PHILLIP DRAYER DUNCAN



MAD MAUDLIN

"MAD MAUDLIN IS A DEVILISH GOOD TIME"
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MAD MAUDLIN

By

PHILLIP DRAYER DUNCAN



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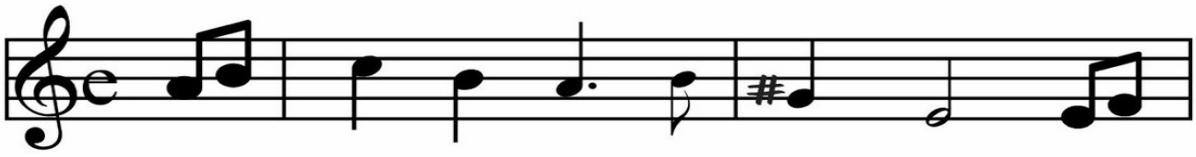



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Foreword

Who is Mad Maudlin?

That was the question I had to answer.

You see, this little project started in the year sixteen-hundred and… something.

Wait…scratch that. I don't want to give you the wrong idea. I didn't start writing this book four hundred years ago. I'm not *that* old.

My part in this tale begins a few years back. My partner-in-crime, the wonderful author and musician J.H. Fleming, loves going to the Ren Faire. By default, I often tag along.

One of her favorite things at the faire was the band Music the Gathering. In fact, after a time, she partnered with them to novelize their stage characters in *Music the Gathering: A Most Inconvenient Curse* and *Music the Gathering: A Most Unusual Assassin.*

Point is…I've watched Music the Gathering play a lot. Like…so much. And I never minded. Their shows are brilliant. They're exceptionally talented performers and have a fantastic stage presence. And they're wonderful people, too. We both adore them and their music.

They play a mix of traditional folk songs, which they've made very much their own, as well as original songs they've written themselves. Of the former, one of the traditional songs they cover is called "Tom of Bedlam."

I've always enjoyed their version. Most of the covers I've heard are played soft and slow. Music the Gathering attacks with speed and a sort of frantic pace that matches the tone of the lyrics. And frankly, better matches

the “mad song” genre from which it hails. At least in my humble opinion. You can hear it for free on their website at musicthegathering.com.

Often, before they’d play the song, they’d inform the crowd that it is believed to be the oldest song written in English. In fact, the earliest versions go back as far as the 1600s. The original lyrics follow the character of “Tom o’ Bedlam,” which was a term used to describe patients, or inmates, of the Bethlem Royal Hospital. And since people tend to be people, it also became a slur used to describe beggars at that time, particularly those of the seemingly “mad” variety. Hence the “mad song” genre.

So, within the realm of those old and peculiar, lyrics, we don’t really know who Tom is. He seems a man out of his wits, traveling about and begging for scraps.

Around the same time, a second or sister version of the song began to appear. It shared many of the lyrics but changed narrators. This one, sometimes referred to as “Mad Maudlin,” follows Maudlin in her quest to find her lost love…Tom of Bedlam.

Modern covers tend to further combine the two, taking the perspective of Tom or Maudlin. In the case of Music the Gathering, Maudlin is our viewpoint character.

Okay, so while this is all fascinating, where do I come in?

I think the thing that fascinated me…

If you had asked to me guess what the oldest song written in the English language was about, I would have guessed some kind of religious song. I certainly wouldn’t have guessed it would be a song, or songs, about a lone beggar or the woman who desperately wishes to find him. And I certainly wouldn’t have expected all of the fantasy elements, the vague mentions of giants, goblins, and fairies, among other things more intriguing still, like the very magical vibe of the melody and lyrics.

That was what piqued my interest.

As I heard them play the song time and again, these images began to form in my mind. And the questions, “Who is Mad Maudlin? Who is Tom of Bedlam? Who are the Bonny Boys of Bedlam?”

And I realized there might be a fantastic story there.

Because I’m an idiot, I didn’t think I was the person to write this story. Didn’t believe I could do it justice. I thought it would be too challenging to live inside Maudlin’s mind and bring her to life. I wasn’t the writer for that.

Imposter syndrome ‘til death do us part!

Speaking of death, sometimes an idea just won’t die. Each time I heard the song, more ideas took shape. I began to see the form of a fantasy novel.

Arguing with myself, I pointed out that the best viewpoint character wasn’t Tom or Maudlin. In fact, living directly in their heads wouldn’t do at all. For the story to work, we needed to stay grounded in a more familiar mind. If only I had ever written something like that…

Right, so I realized the framing I used for *The Blade Mage* was quite similar in that regard. Those novels wouldn’t work if we lived inside Axel’s wild and wonky mind. The character works because we see his outrageous behavior from the grounded viewpoint of Wyatt. This was the same. I just needed a character who was, for all practical purposes, normal. In fact, someone who was the polar opposite would be ideal.

Garbhan Duhallow was born.

But then, why would this character follow Maudlin around? No sooner had I posed the question than I had an answer. His backstory hit me like a lightning bolt.

Next thing I knew, I was starting a new novel I wasn’t supposed to be working on. *Oops.*

My original plan was to fit it all into a single book. As I began to work through my ideas, though, I realized it would take more than one. So, my new idea was to do a single book for each verse of the song. That could be fun, except…

As I am prone to do, I wrote *way* more than I intended.

Somehow, I took the first verse of a song and wrote a damned trilogy.

What is wrong with me?

Will I do the rest of the verses? I don’t know. Truly. I don’t have an answer.

But if you’re reading this, then this is the journey you’re presumably about to begin.

Three books based off the first verse of a very, very, old song.

Hope you like it.

-Phillip Drayer Duncan, August 2026

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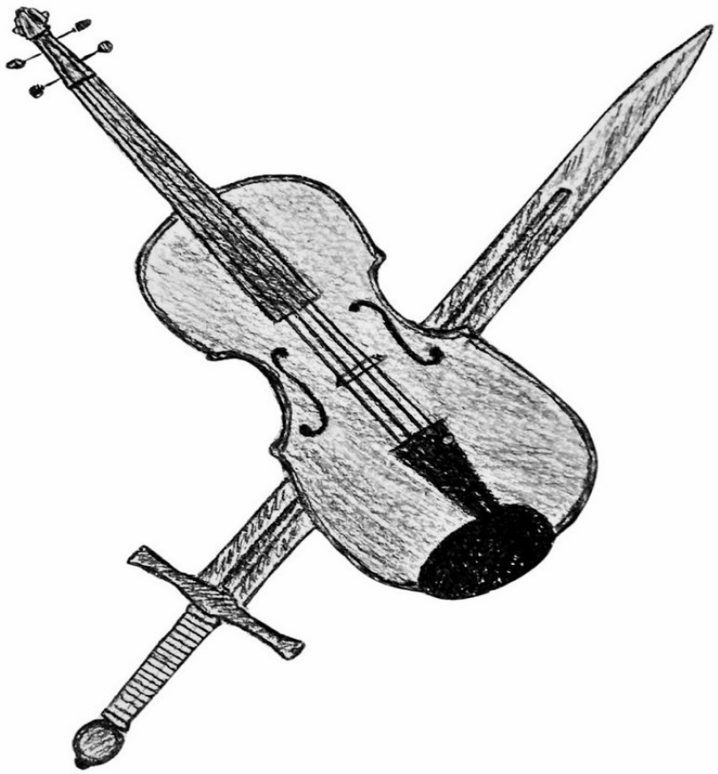
MAD MAUDLIN



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Overture

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Storm Coming

The boy came in the bleeding hour, when the sun began its dying.

As that great sphere bled out, a gathering gray mass offered some modesty for its final, rasping breaths. Crimson seeped between those clouds, making clear the sun's passing. It was not a kindness they offered, those clouds. No, they promised violence. They rushed that poor sun to its demise so that the darkness might come sooner. For that was when they'd strike, like an assassin's blade. A hurricane, mayhap. Or something worse.

My thoughts had been on an early rest. Sleep before the storm.

But I heard the boy coming. And I sensed him before that. Never a mage, but my wards were keen. Learned from the best.

I cast aside my sheets along with my desire for rest. Too late for all that. Storm was almost here. And so was the boy.

What might he want?

I shrugged on my clothes and started for the door. Perhaps Old Loc had sent him to warn me of the weather. To coerce me to join them behind the sturdy stone walls of The Tickled Pig. To abandon my poor hut to its fate.

But at the bleeding hour? No. No. Old Loc wouldn't put the lad in danger for something so trivial. Not his grandson. Not the last of his kin.

Something more urgent, then.

But what?

I swung open the door.

The boy was there, eyes wide, arm raised, ready to knock.

"Cian!" There was an edge to his voice, as if he'd expected someone else.

"Finnegan," I said, offering him a nod.

Then we stared at each other. Me, a man. Him, a child. He could not hold to silence for long. Not that lad. I understood well enough. I'd been a chatty lad myself once, long before. Curious about the world, I'd been cursed with a head full of questions and far too few answers. But that had been another life. Someone else's, mayhap.

"Storm's coming," the boy said, glancing over his shoulder. "Grandad says it'll be a bad'un."

"Your grandad would know."

Again, the silence.

"Why'd he send you up the mountain, Finn?" Perhaps I had not entirely aged out of my questions.

"Oh, right!" he said, head bobbing. "Grandad wanted me to tell you a ship come into port. Said you might not have seen, what with the clouds."

I studied the boy, mind racing. Then I stepped out the door and moved past him, where I had a view down the side of the mountain.

The lights from Upper Hill were already pushing back at the growing gloom. I couldn't see the tavern, but I knew well its glow. Further down, my gaze sought Bottom Shore. There, so far off, the lights had wed. The larger town was but a singular glow. I couldn't make out the harbor, much less a lone ship.

I considered.

On a sunny day, Old Loc would often send Finn to tell me when ships arrived at the island, rare as they were. But with the coming storm… My unease grew.

"Did your grandad say if any travelers were spotted coming up the hill?"

Finnegan shook his head. "They'd be cracked in the skull, what with this promise of weather."

Again I considered.

"Cian?" the boy said, a question on his tongue.

I grunted, only half paying attention.

"Why do you always want to know about ships coming in?"

An innocent question.

I took another glance at the angry sky with its dying light and malevolent promises.

Damn.

No time to dither.

The boy needed to return. Already he'd be walking a dark path, the moon as much a coward as the dying sun in the face of such a storm.

"Finnegan," I said, whirling on him. "Who was in the tavern this eve?"

The boy shrugged, seeming bored by the question. "Just the miners, you know. Same as always."

"No one else?"

"No," he said, kicking at the gravel. "Oh, wait, yeah. That one bloke."

"Who?"

"That traveling minstrel what stopped a few nights back. The one you was watching. Seemed you didn't like him much. How come?"

"I don't like strangers."

"Then how do you make new friends?"

"I don't." I turned from him, rubbing my chin.

The answer lingered in the back of my mind like an old acquaintance, one I didn't relish seeing. The sort I'd pretend not to recognize at the market.

But there was little use denying it. I knew well what this meant. Knew why Old Loc had sent the boy.

I prayed then to whatever god might bother listening. Prayed I might be mistaken. A foolish notion, that, for surely any god who had not yet turned their back on me was doubtless one I'd rather not have in my corner.

"Wait here," I said, turning back into my hut. I slammed the door behind me.

I could have denied it. Could have assured myself I was overreacting. Could have sent the boy racing home in the dark. Could have put myself back in bed and waited out the storm.

But that wasn't how life worked. Not mine. My fears wouldn't be unmade by ignoring them. Resisting the reality in front of me would make it no less real. The churning in my gut could not be ignored. Nor could it be denied.

Action. That was how one survived. How one continued breathing, no matter how putrid their paltry existence. Crying in the corner led only to death. Trembling in fear offered more of the same. Ignoring the warnings, though, that was something worse. I'd take cowardice over foolishness, but I wasn't keen on either.

So, despite the misery stretching from gut to groin, I made for my meager bed.

Was a fantasy to believe this day would never come. I'd prayed as much, and to gods who surely mocked me. Knowing that, I'd hoped with more vigor. But only a fool would rely on either, so I'd put more effort still into preparing.

Hands trembling, I grabbed my shoddy bed and dragged it across the old plank floor. It wasn't heavy. Nothing special, my bed. Nor my hut, for that matter. Was it really so much to give up?

Beneath the bed were the loose planks I'd pried up when I'd first moved into the old hovel. I ripped them up, tossing them aside. Beneath was a hole. The hut I may have claimed, but the hole I'd dug myself. This old mountain was a volcano, silent for generations, or so I'd been told. The dirt had quickly given way to stone. I'd had to chisel my way down. It had taken weeks to reach the depths I'd desired. Time had been on my side then. Not so now.

I reached into the darkness, retrieving my old travel pack. It had clothes in it, no doubt musty from their time in solitude, but ready. There were other items in that hole as well, bits and bobs I would need for the road, and other things more important still.

The next item to appear from the darkness was a sword, which I quickly strapped around my waist. The belt and scabbard were nothing special. Standard fare. The handle I had long ago wrapped in old leather, hiding its visage. To a passerby, it would seem nothing special. The cheap blade of a sellsword or soldier. Still, even in costume, I had feared carrying it in the open. Far too valuable.

Had a thief nabbed it and peeled back that leather, they'd have raced off to find themselves a foolish merchant, one who would've coughed up enough gold coffins to purchase a small estate. Likely one with a vineyard.

Had our imagined thief stumbled upon a merchant with a keen eye, though, then they would have bathed in coffins, enough for a very large estate indeed. Certainly a vineyard.

But if our thief happened upon someone who recognized that blade, well, then our thief would have been confused indeed, for the would-be purchaser would have fled, screaming all the way. Thus it had gone into the hole and had remained, hidden.

Likewise with my old shield. It came out next. Unlike the sword, it was truly nothing special. Not to anyone but me, lest a keen sorcerer were around to sniff out the enchantments laid upon its flesh. But to the average

eye? Forget gold coffins or silver pretties. If I had taken it to market, I'd have been lucky to fetch a copper piss penny. Beaten and battered, it was. No crest upon its surface. Not anymore. Not for a very long time. The markings of its birth nation had long since been slashed, hacked, and scratched away. Yet it remained priceless to me, enchantments or no.

The last item in the hole was a cherry red wooden box with strange symbols shimmering across its surface. It was half an arm's length and better than a hand tall. An awkward thing to carry, especially for hard travel. I considered tossing it back into the pit. Surely I'd have no need of it, and the damned thing would hardly fit in the pack. Certainly I'd not be able to cinch up my bag with the box jammed in, leaving my clothes, food, and wares at risk for rain.

But if I *did* have need of it…

I set the box to the side and quickly dug through my travel pack, removing three daggers. The largest, I strapped onto my sword belt. The handle was of bone, the blade long and curved.

The smallest, a short blade with a black handle, I secured in my boot.

The middle one, ugly thing that it was, I tossed back into the pack without so much as looking at it. I had no wish to see it. I knew well the devil's image carved into its flesh.

Next, I dug out a small knitted bag from within my pack's depths. Pulling on the drawstrings, I dumped the contents into my hand. Charms, in a variety of shapes, styles, and makes, some of dark metal, others with a shine fit for a royal court.

My eyes drifted to the bracelet on my wrist. Twisted steel, made to look like vines. A pauper's piece by any jeweler's accounting. At least from a glance. On closer inspection, one would see that it was quite intricate. I wore it always. Just then, a singular charm hung from it, one in the shape of a black thorn branch. Did I have time to add the others?

I made time.

There weren't so many.

Like that ugly old dagger, one held the visage of a devil while another had the outline of a unicorn, and another was in the shape of a stag. There was a drake and crow as well. And a tortoise and an owl. Not all were in the likenesses of creatures. There was a snowflake, sparkling in silver. Almost white. Another, of a rougher make, looked like the spokes of wheel. And finally, a jester's hat.

Next, I reached into another pouch and slid out a neck chain, which I slid over my head, refusing to glance at the pendant it held. I didn't care to see that serpent, nor to delve into the memories that came along with it. Instead, I let it fall beneath my tunic so that it might hang against my chest, out of sight.

Finally, I turned my attention back to that damned box. At the very least, I could check how it fit in my pack, couldn't I?

The answer was that it fit about as well as I'd expected. I could carry the cursed thing, but I could not cinch up the pack with it jutting out the top.

It would have to do.

If I found myself in need of the contents of that box…

There was no replacement I could find. Certainly not in short order.

The risk of wet clothes did not outweigh the risk of not having it, were I to need it. I prayed to those same mocking gods that I would not.

Those matters resolved, I grabbed my coin purse and jingled its meager contents. One silver pretty and a pile of piss pennies. I'd need every bit, and more still. Fortunately, there were more. At least I thought so. I was all but sure I'd stashed some in my travel pack before I'd dumped it into its hidey hole. Couldn't remember the sum, of course, and there was no time to count. I was sure it was no fortune.

I forced some salted beef and a couple of apples into my pack, jamming them around that damned box. Wouldn't be enough, not for so far as I needed to flee, but I had to see Finnegan back to his grandfather, and I suspected Old Loc would spare me some food for my journey.

Returning to Upper Hill posed a substantial risk. A wiser man would've set the boy on his way and headed off on his own.

I was not a wiser man, and I'd known few who would have considered me as such. I couldn't send Finnegan back on his own, not with the storm coming. Already the wind beat against the trees, the first of the clouds' armies marching in for a skirmish against the land, two infantries testing one another.

Finally, I donned my cloak and stepped outside.

Lightning raced across the sky, crackling like a whip. The thunder roared its hatred.

The boy looked up at me, eyes wide. Afraid. "Think Grandad's right. Going to be a bad'un."

“Let’s go,” I said, and started for the path.

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A Name in the Night

"Cian, can we go fishing again?"

Despite our haste, I came up short, the question catching me ill-prepared. So focused was I on outpacing the storm, surveying the darkness, watching for threats, and ignoring the ache in my gut that his innocent question caught me like an arrow to the lung.

Forcing some levity, I replied, "In this weather?"

"Are you daft? I meant after the storm. Tomorrow or the next."

"Ah," I said, continuing forward.

The lie very nearly escaped my lips. Nearly fell out of me of its own accord. But I didn't want that. Didn't want to deceive the boy. Not here, not at the end.

So I gave no answer. Just walked on.

"I want to catch a gruber," Finn said.

"You have caught many gruber."

"Not a big'un, though. Not like what you caught that once before."

"I see."

"So, can we go? Will you take me?"

The persistence of youth.

The lie was there, ready to be wielded, while the truth hid in its turtle's shell like the coward it was. In the end, I met them in the middle. "We shall see."

"Gran says fishing is best after a storm. Says the fishes get all stirred up. Have a feeding frenzy."

"Finn," I said, turning to face him. "Might we continue this conversation once we reach the tavern? We need to keep our wits about us

out here in the dark. It wouldn't bode well for either of us to roll an ankle. Not with the storm coming."

Finn looked up at me, his big eyes but shadowed orbs. After a moment, he offered a brisk nod. "Sorry, Cian."

"No need to apologize. You've done no wrong."

"I just… I don't like storms. Not the big'uns."

"I know," I replied, ruffling his hair. "I, too, am worried over the weather. That's why we must make haste. And keep our wits."

He nodded once more and we continued on.

In the daylight, it was a short walk to reach the village. In the fading light, the path could be treacherous. I fought down the urge to take off at a clip. My instinct was to run. To race through the darkness without a backward glance. But I had spoken true. That would not serve either of us.

And I needed to listen. Not that there was anything to be heard over the raging wind. The trees must have owed it coin, for the thrashing it gave them. An army could have been marching on us and I wouldn't have heard their feet pounding over the scream of the squall.

I considered, and not for the first time, of going off the path. Of finding our way through the trees. I'd done it before, but not in the darkness, and not with a hurricane brewing overhead. The hillside was severely steep in places. It would slow us down if it didn't put us off course entirely. Worse, one of us might take a tumble, rolling all the way down the mountain until we crashed, broken and bleeding, on the shore. Locals claimed there was once a woman who'd rolled the entire length, tucked inside an empty barrel. Some claimed she'd walked away beaten and battered. Others claimed her for dead. I wasn't so sure I believed either tale. To tumble so far…

No, we had to stay to the path.

To my surprise, Finnegan kept his vigil. The silence remained. That was unlike him. Perhaps the fear had rendered him mute. More likely, he sensed something in me. Something which made him more afraid still. He was right to be.

We trekked on.

We were three-quarters of the way when my fears were made true. The sky opened, offering that first drizzle. Just a taste. An augury of what was to come. It wasn't the oncoming storm that prodded the fear in my heart. But those first drops served as an omen. A promise of pain.

I sensed them before I saw them.

Some old intuition flared to life. Forgotten, but not unlearned.

My mind rebelled, just as before. Said I was being paranoid. Told me I had nothing to worry over. That I was jumping at shadows. For who would brave such weather? Who would be out here, so far from the middle of anywhere? Who could have found this beaten path, which led to naught but my lonely hut?

I ignored that putrid voice, and this time without hesitation. I was past all that. I was coming back into myself. A different self, one I'd hoped long gone. Dead, decayed, and forgotten. Was not to be.

Stopping, I turned and took Finn by the shoulder. I pulled him close so that I could whisper. "Hear me well, Finnegan. If I bid you run, you fly. Fast as you can, back to your grandad."

He stared up at me through the gloom.

"Do you understand?" I asked, giving his shoulder a squeeze.

He nodded, bug-eyes full of fright. Full of questions, too.

I started down the path again. Only a few steps before I came up short once more.

A shadow slipped from the trees ahead of us, barring our way.

The outline was that of a person, but cloaked and concealed, their hood pulled low.

"Well met, traveler," a man's voice said, all but shouting to be heard over the wind. His voice held no hint of an accent. Clue enough. No island man. Not from here. "Dangerous eve for a stroll, is it not?"

"Indeed it is," I replied. "Why, then, are you out? Lost on the path?"

"Can one be lost when one is on a path?"

I paused, considering the strange response. Slowly, I said, "I suppose so."

"Then perhaps I am. What of you?"

"Seeing my young friend safely home." I motioned toward Finn, who was clutching my cloak just behind me. I wanted to make sure he was seen. Wanted this stranger to know that there was a child present. "I'd liked to see him indoors before the sky opens further."

"Perhaps we might walk with you, then?" the man asked. "Since you know the way."

"We?" I asked, though it was a deceit. Feigned ignorance. I could feel them gathering round, closing in. Ready to pounce. How many? I could not say.

“Aye,” the man said. “Traveling with a few friends, so I am.”

“Yet you appear alone. Do your mates hide among the trees? Do they so fear a lone islander and one innocent little lad?”

The shoulders beneath the cloak shrugged. “Dangerous times, innit? We could not know who it was strolling along to greet us.”

“Nor do you still. Yet yours gather round. Might be enough to make a man and a small child leery. Mayhap it’s best if your friends keep their distance.”

“No offense meant.” The man put up his hands, placating. “Apologies if we gave you a fright. I would still ask this boon of you, though. Might we follow you back to the village?”

“You are on the path. You have but to turn around. Follow it back the way you came.”

“You seem a bit of a paranoid, my friend.”

“Healthily so.”

The man chuckled. “Have you a name, stranger?”

“Cian,” I replied. “Cian Asra.”

“Cian Asra,” the man echoed, as if trying it on for size. But there was a hint of mockery in his tone, too.

I glanced back at Finn, who clutched at my cloak as if it were a dinghy. Voice a whisper, I said, “Remember what I told you. Be ready.”

“Cian,” the boy croaked, grasping at my cloak ever harder. “I’m scared.”

“I know, Finn. But let loose of my cloak and make ready to flee. You understand?”

He nodded, but did not speak. Nor did his grip loosen.

I turned my attention back to the man. “And who are you, stranger?”

There was a pause. A long one. As if he had to consider his own name.

“You can call me…Tom.”

I flinched despite myself.

Then cursed myself for a fool.

It was an offering, that name. An offering for a reaction. The trade had been made. I’d given him precisely what he’d sought.

The game was nearly at a close.

I turned again, looking down into Finnegan’s frightened eyes. I ruffled his hair once more and gently forced his hands from my cloak. “Be ready.”

He didn’t reply, save for a tremble.

