

# Three Ills

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## The Oracle

“Three children will ye bear, and three ills will upon them fall. The first, an eye to be lost. As libation to Lu, known as One-Eye, its humors must be poured at twilight over laurel of the mount - so pretty, and so deadly - lest the eyehole rot and grow, and consume her entirety.”

The Oracle, man or woman it was difficult to say, was old, but its hair was black. Its voice was but a whisper, yet every word was clear. It smiled as it spoke, which was very unnerving. Its teeth were randomly yellow, black, gold and white.

It continued, and the young couple was unable to move more than shaking, their boots stuck impossibly in the mud. Around them it was starting to get dark, and they wished to go home. The road beneath their feet, and fields beyond that, could be seen with the help of the light of One-Eye, the luna, the bringer of fearful things in the night. Behind them the road led back to the village, while ahead of them, past the Oracle in its old ox-drawn covered wagon, was home, the farm of the man’s father.

“The second, a limb. It will shrivel and rot, but ye must let it fall of its own accord. To Tecah will ye gift it, at dawn, as the masons and the cobblers start the day’s labors, lest the owner’s soul fall into a place from which it will ne’er return, the smile and bright wit lost to all who would love them.” All knew of sacrifices to

Tecah; it involved placing bones into mortar and including it all in a building, usually the foundation.

The woman was graceful and revealed an almost regal bearing despite her dismay. She thought she knew why such foul curses might befall her children, the first of whom quickened in her belly as she stood.

The man, young and solidly built, seemed stoic, detached. His lips formed a thin line of resolve. Perhaps he did not believe these words, as his young wife did. Perhaps he was only confused, unprepared and unknowing of why he and she should be subject to such vile pronouncements. Biting back his fear, he started to talk; but the ancient creature cut his words off before they could escape his mouth.

“The third,” continued the sayer, “A life.”

A gasp caught in the lips of the man; perhaps he was starting to believe. The Oracle was still smiling, as if that were the only expression it could muster. It was shocking and horrible when observed in tandem with what was spoken.

“Once the vile ichors of malar steal his very last breath, and not a heartbeat sooner, his body must be burned mid-night and the ashes given to the winds and dedicated to Ki; lest fire and chaos take the village and its children.”

The young couple stood, caught in shock, wondering if there were more. They did not try to move.

The Oracle spoke one final time.

“Know, too, that the children ye bear will face no other ill of the body before they are ripened and grown; as it is of your nature. To be born of divinity is always a blessing, always a curse.”

## Alurae

Alurae was sweet and fair, and blonde like her father had been in his childhood. She was a joy to be around; always happy, running around and getting into trouble, of the mischievous variety, her lips in a smile and with her mouth open, for some reason.

When her father died suddenly, during the birth of her second brother, she was distraught and confused for a time, but after the family moved into their neighbors' farmstead, her cheery nature soon returned. Her mother seemed happy, and busy with the two younger boys, so Aly had plenty of time to explore and play with the oldest son of the host family.

She had seen but two summerfests when her father had died, and the boy, Saffron, was four and therefore much more interesting than either of her own baby brothers, Chooura and Queura. There was a girl, too, called Pepper, Saffron's sister, but she was just a year old and could barely talk. Pepper's brother was much more fun than Pepper, thought young Aly.

Aly's eighth year saw her sprouting up, her cherubic smile replaced by her mesmerizing eyes as the feature that struck onlookers the most. They were a rich blue, and they had an intensity that would frighten and, at the same time, command a sort of awe. Divine blood has a myriad of ways of manifesting in young people.

Never was she ill. Her mother was the same, and her brothers. Even when the Mauve Curse appeared in the Village, and took almost a quarter of its good citizens, and also took poor Saffron, it did not touch Aly or her family.

Of course, this did not stop accidents from happening, as they do on a farmstead, from time to time.

Looking like a tribal shaman, the gryffin vulture normally summons only enough courage to fight dead things. But on one fated day, perhaps infused with purpose from one god or another, a member of this species spotted a young girl of ten summerfests lying on her back in a field, resting or sleeping. It soared above her, looking around her. It glided lower.

