

THE POISONS OF CAUX: THE HOLLOW BETTLE (BOOK I)

Susannah Appelbaum
Illustrated by Jennifer Taylor

Knopf




RANDOM HOUSE
CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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THE POISONS OF CAUX

BOOK
ONE



THE HOLLOW BOTTLE

SUSANNAH APPELBAUM

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Alfred A. Knopf  New York

to my father,
the Winds of Caux

**If you drink much from
a bottle marked “poison,” it is almost certain to
disagree with you, sooner or later.**

**—Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland
Lewis Carroll**

Part I: Of Poisons and Tasters

- CHAPTER 1 [Mr. Flux Arrives](#)
- CHAPTER 2 [Poison Ivy](#)
- CHAPTER 3 [The Deadly Nightshades](#)
- CHAPTER 4 [Soup](#)
- CHAPTER 5 [Aqua Artilla](#)
- CHAPTER 6 [The *Field Guide*](#)
- CHAPTER 7 [The Worse of Two Tasters](#)
- CHAPTER 8 [Rowan Truax](#)
- CHAPTER 9 [The Trestle](#)
- CHAPTER 10 [Axlerod D. Roux](#)
- CHAPTER 11 [The Cinquefoil](#)
- CHAPTER 12 [The Doorway](#)
- CHAPTER 13 [Pimcaux](#)
- CHAPTER 14 [The Return of Shoo](#)
- CHAPTER 15 [Repose](#)
- CHAPTER 16 [Flight](#)

Part II: [Elixir](#)

- CHAPTER 17 [The Director](#)
- CHAPTER 18 [Arsenious](#)
- CHAPTER 19 [The Terrible Tonic](#)
- CHAPTER 20 [Southern Wood](#)
- CHAPTER 21 [The Bettle Boar](#)
- CHAPTER 22 [Underwood](#)
- CHAPTER 23 [The Amber Room](#)
- CHAPTER 24 [Poisonry](#)

CHAPTER 25 [The Dungeon](#)

CHAPTER 26 [The Royal Cobbler](#)

CHAPTER 27 [Prisoner No. 11,802](#)

Part III: [The Winds of Caux](#)

CHAPTER 28 [The Potion](#)

CHAPTER 29 [Bearing Stones](#)

CHAPTER 30 [Windwhippers](#)

CHAPTER 31 [The Mildew Sisters](#)

CHAPTER 32 [The Lien](#)

CHAPTER 33 [Departure](#)

CHAPTER 34 [Skytop Glory](#)

CHAPTER 35 [The End of the Line](#)

CHAPTER 36 [The Mines](#)

CHAPTER 37 [The Hollow Bettle](#)

CHAPTER 38 [The Gate](#)

CHAPTER 39 [The Hanging Gardens](#)

CHAPTER 40 [The Maze](#)

CHAPTER 41 [The Hedgehog](#)

Part IV: [Templar](#)

CHAPTER 42 [Sorrel Flux](#)

CHAPTER 43 [The Knox](#)

CHAPTER 44 [The Estate](#)

CHAPTER 45 [Mithrodites](#)

CHAPTER 46 [Peps D. Roux](#)

CHAPTER 47 [The Invitation](#)

CHAPTER 48 [Not One, but Two](#)

CHAPTER 49 [Arrivals](#)

CHAPTER 50 Preparations

CHAPTER 51 The Guest of Honor

CHAPTER 52 The Tapestries

CHAPTER 53 The Hunt

CHAPTER 54 The Menu

CHAPTER 55 Poppy

CHAPTER 56 Axle

CHAPTER 57 The Kitchen of the King

CHAPTER 58 The Wind

CHAPTER 59 The Prophecy

CHAPTER 60 Reunion

EPILOGUE Final Words

APPENDIX

Part I

Of Poisons and Tasters

The bereft souls from whom nature has withheld the legacy of taste have dour expressions upon their sallow faces, their countenances speak of deprivation, and they are forced at every turn to wonder at their plate—is it ...poisoned?

—The Field Guide to the Poisons of Caux



It's an astonishing feat that young Ivy Manx was not poisoned during Mr. Flux's tenure as her taster.