I rose to my full height and started forward. My hands slipped into my cloak, one on my sword hilt, the other on the bone-handled dagger.

It was coming.

I could sense it, not unlike the storm. Just ahead.

The violence.

An old friend of mine, violence. A former bedmate, even. But one I had not rutted with in so very long it was like a faded memory. That other man's life. The one daring to take over my own. Did he still know the way of it? Did he remember the dance? Did I still have the grit for the blood and the bile and the shit? An answer was forthcoming, I knew.

"Come," the man who called himself Tom said, motioning me closer. "Show us the way, Cian Asra. Show old Tom and his bonny boys the way, won't you?"

That was when they made their move.

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The Dance

They attacked as one.

Two came from either side of the trail, charging out of the shadows.

Time halted its march, as if to encase me in this moment of horror, this season of death and rebirth. Death for the man I had become, and a rebirth of the one I had been. A farewell to peaceful solitude, and a welcome to the sins of my past. Bound was I, to the paths I had taken, as well as to those I had not.

Finnegan was behind me. Would he, too, pay for my sins? Would they cost him his blood and bile? Or would these hungry wolves be satisfied with my flesh alone?

In that frozen moment, I had but one choice left to me, and no time at all to decide.

I could stand as I was and let the fates take me, or I could let that other man take over.

It was no decision at all. Not really.

The noise fell away, my fears and worries with them. Anger and old resentments, too. They were gone. Stripped bare. For this other man, who was also me, he remembered the rules. Still knew the steps. Emotion gave way to clear, cold calculation.

Finnegan would need protecting, then an order to flee at just the right moment. This was not it.

The man who called himself Tom had remained as he was. Just a spectator, then.

The two warriors, collapsing from either side, were the imminent threat. I had no way of knowing who they were or what type of weapons they wielded. That they were charging me, though, meant it was likely steel.

Strange, that, for I was sure they would have wanted to torture me first. Perhaps they planned to wrestle me down and subdue me, in which case they'd meet my steel.

Time snapped forward.

Already my hands were moving, drawing my blades as if under someone else's command. Mayhap they were. That other man. His feet fell into step, moving of their own accord.

I spun, raising both sword and dagger. Their steel clashed with mine, ringing out against the wind in that old, familiar tune.

So it wasn't to wrestle me down, then. They were playing for keeps.

I spun, slashing at one while kicking at the legs of the other.

"Now, Finn!" I cried. "Run!"

I spun again, batting aside another sword strike.

The one I'd kicked charged back in as well. That surprised me. Most men would've lost their balance. Would've been out of the fray for at least a few moments. He was unbothered. Maybe I'd misplaced my kick…

No, there was no time for self-doubt.

The kick landed where it should have. He was just unbothered.

These were no amateurs.

They moved with grace, speed, and power, their attacks precise and deadly. Even in the fading light, I could tell they were expert swordsmen. Not marauders. Not hired hands. More like champions who'd won tourneys and kissed the rings of kings.

And I was sorely out of practice.

It'd take all my wits not to disappoint them.

Still parrying and blocking, I sensed something else.

A faint feeling, but one which could not be mistaken.

Magic.

Of course. It always came back to magic, didn't it?

I glimpsed Finnegan as he raced up the path, past the man who'd called himself Tom. He didn't reach for the lad, his eyes focused on the melee.

"Alive, gentlemen," he said, voice calm with but a pinch of annoyance. "Need him alive."

So my first assumption had been correct. These champions had acted on instinct, attacking me the way they knew best. Steel. Did they fear me so? *Good.*

The oppressive feeling of magic grew stronger still, and I was sure it wasn't resonating from my attackers. More likely they had more allies hidden in the trees. I still couldn't guess how many, but it was clear I was surrounded. And about to be in real trouble.

A spell, hex, or curse had been summoned, and it had my name on it. No doubt it would bode poorly for my health.

My attackers continued striking from either side, boxing me in, trying to keep me from slipping away. They were damn good. Bonny fighters, no doubt. They kept me on my toes, allowing me no chance to counterstrike.

I couldn't afford to stay on the defensive. Instead, I opened my mind to a particular charm on my bracelet. Most served as defense against one sort of magic or another. But not all. A few had tricks of their own. It was one of these I called upon: the night crow.

Stealing a glance, I ensured I knew the path ahead, planning to race past the man who'd called himself Tom. Only now another stood beside him, a bow at the ready.

Damn. It was too late.

Everything went black.

I expected my attackers might call out, surprised by their sudden blindness. That they did not only reconfirmed what I had already surmised. These weren't chums. They were disciplined and canny fighters.

The only sound, other than that of the rain and wind, was the "thwack" of the bowstring. I darted to the side as something whistled past my head.

"Alive, I said!" the man who called himself Tom shouted. "He's no use dead!"

I could charge straight at the archer and the man who called himself Tom, but they'd expect as much. They'd be ready, no doubt.

The rain was picking up. I could feel it tapping on my skin. Much like this battle, it was only the beginning. It still promised of a fury yet to come, as did that sense of magic.

I chose a direction at random and ran.

My course led me straight into one of the swordsmen.

We both staggered, unbalanced by the unexpected collision. I didn't hesitate, again seeking to take out his legs. He was quick on the defense,

though. Unable to see me, he knew where I was, and no doubt had his sword headed my way.

“He’s here,” the man said, voice calm despite being blinded.

To maintain such composure…

These weren’t mere champion swordsmen, even. These were trained killers. Elite. About their business. That did little to calm my unease, but offered something for my vanity. That I’d hung with them this long, while so much dust rested upon my skill? It also told me how cautious I needed to be.

I threw caution to the wind just the same.

Lowering my shoulder, I charged straight into him, slamming my bulk against his, but this time with intent. Likely I was just lucky to catch him off balance, but we both tumbled over the side of the trail.

And then I was falling and bouncing, first off the ground, then off my attacker. It seemed I’d found one of those steep slopes after all.

Over and over, and seemingly forever, I bounced and rolled, wondering when I’d smash my head against a tree or boulder. Then I wondered if I might not just roll all the way to the bottom, like that woman from the story.

I did not make it to the bottom. My journey came to a jarring halt on a flat piece of ground.

Every bone and muscle flared, pain seizing me from end to end, but there was no time to worry over bruises and scrapes, or even broken bones. I bounded to my feet, demanding that my brain settle its dizzy spell. There was no time.

Glancing around, I saw I was well out of the range of my crow charm’s smoke cloud, but I was still under the cover of trees, leaving me lost in near darkness. The bleeding sun could no longer help, for its own enemies, those clouds, had dominated the sky.

There was a glow, though…

Glancing down, I saw it was coming from two of the charms on my bracelet. Only then did I feel their heat against my skin. I couldn’t tell which they were, for they glowed red and were hot to the touch as they fought against whatever spell, hex, or curse had been levied. Lucky, that.

But no victory.

Rare it was, to see them so overworked. That they were frying my skin like a side of bacon was not a good sign. It could mean only one thing.

Whoever the caster was, they were no hedge mage. Just like the warriors, they were elite. A master of their craft. Some bloody sorcerer or a proper damned wizard.

Even as I had the thought, a third charm began to glow. Another spell, hex, or curse, this one of a different variety. A completely different type of magic.

Damn.

Not just another spell, then.

Another bloody caster.

There were at least two spell slingers, and neither an amateur. They could keep the pressure on my charms. At the rate they were going, I suspected they might break them yet. Or they could try something different. They could seek a spell my charms weren't able to repel. Neither boded well.

Above me, further up the hill, my pursuers didn't make a sound. They didn't communicate with one another, nor did they so much as snap a twig. I was sure they were coming, though.

My tumble had given me a head start. No use in wasting it.

Ignoring the searing pain on my wrist, I made to flee.

Another shadow darted out from behind the trees. This one moved silently, like an apparition. I could see nothing of their figure or face. They were bathed in black.

A short, curved blade struck out at me and I parried, only then realizing I'd lost my dagger in the tumble. Fortune favored me, though, for I'd hung onto my sword and not skewered myself on it.

I considered going for my shield.

The first problem was that it was secured on my travel pack, which was on my back and under the cover of my cloak. It would be no quick feat to reach it. Which led me to the second of my immediate problems.

There was no time.

My attacker moved with blinding speed, keeping pace with the lightning as it slashed the sky. They struck again and again, as fast as any foe I'd faced. It was all I could do to keep up.

Yet this opponent was not the same as the previous two. No, this wasn't some bloody champion. Quick as sin and unbothered by darkness. A proper assassin, if I had the measure. And a damned good one to boot.

I was too far out of practice, but trusted my sword arm to find its reflexes. Were they as quick as they'd once been? This battle would give answer.

Waiting for the right moment, I stooped, pulled the second dagger from my boot, and rose, slashing.

My assassin darted back, avoiding my attack with ease.

As I raised my sword, I glimpsed the bracelet on my wrist. More of my charms had lit up, as though a blacksmith had just pulled them from the fire.

Explained why the pain in my wrist had intensified.

How many damned sorcerers were there? It wasn't just the bloody two, I was sure of it.

My attack charms weren't getting the same play as my defensive ones, so I sought to rectify that. I summoned my jester's charm.

My opponent staggered.

I stared at them, slack-jawed. Feeling the fool, indeed.

I hated that one, the jester's charm. A nasty thing. One I didn't relish using, even on a foe. It summoned some bit of madness. Turned the world upside down. Made one question one's own eyes. Blossomed fear in even the stoutest warrior's heart. Made the victim cry and claw at their own eyes. A wicked thing, that little charm. One I'd only use in the most dire of circumstances. Yet…

My assassin had merely staggered. Didn't cry out. Didn't scream. Didn't claw at their eyes.

By the gods…

They had magical protections, too, it seemed.

Still, it *had* staggered them.

I ran.

I'd only made it a few steps when yet another searing pain shot through my wrist.

Glancing down, my heart nearly fell out of my arse. Every damned defensive charm glowed like the midday sun. All challenged. All being set upon.

I'd never seen the like.

Never could I have imagined.

A few of my charms offered some general magical defense, but most were geared toward specific types of magic. Different practices or schools

of craft, if you will. For example, my stag's head charm was to defend against devil magic. It, too, glowed brightly.

Among wizards, witches, warlocks, and other sorcerer types, most had a proclivity toward a certain style of magic. Most trained, dedicating their lives to but one or two specific crafts. So, for all of my charms to be lit…

It made no sense.

It was like an army of sorcerers, from every different sect, had gathered here just to kill me.

No, not kill… The man who called himself Tom had been adamant he wanted me alive.

By the gods, but some of those sorcerers were surely bitter enemies with one another. And masters, all. That they could put aside their differences for me…

A fresh pain flared, this one on my chest.

It was the serpent pendant hanging from my neck, the one I'd not wanted to look at earlier. It was burning hot as well, the glow visible through my tunic.

Every bloody defense I had…

No, not all, I reminded myself. I still had my tattoos. My last line of defense.

Glancing up, I realized I'd lost sight of my assassin, but I could see more shadows moving through the trees. More warriors. More killers.

With no other choice, I stepped over the hillside and dropped to my hip so as to slide. That was a better alternative to another tumble. I eased along, keeping some measure of control.

At least for a time.

Even as I went, I felt my tattoos activating. Waking up.

They'd been carved into my flesh by one who knew her business. Someone whose name I would not mention aloud, but who could make the mountains quake at her call. And they'd been further improved and finished by one of near equal skill.

And yet…

I kept on, sliding a few feet and then scooting a few more. It was as slow as it was painful, but my misery was tuned to my scalded flesh, and certainly my foes would not have expected me to willingly go over the hillside. Least, that was what I'd hoped.

But then…

A wave of nausea struck me like a blow to the head.

Some spell, hex, or curse had passed through. Either my defenses were finally overworked, or my attackers had stumbled on something I had no protection against.

I lost my balance and fell to my side, rolling once again as a roar hammered through my skull.

The rain picked up its fury, lashing at my skin and the hillside alike, turning dried dirt to slick mud, giving me no purchase or hold.

I may have fallen for hours or minutes, for that was how it felt. Surely it was but a few moments.

When at last I came to rest, everything hurt, but not so much as my charred wrist, seared chest, and baked, tattooed flesh.

“Enough.”

The voice spoke out into the night, calm but unnaturally loud.

The roaring in my head subsided. The nausea, too.

Staring down at my wrist, I saw the rain sizzle as it struck my charm bracelet, but already the glow was dimming. They’d let off.

“That’s quite enough,” the voice said again. This time I recognized it. It was the man who called himself Tom. I suspected he was still atop the hill somewhere, maybe even still on the path, projecting his voice with magic. “There is no way off the island, Cian. Even if you had a boat, you’d not make it far in this storm. And I assure you, this weather will not subside until we have what we came for.”

Still lying in the mud, trying to catch my breath, I snorted. Death in the drink was surely better than whatever they offered. But wait… Had he implied they were responsible for the storm? That they were in control of it? That was… That was pure madness. The power to summon such a storm…

“And we have the boy,” he said. “The old tavern master, too.”

That gave me pause.

He continued, “I don’t fancy spending my evening in this weather. So, here’s what we’re going to do. My associates and I will be returning to the Tickled Pig. We’ll wait for you there. At least until I grow bored. It would be best if that didn’t happen, of course, for I may just amuse myself by killing the old man. The boy, too, perhaps. Their lives may have no meaning to you, but rest assured, when I’m done, we’ll come and find you just the

same. You can’t escape the island, Cian. You cannot escape *us*. So, be a good lad and come along. We’ll be waiting.”

And that was it. He spoke no more.

I sighed and rolled over in the mud, letting the rain wash over me.

There was much to consider.

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A Hopeful Fool

The rain had reached a crescendo by the time I staggered into Upper Hill. The wind was at a fever pitch, the storm raging, a hurricane indeed. Trees offered some meager protection, but as I made it into the village, the gale was such that I found it difficult to keep my feet.

The Tickled Pig lay just ahead, its lanterns lit. A beacon in the storm.

My bones ached. My muscles throbbed with fatigue. Both paled before the agony of my burns. I staggered on slowly toward those lights.

What would I find there?

Was Old Loc still alive? And what of Finnegan?

I felt no eyes on me. The townsfolk were surely bedded down. Keeping their heads low and praying they might weather the storm. I half expected my attackers to jump me as soon as I entered the village.

The man who called himself Tom had not lied, it seemed. For surely they were gathered within the Tickled Pig, sipping a pint and slurping on stew. Old Loc made a mean stew.

I stared up at the door, considering. It was a door I'd passed through countless times, and never with a care. No, that wasn't quite right. I'd long carried my apprehension, fearing as always that this day might come. It was the mere fact that it had arrived which made the act of passing through seem such a weighted thing.

For a time, I just stood there, being beaten by the rain and suffering my injuries. Neither was at the forefront of my thoughts. My mind was elsewhere. Plotting. Considering.

What if I snuck in through the back? Could I get the jump on them?

Surely not. These weren’t mercenaries or marauders. They were professionals, all. Walking in the back would offer no more advantage than strolling in through the front. Maybe less so.

It wasn’t too late to flee.

When I first came to this island, I’d come with a hope, as did most of the travelers who found their way here. Our wishes were different, though. They came based on the tales of beauty and promises of wealth. That was what drew the fools in. And they’d learn, not long after they’d made port, that there were few chances for wealth here. Beauty, sure, but few coins.

There weren’t many jobs to be had. Two options, really.

One could sign on with a fishing crew. Dangerous business, that. They fished for countesses off the reef, a rare and dangerous fish. Bigger than a man and meaner than a shark, or so it was said. But back on the mainland, fat nobles and rich tits considered them a fine delicacy. A single dried-out carcass would fetch a few gold coffins. Which was ironic, seeing how so many fishermen died on the water to fetch them. They’d get no coffin to lie in, nor the ones promised for their purse. Their final resting place was the sea and the belly of the very fish they hunted. Or mayhap the belly of a shark or octopus, for there were plenty of them as well, and in size enough to sup on a man.

The only other option was to seek work in the mine, digging for jade. Just as dangerous, but in a different sort of way. Sure, the mine claimed plenty of lives itself. Gas pockets. Collapses. All that. But those were quick deaths compared to the slow kill that got the rest. See, when one signed on, the mine company put up lodging, clothes, and even food. Problem was, they called it a loan, and they docked it straight from the poor sod’s pay. And there was the interest, of course. Those miners would toil from sunup to sundown and would rarely walk away with more than a couple of copper piss pennies.

Some of the damned fools got it in their heads that they’d save up. That they’d hold on to it until they had enough to pay off their debts and book a passage off the island. That was part of the jest, for the company controlled the vessels coming in and out. They controlled the costs. Passage to the island was cheap. Passage away was more than they could save in three years.

Not that any of them managed to save enough. The lucky ones were simply robbed by their own fellows. The unlucky ones had their heads

bashed in by those same fellows. Then they were robbed.

A funny thing, the hearts of men. Hope didn't fly with the miners.

See, most came to understand their lot. They accepted their fate. They spent their meager wages on drink, and occasionally whores, when they could afford them. Just waiting out their time to die. But if someone dared to dream? Didn't matter if it was their best mate, the uppity fool had to be slapped down. If they didn't have the metal for it, then none should. The company rather encouraged this attitude. They didn't mind if a few hopeful heads got cracked to keep the workers in their place.

This island was a trap for hopeful fools.

I had come into port with a hope of my own. It wasn't money or beauty I'd sought. It was refuge. A place at the edge of the world where no one would come looking. Somewhere I could spend out the rest of my days in something akin to peace.

That said, I'd have probably signed on with the fishers and ended up in the belly of a whale if not for Old Loc. It was no small fortune I'd stumbled into the Tickled Pig when I had. A plague had passed through the island some months prior. It had claimed Old Loc's wife. Claimed his son, too. And his daughter-in-law. Only Finn remained. Loc was too old to do it all himself, and Finn was too young to be much use.

And I could play an instrument, too. That had sealed the deal.

No, that might not be true. I think… I think Old Loc had seen the desperation in me, different, yet similar enough to his own. I guessed he saw me as a kindred spirit of sorts. The pay he'd offered wasn't any better than I'd have gotten in the company mines, but the hut had come free, as well as meals and good company. I had but to pull my weight.

And what now? Would I pull my weight again?

There was still time, I reminded myself. Still a chance to flee. A while back, I'd found a small boat gone ashore. I'd tested to see if it still floated and then had hidden it away on the off chance I needed to make a quick escape. No one had come around asking about it, so I'd figured it for a forgotten dinghy, probably cut loose from one of the proper ships. Not the sort one would take out across open water, such as was between us and the mainland, but death in the drink was better than what awaited me in the tavern.

A wise man would have run for it. Taken his chances.

But…no.

I had never been a clever man.

I couldn’t leave Old Loc and little Finn to their fates. Not on my account.

It wasn’t who I was. There were many things folk might say about me, and plenty of them were true, but I’d never been a man who abandoned his friends. I wasn’t the sort to let others pay for my sins. And I was okay with that, albeit a little annoyed.

All the efforts I’d put into planning and preparing for an escape, just to be squandered for…what? My bloody foibles?

I’d let myself get sucked in again.

I could hear her laughter in my head. Could see that damned smirk on her rotten cheeks. If she’d been there, she’d have told me to get on with it, because it had been obvious all along. And she’d have chided me for a soft-headed fool. Guess she’d been right about that. She usually was, in her strange way.

I sighed and sauntered up to the door. At least I’d die out of the rain.

Sheathing my sword, I stepped inside.

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The Tickled Pig

The Tickled Pig invited me in with its warmth and dryness, if little else.

Not a large tavern, its typical patrons were those same brave fishermen and hopeless miners. None were in sight this eve. They'd have all been locked up tight in their bunkhouses.

Yet the Tickled Pig was not empty.

Several faces turned my way as I entered.

There was Old Loc, seated at one of his own tables, a worried look scrawled across his features. Finnegan sat beside him, eyes downcast, his fear on display. But his face lit up when he saw me.

"Cian!" he cried, and he tried to move toward me. His grandfather grabbed him by the tunic and sat him back down.

It was the other faces which concerned me. Many faces. Far too many, none of which were known to me. Well, save for the minstrel, who'd I had only seen the once before. He was seated on a stool in one corner, strumming his lute to pass the time. His playing came to a stop when he saw me, though.

The rest of the faces? No, they were not known to me.

Yet I recognized some of the crests, and some of the dress as well. Not all, but a few gave themselves away by the clothes they wore. The way they held themselves. The weapons they carried.

It was an odd assortment indeed. Such a gathering could only be found in some bard's tale or a fae story. Yet here they were. Uneasy traveling companions gathered together in a threadbare alliance, all come for one purpose.

Me.

Every table was taken, which left many standing or sitting along the walls. There was not an empty seat to be found. Many chairs had been shuffled about, though, so they could all sit with their mates, or comrades, as it were, though some chose to remain alone.

The largest gaggle, and perhaps least terrifying of the bunch, were gathered around three tables. Most of these were dressed in a surcoat, tabard, or gambeson, and more than a few wore chain-mail as well. Nearly all of them bore a crest. And there were a great many crests. Knights and champions, hailing from more nations than I'd bother to count. Seated among them were a handful of court wizards, advisors, and the like, all surely sent by their kings.

That I found this assortment to be the least horrifying says much about the rest.

Another table awkwardly hosted more wizards, witches, and warlocks than could comfortably sit around it. A proper assortment of sorcerers, these. Dressed in robes of various shades. Each had either a staff or wand. These I figured must have been sent by the Circle of Lariar, though that was surely just a guess. The Circle, to my knowledge, was the largest collective of sorcerers in all the world.

They were a stark contrast to the witches seated nearby, all dressed in skins, their faces painted, headdresses bearing moss, leaves, and antlers, their adornments and jewelry crafted of stone, bone, plant, and dead flesh. I knew precisely who they were. Just as I recognized the warriors who had traveled with them, also dressed in furs and bearing their war paint. These carried spears, bows, and brush blades. Though not as armed or armored as the knights and champions, they were never to be underestimated. No mere barbarians, these. Their battle prowess was equal to that of the champions of those many nations, and their witches were a match for those wizards.

Standing by the bar was a man in heavy plate, bearing a crest most would have recognized. A knight of the Church of the Holy Tree. An inquisitor, then, or at least a templar.

Sitting at the table nearest him, dressed in vestments bearing that same crest, was a priestess. Her hands were folded in her lap, shrewd eyes studying me, judging. I didn't have to wonder whether she found me wanting.

As my gaze wandered, taking in the next table, I came up short, for here was something stranger still. A group of tall, slender folk, still clad in their

cloaks of deep green, studied me with almond-shaped faces and curious eyes. Had one of them been seated alone, I might not have noticed their ears. Seated together as they were, it was impossible to miss.

Elves.

I had met a few over the years, but these were… There was something both regal and wild about them. Their attire wasn't made of skins like those warriors from before, yet it had about it a forest look. Their cloaks alone could make them disappear in the underbrush, while at the same time, they bore a stature fit for a king's court. I knew not where they might have come from, or what organization they might represent, but there was a dangerous look about them.

At the next table over were several armored warriors of a…shorter stature.

There was no mistaking them, either.

Dwarves.

These weren't the loud, jovial, heavy-drinking dwarves of folklore. These were about their business. Silent they stayed, studying me from behind ash-black helms, faces hidden. They were each clad, head-to-toe, in that same charcoal armor. It bore no markings. No crest. Yet there was no doubting they were part of some faction. Representatives of some order.

My eyes drifted past them to the back of the room, near the bar, but opposite the end where the inquisitor and priestess were. A lone figure stood there, dressed in black. Their face was hidden behind a balaclava, but it couldn't hide the strange shape of their ears, nor did it do anything to shade the red of their eyes.

I blinked, ensuring my own eyes hadn't deceived me, for if I were not mistaken, this figure, likely the same one I'd faced outside, was a dark elf, real and true. I'd heard stories about them, of course, and given the things I had seen, it should have come as no surprise. Yet surprised I was. It was no small wonder I'd survived at all.

But for a figure like that, something straight from folklore, to be working alongside all these knights and the bloody Holy Tree…

It got worse, though, for I would gladly take the dark elf and all the others over the creature by the hearth.

