

Autumn

by

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Meliora Hero's Journey

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I had been laying on a stone for quite a while. It had been baked warm and smooth in the high autumn sun, leaving it a light grey color with streaks of orange. I was shirking my responsibilities, hoping that someone else would do my work for me, although I knew they wouldn't. I would end up working well into the dark, but that was fine. I hated working in the heat. I reached down to the ground, picking up handfuls of rocks, tossing the ones that weren't perfectly spherical. The ones that were stood in a small pile to the right of me. It grew slowly. I added a reddish-brown pebble about the size of a pea. Then a light-grey one that was slightly larger. Then another. And another. Before I knew it, my hand hit dry dirt where there used to be gravel. I took this as my cue to leave. I picked up the pebbles I had deemed worthy of not being thrown into the grass and let them fall into my pocket. I had no use for them, but I felt I should take them anyways.

I watched the sun slowly dip towards the horizon, silhouetting the crops and the farmers among the rows. By the time I had made it back home, the sun was nearly gone, but there was enough light to work by. I set about my chores, scrubbing stains from clothes, sewing up the holes that appeared daily, washing pots, sweeping away straw and dust, carrying feed and straw to the animals. It went by slowly, and I found myself whistling. I stopped when I heard the door open. My father.

“Slacked off again during the day, huh?” I felt a little ashamed, but I knew he didn't really care so much.

“I don't like working when it's light out.”

“I know. As long as it gets done.”

He walked into his room and shut the door. My mother was in there. She'd been in there all day, of course. Her sickness had only gotten worse, even though the doctor had said that it would get better as the heat and the humidity died down after the summer. Friends of my father had told him to call on the doctor from Pellen, our neighboring town to the east, but he claimed that whole town was a little crazy. He didn't trust my mother's life in their hands. I didn't either. I didn't trust her life in any hands except my father's. He could fix anything. When I was little, our neighbor's daughter broke her doll; a porcelain doll from Yuri, which was easily a two months' journey to the east. He was able to piece the porcelain shards back together, which is much more difficult than it sounds, especially when your hands are hardened from years of farm labor.

I washed my face in the basin, wiping away the dust that had accumulated over the course of the day. My chores were done. I hadn't heard a noise come from my parents' room. That wasn't too out of the ordinary, though. My mother was usually fast asleep by the time my father made it home, and he was usually too tired to stay awake much longer. I was tired too.

I woke up the next morning to the ear-numbing silence that was our household. I went about my morning routine, getting ready for another hard day of slacking off. I went into the kitchen, searching for breakfast. My father usually set out some bread and butter for me on his way to the fields, but this morning there wasn't any. The door was still locked, too.

"Dad?" I called, as I walked towards his and my mother's room. I knocked on the door. There wasn't an answer. He could be gone, my mother still sleeping. I knocked again. Still no answer. Maybe he was still sleeping, too. Maybe she was in the outhouse and had gone out the back door.

I opened the bedroom door. My parents were still in bed, my father embracing my mother.

“Dad?”

He didn't answer. He showed no sign that he had even heard me.

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Several neighbors and officials of the town came to pay their respects. For the first few days, wives of my father's friends brought food for me. Loaves of bread, smoked meat. By the end of the week, it was as if nothing had happened. I was tending the farm, having to fill my father's role.

One night, after having finished my work for the day, I ate my dinner and left. I walked through town. I saw a handful of people, but they all averted their eyes as they walked past. I was the orphan now.

I walked to the end of the road and kept walking. I stopped when I reached the woods. I turned around and walked back.

The next day went similarly. After dinner, I walked to the woods, but this time I kept walking. I reached the clearing with the big oak tree. I sat under the tree for a few minutes and then walked back.

The day after that, I walked past the clearing. The sun set behind me as I passed tree after tree and I stepped over a handful of creeks. I found a yew tree and laid on the bed of needles underneath it. I cried.

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They came into town on a dusty afternoon. Their wagon rolled down the road, past my house, and into the square. Nobody visited our town; it simply didn't happen. Everybody heard the wagon rolling down the road and stopped what they were doing to see who, or what, it was. Peering through the dirty glass of my bedroom window, I could see into the back of the wagon. Two men and a woman sat in the back, and a third man sat out front with the horses.

