



The Highest House

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After six years, Lord Demini and his family have returned to Highest House, and Moth has fallen in love with Demini's daughter, Lady Shurubai. After saving her life in an accident, Moth has earned her friendship and been promoted by her father to a position serving inside Highest House. But betrayal is brewing among the lords of the Consistory, and Lady Shurubai has a secret that Moth may not be prepared to learn...

The Highest House

Obsidian's Bargain, Part 4

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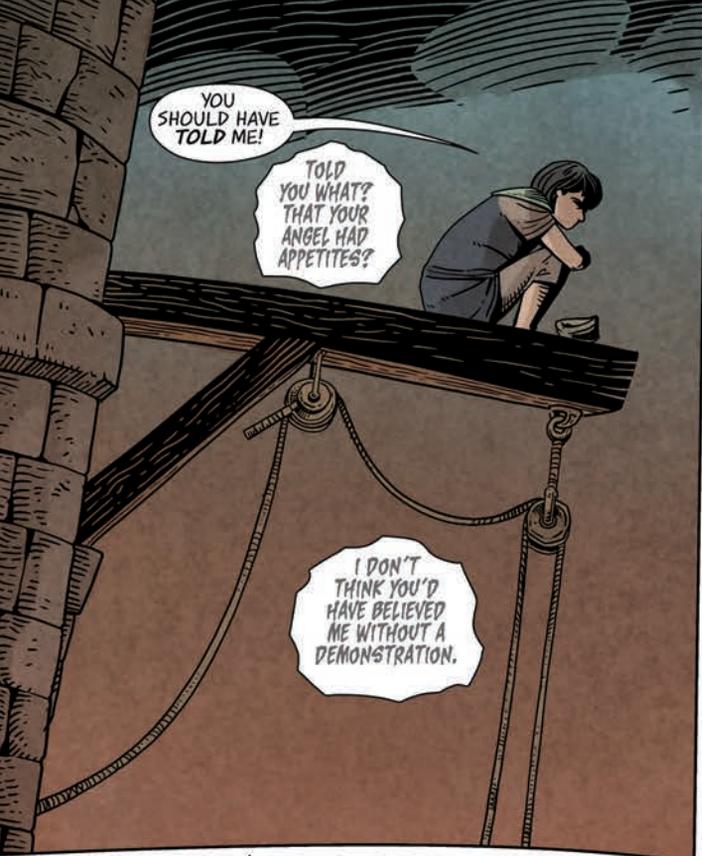
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YOU SHOULD HAVE TOLD ME!

TOLD YOU WHAT? THAT YOUR ANGEL HAD APPETITES?

I DON'T THINK YOU'D HAVE BELIEVED ME WITHOUT A DEMONSTRATION.



YOU LET ME IMAGINE--

--THAT YOU COULD ENJOY HER? YOU WERE NEVER CLOSER.

WHAT? WHAT DOES THAT EVEN MEAN?



WILL YOU COME DOWN FROM YOUR PERCH, GOODMAN BOY?

NO.

MY LADY WANTS WORDS WITH YOU.

GO AWAY.



WHATEVER YOU MAY HAVE THOUGHT, OR THINK NOW, LADY SHURUBAI IS YOUR MISTRESS AND SHE COMMANDS YOU TO COME.

IF YOU DISOBEY YOU'LL BE FLOGGED.



AND WHAT ABOUT YOU, LACE?

WHAT ABOUT ME?

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO YOU, IF LORD DEMINI FINDS OUT YOU LIE WITH YOUR MISTRESS? WORSE THAN A FLOGGING, I THINK!



WELL THEN, COME WHEN YOU CHOOSE.



I'LL COME.

I HAD NO RIGHT TO SAY THAT.

I DON'T KNOW WHAT I'M SAYING. I'M SORRY.

I'LL COME WITH YOU.



THE BOY IS RETURNED, LADYSHIP.

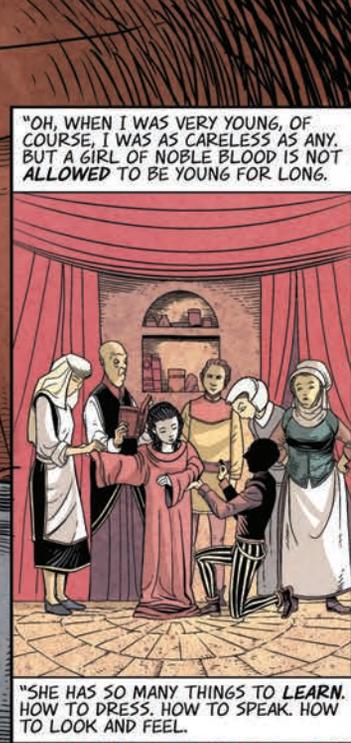
THANK YOU, LACE. PERHAPS YOU COULD WARM A LITTLE MEAD FOR THE THREE OF US.