Its jet black armor bore no crests of any kind, nor did it need to. There was no mistaking the black knight for what it was, if indeed I actually knew what it was. This wasn't the first of its ilk I had seen. Plate as dark as

midnight, their helm bearing the terrible likeness of a devil. More fable than reality, and feared by all who'd ever heard of them, though few had. That they'd been invited to join this alliance…

An elderly man sat at a table alone. His skin was spotted and wrinkled, drooping from his face. His head was hairless and he had one milky-white eye, which matched the long wispy beard hanging from his chin. He was dressed in dark robes, but had his cowl thrown back. A gnarled staff lay on the table before him. A sorcerer of some kind, then.

To tell it true, his appearance gave me no fright.

It was the fact he sat alone that put shivers down my spine. He had his table entirely to himself. None of these hard cases were brave enough to sit beside him. What did that say about him? Was he as worthy of fear as the black knight?

Finally, my gaze was drawn back to the center table where Loc and Finnegan sat. One man sat with them. He wore a simple tunic of black with gold trim. An expensive garment, fit for a court, yet his sleeves were carelessly rolled up. I guessed him to be in the later stages of middle age, silver showing on his finely groomed hair and beard. He had a serious look about him. But then, they all did. He alone seemed entirely at ease among this strange ensemble. And he, too, was a magicker. I could feel it.

A smile played across his lips at my notice. "Welcome, Cian Asra."

I recognized his voice. This was the man who'd called himself Tom.

His gaze flicked around the room. "See, friends. I told you we need not fret nor fuss. He's a reasonable sort, our Cian Asra."

There was no response from the other tables. They just studied me.

"Come, come," the man said, motioning toward the open chair beside him. "No need to be shy. We are all friends here. Have a seat."

"I think…" I said, letting my gaze shift about the room. "There has been some terrible mistake."

"Perhaps," he agreed. "And if so, I'm sure we can come to some manner of understanding in short order. Please, shrug off your wet cloak and join us here. Master Loc has made a fine pork stew and I'm certain he'd be delighted to fetch you an ale."

My gaze moved to Old Loc, who gave me the briefest of nods. The fear was ever-present in his gaze. Was there something else there, too? Regret, mayhap? Anger? Disappointment?

I did as I was bid and shrugged off my cloak, hanging it on the hook by the door alongside many of their own.

As I started forward, two warriors rose from their table and started toward me. Both stout men, confident in their stride. One of them spoke. “We’ll be having that sword.”

I stared at them, unmoving. To give up my weapon…

“I’m not sure that’s entirely necessary,” the man who’d called himself Tom said. Then he motioned toward his table where my dagger sat. “But we do have your dagger, friend. Found it in the forest for you, so we did. Perhaps you might set your sword beside it. An amicable compromise. You can keep it in reach, and my friends here won’t be so nervous.”

“It’s not nerves,” the warrior said, his eyes still on me. “We saw what he did out there. We know the stories.”

The man who’d called himself Tom gave me an apologetic shrug, then once more motioned toward the seat beside him. His gaze switched to Loc. “I know it’s unusual, seeing how he’s your bar hand, but would you be so kind as to fetch our guest food and drink?”

Loc’s gaze shifted to Finn.

The man who called himself Tom reached over and ruffled the boy’s hair. “Fear not, tavern master. I’ll keep an eye on the boy.”

Old Loc gave me another pained look and then started toward the bar.

I ignored the warriors and stepped past them, moving with purpose. As I reached the table, I slowly unbuckled my sword-belt and set it alongside my recovered dagger. Then I knelt to remove the dagger from my boot.

As I rose, I noticed the man who called himself Tom was studying my sword. He gave me a friendly smile. “A fine sword for a humble bar hand.”

I did not reply.

He motioned toward my travel pack, still strapped to my back. “Unburden your load, my friend. And please…before you protest, I must insist. For the peace of mind of my companions. I’m sure you understand.”

I stared at him for a moment but saw no alternative. I was well and truly cooked. He knew it and I knew it. The entire damned tavern knew it. I doubted many in the room feared my weapons, nor what I might have hidden in my pack. I shrugged it off and set it on the table.

“Magical trinkets, too, I’m afraid,” he said, still smiling, then repeated his earlier sentiment. “I’m sure you understand.”

I pulled off my pendant and tossed it onto the table. Then I took off my charm bracelet, wincing as it tore free of my melted and crusty skin.

The man's eyes widened at the sight. "That's some injury."

He raised a hand and snapped his fingers.

A woman with auburn hair and striking features rose from the table of sorcerers and strolled over. I didn't struggle as she took my hand in hers, turning it over, studying my burns. Then she reached up and took hold of my chin, tilting my neck back. "Serious burns. Will you allow me to treat them?"

I nodded. No reason to wait for death in pain.

The woman drew out a wand and held it over my wrist. Closing her eyes, she mumbled to herself and a blue light began to emanate from the tip. The burns on my wrist tingled, not an altogether unpleasant feeling.

As the seconds passed, the pain dulled from a roar to an ache. A sigh of relief escaped my lips. I'd been so focused on my predicament, I hadn't realized how much pain I was in.

She motioned for me to remove my tunic and I hesitated, but the pain was such that it overrode my vanity.

As I lifted my tunic over my head, there were gasps from behind me. That was the cause for my hesitation. Few would have seen such scars as I carried on my back, and they'd know well there was but one thing in all the world that left scars like that.

My healer stepped around, seeing what all the fuss was. She, too, let out a little gasp.

Then she set to work on my baked flesh. Where my pendant had hung, the skin was burned severely, as were my tattoos, which ran across my chest and shoulders.

As she worked, the man who called himself Tom began rummaging through my pack. The first item he found, of course, was the long wooden box. His eyebrows rose as he withdrew it. "What's this, then?"

"A gift for a friend," I replied.

"Locked away in such a container?" he asked, studying the sigils scrawled across its surface. "Powerful magics. I'd daresay it'd be a task to open. Must be something valuable. A very special friend indeed."

I didn't reply.

He chuckled to himself. "Fear not, Cian Asra. We didn't come all this way to rob you."

I held back another sigh as he set the box to the side.

Next, he retrieved the third dagger from my pack. The ugly one. “And what have we here?”

It did not escape my attention that others in the room took notice as well. My healer paused, her eyes widening at the sight. The old wizard who sat alone also leaned forward. The priestess and her knight shared a look.

“Do you know what this is?” the man who called himself Tom asked, turning it over in his hand.

I studied the ugly image of a devil’s face on the pommel. It was quite clearly designed by someone with a very morbid sense of art. That, or it was designed for some dark ritual. Sacrifice.

“Fillet knife,” I replied. “The merchant gave me a steep discount on account of the ugliness. But he assured me it was second to none for gutting a fish. Thought I might need something like that out here on the island.”

“Is that right?” he asked. “How’d it do? At filleting fish, that is?”

“Never got around to trying it.”

He set the knife on the table and continued rooting around, but found nothing else of interest.

Loc returned, setting a bowl of stew and a mug of ale on the table beside me. He paused, staring at me for a moment before making his way back around to his original seat.

We waited in a painful silence while the healer finished her work. To my surprise, though, when she put her wand away, she still was not done with me. She produced a salve from a pouch at her side and set to smearing it around my red wrist. Already the pain had subsided, the furious burns calming to harsh pink. Next she slathered it onto my chest and shoulders. Once the salve was applied, she wrapped my wrist in a linen bandage. My chest she left bare. Without a word, she moved back to her seat.

I pulled my tunic back over my head.

“Please,” the man said, pointing toward the steaming bowl of stew. “Eat.”

I didn’t argue.

One of the others, somewhere behind me, protested. “Let’s get on with it.”

The man who’d called himself Tom flicked an annoyed glance over my shoulder, then smiled again. “Perhaps, while our friend is taking nourishment, I can make some introductions.”

No one protested.

He cleared his throat and began. “You might find us strange company, and indeed we are. I’d daresay that never before has there been such an alliance. And there are more of us still, down in the town on the shore. What was it called?”

“Bottom Shore,” Old Loc said.

“Ah, right,” the man replied. “Simple name, that. Straightforward. Just like Upper Hill, innit? I like that. Cuts straight to the heart. Perhaps I can take it as an example, no?”

He waited, as if he expected me to reply.

I looked up at him with a mouthful of stew. My gaze flicked to Old Loc and back again. “Whatever business you believe you have with me, Loc and Finnegan are surely no part of it. Let them go.”

“In this weather?” he asked. “Do you take me for a monster? I’d not see them out of the safety of this tavern to brave such a storm. No, no, I think it best we all hunker down together. Stone walls to provide shelter. Warm ale, good food, and swell company. What better way to wait out the weather? Worry not, though. I am a man of my word. So long as you behave, we have no quarrel with them.”

I thought to remind him that he’d claim this storm was of his own making. I didn’t see much point, though, so instead, I nodded.

“Now, then,” he said, glancing about the room. “Where were we? I was about to make introductions, but to tell it true, it’d take half the night, would it not? Surely, you recognize some of the crests with us. Surely you can piece together many of the rest. And I’m sure you’re wondering how such an alliance was made.”

I had a mouthful, so I didn’t bother to reply, though I considered a polite nod. In the end, I shoved the thought away.

Unbothered, he continued. “There was a gathering of sorts, you see? A collective of wise minds from all over the world. Kings and queens, emperors and other dictators alike, heads of state and heads of churches, sorcerers of the highest orders, wizards of the most powerful cabals, warlocks of great repute, witches of fierce renown, scholars and famed philosophers, ambassadors from the most secret of societies, and so on. You get the idea.”

“By the gods…” Old Loc let out a sharp breath, his eyes widening as his gaze fell on me. “What have you done, lad?”

“I’m afraid it only gets better,” the man who called himself Tom said. He motioned toward the gaggle of knights, champions, and court wizards. “Here, we have representatives from virtually every kingdom worth mentioning, certainly more than I care to count, each hand-picked by the lords they serve, and ordered to join us on this expedition. More, still, await us at the docks.”

Old Loc’s face went pale.

“And of course you would have recognized the revered Grand Oak Mother of the Holy Tree, accompanied by her very own inquisitor.”

This time, Old Loc let out an audible gasp. There were few across the world who were unfamiliar with the Holy Tree.

The priestess offered me a curt nod. Her inquisitor remained still as a statue.

I fought down the lump in my throat. I had thought she was likely an Oak Mother, but a Grand Oak Mother? She was of the highest rank of the church, only below their very own Oak Bishop. And the inquisitor? A templar of the highest order, zealots who carried out the Holy Tree’s wrath with zeal and glee.

The man who called himself Tom pointed toward a table full of wizards. “Senior representatives from the Circle of Lariar.”

Again, Loc let out a gasp, for like the Holy Tree, the Circle of Lariar was known, yet it differed in that few people believed it was real. It was mostly spoken of in whispers, for most common folk didn’t believe in magic. They didn’t believe there was such a thing as witches, wizards, and warlocks. So, the Circle was more rumor than reality. Seemed to me—just then, at least—it was very real indeed. But I already knew as much.

The Circle’s influence was as dug-in and dangerous as the Holy Tree’s, even if only spoken of in whispers. They were both admired and feared, but always respected.

In all the time I’d spent in hiding, fearing I might be found, this was so much worse than I could have imagined, and as the man had said, there were plenty more to introduce.

He motioned toward the table of witches. “I believe you are already familiar with the Gnea Kocce and the warriors who travel with them. Surely you already understand why they have graced us with their presence.”

Next, he waved toward the black-clad dark elf, then the other group of elves, and finally to the dwarves. “Here we have representatives from

orders most wouldn’t even believe exist. Orders most folk have never even heard of. Yet our combined purpose is so great that they would risk exposure to see this business handled. Out of respect and gratitude for their attendance, I will not name them to you.”

That was just as well. It was all a bit too much already. Poor Old Loc looked ready to pass out.

The man who called himself Tom moved right along, pointing toward the ancient sorcerer seated alone. “And here we have the famed sorcerer Gelonde. I believe you may have been acquainted with his former apprentice, the wizard Thirezac.”

The old man offered me a wicked grin, revealing the gaps where his teeth should have been.

“And we have others with us…” The man who called himself Tom made a point of turning his gaze toward the dark armored figure by the fire, the black knight whose dark helm held the visage of a devil.

I tracked his gaze, but only for a moment. I couldn’t hold to those cruel, carved eyes, knowing well that the true eyes beneath the helm were likely worse still.

“But alas,” the man who called himself Tom said, “it would take all night to make *all* the introductions, so I will come to myself and my own fellows now.”

I shoveled another scoop of stew into my mouth, not bothering to reply. He could have taken the whole night with introductions for all I cared. The longer he spoke, the longer I continued breathing.

“I am a member of a rather…quiet order,” he said with that mischievous smile. “An order which seldom gets involved in the affairs of others. In fact, like some of the other organizations represented here, few believe we even exist. So, I do hope you’ll politely maintain our discretion.”

I stared up at him, waiting.

“I am Supreme Enchanter Kavan Exirax of the Pale.”

The Pale.

As if this couldn’t have gotten worse. If there were a more secret cabal of sorcerers, I’d certainly never heard of them. Certainly there were none more feared. Where the Holy Tree sought to save everyone’s souls through holy war and cleansing fire, the Pale simply murdered any who stood in their way. Where the Circle of Lariar sought to bring magickers together for knowledge and safe practice, the Pale sought only power. If the others were

the monsters hiding in our closets, then the Pale were the monsters hiding in theirs.

It made sense, in a way, that they'd chosen a member of the Pale to lead this pack of wolves. They stood apart from the rest of society. They worked in the shadows, their goals only ever their own. But they were feared, and rightly so. They held knowledge the rest of the world craved but none could take. They had power that kings, queens, and emperors desired but could not claim. For those who knew of them, it was often said it was a good thing the Pale didn't wish to rule all the world, for otherwise they would merely snap their fingers and make it so.

I did my best not to react. "Thought it was 'Tom.' "

"I think you know why I gave you that name."

"By the gods…" Old Loc said again, staring around the room at the ensemble. Most of them seemed more faery tale than reality. Here was a bard's tale indeed, unfolding in his humble tavern, half the world away from anywhere. Finally, his gaze shifted back to me, eyes full of wonder, curiosity, but mostly sorrow. He asked again, "What have you done, lad?"

"And you…" Kavan Exirax said, staring straight at me. "You are not Cian Asra, though I appreciate the beauty of the name. I am out of practice with the Xelt language, but I believe Cian means to endure, and so you have. And Asra, even more appropriate perhaps, means to travel by night. A clever name for one who has endured much and has traveled oh so far to be as forgotten as the lonely island where he hides. Clever indeed, my friend, for you were not so easy to find."

"I am not whoever you think I am," I said, though the lie carried little weight.

Kavan chuckled and shook his head. "Oh, but you are. You are precisely who we seek."

"And who is that?"

"Garbhan Duhallow."

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Garbhan Duhallow

He spoke the name as if it carried weight. Not with reverence. There was no fanfare. No wonder. More as though it might summon a devil upon us.

Mayhap it could.

But it wasn't such a powerful thing, that name. Not so well known. Not a name to inspire fear, nor to cause fright. Or maybe it was. I couldn't say.

Old Loc didn't react, not the way he had to the revelation of those who'd taken over his tavern. The poor man… Always he'd known I was on the run. Probably figured me for some pisspot prince or the like. Or a killer on the loose. Some fool who'd gotten himself into a spot of trouble and escaped to the island to hide. He'd have been partially right. Certainly he hadn't expected the most powerful folk in all the world to gather in his tavern to hunt me down.

But the mention of the name… He had not reacted to that.

I stared at Kavan, not replying, wondering if there might still be some way out of this mess.

The tavern had grown silent, the only sounds those of that wicked wind outside and that of the rain slapping stone. The roar of thunder.

When Kavan spoke again, it was not a question, but a statement made as fact.

"You are Garbhan Duhallow. You are, or were, the traveling companion of Mad Maudlin."

Old Loc sucked in a breath.

That was a name he knew. Of course he did. Everyone knew *that* name. A name to be feared. Reviled. Hated. Loved. Praised. Ridiculed. Was a

name which meant a great many things to a great many folk, but always… Always it was that first thing. To be feared.

"My name is—"

Kavan held up his hands, stopping me. "You *are* Garbhan Duhallow. You were born a farmer's son in a sleepy hamlet called Fawnsrun. When you came of age, you signed on with the Kastan Army, serving for just under two years before being dishonorably discharged. You were then, somehow, indebted to the devil Aezrenuth, for whom you performed many questionable deeds. That is, until the infamous wizard, Caroc Blackthorn, traded for your debt, which he held for a time, until it was ultimately passed on to the one and only Mad Maudlin."

"You have the wrong man."

Ignoring me, Kavan continued, "It was in the company of Mad Maudlin that your true mischief began. Kings killed. Wars waged. Chaos everywhere the two of you went. Why, to follow in your footsteps, one need only find the trail of corpses."

I did not reply.

"Many tales have been told about you, Garbhan. More still about Maudlin. And if these stories are to be believed, you have a great many dark deeds to your name. You played a pivotal role in monumental events: the slaying of the Butcher of Barlington, the fall of a king and the nation who yet mourns him, a civil war between tribes. So many tales."

"Sounds a bit much for one man and woman, don't you think?" I asked.

He ignored me.

"All of which pales in comparison to your role in the Battle of Bruckor, where it is said that you, Garbhan, led an army into one of the bloodiest conflicts this world has ever known. Likely an exaggeration, that, but it is certain that there have been few others, at least in our time, with so much magic so carelessly flung about, nor any with such dire consequences at stake."

I turned my gaze, refusing to look at him.

"It was you who followed Mad Maudlin in her chaotic pursuit of Tom of Bedlam. It was you who stuck by her side as she chased after him from land to land, always following his blood-soaked trail, ever after his shadow."

He paused for a time, but still, I refused to meet his gaze. Mayhap that was an admission of guilt.

“And it was you, Garbhan Duhallow, who was there at the end. Who knew what it was Tom of Bedlam intended, and quite likely how he planned to do it. And it was you who aided in stopping him. This much we know.”

He drew to a silence, but the rain and the wind continued pounding, continued beating on the old tavern, just as his words beat down on me.

I studied my half emptied bowl of stew, refusing to look up. Refusing to meet his gaze. It was all too much, to have it all crashing down on me in the way he’d put it.

Finally, he spoke again. “We are not here as your enemies, though certainly there are a few among us with due cause to be as such. No, what we seek are answers. We seek her, Garbhan. We wish to find Maudlin.”

I looked up at him then, a chuckle escaping my lips. “Then I fear you have traveled very far and for no good reason at all, for it was not you that I hid from.”

He raised an eyebrow at me. “You are hiding from…her?”

“I am hiding from everyone,” I replied, shrugging. “But yes. I am hiding from her most of all.”

“And do you know where we might find her?”

I shook my head. “No. She could be anywhere. Couldn’t even begin to guess. Maudlin follows no path but her own.”

Kavan sat back in his chair, studying me. There were a few whispered conversations from among his companions, but he just sat there, watching me. As the voices rose around him, he raised his hand, calling for silence.

He gave me an apologetic smile. “There are things… Things we must understand.”

I nodded, figuring as much.

“You *do* know what Tom sought to achieve?”

I nodded, but then caught myself. “Can’t say as I completely understood, but I got the gist. Understood well enough, I suppose.”

“And can you imagine, then…” He waved his arm around at the others, “why wise folk and rulers from all over the world sent us to find you? Why we would gather together in this tumultuous alliance? Why we, and those we represent, wish to know what you know?”

“Suppose I do.”

“Then will you agree to tell us? Will you tell us your story, Garbhan?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Of course,” he replied, flashing me that wicked grin. “Two choices, really. You can quite sensibly agree. That would be one. Refusal would be another. And to tell it true, I’m not sure what I’ll do if you choose that second option. I’ve been long debating it. I considered letting the Grand Oak Mother and her inquisitor try their methods. I also considered allowing Gelonde to try his. The thing is… So many of my companions are experts at extracting information, that, well, it would be a challenge for me to choose one. I mean, of course we of the Pale have our own methods. Quite effective, to tell it true. But let us not get ahead of ourselves. You’re no fool.”

“I’m sure there are many who would disagree.”

“For certain. Some in this very room. But I do not share their views. I have heard enough pieces of your story to create my own picture. But that’s the problem, innit? It’s all just pieces. None here, nor anywhere, it seems, know the full tale. Perhaps even you don’t. But I’d dare say you can tell us more than any other. And we’d hear it.”

I stared at him, still unsure what to say or think.

“Truth be told, Garbhan,” he said, giving me an apologetic smile, “you’ve already been bamboozled. Has it not occurred to you that you gave in too easily? You have already been charmed. Part of the magic used in healing your wounds. Apologies for that. Just a little something to help loosen the tongue. Otherwise, you’d surely still be denying your identity through torture and worse.”

I blinked, realizing what he said to be true. Left to my own devices, I would have denied my birth name to the grave. Maybe even through a great deal of torture. I was not so arrogant as to believe I wouldn’t have cracked at some point. Sure, we’d all like to believe that, wouldn’t we? That we’re made of something tougher. But I knew better. All meat sacks have a breaking point, and the darker minds of this world have long studied how they might find them.

But to have so easily cracked, it only made sense that I was under some sort of impulse. As soon as I had removed my pendant and charms, I had nothing save for my tattoos to protect me. Like my charms, they were only geared toward certain types of magic. Not to mention they’d been taxed so far, I wasn’t sure they were even still effective.

“It’s like this,” Kavan said, leaning forward. “I cannot, and will not, guarantee your safety when our business is concluded. However, you have

my word, and that of my companions, that if you do this thing for us, both Old Loc and his grandson will walk away unscathed. Better, in fact, for I will buy their silence with a hefty sum of gold coffins. They will be well and they will be wealthy. Deny us, though, and be denied my goodwill. You can imagine the rest."

I considered, but not for long.

I was a dead man.

There was no escaping this. No chance for me to get away. I was a fair hand with a sword and I knew more than I should have about magic, but against an army of master sorcerers and champion warriors… I had no chance. No hope.

My sins had finally caught up with me.

It had always only been a matter of time.

I couldn't help but laugh. Certainly I deserved this fate. It was no small blessing that I had earned myself some time in peace, but it would be worth something to no longer have to look over my shoulder. And there were worse foes than these who could have found me.

"Where shall I begin?" I asked, meeting the sorcerer's gaze.

"From the beginning," he said, spreading his arms apart. "We would have you tell all."

I shook my head. "Would take too long."

"We have as much time as we need." He motioned toward the ceiling. "That's quite some storm."

"It would take all night, at the very least."

"Then all night you shall have. This storm will not pass until your story is told in its entirety. Nor shall we leave until you are done."

Before I could respond, I felt a warmth on the back of my head, followed by a flash of light in my peripherals. I spun around, seeing that old wizard, the one he'd called Gelonde, just behind me with his gnarled staff aimed at the back of my head.

"What was that?" I asked.

The old sorcerer winked at me with his milky blind eye. "A little something to ensure we have naught but the truth."

Then he chuckled and hobbled to his seat.

I turned my attention back to Kavan, who gave me another apologetic smile. "The first hex was to loosen your tongue. This one will ensure you speak true."

At that, I raised an eyebrow.

“It’s a compulsion,” he explained. “I’m sure you’re familiar with the concept. This one won’t allow you to lie. This is a good thing, for I’m sure much of your story may come hard to believe. Under this compulsion, my companions may rest assured that every word you utter is the truth to the best of your knowledge, precisely how you remember it. Additionally, you will find that as you start, it will be easier for your mind to recall your journey. You’ll be less inclined to forget things, or tell them out of order. It is a storyteller’s hex. Should help you right along.”

“Fair enough,” I replied, unsure what else to say. It wasn’t like I could do anything about it. “So, again, where do you want me to start? When I met Maudlin?”

“Let’s go back further than that, even. Many of us have questions about your time with the devil Aezrenuth, and how it was you came to be in the debt of one such as he. Me personally, I’d argue for going all the way back to your childhood, but alas, as you’ve already stated, we may be here for a while. Why don’t we start when you were discharged from the army?”

I shook my head and ignored his frown. “I’d not speak of my time with that devil. It has little bearing on my travel with Maudlin.”