Aly had spent the morning doing chores around the farm, and then had played stone-stick-stack with her brothers. Now that they were back on their own family farm, there was extra work to do, for their hosts had not let the family keep both cows or any pigs, only Mish and the chickens. They had to work hard to make their farm viable, and were unable to hire more than one hand to help. So Aly was tired, and had earned a short rest, which she took on a little hummock she called Hawk Hill.

Later in life, Aly's one eye would still command the respect, even awe, it had when it had a sister. But it was half of a pair, and as a strong-willed beauty with an eye patch, Aly's life was destined to be a hard one.

## Chooura

Chooura was in a foul mood the day Alurae lost her eye. He had played stone-stick-stack with Aly and Q, and Aly, who was older and usually got her way, won as usual. There had been a lot of work in the morning, and Mish had not produced enough milk and he'd had to tell his mother, which led to other worries for her and for him.

Cho's moods were famous, in the family and in the village. People said a black cloud followed him when he was down, and a red fire surrounded him when he was angry. Most of the townsfolk didn't see these things, but they felt them. For when a person

contains a spark of divinity, anything he excels at takes on a special form. And Cho excelled at his moods.

Of course, when he was happy, anyone who encountered him felt lifted up, as if the sun had just come out. Or, as if Aly had been there.

So it was, on that day, when Cho was morose, and with his black cloud around him, that Aly screamed out louder than anybody had ever heard her scream. And Q was inside with his Ma, so Cho looked to see Aly. He was perhaps a little slower than he could have been, his mood to blame, but soon he was running at full speed up the hill toward his older sister, who was holding her face, with blood. And with shock and disbelief, he yelled as loud as *he* could for his Ma.

His mother, soon kneeling over her daughter, was simultaneously upset, confused, and crying so profusely that she could barely see. The children all heard what she said, then. “It’s true, no, no, no. NO!!!” Then through her tears she saw her children’s faces, and tried to comfort her daughter, and said nothing more as she composed herself.

After what seemed like an eternity to the boys, who were just listening to Aly babbling about a huge bird that had attacked her, they were given instructions. Q was to run to the village and get the healer, tell her what he saw here; Q was a fast runner, and wouldn’t tire running there and back. And Cho was to look for the bird, and recover her sister’s eye, or whatever was left of it. “Bring the bow, kill that bird. Don’t come back without the eye!” As Cho began to question her she merely interrupted and screamed at him to just do it, immediately. He stormed off, as if it was all about him.

It *was* all about him, in that moment. But once he’d gotten back to the house and picked up the bow, some of his thoughts were on his sister, and her eye, and why this had happened. He carefully

slid the quiver of arrows over his back, crosswise, and stepped outside, bow in hand. He pondered his mother’s words. “It’s true,” she had said. What was true? And why did she need Aly’s eye? Would she try to put it back in?

His eyes scanned the skies. Clouds were moving in, but were not here yet. He looked for a bird, and realized he did not know what kind of bird he was looking for. He ran back to his mother, who was still with Aly, and asked her what kind of bird it was. Aly, who seemed impossibly distraught, spoke up over her tears, fighting back her pain. “It was that gryffin vulture!”

Cho nodded, and looked around. That vulture, if it was the same one they had all seen many times, had never attacked. It always flew high above, watching, waiting for something to die. Q had said he once saw it attack Pepper’s father’s dog, Nutmeg, as he slept, but it had not injured him and Cho was not sure Q was telling the story true.

The eye. He had to find the vulture, and the eye. As he jogged toward the nearby coppice of trees, where he thought the large bird might be, he wondered if it might have eaten the eye. If that were the case, and he were able to bring the bird down with an arrow, would Cho be able to find the eye in the beastly bird’s stomach? He did not know.

He arrived at the edge of the line of trees, where the bushes grew taller. It was not far from his home, and he had run through these woods a thousand times. He knew them well. With his eyes turned upward, he started down the central path through the trees. His heart beat loudly in his chest, and he was not sure if it was because he was running or concerned about his sister’s eye. From his mother’s way of speaking to him, this was important, very important.