The wagon stopped. The people who had previously been sitting still in the back sprang to life, unloading crates, boxes, armfuls of clothes. They set up a small marketplace. A crate of oranges from Hute; a handful of windup dolls, probably crafted by a bored dwarf in the nearby mountains; a bin of old coats. The goods were hodgepodge. A combination of useless vanity items and worn essentials. The four wagoneers began shouting out prices, drawing a crowd. At first, the townsfolk were reluctant. They stood in their doorways, eyeing one-another, seeing who would make the first move towards the wagon. Eventually, a man walked out and started haggling over a wool jacket. Soon after, everybody approached, myself included. I didn't have any money, much less enough to buy anything that I actually wanted, but I made a show of trying clothes on, asking questions, and then moving on to the next item. The few merchants that I spoke to seemed nice. One of the men from the wagon came over after most everybody else had left, having bought what they needed.

“You there, how can I help you?”

“I'm just looking, thanks.”

“Well, what are you looking at? I could haggle a bit if I knew what you were after.” He flashed me a grin. He didn't look like a wagoner up close.

“I’m not really *considering* anything. I don’t have enough money.” It was embarrassing to admit.

“Ah, I understand that well. I was once poor myself. Not so long ago, in fact.”

“I’m not p-” I stopped myself, realizing he was right. “You seem to be doing well for yourself now.”

He smiled again.

“My name is Tamlin. Would you like to see something?”

I followed him, although I’m not sure why. He was mysteriously enchanting. Maybe I followed him because I had nothing to lose.

“How old are you, little one?”

“I’m sixteen.”

“You don’t have much holding you here, do you?”

“Why do you say that?”

“One of the townsfolk mentioned a child who’d lost their parents. Figured it was you.”

I broke his gaze, hoping that he wouldn’t see my eyes beginning to water. I looked at the maple trees we passed.

We made small-talk as we walked, and his accent became thicker the further we got from civilization, presumably having been putting on a fake accent so as to not scare away the locals. I would guess he was from the empire.

He led me down the road from the way they had come, past my house. I thought about what he had said, that I had nothing holding me here. Nothing that couldn’t be bought.

Tamlin turned abruptly and without warning, bringing us through some thickets and to a clearing. There was a wagon in the center. He climbed in the back, and I followed.

The inside of the wagon was full of more crates like the ones they had brought out in town. I kicked one casually, but hurt my foot on a crate much heavier than I expected.

“Easy there, those are some expensive shirts.” Tamlin winked.

I reached to pull off the lid, but Tamlin stopped me.

“Before you do that, I have to know something. Do you want a family again?”

I tried to imagine how this could possibly be related to what was in the crate, but couldn’t think of anything.

“I do.”

He smiled that too-white smile once again. He took his hand off the lid, allowing me to finish pulling it off.

Inside the crate was a mere bundle of rags. I quickly realized that they wouldn’t weigh enough to hurt my foot, though, and lifted them up. They were covering a lock-box. He opened it with a key that hung around his neck. It contained what must have been enough gold and jewels to buy a kingdom. I didn’t know what to say. When most people don’t know what to say, they usually say nothing, but I babbled something incoherent instead.

“Sit down, little one.”

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“My crew members and I, we’re thieves. Smugglers, too. Mostly smugglers, actually. I, personally, wouldn’t consider us to be thieves, but it’s tough to judge yourself, and anyways,

that's a different discussion for a different day. I think you would make a good addition to our little band we've got going."

"I'm not a thief." I stood up and hopped down out of the wagon. He followed.

"I know you're not. Well, I didn't know that, actually, but I was safe in my assumption. I know that this is a lot to wrap your head around, so I'll give you time to think. We'll be here until midday tomorrow."

I wandered home, my thoughts spinning a web inside my head, which only slowed my coming to a decision even more. I wasn't a thief. I knew that. But I also had no place to call home. I had a house, but it wasn't a home anymore. There was a blood-stained bed in one room and two fresh graves out back. It felt empty. It was a husk. An old ceramic pot laying in the sun.