SIT, MOTH.



I'D LIKE TO TELL YOU A STORY. SO YOU CAN UNDERSTAND THE TRUTH OF US.

I WAS...NOT A VERY HAPPY CHILD, MOTH. YOU MAY THINK I HAD GOOD CAUSE TO BE, BUT I WAS NOT.



"OH, WHEN I WAS VERY YOUNG, OF COURSE, I WAS AS CARELESS AS ANY. BUT A GIRL OF NOBLE BLOOD IS NOT ALLOWED TO BE YOUNG FOR LONG.

"SHE HAS SO MANY THINGS TO LEARN. HOW TO DRESS. HOW TO SPEAK. HOW TO LOOK AND FEEL.

"MY FATHER BEGAN TO SEEK A HUSBAND FOR ME WHEN I WAS NINE, AND HE DEMANDED A GOOD RETURN FOR MY DOWRY.



"LORD STIRKLIN HOLDS A DOZEN VOTES IN THE CONSISTORY. LORD AIMOR, A GREAT ARMY. LORD CARROW, A FLEET OF SHIPS.

"TO BE BOUGHT AND PAID FOR WAS A SLAVE'S LOT, I HAD ALWAYS THOUGHT. BUT NOW I SAW THAT IT WAS A WOMAN'S LOT TOO.



"AND SO I FELT MORE KINSHIP WITH HIGHEST HOUSE'S SLAVES THAN WITH MY OWN FAMILY.

"AND WITH ONE SLAVE IN PARTICULAR. NEWLY PURCHASED. NEWLY NAMED.



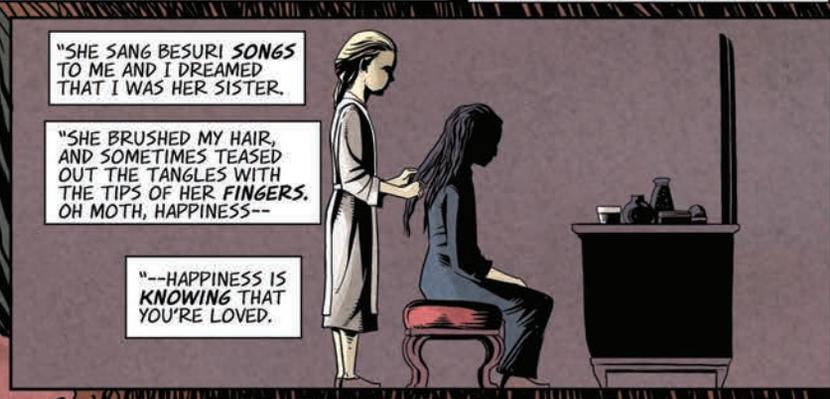
"BECAUSE SHE WAS FROM BESUROS AND HER GIVEN NAME FITTED BUT POORLY IN A KOVIKI MOUTH.



LAI'A'ISSA.

YES.

LAI'A'ISSA.



"SHE SANG BESURI SONGS TO ME AND I DREAMED THAT I WAS HER SISTER.

"SHE BRUSHED MY HAIR, AND SOMETIMES TEASED OUT THE TANGLES WITH THE TIPS OF HER FINGERS. OH MOTH, HAPPINESS--

"--HAPPINESS IS KNOWING THAT YOU'RE LOVED.



"WHEN I WAS FIFTEEN WE RAN AWAY TOGETHER.

"OUR PLAN WAS TO TAKE SHIP AT MONKS' PORT AND GO TO BESUROS, WHERE LACE'S FAMILY WOULD TAKE US IN.

BUT YOU DIDN'T SUCCEED.

NO. THE FIRST CAPTAIN TOOK ONE LOOK AT OUR HOUSE-MARKED STEEL AND BROUGHT US BACK TO MY FATHER.

WHO REWARDED HIM WITH TEN TIMES WHAT I HAD OFFERED.

"WHAT WERE YOU THINKING? HE ASKED ME."

"OF FREEDOM. I TOLD HIM. AND A WORLD BIGGER THAN THIS HEAP OF DAMP STONE AND MOSSY SLATES."

"YOU ARE MY DAUGHTER, HE SAID. NO MAN OR WOMAN OF COMMON BIRTH MAY TOUCH YOU WITHOUT YOUR LEAVE."



"THERE WAS NO ANGER IN HIS FACE. ONLY SORROW. HE CALLED FOR A WHIPPING FRAME AND A SEVEN-TAILED LASH WITHOUT BARBS."