These were corrupt times in Caux, the land being what it was—a hotbed of wickedness and general mischief. The odds were stacked against anyone surviving their next meal, unless they had in their employ a half-decent Guild-accredited taster. A taster such as Mr. Flux maintained himself to be

The day of Mr. Flux's arrival was a day like any other, devoid of goodwill and cheer (and befitting the taster's disposition). A fire burned glumly in the grate within the small tavern Ivy called home, and beside it a few disinterested regulars took their drinks in tedious silence. Hidden in her secret workshop, Ivy Manx found herself hoping for something thrilling to happen—perhaps a particularly rousing poisoning. She had been ignoring her studies in favor of one of her experiments when Shoo cawed softly.

“Never you mind,” Ivy admonished the crow. “Cecil will never know I was using his equipment unless you tell him.”

She proceeded to strain an evil-smelling mixture through her uncle's sieve. Ivy worked with a look of great concentration upon her face, and when the task was finished, she set the vessel on a burner to boil. Almost immediately the syrup discharged a clingy cloud, and a sickly sweet smell filled the small room, forcing the crow to alight dizzily on a coatrack to avoid it.

This was greatly disobedient, she knew. Her uncle wished her to be a learned apothecary—a healer—yet tinkering with her noxious brews was much more satisfying. Like most of Caux, Ivy preferred not the well-meaning herbs, but the darker, more potent ones. Apothecopathy seemed ancient to the ten-year-old, from a time when plants were used to heal, not harm. Her uncle's collection of dusty books and scribbled parchments made her yawn—both to Cecil's and Shoo's great disappointment.

“There. Let's see what that does when it's done.”

As she stepped back in the workshop, Cecil's top shelf caught her eye. He was still in the habit of putting his secrets up high, thinking they remained safely out of her reach. There was quite a lot to see, for as Ivy knew, there is no such better display of a person's ideals and deficiencies as a bookshelf. (Cecil tended toward being an untidy person and the shelves illustrated this fact well.) Her eyes narrowed at the sight of the small leather case that contained his apothecopathic tinctures.



She pushed over a three-legged stool, and as Shoo grew ever more agitated, Ivy climbed up, reaching.

“Just a peek, Shoo. It’s his remedies. Clearly, this counts as studying.”

The black crow, longtime resident of the Hollow Bettle, knew better. The ampoules were strictly off-limits at this point in her studies, and the crow began pacing excitedly. With her uncle set to depart the tavern in the evening, Ivy was reminded that this trespass would be better wait until then.

“But he’ll take them with him,” she told Shoo. “And, if you’re lucky, you, too.”

The stool was proving to be insufficient. Ivy considered climbing up the rickety shelves themselves. She wanted nothing more than to examine the delicate glass-stoppered medicine within the case and had long ago given up asking. First she must complete the long memorizations of herbs and plant lore—so completely bookish and boring.

“Anyone can produce a potion that will make you sick,” her uncle would remind her, his eyes gleaming with enthusiasm. “But it takes much learning to use plants to cure! Which would you rather be, then, a common poisoner or a respected healer?”

Interestingly, Cecil never seemed to wait for an answer.



Testing a bowed shelf for sturdiness, she gingerly began scaling upward, with Shoo no flying about the room squawking excitedly.

Ignoring the bird, Ivy was quite nearly there when the worst happened. Her foothold gave way and the entire contents of the overburdened unit—her uncle’s medicinal books and priceless notes, his scales and workshop essentials, important-looking mahogany boxes containing powders and infusions—all came crashing down, nearly taking Shoo with it.

In the silence that followed, Ivy and the crow waited nervously for Cecil’s appearance. Her straw-colored hair and flushed cheeks were streaked with her uncle’s pitch. She brushed something white and gritty from her shirtsleeve while considering what an appropriate punishment would be—and wondered if he’d forbid her from her experiments. (Just how that would be enforced in his absence she wondered, too.) Shoo, rumpling his sleek feathers, settled in front of the narrow door that let out into the tavern area.

“Don’t be in such a hurry. He’ll hold you responsible, you realize.”

When a remarkable amount of time had passed and her uncle had failed to respond, Ivy grew curious.

The workshop door was veiled from sight by dust and shadow, a sly entrance cut in the middle of an enormous blackboard in residence upon the tavern’s far wall. It was further obscured by the simple fact that the shadowy wall was never regarded—the menu on the blackboard was long obsolete. When Cecil was seeing his patients or when the workshop was hosting Ivy’s nefarious experiments, a sharp eye might discern a flickery crack of amber light slicing through the darkness. It was here that Ivy put her eye, wondering what might be keeping her uncle.