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I became acquainted with Tamlin's small crew the next day. His right-hand woman was Neah. She looked innocent, partially because she was only a handful of years older than I, but wasted no time teaching me how to pick a pocket (although I didn't see the point in learning).

Gurt was the muscle, for lack of a better word. He was a simple man. He loaded and unloaded the wagons and used his size to get us out of any unsavory situations. Surprisingly, he didn't take himself too seriously.

The final member of the crew was Arthur. He didn't say much and mostly just took care of the horses, but he was more than capable of anything asked of him.

The five of us rolled into Pellen the next afternoon, the sun just beginning to set. After arranging a spot for our horses and wagons at the stables, we walked over to the inn in the center of town.

Tamlin walked into the pub after telling me to wait until he came back. I spent the short time chatting with Neah, attempting to become better acquainted with her.

Less than an hour later, Tamlin came out of the inn and motioned me to come with him. I hopped out of the wagon, nervous and unsure of what was going to happen inside.

Tamlin and I walked into the pub. The guard at the door stopped me, but Tamlin explained who I was, and the guard reluctantly let me in, grumbling something about how “they” got younger every year.

The back room was smoky. The smell of ginseng and rosemary filled my nostrils. A strange combination, but not totally unpleasant.

A tall, slender man stood up from his chair. His clothes were plain, but clearly of good quality. Not many people pay good money for clothes that let them blend in.

“This is the one whom I told you about.”

The tall man nodded.

“My name is Marc. It’s nice to meet you.”

“You as well.” I didn’t know what else to say, although I felt I should have said more.

“Well,” started the tall man, “we should get down to business.” He walked to the other side of the room and pulled a ledger off of a shelf. He leafed through it as he sat back down in his chair, and motioned for Tamlin and I to do the same.

“It looks like the Baron Ulris needs some more... goods. He’s gone through what I sent him a couple of months ago rather quickly.”

“What kind of goods?” Marc’s eyes shot up to meet mine and Tamlin tensed in his seat.

“Never,” spat Marc, “do we, or especially you, ask questions about what we’re transporting.”

“I’m sorry,” I stuttered, “I had no idea.”

He put a hand up to quiet me. “You’re right. You had no idea.” His gaze shifted to Tamlin, who seemed to sink in his chair.

“I’m sorry, Marc, I should have informed him.”

“Yes, you should have. But the baron needs another shipment right away, and I’m low on runners as it is. You want the job?”

“Of course. Drop it in my wagon. The front wagon.”

Marc’s men, along with Gurt, loaded barrels into both of our wagons. Tamlin explained that having one barrel made it too easy to find the contraband should we be stopped on the road, so they always kept several decoy barrels. Thirty of our thirty-six barrels were full of apples packed in sawdust. I didn’t know what was in the exceptional barrels.

Tamlin wanted us to rest before heading on to the next town, so we spent the night at the inn. Arthur slept in the wagon. I shared a room with Gurt. Fortunately we had separate beds.

I was woken up by the smell of smoke and burning sugar. It was still dark. I shook Gurt awake, concerned that the inn might have been on fire. He rolled over and grumbled something before falling back asleep. Both curious and scared, I walked out of my room and down the stairs, looking for the source of the smell. There was nobody on the first floor of the inn, so it must have been pretty late. I wandered around, expecting to find a knocked over candle or similar. I didn’t find anything, so I went outside. There was a group of men and women sitting

on the ground a short distance down the road, one of them holding something burning. I walked over to them. They didn't seem to notice me, so I made myself apparent.

"Hello."

Two of them looked over at me, but the other four must not have heard me. One of those four was holding a book of matches and a pipe. The two that looked over smiled at me.

"What a great night, isn't it?" one of them said, grinning ear to ear.

"Yes, it is. I thought I smelled something burning, I just wanted to see where it was coming from."

He laughed a broken laugh, his eyes wide open. "Hagh hagh hagh hagh hagh! I didn't know it was so obvious. Julep, put that thing out!" He elbowed the girl next to him in the ribs. She looked over at him, her eyes just as wide and distant as his.