No large birds were spotted until Cho passed a tree and saw a great, mangy avian perched on a thick branch, quite high up and almost directly above him. Something was hanging from the bird's angry beak - something stringy. Cho stood on a flat part of the path, held up the bow, and pulled an arrow from its quiver. He knew he should aim and shoot quickly, as with hunting rabbits. The arrow left the string and Cho thought his aim was true, but the gryffin vulture had already spread its wings, and just as the arrow flew, the bird dropped smoothly off the bough of the tree. Gliding and then flapping its wide wings, it headed out of the trees and westward, where the land was a little rougher. The arrow was gone, off into the sky and then a field somewhere.

Running after the bird, Cho wondered if Q was at the village yet; if the healer was on her way. Cho's brother could run fast, faster than anyone Cho knew, and he didn't tire. For the first time, Cho was glad Q was so fleet of foot.

The vulture entered another small grove of trees. This one surrounded a shaded glade, where the stream fed a small pond they sometimes swam in. Cho ran speedily toward it, hoping the hateful creature didn't continue onto the next. When he reached the trees, he saw the great avian again in a tree, high above the pond. Again, Cho found solid footing and smoothly pulled an arrow into his bow. As he started to draw back the sinew cord, something dropped from the vulture's beak. It looked like a stone with a string attached. As it landed in the pool, Cho saw what it was.

He let the arrow go, without aim, and it shot off into the trees. At a full run it only took him a few seconds to reach the pond, and he kept his eyes on the spot where the eye had landed. Luckily the pond was small and shallow, and Cho had no worries about being able to find it. Would it float? He did not know. He started wading in.

What he was not expecting, though, was the wind that suddenly assailed his ears, or the shadow, squawking, and feathery flapping that would follow it. The gryffin vulture had dived, and after the initial surprise, Cho saw it reach for something in the water, causing a great splash, and then flap furiously to gain speed and height away from the pond. It held the object of his quest, again, but this time in its dirty talons.

Cho rushed toward the vulture, but he was too late, and the bird was already flying and gaining height. He watched it flap noisily through the trees, and started after it again. It did not go far. A short distance from the pond stood a shallow cliff overlooking farmland and woodland below, and atop this bluff stood a standing stone with the gryffin vulture on top, looking around as birds often do. The standing stone had been placed there by ancient peoples, or so Cho had been told, for reasons unclear, but likely related to the rising and setting of the sun, the moon, the other greater deities that inhabited the heavens, and the stars of the southern sky.

After seeing the bird, Cho moved closer so that he could get a good shot away. His bad luck held, though, and as soon as he started to release his finger-end grip on the bowstring the wind picked up and pushed him, just a bit, so that his arrow flew wide once more. The vulture launched itself into the air again, and Cho took another shot at it. He thought he might have hit it, but he couldn't be sure. However, he noticed it was no longer holding the precious eye or its entrails.

The standing stone was smooth and tall. From looking at it, one could not tell whether it was carved by humans, or was naturally like this. This didn't matter to Cho, who just wanted to climb it, and hopefully find his sister's eye up there. He climbed up the bluff to the stone, and circled it, looking for a way up. The stone was tall; as tall as three men, at least. It was smooth, and there were no rough

parts, no crevices or hand-holds or even corners to grab onto. He tried to climb it, but it seemed impossible.

Looking up, Cho could see the trees beyond, and at least one branch hanging tantalizingly over the top of the stone. Many children are natural climbers, so even though Cho couldn't mount the stone, he was sure he could get up that tree. A short time later, he was worming along the branch, and he soon found himself directly over the stone. He looked down and saw something dark on the flat top of the monolith. There was a splotch of wetness on the stone, from where the vulture had perched, but within that spot there seemed to be a hole a little bigger than his foot in size and shape. He recalled that the ancient peoples had supposedly used this hole for their mysterious astrological rituals.

Cho could only imagine the eye had gone into the hole. Or had it rolled off? From his precarious spot on the branch, Cho's eyes searched for the eye on the ground and rocky slope below the stone. It could be down there somewhere, he realized, but since he was already above the stone, he decided he would check it first, and if the eye were not there he would then search the ground thoroughly. He started to worry that he would not find the eye.

The standing stone's top was more than a man's height below him, and he would have to drop onto it. If he missed the center, he would fall off the edge and very probably hurt himself, badly. He shook his head as he lowered his legs, and then the rest of his body, so that he was holding onto the branch with just his hands, from below it. The stone was still a good leg's length below him. He could drop, but he had noticed the branch bouncing slightly as he had lowered himself, so he tried lifting himself up a little and then down again, getting the branch to begin bouncing slowly, up and down. Up and down, and soon his feet were less than a forearm's length above the flat top of the stone, on the downswing.

