

The Secret Education Of Thumbprint

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The Sixth Night of the Second Summer Moon, in the 1510th Year of Underhaven

'To the Palace Keepers' dung trenches with spooling spider silk!'

Thumbprint barged into her father's study, marching so fast that when she stopped the momentum of her skirt blew some scrolls off a chair just to the right of the door. Knowing that Inkstain wouldn't so much as acknowledge his daughter's presence in his sanctum until the mess was cleaned up, she put them back upon the seat without comment, stewing in irritation all the while.

Her black-bearded sire was seated at his desk, hunched over his latest project as he always was. Surrounded by piles of parchments, scroll-cases, book, and chalk-slates to either side. Packets from the Archive. Interview transcripts, requests for interviews yet to be sent out, replies to request for interviews. Memos and missives yet to be condensed into cohesive form for his next text. The historian did not look up from his writing. "Yes?"

"I did everything you said! To the letter! It's *still* not coming out right!" The olive-faced lass held out a ratty spool of thread which was falling to pieces, insanely thin strands flying off as she shook the thrice-cursed thing. A large portion of failure was caked over her hair and forearms and chest. Her fifteen-year old fingers felt many times their age, knuckles pulsing with arthritic cramps. Big, stubby, troll hands were not meant for such absurdly fine work! "What use will spinning thread be, anyway?" she grouched. "A librarian doesn't need to make the books! Just know how to get to the right one! And explain what's in them to fools who never learned how to read properly!"

Inkstain's writing slowed, but did not completely stop, save to refill the quill. "You want to become Pigment's apprentice, don't you?"

"Yes, yes, of course I do!" The young student had never really considered any career for herself but to work and serve in the Library. The place where she could explore the world from shelf to shelf. The institution her father had brought her to many a time while was doing his research. And, most importantly, Pigment's domain. He was the key to the future she envisioned for herself. While she was five years out yet from applying to the Scholar's College, competition for patrons - the head librarian included -- was already fierce. "All I want is for you to give me *something useful* to do to impress him!" The remark was as much a plea as a recrimination.

"I did. Pigment accepts only the best as apprentices," he patiently stated, not for the first time. Eyes still on his work. The soft scratches of his quill sneaking in between words. "And the best apprentices know more than they 'need' to. Show him you know everything about how a book is made. From the covers to the ties in the bindings, to the pages and script in between. Work out the questions he may ask you, and have an answer ready before you arrive for the interview. He won't be able to forget you."

"Ha!" She had him! Pointing the fingers of her free hand at him then the way out of their home,

she crowed, "That's just it. I went to the Library yesterday and asked around! Nobody uses silk string to bind pages! They use linen-twine!" An almost manic grin had come over her face. Surely such a display of forward thinking would earn her a break from this painstaking labor; time with her friends before everyone was buried in study for the next battery of tests.

Inkstain looked up from his papers, sharp blue-grey eyes becoming visible under his bushy brow for the first time. "Then learn how to make linen-twine, too."

Roaring her vexation, Thumbprint stormed back out of the room. She heard the scrolls hit the floor again, and kept walking.

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The Eighth Night of the Third Summer Moon, in the 1528th Year of Underhaven

Thumbprint looked up from the desk and rubbed her exhausted eyes. "If I keep on at this rate, I'll be in glasses by the time my term of service is done."

Apprenticing as a librarian under the illustrious Pigment was an honor and a privilege. Academically. In reality, it was long hours, a demanding schedule, regular memory drills, and strict adherence to the rules of penmanship. The fact that the learner was the master's future daughter-in-law only raised his very high expectations. It didn't even grant the student her own workspace. Her workstation was located in a partition of Pigment's own office, which was positioned a story up from the main floor of the Library. At least she got her own lantern to read and write by.

