

Centuries Dying

By Galadriel Coffeen



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Innocet dressed quickly, shivering in the badly insulated room. During this time of year, she slept with her family in the loft of an ancient thatched barn, on a bed that had first been built centuries ago by a long-lost Cousin. He used to sneak away from the House when the other Cousins had been cruel to him, or when Saththralope had rebuked him with particular viciousness. Innocet ached for those simpler days, when there was nothing more fearful in life than a harsh scolding.

As she buttoned her blouse and moved away from the bed, her hair trailed after her in two long, ragged brown and grey plaits. For the first years after her family's escape from Lungbarrow, she had kept her hair short. But no matter how long Innocet spent badgering the clerks and secretaries who surrounded the Lady President, the promised restoration of her House had never come. And then war descended upon the universe, and Innocet was thrown out of the halls of governance along with her pleas. Her family were nomads now, living sometimes in the sheds and stables that used to be part of Lungbarrow's estate, sometimes in a small underground village with other outcasts.

So once again Innocet wore her shame for all to see. In the Wildlands, it wasn't safe to burden herself with a heavy coil weighing down her shoulders. Instead she crossed the braids over her back and wrapped them around her body until they bound her from chest to hips like a corset. The hair kept her warm in the chill morning air; it supported her aching back; and its tightness against her ribs reminded her of her failures with every breath.

Even after all these centuries, she hung the useless keys of Lungbarrow at her waist like a ring of strangely-shaped daggers. Talismans of hope, or more reminders of her failure? She didn't let herself think too closely on it. She fastened her cloak and climbed quietly down the ladder.

Owis and Jobiska were already awake. A small fire burned in the central pit, and the two men sat in lifeless wooden chairs beside the flames, eating leftover pig-rat and mill-grain porridge. Owis looked up from under his fringe of greying hair, then looked down again and kept shovelling porridge into his mouth. Jobiska gestured Innocet to join them.

She sat beside Jobiska, and he smiled at her. She attempted to smile back. She remembered when she and Jobiska were young together. Jobiska's previous body, an ancient, fragile husk, had failed the same day Lungbarrow fell: like Innocet, he had emerged from their long imprisonment with a new form. They had shared so much hope in those

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early years. But now both of them were growing old again, and they remained Houseless.

“Porridge?” asked Owis cheerfully. He, of all the Cousins, had adapted best to this drab existence. He had never known anything but scrounging and hunting; the mere fact that he now did his foraging in clean sunlight instead of mildewed darkness was enough to make him happy.

Innocet nodded, and Jobiska handed her a bowl and a wooden spoon. Owis served her from the pot warming over the fire. Innocet held back a grimace as she dug into the bland breakfast. She reminded herself that it was better than raw tafelshrew meat and slimy mushrooms. These days, they had fruit and vegetables from the garden, grain from the small fields they had managed to cultivate, and fresh meat from the hunters who passed through. They had sunlight and fresh air and freedom. They even had *children*, young Outsiders who had joined their family.

But they had no House, no Kithriarch, no legal status in society, no *life* in any meaningful sense of the word. Owis and a few others had embraced their new circumstances, but the rest were just fading away gradually, spending centuries dying. And it was Innocet’s fault.

The porridge stuck in her throat. She swallowed with difficulty and set aside her bowl. Owis gave her a glance to confirm that she was finished before picking up the bowl. Innocet almost smiled. Her youngest cousin *still* had an insatiable appetite.

“Any news of Luton?” asked Innocet.

“Nothing,” said Jobiska.

She looked to Owis: he had developed a knack for talking with the true Wildlanders, the leather-clad tribes who had never set foot in House or City. Sometimes they shared news with him. But this time, he only scraped up the last of Innocet’s porridge and shook his shaggy grey-streaked head.

So, Luton was gone. Innocet had known it, of course. But she had refused to count him among the missing until a full year had passed without word of his fate. She tried to convince herself he was still alive somewhere. He’d most likely just grown tired of scraping out this meagre living. He wasn’t the first.

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She rose with a bitter lump in her throat and left the barn-turned-house, pulling her cloak tight against the chill wind. The first sun stood thirty degrees high and the second glowed faintly below the horizon. The last vegetables waited for harvest in the frost-touched garden. Innocet picked up a machete from beside the door and turned her face into the wind.

Behind her on the far side of the barn were the grain fields, a primitive outhouse, and a path leading toward the underground village where her family took refuge from the summer heat. But on this side, there was only wilderness. More than a thousand years ago, the chaotic growth had been an orchard, and plenty of fruit trees still grew wild. But except once a year when the magentas ripened, nobody but Innocet ventured in this direction.

She had forbidden her Cousins from going near the ruins of Lungbarrow. They didn't know she regularly broke her own edict. Her knees ached with every step, but she was still strong enough to hack her way through the brush and vines. Her previous body had aged into a pallid, fragile thing; but this time, the hardships of life in the Wildlands had turned her wiry and tough. Her hand on the hilt of the machete looked like old leather stretched over the knotted cords of knuckles and tendons.

She broke through the underbrush onto the scarred patch of bare earth and stone at the edge of the cliff. Nothing grew where Lungbarrow once stood. Innocet hated coming here. But if she tried to stay away, she started feeling cold grasping fingers in the pit of her stomachs and sepulchral whispers in the back of her mind. Sooner or later, she always came back.

Innocet clipped her machete to one of the braids around her waist, then moved to the middle of the barren space. The wind fluttered her cloak. Time had smoothed away most of the furrows and gouges in the ground, but a few particularly deep ditches still led to the edge of the cliff, like the marks of enormous claws scraping through the dirt before losing their grip. Innocet suspected that if anyone dared to excavate this site, they would find a trail of shingles and broken glass and shattered teacups leading over the edge of the precipice.

She didn't go near the edge. She'd seen the view often enough. Far below, in a crevasse that had opened to swallow the falling House, lay the ruins of Lungbarrow. It was nothing but a crushed and crumbling pile of whitewood and blankstone jammed into a crack in the ground.

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But it still whispered deep in the recesses of her mind, a centuries-long fading moan as it died.

As the great building had taken centuries to grow to its intended size and reach full awareness, so it took centuries to crumble under its dying weight and fade from sapience. Every time Innocet ventured here, she felt Lungbarrow's drawn-out death rattle breathing coldly upward from its crevasse. Every time she stood atop the cliff, she felt the anguish and hatred of the House's suicide rising to claw against her mind.

She had inherited the role of Housekeeper, though Lungbarrow had already been too far gone to bond with her. Her family had taken to calling her Kinkeeper instead, but the title was meaningless. In her hearts, she was a Housekeeper. She still owed the near-dead House... *something*. She didn't know what.

"Please," Innocet whispered into the wind, "please just die." She felt like a traitor saying those words. But as long as Lungbarrow had the faintest spark of life in its walls, Innocet *couldn't* leave. She clenched her hand around the ring of keys and felt their jagged edges digging into her palm.

"Please!" she cried. "Just let it *end!*" Maybe when the House finally finished dying, its Cousins would die with it. Or maybe when the House's final breath drew to its end, they would be set free at last from its jealous grip on their lives. Maybe Lungbarrow's Cousins would be able to move on.

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