One bounce down, and Cho released his fingers. He dropped down, his feet hitting the the surface of the rock, and he immediately fell down on his hands and knees. The family bow was still over one shoulder, and it was getting in his way, so he carefully removed it and placed it on the stone next to him. His eyes were already looking in the hole.

He spotted something. The hole was not straight or smooth, so he had to reach in and move his body to get his hand further down the hole. Soon, he felt something wet and soft. Was it leaves, or some animal dung? No, it was not that soft. It was round, like a ball!

He managed to almost get his fingers around the spherical object, but he needed his hand to reach a little more. He moved a bit to the side, and reached, and he grabbed whatever it was. But his knee was on top of his bow now, and as he started pulling up his prize, his knee slipped, and his leg slipped. As his other hand grabbed for a handhold, it got caught in the bowstring, and his body started to fall... off the top edge of the standing stone. But the first hand was still in the hole. He felt a sharp pain in his arm and another in his shoulder, coupled with an audible cracking sound in his forearm. He did not fall to the ground. His broken arm kept him on the stone, and soon his other arm had secured his place. He screamed now, with the pain, even as he held tight to the rock to keep from falling a long way down. He felt and heard his heart beating now, that same blood pulsing with pain through his arm.

It seemed like several minutes before he was able to gather his wits and pull one leg up to the top of the stone, and then the other. Once that was done, he was able to extricate his hand, still holding the eye, as it turned out to be. His sister's eye, plucked out by a mangy vulture. He imagined his sister looking at him, but knew it could not be so, not without some kind of magic.

He held onto it with the hand of his broken arm.

Cho surveyed the stone, and found the top had one side that was somewhat sloped, for a bit. If he could slide down that, slowly, he'd be far enough down that he could jump onto the flatter bluff below. Before sliding down, he reached for the bow and tossed it down onto a small bush below.

Nobody would find him here; nobody would rescue him. He had to get back on his own. His arm and shoulder throbbed with pain, and he had to move slowly to keep from making it worse. But eventually he was poised above the sloped part of the stone, ready to plunge down it. Still, it took him many heartbeats, hundreds to be sure, to summon the courage to make the slide. Edging onto the slope, he discovered that though it was smooth, it was not overly slippery, and he thought he might be able to inch his way down slowly rather than sliding down in one go.

This was successful, and in the end, the jump off the sloped part of the stone was less than the height of two men. Even with his broken arm, he should be able to make this jump.

Cho arrived back home holding his sister's eye in his one good hand. His other hand was tight to his side, and he was in tears, his face red with pain and exertion. Queura, who was outside doing chores, was first to see him, and he ran inside to inform his mother.

His mother was in the children's bedroom with Aly, who was in bed, with Zhunel the healer by her side. Zhunel, who was known in the village for her skills, held a cloth that had been soaked in a bright yellow liquid, and with it she was cleaning the area around Aly's eye socket.

Cho's mother burst into tears as he entered the room, and fell onto her knees and hugged him when she saw the eye in his hand. "You don't realize it, but you've saved your sister's life! There is

still time. Thank you Choeura, you've done well." She did not notice his arm, but saw his face and realized he was in pain, especially when he gave her the eye.

"I think I broke my arm," said Cho. "I had to climb the standing stone, and I almost fell off. I felt it break." He looked at the healer.

Zhunel asked him to lie down in his own bed and told him she'd look to him soon. She gave Cho's mother an uncertain look before turning back to Aly. A moment later the middle aged woman reached into her leather pouch and found a small jar. She held it up for the children's mother and asked her, "Aetherae, would you be able to take one spoon of this and stir it into a mug of that hot water? To ease Choeura's pain and help him relax. If he can sleep, that would be best." Everyone else called the children's mother, Aetherae, by her nickname Rae, but Zhunel always used people's full names; even though she had known Aetherae since they were both children in the village.

After quickly following the healer's instructions, Cho's mother looked out the open window and let a small gasp escape from her lips. The sun was going down. She took the eye and moved to the door. She hesitated there, and said to Zhunel, "I'll be back shortly. There is something I must do."