“Ah, but that’s not quite right, is it?”

“You said this spell won’t allow me to lie.”

“It takes a few moments to activate,” he said, giving me another wolfish grin. “And you must have realized that, testing your little fib just now. If not for your deal with that devil, you would not have come into Maudlin’s service as you did, no?”

I gritted my teeth. “Perhaps. But I…”

“Yes?”

I glanced around the room, struggling to meet any of their eyes. I took a calming breath and considered my words. “For certain, many of you count me as an enemy. And in many cases, that is assuredly fair. You have good cause to consider me your villain. As for the rest of you… Well, you may also count me as such by the time my tale is told. But I would ask this one boon of you: do not demand that I tell you *how* I came into the debt of this devil. I will tell you all, and I will tell you true, of my time with Maudlin. But my business with that devil was my own, and had nothing to do with her.”

“Would you stake Old Loc and Finnegan’s lives on that request?” Kavan asked.

“Yes.” I blinked, realizing what I’d said. Apparently, the compulsion had taken effect.

My gaze shifted to Old Loc, who stared back at me in horror. “I’m sorry, my friend. For all of this. And for that.”

Kavan held up his hand, one eyebrow raised. “Garbhan, does the telling of that tale put someone else’s life at risk? Someone you value as much as Old Loc or Finnegan?”

He was quick, this supreme enchanter. I nodded but wouldn’t meet his gaze.

“I see,” he said, glancing over at Old Loc. “I wouldn’t hold it against him, then, old chap. He is protecting another just as he would protect you by complying. Interesting. Quite interesting.”

Someone else spoke up from the back. I didn’t bother looking up to see who. “Have him tell it anyway.”

Several others murmured their agreement, but Kavan held up his hand yet again. “Now that the compulsion is activated, let me ask you the same question another way… Will telling us how you came into the debt of this devil provide any useful information regarding Maudlin or the answers you know we seek?”

I shook my head. “No.”

“Very well, then,” Kavan said to a chorus of groans and moans. He waved them down. “Everyone deserves to keep a secret or two. This one may remain yours. But I will only compromise so far. You may begin your tale in the service of that devil, and I, for one, would appreciate knowing at least a little about your time together. What you did. What it was like. Just to sate my own curiosity. You don’t have to reveal all, but you certainly must begin your tale prior to coming into the service of the wizard Blackthorn. And from there, tell us the rest. Deal?”

I nodded.

“Wonderful,” Kavan clapped his hands together and leaned back in his chair. “Everyone, get comfortable. You’ll not want to miss a word of this. Loc, old chap, would you fetch us each a fresh drink before we begin?”

I glanced up at Old Loc, meeting his gaze. There was no doubting the regret in his eyes then. Certainly he wished he’d never taken me in, the stray that I was.

And Finnegan… The young lad stared up at me with big, awful eyes. Would he have to hear this, too? Certainly my tale was not one for the ears of a child. No one else seemed bothered about it, however.

Old Loc rose from his seat and Finn followed. A handful of knights escorted them to the bar, helping to pass out mugs as they were filled.

I sat in quiet contemplation, mind rolling over the story I was about to tell.

Kavan leaned forward, keeping his voice low, just between the two of us. “What are you thinking?”

“That this story would die with me. And that for so long…I thought that was best.”

“And now?”

“Now, I’m thinking I’ll be glad to be rid of it, and certainly before I die. It’s all I have left, I suppose. No children. No family. Just…my story. That is all.”

The sorcerer nodded.

“Is it the compulsion?” I asked. “Is that why I find myself willing to share what I’ve tried to keep hidden for so long?”

Kavan shook his head. “It doesn’t work like that. No, I suspect you’ve just been carrying a heavy burden for a very long time, my friend. Now you have a chance to lay it down.”

“And for those who would see me dead.”

He shrugged. “Who better to trust than your enemies?”

The moments passed as sludge until the room was ready.

Kavan made a show of looking around, ensuring everyone was seated and paying attention. Finally, he turned back to me. “At your leisure, Garbhan.”

I nodded and took a slow sip of the ale in front of me, letting the warm liquid trickle down my throat. Then I took a moment to gaze across the faces staring back at me. Some wore undisguised hatred, but all were curious. All were ready. Lastly, I took in the sound of the rain and the wind, still beating against the tavern outside. That occasional roar of thunder.

Finally, I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and began.

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First Movement

Blackthorn

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My Devil

"Garbhan."

The voice lulled me from some dark dream, forcing me back into my cruel reality.

It was extraordinarily cruel just then, my reality. As was that damned voice. My head was swimming, my sense of balance warped by the river of ale I'd consumed some hours earlier.

I heard the echo of his laughter in my mind. He found it amusing, my devil.

Of course he did. I should have known. My devil liked nothing more than to summon me awake when I was hopelessly deep in my cups.

The woman beside me stirred, her eyes flickering open.

"What's wrong, John?" she asked, wiping her eyes. "What's the matter?"

I stared back at her, blank-faced.

After a moment, her eyes widened. "Sorry. You're not John."

"No, I'm not," I replied. I could hardly blame her. It wasn't like I remembered her name, either.

Ignoring her, I focused on my spinning head and fought to get it under control.

This was to be a losing battle.

The woman rose and quickly dressed.

Good. She'd be leaving. Likely returning to John, whoever he was. And mayhap I could hold on to what little of my dignity remained until she was gone.

She didn’t speak, but stood beside the bed with a knowing look scrawled across her features. As if she were waiting for something.

Right. Coin.

I leaned over the bed and reached for my coin purse. Fortunately, the chamber pot lay right next to my crumpled clothes, and just then, I needed it much more.

My devil’s laughter echoed through my head as I emptied my guts into the piss pot.

The woman was polite enough to hold her comments, but didn’t shy away from wrinkling her nose. Fair enough.

When that was settled, I grabbed my purse and shook out a few random coins. I held them out without bothering to count.

It must have been a gracious sum, for she made no complaint. Instead, she snatched them from my hand like a dog fetching a treat, then disappeared out the door.

I reached for the piss pot once more.

Once I’d wretched clear my guts again, and was confident that was the last of it, I set the pot on the floor and spoke into the empty room. “What’s the job?”

“What’s this?” my devil asked, his tone slithery and amused. “No greetings? No swapping of pleasantries? My, how you’ve changed in our short time together.”

I grunted a reply.

It hadn’t been such a short time. It had been close to a year, at the very least. I couldn’t say how many moons had passed, exactly, for I hadn’t bothered to count. I wasn’t worried that he’d cheat on the time I owed him, fool that I was.

A year and a day.

That was what I’d pledged. What I owed. By my measure, it was coming up soon enough.

No, I had no worries that he’d cheat me on something so trivial as my time in service. Not when he’d already tricked me in so many other ways.

There were terms, you see? Things we had agreed from the outset. Things he could not ask of me. What a laugh that was. I’d thought myself clever in that, but alas, no, I’d been a fool there, too.

Sure, he’d made good on his word and had never demanded I commit murder in his name, nor bring direct harm to children or innocents, nor

engage in any perverse sexual acts, but… His tasks were no less dark. No less foul.

No, he'd never tasked me with killing, but if my devil wanted someone dead, he'd simply command me to steal from them, thus forcing a confrontation. And I would defend myself.

No, he couldn't ask me to commit murder, but he could certainly demand that I inflict pain. Torture and the like. Any poor sod who held information he desired. Or if he was bored.

He never asked me to inflict direct harm on children or innocents, but he certainly had me inflict indirect harm. There were more than a few young ones who'd grow up without their fathers on account of my blade. And if some hamlet gained his ire, or perhaps for his amusement, he might have me throw dead rats into their well. No direct harm, but certainly indirect.

And no, I'd never been forced to partake in any depraved sexual acts, but I'd been made to watch plenty. Horrible things. Such horrible things…

Once, when he'd been out of sorts with some fellow, he'd commanded me to flirt with the man's wife. See, that didn't count against our agreement. He'd not directed me to rut with the woman. Only to pay her my favor. And he'd demanded I do it in the middle of the town dance, for all to see. Again, that was not against the rules we'd agreed. Naturally, the husband had been irate. A few of his mates, too. One thing had led to another, and much to my devil's delight, my blade had claimed more than one life that night. And no, I never rutted with the widow, for all that it matters.

Sometimes, I promised myself revenge on my dear devil.

But that was a lie and I knew it. Whatever his powers, they were certainly beyond me. I knew not even his name, nor how to track him down.

Other times I considered… I considered dying.

Would have been simple enough. I'd just do as he bade me, which would doubtless enrage some poor sod into a murderous rage, as was often the case. Then I could just stand back and let them run me through.

It'd be over.

I'd be free.

What reason did I have left to live? Even once I was freed of this wretched deal, what then would I do? I had nothing and no one. No purpose. No family. No place to call home. Not anymore.

I could think of no reason to go on living, save one.

My devil was tricksy, so he was. If I died in his service, then I suspected our deal would remain intact. But if I allowed myself to die? If I allowed someone to kill me while working at his behest, would our deal yet stand? I suspected not. Call it intuition, but I feared that would void our contract. I would die only for…

Only for him to go back on what he'd given.

Could I risk that?

No.

I had not made this deal casually. I had traded everything for one thing, and that one thing still mattered. It mattered a great deal. Was the *only* thing that mattered. It was all I had left, though I did not have it at all. That was the cruelest part of our bargain.

That which I had traded for was forever lost to me.

Despite that, the deal had to remain intact. It *had* to, at all costs.

And so, I had to go on living. Had to continue doing his bidding.

Eventually, my business with my devil would be concluded, and then…

And then what?

I sighed and repeated my question. "What's the job?"

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The Stranger

I studied the entrance from afar, hidden in the trees on the hillside.

There was very little activity in and out of the tombs. I had only laid eyes on a few scavengers. Most were within, which may have hidden their numbers, but I could see the smoke drifting from their camp on the opposite hill. It didn't seem a large camp. Not many, then.

I had seen a couple of women exit earlier. That was no bother. Not for me. I'd known men in the army who'd been squeamish about facing women in battle. I'd watched those same swinging dicks get gutted by those same ladies. No, facing women did not bother me. With a sword in hand, it mattered not whether one had a slit or prick. Except…

Three children had followed a man out a short while ago, just old enough to be in the way, but not quite old enough to be any use excavating.

Likely a family operation, then.

According to my dearest devil, some hunter had stumbled upon these forgotten ruins. He'd blathered about what he'd found, and these fools had sought him out and paid handsomely for the information. They'd hoped to uncover rare valuables.

It wasn't an uncommon practice. Throughout the lands, there were ancient places, mostly forgotten by time. Many would avoid them for superstitious fears. Often, though, greedy brigands put rumors aside for treasures unfound. These weren't brigands, though. More likely some scholarly snot had put a crew together to come explore, the scholar seeking knowledge while their compatriots sought the same as the brigands.

Given the presence of the children, I was confident these were not marauders, and there likely wasn't but a warrior or two among them, just

for protection.

More often than not, ventures such as these ended in failure. Not for the snobbish scholar. They'd fill parchments with what they'd seen. But for the starry-eyed scavengers, they'd find naught but bones long picked.

Likely that was what the group was thinking as they continued exploring, their hopes diminishing.

What they did not realize was that they *had* dug up something.

My dearest devil was convinced they did not understand the value of what they had unearthed. In fact, he assured me, they'd left it where they'd found it. He'd said it would look like a simple round stone, blackened and charred.

It was, however, an item of some power.

Something they had awakened without even realizing.

Something my devil desired.

That was my task.

To fetch it.

And to do so quickly.

If it were up to me, I would have waited for them to clear out and then gone hunting.

But alas, it was not up to me.

I had been instructed to move quickly and not to wait. All innocence, my devil had assured me others would be coming. That he wouldn't have been the only one to have sensed this awakening.

Whether that was true, I could not say.

It was my devil's way to feign innocence, especially with jobs like this. It wasn't unusual for him to send me on an errand to fetch something, claiming that time was of the essence. He'd force me into a hurry, which would no doubt land me in trouble. Usually the fighting kind. Afterward, while my blade was still wet, he'd berate me for my violent tendencies. He'd assure me he'd not intended me to cause such harm. That was his way.

Likely this was the same and he wished for me to inflict harm on the innocent scavengers, and for no reason save his own amusement. But he could not ask me directly. Could not demand it. He *could* demand that I march into the ruins and steal from them. And if they treated me as a brigand and attacked, then my devil would claim innocence ever afterward.

How could he have known? How could he be to blame for my cruel actions?

I would not have been surprised to discover that this supposed object of power was a lie as well. Nothing more than a pebble, just an excuse, so that I might inflict more wickedness in his name.

Then again…

A hooded figure appeared from the trees, marching slowly toward the entrance to the tombs. They came not from the direction of the camp, but from…elsewhere. This was not one of the scavengers. Not someone I had seen before.

Interesting.

As the figure approached the dark entrance, they paused, their hooded head turning toward me.

A chill ran down my spine.

From a distance, I couldn't see their eyes. Couldn't make out anything save for a long, white, wispy beard. Yet I felt sure he was staring at me. That he was looking right at me.

There was no way he could have seen me from where I hid among the brush.

Yet he was surely staring right at me.

What, then? Another devil? Some sorcerer? If devils were real, along with their magic, then why not sorcerers? Why not something else, hiding in the skin of a man?

Whatever—or whoever—this was, I had the overwhelming sense that I was not his match.

And that… That made my heart beat more quickly.

If he were beyond my measure…

Then, he could kill me, and honestly so. Mayhap I had found someone who could defeat me despite my best efforts, leaving me dead and my contract intact.

The hooded figure hobbled forward, disappearing into the shadows of the ruins.

I waited a few heartbeats and made to follow.

The entrance looked an awful lot like a cave, which was appropriate because that was what the interior looked like as well.

Perhaps it was no surprise that this place had remained forgotten for so long. Hidden deep in the forest, appearing as little more than a cave, who

might have stumbled upon it save for a hunter? And they wouldn't have entered for fear it was the den of a bear, cat, or some other beastie.

I kept my wits about me, but moved with haste. My orders were to secure the prize, and I had to keep up appearances. My devil's eyes were ever on me, even in this dark place.

The scavengers had set up torches along the path, ensuring they had light by which to move. I was grateful, for otherwise I would've been stumbling about in the dark.

I traversed the first tunnel, seeing no signs of that strange figure with the wispy beard.

The tunnel led into a wide chamber with multiple intersecting paths to choose from. Here were the first signs this was not merely some beast's cave. There were carvings along the wall and ancient writings, likely in some forgotten tongue. Certainly I could not read them. There were crumbling statues as well, ones which may have once held the visages of men, but now could be mistaken for mere stones if one didn't look closely enough.

The scavengers had set more torches around this chamber, though there remained plenty of darkened corners and shadowed recesses.

It seemed they'd placed torches only where they'd previously explored, or so I assumed. There were three tunnels with lights before them. The others remained dark. Surely the artifact I sought would be down one of the lit ones. And surely there I'd find the stranger, too.

My heart raced again at the thought.

I started forward, choosing a path at random.

Before I reached the tunnel, a voice called out from behind me, "Greetings and salutations."

I paused.

The voice was that of an elderly man, the words spoken calmly and without menace.

I turned to find the stranger a short distance behind me, a gnarled staff in his hand. It was pointed at my chest.

His face remained shadowed in the dim light, but I could see his long white beard well enough.

I did not reply to his greeting.

"You have a stench about you, lad," he said, studying me. Moments passed before he spoke again. "Ah, I see. It is the stench of devilry, is it

not?”

Again, I did not reply.

I considered my options. If I charged him, raising my sword and shield, would my devil buy the act? Would he think I intended to fight and remain true to our deal, despite my untimely demise? Whatever I did, I had to make it look good. Had to make it seem I was loyal to the last.

A greater fear rose in me then. What if this old man was not a threat? What if I merely charged forward and cut him down, another death to my tally?

“Are you so lost to your master that you cannot speak?” the old man asked. Now his voice held a bit of menace. “Are you a man turned such monster that you are no longer capable of words? Or do you simply think me beneath you? Perhaps you were never a man. What devil do you serve?”

“I…” The words came from me unbidden. “I know not his name.”

“Of course not.” The old man chuckled. “So, here it is, then. I’ll not allow you to harm these explorers, lad. Whatever wickedness you intended, it ends here.”

The staff rose.

Yet he hesitated.

Please.

I nearly shouted it.

Nearly begged him.

Just end it. Please.

“Will you say no more?” he asked. “Will you not beg or seek penance?”

Gods, please just do it!

I’d have to charge him. That was all there was to it.

I began reaching for my sword, near giddy with anticipation. This was it. This was my chance to be free…

A cry sounded from the tunnel at my back.

A child’s cry.

Her cry.

I ran.

I raced toward her cry, ignoring the bright flash of light striking where I’d just stood.

I had to get to her.

Had to help her.

Some part of my broken mind tried to remind me it could not be her. The greater part of my mind, just as broken, or maybe more so, denied that truth as foolery.

That cry.

Such anguish and horror. Pure terror.

There were more shouts and screams, these from adults. I cared little for them. It was her scream I had heard. Her voice to which I fled.

Down the tunnel in an all-out sprint, I no longer cared if the scavengers saw me. I could no longer afford to hide. *She* needed me.

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From a Nightmare

The stench of raw meat attacked my senses as I entered the next chamber, this one nearly as large as the last.

The first thing I noticed were the bodies strewn about, some of them in pieces.

And blood.

So much blood.

Some of it gathered in pools while more painted the floor in smeared brush-strokes.

Around the perimeter, hugging the wall and huddled together, were what scavengers remained alive. Most of them, anyway.

There, in the center, was a beast unlike any I'd seen before, a creature worse than anything from my nightmares.

Easily twice my height, it stood on eight spindly legs, not unlike a spider. Yet it had a torso like a man but with pale, translucent skin. I could see its ribs beneath its flesh and the dark meat pulsing beneath them. Black blood pumped through its veins. Its fingers extended as long, needle-like talons, each dripping crimson. And its head…

It was a misshapen, human-like skull, with translucent skin stretched tight. It had no eyes, this creature from the dark. And there were slits where its nose should have been. It did have a mouth, though, one full of razor-sharp teeth. Those, too, dripped with blood.

And standing before it, rigid as a statue, was a young lass, a girl of only eight or ten years.

Not *her*, I realized, my senses finally returning.

Of course not. *Daft fool.*

Yet my feet carried me onward.

I cursed them, those treacherous feet.

For what hope did I have against such a monster?

If my devil were watching… If my devil saw it rend me to pieces, then my deal would be broken, for I had not been tasked with saving a child from a nightmarish beast. Yet…

I jumped between the lass and the monster, raising my shield.

Over my shoulder I cried, “Run!”

The talons came down, slamming against my shield.

Thunder roared. Lightning raced up my shoulder. The impact knocked me right off my feet.

I landed hard, my arse aflame.

But my rugged old shield, that same one I’d carried in war, did its job for me again. It never let me down, that bonny chunk of metal.

Raising my head, I saw the girl remained where she was. It was no small fortune I hadn’t plowed her over when I’d been swatted down.

But she still stood before the beast. Helpless.

Time slowed as I took in the scene.

Around the perimeter, the few remaining scavengers watched in horror, too terrified to lend aid. It irked me that none were brave enough to jump in. But then, perhaps those with heart had already tried. They were the ones in pieces strewn about the floor.

The beast reared, making ready to strike.

The girl remained rooted.

I rolled up to my knees, knowing I could not get between them in time.

There was but one thing I could think to do.

I hurled my sword at the monster.

My old longsword wasn’t made for chucking. It was weighted for hacking, chopping, and stabbing. Still, it didn’t let me down, either. It sailed true, end over end, burying in the monster’s chest.

The beast let out a high-pitched roar, head tilted toward the ceiling. It was hurt, and it was furious, but not undone. Moments. That was all I had bought.

I scooped up the child and raced toward the remaining scavengers.

I’d only made it a few steps when one of them shouted, “Behind you!”

I shoved the child toward a woman who stood waiting, arms outstretched.

Then I turned to face the nightmare.

A stone dropped in the pit of my stomach even as my balls drew up tight, as though my guts were pulling everything toward my center for protection.

What was I doing?

This wasn't my mission. This wasn't what I'd been told to do.

If I died now…

It didn't matter.

My decision had been made.

There was nothing left for it.

Without my sword, which was still firmly planted in the monster's chest, I had naught but my shield to protect me.

It may have saved me from the previous attack, but it had not gone unscathed. The beast's talons had scraped a trail into the metallic surface, leaving it scarred. Better that than my flesh.

The monster raised its talons and skittered on its spider legs, racing toward me.

Roaring, I charged in to meet it.

In the moment before we collided, I wondered what the lads would have thought, those brave soldiers I'd fought, bled, and served beside. What would they say, if they saw me race toward some hell-beast with naught but a shield. Would they have charged along with me? Would the captain have given me a proper chewing for my foolishness?

The monster, realizing I was racing toward it, came up short, as if surprised.

It was about to be more so.

I swung with my shield, hammering one of those talon-tipped arms. I punched with all I had, landing the blow against its forearm. The result was a satisfying pop as the bone shattered, leaving its hand hanging limp.

My victory was short-lived.

It swung back at me with its other arm, hammering my shield again. Same as before, the force was inhuman, and once more I found myself on my arse.

It was on me in a moment, spindly spider legs pressing down, holding me. They pinned my shield, too, so I couldn't bring it to bear.

This was it.

No way to defend myself.

No way to stop what came next.

I stared up at its black face, at the spot where its eyes should have been, glaring my defiance at the nightmare.

I only hoped that my devil would continue to make good on our deal. That he would not see this as a breach of contract.

It was all I had, the one measure of goodness my life had wrought. I had saved some of my fellows back in the army, but for what? So that they might die on another field? No, that deal with my devil was the only good I could see from my life, and the cost had been much wickedness.

I closed my eyes as the talons dropped toward my face.

A great burst of light made me open them again.

The monster was still above me, screeching as half its body was lit in white and blue flames.

White and blue? These were no normal flames.

There was no time to wonder. I had been forgotten for furious pain, and had to take advantage. The spider legs danced back from me, the creature lost in its agony.

I rolled to my hip and punched with my shield, slamming it against a leg joint. It snapped like a twig, causing the creature to stumble toward me.

I reached into the flames, not caring whether I burned with it, and grabbed hold of the hilt of my sword. It was still firmly implanted in its chest, so I used it to pull myself upward. Then I swung up with my shield, slamming it against the side of the creature's head.

Whether it even noticed me, I couldn't say. It was still screeching in agony as the flames charred its translucent skin black.

If those same flames were burning my flesh as well, I did not notice. Mayhap I was just lost in a berserker rage and didn't feel the pain. Whatever the case, the strange fire didn't slow me.

I swung again, and again, bashing the hardened edge of my shield against the side of its head, over and over.

Finally, on the last swing, my shield buried right into its skull.

With some last bit of effort, the monster back-handed me.

I felt a sense of weightlessness as I flew. I came down hard, realizing I'd struck my head.

I had but a moment to relish my impending death, and then I drifted off into nothingness.

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A Deal Fit for a Devil

I coughed.

That was my first hint I was still alive, much to my chagrin.

I tried to deny it, of course, much in the way one might refuse to awaken from a pleasant dream, realizing all the while that it was a futile gesture.

My eyes opened, bleary and half-stuck with dried tears, or something like them.

I sucked in a breath and blinked, trying to get a handle on reality.

Not dead.

I was still not dead.

My head hurt something fierce, though. I'd taken a good whack for certain, and there was a warmth about my skull, and perhaps a bit of wetness. Likely I was bleeding.

The nightmare monster lay nearby, unmoving. Its flesh was blackened from where it had burned, but my sword, still buried in its flesh, seemed unscathed. And my shield, too, was still firmly planted in its skull. Neither bore the same char.

"A brave thing you did," said a voice.

I turned, blinking, to find the old man standing a short distance away. He stared down at me, studying me while he stroked his long beard.

"The child," I said, rubbing my face. "The little girl. Is she all right?"

"She is."

"She… She was not Benne."

"Who is Benne?" he asked.

I shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts. "It matters not."