It was fortuitous timing. Ivy watched as a scrawny and particularly unimpressive stranger crossed the threshold, pausing right in front of her to scrape the caked mud from his tattered boots. He exuded from him a sour sense of disinterest, and clinging to him, although unseen, was an odd sort of melancholia—the kind that affects the bearer not at all, but those who behold him feel instantly cheerless.

Having just passed through the Bettle’s creaky front door, Mr. Flux—for indeed this was he—made a beeline to the bar. He ordered and consumed an unusually expensive brandy and then quickly ordered another, requesting Cecil leave the bottle before him.

Surveying the room, Ivy gave the lone traveler five minutes in the midst of this group of scoundrels and found herself eager at the prospect of his gruesome end.

“At last,” Ivy whispered to Shoo. “Something exciting.”

The room grew deeply quiet; there was nothing but the sound of coals settling, shooting off a vicious whip of sparks. The tavern’s regulars, with a great distrust of outsiders, ceased their chatter. Ivy watched the stranger smirk as he took a bored look around the silent room. His pasty face, tinged an odd yellowish hue, was half hidden by an unusual hood. With no one to meet his eye, he returned to an idle consideration of his glass.

Ivy was perplexed. The rule of the land was poison or be poisoned, and such a haughty entrance seemed to shout out for a lethal dose of attention. Yet everyone seemed intent on avoiding the man’s eyes—a few chairs creaked uncomfortably, and Ivy frowned as Curtain, one of the tavern’s more notorious regulars (and one of her best clients), sidestepped it to the

door.

She examined Mr. Flux closer. Something about the man's threadbare cloak seemed familiar, although even in the dying light of the tavern it was plain to see that the robes were ill kept and patched with an unsteady hand. Ivy tried to place it. Her thoughts turned to her neglected studies, and with a start, she realized what it was she was seeing.

"A graduate of the Tasters' Guild—Shoo, can you believe it? A real taster, here at the Hollow Bettle!"

Indeed, it was so—Mr. Sorrel Flux was the first Guild-accredited, educated palate to call upon the services of the small forgotten tavern. A true taster! There was normally the territory of the rich and royal, and surely only the very well-to-do might employ one.

Yet there was something oily about Flux, and his carefree way of pouring her uncle's fine brandy down his gullet seemed to be anathema to a taster's training. His collar was askew—and worse, stained with marrow and puddles of grease. Much less refined than Ivy thought a taster should be, he looked as if he'd been dragged by his scruff through a thornbush.

Since her uncle cared little or nothing for the Guild or its graduates, she waited expectantly for Cecil to show him the door. Instead, to Ivy's great astonishment, they began conversing in low, hushed tones.

Ivy pushed Shoo aside for a better look, receiving an indignant squawk.

The taster's eyes alighted upon a high shelf behind the bar. There a stocky bottle made vague with dust and grime sat alone. Inside, amid the amber brandy, a twinkle of red from a small stone.

"Perchance that be your bettle, sir? Of which you've named your fine establishment?"

Cecil followed the taster's gaze. "That it is."

"Priceless, they are."

"I suppose. To some," he allowed.

"To those who wish to ward off the ill effects of poison," Mr. Flux scoffed. "May I?"

As the taster licked his thin lips, Cecil retrieved the bottle from its perch and placed it upon Mr. Flux's yellowed palm.

"What an odd twinkle it possesses! I see now how one might think it hollow—although, of course, that's an utter impossibility."

The bottle clinked appealingly as Flux angled it for a better look. He fingered the coil of golden wire that sealed it. A moment passed, at the end of which the taster put the bottle down haltingly, tearing his eyes away, swallowing what remained in his chipped glass.

"If you don't mind—" Cecil was attempting to return the bottle to its shelf, but the taster's fingers still gripped it tightly.

"Yes, yes, of course." Mr. Flux dismissed the bottle with a wave. "I see now it is but a clever fake," he said. "A hollow bettle! A fine example of wishful thinking."

Mr. Flux was close enough for Cecil to smell his sour breath and appreciate a protruding vein in the man's left temple—a proximity that Ivy's uncle wished to change immediately. He was prevented from doing so by the following statement.

“Word has it, you’re off to cure the king,” the taster hissed.

Cecil froze, bottle in hand.

“Perhaps,” he finally allowed.

“Never mind that none have succeeded before you. Yours is not their unfortunate destiny now, is it?”

From the workshop, Shoo let off a low throaty call. Ivy’s uncle had said nothing of the dangers of his travels.

