camped another night. It was noon the next day when they arrived in Hroznětín.

* * *

Ryland handed Irving a package. “In here is everything Artezo requested for his shop. I’ve included some of the plant species that may be of medicinal value. I’d be grateful if you and Artezo could return with any findings you make.”

They stood outside Ryland’s shop. The morning was warm with the heat of summer and the golden fields that had surrounded the village were now picked clean. Irving took the

package and placed it among the clothes he brought and over two dozen pages of parchment he had filled with notes.

“And this is for you.” Ryland handed Irving a small leather satchel. Irving looked up, Ryland motioned for him to open it. Inside were several pouches containing seeds.

“If you’d like to start your own garden in Louvice, these should help. I hope that you may have learned something useful from this trip.”

“Yes,” Irving replied, “I learned a great deal. Thank you, Ryland.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Now be off! I’m sure to see you again soon.”

Concrēscēntia

As Irving rode back to Louvice, he breathed the fresh air surrounding him. He looked out at the expansive fields of dirt and felt the warm glow of the sun. He arrived in the afternoon and brought Artezo’s horse back to the inn, where Aliea met him and embraced him in a hug. Their conversation grew rapidly as they stabled the horse, then they made their way into the inn where Artezo was sitting at a table enjoying a meal.

“Good afternoon, master.” Irving said.

Artezo looked up with a smile. “Good afternoon, Irving. Please, sit – I’m sure you have much to say about your travels.”

Irving sat and recounted his trip from beginning to end. When he finished, Artezo nodded. “It sounds like you’ve learned a great deal. Tomorrow we can look at those plants in greater detail, for now take the day for rest.”

“Of course, master.”

Irving spent the day with Aliea and his parents. He was overjoyed to hear of the successful harvest and the tales of travellers through the inn. The next day, he joined Artezo in the shop. They carefully reviewed Irving's notes and explored the properties of the plants he had brought back. Irving took the time to plant the seeds Ryland had given him, and in a few months, a blooming garden with a variety of restorative plants grew outside the shop.

Irving married Aliea the following year. The following year their first son, Castor, was born. Around that time, Artezo's red beard slowly faded to grey. He relied heavily on his cane to move and his vision worsened each day. Teresa began to care for Artezo, making all of his meals, while Irving cleaned and organized his shop. Despite his failing vision, Artezo continued producing elixirs and Irving applied them when treating his patients. Soon they were well known across the country. When Ottokar II was slain in battle, he was succeeded by Wenceslaus II. Soon after, Artezo received a letter at his shop. He and Irving were called upon to work in the castle as the Royal Physicians.

Irving's parents were overjoyed at the news. Tears welled in his father's eyes and he said: "You've made us so proud." Irving's mother hugged him and asked him to return as often as he could. That night he told Aliea, and promised to send for her and Castor as soon as he could.

Artezo was sitting idly as Teresa packed his things. She placed his clothes in the trunk then moved on to the books. From the top of the book pile she removed a lump wrapped in a grey cloth.

"Ah." Artezo said.

"What is it?" Teresa asked.

Artezo held out his hands and Teresa brought him the lump. He began unwrapping it, “Years ago, before my master died, we were working on the problem of transmutation.”

Underneath the grey cloth the lump of gold shone with luster. Teresa gasped.

“After all these years it’s sat here in memory of him.” Artezo turned the lump of gold in his hands, then extended it to Teresa. “I want you to have it.”

“I couldn’t.” Teresa replied.

“It’s the least I could give you, for all you’ve given me.”

Teresa took the lump of gold and set it aside, wrapping Artezo in a warm embrace.

Ad finem

Artezo and Irving arrived at the castle and were greeted by the King himself. Artezo found no trace of scorn from the new king. Many of those who had shamed Artezo for his hair during his prior engagement were now dead or otherwise held their tongues. Wenceslaus II focused his attention on stabilizing and promoting unity within the kingdom, which his father had greatly expanded through his ambitions.

After Artezo and Irving’s inauguration they went to their rooms. Irving was placed in the physician’s quarters with a private room. He had a stained glass window, a soft feather bed, a desk, and his own personal bucket to shit in. Artezo found himself comfortably set into the luxurious life of hot baths, comfortable beds, and servants.

They met in the physician’s room in the evening. Irving led Artezo around the room, which was exactly as Artezo recalled. The workbenches were long and contained every

apparatus one needed to create a remedy. The shelves were filled with every medicinal ingredient known to man.