An awkward silence passed between us then. Only after a few moments did I realize he was no longer stroking his beard. Instead, he held what appeared to be a spherical stone in his hand. He was tossing it up in the air, catching it, and repeating the process, all while his eyes remained firmly stuck on me.

The artifact.

He'd found it.

Which meant…

He could still kill me. If I attacked him, he'd be forced to put me down. I could still die in the service of my devil and my contract would remain intact.

I tried to rise, but the world was unbalanced. Worse even than when my head was full of drink. I fell right back on my arse.

The old man raised a bushy eyebrow, then glanced at the stone in his hand, as if he were only just then realizing it was what I'd sought.

By the gods, if I could not walk to my death, then I would crawl. I had to ensure my devil knew I'd died trying. I *had* to.

"You know," the old man said, "sadly, I've met more than a few poor souls who were enthralled, enslaved, or otherwise in the service of a devil or demon. But I must say, you are the first I've witnessed save an innocent child. Not enthralled, then?"

I wasn't sure what that meant exactly, but I shook my head.

"Enslaved, perhaps? In servitude?"

"Something like that."

"Why?"

I tried to crawl toward him, but again, the world was too unbalanced. I fell to my side.

Sighing, I asked, "What difference does it make?"

"Mayhap none at all," he replied. Again he tossed the stone and caught it. "So, you are in the service of a devil, but you do not know his name?"

"You didn't seem surprised by that. Before."

"Nor am I now. Far too common an occurrence, if you ask me."

"I didn't ask. But…is it common? For folk to make deals with devils?"

"No," he replied with a shrug of his shoulders. "But honestly, even once is ten times too many. Wouldn't you agree? Or have you've enjoyed your service?"

"No." I looked away.

“And yet here you are. Tell me, lad, was it worth it?”

“Yes.” I still refused to meet his gaze, but I needed no time to think it over.

“Interesting.”

“Is it?” I asked, turning to face him again. He was stroking his beard once more.

“Why, of course,” he assured me. “Very interesting, in fact. And it tells me a great deal about you and your motives.”

“That so?” By this point, I was just playing along in hopes that I might recover well enough to make my move before he skittered off. I just had to make it look good.

“It is so. It tells me you did not bargain for gluttony, nor greed, nor any other perverse desire. Those who do come to regret their deals, and rather quickly, the selfish brats. Certainly they are not the type to defend an innocent child from a monster. No, you must have sought something dear to you.”

“My reasons were my own.”

“I’m sure they were. But were they good reasons?”

“I rather think so.”

“Yes, but you were daft enough to make a deal with a devil, so I’m not sure whether we should trust your judgment.”

I snorted. “Perhaps not.”

“So, am I to take it you are not inclined to share the specifics?”

I only stared at him. A few more moments, that was all I needed. Least, that was what I told myself. A few more moments, then I’d have the strength to attack.

“I’m not disappointed,” he said with a shrug. “To tell it true, it’s more fun this way. Let’s see, now. You carry a sword and shield, but you don’t carry yourself like a marauder. You *do* hold yourself like a soldier, though. Am I on the mark so far?”

“Something like that.”

“Something like that? Or the very thing?”

“The very thing.” I couldn’t say why, but I felt inclined to share this small measure of truth with him. Likely, it was simply because I hadn’t spoken to anyone in so long. I mean, sure, I talked with folk as I moved about, carrying out my tasks, but never just…conversation. I’d been alone for too long, it seemed.

“So, then,” he said, eyes narrowed as he studied me. “Did your deal have something to do with the army? A fellow soldier you hoped to save? An enemy you wished to defeat?”

I shook my head. “I was out of the army when it happened, but only just.”

“I see. Hmm. But you aren’t old enough for retirement, so you couldn’t have been in for long. Why did you leave?”

“Are you trying to solve the mystery of my deal or my short military career?”

“Would you prefer I root around in this story or that one?”

“Neither.”

“Yet here we are. So, which would you have me know?”

“Why do you care?”

“You’re a curiosity. Come now, amuse an old man.”

I sighed, but again felt the urge to share. Just not about my deal. That was for me alone. “I was discharged just before my two years were complete.”

“Would you have re-upped?”

“I was…undecided.”

“So, what happened?”

“I saw a man kick a dog.”

“You saw a man kick a dog?”

I nodded.

“And I suppose you took exception to this?”

“I did. Gave him some of the same treatment back.”

“And for that you were given the boot?”

“No, I was given the boot because he was an officer. I was but a bloody pawn.”

“Ouch,” the old man said with a chuckle. “That can’t have gone over well.”

“Worse. He was the bloody general’s son.”

“Speak true?”

“Aye.”

He replied with a hearty chuckle then. “So, I suppose that’s one mystery solved. Back to the original. So, you had already left the army when you made this deal?”

I nodded.

“And only recently out, you said?”

I nodded again.

A thoughtful look crossed his features and he mumbled, though I think it was more to himself. “I see.”

A few moments of silence passed between us. Finally, he said, “Well, let’s hear it, then, the terms of this deal. Let’s see how this devil tricked you. I can assume you were at a low point. That’s when they always come. When they can get you at your weakest.”

“I need no help to determine how I was fooled. That part is clear enough to me.”

“Is it, though? For surely you’ve caught a few whiffs of this stinky onion, but I doubt you’ve peeled back all its putrid layers, for then you’d assuredly be crying. How long is your service?”

“A year and a day.”

“A year and a day?” the old man chuckled again. “Not likely, my friend.”

“Those were the terms. I’ve already spent… I’m not sure.”

“No.” He shook his head and offered me a pitying smile. “What were the terms exactly? Do you recall?”

“There were worse bits than the length of service, I assure you.”

Again he shook his head. “No, there were doubtless some terrible terms which you believe are worse, but those were merely so you’d look the other way. Can you recall the precise words concerning your time in service?”

It was hard to think with my head still pounding, but somehow it came to me. “He said… ‘You will toil for me for a year and a day. You will provide service to me at the value of a year and a day’s effort.’ ”

“Aha,” the old man said, tapping his nose. “And there it is. He pulled the rug right out from under you, so he did.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“He did not tell you that you would be in his service for a year and day. He told you that you would provide him a year and a day’s worth of service.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Clearly, you daft duck. It’s quite simple, really. It is a measure of time spent performing the tasks, not a total measurement of time. When you eat, when you sleep, when you aren’t performing a task, then no time is being

applied. Tell me, how long have you been in his service now? If you had to guess."

I shrugged. "Close to a year, I reckon. Certainly many moons."

"And in those many moons, how many days would you say you have spent directly working on something he asked you to achieve?"

"I…don't know."

"Give it some thought. Real thought. How much time have you truly put against your debt?"

My head drooped as I realized what he was saying. In all the time I'd been in my devil's service, the actual time I'd spent doing his bidding… It was very little. An hour or two here. An hour or two there. All in all, it probably only amounted to a couple of days' worth of work.

Seeing my face, the old man continued, "And that, my friend, is how he'll keep you in his service for years to come. And when, finally, your measure has been met, if you yet live, and if you are still somewhat sound of mind, he'll get you again. For by that time, he'll have come up with some other hook. I'm afraid you're quite properly peckered."

I again tried to rise. Tried to make my way toward him so that he might be forced to kill me.

Another voice spoke into the cavern.

This one all too familiar.

It was the slithery voice of my devil.

"Caroc Blackthorn."

The old man, who was apparently called Caroc Blackthorn, turned, looking about, eyes narrowed.

My devil did not appear. He never did. At best, he might gather as a shadow to give form. More often than not, he only spoke. This was the first time he'd done so where others could hear him.

"Do not bother my pet. He has work to do."

"He's fallen a bit short, though, hasn't he?"

"Had I known you'd insert yourself in my business yet again, I might have sent someone a little more…prepared."

"But you did not," Blackthorn said, "and here we are. Me with the prize, and you with…"

He paused, pointing at me.

"Garbhan," my devil said. "Be a dear and finish your task, will you?"

I again tried to rise and fell. Still, the damned world refused to sit still.

Blackthorn snorted while my devil hissed.

“Arise, Garbhan,” my devil said. His voice did not hold its usual mirth. “Arise and take what is mine from this old fool, or I will count our deal void. Did you think I did not see? Did you think I would not watch as you threw yourself in front of that beast? And to protect some worthless meat sack? Oh, I know what game you play, Garbhan.”

As my devil spoke, Blackthorn simply watched me. Studied me. I supposed I was little threat to him. More of an amusement.

My devil continued, “You think death will allow you to escape our deal? No, no, Garbhan.”

Then he put words to my very fears.

“In death, you may find freedom, yes, but our deal will be void. For it to stand, you must remain alive and fulfill the terms of our agreement. Otherwise… Well, you know the cost, don’t you?”

I shuddered and hung my head. Even if I died in his service, it would not be enough. There was no freeing myself of him. No way to be rid of this deal, lest I broke it, and that… That didn’t even bear thinking about.

A great and terrible weight settled over me then as I realized just how well and truly cooked I was.

“And to think,” my devil said, “you nearly threw it all away over some snot of a child? You should be ashamed of yourself. But…I am nothing if not forgiving. Stand on your feet, my little soldier. Kill this wizard. Take what is mine. All will be forgiven. Refuse me or die by his hand, and I will consider our contract broken. And remember, Garbhan, if you break this contract, it is not you who will suffer.”

I didn’t reply.

He spoke to me again as if I were a child. “Nod if you understand.”

I nodded, and again tried to find my feet. I nearly made it, but the world was still too unbalanced.

I fell, defeated.

No.

No, I couldn’t be defeated. I had to do this. *Had* to.

“Mayhap we’re all getting a bit ahead of ourselves,” Blackthorn said, again tossing the stone and catching it. “Clearly, devil, your man isn’t fit for duty. Perhaps we could strike a deal of our own.”

There was no reply for several seconds.

Finally, my devil's voice spoke. That edge of humor had returned to him. "You would make a deal with me, wizard? You, of all people?"

Blackthorn shrugged. "I'm feeling a bit charitable, at least for the moment. Would you hear me out, devil? Or are you too proud to listen to what an old wizard might offer?"

A growl was the only reply.

Blackthorn chuckled and continued tossing the stone.

Finally, my devil spoke again. "Speak quickly, wizard, for I have little appetite for your company."

"Fortunate that you aren't really here, then, isn't it?" The old man cackled to himself. "But fair enough. We both know what it is I've found. We both know why the other seeks it. But to tell it true, old devil, I'm not so partial. So, how about a trade?"

"You would…trade me for it?"

"I would."

"And what do you desire?"

Blackthorn didn't respond straight away. Instead, he again studied me and stroked his beard. Finally, he pointed at me. "I would take his service, as it is owed. I would have you forfeit his debt to me. You will sever all ties with him. But you will make good on what you owe him. Whatever deal was struck between you, you will continue to uphold after I have given you this item in my hand."

My devil didn't respond. Neither did I.

I was surprised by his silence, though, for it seemed a fair trade.

What was I to him? Nothing. I was replaceable. In fact, I suspected he had others like me already. Surely I was not the only fool to have agreed to one of his thorny promises.

But if he agreed, he'd gain something he desired. Otherwise, I'd be forced to attack this Blackthorn, who indeed seemed to be a wizard real and true, and he'd certainly kill me, and then my devil would end this game empty-handed.

My head had been banged about and I wasn't so sure I was thinking clearly. Yet it seemed to me there was but one logical conclusion.

Finally, my devil spoke. "Why?"

The wizard shrugged. "As I said, I'm feeling charitable."

My devil laughed. There was no sound I hated more than his cackle. "You have grown soft, Caroc."

“Perhaps.”

Another pause.

“Hear me well, wizard. If this is another of your tricks…”

Blackthorn made a show of sighing. “Oh, never mind, then. We’ll just let this poor sot die and I’ll be on my way with this little trinket, if it’s of no—”

“Fine,” my devil said. “You have a deal. Hand it over.”

A gray cloud formed in the air, swirling just above my head, like a magical tether of some sort. Or was it a leash? Yes, that would have been more fitting. I was but a dog to him, was I not?

The wizard tossed the stone right toward it, and for a moment I thought it would strike me in the head. Instead, it disappeared into the cloud and was gone.

My devil’s voice spoke to me one last time. “Farewell, Garbhan Duhallow. It was a pleasure doing business with you.”

And then his voice was gone. With it went the cloud, disappearing in a moment.

But what was more…

It felt as though a weight was lifted off me. As if some shadow had been forced away by the coming daylight. As if a mountain had been lifted off my very back.

The wizard, Caroc Blackthorn, came to kneel beside me, raising his staff.

I jerked back from him, wondering if he planned to kill me after all.

“Easy,” Blackthorn said as he pushed his staff against my skull. “This won’t heal you entirely, but should get you back on your feet long enough for us to conclude our business here.”

“Our business?”

A grin appeared behind that wispy beard. “You know, I’m quite versed at dealing with devils and demons. That’s why I insisted he sever all ties to you. It was what allowed his presence to appear here. That gone, he’ll have to send another minion. Or, if he’s capable, come himself. That would be… less than ideal. Best we hurry.”

“Why would he come after us? He got what he wanted, did he not?”

“Not quite. First, I assure you he isn’t happy with either of us. Devils don’t like losing their pets. They tend to be a bit stingy, you know? Nor do

they like dealing with wizards. I can assure you he's rather annoyed, and annoyed devils are… Well, as I said, best we hurry."

"And?"

"And?" he repeated back, raising a bushy eyebrow.

"You said that was the 'first' reason, implying there was a second."

"Well, aren't you just a clever crumpet?" He rolled his eyes at me. "I suppose I did say that, didn't I?"

"And?" I asked once more.

He gave me a sheepish smile. "And he may have just discovered that he didn't *quite* get what he thought he was bargaining for."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"Do you always ask so many questions?"

"Only since a wizard pointed out I was bamboozled by a devil."

He narrowed his eyes at me. "Well played. Though I'm not sure I like you, Garbhan."

"Then you shouldn't have traded for me. Now, tell me, what you meant when you said he may not have gotten what he bargained for."

"Well, I offered him what was in my hand, did I not?"

"Yes…"

"And what was in my hand was…a rock."

"A rock?"

"Yes, a rock. A rather pretty one, too, I must say. Did you see how perfectly cylindrical it was? Just marvelous."

I stared at him, not quite believing. "So, wait. You didn't give him the magical artifact?"

"Are you daft? Of course not! What sort of wizard goes around trading objects of power to bloody devils? The nasty buggers are quite nasty enough, thank you very much."

"So, it was…just a rock?"

"No, it was a very pretty rock. Are you listening to me at all?" He grabbed me by the shoulder and helped me to my unsteady feet. I was surprised by his strength. "So, for the third time, we'd best hurry, because if I'm not mistaken, you, my friend, sold your services to one of the nastiest devils in the bunch. Hard to tell, really. They all sort of sound the same. But I think that was one of the less friendly and more awful of the lot. One of the big'uns, as it were. *And* I just tricked him into trading you away for a

bloody rock, albeit a very pretty one. Despite that, I suspect that right about now, he's cursing both of us to the hells and back."

"Was that…wise?"

"Almost certainly not. Ah, but I'd have loved to have seen the look on his face. Wouldn't you? And you, my friend, should stop asking daft questions. Don't you know to never look a gift wizard in his beard?"

"What?"

"Meh. Doesn't matter."

I hadn't fallen again, so I eased myself from his grip, ensuring I could stand on my own. When I didn't tumble, I asked, "So, what happens now?"

"Now, we're going to go find that artifact and make it out of here quick as a cat. Or a pair of cats, being that there are two of us."

"I meant…"

"Your service?" he asked. "Ah, yes, well, we'll figure that out, won't we? For the moment, just take assurance in the fact you've escaped a deadly devil only to end up in the hands of a wicked wizard. What could possibly go wrong, eh?"

To that, I had no reply.

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In the Service of the Wizard

It may seem a wicked thing to be tethered by magical contract. To be tied to another, be they devil or man.

Indeed, it is.

And yet it was not such a terrible thing to be tied to the wizard. Not when one considered who he'd untethered me from. When the deal was done, with me now in a sorcerer's custody, I remained in fear. For as Blackthorn had put it, I had escaped a deadly devil only to end up in the hands of a wicked wizard.

But that was a lie.

The most wicked thing about the wizard was his wit.

Caroc Blackthorn did not treat me as a slave, nor even as a servant. He was neither vile nor cruel. Instead, he took me to his home, where I would have a chance to work off my debt.

I believe true that he would have freed me of my oath, but I refused any such talk, for I feared the consequences. I hadn't made the deal I'd made for foolish notions, nor even selfish ones. I'd made the deal and plunged myself into the service of another so that…

Let us leave it there and say only that I still very much desired the same outcome for which I had pledged myself. Yes, I had been duped by a being beyond my wit and wisdom. The consequences to me were great, but put in the same position again, I would have done so again.

Blackthorn shared my concern, unconvinced that my end of the bargain was guaranteed in the exchange if he released me without me having fulfilled the requirements. He reasoned that even though the devil had traded my service for that very pretty rock, I was still dependent on that

very same devil to deliver on what I had traded for in the first place. Given any loophole, he would surely go back on it. So, my best bet was to ensure I fulfilled my end of the contract by delivering the remainder of a year and a day's worth of service to the wizard.

I would take no chances.

Besides, I had nowhere else to go. Nothing else to do. My family… They were…lost to me, let us say. I would never, and will never again, see the face of anyone who shares my blood.

Before I made that deal, I was a young man returned from war. Two years of toiling in the killing fields. Two years of watching friends die and dealing my fair share of death. I had no desire to return to war.

But I wished to grow a potato about as much as I wished to swing a sword. Which is to say, not at all. I did not wish to follow in my father's footsteps, may he rest in peace.

No desire to farm. No desire to fight. Yet I knew nothing else.

When I made that desperate deal, I was a man come apart. There was nothing and no one left to me. Everything was gone.

So, it was just as well that I stayed and served the wizard.

Besides, I found need of his protection, for as my previous master had pulled the wool over my eyes, so had the wizard pulled the wool over his. Blackthorn was certain my devil would want revenge, pretty rock or no.

So, despite his jest about wicked wizards, this was the truth of it: I had escaped one deadly devil only to end up in the hands of a *wise* wizard. Not a wicked one.

Looking back, I can say that with certainty. Forget whatever stories you may have heard of the wizard Caroc Blackthorn. Disregard whatever rumors you may have been told. The truth is, he was, and hopefully remains, not just a wise wizard but indeed a great man. The best among us. And in the end, he may not have been the one who saved me, but he certainly pulled me from the flames. He freed me from a devil after all.

And so we ventured to his home.

I found myself in a small cottage outside a sleepy hamlet, not so different from the one in which I was raised. The back of his place butted up against a quiet forest. On the other side was a lovely view into the valley and hamlet below.

His cottage was made of stone, laid piece by piece in the old way. It seemed rather cozy from the outside, but within, the builders had made

clever work of the space. There was a kitchen, of course, and though small, it was open to an ample dining area. There was a larger sitting room just around the corner. There were also two bedrooms in the back, as well as a washroom and another, larger room, perhaps once intended to be a bedroom, which I came to think of as the Wizard's Room. It was not where he slept. He had one of the small bedrooms for that, when he bothered. No, the Wizard's Room was where he worked. Where he brewed his concoctions, performed his spells, and did whatever it was wizards did.

You may find it strange that a sorcerer had a spare bedroom, for they are known for being reclusive types. And it is true, to a degree. Blackthorn often spent days and weeks in solitude, totally focused on one task or another. Often he wouldn't even speak to me. Before I came to live with him, he may have gone months without even seeing another person. Despite that, and me knowing him very little at the start, he made quite a fuss about having to give up his spare room, for where would he put up his guests? I thought this a jest, so I gladly told him I would camp outside when he had company. That, perhaps, was another bit of foolishness on my part. I have never been a clever man.

In the time I lived with him, the wizard received many guests. Witches, wizards, sorcerers, and all other sorts traveled from far and wide to pay him respects. Many were old friends or acquaintances. Some I would come to learn were enemies, but he put them all up just the same. Others were important types, come to seek his counsel at the behest of some lord or other.

Always, when forewarned of their coming, Blackthorn would pout and fuss and groan and cuss. On and on, he'd froth about, complaining to me or the walls, whichever of us bothered to listen. He'd claim he'd refuse the presumptuous would-be visitor and turn them away. He'd work himself up into such a fit, I often worried over his health. I'll never forget that first time he informed me we were to receive a guest. The tizzy he worked himself into.

I can remember clearly, I asked, "If it's such a bother, why not refuse them?"

"Refuse them?" he repeated back. "Are you daft, my boy? We can't merely refuse them!"

"But you said…" I shook my head and tried a different tact. "Why?"

"Because."

“Because?”

“Because that would be rude, you knuckle-ninny! And wizards are never one thing. Do you know what that one thing is?”

I remember smiling at this, for it was a phrase he often used, only changing whatever the *one* thing was to fit whatever point he was trying to make. I had learned that the *one* thing wizards never were was daft, too intelligent, too merry, and certainly never smelly. Don’t ask about that last one. It involved some new spell he’d tried. I never learned what it was meant to accomplish, for it had failed stupendously, but had involved the three goats he kept penned outside, and, well… You get the idea.

At any rate, Blackthorn would cuss and fuss about his pending guests right up until the moment they arrived, at which time he would greet them with open arms and a big smile, beckoning them in. Then, more often than not, especially if it were friend or foe—come to think of it, more especially if it were a foe—they’d drink the night away in a raucous fit. They’d laugh and carry on such that folk in the hamlet would hear their merriment. It was that, more than anything, that made the poor hamlet folk wary of the wizard.

And good to my word, I’d give up my room and sleep outside or in the small storage shed, if it was too cold for the stars. The next morn, I’d sort breakfast and deal with the fallout of Blackthorn’s hangover. To which he’d claim that the one thing a wizard never was, all while rubbing his forehead, was hung-over.

At any rate, I had my own room, save for when we had company. Which was a sight better than sleeping under the stars or bouncing from inn to inn as I had before. An improvement, to be certain.

And I was no longer alone. At the start, I had an uneasy companion in Blackthorn, and he was, as his reputation would have it, a cantankerous sort. That much you can count true. For he was every bit as stubborn, fussy, and ornery as the stories would have him be. But never cruel, nor spiteful, as some would have you believe. Certainly not wicked. No, Caroc Blackthorn was none of those things. In time, I saw through all that noise and valued him as a dear friend and a mentor, of sorts, though I’m sure he’d have colorful thoughts on the matter.

As I have said, he was a great man.

A man I came to admire and respect.

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My Debt

You may wonder how I set about paying off my debt.

There's something you must understand about my debt to begin with.

I had no way with which to measure it. No way to know how much progress I had made.

This was, in truth, another way in which I had been duped, and something I did not understand until I met the wizard.

Few folk believe such devils even exist. They are more faery tale than reality. Even now, as I am telling you this, you may doubt my words. Sure, I am under enchantment to tell naught but the truth, but you may think me mistaken. Misled. That I was fooled even in that, believing that it was a devil who had ensnared me. That is fine. I do not require your belief. I only require, if you are to join me in this tale, that you understand my debt was of a magical nature.

My devil was a tricky bastard, so he was. Not only had he set my tasks so that I earned back little time, but he seemed to know me. Seemed to understand my mind. Always, his tasks pushed me just to the edge of what I might refuse, but never quite over the mark. But surely, over time, the gap widened, and I was more willing to do his wicked work.

I was a fool. What's more, I was a wicked fool. I could stand upon a metaphorical pedestal and say I never harmed a child nor committed foul deeds against a woman, but that is little comfort when I am forced to reflect on the things I *did* do. I *was* a wicked man, one who deserved a very real pillory. I did little good in those days, always convincing myself that the cost was worth the prize.

But I have digressed.

Blackthorn understood how I had been duped. He understood a little better once he'd taken on the magic of my debt, but even he wasn't so sure how it all worked. It intrigued him, though. Gave him something to study, for which he was always grateful.

As for how I would work off my debt?

I can still remember my arrival at his cottage.