Suddenly business-like, Mr. Flux produced a packet of papers, which he proudly called his credentials.

“You’ll find everything in order,” he assured Cecil in his nasal voice. “Normally my fee is—well, how to put this? Unaffordable.” His eyes strayed back to the red bottle. “But in light of your honorable errand, I find it my duty to be of whatever service I might in your absence. Times like these, I’m sure you’ll agree, the well-being of the little girl is of great concern. I am, of course”—and here he allowed a slight crooked grin to rise unsteadily upon his face—“Guild-accredited.”

It was the way Flux spoke the word *Guild* that sent an odd prickle up Ivy’s spine, and a profound feeling of dread settled in—as sure and heavy as the dander upon Flux’s weary shoulders. The feeling, not at all a pleasant one, would remain there in its way for quite some time.

It was quickly decided.

For a surprisingly small fee—a few minims and a scruple only—Mr. Sorrel Flux would reside at the Hollow Bettle and assume tasting responsibilities for Cecil’s niece. Since the apothecary expected to be gone no longer than a week at most on his errand, it was arranged.

Sadly for Ivy, it was the case that the well-timed arrival of Mr. Flux heralded an important departure. The day that Mr. Flux arrived inquiring about a position was the day Ivy’s uncle Cecil left, unhappily, not for a week as he had planned, but for good.

In his hurry, Cecil Manx overlooked some of Flux’s more obvious failings. He also neglected to tell the taster anything of his niece Ivy—after all, the man had not asked. And for this, it could be said that Mr. Flux had sorely underestimated the talents of his charge.

As Flux had arrived across the threshold of the Bettle, his incurious nature allowed him to overlook a crooked panel, with a flourish of red ink, that clacked beside the front door.

Poison Ivy

Inheritances hurried

Rivals disposed

Revenge awarded

~ Starting at 5 minims ~

And since Ivy Manx held the questionable taster responsible—rightly so or not—for the disappearance of her uncle, it was an astonishing feat that Mr. Flux survived what was to be

his entire year of tasting for Poison Ivy.



It was generally assumed at the Hollow Bettle that Cecil Manx's excuse for his inexplicable tardiness was his own death. It made natural sense to everybody—everybody but his niece—that Cecil had succumbed to poison along the route his impulsive errand had brought him. Ivy would hear none of it, while her taster preferred not to raise the subject lest her desirable position somehow be lost. The only problem with this agreement—immediately presenting itself upon Cecil's departure—was the simple fact that Mr. Sorrel Flux was a taster of dubious quality and talent. He

seemingly could no sooner detect poison in a bowl of the Bettle's famous hundred-year soup than stretch out his scrawny arms inside his shabby cloak and fly.

"Cabbage," he pronounced Ivy's lunch shortly after Cecil had left. It was his first and only attempt to taste for the young girl.

"But this is *beet* soup!" Ivy answered, incredulous.

"Yes, of course. Just as I said. And it's quite fit to eat," he called over his shoulder—making fast progress up the stairs to her uncle's chambers with his small roll of possessions.

Ivy wondered almost immediately if he was indeed a graduate of the revered Tasters' Guild.

Mr. Sorrel Flux dressed in the robes of the Guild, although ill fitting and worn, and he liked to pepper his phrases with references to the secretive school for anyone within earshot. But Mr. Flux was, simply put, an awful taster who couldn't save anyone's life but his own, and this he did purely through inactivity and insubordination to his taster duties. He ate very little, and only for himself, and even then with a look of distrust and trepidation on his unpleasant face. Given these habits, it would be of no surprise to learn that he was of quite a scrawny build. That, coupled with the yellow cast of his skin, made him, with very little stretch of the imagination, resemble a plucked chicken. Mr. Flux was furthermore entirely un-apologetic about his inabilities and quite soon revealed another annoying trait: a penchant for napping and idleness.

So it was on one subject alone that the two of them agreed: they would talk to each other as little as possible, and then only about vagaries.

Conveniently, there had been nothing of an introduction between taster and charge—Mr. Flux simply referred to her almost immediately as "the little menace." (The taster did, however, stumble upon the old crow's name, purely by accident, as he repeatedly swatted it away from his morning porridge.)

Their conspiracy of silence was broken only twice.