## Queura

On her way outside, she stopped in the kitchen for a sharp knife. Once out of the house, she asked Queura to follow her. She did not want to do this alone. As she walked briskly toward Hawk Hill, she spoke to her youngest child. "I would like you to watch. I am to pour the liquid of the eye - there is a liquid inside it - I am to pour it out on the laurel of the mount. Those are those little white

flowers with red dots in them; the ones that give a rash if you touch them. Could you run ahead and find them for me?"

Q ran up the hill at full speed. Rae did not want to think of Choeura's arm, and what it meant, either for him or for Queura. She just wanted to get through this one task, and she was sure she would worry and cry over her sons afterward.

She reached the top of the hill, and Q was running around a large stone there, looking at the flora. Neither of them watched the sky as it glowed brilliant hues of red, orange, and yellow. Q called out, "I found it, Ma!"

Wasting no time, Q's mother moved over to where she saw several naturally growing flowers on a bush, white and dainty with small red dots, and circle of red in the center. It made her think of an eye, and she wondered if that were some cruel joke of the gods. Not hesitating, she took the sharp knife and sliced a hole in the eye. It was tougher than she expected, and a good thing she had brought a sharp knife. As she cut it, she realized it was already torn open, and some of the fluid was gone. She closed her eyes in despair and hope.

Finally, she opened her eyes again and held up Aly's eye, pouring what remained of its humours on several of the flowers. She decided she would try to at least touch each of the flowers with some liquid, so she completed the ritual kneeling down, touching the lowest of the laurel of the mount with the eye's sticky fluids.

Queura felt sorry for his sister, and couldn't imagine having his eye plucked out by a vulture. It was horrible to contemplate, but he couldn't stop thinking about it.

Cho's arm was broken, and the bone had been pulled from its place, briefly, but after a good rest and a splint and sling, he was up and about. There was plenty to do, with Aly still in bed, and she would take much longer than Cho to recover.

This left extra chores for Q, and though he resented having so much fall on his shoulders, he knew his mother was burdened even more, and that his sister and brother were not at fault for their part in it all. Once in a while he would skip his duties and go for a swim, or a walk, or looking for the treasure he imagined should be buried within his domain by brigands in times past. His mother must have understood, for she would scold him only briefly, and then stop, and cry for some reason.

In this way the summer flew by, and soon Cho's arm was mostly better, with just a niggling pain and a slight yellow hue; and Aly, too, was able to move about. They all rode into the village on Aboun and Sebith's oxcart, lent for the occasion -- which was to fit Aly with a fine leather eyepatch. The visit went well, and they were able to trade barley for some fresh fruits and a small flagon of something good for their mother. They forgot to bring coins, though, and had to promise to send the coin for the patch and cord later in the day.

Running to the village had been Q's job even before his siblings were injured, for he could run the whole way there and back quickly. Q took the pouch with a few silver coins and headed toward the stream instead of to the road. He had a shortcut he liked to take, alongside the stream, and it met up with a rough cart path closer to the village.

It did not take long for Q to reach the spot where he could see the path, and on it he saw an ox-drawn wagon slowly winding its way. The wagon was covered, and decorated with all manner of pictures and small items, apparently for selling, and it was being steered by an old woman or man. He thought it was a woman at first; the ancient creature had a full head of stringy black hair, and no beard or facial hair, but it had no ear or nose rings, or other feminine adornments, so he could not be sure.

He slowed a bit as he watched the wagon steering through a narrow space between two large rocks on either side of the path. The wagon seemed to get stuck on something -- a hole, perhaps, or a rock or root in the path. Q decided he would try to help, for he might gain a small reward in doing so. At that instant, however, he saw the top-heavy wagon tilt and begin to fall over sideways, only to be caught on one of the large rocks.

The old driver let out a loud cry, and the wagon stopped tipping when it was halfway horizontal, its hanging goods pulling on the canvas and the wagon as it remained at a precarious angle. The driver fell out and onto the ground, out of sight of Q, but the ox stupidly tried to keep pulling, and with a lurch the wagon moved forward a hand's length and toppled just a bit more. The driver let out a louder scream -- he or she must have been crushed! And then, to Q's surprise, the driver let out another call.

