

Excerpt from **The Witch's Heart**
(my upcoming fantasy novel)

Logline: A witch goes into a deep sleep after getting her heart stolen by an alchemist, and it's now up to her familiars (a mouse, an owl, and a cat) to somehow retrieve her heart from the alchemist's lab.

Chapter 3 The Corpse Bog

At the end of a mossy pier jutting out into a murky bog, there stands a man. He stands with a distinctly regal demeanor. He wears a cloak with a high collar; crimson on the outside, dark purple on the inside, with a golden trim. His angular face is adorned by a strange monocle, the lens of which seems to reflect all the colors of the spectrum at once – as if staring into a kaleidoscope rather than meeting a man's eye. His raven hair goes down to his chin, yet here and there, entire locks of onyx have turned white as bone.

He holds onto a tall opulent staff, but he does not lean his body upon it. Rather, he holds it with the poise of a scepter. The body of the staff is a golden rod, as tall as a man's crown. Atop the staff are several concentric golden hoops, each embedded with a different gem or crystal. All these bejeweled hoops are combined to resemble the paths the planets take around our sun, which in this case is a sphere of quartz at the center of the rings. Unseen machinery within the staff breathes life into this stellar model, causing the hoops to spin and rotate within and around each other in a dizzying display.

He gives the wooden boards of the pier a few hard taps with his staff. "Come now, Cassius. Hurry it along. I rather be done with this morbid affair before the sun fully rises. God forbid some wandering peasant witnesses this foul business."

"I will make haste, master," Cassius says as he makes his way up the pier. Cassius is a barrel-chested brute with broad shoulders. He is wearing a sweat-stained tunic underneath a leather apron and has black leather gloves on. He has a vacant look in his eyes and a row of stitches across his forehead.

Cassius is pushing a wheelbarrow that bears the weight of three corpses – two men and a woman. Their skin is a greenish gray, their clothes blood-stained and torn. All three have expressions of excruciating pain frozen onto their faces.

One of the dead men is rather young. He has a gaunt face and greasy blonde hair, parted down the middle. His upper lip is broken by a scar. The agony on this young man's face is haunting.

As the wheelbarrow trundles along, the rotting planks of the pier groan and creak, as if in protest of being forced to bear such a burden. When Cassius reaches the end of the pier, he tips the wheelbarrow forward – dead bodies spill out and tumble through the air,

landing in the bog with a sickening splash. The corpses are not fully submerged, but the voracious mud of the swamp will soon consume them like all the rest.

“Failures,” the man with the golden staff says, “failures and disappointments, the whole lot of them.”

My position is becoming tenuous, he thinks. The king grows more impatient by the day. I need to produce some positive results soon if I want to keep my post as Royal Alchemist. I need all the perks this posting provides if I ever hope to complete my research.

Cassius takes a few steps back from the edge of the pier, turns the wheelbarrow around, and heads towards where the pier meets the shore.

“Only load up two bodies at a time from now on, m’boy,” the Alchemist says. “These soggy planks can’t handle such a heavy load. I don’t want this rickety old pier to collapse from the strain. Especially not while I’m standing on it.”

“I understand, master, and I obey,” Cassius says.

Loyal to a fault, that one, the Alchemist thinks, but the art of conversation is now beyond his grasp. No way to change that. The Alchemist inhales the moist swamp air, and then sighs. Complete and utter servitude comes at a high price. Glad I’m not the one who had to pay it.

The Alchemist looks back to the oxcart that they arrived in, parked in the shade of a weeping willow near the water’s edge. In the back of the cart, a canvas tarp is thrown back to reveal a mound of corpses that yet await their undignified disposal. The ox that pulled such grisly cargo now feasts contentedly on a feedbag that is strapped onto its head.

Cassius arrives back at the oxcart with his empty wheelbarrow. He reaches into the tangle of limbs in the back of the cart and yanks out a body. He deposits the corpse in the wheelbarrow as if it were a sack of grain.

Initially, the Alchemist had wanted access to *all* the prisoners of the Black Hall as potential test subjects. *Vile humans that have been sentenced to death are sure not to be missed*, he had thought.

But King Roderick knew better. The king knew those convicts would be missed the most by the common rabble, those that eagerly gather every time the blade of the guillotine is hoisted high. Public executions are one of the finer entertainments available to the lower classes. The demonstration of authority also reminds them all to stay in line.

So, instead, the king allowed him access to the populace of Bellgrave, otherwise known as Pauper’s Prison. It was where people that couldn’t pay their debts ended up, be it an unreturned loan or just being unable to pay taxes due to poverty. To the king, these people were just a burden upon the kingdom, draining the coffers of all around them with their inability to pull their own weight.

The king had said to him, “If these people can’t even pay their taxes, can’t even show the crown the most basic modicum of respect it deserves, then what worth do they have to this kingdom? Less than the rats that scurry in the gutter. At least those rats fill the bellies of hungry cats.”

If not the Black Hall, he had considered tapping the insane asylum for candidates for his experiments, but recruiting specimens from Bellgrave was far more appealing. Rather than having to deal with psychopaths and lunatics, the inmates of Pauper's Prison were just normal peasants, most having healthy bodies and sound minds. Much better for acquiring consistent and reliable test results.