The first was early in his stay, when Ivy wondered whether Mr. Flux might have had any word from her uncle. Mr. Sorrel Flux replied—truthfully—that he had not. Inwardly, the taster could not have cared less about the girl's uncle, except where it concerned the comfort

of his feather bed or his taste in nightshirts. Mr. Flux was of the opinion, anyway, that it was unlikely that the foolish man had gotten far—his journey's commencement was ill timed for the start of Caux's dangerous Windy Season.

This prompted the second, and last, conversation.

It was a simple request. Ivy warned him away from her garden.

Ivy's satisfying garden grew behind crumbling stone walls thick with moss and knotted branches and buzzed loudly with honeybees. Poisonous plants grew right beside their natural antidotes, with chipped slate announcements (in curly writing) labeling each in the open tongue. With Ivy's care, the herbs grew to great beauty and potency. With Shoo's help, the garden was not bothered by pests; he could be found—without any sense of irony—perched upon a stricken scarecrow.

Understandably, for the uninvited, Ivy's garden was a place of grave danger.

Sorrel Flux knew himself to be uninvited, but Ivy's warning had piqued an uncharacteristic interest in his languid brain. One day, in a fit of exertion, he found himself beside the overgrown walls. Hearing something, he peered in.

A picture of sweet sadness met his eyes. Ivy had been weeping over a crop of feisty snapdragons—her uncle particularly delighted in them—and as she sat there crying quietly upon the earth, not a soul could resist being moved by the young girl's plight.



Not a soul, that is, but Mr. Flux.

Mr. Sorrel Flux's heart, in fact, which pumped its limp business inside his chest, was just as hard and calloused as the rest of him. It was stony and small, and if someone had plucked it from his chest and thrown it at you, it would have certainly left a bruise. Because of this, Mr. Flux was entirely incapable of shedding a tear—except perhaps for himself—so Ivy's current lonesome state left him entirely dry-eyed.

Dry-eyed and thirsty.

As he made to leave, he was distracted by a different sight. Mr. Flux was not in possession of even the slightest green thumb, but his eyes were drawn to the curious nature of the plants within the old walls. The foliage seemed to positively sparkle and pulse with an odd, shivering force, and the taster wondered at once if he were not the victim of a bottle of bad brandy. The plants trembled, as if with a chill, and Flux couldn't escape the idea that they might extract their pale, sodden roots from the soil and start scurrying about. He blinked several times and rubbed his eyes thoroughly, and to his relief, the effect was gone.

But the experience served as a reminder that the tavern that Ivy Manx called home had some fine brandies from which to choose, as well as a hearty assortment of hard ciders and something called applejack that was better suited as fuel for the tavern's few and flickering lanterns. With this, Sorrel Flux departed the garden for the tavern, where he spent the rest of the day recovering from his stroll.

The next morning, Ivy recognized telltale signs of his adventure. Flux's first and only visit to her garden resulted in a persistent rash. It began as blisters and soon formed red itchy welts concentrating themselves upon the taster's heavy-lidded eyes but soon spreading merriest about his entire face. The punishment for his excursion was straightforward—the glossy vine that clung to the garden walls was none other than Ivy's namesake. And since none of Cecil's poultices seemed to alleviate his discomfort, he resigned himself further to bed. Here he breakfasted and lazed away the day, occasionally calling on a little wooden whistle for Ivy to prepare for him a tray of assorted brandies.

Sadly, Mr. Flux never felt entirely well again for the complete year he lived there. The yellowish cast his skin possessed upon arrival became more pronounced, spreading alarmingly to the whites of his eyes. He complained of sharp pains while reclining in bed (Shoo had taken to introducing Ivy's silvery pushpins into his mattress while he slept, and resembled more a pincushion than a pallet.)

In fact, never once did Mr. Flux think of leaving the Hollow Bettle for more predictable digestive arenas. In a thin convalescent's voice, he would remind the Bettle's long-tenured maidservant that the Tasters' Oath to which he'd sworn prevented his departure.

He must stay with his charge to the bitter end.

It was Ivy Manx's hope that that end would come soon, and from this wish was finally born a plan, a dangerous plan, which she decided to implement only after it became sadly clear that her uncle was not coming home.

The Deadly Nightshade



Looking down at the world of Caux, say, from a passing cloud, there is no telltale sign—no indication at all—of the mischief and malingering of its inhabitants. Why, Caux from up here looks positively cozy—snug with its borders of sea and cliff. Vast green plains and fertile rolling hills. Thick, fecund forests filled with luscious flora and fauna. Bustling cities. Clever castles. Winding rivers, picturesque trains, and, of course, glorious trestle

But as we draw close, looking down now as a circling crow, there is hardly anything to spark the same surge of joy. From even here, high above the tallest trees, you can feel the land's misfortune—a poison that the citizens endure. You might feel it even pulling you in.

