

The Culled Crown

Practicing with Straw Dolls

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I watched Kace shoot for about an hour before I abandoned him and went to get started on the laundry. There are places in Eirden Dow that have electricity and constant running water. Even our house is equipped with electricity. It just never works.

As the war has grown progressively worse, the places with running water, strong electricity and engine-run transportation have dwindled. I don't know much about the other sectors, but the Wilds lost electricity entirely three years ago. We have never had running water.

The laundry is done by hand with water I have either warmed over the fire or on the stove. We had very little soap left and what we did have I wanted to ration for the dishes. Ambrose and Kace would have to make due with rinsed and dried hunting clothes.

I work quickly, laying out the clothes and retrieving the tub from the barn. It is the same metal bathtub we use to bathe in. It is heavier than I can lift so I have to drag it awkwardly through the rain and into the house. Once done, I collected the water from the pump. This time I didn't use matches to light the fire, I used my hands.

After lunch, Kace took the mare and rode over to the Cook's to check in on mama. I grabbed my jacket and hurried outside as soon as he disappeared from sight. I had been thinking about the Culling nonstop since I'd made the decision—tentative as it was—to announce myself. I'd decided, in order for me to have a chance at surviving the competition, I would need to use my

ability to defend myself. It wasn't enough to just be able to conjure fire at will. I needed to use it to hurt other people.

The first thing I did when I got outside was fill two buckets with water, the one we use to water the horses and the one we use for filling the bathtub. I hauled both buckets behind the barn, sloshing water on myself as I went. The rain was still coming down quick but I don't really mind it. I tell myself it is an extra challenge to work with.

I set up the targets similarly to how Kace had them, large crates stacked to three varying heights, sat in the middle of the nearest field with a bottle centered on each one. Since I can't really catch glass on fire, I went to the barn to try to find something more flammable.

I made two little straw dolls using what was left of Chicha's breakfast. One doll for each of the goddess-touched girls I knew about. I made one doll for the girl who could read minds and one doll for the girl who can control people with her voice. When I was done I walked them outside and leaned each of them against their own glass bottle.

I stepped back fifteen paces and rolled up my sleeves. I was proud of my little practice range, as odd as it was. I didn't really know what to do. Starting a fire was one thing, but projecting it was another.

I struggled to get the fire going and when it did finally light, it sizzled and popped against the falling rain. I basked in the warmth building inside of me. I felt like I was glowing, if I were to be cut open inside I would be only embers.

I let the fire sit in the palm of my hand for a moment. It moved, slid and hissed like a living being, breathing and exhaling angrily against my skin. It is always like that during the longer burns. I had to associate myself with the flames. In quick moments, like when I am lighting the stove or getting the fireplace going, the fire doesn't linger with me. It is there and gone in an instant.

But now the flames were dancing along my hand, moving across my skin and over my wrist. Instinctually I knew I could have tighter control. The flames shouldn't be allowed to wander from my palm if I have willed them to remain there. Knowing and doing are different and in that moment I couldn't seem to get my mind to cooperate.

Still, I tried.

I concentrated on the flame. It had spread and was creeping dangerously close to the rolled sleeve of my coat. I called the fire back pulling it, with every ounce of strength I had, to slip backwards towards the mark on my hand. I kept trying, but it didn't obey. It continued to work its way up my arm. I used my other hand to pull the fabric further up my arm and sidestepped so I was a little closer to the buckets of water if I needed them.

I held my arm out straight, inner elbow facing towards the grey sky. "Come on," I said, speaking to the flame the way I would to a frightened horse, soft, unassuming. "Back up."

Still, it didn't listen and I could feel myself losing control. It had been so long since I'd been allowed to use my ability and I didn't know how to do it anymore, at least not with any skill. The idea of entering the Culling no longer seemed like such a good idea. I couldn't even get the fire under control when it was on my own skin, how was I supposed to use it in a fight?

I stuck my hand in one of the buckets of water, soaking it up to the elbow. The fire fought back, hissing and sending up steam, but eventually even it couldn't survive underwater. I pulled my arm out and wiped it against my trousers.