Unfortunately, he thought, that also meant they felt physical pain more acutely and were distinctly aware of the hell they were being put through. Madmen might have been more blissfully numb to the whole experience.

The Alchemist looks out onto the water, admiring the lily pads that are scattered atop the surface. *A lily pad, he thinks. Beauty can manifest itself in even the simplest of forms.*

He enjoys the serenity of these dawn hours. The bustle of the world hasn't built up yet, what with most people still asleep. The quietude helps him think, allows him to do his calculations without distraction. Nothing to hear but the gentle rustle of the breeze and the tireless choir of the frogs.

He spots a toad sitting on a lily pad that is refraining from joining in on the chant of his brethren. Stranger still, the toad seems to be looking right back at him.

The Alchemist closes his bare eye with a hard wink, so he can focus his vision through the multi-colored lens of his monocle. That monocle houses no mere disc of stained glass – it is a crystalline wafer, grown in the Alchemist's laboratory as one would a crystal, and then enchanted to give it a multitude of properties. One of which being the ability to view magical energies that would otherwise be invisible.

Energies such as the odd aura he could now clearly see around the tight-lipped toad. The aura had a light green hue, like the inside of a lime, and its radiance extended two feet in all directions. A rather large aura for such a small creature.

That shade of green, the Alchemist thinks. It reminds me of something...

It was during those witch trials I watched get botched in my youth. So many hapless fools without an ounce of magic in their bones, all burned to ash by those religious fanatics.

The Arcane Inquisition. Zealots that believed all magic was a sin.

Those cretins wouldn't have recognized a witch if one hopped on a broom and flew circles around them.

He remembers that when they burned one alleged witch in particular, a bizarre thing occurred. All the others that had come before had burned at the stake as one would expect: lots of smoke, fire, and the usual screams of agony. But this one did not beg or plead; she simply awaited her fate with her eyes locked upon the horizon. It seems that the inquisitors had finally gotten it right, for when her body caught fire, the crowd gasped as all the flames turned a ghostly shade of green.

The same green as the aura around that toad, he thought. It must be a witch's familiar!

The toad must sense the intense scrutiny of the Alchemist, for it begins to fidget towards the edge of the lily pad. The toad turns to the side and dives into the water.

It was spying on me! I mustn't let it report back to its master.

The Alchemist grips his ornate golden staff with both hands and plants it firmly upon the planks of the pier. Even though the toad is underwater, the Alchemist can still see the toad's verdant aura thanks to the enchanted monocle. That pesky nexus of green energy is darting away into the depths of the bog at a manic pace. The Alchemist squints as he concentrates, focusing on the exact point in space where he believes the toad to be.

"Zurig-Vikra-Havash," the Alchemist says, with a voice that echoes from the core of his being. The stellar model atop the staff ceases its perpetual motion – a quick series of clicks as all the hoops lock into place; while some rings are at odd angles, three bejeweled hoops face forward. The jewels in those three rings begin to glow: a blue gem, a yellow opal, and a purple emerald. Then the orb of quartz that serves as the head of the staff becomes filled with the brilliance of an azure flame.

With a flash, a blazing blue bolt of energy shoots forth from the head of the staff. The bolt arcs through the air, undulating and crackling with power, and strikes down deep into the murk of the swamp.

A flurry of bubbles rushes up to the surface as a blue light pulsates down in the depths. Then a sphere of ice buoys up to the surface, causing gentle ripples. Encased in the ice, the escaping toad is frozen in mid-swim.

"There you are, my little web-footed friend," the Alchemist says. "Thought you could elude my all-seeing eye, did you? I'm afraid not."

The Alchemist turns back to check on Cassius. He sees that Cassius is halfway up the pier with another pair of offerings to be fed to the bowel of the bog.

"Halt what you're doing, Cassius," the Alchemist says.

Cassius comes to an abrupt stop and sets down the back legs of the wheelbarrow.

"See that ball of ice floating out on the water?" the Alchemist says.

Cassius lurches forward as he peers intensely at the surface of the water, then blinks rapidly. "Yes, master. I see it."

"Be a good lad and fetch it for me, would you?"

"Of course, master. Your will is my will."

"Now, I don't want you wading out too deep into that murderous mud. You'll have to find a dead branch first. Then you can use that to get at the ice ball."

"Dead branch. Murder mud. Ice ball."

"Yes, exactly right. Now, get to it! Before that ice melts and my prize swims away."

That frozen amphibian might prove to be more useful than Cassius in the grand scheme, the Alchemist thinks. It's well worth risking him getting swallowed up by the bog in order to obtain such a rare find. The familiar of a witch... Who know what powers it possesses?

It would be a pity to lose Cassius, of course. Men of his stature and strength are hard to come by these days, what with most of the citizenry being emaciated due to famine.

On a nearby grassy slope, Cassius turns toward the Alchemist and raises up a fallen tree branch. “Dead branch!”

“There’s a good lad.”