And were you to actually put your two feet on the ground, thus falling under the rulership of Caux's contemptible new king—King Nightshade—why, the world at your doorstep might not seem very bright at all.

In fact, positively dismal.

King Nightshade of Caux was a wicked and unhappy man. He was unhappy because he suffered greatly from a hideous affliction he possessed since birth. He was wicked because, well, he was unhappy. (Or perhaps he was just born that way—we'll never know for sure.) But from being shamelessly vile he derived great pleasure—thus forgetting momentarily his own unhappiness in the utter suffering of others.

The king maintained one wish, which was a simple one. He wished that his suffering—his dismal disfigurement—would disappear. He wished to be alleviated of his defect, and he thought that this might finally make him happy. Still wicked, but happy.

So he devised a plan and put the word out, in the form of a Royal Proclamation, that anyone who might cure him of his affliction would benefit greatly. He was intentional, vague, mostly because he was undecided about what form his reward might take. He was unused to acts of kindness, and so, incidentally, was the queen.

But it was finally announced that whosoever might provide him with a cure would receive a handsome fortune—his weight in gold and priceless beetles. And since beetles were beloved by the citizenry of Caux not for their beauty and rarity (and they possessed both), but for their supposed charms against poison, this was a tempting prize indeed. The king knew that most of the people of Caux who were presently alive preferred to stay that way.

But the punishment for failure, well, that was quite natural and easy for the Nightshade. Queen Artilla would see to their demise. She was, after all, quite famous throughout Caux for her spectacular acts of ruthless poisoning—a reputation she worked hard at maintaining.

King Nightshade enjoyed his power. Indeed, he had worked hard to take it away from his predecessor. It was an unusual day when he did not issue forth a Proclamation of some sort—whatever struck his royal fancy—and it would instantly become law. He was, after all, the

king.

After assuming reign in what was generally believed to be Caux's most dismal day, his first act as quite a young king was to abolish at least one thousand years of learning in a enormous bonfire, targeting for the flames anything remotely connected to the previous king. He raided the famed Library at Rocamadour—the fire burned, it was said, for eight days and eight nights.

It so happened that the previous king was also a learned apothecary, so what was thought to be a priceless collection of irreplaceable medical and herbal healing books was lost forever. With the Deadly Nightshades in the seat of power, apothecary evolved into poisonry quite quickly, and people soon foraged deeper in the forest for the darker, more potent herbs.



What followed was the new king's First Proclamation:

TO BE A PRACTICING APOTHEOPATH IS ILLEGAL, PUNISHABLE BY DEATH

At the time, when the news reached him that he was now an outlaw, Cecil Manx had merely shrugged. He was a man of many talents. He'd always wanted to open a tavern, and so he did.

It was hardly a secret, however, that he kept seeing patients in his back room.



As it was unlikely that Sorrel Flux saw to any of the business concerns of the tavern, and as Cecil Manx never bothered Ivy about the taxes, it was safe to say that for the entire year her uncle had been gone, not a minim had been sent to the king's tax collectors.

There was a pile of correspondence behind the bar, and that was probably the best place to find the tax bills—but it's hard to look for something you don't know is missing. Besides, Sorrel Flux was often found warming his bony hands beside the fire—which, if it was not warm enough for his liking, he would ignite with a handful of paper nearby. It was in this way that the Notice of Default and Intent to Collect went up in smoke.

When it came to taxes, King Nightshade was ruthless and efficient.

His sentries, in fact, were waiting outside for first light when they saw a candle flickering in the young girl's room above the tavern before dawn. This was interesting to the group only insofar as it momentarily distracted them from their hunger. The men knew taverns to be occasionally a place of good food and drink, and they had been without either for the entire night. The glow vanished almost as soon as it appeared, and the sentries returned to the grumbling of their stomachs.

Ivy was executing her dangerous plan. If her uncle would not come to her, she would go to him. An entire year had passed—a miserable year, one filled only with the tedium of Flux's company. She was now eleven, and Ivy had no plans on growing any older without her uncle's company. Besides, the thrill of experimenting on her freeloading taster was gone, but as a parting gift, she had slipped some of her famous sleeping draught into his nightcap. A double dose.

