

THE BAKER'S GIFT

People would come from miles around, drawn in by assorted scintillating scents that, instead of dispersing with distance, became distilled into a singular breeze that wound its way down the cobbled streets to the edges of the city and into the countryside beyond.

The birthplace of that delicious smell was small and humble - merely the end of a short alley on a side street of a broad avenue that marked the boundary of one of the merchant districts. Yet distance was no deterrent to those who followed the trailing tendril back to its source. As footsteps moved closer and closer, the waft became a current that couldn't be denied, drawing masses helplessly forward into the soon-crowded and narrow lane. And what should they find at the end but the greatest prize indeed - the open door and windows of a bakery.

Trays lined the counter, tempting the boys and girls waiting in line with quick glimpses at sugary dusted cakes and cream or jam-filled pastries sparkling like gems of every color.

As the crowds moved closer to being inside, they could hear the voice of the cheery proprietor happily singing out to customers, repeating their requests while almost as rapidly pulling this treat or that out and into a white cylinder of paper. The delighted recipient would quickly throw his or her money on the counter, not bothering to count it or wait for change. Instead hands would reach greedily into the makeshift bag and pull out little morsels that were quickly popped into waiting mouths. Expressions of intense concentration came as each person tried to chew as slowly as possible, followed by smiles of utter satiation as the last crumb was licked away.

Degree by degree, in long agonizingly hungry minutes, the line moved forward. And no matter how much those waiting in the back feared, the baker always pulled out yet another tray of fresh breads and sweets, swearing that she would have enough for even the last person in line.

And so it went, from early morning until dusk, until nearly every person within the district had been fed. At long last, the line was gone. As the door closed, the baker quickly turned the sign that read "Open" to "Closed until next Friday."

This sign was read by dismay for the next six days as people returned time and again, some having missed the previous opening, others waiting anxiously for just one more bite.

Late Thursday afternoon, the smells of rising bread began to fill the air of the little alley. All through the night, the plump chef labored over her creations, singing little lullabies to herself, smiling happily as each creation came out of the two large ovens that stood proudly at the back of her little shop.

On through the night she rolled and coiled, she iced and decorated. Hundreds of succulent desserts were set out to cool, their yeasty-sweet smells rising through the air, in-between cracks in the walls, and out into the night.

By dawn the entire city was flooded with intoxicating scents of the tiny bakery. Before the sun had risen fully over the steeples and parapets of the city, a line had begun to form. Faces glowed with excitement. Children played while mothers or fathers broke into short jigs, almost as if a festival were in town rather than the mere opening of one stout wooden door to a simple two-room building.

But celebrate the people did.

Further out, beyond the city walls, a boy and girl were walking slowly away from their home, their sad echoes of goodbye reverberating hollowly behind them. They were on their way to the city, determined to find work and save money to send to their beleaguered parents, who were both very ill.

About midday, as they came within sight of the city walls, they were hit by the most mouth-watering smell they could ever imagine. It went straight to their empty stomachs, nearly doubling them over in pain. They glanced at each other and turned as one to follow the smell. So close were they that there was no need to speak, or to plan ahead. They simply knew they had to find and eat whatever it was tempting them in so agonizing a manner.

Nearly two hours later, they entered the city. Despite their hunger, the boy was determined to find a place to stay first.

"Maggie, I know you're hungry. But let's first put our belongings somewhere and then go find that place we're smelling."

"But my tummy hurts so much, Johannus. I wanna go eat."

"Soon, my Maggie. Just as soon as we find a little place to stay."

They had little money, only enough for a night or two. Johannus knew they needed to find work right away. But he was also tired, and still only a boy of twelve, making the temptation to find food first harder to resist. But it was his sister's insistence on eating that hardened his waning determination to find a cheap hostel in which to stay the approaching night.

Shortly after, they came to a building that had a sign above it. Although neither Johannus nor Maggie could read, they recognized the picture of a traveler, bag slung over the shoulder. They went in and shortly secured two mats in a room. But before they could leave, the tall, thin proprietor stopped them.