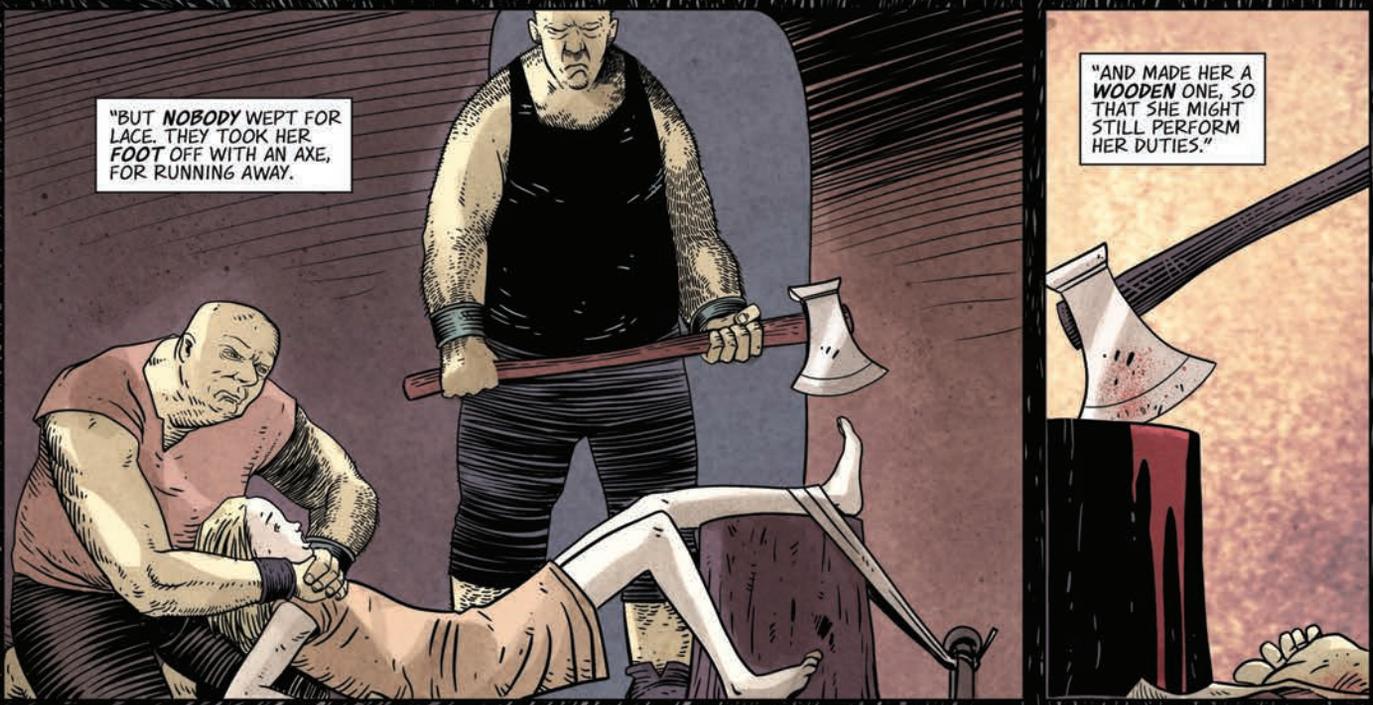
"IT DIDN'T HURT. OR NOT SO VERY MUCH. HE SENT THE SERVANTS AND COURTIER AWAY SO NO ONE WOULD SEE MY SHAME."

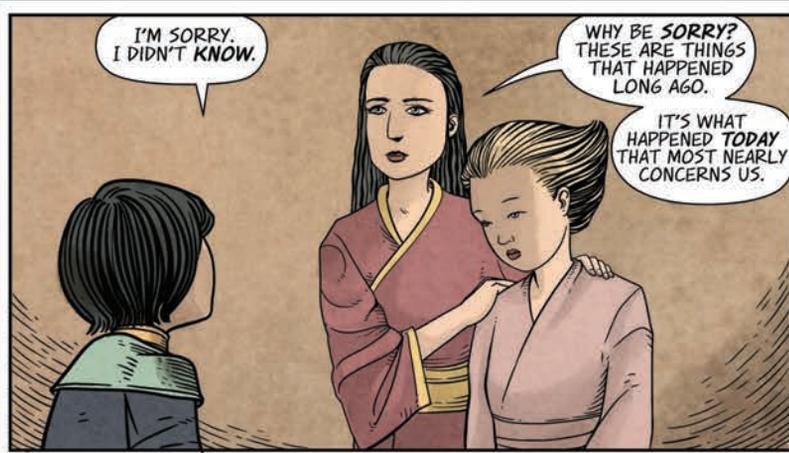
"HE WEPT AS HE DID IT, AND MY MOTHER WAILED AS THOUGH THE WORLD WOULD END. 'HER SKIN, DEMINI! HER BACK! HER SKIN!'"