Ivy was headed to the tavern with an audacious theft in mind. It was her intention to relieve the Hollow Bettle of the very jewel for which it was named. She paused in the lobby hall, straining to hear any sounds from the taster's quarters.

Cecil Manx's mill house was resplendent with little hidden passageways, and in the dim morning Ivy used one of them to bring her down a set of irregular stairs. She soon found herself just where she needed to be: at a small door behind the Bettle's bar.

Ivy quietly opened the little door and discovered, to her complete surprise, that she was not the only thief in the room. Two other souls populated the tavern presently, and further to the young girl's dismay, one of them was quite easily recognized (even at this early hour): the unpleasant man who had been nothing but ill tempered and poor company to her for the past long year. Mr. Flux looked wide awake, she noticed, in defiance of her robust sleeping potion—a first, if ever there was.

The taster's companion—for they seemed on quite familiar terms—was even more

inexplicable.

He wore an objectionable amount of facial hair and towered over the taster. His eyes were deep-set and dark. And, most disconcerting, he seemed to speak—the few times he did—guttural grunts that Ivy could make nothing of but somehow Mr. Flux comprehended with practiced ease.

Ivy was no stranger to madmen—especially drunken madmen—but something about the friend of the taster's made her hesitate. The bottle, in its bottle of brandywine, was on a shelf right above her, but to get it would require her to climb on a nearby cask and stand for a moment in plain view. This was unacceptable, considering her company.

Fortunately, the two trespassers were embroiled in what seemed to be an argument and hadn't noticed the girl in their midst. There was some pluck in the small taster. His diminutive stature brought him merely to the dark man's collar, but his contempt challenged even the mighty. Mr. Flux was uncharacteristically animated—Ivy was so accustomed to seeing him in his nightdress with nothing but a collection of chipped glassware as company. He was stamping his foot and repeating himself intently, slower now, as if discussing a lofty topic with a child.

“I don't care what the orders were; I'm telling you we'll do it my way—who's been living in this dump until the word came down? I've been here for an entire year, waiting!”

The tall man uttered something menacing, and although Ivy could understand none of it, she felt a chill run down her spine. His voice and presence had none of the same effect of Sorrel Flux, who was by now so enraged his arms were flapping about his sides.

“I won't waste my breath on you any further. Do as I say,” he snarled through gritted teeth, “or I'll be forced to discuss this with the Director.”

But the argument would not soon see itself resolved—at least not today at the Hollow Bottle—since before another word could be exchanged, the tavern's door was rudely separated from its hinges and made suddenly into not a door at all, but a welcome mat for twenty of King Nightshade's most hungry sentries.

Ivy used this moment to procure the bottle of brandywine from the top shelf, slipping back down to her hiding spot just as quickly again to watch the newest arrivals.

“Good day,” declared the captain of the group as he stepped forward from among his men. He was an ambitious gentleman—at least for the next fifteen minutes—with an influential family made up mostly of tradesmen, influential enough to get him several dubious promotions to the level he now found himself at in the Nightshades' army. His name was Turner Taxus.

“Can I help you?” Sorrel Flux demanded, successfully turning his outraged tone into something more akin to sweet cheer.

“Are you the proprietor?” Turner Taxus asked in his most official voice. “One”—he consulted a sentry next to him—“*Cecil Minx?*”

The taster sensed in the situation perhaps a way to profit, and his pasty face, as if made of putty, expertly molded itself into a hospitable one.

“Welcome! Welcome,” he cried, gesturing about the bar. “I say. Can I perhaps get you

gentlemen something to drink? You must be thirsty after breaking down that door—or at the very least hungry for something warming and restorative.” He stepped in front of his companion, who was trying, in any event, to keep to the shadows.

“Very well. Here you are.” Turner Taxus slapped a parchment roll into Mr. Flux’s hand with the precise air of a bored official.

“What’s this?” The taster recoiled. Things wrapped with the king’s colors and sealed with his wax seal rarely contained good news.

“A copy of the Crown’s Notice to Collect; I trust you received the original. It says either you pay the taxes due to King Nightshade, with a generous amount of interest, or you surrender your establishment to him immediately. Wherein he installs a new tavern keeper.” Turner Taxus’s long face was stony. Repossessions such as these were completely beneath his status, he felt, and giving anything more to them than necessary was a waste of his valuable time.