It was a cozy home, sure, but…

Wizards tend to collect things. Or at least, Blackthorn did. Also, wizards tend not to be bothered by superfluous things like a dirty home. One does not have time for scrubbing the floors whilst one is busy learning the secrets of the universe. One cannot be bothered with washing dishes whilst one is busy reading ancient tomes. And what of shoveling shit from the goats' pen? Certainly not when there are new spells to practice.

So, it was that.

I became the wizard's housekeeper.

It was not easy going. At least, not at first.

The problem was not the work. Never the work. I'd been raised on a farm, after all. Then a soldier. No, work and discipline proved no challenge for me.

The damned wizard did.

You see, he'd grown comfortable in his clutter. He'd gotten used to having his dishes piled on the floor so that he might use his cabinets for spell ingredients. In his Wizard's Room, on the shelves intended for those same ingredients, he'd stacked ancient tomes, while his bookshelves were piled high with knick-knacks. He'd long run out of space for the various trinkets he'd found, so he stacked them high upon his dinner table, the floor, my new bed, and anywhere else that seemed appropriate to his whims. Wizards, it seemed, had little time for organization, despite his many claims that the one thing a wizard never was, was disorganized.

He would mill about his house, cranky, and tugging at his beard, mumbling to himself about where he'd put this or that. Yet whenever I tried to organize, he'd work himself into a tizzy, barking about how he'd never be able to find anything if I rearranged everything.

And when I did move something? When I did slip some order into the chaos?

He’d fall into a screaming frenzy. He’d threaten me, he would. He’d say he’d turn me into a newt. Or that I should plan to wake up with a tail the following morn. Those were the milder of his threats. Many were far worse.

Once I stumbled upon a box which contained a pair of women’s shoes. Fancy dress shoes, they were. Red with little sparkling bits that shone in the sunlight. The sort a woman of high society would roam about in, but only on special occasions. Shoes for a proper lady with more wealth than sense.

The wizard came uncorked when I moved them, swearing that they were of the utmost importance, and that should we need them, they’d best be easy to find. What sort of emergency might arise where an old wizard might find himself in desperate need of a pair of sparkling ladies’ heels? I couldn’t say, and he was too far into his fit to bother to explain. The box with the shoes was placed atop a shelf and easy to find, should his shoe emergency arrive unexpectedly.

It didn’t take me long to find the humor in his threats. They weren’t real, you see? This was not the wrath of some dark wizard. No, these were the protests of an elderly man who’d lived on his own for too long. The truth, I realized, was that he appreciated my efforts. And after a time, instead of tugging his beard, mumbling to himself, and walking about in circles, he’d simply ask me where to find what he was looking for.

“Garbhan, where is my volume on southern horticulture and herbs?”

“It’s on the bookshelf, Caroc.”

“Hmm,” he would reply, tugging that damned beard. “Where abouts?”

“It’s in alphabetical order.”

“So?”

“Bookcase on the right. Third shelf from the bottom, if memory serves.”

“I see,” he would reply, rolling his eyes. “That’s why I couldn’t find it! You moved it yet again! And who organizes a bookshelf that way anyhow?”

“A fool, Caroc. Doubtless a fool.”

“Ha,” he’d snort. “Least you know it.”

But back at the start, during those first few days, when he was still fighting me about sorting his mess, we stumbled upon something curious about my debt. Or at least, he did.

I had been busying myself with choring while he sat in his favorite chair in a contemplative silence. This was not unusual. When the wizard had

something on his mind, he'd sit for hours, staring off at nothing, only ever breaking his trance to relight his pipe.

During one of these times, he called out to me, summoning me to him.

"Garbhan," he said. "Come here, would you?"

I moved into the sitting room to see what he might need. To my surprise, he motioned for me to sit with him. He'd had no qualms about me sitting in the sitting room, for that was its purpose. I was only restricted from bothering him in his Wizard's Room while he worked. Otherwise, he'd made it clear I had the run of the house, but he'd never invited me to sit with him, for at that time we were still strangers, barely comfortable in each other's presence.

Unease gripping my guts, I took a seat, fearing news of my devil.

I watched as he puffed on his pipe and stared at the wall.

After a time, I thought he had forgotten me and was about to return to my choring when he finally spoke. "I've discovered something curious about your curse."

"My curse?"

"Your debt," he said, glancing over at me. "It's sort of a curse."

"Oh."

"The mechanics are the same, at least."

"The mech… What?"

"Never mind that." He waved the notion away and took another pull from his pipe. "It's to say your debt works like a curse. You are bound to it until the conditions are fulfilled."

"Right," I said with a nod. This was not news to me.

He narrowed his eyes as if I were speaking out of turn.

I waited.

"I've noticed something peculiar. How many days have you been here now?"

I blinked at him, thinking this a jest. But studying his face, I realized it wasn't a joke. He truly didn't know.

"Three days," I said.

"Three days? Is that all? By the gods, I would've thought it had been weeks, what with you always bumping about, making noise, and carrying on. How will I survive this torment?"

I crossed my arms and glared at him. "Is there a point?"

“Yes, of course there’s a point, you dullard. The point is you have, apparently, spent three days moving my stuff around, much to my dismay, and attempting to clean this old place up, despite it being the embodiment of cleanliness.”

I raised an eyebrow at that.

He rolled his eyes again and said, “My point is that despite your misguided efforts, you’ve clearly been working on my behalf.”

“Yes.”

“And your debt has not been reduced. Not one bit.”

“Are you sure?” I asked, leaning forward.

“Of course I’m sure,” he said in a huff. “There is one thing a wizard never is, Garbhan. Do you know what it is?”

“Sure?”

“Unsure, you sour egg.”

“Right, then,” I replied, not taking his insult for the bait it was. “So, what does that mean?”

“How should I know?” he replied. “But it’s curious, is it not?”

“Curious is a word one might use.”

“Don’t get smart, lad. Let us not forget, you are the fool who landed himself in the debt of a devil.”

“I haven’t forgotten. But if I can’t repay the debt…”

“Are you listening to me?” His eyes narrowed. He was a hair’s breadth from one of his fusses.

“I… Yes, Caroc. But you might have to explain more…thoroughly. I am a dullard, you know. A bit thick in the skull.”

“Right. Right.” He nodded along, happy with my self-assessment. “It seems you cannot clear your debt by toiling for me at your own whim. Least, that’s what I suspect. We’ll have to put a bit of effort into understanding this curse of yours. I’m quite intrigued by it. I wish to understand how it works.”

“You and me both.”

Again, the old coot rolled his eyes. “Clearly. That’s why you asked so many questions before being bound to it. Oh, don’t give me that sour look. Had you the foresight to ask questions, we’d better understand how it works.”

“If I’d had better foresight, I may not have made a deal with a devil, and you’d not have this delightful mystery to solve.”

“Come now, you day-old donkey. We both know you’ll never be wise enough for all that. Now, tell me, what chore were you busying yourself with just now?”

Instead of reminding him that *just now* I’d been waiting several minutes for him to speak, I said, “I was sweeping the kitchen floor.”

“Sweeping the kitchen floor?”

“Yes?”

“Why? My kitchen floor is spotless. Mayhap that’s the problem. Could I have it all wrong? Yes. If the task isn’t warranted…”

“Plenty of the tasks my devil set me to were unwarranted.”

“Are you sure?”

“Quite. And your floor is a bloody mess. Some crotchety wizard tracked mud through the kitchen.”

“Who?” he asked, seeming genuinely confused. “There was another wizard here? Why in the blazes didn’t you tell me?”

“No, Caroc… What is your point?”

He harrumphed, not unlike a child, before finally saying, “I think I may have to instruct you to complete the task, or it doesn’t count. So, Garbhan, despite the fact my kitchen floor is in pristine condition, go forth and clean it for me, will you?”

And so I did.

I’d only been at the task for a few minutes when he shouted from the sitting room. The sound made me jump, and I feared something was amiss. A moment later, I realized it was a victorious shout, followed by a hearty laugh.

I returned to the sitting room.

He clapped his hands and beamed up at me. “That’s it, Garbhan! That did it! I can sense the tiniest bit of your debt melting away.”

“Truly?”

He rolled his eyes. “Of course! Do you take me for a fool? Do you know what the one thing a wizard never is?”

“Yes, yes,” I replied, waving him down. “So, I can’t merely chore for you. You have to instruct me to complete each task?”

“That seems to be the measure of it. We’ll have to test further, of course. Oh, this is exciting, isn’t it? What is better than unraveling the intricacies of a curse?”

“Not being cursed in the first place?”

He sighed and shook his head. “Away with you, dullard! Back to cleaning my floor!”

And so I did.

As the days passed, we tried different things. Different ways for him to instruct me. For example, we tested whether he could merely suggest he wanted something done, or if he had to ask, or demand it. It was the latter, of course, but there didn’t seem to be any tricks. Once, just before bed, he ordered me to go lie down and sleep. That did nothing for my debt.

It may seem a simple thing, that he merely needed to order me about. And at first, it was. But then he grew bored with the whole game, and, well… That was when the proper work began. My greatest chore became getting him to give me chores.

Each morning, if I were lucky enough to find him in his sitting room and not otherwise engaged, our conversation went like this…

“Good morn, Caroc. What would have me do today?”

“Huh?” he’d asked, barely noticing me. “Garbhan? Are you still here?”

“I am indeed.”

“Whatever for?”

“We still have the matter of my debt to settle.”

“Speak true? I thought we sorted that out months ago.”

“We did not. So, please, what tasks would you have me do today?”

“Didn’t I already give you a list?”

“That was yesterday.”

“Was it? Hmm. Fine, then. What do you want to do today?”

Then I’d come up with a list of things I thought needed doing.

If I wasn’t always lucky enough to catch him in his sitting room, it proved much more challenging. Often, he would work straight through the night on one project or another. Or if he slept, he’d be up before the sun, back in his Wizard Room, toiling away. During those times, he hated to be disturbed.

The conversation would start out much the same, but end with an eye roll and a comment such as, “Oh, bother. Just give me a short while, will you? I’m nearly finished here!”

The problem was that we’d repeat some version of the same conversation when I returned. Again. And again.

As I’ve said, I have never been a clever man. In fact, it could be argued I was a bit slow on the uptake. But I was crafty enough to build a list of

daily chores. As a child, my mother had insisted I learn to read and write. I wasn't well-educated, but I knew how to scribble most of the words I needed. Enough to make a list.

The wizard had parchment aplenty and a quill and inkwell. Didn't mean he was keen on sharing them, but I made use of them just the same and wrote out my list. That made our daily bouts somewhat less painful, for I merely needed him to read it like a script and instruct me to do each thing.

Often I'd have additional items, but those were easy enough to remember. Like the time the roof was leaking. Blackthorn didn't think it was worth the fuss, but I insisted he instruct me to fix it.

After a time, though, I quit bothering with having him instruct me on those extra items. I just did them. And sometimes, if he were in a fuss, I wouldn't bother having him read the list at all.

I grew comfortable there, living alongside that crotchety wizard. And it wasn't all toil for the sake of my debt. He taught me a few bits about magic. Not to be a practitioner, of course, but to know what to look for. How to spot things out of the ordinary. How to protect myself against various spells and workings.

Despite the fuss he'd made about me using his precious parchment, he also helped me learn to read and write better. Before long, I was allowed access to some of his library. Not the spellbooks, of course, but tomes about herbs, beasts, and the like.

And there was one other thing he helped me learn after a time.

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Sawing Strings

I found it while choring.

There were many treasures in the wizard's home. I often amused myself with fresh discoveries. Sometimes I'd stumble upon some strange trinket the likes of which I'd never seen. Or I'd find some rare artifact or a strange piece of art. Sometimes it was dusty tomes or odd tools I couldn't fathom the purpose of. Often these treasures were kicked beneath a piece of furniture or crammed behind some other treasure only to be forgotten.

Nothing dangerous, of course.

I have done my host little justice in my retelling. Where he couldn't bother himself with organization or cleanliness, he was not lax in the care of dangerous items. Those he kept a tight eye on, and made sure I knew to avoid them. I wasn't so brash as to test my luck.

At any rate, my efforts to organize my new home began with my very own bedroom. That was the one place I could clean without the wizard getting too worked up. He'd told me I could make use of the trunk there, so long as I found a safe place to store the carefully sorted belongings within.

By carefully sorted, he of course meant randomly tossed in until the trunk was overflowing.

It was fortunate I had arrived with very few worldly possessions and required little space. The trunk was more than enough for my meager belongings. Once emptied, of course.

And therein lay the challenge.

There was nowhere to put the things from the trunk. It was a game of stacking, moving, and sorting. A game that would take days, and sometimes

weeks, depending on the room.

At the start, the wizard and I interacted little, being strangers as we were. I knew him barely at all and found him to be an odd sort. And I still carried some worry that this was all some cruel ploy. I couldn't say what he thought about me. Well, other than he must have thought me a great fool for the decisions I'd made and the trouble I'd landed myself in. Aside from his fussing and cussing over my attempts to clean, and an occasional chat about my debt, we spoke very little at the beginning.

Our first hint of companionship blossomed from the two old cases I found tucked beneath my new bed.

I was clearing space to move one thing so that I might move another, so that I might move yet another, so that I might finally free up some space in the trunk, when I had a look beneath the bed. I'd already known it was crammed full of nonsense, for I could see it poking out, taunting me as a challenge I was hesitant to meet. Finally, there was no more putting it off. I needed to make use of that space.

So, I was tugging out odds and ends when I came upon a strangely-shaped case, thin at one end and thick at the other. A teardrop shape, but the entire case was only the length of a short sword. The flesh was a tanned hide stretched tightly over a hard body. The sort of case meant to protect something valuable. But what of the shape? What could it be?

I tried to push my curiosity aside, for I'd learned there were many oddities in the wizard's house, and if I stopped to examine each, I'd never accomplish a thing. Yet when I reached under the bed again, I found a second case.

Two of them.

Two of the strange teardrop cases.

My curiosity got the better of me.

I sat both of them on the bed, chose the finer of the two, flipped the latches, and swung it open.

I blinked at the instrument within.

It was similar in shape to a lute, with its oblong body, thin neck, and strings, but not nearly so large. The body was a finely polished wood with intricate swirls and designs. I knew little about instruments, but guessed it was worth a small fortune, what with the silver fixtures and the finely crafted woodwork.

"There it is!" said the wizard from behind me.

I jumped, not realizing he'd crept up on me. He had a nasty habit of that. I think it amused him, creeping up on me while I was cleaning and sorting, only giving himself away when he realized I had found something he had misplaced. Which was odd, since he was so damned sure he knew precisely where everything was. But let us not digress…

"Do you know what it is?" Blackthorn asked, moving alongside me.

I shook my head. "I know not the name. Heard one once, though. It was…"

"Beautiful?" the wizard asked.

"Yes, but…" I shook my head. "Baleful. That's what I was going to say."

He cocked an eyebrow at me.

I stammered, trying to summon words to describe my meaning. "It was just after the battle of… We had lost…"

"Take your time," Blackthorn said, watching me.

"There were four lads who'd brought instruments with them. To war, I mean. May have been against regs, but no one chided them. Three of the four, they would play together to pass the evenings. We'd all listen in. One had a lute, another a flute, and the last had a wee hand drum. The fourth had one of these." I motioned toward the case. "Or at least, I think it was one of these…"

"And he did not play with the others?"

"No. They asked him time and again. But ole Smitty, he'd just shake his head and keep his thoughts to himself. He was like that, you see? One of those what wouldn't say much. Didn't carry on. Even when the lads… Even when we gave him guff, he'd just keep on, carrying his silence. And his instrument, too. He lugged it along day after day, camp after camp, battle after battle. And, well…"

The wizard waited.

"So, this one evening, after a scrap… It was a bad one, see? And, well… We were taking count of our losses, figuring out who hadn't made it back. Captain made a bitter joke about how it would be easier to count who was left. It wasn't quite so bad, but only by a narrow margin. When the counting was done, we'd lost about a third. That was… That was the worst one. Worst I'd seen, anyway. And, well, we'd thought there'd be no music that night, for the lute player, the flute player, and the drummer had all fallen. Lost to the fray. But when we gathered about our fires, somber and

soured, ole Smitty took out his case. He played then. Played one for the lads. Played one for the dead. Or maybe it was for us still living. Can't say and often wondered. But the sound he made…"

The wizard nodded. "Baleful."

"As if those strings held all the sorrow in the world, and he could take his stick and saw it all away. Such a tune. No words, mind you. Just the song. The music. But it was… By the time he was done, there wasn't a dry eye among the bunch. And that was it. The only time. We lost him a month later at… I can't rightly remember. Guess it don't matter."

We stood in silence for a time, the wizard and I.

Finally, he said, "It's called a violin. And you may be onto something. If any instrument might capture all the sorrow in the world, it would be the violin. It can bring blossom to the beauty of our pain, so it can. But not just misery, mind you. It can summon joy, too. It can tell that tale just as well."

I nodded, unsure what to say.

He turned to look at me, raising one of his bushy eyebrows. "Would you care to learn?"

"What?" I asked. "Me? I don't think… I don't know nothing about music."

"But you can learn," he said, reaching for the other case.

The second violin wasn't as fancy as the first. The pins and fixtures were not of silver but some darker metal. Nor was the wood polished to the same sheen, nor likely of the same quality. Yet it was beautiful, too, in a different sort of way, for I could see that it was well worn. Some of the polish was faded, but not for lack of care. On the contrary, it seemed to have been polished with the same love as the other, but it bore the scars of use. Someone had spent a lot of time with this instrument.

The wizard ran his fingers over it, giving it a loving pat before finally turning to me again. "This was my first. The one I learned on."

He held it out to me.

I stared back at him, unsure what to do, for surely he understood I wouldn't know what to do with it. And besides, the loving look he'd given it… I feared I might drop it.

"Come now," he said, pushing it toward me again.

I took it from his hands and held on for dear life.

He chuckled at my discomfort. "I have not mastered music as I have magic, but I am a fair hand. It would be good to practice again, and having

a student might be just the thing to get me back into the rhythm. What say you?"

"I don't know…"

"Oh, come now. It won't be so bad. I have two, so… Listen, Garbhan. You grew up with a farmer's instruments in your hands. A hoe to plow. A shovel for shit. An ax to chop. Those didn't sing the song you desired, and so you went soldiering. And yes, yes, I know you say you only joined up so you could give your folks the signing coin to keep their farm, but seek not to fool me as you seek to fool yourself. That may well be true, but I'd dare guess you were a young lad seeking adventure, too. Seeking a new song. And so you took up the sword and shield, your new instruments. But, in time, you came to see that they did not make the tune you desired either. Do you think I do not know why you wish to clean out that trunk? For your stuff? Bah. We both know it is so you can bury that sword and shield down deep so you won't have to look upon them again."

The truth of his words stung deep, like an arrow to the heart. Swallowing the lump in my throat, I said, "And you think this might bring the song I desire?"

"Remains to be seen. We can only try and find out."

"I don't know…"

His patience ran out just then. It never took him long to fuss when he wasn't getting his way. Caroc Blackthorn was an eccentric man, no doubt, but at times also practical. He didn't need to argue. Didn't need to convince me. There were simpler means to have his way.

"Garbhan, I'm afraid I must insist. In fact, I order you to learn to play the violin. As part of the debt you owe me, I demand you set your efforts to learning the violin so that you might become proficient enough to play for me."

And that was that.

No further argument could be made.

Not that another argument would have been made, once I heard him play.

Gone, too, were my doubts. Not my doubts about learning, mind you, but my doubts about whether I wanted to. For Blackthorn had spoken true. With the bow in his grip, he summoned forth sounds of joy and sorrow, both in equal measure. Fast and fervent jigs fit for the fall festival. Somber and sorrowful songs for the solstice. Happy and hearty tunes for the turning

of spring. Salty, sweaty songs for summer. It was as if all of life lived in those strings, as real as any spell the wizard cast. This was magic, just as true.

And to create such magic by my own hand? The very thought!

Yes, I had my doubts about my ability to conquer such a beast, but I oh so desperately wished to try.

And Blackthorn was an enthusiastic teacher, albeit still a crotchety one, even at the best of times.

Most evenings we gathered in the sitting room, him barking out directions and fussing about my flaws while I tried my damnedest.

Turned out my damnedest wasn't good enough. It was slow going, my learning to play. But each time I found it helpless, thinking perhaps I should give it up, there was the wizard, as if he could read my mind. He always seemed to know when to give up the cussing and fussing in favor of encouragement and guidance.

And after a time, I began to find my way. I began to saw out something that sounded like a song. At least a part of one. With more practice, I faced entire tunes. It took me a good long while. Certainly longer than it would've taken most folk, but I stuck with it, practicing for hours every eve and near the time our first year passed, I could play a handful of songs, and most nearly properly.

Whether he was bored with hearing the same jigs or just wanted to encourage me to continue, Blackthorn would often teach me new ones.

After a time, I was the one playing our evenings away while he sat back in his chair, eyes closed, puffing on his pipe.

The violin did something else for us, too, though neither of us ever spoke it to truth. It became the catalyst upon which we built something like a friendship. To this day, I'm not sure whether Blackthorn would admit it as such, but I will.

And so, in short order, I came to truly appreciate my new home. I had my choring to keep my days busy and the violin to steal my nights away. Always, I had a full belly and a place to sleep. I was comfortable there, and after a time, something near happy.

So it was that I came to be in little hurry to clear my debt.

That, it turned out, was a mistake.

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The Thing in the Corner

Complacency kills.

Or in my case, it caught up with me, at least.

As I've said, I grew comfortable in the wizard's home. I didn't mind choring. In time, it made me rethink my position on farming. Perhaps I could have followed in my father's footsteps. It certainly beat swinging a sword. I cared little for the repetitive nature of my work, but I found joy in the completion of tasks. Whenever I felt a hint of boredom, Blackthorn would surprise me.

Wizards, or at least that old wizard, worried little about the damage he caused while testing new spells. He didn't care if he nearly burned down the house brewing some new concoction. He wasn't bothered when he smashed furniture or filled the cottage with smoke while undertaking some mad experiment. There was always something new for me to clean or fix.

And always something new for me to learn. I came into the wizard's home knowing little about construction and left knowing… Well, not a great deal more, but certainly I'd figured out how to patch roofs and walls. And with the reading and writing, my vocabulary expanded. I learned new words. Learned about other places, plants, beasts, and bits about magic. And there was the lovely violin, of course.

The fear of my devil remained ever in mind, but Blackthorn assured me he could not find us. Not there, not in his home. Despite that, after a time, I took up my sword again. I'd thought to leave it as a ghost, hidden at the bottom of the trunk, just as the wizard had called out. But that was something else he taught me. Despite his fussy nature, Caroc Blackthorn was wise indeed.

He taught me to change the way I thought about things, to consider the logic of ideas, to separate my emotion from my reality. To realize when I was putting more weight to a thing than the true measure of it, this being a trap many a folk fell into and all too often.

So it was that after some time I realized the apparition in my trunk was just that. A ghost.

The weight I felt about my sword was a manifestation of my own imagination. My sword hadn't caused the harm which ever weighed heavy on my mind.

I had.

It was I who'd done those dirty deeds. Not some chunk of steel. My blade was but a tool. It could be used for good just as easily as it had been used for evil.

So, I took to going through my forms in the yard each day, just as I'd been taught in the army.

That first time, just as I finished, I realized it was not only the goats who'd been my audience. The wizard had been, too, hidden in the cottage doorway. When he saw I was aware of him, he gave me a sharp nod and suggested I add it to my daily list. And so I did.

I had little hope that my sword would prove helpful if my devil came calling, but it might, perhaps, if he sent another of his minions. I was confident in the wizard's ability to protect us, but in this way, I might contribute should the need arise. Moreover, in this, at least, I was not complacent.

And Blackthorn made for swell company when he felt up to it. When he didn't feel up to it, though, I admit I found amusement in his fussing and cussing. There were large swaths of time I had to myself, which I preferred. Other times, the arrival of guests broke up the monotony.

And so, as I alluded to, I felt no rush to see my debt cleared. For where would I go? What would I do? I was happy. Content. Glad to stay in that little cottage so long as the wizard would have me.

The months marched on, giving way to seasons which slipped by with equal speed. I didn't keep track of the days, nor the months. Yet I couldn't help but count the years.

Two of them.

Just like my time in the army.