"What's wrong, Kai?" She seemed to have trouble stringing together that sentence.

"This kid smelled us from-kid, where'd you smell us from?"

"I was in the inn."

"He smelled us from the inn, Julep. You can't leave that burning for so long."

I realized that what they were doing was illegal, but having grown up in such a small town, I'd never been exposed to it before.

"What is that?" I asked.

The man named Kai grinned again, his eyes looking right through me.

"Are you dumb, kid? It's amber. You know, sap."

"Sap? Like tree sap?"

He laughed that broken laugh again and nudged Julep once more. “This kid doesn’t know what sap is, Julep! Do you think he’s stupid or a liar?” He didn’t wait for her to answer.

“Here, kid.” He pulled the pipe out of Julep’s hand and handed it to me. “Find out for yourself.”

I peered into the bowl of the pipe. It contained a small ball of half-melted resin, still holding an ember. I now understood why they called it sap. I looked up to see six pairs of dilated eyes staring at me, all accompanied by a grin full of bright white teeth. One of the four who hadn’t said anything prior spoke up.

“Go on, do it.”

I held the pipe up to my lips. I’d watched my dad smoke enough tobacco to know how to smoke from a pipe. I felt my hands shaking as I inhaled. I tasted what I had smelled in my room at the inn: burning sugar. I coughed all of the smoke out of my lungs, all six of my onlookers laughing the same laugh as Kai. I handed the pipe back to Julep, my eyes watering from the burning in my lungs. I sat down, although I don’t know why, embarrassed and ashamed of myself for what I’d just done.

Five of them continued passing the pipe around their group, skipping me. The sixth man was chewing on a ball of sap the size of a coin. They were talking with one another and laughing, but I acted as if I wasn’t there. I felt my heart beat slower and slower and my vision become less and less focused, stars flashing across my eyes. I felt relaxed.

I woke up the next morning in my bed at the inn, not remembering walking there, with a pressure behind my eyes and an aching in my joints. I dragged myself downstairs to eat some

breakfast. Tamlin, Neah and Gurt were eating already. They mumbled good-mornings to me. Tamlin eyed me suspiciously.

We left the city before sunset and had hit city limits just as the sky started turning that mysterious red color that it always seems to turn in the autumn. Tamlin and I sat out front of the wagons, a lantern hanging in front of the horses illuminating our path. I didn't think about much other than my experience last night. The aching in my joints had gone away, but the headache lingered. I kept catching myself staring at the barrels in the back of the wagon, now fully aware of what they contained.

I'd never felt this far from home. I'd never been this far from home.

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I woke up to banging. The wagons had stopped, Tamlin was sitting next to me on the floor. Republican guards were taking the lid off of one of the barrels. It popped off, sawdust streaming into the air. One of the other barrels was already open. The guard who seemed to be in charge peered inside the barrel, and, seemingly approving of what it contained, dropped the lid and motioned for his men to follow him.

“What just happened?” I asked Tamlin.

“I have a bit of a reputation with the guards around here. Especially that tall one with the sword.”

“They know what you- *we* do?”

“No, of course not. They just have a suspicion.” He smiled.

That didn't calm me down very much. Gurt and Arthur put the lids back on the barrels and swept the sawdust out of the wagon. Neah and Tamlin stepped outside and talked. I couldn't hear what they were talking about, but Neah looked upset.

“Arthur, what's going on?”

He stopped sweeping and looked over at Neah and Tamlin. “Neah doesn't like dealing with guards. She's been talking about making her own way.”

“She taught me how to pickpocket, I didn't think she had many convictions related to the law.”

“She doesn't. She doesn't like what we're doing here. Thinks it's immoral.”

“Well, isn't it?”

“That's for every free-thinking person to decide for themselves. If she decides it's immoral, there's nothing stopping her from leaving.”

I looked over at the barrels again.

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We spent the next two and a half months traveling to Yuri, delivering *something* to the Baron Ulris. We stopped at most towns we came across. We would stay at the inn, and, in nearly every town, I would catch a whiff of burning resin, just as I had in Pellen. I would look out the window and see a group of people passing around a pipe outside, or a man smoking by himself under the eaves. It disgusted me. I was disgusted with myself for having done the same as them.