“Ah—you have made the understandable mistake of assuming me to be a property owner. I admit, I betray an air above my station. I am merely a *servant* to the proprietor, my dear man. Of the *Guild*, I dare add. I hardly am qualified to accept such a document.” He tried to unhand the awful parchment and return it to the sentry. “Your scroll.”

Having no luck rescinding the decree, Flux relieved it onto the sawdust floor and with the tip of his boot pushed it at the man in uniform, taking a step backward.

“I’ll just leave you to your business. I’m sure the fellow’s around here somewhere—and not, I know where his bony little girl is sleeping—”

While Flux was spitting out the directions to Ivy’s bedroom, his eyes wandered to behind the bar. Ivy was now completely within his sight—he need only glance down to spot her. But his eyes were looking to the top shelf, drawn to his prize.

“Mind your head at the top of the steps—although those helmets must be good for something. And do watch out for that bird; he’s been trained to go for the eyes....”

Then he froze, seeing only the dust shadow where the beetle once was. From where Ivy saw Flux looked monstrous, and she pushed back further into the shadows. Towering over her, at last he lowered his yellowed eyes and found her easily. A particular smirk slid across his unpleasant face. As Mr. Flux turned back to the captain, Ivy braced to be turned over to the king’s soldiers.

“But wait! Where are my manners? You should really try the soup—it’s famous, you know—before you go on with the tedious details ahead of you.”

At the mention of food, the sentries perked up. Sorrel Flux stepped back by the fire and lavishly gestured at the large kettle filled with the hundred-year soup.

“It’s been cooking on this fire uninterrupted for over a century. Every day something added to it—more potatoes, parsnips. A ham bone, an oxtail. Truly an adventure in both history and taste!”

Turner Taxus wasn’t as hungry as his men—he had prudently brought along a bagged supper for the trip and eaten it in a quiet moment with his taster in the wee hours of the morning. But he was aware that it smelled quite delicious: rich and hearty—a good moral

booster. He remembered that a leader is only effective if he has the admiration of his men.

While Taxus mulled this over, Sorrel Flux signaled his dark friend with an almost imperceptible nod in the direction of Ivy's hiding place. Keeping to the shadows, the man began creeping her way, breathing appallingly, with what could only be thick spittle stuck to the corners of his mouth.

Turner Taxus raised his gloved hand to his men and beckoned.

From behind the sentries, somewhat meekly, emerged a young man—barely old enough to be wearing tasters' robes. They were, Ivy was happy to see, quite a better example of those worn by her own taster—the black cloth was new, crisply ironed, the collar (really, more like a bib) white and untainted. In their presence, Sorrel Flux somehow looked even more shabby and ill kempt.

“Taster,” Turner Taxus commanded, “taste, if you will, this soup.”

Sorrel Flux stirred the pot invitingly with a long wooden spoon.

“Please step away,” Taxus added, “and let my taster work.”

Flux did, with flourish.

The young man approached the hearth. He couldn't have been much older than she, Ivy guessed, and although he was doing his best to maintain a demeanor of professionalism and scholarship, she noticed he seemed slightly unsure of himself.

He cleared his throat and ladled himself a serving into a plain earthenware bowl. He leaned in and sniffed. He sniffed again—this time quite loudly—after which he looked upward, as if playing the odors about on his palate. Thoughtfully, he brought the bowl up to his mouth. Sorrel Flux eyed him with undisguised contempt from beneath heavy eyelids.

The young taster allowed a small drop, really no bigger than a child's tear, to pass over his lips and onto the tip of his tongue.

All of his taster training, many long years of study at the impeccably credentialed Taster's Guild, came down to this. True, he hadn't been the best of students. Nor had he graduated anywhere near the top of his class, making him almost unemployable. But he had somehow landed this impressive charge—for a first assignment it was a good one. He was unaware of the reputation of the Taxus family, which was one of immense thriftiness and military frugality. They were just as happy to hire him at a discounted wage as he was to accept the position. Unfortunately, you almost always get what you pay for.

Rowan Truax, for that was the young taster's name, let the droplet play about all areas of his tongue—past the tip, onto both sides, and over to the back of his mouth. He played the complex flavors over his taste buds—hints of sweet and sour, salt, and even bitter (the flavor of many poisons). Tasting nothing untoward, he turned to his charge and pronounced the kettle of soup fit to eat.

“Fit to eat!” Turner Taxus repeated to his twenty hungry men, with an air of generosity—if he'd cooked it himself.

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