I was cleaning the sitting room on that fateful day.

Blackthorn had gone outside, and last I knew, was busying himself harassing those poor goats. Probably blowing raspberries at them. Feel no sorrow for the beasts, though, for they fussed and cussed nearly as much as the wizard. They certainly weren't as good of company.

At any rate, cleaning the sitting room often proved a challenge. Blackthorn had simmered over the rest of the house, having grown used to my cleaning, but he would cuss and fuss to no end if he caught me working near his favorite chair or anywhere in his Wizard Room. His bedroom, I avoided entirely.

So, I took advantage of the goats' misfortune and began sweeping up the tobacco ashes on and around his favorite chair.

As I was going about my business, I couldn't help but feel…

Like I was being watched.

That was silly, of course, for who could have entered the wizard's house uninvited?

Yet my hackles did rise, and the feeling could not be shaken.

I glanced around, seeing nothing out of place.

Frowning at myself, I set back to my work only to stop again a few moments later.

I was sure…

Again, I looked about the room. It was as cluttered as ever, for Blackthorn owned far too many things for each to have a rightful place. By that point I had it all sorted, best as could be, but it was still a fun game of his to disorganize what I had organized. In the early days, it had just been the fuss. These days, he claimed it was so that I would have more work to clear my debt. I remain convinced it was because he was a crotchety arse and found fleeting amusements in my toil.

At any rate, I saw nothing and once more shrugged off that looming feeling, trying to get back to work.

A bit of time passed again and I paused once more, mid-sweep.

I had caught sight of…something.

There in the corner of my eye.

Just a glimpse.

Here and gone again, like a dream.

Blinking, I glanced up at the shadowed corner of the room.

A pair of eyes stared back at me.

I screamed and jumped back, dropping the broom to clank against the floor.

My gaze focused on that darkened corner again.

The eyes remained.

Just below them was the hint of a smile.

It was a person, I realized, as their form took shape.

A bloody person!

A woman.

She was tucked down in a crouch, hidden among the junk, clinging to the shadows.

You may think me a fool. How could I not have noticed a woman crouched in the corner?

For one, that corner caught no light from the windows. It was often dark, the shadows deep. That was the very reason I'd packed so much of the wizard's junk there.

Furthermore, this woman, whoever she was, was filthy—dirty and unkempt, her skin covered in dark grit. Clothes threadbare, dusty and faded, as though the grime were glue holding it all together. Her hair was a bird's nest of a mess, also shaded in grit, all of which blended well with the shadows and the dusty relics behind her.

She looked like some wild animal, tucked in like that, studying me as a beast might study its prey.

Only the whites of her eyes gave her away.

And now, that smirk.

She was grinning at me, amused I had finally noticed her.

How long had she been watching me?

My initial jump of fear gave way to…violation. My privacy had been invaded. I felt dirty. As dirty as the woman in the corner.

I took a step back from her, regretting that my treacherous hands had let go of the broom. It wouldn't have made for much of a weapon, but it would've been better than nothing at all.

You may think me a coward in this, but consider my plight. Had I been in any other home, perhaps one in the hamlet, I would have carried little worry over this stranger, for she may have been a passing vagrant in dire need of a meal. Or even a bandit, which would have bothered me not at all. But I was not in another home. I was in the home of the wizard Caroc Blackthorn, and no one slipped in unannounced.

Yet this woman had. She'd slipped in without my notice, which was no great triumph. But to have invaded without Blackthorn's notice? Inconceivable.

To have come here at all spoke to her ability. No normal sod, this thing grinning at me in the corner. As I've said, the wizard's guests were often of the magical sort. For her to slip in as she had, through the wizard's wards and protections, meant she was no doubt something abnormal indeed.

Then she'd just sat there, crouched, watching me for some unaccountable measure of time.

And when finally I'd noticed her, she'd had the gall to smirk at me, as if she'd won the game I hadn't been aware we were playing.

If that isn't enough to clear my name of cowardice, well…

There was something about her. Some foreboding feeling blossomed in my chest. Told me to flee. Begged it. Told me no good could come from that woman in the corner. That everything was about to change.

Some might say I've built that into my reflection, that my memory has altered events, brewed that sense of trepidation after the fact. It is not so. I felt it clearly, that there was some weight to the appearance of this woman. Something I could not yet understand.

We stood thus, staring at one another, me terrified, her grinning.

The door burst open behind me and Blackthorn stomped into the house.

"What is it?" he asked with a note of worry.

Refusing to take my eyes from the woman, I motioned toward her. "We have a guest, it seems."

Blackthorn moved to stand beside me and only then did I cut my eyes away from her, curious to see how he would respond. Like me, he didn't seem to see her at first.

Then his eyes widened and his voice lowered to a quiver. "It can't be…"

Like a bowman with a notched arrow, the woman shifted her smile from my heart to his.

When she spoke, her voice was husky, yet silky, and dare I say… seductive.

"Hello, Cuckoo Caroc."

Blackthorn replied with a single word, as though it were all his voice could summon. As though that single word weighed so much his lips could handle no more. It was a statement as much as a question. A pronouncement

of disbelief mixed with caution, joy, and worry. All emotions poured into that single, hefty word.

He said simply, “Maudlin.”

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Her Name Was Maudlin

"Maudlin."

Blackthorn repeated the name as if he couldn't quite believe it.

We three stared at one another, lost in an awkward trance. I couldn't say what Blackthorn was thinking. With all the previous visitors, whether forewarned or not, I'd never known him to have such a visceral reaction. Never had I seen him caught at such a loss. That put me in a nervous stupor.

This woman, though? This Maudlin?

She just grinned back at us, buried beneath her layers of filth, like a wolf who's just cornered a pair of helpless hares.

Had I only known then…

Finally, Blackthorn came to life with a cough. "Maudlin, my dear. It's been far too long. A delight to see you. In fact… Wait here for just a moment longer, if you will. I have a gift for you. It's just in the other room."

The woman replied with the slightest shrug, as if she didn't have a care in the world.

Blackthorn let out a nervous chuckle, then bolted out of the room, leaving the woman staring at me like a hungry lion.

For a moment I feared the wizard had abandoned me, that he was making a hasty escape out a window and leaving me behind, a poor fawn fit for this lion's maw.

Much to my surprise, though, he returned a few short moments later carrying a small box.

A familiar box.

I'd not forgotten how he'd scolded me to the hells and back for having moved it.

It seemed we'd come to that aforementioned emergency after all.

You see, that was something else I'd learned about my host. Often his eccentricities had merit. He wasn't just some goofy old sot. And it turned out there was a reason, indeed, for all the fussing and cussing about needing to find this particular box in a pinch.

The dirty and disheveled woman gave him a suspicious yet hungry look as he handed it to her.

Her eyes widened as she opened it.

It was the shoes.

The blood red, sparkling, high society lady's shoes.

The very ones he'd cussed me for moving.

And here was this woman, this creature covered in grit, staring at a pair of shoes befitting a queen. She studied them long, not saying a word. Neither did Blackthorn, though he did pass a worried glance my way. I knew not what it meant. Didn't understand a bit of it.

Finally, the woman looked up, eyes glittering. "Pretties."

"Yes," Blackthorn said, forcing a smile. "Do you like them?"

"Oh, yes," she said with a nod. "Maudlin likes them very much."

"I hoped you would," Blackthorn said with a dry chuckle. "When I saw them, I thought, these are shoes fit for Maudlin and no other! Just her sort."

"Yes," Maudlin said, looking down once more. She raised her hand as if to touch them, but seeing the grime, she paused. A frown formed on her features.

Blackthorn coughed again. "Ah, Garbhan, why don't you see about starting some tea…"

The frown deepened.

"Err, ah," Blackthorn forced another chuckle. "I meant to say, why don't you fetch the firewater from the cabinet and then, uh, fill the bath for our guest, won't you? I'm sure she's traveled far and, uh, why don't you get the guest room sorted for her as well?"

"A bath," the woman said, eyes still on the shoes. "Yes, that. No room, Cuckoo. Won't stay long."

"No?" Blackthorn asked, seeming surprised.

She looked up, grinning at him. “Not if Cuckoo Caroc can help. I won’t be here long at all, then.”

The wizard bit his lip, seeming more uncomfortable than ever before. “Of course, my dear. Garbhan will fill the bath for you.”

“Garbhan,” she replied, as though she were testing out the sound. I glanced up to find her eyes on me again, studying me. “Garbhan will fill the bath.”

“That’s right,” Blackthorn said. “But first, refreshments. Snap to, Garbhan! Off you go! Uh, do you care for other refreshments, my dear? Are you hungry?”

“Food.” The way she said it made it sound like a question. Like she was unfamiliar with the word. “Yes.” Her eyes drifted down to the lovely red shoes. “Drink. Bath. Food. Yes?”

“Of course, my dear,” Blackthorn said. “Whatever you desire.”

“Whatever I desire.”

I was still entranced, staring at the woman, when I noticed Blackthorn was motioning for me to move.

Broken from my spell, I realized this was my chance to escape. In war, we learned that sometimes it was best to retreat, regroup, and try again. This was no different. The woman in the sitting room had caught me off guard and unawares. I was not prepared for her. Nor was Blackthorn, it seemed. And was he…nervous?

That worried me something fierce.

Blackthorn was as cocksure as he was rambunctious. Never before had I seen him caught, as one might say, with his leggings about his ankles.

With a score of questions racing through my head, I made for the kitchen and sought the firewater. That, too, was worth a ponder. Nasty stuff, the firewater. The sort of liquor that could set flame to one’s gullet. Usually Blackthorn stayed with the ale, and so did I, but every so often, if he were feeling mischievous, the firewater might make an appearance. But I’d never seen him serve it to a guest. Always he saved a few bottles of wine, some rare and of substantial cost. That was what he served to his distinguished guests. Never the firewater.

Then again, none of his other guests had ever slipped into his home unannounced, looking more like a wild beast than a person. It was truly vexing, this mad riddle of a woman.

Who was she?

It mattered not. That was what I reminded myself. She was just some visitor, and if she were true to her word, she'd be gone again soon enough.

It was not such a soothing thought.

I didn't pick up on it just then, but the problem, I would come to realize, was this…

During my time in Caroc Blackthorn's home, I'd not only found comfort and contentment but also a sense of security. To his word, my devil could not find me there. Nor had he. Nor had we faced brigands, famine, or disease. It was safe. Not quiet, mind you, but safe. At least, that was how I'd felt. After toiling in war and toiling for my devil, I appreciated that feeling.

But it was a false thing, that. And this woman… She'd just lifted the veil.

It wasn't how she'd made me jump out my boots, nor her wild appearance. There was just…something about her.

I couldn't put my finger on it.

Returning to the sitting room, I held the bottle of firewater and two glasses up to Blackthorn.

He gave me a nervous smile and took them.

With a shaking hand, he poured himself a glass. Then he poured one for Maudlin and placed it on the end table beside her. He started to move away, then thought better of it and placed the entire bottle of firewater beside her.

This turned out to be wise, for the woman ignored the glass and scooped up the bottle instead.

Now, as I've said, I'd had my share. Nasty stuff. Like drinking pure fire. Best for sipping in painfully slow turns.

Not for Maudlin, it seemed.

She tipped the bottle back and took a hearty pull, her throat moving as she sucked the vile liquid right down her throat.

I stared in awe.

I know it's common for young men only just discovering their cups to brag among their friends about how much they can drink. How much of the hard stuff they can handle. I was never the sort, but I was a stout lad, and many times drank my friendly foes under the table just to ruin their brag. I could handle my spirits well enough, but… The way she drank it down, like it was naught but water… I'd have spilled my guts on the spot. I'd have gagged and choked and sputtered. Not Maudlin, though.

She drank a quarter of the bottle and sighed, as though it were as refreshing as a sip from a cool spring.

Setting the bottle back on the table, she licked her lips and then looked up at me, frowning. “Why aren’t you making my bath, man-buck? Are you a dullard? Or have you never seen the likes of a woman before?”

As she spoke, she moved her leg, showing off a bit of dirt-crusted thigh. It was ridiculous, given the state of her. As if anyone would look upon her, filthy as she was, and be aroused.

“Garbhan,” Blackthorn said, forcing a smile. “Please see to the bath. Be quick, yes?”

I nodded and headed out the door, again relieved to be free of her strange presence, if only briefly.

Outside, I made my way to the well and turned the crank to lower the filling bucket into the darkness. Then I cranked it back up. Beside the well, I kept the carrying bucket, and quickly used the filling bucket to fill the carrying bucket, which, as the name suggests, I carried back into the cottage.

This may seem boring in my telling, and a trivial matter of no interest to the greater story, but a bath could not be filled with a single bucketful. It took eight, a number I knew well, for I was always the one to fill it. So it was that each time I carried a bucket inside, I had to pass the sitting room where Maudlin sat and watched me pass by like prey she might pounce on. With each pass, I imagined her rending at my flesh like a wolf.

Here I was, a man hardened by war and a devil’s work, feeling as a foolish child before this woman of grit and grime. It was maddening.

Eight buckets later and the tub was full.

I sighed, knowing my next order of business would carry me right back out into the sitting room, for that was where the fireplace was, and in it, the stones for heating the bathwater. I’d have to put myself in Maudlin’s presence at least once more. After that, however, I could likely disappear. Blackthorn rarely expected me to stick around when he had guests. Often I’d take on the responsibility of cooking, whether asked or not, and then slip away so as not to disturb them. Their conversations were not for me. Perhaps this time would be the same.

But was I right to leave him alone with her?

I snorted. What use would I be if it came down to it? Blackthorn was the wizard, after all. He could do things I could only imagine. He could defend

himself better than I ever could.

As I was thinking this, the wizard slipped into the room behind me.

“All filled up,” I said, motioning toward the tub. “I was just about to fetch the heating stones.”

“Never mind that,” he said, waving the notion away.

He approached the tub and drew out his wand. Blackthorn had often told me it was foolish to use magic frivolously. Practice, he would say, was one thing, but a sorcerer should never use their magic to avoid day-to-day tasks, for that led to laziness. And one thing a wizard never was, was… Well, you get the idea.

At any rate, it surprised me when he cast a spell upon the water, bringing it up to a boil in moments. As the hot steam rolled off the surface, he turned and gave me a serious look. Then he glanced over his shoulder to ensure she hadn’t crept up on us.

Voice low, he said, “Listen, lad, our guest is, uh… Be cautious, yes? Step lightly. Stay in her good graces. Always be polite.”

I still had a score of questions bouncing about in my skull, but I knew there’d be time to ask later, so just then, I went with a simple one. “Who is she?”

That, it seemed, was a tougher question than I could have guessed.

“She is…” The wizard bit his lip. “Just be mindful, is all.”

“Is my bath ready?”

We both jumped, neither of us having noticed her slip in behind us.

“Just so,” Blackthorn said with a cough. “It’s properly heated. Mayhap too warm. You may wish to let it simmer a bit.”

“Hmm,” she said, moving around us toward the tub. She stuck a finger in the water to test the heat and glanced back at us. “Whispering whispers, me hears. Cuckoo Caroc and his manly manservant, telling secrets apart from me. Is there a story to tell? I would hear it.”

Blackthorn and I shared a look, but it was he who answered, “I was just, uh, asking Garbhan to see about getting a meal prepared. For when you’re done with your bath.”

“Food. Yes,” she said, her voice dreamy. “That’d be lovely, my dears.”

Then she dropped her dress to the floor.

Right in front of us, without a bloody care in all the bloody world.

She stood, baring her nakedness without a hint of worry nor shame.

Mayhap she still felt clothed by her filth, for even her bare skin, which had been hidden beneath the shoddy rags she'd worn, was heavy with dirt and grime. How long since this woman had last bathed?

Without a word, she stepped into the bath and sank deep into the water.

I realized Blackthorn was tugging on my sleeve.

"Let's allow the lady to bathe in peace, shall we?" he said, giving me a serious look.

I followed him out of the room and swung the door shut behind me.

A thought occurred to me then. "Do we have something she can wear? Surely her clothes are too…"

I fell short as I realized he was waving me to silence. "I've got some old odds and ends in my trunk. I'll take care of that. You see about getting some food on, yeah? Meat. All of it. Whatever we have. Fry it, roast it, grill it, whatever. A feast for a king, you understand?"

"Yeah, all right."

"Very good," he said, starting away. "Do not dawdle."

"Caroc," I replied. "Should I… Should I be worried?"

He snorted laughter. "Yes, Garbhan. Of course you should be worried. One should always be worried when Mad Maudlin comes calling."

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Blackthorn's Debt

She crept up on me again.

This time, I was busying myself in the kitchen, doing as the wizard had bidden, attempting to cook all the meat we had. I was no noble's chef, not by any measure, but I'd had two years of practice and knew my way around the kitchen.

But never had I sought to cook all we had in one go.

So there I was, dancing about, messing with this dish here, watching that fire there, when the feeling came over me again. The feeling I was being watched.

A quick glance over my shoulder and I jumped yet again.

Another stranger had entered the cottage.

Another woman, or so I'd thought.

This latest trespasser looked nothing like the one we'd left in the bath.

She was…breathtaking.

Easily the most striking woman I'd ever seen.

I blinked, trying to clear my head, and reminded myself that I had not lain with a woman in… It was too long to put to words. And perhaps that, I'd thought, was the reason for my visceral reaction.

But no, with later clarity, I knew she was among the rarest of beauties I'd ever seen. Because it wasn't just her looks, you see? Wasn't just her shape nor form.

There was a presence about her.

Maudlin was a king in her own court wherever her feet did stand.

For several moments, I struggled to retain my hold on reality, much less that of my dignity, shallow as that well was.

Likely it should have been her soggy hair that gave her away, but it wasn't. So stunned was I that her wet locks could not give away her disguise. It was her eyes.

She held that same predatory gaze, that same arrogant quirk upon her lips. Leaning against the door-frame, the half-empty bottle of firewater in her hand, she studied me once more.

Blackthorn had made good on his promise of finding her clothes.

A man's blouse, far too large for her, clung to her wet skin, giving me a clear view of her shapely form. He'd found her a pair of trousers as well, which were tied about her waist with a bit of rope. And finally…

The blood-red, sparkling shoes.

They looked ridiculous aligned with the rest of her makeshift outfit, but they were on her feet regardless, as if her toes had waltzed her right into a castle ball, the rest of her attire be damned. And if she had been in some king's court, I daresay even in her shambled attire she would have put all others to shame.

Once she saw she had my attention, she grinned, took another swig of firewater, then turned to re-enter the sitting room.

What in all the fiery hells? I wondered, only realizing a moment later that I was burning my chops.

I set back to the mess, trying my best to turn it all into something edible.

Lost in my work for a time, I paused again as her voice fluttered in from the other room.

She was singing.

Her voice…

By the gods…

And that was apt, for surely it was a gift from some place divine. A voice beyond anything I could have imagined.

"Oh, my bonny boys, my bonny mad lads, where hast thou scattered? Do ye still live bare? Do we breathe the same air? Hast ye found a taste for drink or money? Oh, my bonny boys, my bonny mad lads, never scared nor tarried, come back to me now, lest ye be buried."

Her voice melted away at those strange words, which held no meaning to me. Yet I found myself in a trance once more.

Then she spoke, and it was clear she was speaking to Blackthorn, though her voice remained with the silent tune. "Let us drink to Tom O'

Bedlam."

"As you wish, my dear," Blackthorn said.

A few moments passed before their conversation picked up again. I could hear most of their words, them being no further away than the sitting room, and me right there in the kitchen. I caught not all, but enough fluttered in that I might fill in some blanks. Enough to get the gist, though I understood not a lick.

It wasn't just my lack of context, but the way the woman spoke. It was as if… As if every word were a lyric to some sad song, the writings of a ballad, both epic and terrible.

"So, that's it, then?" Blackthorn said. "You still pursue him? Still chasing your Tom?"

"What else is there?"

"There is…much." The wizard's words fell flat. Maybe he could not find the ones he wanted. But he was eager to try again. "There is life, Maudlin. So much life to be had. There is more out there than just Tom."

"No, Cuckoo. To find my Tom, ten thousand years I'd travel. Every ground would I cross."

"And already you've crossed many," Blackthorn replied, a weighted sorrow in his own voice. "And more still to come, it seems."

"Where?"

A singular word, spoken softly, yet sternly. A question. The very reason she's come, or so I surmised.

Blackthorn was long in his reply.

"I know not."

Maudlin's response was equally slow in measure.

"You must."

"I do not."

"Would you seek to lie to Maudlin? Would Cuckoo Caroc betray this friendship, hard-earned and long-lived?"

A deep sigh came from the wizard. "No, no, he would not."

"Then sing."

"I know little more than you."

"Little is more than nothing, last I measured."

"Yes, I suppose it is. I know, as do you, that Tom is up to something. But I know not what madness he seeks."

There was a pause then. I guessed the wizard expected her to reply. If she did, I could not hear it.

After a time, he continued, “East, I’d warrant. Can’t say where, exactly, but… You know one who might know more, and it is on the way.”

“Yes.”

“And so you see,” Blackthorn said with another sigh. It was as if he were breathing out some pent-up anxiety, relieved to have shown that he knew no more than her. “I know nothing of real value.”

“You know what he’ll need. What it will take.”

“I do not.”

“If not you, then who? Who could sing this song for me?”

“A friend to the east, mayhap.”

“This you have already said.”

“And it remains true, my dear. Your Tom… He hasn’t been here. Hasn’t sought my counsel, and that is the truth of it. For you know, as does he, that I would seek to talk him down, whatever it is. Nay, that I may try to stop him, if it is so dangerous as I suspect.”

“Tom may achieve whatever he dares to dream.”

Another sigh. “No man has ever deserved the loyalty with which you favor him, Maudlin. He is undeserving of you.”

“Speak no ill of my Tom, wizard.”

“I would never.”

Another long pause.

Finally, Blackthorn said. “Garbhan will finish the meal soon. You are welcome to stay here, of course. I have the spare room. You need not rush off.”

“Our business has not yet concluded, Cuckoo.”

“Hasn’t it? I don’t know what else I may offer.”

“You may offer that which you owe. I need aid to see this journey done. To find my Tom. I can go it alone no longer.”

“I can see to it that you have clothes, food, and supplies. I can do that much for you, though I fear I have little more to offer.”

“But you do.”

In my infinite wisdom, me never having been a clever man, I chose that very moment to stroll into the sitting room to announce that dinner was ready.

Before I could get a word out, though, Maudlin's eyes cut me like a knife. A blade across my flesh. An arrow through my eye. A spear through my own dear heart.

Her glare rooted me to the spot.

This was not the whimsical, dream-like woman, nor the harried hunter staring down its prey. This was something else. A dark determination, mixed with barely held fury.

I stared at her, dumbfounded by the intensity and fearing her intent.

Slowly, Blackthorn's head turned toward me, as though seeing me for the first time. Then he rounded on Maudlin. "No."

"No?" she asked, her eyes never leaving my own.

"I… I cannot. It would not be fair."

"One debt for another? This is not fair?"

"You do not understand what you're asking."

"Do I not?"

"No."

"And yet still I ask."

"Would you doom another soul for your quest, Maudlin? Would you doom every soul so that you may find your Tom?"

Finally, her gaze shifted back to him. "Was it not you, Cuckoo, who once said that a person should not ask questions for which they do not desire an answer?"

Blackthorn looked away, eyes downcast, head shaking. "Maudlin, I implore you—"

"I can sense it," she said, her eyes again on me. "Can all but taste it. Give me this and our own debt is clear. You will owe me nothing."

Again Blackthorn sighed, and just then he didn't look like the wise-cracking, wizened wizard I'd come to admire. Instead, he looked like an old man, weary with the weight of the world.

He glanced up at me then, misty eyes taking in my measure. Finally, he nodded.

Without looking at either of us, he said, "It will be so, Maudlin."

She clapped her hands, grinning like a child who'd just unwrapped a solstice gift.

I feared what this conversation might mean, but I saw the tension melt from her at last, and seeing Blackthorn so glum… I thought it an appropriate time to change the subject. To make my announcement. Like a

fool who’s too daft to realize he’s been pinched up, I proudly proclaimed, “Dinner is ready.”