"Ahem. Payment is required in advance."

Johannus halted, startled and embarrassed that he hadn't known that before.

"I'm sorry, sir. How much is it for the night?"

"It will be fifteen pennies."

Johannus' eyes bulged. That would be nearly the entire sum of money that their parents had given them. But he had been taught not to argue with his elders, so he bowed his head meekly, took out his money pouch, and counted out almost all of the bronze and copper coins he and Maggie had for their start in the city.

As they left the hostel, Johannus missed the proprietor's eyes gleaming with satisfaction. He only heard the man's chuckling as they disappeared down the street, unaware that the hostel owner had recognized their country clothes and accent and taken advantage of their innocence, charging them nearly triple the going rate.

But by that time, Johannus and little Maggie were nearly faint with hunger. Although he knew they only had a few iron farthings left, he took Maggie's hand and began following the trail left by the bakery's enchanting aromas. He thought about asking where it was, but then, with a surge of pride, decided to find it himself. After all, hadn't his Da trained him to track down deer in the forest? Surely a city couldn't be much harder.

He tried to mark several turns, but was often distracted by the ache in his stomach. He found himself closing his eyes at several corners to better identify in what direction to go. As the sun was setting, Johannus finally admitted to himself that he was lost. He was about to tell Maggie when she clutched his hand tightly.

"Johannus... look! All those people are leaving that alley with pies and pastries and bread!"

He turned to look in the direction she was pointing at. Yes, there it was, and there, too, was the end of the line. They hastened over to the stand at the end. Over the course of the next hour, they slowly inched closer and closer to the tantalizing doorway.

At long last, nearly faint with hunger, they stepped up to the counter. The last couple was exiting the door, leaving them alone with the cheery baker.

"Well, then, children, what can I get for you? I haven't got much left now."

Maggie piped up.

"Please, ma'am, do you have any jelly pastries?"

"Yes, young lady, in fact, I have one cherry pastry left. And for you, young sir?"

Johannus wanted the cream cake he could see waiting on a nearby tray, but the image of his almost-empty money bag rose before him.

"Please, ma'am, how much for the cherry pastry?"

"Well, lad, that'll be 8 copper pennies."

Johannus looked down.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. We don't have that much. What can we get for four iron farthings?"

The huge baker looked at them for a moment.

"Well, I'm afraid you can't get much of anything for that."

At her words, Maggie started crying quietly. Johannus placed his arm around her.

"Thank you, ma'am. We're sorry to have wasted your time."

Johannus and Maggie turned to go, but the baker called out to them.

"Now just wait a minute."

The two turned back to face her and she smiled down at them.

"It just happens that I be looking for some help around here. As you can see, I have a lot of customers. Would you be willing to work for your meals?"

An answering smile broke out across Johannus' face.

"Oh, yes, please!"

"Now, then, where are your parents? We need to work out time for you to come here."

Maggie once again spoke up, her tiny voice piercing the air.

"They live far away. They made us leave."

Johannus looked down in shame. Why had their parents thrown them out? He could have brought in more food, and even Maggie was good at finding nuts and berries and picking herbs.

"Well, then, tell you what. You can stay here in the back on the floor and then work for me during the week. I'll feed you twice a day, but mind, you'll be working for it. You'll have one day off a month. How does that sound?"

Johannus was speechless. A place to sleep, meals, and a job!

"Oh, ma'am, yes, please, thank-you!"

Maggie echoed him.

"Ma'am, thank you!"

The baker chuckled, her large frame shaking with mirth.

"Now, then, you can't keep saying 'ma'am.' Call me Aba Bakerin."

"Aba Bakerin, my name is Maggie and I'm seven years old. This is my brother Johannus and he's twelve."

Maggie announced this as Aba Bakerin reached behind herself and began sliding leftover loaves, cakes, and pastries onto the counter.

"Very well, then. Maggie and Johannus, here's your first meal. After that, I suggest you sleep, because we have a long day ahead of us tomorrow."