"Queura! Help me!" The voice was old and croaky, but still, he could not tell if it belonged to a man or a woman.

Queura was already running to the wagon, and he was so shocked to hear his name that he paused, slowing a bit. How did this person know him? How he had been seen he had no idea -- the driver was looking the other way and concentrating on steering the wagon! But he, or she, was in need, and Q was almost there, so he kept running, and he raced around the half-toppled wagon to the other side, where the old driver had fallen.

The old person had indeed been crushed by the wagon. The ox was still grunting and struggling to pull it, and every time it did the driver screamed in agony, calling his name when able. Q wondered what he could do, but quickly realized the wagon was partially balanced on two of its wheels, though one of them was broken. But that meant the weight on the driver was not the full weight of the wagon. He was at a loss for words, still shocked at the

old driver calling his name, as he stood next to the wagon and tried to push it upright.

He had no success, and soon realized that the wheel was caught on the rock, so he got down on his knees to see if he could nudge it in any particular direction. He realized too late that if the cart were unjammed, it may fall over completely and crush the driver, and him too. The stupid ox did not know this, though, and after resting a short while it gave another great heave, and the wagon moved again. Free of the rock, it fell hard, and quick as Q was, he could not fully escape the falling wagon. His arm was crushed under the weight.

The pain was excruciating, and as Q cried out, he heard the old driver cry out as well. Then the creature spoke, in a quiet voice, but he could hear every word. It told him something strange, but at the time he did not take it in; it told Queura of his future, of his life.

And then the driver died.

## Aetherae

It was very fortunate that the healer, Zhunel, happened by shortly after, or Q likely would have died, for his arm was crushed and also cut, and he was losing blood. Zhunel was on the way to the farm, and it was also fortunate that she had come on foot, for otherwise she would not have taken the same shortcut.

When she saw the overturned wagon, and Q and the old creature there, she rushed to help them. Discovering the wagon driver dead and Q barely conscious, she decided to first bind off Q's arm above the trapped part, to quell the bleeding. She gave him some dried powder to help relieve the pain, putting it directly in his mouth and adding a bit of water after.



Then she tried to lift the wagon, but it was too heavy. Though Q seemed unconscious by then, she told him she was going to get help, and she resumed her journey in haste. Zhunel knew that Pepper's family, with their cart, would be able to help, and thought one of the other children, perhaps Cho, could then run to the village for additional aid.

They rescued Q before nightfall, which was good because after dark the nightbogs might have come. With Arboun and Sebith's ox and cart, and both families working together, the covered wagon was lifted and Q was taken home. They also took the old driver's body, but Q's mother did not want it on her farm, so it was taken to Arboun and Sebith's.

Q was feverish and not fully conscious when Zhunel was finally able to look carefully at his arm, in the same small room she had treated Aly and Cho. It was crushed, the bone broken, and some of the flesh severed. In solemn tones she told Rae he would lose it, and that it needed to be removed; they would have to take him to the village in the morning. They couldn't risk the trip this late at night. Rae asked the healer to make sure the cord was tied tight, and she offered her some food and drink; for she would be staying the night, of course. She would share Rae's bed.

As Rae lay there, she was unable to sleep. Intruding in her mind were thoughts of the old driver, the same one, Rae was sure, who had pronounced the prophecy of three ills to her and her late husband. She had not mentioned it to anyone since he had died, but it had always been gnawing at her soul. And she believed it, too. She had wondered, before, if believing it might cause it to happen, but after Aly's eye, she didn't really think that anymore. And then Cho's arm, and now Q's.... Her tears were plugged up inside her, like wine in a skin, and the cork can't be pulled. She needed to talk.

"Zhunel. You awake? I wish to tell you... something."

The healer turned onto her back, and said, "I am."

"Zhunel, you should know about the prophecy. It told of Aly's eye. Before she was born, it told, and then this year it happened."

"What prophecy?"

"When I was with child, with Aly. The old woman, or man. The one who today died. She -- he -- also *saw* an arm, lost. But it must fall off of its own accord, or worse things will happen. I must have the... the spent arm, when it falls, and I must perform a ritual on it, as I did with Alurae's eye."