One night, about two weeks after I'd left with Tamlin, I woke up to the the all-too-familiar smell once again. I got up and looked out the window as usual, seeing who the culprit or culprits were. There were two girls across a small field passing a pipe back and forth,

but I also saw Tamlin and Arthur just a short distance from the inn, standing, talking. I cracked the window out of curiosity to hear what they were saying.

“All I’m saying, Tamlin, is that you should be careful.”

“Why? The kid’s parents are dead, he’s about 200 miles away from home, and he’s also doing something illegal. What’s he going to do, go to the guards and say he’s transporting contraband with a band of smugglers?” Tamlin laughed.

My eyes started to sting, and my stomach ached, realizing that they were talking about me.

Arthur shrugged. “I just don’t like it. I think it’s risky to get kids to do this with us. They’re irresponsible. Not trustworthy. What if he leaves? We’re shorthanded one for the rest of the trip.”

“Leave?” Tamlin shook his head. “And go where?”

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I avoided talking to Tamlin too much after that night, as I thought I might somehow manage to give away that I had eavesdropped on their conversation. I didn’t think he’d take too kindly to that.

We continued traveling. When we were in Barcombe, about three weeks outside of Pellen, Tamlin and I ended up sharing a room at the inn. Not long after we’d gone to bed, I heard him get out of bed and walk downstairs, attempting to be quiet. I waited a few minutes and then followed. I cracked the front door of the inn and peered out. I saw Tamlin standing across the road, talking to a pair of soldiers. He handed a ball of resin to one of the soldiers, and he was given a handful of coins in exchange.

The next day, as we were walking through the town, Tamlin and I witnessed a man cut another man over a small ball of resin. It wasn't a terribly deep cut, but he never stopped bleeding. I tried to help him, but Tamlin told me that it was no use.

“When you have sap in your bloodstream, your blood never clots. He's going to bleed out. They call them bleeders for a reason.”

“Are you okay with this, Tamlin?” I was yelling, but I didn't realize it.

He answered me in a monotone voice, clearly unphased by my emotions.

“Okay with what? Giving up trying to save somebody who is beyond saving? Letting somebody receive due punishment for their poor choices in life? Yes, I'm okay with that.”

“This is your fault, Tamlin. You can't do this.” My cheeks were hot and wet.

He pulled me away from the man. The constable showed up, having heard the commotion and having seen the blood. I looked guilty, having fresh blood on my hands, and I was treated as if I were. I was questioned and assumed to be the murderer of the bleeder, who was now slumped over on the side of the road. Fortunately, Tamlin and a handful of bystanders vouched for my innocence and explained the blood on my hands, because apparently, in that town, you don't have the right to explain yourself if you look as if you've committed a crime.

Unfortunately, the constable, who seemed irritated that he didn't get to arrest me, began looking into the reasoning behind our visit to his quiet little town.

After a short conversation with us, he decided that he was to look in our wagon.

Tamlin handed him a crowbar.

“Take a look. Nothing but fruits and vegetables.”

The constable glared at Tamlin before walking to a cluster of barrels in the corner. He began to work the end of the crowbar under the lid of one of the barrels, and I saw Tamlin tense up. He reached for a bottle of brandy on a shelf to his left.

I knew what was about to happen, but the constable didn't, as his back was to us.

Tamlin took two silent steps forward and smashed the bottle over the constable's head. He collapsed, unconscious, his weight falling onto the crowbar, popping the lid off of the barrel he'd been attempting to open.

I stood there, heart racing. Tamlin looked into the barrel and swore under his breath.

“What?”

“This barrel has apples in it.”

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Tamlin bent over, removing the sheathed short sword from the constable's belt. He walked past me, hopped out of the wagon, and yelled for Gurt, Neah and Arthur. I was glad that Arthur had decided to park the wagons outside of town.

I looked at the unconscious man lying on the floor in front of me. Blood flowed from his head, mixing with the brandy and glass on the hardwood floor, which turned the color of a ruby. Gurt pulled himself into the wagon behind me, and lifted me out of his way. He picked up the constable and carried him outside. I sat down on the floor, still staring at the puddle. *Was the constable dead?*

Arthur threw a wet rag down and began scrubbing, occasionally wringing blood out into a small pail. Neah grabbed me by the arm and pulled me outside.