The dolls still stood, trembling slightly in the light breeze. One would know anytime I wanted to strike and the other could simply tell me to stop—or even to just kill myself. I clenched my fist. I wondered what Ambrose would say if he could see me now. Some queen I would be, I couldn't even control something that was supposed to be apart of me. How could I control a kingdom? *Which is why you won't be queen, I thought. Instead, you will be dead.*

When I tried again, ten minutes later, I was determined to at least get the flame to listen to me. I cupped the fire between my hands and focused all of my attention on it. I listened to the way it clicked and burst whenever rain hit it. The flame, still small, quivered and twisted in the wind, brushing against my fingers like a hot caress.

I didn't have to tell my fingers to reach or my eyes to blink. It felt weird to need to tell the fire what to do. I decided to stop trying. I wouldn't tell it, I would merely point it in the direction I wanted it to go. I would let it be a part of me. I leaned my back against the outside wall of the barn and concentrated on the feel of the fire against my skin. It is apart of my body, an extension. I lifted one hand to shelter the flame from the rain. It settled.

I imagined the flame as being an addition to my fingers. I let myself feel it, but not in the regular sense. I didn't feel the heat of it, or the way it should burn my skin—rather I felt the quiver of the flame against the wind, the way it twitched and cried out against the raindrops. I let what hurt the flame, what moved it, what changed it, affect me too.

The shift in perspective seemed to affect the flame.

I twisted my hand, willed the flame to twist and it did, sliding effortlessly from my palm to the back of my hand. It did not grow or spread, it merely moved. I sheltered it with my other hand, keeping the rain at bay.

Progress. I smiled.

I played with it some more. I shifted it from one hand to the other. I made it retract and then grow. I let it crawl up my arm, but I set limits and, with the right amount of mental nudging and concentration, it listened.

I walked to the targets and then retraced my steps until I was fifteen paces away again. I practice tossing the fire from one hand to the other. It took a lot of energy to throw it, it liked

having a surface to crawl on. I found the fire clung to my skin. It didn't want to be airborne. But I wanted it to be. I needed it to be a weapon.

I took aim at the first straw doll. I decided this one would be the one with the controlling voice. If I were in a fight against both of these girls at once, I would want that girl dead first.

Dead. I shivered at how easily the thought came to me. I let it wash over me for a moment. A day ago I hadn't wanted to hurt anyone and now here I was, contemplating killing complete strangers—all because of a letter.

I shook my head, trying to pull myself back to the present moment. What's done is done. In the brief pocket of distraction, the fire had crept up my arm. It circled my wrist like a burning bracelet. I called it back to my hand and it obeyed. The rain was starting to pick up, if I was going to do this I needed to get on with it. I planted my feet, shoulder width apart and squared my shoulders with the first target.

I bounced the flame like a ball between my hands, molding it into the circular shape I wanted. It was a slow process and it took a lot of effort to keep the fire in my control. It didn't like being compact and small, it wanted to extend and grow.

I adjusted my shoulders, took a hard step forward and thrust the flame away from me. It flew out of my hand with surprising force. I started to smile, instantly certain I'd done it, I'd used the flames as a weapon—but I started celebrating too soon. The flame didn't make it to the doll, wind and rain pushed it down and it landed short, hitting the stack of crates it sat on instead. I panicked and grabbed one of the water pails.

The fire was angry, mad I'd cast it away, and it feasted on the crate, devouring it with speed. I drenched it with one bucket and then I returned with the second just for good measure. I wondered, just briefly, what the fire would do to a person. Would it eat away at a living, breathing person just as quickly?

I took stock of the crates. The bottom one had been badly burnt on one side but I hoped, with the right positioning, Kace wouldn't notice. I decided not to try again. I needed to practice tossing the flame more first, get it used to being thrown around.

The crates were heavy and I was physically and mentally drained. I un-stacked the crates and twisted the bottom one so the burn section faced deeper into the field and away from where Kace would be standing. When that was done I set the rest of the crates back in their place and reset the glass bottles for shooting.

I took both dolls with me, stashing them in my coat pockets along with the two letters. My movements were sluggish, tired and strained, as I made my way back to the house. The clothes were still laid out drying, exactly how I'd left them. The house was warm from the fire and I left the door open to let the hot air out. Kace was still gone. Ambrose was at market, probably meeting with Ellora. They were discussing their future together. The rain was still falling, clicking off the roof of our house. Everything was the same and yet for me, everything had changed.