Months passed as they settled into their role as Royal Physicians. Irving used what money he had to purchase a house in the city for his family. He spent many hours bringing Emmet through the fields outside the castle walls, showing him the various flowers, herbs, mushrooms, and trees. Meanwhile, Artezo retreated to his study more and more. He took to writing; his knowledge sat at the forefront of his mind, as if waiting to escape onto the pages.

Each night, they gazed up at the heavens and found comfort in the light of the stars. They watched as the constellations shifted overhead, each night a grand display of lights. One night, as the bright lights of Jupiter and Venus shone side by side. Artezo saw in them two bowls filled with yellow liquid, and the voice of his master echoed in his ears:

“Listen to the bowls, hear them sing...”

Three days later, Artezo called for the owner of his master’s old shop. He bought the deed outright and Irving helped him fill it with supplies. Being in the old building filled Artezo with a happy nostalgia. He ran his hands along the counter, remembering the many days he spent organizing and studying the ingredients and serving remedies to the customers. Upstairs, Artezo stood by the benches he and his master had spent many nights performing alchemical trials at. They were illuminated with memories. He took slow steps with Irving until reaching the room where his master had died. A sudden warmth overtook him as he came to the Arbadil rug.

* * *

Artezo was nearing the completion of his manuscript and the end of his vision, while Irving took on most of the duties required by the castle. One night, after working late in the castle, Irving was surprised to find Irving standing outside the apothecary. He said to Irving: “Come, there is something I want you to see.”

He asked Irving to take him to the shop. As they walked through the streets, Irving looked up at the stars. He recognized Jupiter and Venus side by side. They mounted the steps of the old building and Artezo groaned in pain. Irving was prepared to pull him back but Artezo waved it aside and took another step. Upstairs, Artezo brought down two bowls and several containers of ingredients.

“It is time I showed you what my master taught me long ago.” Artezo rasped.

Irving watched as Artezo’s hands nimbly added the various metals and powders to the bowls, speaking slowly as he worked. “We’ve done many fine things, Irving. We’ve made many remedies, aided many people, and created extraordinary elixirs. But at some point, the alchemist comes back to what will serve the world best.”

“What serves the world best?” Irving asked.

“Do you recall when we were in Louvice, and that man came with his son?”

“Herold and Tyrell.” Irving recalled.

“Yes. Wealth, for instance, can be created much in the way Herold described – shiny things without value. But the alchemist’s true goal is the formation of true wealth.” Artezo walked over to the velvet curtains and pulled them open. As the light of the cosmos hit the bowls they started to bubble.

“Listen, listen.” The grey-bearded master whispered.

Irving put his ear by the bowl of yellow gurgling goop.

“What do you hear?”

“Popping. Thick, gurgling pops.”

“Yes. What do you see?” The master asked.

“Thick yellow swirls – dark and light.”

“And how can we tell the solution is progressing?”

“By the color, the smell, the taste, the sound, and the texture.” Irving recited.

“We combined what we needed and the stars are aligned.” The master pointed to the window, “Why do we see no gold?”

Irving thought for a moment. “I don’t know.”

“Come.” The master pulled his apprentice by the sleeve. They went to the back room. The curtains were drawn, but a thin veil of grey seemed to cover the empty shelf and the large Ardabil rug in the room. The master took a seat on the rug and the apprentice sat before him. The apprentice shifted a little, looking to the master for some sign of what was next, but was met only with a pleasant gaze and a subtle smile.

“When we create these solutions,” Artezo began, “We use not only the materials of Earth, but of Heaven...”

Ad maiōrem Dei glōriam

Post scriptum

Artezo's Manuscript – *On the Energetics of Darkness*

“The darkness that surrounds us is more often than not overlooked. It is said to be devoid of energy, to be empty space, to be but a playground for the stars; perhaps a place where all is unknown and is said to be a place that does not matter. But to the alchemist who seeks to transmute matter into other forms, and to use the natural forces and materials of the earth, the absence of matter is where that change must take place. It is here that the matter we see becomes the matter we don't see, the matter that is unlimited in potential and without bounds.

“There are two considerations when speaking of darkness. There are foremost the variations of darkness itself – the night sky and that of the underground. There are then the variations of energetics between these forms of darkness.

“Darkness as experienced underground is simply the absence of light. It contains precisely what it contains when it is lit by a candle or flame. The dirt, rocks, ores, planks, bones, and creatures that roam in the darkness are there even if unseen. The same for lightless storages, such as those for preserving various forms of elixirs, tonics, and salves.

“The second form of darkness is the darkness one sees in the night sky. Not simply the absence of light, but the space in which light arises. This darkness not only includes the light that casts forth from the heavens but includes the heavens itself. It is here where transmutation occurs...”