The two kids fell on the food with all the enthusiasm their young minds could offer. It was, in fact, the best food they'd ever tasted, and long after they felt full, they kept stuffing more in their mouths, fighting over crumbs and crusts. Vague thoughts of going back to the hostel to retrieve their belongings faded away, lost in the taste of sugar and cream and honey. Throughout all this, Aba Bakerin watched them, a gleam in her pale blue eyes, a small smile curving the corners of her thin lips.

Over the next month, the boy and girl worked from sunup to well after sundown. Johannus mostly ran errands for Aba Bakerin and cleaned the ovens, while Maggie learned how to roll the dough for the endless loaves of bread that Aba Bakerin then turned into hundreds of different recipes.

But one evening, as Johannus was returning, he found Aba Bakerin waiting for him, her face grim and disappointed. One of the city guard was there, along with Maggie, looking scared.

"What's going on, Aba Bakerin?"

"I'll tell you what's going on. Look what I found under your sister's pallet!"

She held out a bag and upended it into her palm. Out fell three gemstones - an emerald, a ruby, and a sapphire.

"What? Maggie would never steal from you!"

"Ah, glad to hear you say that, young Johannus, for when I confronted her, she was able to convincingly prove her innocence to me, for hasn't she been with me near day and night for the last two weeks, baking at my side?"

Johannus glanced at the guard, who was looking at him menacingly.

"I don't understand, Aba Bakerin. Why is one of the city guard here."

"He's here because only one other person has access to my home and my valuables, and that person is standing in front of me."

Almost as if he'd been struck in the gut, Johannus staggered with the force of Aba Bakerin's accusation. The guard came forward and roughly grabbed his arm.

"No, that's not right. That wasn't me. I didn't take anything!"

"But Johannus, you just said you knew it wasn't your sister. How could you have known that unless you were the culprit!"

"No, Aba Bakerin, please, I would never! I didn't take nothing. Please don't send me away."

At that the guard let out an ugly laugh.

"Send you away? Boy, the punishment for stealing is losing a hand. We'll carry out the sentence in the morning."

Johannus eyes widened in terror and Maggie covered her face with her hands, sobs shaking her frame. But Aba Bakerin shook her head.

"No, guard, there's no need for that. He's a hard worker, so I think it's best he be sent away and sold as an indentured servant at one of the workhouses in the outlying provinces."

Johannus was aghast. He was to keep his hand, but lose his little sister?

"Very well, then. That can be arranged. What about the girl?"

Johannus shook his head in denial, tears streaming down his face, as Aba Bakerin turned to Maggie and reached out with one of her doughy arms. Maggie curled herself into Aba Bakerin and hid her face.

"I will keep the girl and train her in my trade, for one day she will take my place."

The guard nodded and began dragging Johannus away.

"No, stop! I'm innocent! I didn't do anything! Don't send me away! Please, Maggie, you have to listen. Aba Bakerin is lying. Maggie? Maggie! How could you? Maggie!"

Maggie said nothing, clutching instead more tightly at Aba Bakerin's warm and comforting figure. When his cries had faded away, Aba Bakerin patted Maggie on the head and pulled her away.

"I meant what I said, you know. One day, you will take my place. This is my gift to you. Do you agree to learn?"

Maggie thought about Johannus, how he'd lied and almost gotten them both put in jail. She thought about how her parents had abandoned her. And she remembered how Aba Bakerin had opened her arms and given her a home and all the food she could want. She smiled up into the red-cheeked visage above her and wiped at the tears her own cheeks.

"Yes, Aba Bakerin. I promise to learn."

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On a bright, clear day, many years later, Johannus found his way back to the city. He was lean but strong, his back covered with old whip scars that he tried to forget. He paid in sweat and blood for a crime he'd never committed, but that hadn't made him cruel or mean-spirited. Instead, he nursed a secret anger, fueling a desire to serve his own form of justice.