The healer was quiet for several heartbeats. Her view of the world was quite different than Rae's. "And so that is where Cho was, and what he brought you from outside. You performed a ... ritual."

Rae sighed. "I thought it would be Cho's arm, on that same day. But it's not. Q's arm is gone, is it? No hope of ... recovery?"

"That's right," responded Zhunel.

"How long will it take? I mean, before it withers and falls."

"Yes, about that.... That is most unwise. The humors in the arm will continue to flow, through some blood channels that were not crushed. They will turn black, or white, and evil will replace the good blood, and spread to the rest of him. And it will be painful for him, for a long time. Until he dies. The arm needs to be removed."

"No. I can't... I must follow the prophecy's cautioning. It is the opposite of what you say - if it doesn't fall on its own, he will be lost."

Again Zhunel was quiet. Finally she said only, "Now I shan't sleep." But she rolled away from Rae and closed her eyes. Perhaps in the morning she would argue.

The healer looked at Q's arm again in the light of day. She shook her head, in sadness or disappointment or concern.

“Something on the side of the wagon -- a horseshoe or pot or other hard implement -- must have been there, for the arm is almost cut off.” She spoke to Q, who was now awake, though drowsy with the potent draught she had given him. “Your mother insists we leave the arm, let it wither by itself. No, it is too far gone to save, I’m sorry to say. You must start thinking about your life with just one arm. You’re a bright and healthy boy. I have no doubt you can be useful and happy if you set your mind to it. You must accept the present, but make your own future.” She had given similar news before, and had practiced the delivery to make it more palatable, more positive.

Q looked at her, then away from her, at nothing. He had tried to save the old driver, and now he would be missing an arm. Forever. He tried to hold back his tears.

“I will bind it tight for you, but your mother will need to learn to do the same after I leave.” She knew it was usually best to distract one suffering the future by bringing him into the pragmatic present.

## Queura

The family made one more attempt, hopeless as it seemed, to do something about Q’s arm. There was another healer, of sorts, in the forest. Called the Skunk Man because he was friend to several skunks, he was a forest dweller reputed to have some kind of mystic healing arts.

But the visit proved fruitless. The shy Skunk Man looked at the arm, but he said very little as several black and white skunks scurried at the feet of Q and his mother. The arm was too damaged, the wound too sharp and substantial, to have any chance of recovery. No arts he knew could save it. But he did add an opinion that it

might not spread the *malar*, the disease, up into Q’s body if it was kept tightly bound.

And so it became important to keep the cloth binding tight, and to start learning to do things with just one arm. Life on the farm became more difficult, and it was Cho now, with his arm functional but still ailing, who needed to pull his weight more. His arm started to hurt more, again, almost as if it were in collusion with its cousin arm, Q’s arm, or as if it somehow contracted that arm’s pain and infirmity.

Aly, too, was able to do more, and as the eldest, she showed able leadership among her siblings in helping her mother out as much as she could. Her demeanor improved, and her one eye commanded almost the same respect and awe her two eyes together had before. One could imagine a day when it became even more potent, as a missing eye can be frightful in its own right; and if used right, Aly might one day be a force. The end to which she applied this power would be up to Aly herself, and no other.

Q’s arm withered, at a pace that did not seem natural. After a month it was half the size of his other arm. It hung, limp, at his side, and so Q crafted a sling for it, just to keep it from swinging around. After two months, the stub, halfway between the shoulder and the elbow, began to ache, and to itch, and then finally to bleed again. Zhunel gave him another powder, made from tree bark, to drink with tea, which helped diminish the pain and itch without making him too drowsy.

The following weeks were more difficult, and the weather started cooling. Q tried to pass the time by being outside, running around, to help him ignore the pain of his arm, and the cooler weather and higher winds helped him to stay comfortable.

When eventually it did fall off, it was a messy affair. But Rae was efficient in getting things cleaned up, and she insisted on

taking the arm and storing it in a special box she had prepared. Her children didn't understand why she insisted on taking it into town, and bestowing it upon old Greeve, the mason, who was fixing a back room of the public house that day. Then she surprised all three of them by telling Aly and Cho to go home together, and telling them that Q and she were going to remain in town for the night.