The young troll shook her head free of nerve-wracking clutter and got back to work. Popular volumes wore out sooner than most, and Pigment had given her the responsibility of replacing one of them. Carefully she dipped her quill for another sip of ink, ever aware that a single smudge, fingerprint, or overly generous blot of ink at the end of the parchment she was to be writing upon would result in her instructor rejecting it all and ordering her to start the whole page over. And the pages she was crafting were important ones indeed, truly worthy of the care she'd been taking. She'd been put to work transcribing a new copy of *Catalyst's Commentaries on the Tome of the Ancestors*. This next page detailed one of the most famous aphorisms of the Tome, which she filled the header with in florid calligraphy...

'Beware the words of the Changing Ones, for they speak with many tongues.'

... Followed by several paragraphs of historical context and literary interpretation. The general impression to be taken by the reader being that the whims of the Changing Ones (referred to as Palace Keepers in later texts) were known by the honored forebearers of Underhaven to be as transitory as their bodily forms. A pledge made one day would be recalled as a jest the next and forgotten entirely on the third. More sinister were the statements meant from the start to be twisted into something else. Such as the assurances made to those who took refuge in the Palace at the fall of the Ancestral World, declarations which fell to ash as the Age of Bondage began.

Stroke upon stroke, the words became manifest. Words became lines, lines became paragraphs. As Thumbprint brought the duplicate into being she absorbed -- as would those who would read

it from then on -- the lesson held within. Thumbprint performed her own spot inspection, aided by a jeweler's loupe, its broadening eye bringing details to her attention that her master would note from an arm's length away. Slowly, meticulously, she satisfied herself that it would pass her teacher's muster. Only then did she set it aside on the shelf above her desk to dry, after which it would be added to the weighted frame that held its fellows. In the end, a group of pages would be stitched together in lots, the lots then tied into the complete volume, and bound into a thick leather book jacket. Every step of the process, save the fabrication of the parchment and the leather, to be carried out by Thumbprint's own hands.

A chime sounded from the stairway to her left. It was a call for aid; a visitor to the Library was in need of some book, scroll, or scrap of data which the novice stationed at the help desk could not uncover on his own. Thumbprint quickly tidied up her workspace -- Pigment tolerated no clutter! - then slapped some life back into her cheeks, and headed down to greet this new querent.

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The Sixteenth Night of the Second Spring Moon, in the 1639th Year of Underhaven

It was late indeed when Inkstain, ever-present satchel of papers in hand, emerged from the depths of the Archive into the stately Forward Foyer. So late that all staff, save a wandering guard, had gone home. Thumbprint shot out of a chair she'd hardly spent any time sitting in to confront him. "Where have you been?" she hissed, her practiced professional facade having crumbled over the course of a very aggravating night. "A formal dinner with my husband and his family, in his father's home -- *my professional superior's home* -- is awkward enough. Not having all of *my* family there, not having you there, made it practically unbearable!"

An almost childish look of surprise played across his greying face. "Oh, my. Was that tonight? Sorry, my dear, couldn't be helped. A sudden opportunity to get a glance at some ancient papers came up, and in my zeal I must have lost track of time. One must grasp opportunities as they float by."

Rubbish! Thumbprint's father was no absent-minded teacher who misplaced his thoughts between pages! "Don't give me that rot! I've been checking time here for a bell now waiting for you to appear, and that was after looking about with no sign of you. I even sent the apprentice out to search the places I can't go, and nothing. You came here and then you weren't here! Lodestone was more than happy to tell me as much in looks if not words."

Inkstain's face hardened. "Manners, daughter. We will not make gossip of our fellows within their own domain." He took her by the arm and led her out of the Archive -- Lodestone's domain -- deftly ignoring her sharp-browed attempts to continue the argument she was determined to have. Only when the two of them were sitting in a public alcove did he consent to continue it. "Lodestone doesn't know as much as he thinks he does, young maiden. He could one day learn some of what I have to teach, but his pointless feuding shuts doors. He'd have a chair in House Leadership by now, Pigment too, if they could only keep their personal history out of their politics."