As he walked, his mind was full of his lost sister, and the angry words that had been his parting gift. He rehearsed his apology over and over in his mind, picturing Maggie's bright smile, her flushed cheeks and infectious laughter, her arms swinging tight around him. She would forgive him, and they would leave and go find their parents together.

Although the location of the bakery had changed, its scent still filled the air, making it an easy trail to follow. Instead of taking him to a small hidden corner of the city, the wafts of baking bread led him through the merchant districts and up through the wide avenues of the nobility. Throngs of people moved up and down the sides of the boulevard, the middle taken up by carriages. A huge crowd enveloped him and he was carried forward and deposited into the large plaza at the city centre. Shouts sounded around him, but he was too absorbed in the spectacle towering above the plaza, sitting in the exact center of the city. A round building with three levels and a marvelous balcony was inlaid with thousands of priceless jewels, mimicking a wonderland of sweets. There were giant ruby and sapphire-topped cupcakes, diamond-crusted donuts, and emerald and pearl frosted cakes. Smaller (though still oversized) confections were scattered about the lawn or dangling from the cornices of the entryway. Amethysts, garnets, agates, tourmalines, opals, labradorites, topazes, and citrines formed brilliant swirls of decoration atop gold, platinum, silver, and copper tarts, jelly rolls, cookies, pies, and pastries.

Johannus stood, mouth still agape, trying to compare the humble bakery of his memory to the gaudy, gem-covered monstrosity in front of him. He then noticed that people were going in the rounded doorway, with jewels clasped in their hands and coming out with small cones of this dessert or that, their faces practically glowing with satisfaction.

How can they give up everything they own just for a few bites of sweet bread?

Then a memory flashed in his mind of fighting with Maggie over the last crumbs of a small cake that Aba Bakerin had given them. He remembered how furious and unreasonable he had been. He had been convinced that he needed nothing more in the world than to polish off that final smattering of crumbs.

Suddenly it made more sense that people were happily giving up their most valued belongings for another bite from the entrancing bakery.

We're all helpless against her power.

Determination to save little Maggie filled him up, and he walked steadily towards the opening, doing his best to ignore the fragrant odors filling his head. He walked through the opening and stopped to let his eyes adjust. As the outlines of the shop came into view, he focused his attention on movement behind the bar. A broad back was bending over, pulling out yet another hot tray.

Aba Bakerin!

He gripped the knife at his belt as cold rage cleared his head. Ignoring the line of people at the counter, he ran forward

and vaulted over the counter. Amidst the gasps of outrage, he reached out one hand while the other went low, preparing to thrust in his dagger. He spun her around, expecting to see the small eyes and lined, round visage of Aba Bakerin.

"Johannus?"

He froze, the knife falling unheeded to the floor. Once again, his mouth hung open as he tried to reconcile the memory of his wee, darling Margaret with the rotund, oily woman standing in front of him.

"Maggie?"

She had grown as large as Aba Bakerin, though no lines wrinkled around her dark eyes, which themselves were nearly hidden beneath the folds of her flushed pink cheeks. They looked undersized and mean in an otherwise jolly face. Her once-golden hair peeked out from underneath her hat, brown and limp.

She glanced down and saw the knife lying on the floor.

"You would try and harm Aba Bakerin in her own shop?"

Her words filled him with fear, for they were full of hate, devoid of any sisterly recognition.

"No, I mean, I thought... Maggie, it's me! I'm here to rescue you, to take you home... "

His words stuttered to a halt as he realized how ridiculous he sounded. He could see from the rich weave of her clothing to the indignant shouts behind him that she was in no danger of losing her life.

"How dare you come in here and try and harm she who gave me everything good in this life? She from whom you stole remorselessly? She whom you would offer harm, when she did nothing but offer you her home and a place to work."

"Maggie, you have to listen. I know I said a lot of bad things the last time you saw me, but I never lied about that. I didn't steal anything. Trust me - "

By this time several officers of the law had rushed in and located Johannus. They went around the counter and grabbed him roughly.

"Madam Margaret, has this young man threatened you?"

"Yes, Constable, arrest him immediately. He escaped once from the charge of stealing, and now he has attempted to take my life. Behold!"