When asked, all she would tell them was that Q's arm needed to be properly devoted at dawn. Q recalled the ceremony of Aly's eye to his mother that night, and asked her if this was the same. When she was quiet, and about to answer, he added, "Why did this happen? Why do you know what to do with them? My arm, and Aly's eye. Did the Shepherd Brandel tell you?" Shepherd Brandel was the senior of the village's two Holy Shepherds, who, on special occasions, told stories of the gods and gave advice to the villagers.

"No. It was another."

The next morning, before dawn, Rae and Q stood with Greeve as he carefully removed the shriveled arm, wrapped loosely in canvas, and placed it in a hollow in the ground. It was next to the wall he had been working on, though Q thought it probably wasn't really part of the wall proper. Next, the hollow was filled with the mortar Greeve had made, until it covered the arm and canvas completely, and more. After a short wait for the sun to begin to appear, Greeve recited a short prayer to Tecah, the god of building, his eyes closed, and it seemed to Q that Greeve had probably said those words a thousand times before. He realized it should not be a surprise that a builder such as Greeve would know the ritual so well.

Q felt his missing hand clench, or he imagined it did. He was not sure, and he wondered if there were really a difference.

## Choeura

Cho's arm remained weak for a time, and Cho's heart fell to a lowly and lonely place. His woeful mood seemed to affect his strength, for he began to have trouble doing his chores. He would drop things, or stop and sit on the ground, holding his arm. He didn't complain about his arm, at least not in front of Q.

On good days he would take his break, letting the time and dark cloud flow through him and out, and then take up his task again. On bad days he would sit, and remain sitting, staring at nothing for long periods. Sometimes, he would quietly sob.

His mother was unsure what to do, but she noticed him getting thinner. After the winter was done, he look appreciably skinny. Though food was not in abundance over the winter, Rae always made sure the children had enough to eat, including a variety of nourishing things. But Cho just didn't eat much. And twice over the winter he was so tired, and he stayed in his bed for weeks at a time. Neither Rae nor Zhunel the healer knew what the cause was. Rae wondered at the Oracle's pronouncement that her children would not get ill, and if this were not an illness. Or was it something different?

In the spring, when he suffered a long sleep for the third time, Rae fretted over him, worried he might just expire, and thus fulfill the prophecy that had haunted her all these years. When he recovered, he seemed weaker than ever, but Rae was relieved.

Summer came, and Aly was now comfortable with just one eye. It was harder for Q to get used to just one arm, but he did his best and managed to adjust.

He practiced with sticks, pretending they were swords, and told his mother he was going to be a great hero someday. She

laughed, and asked him why he thought he would be that, rather than a farmer. He told her what the old Oracle had told him: that he would one day go on adventures, many of them, and with someone close to him. His mother's mouth opened in shock, but only briefly, and she smiled and, knowing Q, guessed it was probably true. Cho told Q he thought his companion would be Pepper, and Q, who had first thought the companion might be his brother, realized that would not be possible. But Pepper was a great alternative, and Aly seemed to like the idea too. The future seemed to hold much for Q that summer, despite his disadvantage.

The children grew, and were no longer children.

Cho stayed on the farmstead, and learned to manage money, and ways to make more by growing or raising the right things. His instinct was good, and became even better over time.

Q left one day, with Pepper, who 'borrowed' her father's family sword, which she had practiced with. The two had grown to become lovers at too young an age, and there were some strong words between the young couple and their families, especially Pepper's. They disappeared one night, not to be seen again by their families for several years. One day their adventures would be told by minstrels near and far.

Aly married, and lived in the village. She got involved in a number of activities there, and grew into a leadership role after the Shepherd Brandel died of old age. At one point she kicked her husband out of their house, and she seemed happier after that.

In the village, Cho became known as the wise man. He had a knack for knowing the weather the next season, and the next year. And sometimes he told people of their futures.

Cho stayed with his mother in her old age, and she told him of the prophecy, and what must happen to his remains once he

eventually passed to the next life. She knew he believed it, and would make sure it was done.

And indeed, it came to be. Ki, the fire god, was easily visible that night, a bright orange light in the southern sky, and when the townsfolk dedicated Cho's ashes to him over a grand pyre, the wind took them away.

Aetherae was not there, as she had passed on years before. Nor was Aly, or Q. For when Cho succumbed to his fate, he was over a hundred years old.