"History can wait! This is the here and now!" she knew the instant the words came out of her mouth to stop talking.

Inkstain's cheeks puffed up and burst forth a scoffing laugh, for now it was *his* professional pride rubbed raw. "History can wait? It can just sit in a box down a hole somewhere until someone bothers to come open it? Tell that to the spirit of old Tinderbox, forbearer of our noble House, and our very own bloodline."

Oh no, Thumbprint's father could filibuster for hours once he got started on that topic. She wouldn't let him change the subject so easily. "I am presently the endpoint of that bloodline. Had I any mumps to carry it onward, they would have been interrupting dinner with constant pleas to know where their beloved grandfather was."

Her father looked to her with bemused interest. "And just how did you handle this sudden professional, political, and dare I say personal embarrassment?"

The flustered newlywed breathed in deep, taking a moment to compose herself, to put back in place the face and tone of benign politeness which she wore at work. "We held off on eating until the cook started dropping rather unsubtle hints that he had another party to attend to. We were partway through the first course when the messenger came with your notice. Pigment read it, chucked it in the fire, and didn't say anything apart from 'he's not coming'. He had that look on his face, though." A look from Inkstain insisted on clarity. "That look he gets when he's speaking about Lodestone. This was how I knew to come looking for you at the Archives. Mother brushed the rough edges away with a mention of the work you've been doing for your next book, the lengths you jump to get interviews. The usual natter, if I may be so bold. She and Gearslip did what they could to keep a conversation going through the rest of the meal. For our part, Slag and I detailed our visit to the office that's to be refurbished for him, now that he'll be running the metal shop.' She crossed her arms atop her lap, as her mind's eye travelled down the halls and chambers of Underhaven to the room her husband would soon occupy. "It's a rather artless place as-is, a little too practical for both our tastes. Which I'm sure you'll notice too if ever you're not too busy with sudden literary emergencies to come by."

The ending side-swipe, delivered in a tone as dry as one would use to say the words 'my feet are green', received not a frown but a chuckle. "Good! Sounds as though everything went well in the end. You'll have to smooth over several more little bumps like this, if you can take on the role I have in mind for you. But keep up the strong back against your superiors. It will serve you well to let others know there is only so far you can be pushed."

Thumbprint's shoulders slumped, the fight cleaned out of her by the realization that this was another of her father's tests of character. Tests which had never ceased, even though she was well past the days when she needed such prodding in order to grasp her career goals. She had to admit to herself, again, that as frustrating as these unannounced challenges were in the short term, in the long they had a history of working in her favor. With quiet surrender in her voice, she asked. "What role?"

Hands to his jacket lapels, Inkstain took on his own air of professionalism, one of lofty authority humbled by the weight of time. "The role you've been training for all your life. And I don't mean the one in the Library."

"Nothing you have read, or seen, or been told by me could entirely prepare you for this moment," Inkstain intoned. One hand was grasping the final door. The other hand held within it a heavy key.

Thumbprint took in a deep breath, let it out slowly. "I'm as ready as I'll ever be."

"Good. On we go." There was a twinkle in his eye, one of pride in his offspring rather than delight for what she was about to find inside. A twist and a turn later, the aviary was open. Inkstain bid his daughter enter with a turn of his head.

She did so to the atonal sounds of someone singing to themselves. "BREE TEEE DREEE! BREE TEEE DREEE! BREEEKA OOOKAA AAA -- uh?!" A flash of red behind the troll-sized golden gate opposite a large desk grabbed her eyes. The next thing she saw was a wild flailing of mounds of blue-green moonmoss, one after the next. Then nothing; whatever had moved was now hiding. Curious, but cautious, Thumbprint tiptoed past the desk. Reaching the gate, she peered past the glare of the glowing plant, trying to seek out the stealthy one. It took a second pass to find a plume of leathery lines, quivering of its own volition for there was no breeze. Betrayed by the fringe of its hat, the young Scholar was able to track her eyes down to the head of the creature crouching behind moss-cluster.