She held the knife aloft, though none saw how and when she picked it up from the floor. The Constable and his lieutenants needed no more convincing, for they promptly began dragging Johannus out of the shop.

"Maggie, stop! Please, Maggie, I'm your brother!"

His yells continued out of the door as people began laughing at his preposterous claims. The Constable, tired of the crowd and wanting to avoid extra attention, rapped the struggling man

on the head with the hilt of his sword, cutting off any further cries.

Of Aba Bakerin there was no sign, for she had been greatly occupied with meeting the Lord Mayor of the city and his officials. At their bequest, she was negotiating a pact for her continuing presence in the city, one which supplied her everything she wanted in return for her baked goods. The first she heard of Johannus' return was as she left the Council Hall at the edge of the plaza and began leisurely walking to her resplendent home. One of the Constable's guards came up to her and, bowing low, gave her a brief report.

"A crazy man came into your shop today and tried to kill Madam Margaret. He claimed to be her brother."

She help up a hand to stop him.

"Take me to this... upstart."

The guard nodded and led her to a waiting carriage. They turned away from her home and rumbled out of the plaza, rolling down several winding streets until they came to the forbidding entrance to the city prison. Bidding the driver to wait, Aba Bakerin made her slow, deliberate way up the steps to the entrance. The Constable met her just inside the door.

"I will see him alone."

The Constable bowed and led her to a room where the prisoner had been chained standing up. A chair was placed there in front of him.

"You may go. I will call you when I am finished."

She smiled sweetly at him. Again, the Constable merely bowed and backed out of the room.

As the door closed, the pleasant smile slid off her face and was replaced by a malicious expression of deep satisfaction.

"So... you're still alive."

Johannus worked his dry throat, sore from the beating he'd already received from the guards.

"Aba Bakerin. You evil... hag!"

A gust of laughter blew from her.

"Oh, that doesn't really matter, now, does it? Because people will do anything for me now, yes? If they don't, all I have to do is threaten to close my bakery. As you can see, it's been quite a successful ploy so far."

"You've stolen Maggie, turned her into the some kind of witch, just like you."

The accusation merely caused another smile, this one quite unpleasant, to crease her face.

"And did you come to save her, young man, from me? Because I assure you, not only have you wasted your time, you've ensured a rather painful death for yourself."

"Do your worst. My sister will see what you truly are."

"No, I daresay she'll... enjoy your fate as much as I will."

With those words, she heaved herself to her feet.

"What is it? The secret ingredient that allows you to control so many people?"

Aba Bakerin reached the door and pounded on it with a meaty fist. She then turned and looked at him.

"Why, Johannus, it is nothing more than little boys just like you."

When the Constable opened the door, he found Aba Bakerin shaking with laughter while the prisoner screamed incoherently at her. Afraid of offending her, the Constable quickly walked across the room and backhanded Johannus.

"Aba Bakerin, please forgive this impertinent and disrespectful wretch. It seems we didn't pay sufficient detail to his schooling."

"No need to apologize, Constable. He has been sentenced."

"What would you have of me?"

She shot Johannus a look of pure venomous glee.

"Tomorrow morning, he shall be hung lengthwise from a metal rod and suspended over a fiery pit. He shall hang there until his skin shrivels and crisps, and shall breathe until it is done. His body will be given to me after the crowds disperse. I have spoken."

"It will all be completed as you command, Aba Bakerin."

She nodded then turned to leave. As the Constable locked the door and began to lead her off, she addressed Johannus in a whisper that nonetheless carried only to his ears.

"And your sister shall dine on your flesh before another day is gone."

Johannus felt his resistance vanish as he lost all hope, for none who knew him were anywhere within reach. In fact, no one knew where he was at all except for the city guard and Aba Bakerin.

He was to die.

As the minutes ticked by, he imagined the sun waning in the blue sky, wishing he could see his sister one more time and warn her. He was roused from his dozing by the sound of the lock turning on the door. It was dark, but as the door opened, there was no accompanying flare of light. Instead, Johannus saw an outline of a person and heard the scuffle of leather-soled feet.