“Come on. You need fresh air. You look like you're going to hurl.”

We sat together on a log. She pulled up grass from between her feet and, blade by blade, threw it into the air, the wind carrying it away. She must have gone through three or four handfuls before I said anything.

“Neah, what did Gurt do with the constable?”

She didn’t look up from what she was doing. “I’m sure you know what he did.”

*They killed the constable.* “I don’t understand why Tamlin did that. There were apples in that barrel.”

“Yes, but he thought something else was in there. We’re in a risky line of business. We can’t take chances on things like that.” She looked up at me finally. Her eyes were sad.

We sat in silence for a few minutes longer, before she spoke up again.

“Do you think he would have opened another barrel?”

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On our way to Yuri was my first time in the mountains. I took in my surroundings as well as I could, enjoying the sights and sounds of an area of the world that wasn’t the valley I had grown up in. It wasn’t easy to enjoy anything, given the circumstances, but I tried my hardest.

Not long after we began our ascent up the mountain, I began noticing animals just laying around, but I didn’t really think anything of it.

Eventually we passed a pair of deer in the brush near the path. As we slowly rolled past in the wagon, I followed them with my eyes, noticing something disturbing about them: they were missing flesh all over their bodies. Their internal organs were almost completely exposed, as if the flesh around their ribcages had been eaten away.

I made an exception to my aversion to ask Tamlin about this.

“Tamlin, do you see these deer?”

“Hm? Oh, yes. Quite a strange occurrence, isn’t it.”

I nodded.

“You see,” he continued, “there’s a bug in this area, a type of fly, that lays its eggs in the skin of the animals while they’re asleep. The eggs hatch eventually and the larvae start eating through the meat of the animal. Not the tendons or organs, just the muscle. Now, the animals would die, but the larvae have some sort of venom that both clots the blood and slows down the bloodflow of the animal, which keeps it alive, even though it’s missing a large portion of its body. Once the larvae eat through the muscles in the legs of the animals, they obviously can’t go anywhere, so they just sit there until they die.”

He didn’t look away from his book while he told me this, which disturbed me even more. Somehow this was a completely casual topic in his world. He looked up at me after a few moments and smiled.

“Don’t let the flies bite you.”

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During our trip through the mountains, I was haunted by what had happened in Barcombe. I caught Neah crying a few times, too.

I woke up in the middle of the night, drenched in a cold sweat, having had a nightmare about the man in Barcombe. *That man died because of the sap that we were transporting.* I sprinted out of the wagon, making no attempt to be quiet. I ran through the woods, tears streaming down my face. I ran until my lungs burned, and then I kept running. Eventually my legs gave out. I laid there in the little snow that covered the ground at this altitude, my chest

heaving. I realized that I didn't know where I was running. I had nowhere to go. Nobody to turn to. I was in the mountains. *Tamlin was right.*

Tamlin stood outside the wagon as I walked back. He watched me, but didn't say anything. I didn't say anything either. *I'm a murderer.* I didn't go back to sleep that night.

I wanted to put an end to what we were doing. I'd seen, and experienced, what amber did to people. I'd seen what it made them do. It made me literally sick to my stomach to know that I was aiding a group of people who were transporting drugs. *I was transporting drugs.*

We arrived in Yuri at midday. The barony was smaller than I thought it would be, as the baron had more power than you would think just by looking at his lands. Tamlin and I rolled our wagon past the guard after a short inquiry into our business, names and relationship to the baron. He opened the gate after jotting down a few notes. We stopped the wagon behind the stables.

"When are we unloading?"

"Whenever the baron summons us. Probably tomorrow," Tamlin answered.

I didn't have a concrete plan of what I was going to do. I saw a river on the way in that I thought I could dump it in. I could bury it. I could burn it. No, that's what I was trying to avoid. Maybe I *would* contact the guards. Sitting and waiting, knowing that, at some point that day, I was going to take such a big risk, made me nervous. I felt cold sweat on my back, and my foot tapped the floor of the wagon incessantly.