It had honey-yellow eyes.

It was red as a ripe berry.

It was legend made real.

And it was staring at her. Cautious curiosity in its countenance.

Trickleclaw swallowed. "Hello?"

There was no answer, save a whisper-thin trill of timid breath.

"Trickleclaw, this is my daughter, Thumbprint," came her father's voice behind her, followed by the sound of the door locking. "You've heard me speak of her, remember?"

The little red brow furrowed. Then eyes lit up bright and knowing. It bolted upright. So quickly that the troll-maid stepped back on sheer instinct, never mind the solid barrier between them. "Yes yes yes! Trickleclaw remembers! Is time for cradlesoft munchbasket now?"

Thumbprint hadn't yet had time to ask what the creature meant by that odd combination of phrases when her father scooted her out of the way of the door. "Do step back, dear." He lay his hand upon a bent iron rod, the only thing keeping the gilded gate closed. "Thumbprint has heard me speak of you, as well, Trickleclaw. She is quite eager to meet you properly."

Inkstain's words thus far had been part of a prepared exchange. Next came Thumbprint's part, delivered to Trickleclaw, in a calm and confident voice. "Yes, I am. And I should like to have many more visits, indeed. If you do not mind."

Trickleclaw lowered itself as the iron pin was removed, legs tensing for a great leap. The instant the door was open wide enough to get its wings through, it shot out towards her. She gasped in shock as it circled round her, under her, over her. Thumbprint tried to spin, duck, twist about,

whatever it took to keep her eyes on the creature, but it was impossible to track all its movements. And any limb she moved out to keep her balance was corkscrewed by a silver-red bolt. The creature came to a dead stop in the air, giving her the first full glimpse of the slender specimen. Suddenly fascinated with the female's leather shoes, it dove for the ground. Again taken by instinct, she inched herself back a bit, out of reach of its hands, as it landed.

"Newface Dig-Dig gots hardfoots!" Trickleclaw stated, scratching its cocked head. It looked up at her. "Whyfor Dig-Dig have headtopper stuffs on footsies?" As if to illustrate the oddness it found on the situation, the red bug slapped its hand across the two knots of leather atop its worn brown 'helmet', sending the bands of leather string about all over again. It pointed over to the room's only remaining occupant. "Scritchscratch Dig-Dig gots comfynice footybare like Trickleclaw!" It cocked a foot up, wriggled four clawed, birdlike, toes.

'Really?' was the look Thumbprint gave her father.

'Answer it!' was the motion he returned.

This was most definitely not on the list of topics she had prepared to discuss with the prisoner. Thrown off her guard, and still breathless from the introductory 'dance', Thumbprint stumbled through an answer, "I... you see... I have, somewhat, softer feet than most. Than many. That's the wrong word. More sensitive? I'm not flatfooted! But too much walking around on the cold stone down here-- "

Satisfied with half an answer, or too impatient to hear the rest, the bug blasted into the air again. "Keep-say no more smalldarks?" it pressed, hands on hips.

'Keep-say means promise, 'smalldark' means 'tiny cage,' Thumbprint reminded herself. "I don't see any reason why I would ever want to put you in such a situation. So, in that spirit, of course I promise." That topic of discussion she *had* prepared for. Inkstain had been asked to make the same vow, as had his predecessor, and back on down the line. The caveat 'in that spirit' had been well rehearsed.

Trickleclaw chirped "BREEETEET!" and flew over to within a troll-hand's length from Inkstain, a satisfied look upon its face. "Girl-thing do!"