"Is it time, then?"

His voice croaked out in the darkness and he tensed up in anticipation of another blow to the face. But stealthy fingers snaked up his arm and presently he heard the unmistakable click of the manacle opening. With a groan, Johannus let his arm drop, stifling a scream as his aching muscles began to fill with blood.

"Who are you?"

Hands worked at the other manacle for a moment before it, too, dropped away. He started to fall down, unable to find his balance, when he felt the steadying hand of the other person.

"Let us just say that I am someone sworn to get revenge on Aba Bakerin. In helping you escape, I thwart whatever plans she has for you."

Johannus grasped the man's shoulder.

"Please, let me come with you. I have to help someone."

The man grunted.

"Look at you. Can you even stand alone?"

With that, he stepped back, leaving Johannus to wobble before sinking to the ground.

"No, son, you're too weak to help me with my night's work. I am simply giving you the chance to escape."

"You don't understand, Aba Bakerin has - "

"She has lived too long. After many years of searching, I have found her, and ere this night is done, her blood will drench the earth and my revenge will be complete."

The man lifted Johannus up and helped him to the door. They stealthily walked down the corridor, turning down a narrow staircase that ran to ground level. It opened up to a dim back alley, where they stopped to take a breath.

"Where were all the guards?"

"They were all at the feast of Aba Bakerin, who offers it free of charge once a moon to all who come. Besides, you're nobody, so how could they expect you to escape."

Johannus saw that it was already night, the crescent moon shining in the sky. He turned to regard his savior fully. The man was broad and tall, with a full beard liberally threaded with grey and a mostly bald head. He was wearing all black. Swords bristled from scabbards on his back and knives dangled sheaths on his hips.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Hans. A long time ago, when I was but a boy living in the forest with my parents and twin sister, Aba Bakerin lived in a fantastic cottage made of gingerbread and spun sugar. She tricked me into betraying my innocent Greta and locked me into a cage for many months. During this time, she made it known that she was a witch and that my body was needed for one of her greatest spells. However, Greta finally found a way to free me and we attempted to escape."

He paused and looked up at the sky.

"Attempted?"

Hans looked down at Johannus.

"I made it. She didn't. I was too rushed, too thoughtless - just as Greta used to chide me about. I pushed when she pulled. Ever since, I've only been half of a whole."

Hans fell quiet.

"Didn't you go back?"

"When I tried to return to the cottage with the help of some local villagers, it was gone. *She* was gone. I was locked in jail and sent away to a place for crazy kids. But I knew what happened. And I swore one day I'd have my revenge on her."

He turned his head away.

"That... place in the centre of the city. It is a much larger replica of the cottage I still see in my dreams. And I have glimpsed this Aba Bakerin. It is the face of my nightmares. And so, at long last, I will fulfill the vow I made in memory of my other half, dear Greta."

Johannus desperately wanted to be a part of Hans's vengeance, but he had to acknowledge his growing exhaustion and weakness. His body ached from his beating, his limbs trembled from the need to rest, his arms hung heavy at his sides, and his vision was blurry beneath the swollen skin of his face.

"Very well, Hans. I will take this time to escape. But should you fail, I will return and finish the task for you. And I'll try again to take back Maggie from Aba Bakerin's control."

Hans clasped Johannus on the shoulder and nodded. They stood thus for a few moments, each absorbed with thoughts of the tasks in front of them. As if planned, they then turned away from each other and began moving in opposite directions - Johannus limping from one shadow to the next, Hans striding boldly toward the city centre and the home of the witch, Aba Bakerin.

When Hans reached the plaza, he found it full of people, all flushed with the magic of Aba Bakerin's delicious meal. They scarce paid the tall stranger any attention, and Hans moved easily through the crowd to the edge of the witch's home. He stared up at the lit balcony at the very top of the tawdry edifice. Torches from below lit up the face of Aba Bakerin as she stood on the balcony and waved at the people. A gloating smile hugged her lips, and Hans flushed anew with rage and purpose.