"BUT **NOBODY** WEPT FOR LACE. THEY TOOK HER FOOT OFF WITH AN AXE, FOR RUNNING AWAY."

"AND MADE HER A **WOODEN** ONE, SO THAT SHE MIGHT STILL PERFORM HER DUTIES."

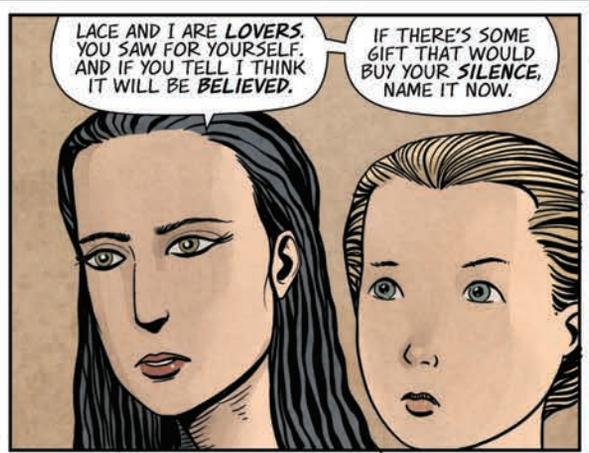




I'M SORRY. I DIDN'T KNOW.

WHY BE SORRY? THESE ARE THINGS THAT HAPPENED LONG AGO.

IT'S WHAT HAPPENED TODAY THAT MOST NEARLY CONCERNS US.



LACE AND I ARE LOVERS. YOU SAW FOR YOURSELF. AND IF YOU TELL I THINK IT WILL BE BELIEVED.

IF THERE'S SOME GIFT THAT WOULD BUY YOUR SILENCE, NAME IT NOW.



AND THERE IT IS! DID YOU EVER IMAGINE THE ROAD TO HER BED WOULD BE SO SHORT?

GO TO IT, BOY. ENJOY HER. ENJOY BOTH OF THEM, IF YOU'VE THE STAMINA.



LADY SHURUBAI--



YES, MOTH.

THERE'S A THING I'VE LONGED FOR, AND ONLY YOU CAN GIVE IT.



WILL YOU TEACH ME TO READ?

OH.



RUPELLO. GHARIS. BEON. STIRKLIN. VAL BENEDICK. CARRAW. TEIN. WATERFELL. THESE HAVE ALL ACCEPTED.

GOOD. AND THE ACCOMMODATIONS?

THE STEPPED HALL HAS BEEN READIED, MY LORD.

AND IS THERE ROOM ENOUGH FOR THEM ALL?



WHAT'S THIS ONE?

A PAU.

A ZEVIN.

ZONIANU.

NO, IT'S GOT A TAIL. SEE? SO THE WORD IS...?



ROOM A-PLENTY, PROVIDED THE LORDS LEAVE THEIR RETINUES OUTSIDE THE WALLS.

WE'VE TALKED ABOUT THIS, EXTAT. THEY'LL SEE IT AS A DELIBERATE AFFRONT.

BUT THEY WILL ACCEPT IT. THEY MUST.



THAT'S NOT A LETTER.

IT'S A MNEMON. A SYMBOL THAT STANDS FOR A WORD OR A SENTENCE.

WHAT? WHY? ISN'T READING HARD ENOUGH ALREADY?



THE VOTE ON AE AND VARINSIN COMES SOON. THE CONSISTORY IS ON A KNIFE-EDGE, AND YOUR VOICE SWAYS MANY.

ONE OF YOUR GUESTS MIGHT TRY TO CUT THE KNOT OF DIPLOMACY WITH A SWORD'S EDGE.



IT WAS SUPPOSED TO BE THE LANGUAGE OF SORCERY, BEFORE THE GODDESS CAME. SIGNS AND SYMBOLS WITH POWER STORED UP IN THEM LIKE WATER IN A JUG.

NOW IT'S JUST TO SAVE INK, I IMAGINE.



YOU'RE TOO FEARFUL. IF ANY MOVE AGAINST ME IN MY OWN HOUSE, I MAY CARVE OUT MY OWN JUSTICE.

AYE, MY LORD. IF YOU'RE STILL ALIVE.

SEQUESTER THE LORDS' RETINUES, THEN



NOW TO YOUR HOMEWORK.

HOMEWORK? WHAT'S THAT?

OH MOTH, THAT I MUST BE THE ONE TO TAKE AWAY YOUR INNOCENCE!



AMIT...MARU... AMIT...TES...

WELL I KNEW THE LADY WOULD KEEP YOU AWAKE ALL NIGHT.

GO AWAY.