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The Sixteenth Night of the First Spring Moon, in the 1640th Year of Underhaven

Preservers were very paradoxical creatures, if Trickleclaw's peculiarities were to be taken as typical of the species. For all its haphazard ways of speaking and answering questions, it could be very particular about specifics. Only recently had someone in the House Of Provisions created wax crayons of the excruciatingly correct shades of grey and ruddy brown to 'allow' Trickleclaw to draw a being it had first spoken of over a millennia ago yet never been able to accurately describe; its fellow Preserver, Shadowcast. That the unseen creature had black skin and brown eyes was known, after long-dead Primrose had established a Preserver-speak glossary of colors. And it was known to wear pearls atop its head, after much trial-and-error involving showing Trickleclaw various stones and gems to determine the meaning of the phrase 'bubblehards'. Now that it had the means to express itself, the specimen practically attacked the parchment with the

tip of its artistic lance -- *tak! tak! tak! tak! tak* -- in order to put in all the dots it deemed necessary in order to complete the intricate patterns and shades of the wings.

The hard raps of the pencil provided an almost musical accompaniment to the soft scratches coming from the end of the desk opposite the pair. There, Inkstain was studiously making revisions to his latest book. The sound which continued even after the specimen looked up from its own work with a proud grin. "Skritchscratch Dig-Dig always making scribblemarks!" it chirped.

"Yes, he does. I remember back when--" Thumbprint stopped herself before offering an anecdote from her younger years. Remembering almost too late the instruction that she must never say anything to pique the insect's curiosity of the world outside Special Projects and Studies. Panic stricken, her eyes darted about the aviary, desperate to find something else to talk about with the specimen.

"I'd say that is enough of this for now!" Her father suddenly said, packing up his things with a suddenness and uncharacteristic clatter that made it clear he was abandoning his project in order to divert Trickleclaw's attentions. It worked. "On to our next task. My daughter, do you recall when you were just a little mump learning her letters?" He smiled with fatherly glee at his memories of old. "You were so proud the day you came home with a parchment in hand, on which you had written your name for the very first time." His 'above business' packed and secured, he now was poking around in his 'below business' satchel.

"Vaguely," Thumbprint answered, barely recalling any of what he said at all. So much of her youth had been spent climbing from one accomplishment to the next, never resting on a goal post long enough to take in the view of a day such as her father was referencing.

"Perhaps this will help." He passed her the very parchment, and the memory did indeed become clearer. "The next day, your mother boiled up a couple of turtle eggs for my lunch, and I asked you to sign your name to them so I could show how smart my daughter was to everyone at the Library. You had trouble writing in small print, so you could only put half your name on one and the other half on the other. I put them into a little box that you said looked silly."

"You know now that I wasn't always going to the Library to do my writing." Inkstain removed himself to one of the larger cabinets, keyring in hand. Inside, a number of small, locked, doors only some of which he had opened in his daughter's presence beforehand. He unlocked one of the new ones, and reached behind a false back. Bringing out the very box he had been speaking of. Over a century old, and showing it in the deepened wood stain. "I can tell you now that I didn't borrow the box. I got it at the marketplace for just this purpose." He removed the lid, revealing a glob of wrapstuff encasing two spheres.

Thumbprint had seen such an arrangement before, atop the table which introduced her to what Trickleclaw was capable of doing to an unwary watcher's eyes. But that container had been full of several, smaller stones. Her teacher placed this box down onto the desk, and motioned to the little red captive. Tiny hands clutching the rim, Trickleclaw put an ear to the globes one at a time. It stood, and shook its head enthusiastically, sending the brown strands that topped its headpiece flying. It declared, "Is snugsafe! Trickleclaw always make good wrapstuff!"

True blades were not permitted in the enclosure, but the keyring contained a blunt palette knife. This Inkstain used to pry one of the spheres loose, handing it to his pupil. "Go on, clean it up," he instructed.

Her own ring held the same kind of knife. It was difficult making progress through the sticky mass. After some scraping, memory flooded into her nose. The smell of squid-ink, the hint of sea-salt used in the boiling water. The shape of the brush she had held in smaller hands. Badger hair, with a number of bristles sticking out crookedly to one side. It had a reed handle. More and more detail of that long-ago day had entered her mind's eye by the time she was able to make out the marks painted onto the rubbery shell. The ones needed to spell the word 'Print', in a hand she recognized as very much her own, for it matched the parchment she had been given. "I've learned to stop saying 'no' to impossible things," Thumbprint stated bluntly, trying her very best to contain her awe.