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I watched the sun set, counting the seconds until Tamlin, Neah, Gurt and Arthur would be asleep and I could act out my plan, or lack thereof. We all sat around a fire, and one by one they turned in for the night, until I was the only one left. I didn't have a way to tell time to know when

they were all most likely sleeping, so I simply counted the logs I threw on the fire. I eventually decided that everybody must be asleep, or as asleep as they'd get.

I stood up from the stump I was sitting on and walked to the wagon that contained the barrels. I pulled myself inside and grabbed a knife off of the wall of the wagon to pry off the lid of one of the barrels. I wedged the knife under the lid, and then pulled it out. I stood there for a few minutes before putting the knife back on its hook and walking out.

“Can I help you?”

Tamlin was standing outside.

“Tamlin, what are we doing?” I ignored his question.

“What do you mean?”

I stood in silence for a moment, not really sure of what I meant either.

“Are we selling sap?”

“Among other things, yes.”

“What else are we selling?”

“A revolution, primarily.”

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“A revolution?”

“You obviously know there's a war going on, if one can call it a war.”

The “war” was between the peasants and the Empire.

“How do you think the that peasants could hold off an army this long? We supply rations, weapons, ammunitions, to the people who started the revolution. They transport the supplies to the peasants.”

“The baron started the revolution?”

“Of course he did. Not directly, but he instilled the necessary ideals in the necessary people. He created a society ripe for revolt.”

My head was swimming.

“It’s quite ingenious, really. The peasants down south, they’re farmers primarily. If they’re busy fighting a war, they can’t be bothered to tend their crops. The crops, primarily corn and the like, die, driving up the demand, and, consequently, the prices. The baron happens to own a large corn farm. His purse ends up a little heavier, the economy around here blossoms, and the peasants in the Empire feel like they’re doing something worthwhile - sticking it to the Emperor. I don’t make much profit off of the weaponry, but, as you know, I sell sap as well. Soldiers use it in battle to stay relaxed.”

I felt a rock in my stomach.

“You can’t do that... Play God like that.”

Tamlin smiled. “We’re not playing God. Everything can be bought. Even war.”

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I didn’t sleep that night. Gurt unloaded a “revolution” into the baron’s dry cellar the next afternoon.

Driving back through the mountains, we passed a convoy of soldiers, presumably on their way to the war that I was supporting. Tamlin waved and smiled at them. I gritted my teeth and felt my face flush. *You’re killing people.*

I didn’t know how to escape the life that I’d joined. I wanted no part of what I was doing, but I had nowhere to go, nobody to turn to. We continued travelling, dropping off and picking

supplies everywhere we went. It amazed me how many people were involved in this. Along with my partners, I was fueling a war that was tearing the empire apart, and we were profiting off of the suffering of the people who fought it.

One day we found ourselves back in my hometown by coincidence. I thought I might run into my parents, as if I was just returning from a day trip, and nothing else had happened.

Tamlin and them began unloading the wagons in the same spot that I met them so long ago. I snuck off. I walked to my old house, which was still vacant. Nearly everybody I passed eyed me, probably recognizing me but unable to place my face. I was confused at first, why they wouldn't fully recognize me, but then I realized that I had been gone for nearly a year. The fall and winter had run their course, and spring was almost over.

I could have walked into my house and started a new life for myself, got the farm up and running again, started back up where I had left off. But I didn't. Slowly, I walked back to the wagons. I approached the square. I saw Tamlin talking to townsfolk about his wares, just as I had last summer. On that day, he was the only person who had given me a second glance for quite a while. Most everybody in the town had ignored me and called it "mourning."

Back then, Tamlin was hope, a new life. He was a way to escape the memories that had haunted me here. Today, I knew who he really was, what he really represented. I went with him again.

Bio: My name is Daniel Josefchak. I'm 18 years old and am graduating high school this year. In the fall I'm leaving for college, and am attending Pacific University in Oregon. I plan to double-major in Environmental Science and German.

I enjoy reading and writing in my free time, as well as playing guitar and piano.