He circled around the edges of the bakery until he faced its back. The crowds were thinner there, the shadows larger. He worked his way across the pearl and abalone encrusted pathway to a back entrance. He turned the handle of the door and was not surprised to feel it turn. As he pushed the door open, he thought that Aba Bakerin's overweening pride had made her a little too lax in her personal security. After all, who among all those who had eaten of her cursed, spelled confections would ever think to lift a hand against her?

Hans smiled grimly to himself and proceeded up the stairs to the very top of the squat tower. There were two doors, one lit and one dark. He approached the backlit door, drawing his dagger and his sword with a sibilant whisper of metal.

With a fierce grin on his face, he kicked open the door and rushed inside. Aba Bakerin had just closed the balcony doors behind her and was cackling to herself. At the sight of Hans, she froze, astonishment flowing over her creased and knotty features.

"For my sister!"

In a blur, Hans rushed Aba Bakerin and slammed his knife into her chest. Aba moaned in pain before falling heavily to the floor.

Hans stood over her and raised his sword. Aba Bakerin looked up at him and gasped out her final words.

"Hans? I... am... Greta."

Hans froze, disbelief stealing his breath. His sword clattered to the ground and he fell to his knees. He gathered up the dying woman and shook her angrily.

"No! No, you can't be. Greta died!"

"Ah, Hans... always... so quick... to judge... "

"I thought she killed you. How? You wear her face?"

Labored breathing filled the air and Hans thought for a moment she wouldn't answer.

"My... curse... I ate... "

Her body convulsed and she started choking on the blood filling her mouth.

"Hans!"

Aba Bakerin, who was once a sweet girl named Greta, beloved twin of Hans, took her last breath and died.

Hans was filled with horror, unable to reconcile the face in front of him with the memory he'd cherished for so long. His revenge had, after so long, been empty. As Greta had claimed, he'd always been too hasty to judge, to react instead of seek the truth.

Tears rushing down his face, Hans pulled out a slim dagger from one of his boots.

"Greta, I won't let you take this journey alone. You won't be alone, not anymore."

Quicker than a thought, he raised the dagger and plunged it into his own breast. They were finally together in death as they had been together in the womb.

At the edge of the city, Johannus turned and stared at the lit sky above the abode of Aba Bakerin. He'd heard no cries of dismay nor seen any breaking of her hold on the people he'd passed.

"Hans must have failed," he whispered to himself.

"Then it falls to me. I will return and I will prevail."

So saying, he turned and began to head away.

Back at the jewel-covered bakery, Maggie was busy getting a fire started. She was making a delicacy unlike any ever served. She hummed over it, enchanting it with her will. All night she worked, filling the city with the fragrance of her labor.

In the morning, as the sun dawned over the city, people were already lined up and waiting as she threw open the doors to the bakery.

She smiled with pleasure at the throngs waiting for her. Cheers assailed her and she lifted her hand in greeting.

"All hail Aba Bakerin!"

She nodded modestly at their praise and turned back inside.

Several mornings later, Johannus returned, in better health with better arms. But when he reached the plaza at the center of the city, all signs of the squat tower had been erased. When Johannus stopped to ask people thronging the plaza on their way to and from errands, they rubbed at their heads and shook them. They walked away vaguely wondering at the feeling of emptiness that rolled around inside their heads and stomachs. Of Aba Bakerin, who was once called Maggie, there was no sign, nor any recollection. Johannus left the city with his heart full of rage. Now he must begin his search.

Several months later, thousands of miles away, in a large city by a modest but prosperous lake, a small and humble doorway at the end of a short alley on a side street of a broad avenue opened its doors for the first time. Trays lined the counter, tempting passersby with quick glimpses of sugary-dusted cakes and cream- or jam-filled pastries sparkling like gems of every color. But it was the smell that was most particular, for it filled the air with a singular scent that began to wind its way down the cobbled streets to the edges of the city and into the countryside beyond.