"Good. Because we're going to eat them."

"*What???*" Thumbprint's eyes went wide. She had enjoyed cured eggs in the Banquet Hall, but those were preserved over the course of weeks or months, not *one hundred and fifty years!* She struggled to put up her 'game face' again. By this point in her apprenticeship, Thumbprint had become quite convinced her father went out of his way to stun her every now and then. In order to force her to learn how to disguise her true feelings from outside observers. But some shocks were just harder to deal with than others.

Inkstain, as usual, was nonplussed. Very used to such disguises, he continued as if he were talking about perfectly ordinary goings-on. "We've spent these past months showing the little one here that it can trust you. Now you must show the same. Trickleclaw says these morsels are as good as the day they were packed—" Trickleclaw folded up its arms and nodded sharply, wide grin on its face. "-So I am going to finally enjoy this long delayed meal. And I invite you to join me. Primrose would approve. She started this private tradition, after all."

The mention of Trickleclaw's first (official) keeper was more than an anecdote. It was a previously agreed upon signal that Inkstain was giving his apprentice an order. One meant to go over Trickleclaw's head, so it may appear that her actions regarding the insect were fully of her own volition. But one meant to be followed to the letter, with no argument. Trickleclaw, dejected, was offering up its own argument in the form of defeat. Facing away from both trolls, it crouched, hiding crying eyes behind its wings. Shoulders shuddering as it heaved scratchy snuffles, the hurtful noise not unlike someone struggling through a melancholy song on a poorly tuned spike-fiddle. "I'm so sorry, I didn't meant to hurt you..." She offered a finger to it, for comfort, only to have it waved away. She was surprised by how much that hurt.

"If we shan't go together, than I shall go first," Inkstain affirmed, drawing her attention back up. He'd already peeled the egg, and in two bites it was gone. He gave a theatrical smack of his lips, a flourish of delighted fingers. Though his daughter wasn't sure if he was making the childish display for Trickleclaw's sake or her own. "Fresh as the day it was cooked."

"Is good! Wrapstuff is always good! Trickleclaw knows!" The little red fellow insisted, eyes to his elder keeper. Turning back to Thumbprint, it practically pleaded, "Please munch! Is good!"

"Very well, if it means so much to you," she answered. More to the point, it meant enough to her superior to make it an order. She cracked the shell with the blunt-edge, peeled the shell back. Her nose and stomach told her quite clearly that the flawless white flesh beneath was fresh and sound. Her rational mind screamed that it couldn't be. Trickleclaw showed no such deliberation; its eyes huge and moist, an eager grin carved itself across the whole of its face as its anticipation grew.

She held out the egg in salute -- a final attempt to delay the inevitable -- and slid it partway into her mouth. It was frightfully delicious. Perfectly cooked, precisely seasoned, just as her mother had always made them, and still did on the occasions when Thumbprint happened by her parents' home in the morning to sample one. She couldn't help but smile at the taste of memory.

Trickleclaw held its arms aloft. "BREEENEENEENE! Trickleclaw is so happy for Hardfoot Dig-Dig!" Its joy was infectious, and Thumbprint found herself giggling, ever so little, before regaining control of herself with a light cough. With control came understanding. Life in Underhaven would be an utterly different thing if this experience were available to all citizens, and not necessarily for the better. "This is another one of those things that never happened, isn't it?" She asked her father, after finishing the last of the one-item meal.

Inkstain shrugged, "This is a highly classified research facility, daughter. Nothing ever happens here."

But something had. Looking down at Trickleclaw, Thumbprint knew it clearly. She really did trust the little fellow more than she had just moments before. She offered it a finger to hold onto. It climbed right up her arm to her shoulder, and nuzzled its head and chest into her hair.

Thumbprint smiled.