What I didn’t understand then, what I couldn’t have understood, was that Mad Maudlin *had* just received a gift.

And that gift was me.

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Gifts and Goodbyes

Dinner did not happen.

At least, not in the traditional sense.

We did not sit down together as civilized folk. We did not sit at all.

Instead, Blackthorn beckoned me to follow him into his Wizard's Room, leaving the mad woman alone in his sitting room. I thought perhaps it had to do with the early hour. It was not yet an appropriate time to sup, but it seemed all sense of propriety flew through the window where Maudlin trekked. I'd later learn how apt that was.

But it was a strange thing for Blackthorn to invite me into his Wizard's Room. That was the place he fussed and cussed over the most. I assumed he wanted to speak to me alone so that he might explain what it was he planned to do for the woman.

I was correct, of course, but only just. I couldn't have expected his true intent. In fact, I was more concerned about leaving that mad woman alone in the sitting room. I nearly commented to this effect, but the look on the wizard's face brought me up short.

He seemed even more put out than before as he rummaged about his desk, mumbling to himself and cursing under his breath. I've made mention of his cussing and fussing. This was not that. His regular sort was more light-hearted. Something I could take with a grin. This, though… I'd never seen him like this. Never so…distraught.

My worries grew, and well they should have.

I paid little attention to the things he fetched, but studied the lines on his ancient face, wondering what this was all about. I also wondered whether I

should ask him plainly. Whether I should try to comfort him somehow.

Finally, he turned and faced me, the heaviness on his heart clear in his eyes.

“Garbhan.” For several long moments, he said nothing more. Finally, he looked away, eyes pointed toward the floor. “You will be leaving with Maudlin.”

“What?” I asked, blinking at the statement. “I’m not going anywhere with that—”

He held up his hand, silencing me. “Are you ready, then, to forsake your debt?”

I shook my head. That wasn’t an option. The risk was too great.

“Then you have little choice, I’m afraid,” he said with a shake of his head. “Nor do I. Your debt will be transferred from me to her.”

“What? Why would you do that?”

“Because there is no alternative. We’ve made a terrible mistake, my friend. We grew complacent in working off your debt, and I fear it has come round to haunt us, for I owe Maudlin a debt of equal measure. Nay, it is greater still. This is the payment she requires. *You* are the payment she requires.”

“I don’t understand. Whatever could she have done for you?”

“That’s to remain between us. Suffice it to say, I owe her greatly. Much like your devil, she is known for trading favors, though hers are not so magically bound. Yet I cannot deny payment, and the payment she requires is your company.”

“My company? For what?”

He took a long breath, considering. Finally, he looked up at me. “I take it you have not heard of Mad Maudlin.”

I shook my head.

“Nor Tom of Bedlam? Sometimes called Mad Tom?”

Again I shook my head.

“That’s probably fair. You are not of the same world as us. You come from a world of simple folk, doing simple things…”

I quirked an eyebrow at him.

“Oh, not like that,” he said, waving the notion away. “I’m not calling you a simpleton. I’m only saying that you grew up in a small hamlet around normal folk. Farmers, craftsmen, and the like. Then you soldiered around… soldiers. We have not moved in the same circles, you and I, is what I’m

trying to say. Among sorcerers, witches, and wilder folk, those names are known. Even among some kings, queens, and noble brats, those names carry weight, but only in hushed whispers, of course."

"Who are they?" I asked. Then, considering what he was telling me, I reframed my question. "Who is she? Who is this Mad Maudlin?"

"Shh," he said, beckoning me to lower my voice. "It would not serve either of us for her to hear you call her as such."

"Fine." I crossed my arms. "But who is she?"

He seemed about to speak, then threw up his hands. "I don't know how to answer that. Gods, but I would if I could."

"Well, is she a wizard like you? A witch of some sort? Something worse even than the devil I once served?"

Again he threw up his hands. "Yes. No. Maybe. She is some or all of those things, and so much more. By all the fiery hells, Garbhan, I can't put to words what she is, and we haven't the time, for her patience is as short as a piss. Bah!"

He turned in a circle, shaking his head.

Then his eyes widened and he glanced at me once more. "Have you heard of Bedlam, perchance? Do you know of that mad place?"

Again I shook my head.

And for a third time, Blackthorn threw his hands up in the air, frustration washing over him. This was more the cussing and fussing I was used to, but it did little to improve my mood.

"Why does she want my debt?" I asked.

He paused, considering. When he spoke, I wondered if, perhaps for the first time since I'd known him, the wizard Caroc Blackthorn had lied to me. Or at least withheld information. Because I assure you, the man had suspicions. Had a good idea what it was she sought.

Instead of speaking those suspicions, however, he merely shook his head. "No, I can't rightly say why she wants it. I can tell you what she's after, though."

"She seeks this Tom of Bedlam."

"You heard that, did you?" He nodded.

"Is he her husband?"

Blackthorn laughed at that. "Nothing so trivial, I fear. Tom to Maudlin is… It goes deeper than marriage, even. And less in some other ways. One does not exist without the other."

“So, they are…what? Lovers?”

“An understatement, to be sure, though it may begin to pick at the scab. Listen, lad, all you need to know is that Maudlin seeks to find him. She has been tracking him for a good long while. But Tom is elusive. Never stays in one place for long.”

“He doesn’t want her to find him?”

“I cannot say. Perhaps he doesn’t care. The geese of gossip squawk that they had a falling out of sorts. But who really knows, besides those two? All that matters is that Maudlin will crawl from one side of this world and onto the next to find him. And you, my boy, you must go with her.”

I stared at him, understanding very little.

“Here,” he said, holding out his hand. In it sat a necklace. It was nothing of a fancy sort. Thinly corded leather with a gray stone hanging from the end, not much bigger than a copper piss penny. “I made this for you.”

I took it from him, studying the stone in the center. There were small carvings etched into its flesh, though I knew not what they meant. Odd.

More odd still was the fact that he’d made it for me. He’d let me live in his home and had given me the gift of a peaceful way to earn back my freedom. In all our time together, it was his coin which kept me fed. His coin, and only by his insistence, that I marched into the village with to repair my shoes or replace my clothes. But never had he given me a physical gift. Never had he crafted something for me.

“I…” I started but paused as he waved me down.

“Place your thumb in the center there. I wish to see if it works.”

I did as he asked, placing my thumb over the carvings. When I did, soft, glowing blue veins crawled across the stone’s flesh. They criss-crossed and spread in seemingly random patterns until roughly a third, or maybe a little more, glowed with that soft blue light. Where the light didn’t touch remained dark stone.

“It’s beautiful,” I said.

He snorted. “It’s more than that, my friend. It’s an accounting.”

“An accounting?”

“Of your debt.”

“What?” I glanced up from the stone, meeting his gaze.

He nodded at me. “A way for you to measure your progress. As you grow closer to seeing it done, so will the light spread further. The more of the stone that glows blue, the more of your debt has been paid. When the

day comes that you've paid it all, it will glow blue across its entire body. Then, and only then, the light will fade, turning it back to just a stone. It will light no longer. When that happens, you will know you are truly done. That you are free."

I was breathless, incapable of speech. Such a gift…

"Put it over your neck and wear it always," he said. "The cord is made of were-leather."

"Were?"

"Never mind that. Just put it on. It can't be severed or broken. And it takes enchantments quite well. I've had no time to test it, but you should find that no other being can remove it from your neck. Only you. Least, that's how it's meant to work."

I slipped it over my neck as he spoke only for him to take hold and try to remove it as he finished. Unprepared, I nearly fell over, but the result was that the cord remained around my neck, as promised.

"Very good," he said with a curt nod. "I'd not take the sodden thing off until the stone shows gray again. Then you may pitch it in a ditch, if you so desire. Or keep it. Were-leather is a rare thing indeed."

"Thank you, Caroc. I know not what to say."

"Then shut up and listen. I have one more thing for you."

He produced a bracelet of darkened metal, though on closer inspection I realized it was crafted to look like a twisting vine. It even had little leaves carefully carved among the twists and turns. It was the sort of piece that looked like nothing from afar. A pauper's piece. But up close, it was as intricate as any jewelry I'd ever seen. Not that I'd seen so many, being a peasant and all.

A single charm dangled from the circlet. It was of a similar metal, but darker still. It bore a ferocious carving, something in the likeness of a devil or demon.

I glanced up at the wizard, who took a steadying breath and said, "Aezrenuth."

As he spoke the word, he cringed, glancing about him and staring up at the ceiling.

Seconds passed where nothing happened, save for me being very confused.

Finally, he looked at me and forced a smile. "Can you remember the name I just spoke?"

“Aezre—”

His hand slapped against my lips, silencing me. “Don’t repeat it, you daft fool!”

I blinked at him, very confused.

“It is the name of your devil,” he said, releasing his grip. “Never speak it aloud. Never speak it at all.”

“You just did.” My beaten dignity felt it was important to point this out.

“I’m quite aware,” he said, shaking his head at me. “Another test. Beneath this roof, you have remained safe from him. Even within the village, my wards here were strong enough to hide you from his prying eyes. But out there, where you’re going…”

“Shite.”

“Precisely.” He pointed at the charm. “That should shield you from him, for his name and likeness are carved into its flesh, and I’ve placed a powerful enchantment over it. So long as you wear that charm, I don’t believe he’ll be able to find you.”

“You think he still wants to? After all this time?”

“Devils aren’t known for forgetting or forgiving their grudges, and rest assured, your old devil bears us both a mighty one. I do wonder if he kept that pretty rock, though…”

I swallowed, taking this in.

“Could you tell her?” I asked. “Could you tell Maudlin about my devil? Maybe then…”

My words died on my lips as the wizard shook his head. “She knows, my boy. She could sense it on you.”

“So, she can do magic? Like you?”

“Not like me, no. But… Yes, there is a power about Maudlin, one which even I can’t quite grasp. Suffice it to say that she could sense your debt, and despite my ownership, I suspect she could smell the devil about you. Gods, but it may have been the very thing that made her want to take it.”

“I would think anyone who could sense the devil tied to me would want nothing to do with me.”

“Aye, but Maudlin is not anyone. She is… You will see, I’m sure. If you’re lucky, it may just be a passing amusement. Mayhap she’ll pass your debt on to another when she grows bored with you.”

I gulped, not liking the sound of this. “What sorts of things do you think she’ll have me do?”

Again, he shook his head. “Guessing what Maudlin will do is about like guessing the weather. She may simply want you to carry her pack on the long trail. Or maybe she seeks your sword for protection, for have no doubt she smelled that upon you, too. Maudlin can read a heart as well as a face. She can take a measure of a soul with a single glance, or so the wilder folk say. I’m not convinced it’s anything so magical as all of that, but she saw enough that she decided she wanted you.”

“Caroc… I suspect there is more you’re not telling me.”

“Perhaps,” he said, turning away. His eyes drifted to his workbench. “Here. Come. What use is a bracelet with a single charm?”

“I’d warrant this one is worth my life.”

It seemed it was not the time for sour jests, for the wizard didn’t so much as snort. Instead, he pulled out a box with several charms inside and dug around while I watched. It was then I knew I had the truth of it. He had suspicions, so he did. Judging by that great sorrow having found him again, I feared what those suspicions might be.

“Here,” he said, reaching for the bracelet which still sat in my hand.

I handed it back to him.

He set to work, adding additional charms. “I wish I had more time to prepare you for this, but…I couldn’t have known. These will have to suffice.”

The first he added was in the shape of a stag’s head, an impressive spread of antlers upon its skull.

“This will offer some measure of protection against…darker magics. The sort your devil may wield. The sort some…less civilized practitioners may use. It won’t protect you from everything. In fact, it may protect you from very little, but some protection is always better than none.”

Next, he added a charm that looked something like a dragon breathing fire.

“A flaming drake. This is a clever little bugger. I’ve held on to it for many years. It offers some ample protection against fire magics, but also, if you pinch it just here and here, it will produce a minor flame of its own. Enough to start a campfire, should you lose or wet your tinder-box.”

Finally, he added a fourth charm, this one in the shape of a small rod covered in spindly thorns.

“The blackthorn,” he said with a chuckle. “This little charm should help keep you safe from prying eyes. Should a scryer seek you, or should a diviner call upon their powers to locate your presence, this little trinket will keep you hidden, save from the most powerful of gazes.”

He tossed the bracelet back to me, the four charms dangling.

“Put it upon your wrist. And like the necklace, I’d not remove it lest you have to. I fear there is little more I can do for you, save to offer you some advice.”

“I’d hear it.”

“Keep your wits about you always. If you’ve thought me an eccentric sort, trust that Maudlin is an entirely different beast. She’s not wicked, mind you. Put such worries away. But don’t think she’s some hallowed saint, either. She’s…different. Doesn’t see the world as we do. I have a mighty respect for her, you understand? Any nerves I’ve shown, it’s because… It’s because she beds with chaos and bathes in destruction. But serve her well and see that your stone lights no more. When that time comes, be done with her. Move on with your life and don’t look back. Do you hear me?”

“I do,” I said, nodding. “Though I fear I don’t understand it.”

“You will,” he replied. “In time. Should you live that long.”

“That… That does not fill me with confidence.”

“Nor should it.” He sighed. “There is much advice I would give you and so little time. Never speak ill of Tom, nor ask too many questions. Do not bring up Bedlam or ask about her Bonny Boys, no matter how many times she may mention them. Just… Keep to yourself and do as she asks. That is your best bet. Your best chance to make it out of this alive.”

“There is much you aren’t telling me.”

“There is. But as I’ve said—”

“We do not have the time.”

“Quite right.”

“One last thing, Caroc… One question I have.”

“No, Garbhan. When your time is up, I don’t want you to return here. Go out into the world, find yourself a nice lass, and settle down somewhere peaceful. There is more to life than fussing after some old wizard.” He paused, seeing my expression. He reached up and clasped my shoulder. “That said, my door shall remain ever open to you. And when you meet your lass, if, perhaps, the two of you are considering where you might settle, then I happen to know of a lovely little hamlet, one which is under

the protection of a silly old wizard. A silly old wizard who'd be glad to call you neighbor."

I smiled. "Thank you. For everything."

"Yes, yes. Well, come along, then." He started for the door. "Our guest is surely past her patience. Gather your things. And don't forget your sword and shield, for surely you'll have need of both."

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A Final Gift

It took no time at all to gather my things.

I owned little.

My old travel pack remained at the bottom of my trunk. It still held my tinder-box, waterskin, a few cooking utensils, my tattered bedroll, and my coin purse, long emptied.

Despite owning little, I counted myself a wealthy man, for I had two pairs of clothes: two sets of leggings, two tunics, and even two pairs of socks, though one had a few holes. I also had a heavy woolen cloak and a fair pair of boots. All thanks to the wizard and his insistence that he'd not have me stinking up the place wearing the same clothes day by day.

Last was my sword and shield.

The same ones I'd carried to war and back. Seemed I would have to carry them again.

I was not happy to be leaving. No part of me wanted to venture out into the world, and much less with this strange woman. I had been in the service of a dark master, and then in the service of a great one. Who now did I serve? Of all things, that left me the most unnerved.

I found her and Blackthorn in the kitchen.

Maudlin had helped herself to my feast. She'd not made a plate, nor taken a seat at the table. No, she hovered over my cooking pans, plucking out chunks of pork or chicken with her bare hands. She sucked the meat right off the bone. I came to understand why the wizard had directed me to cook all our meat, for she did not bother with the vegetables or bread. No, she only sought flesh, and ripped at it like a ravenous wolf until there was naught but bone.

I appeared just in time to see her toss a finished chicken bone over her shoulder. It clanked against the floor, joining her previous victims in a scattered mess.

A rush of panic filled me at the sight. That and outrage, thinking I'd have to clean up that mess.

But alas, that'd be left to the wizard, wouldn't it? A funny thing, that. I could hardly imagine him dipping down to scoop them up. And what of the rest of the place? All the work I'd put into getting it sorted. I guessed it would go back to the way it was. Such was the way of life, I supposed. It wasn't for me to worry over. Least, that was what I told myself.

Maudlin had a cheek full of pork when she noticed me, grease all about her lips.

"Ah, my new pet. Be you ready?"

"I am," I said, giving her a firm nod. Then I turned to Blackthorn. "Is…?"

I couldn't quite find the words I wanted to ask. Fortunately, by that point, Blackthorn could half-read my mind.

He forced a smile and said, "Yes, the transfer is complete."

Maudlin gave me a wolfish grin, still chomping, her cheeks fattened. "The man-buck is Maudlin's now. Prepare thyself for merriment."

To that, I had no reply.

"Garbhan," Blackthorn said. "Best you fill your pack with food, for the road is long. Take as much as you can carry."

I didn't argue, for I had not forgotten the length of the road. Nor its weight.

In a short time, we were ready to leave, me with my traveling gear and several days' worth of food, Maudlin with a near-empty bottle of firewater and her blood-red shoes.

She seemed in high spirits. I was….not.

We three stood awkwardly in Blackthorn's sitting room. Me, a miserable sod. Her, impatient. And Blackthorn… The old wizard seemed sad. Was he bent about my leaving? That touched me, it did. For as I've said, I had grown to respect him, but until he'd given me his gifts, and until I saw him there, that sullen look upon his face, I'd never thought he cared much for me. I had thought myself a burden, and mayhap a bit of a mystery, but little else. Yet in our parting, I saw the truth of it on his face. That was

when I knew we'd become friends indeed. That our respect was mutual. It meant a great deal to me.

"Right, then," Maudlin said, grinning her greasy smile. "To the road and sin!"

"I, uh… Maudlin, dear," Blackthorn said. "Might I borrow Garbhan for just one moment longer? Before you leave, that is."

She rolled her eyes, a sour expression on her face. "Have we not dallied long enough? He is a man-buck, wizard, not your fawn."

"Apologies, my lady," he said, dipping into a bow. "I promise to be swift."

Her expression darkened further. "Yes, yes, Cuckoo. Hurry it along."

The wizard motioned for me to follow him into his Wizard's Room again.

"Your purse," he said. "Make haste."

Empty as it was, I'd left it in my pack rather than tying it to my belt. It took no time to fetch.

To my surprise, he filled it with some random assortment of coins, not bothering to count. "A few silver pretties and some copper piss pennies. Enough to keep you out of trouble. But don't tell Maudlin, lest—"

"Jingle jingle," her voice called from the other side of the door, causing us both to jump. "Cuckoo, dear, is that drinking money I hear?"

"Curses and damnation," Blackthorn said, shaking his head. He grabbed a few more silver pretties and thrust them into my chest. Speaking in a whisper, he said, "Best you put these in your shoes. She'll drink the last drop of them, she will."

"Wonderful," I replied, popping off my boots. I dropped two coins in the first and put the third in the other.

When I looked up again, he was holding out a case.

A teardrop-shaped case.

It was the older of the two, the one he'd learned on. The same one I'd learned on.

"Blackthorn…"

He shoved the case into my chest. "I'll have no argument, lad. Take it."

"I can't," I said, refusing. "You've done far too much for me already."

"It is not a gift for a gift's sake," he said, meeting my gaze. "You will have need of it. Trust me."

I nodded firmly and took the case, trying to hold back a flood of emotion. Some say men shouldn't cry, that we are to weather every storm and leave tears to the tenderness of ladies. That seemed a great deal of hogwash to me then, as it does now, for I have known many warriors, some with slits and others with pricks, who have wept bitterly over the broken bodies of their of comrades. Just then, I struggled not to cry. It wasn't for sorrow, though, but because I had rarely known such kindness. Rarely had I experienced such a blessing from one who owed me nothing at all.

The wizard, it seemed, was struggling as well.

But he gritted his teeth and gave me a hard look. "Go now, Garbhan. Waste not a moment more."

I nodded firmly and secured the violin case to my back.

There was no further fanfare.

I joined Maudlin in the hall and we headed for the door.

Out we went.

Blackthorn remained loitering in his doorway, watching us go.

Maudlin did not look back.

I did.

One quick glance over my shoulder, taking in my home of the past two years. Taking one last look at the place where I'd dared to feel peace. The roof I'd patched. The filling bucket and the carrying bucket.

I even gave those miserable goats one last look. They didn't seem overly bothered by my leaving, the bastards.

Finally, my gaze fell upon the wizard.

He gave me one last nod, and that was it.

I turned my eyes forward and followed the woman toward the road.

And whatever awaited us.

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Intermezzo

I fell into silence, remembering.

Recalling what it was like walking from the wizard's house. Remembering my fears and hopes in equal measure. Knowing I could not have expected where Maudlin, and the road she walked, would lead me. I could not have known.

Around the Tickled Pig, my audience stared back at me, waiting.

"Do you need a rest?" Kavan asked, leaning back in his chair. As I'd told my story, he'd slowly leaned closer and closer, enraptured by my words. His tone implied a hint of disappointment. He wanted me to go on and in a hurry.

I nodded at him just the same, glancing at my empty mug. "I've a throat dry as dust. Haven't spoken so many words in…"

"Ah, of course," Kavan said with a nod. "Perhaps it's fair we take rest and refreshments. Loc, would you mind seeing to our cups? I'm sure we could all use a fresh sip. And some might wish to relieve themselves."

"Bah," said one of the warriors. "Let's get on with it!"

There were a few mumbled agreements.

Kavan whirled around to face the large group of warriors. "It is a fine tale, is it not? But alas, I fear Garbhan told us true from the start. This tale will be long in the telling. There is no rush."

No one bothered arguing with him.

"Come now," Kavan said, rising from his chair and making a show of stretching. "Let's all move around a bit. Get the blood flowing. Our dear Garbhan is not going anywhere."

It was funny, in a way, seeing all these hard cases grumble at the pause. These powerful sorcerers and fearless warriors, all rising to stretch, grumpy that their bedtime tale had been interrupted. It was a wonder I'd not lulled any of them off to sleep.

And that was what it was, wasn't it?

For to hear my story in its entirety, what could they hope to gain? I could have cut to the end and saved us all a lot of bother. It didn't seem that would be the case, though.

"Come along, Garbhan," Kavan said, motioning toward me. "You should move around as well."

I nodded but did not move. He was probably right. Yet I felt weighted down by memory. Rooted in place. Unable to move.

As the others shuffled about, I stayed as I was, staring at the floor.

It was Finn who broke me from my reverie.

"Cian— Er…Garbhan?"

I glanced up at him. "You can still call me Cian, if you like."

"I like Garbhan, too," he said, big eyes all business.

I nodded. "Your choice."

He stared at me the way he did when he had a question he wasn't sure whether he should ask.

Finally, he worked up the guff. "Did you really live with a wizard?"

Again I nodded.

"Grandad says magic isn't real. That it's just a bunch of bollocks."

"Many people believe the same. Your grandad is not alone in that. But it is a hidden thing, you see? Magic folk, such as these in your tavern, they prefer the world not know their magic is real."

"But…why? I mean, it seems wonderful having magic, don't it?"

"I suppose. But people… They fear what they fail to understand, Finn. You'll come to see this as you get older. And there's jealousy to consider. There are many folk who cannot do magic. Most folk, in fact. Many of them fear the ones who can, so…"

He stared back at me, waiting for me to finish finding my words.

"It is dangerous for us," Kavan said, moving to stand alongside the child. "There are people who would seek to control us. Or destroy us. So, it is better, at least many of us think, to keep our magic a mystery."

Finn glanced between me and the supreme enchanter. "But that seems…"

“Foolish?” Kavan offered.

Finnegan nodded. “Yeah. Foolish. Because you could use your magic to help people.”

Kavan smiled at this.

“Not everyone uses their magic for good, Finn,” I said. “Magic or no, people are still people. Even sorcerers know greed, envy, and hate.”

“But that seems silly,” Finn said, shaking his head. “If I could do magic, I’d use it for good. To help folk.”

“You know,” Kavan said, ruffling his hair, “I believe you would, young master. I do believe you would. But as Garbhan has alluded to, not everyone feels the same.”

The boy seemed about to reply, but Old Loc called to him, voice sharp. “Finnegan! Away from them. Come help me!”

I glanced up, noting the look Old Loc gave me. It all but shattered what remained of my busted heart.

It was easy to understand why he wouldn’t want his grandson getting friendly with a sorcerer of the Pale, but…it was me he was glaring at. *Me* he didn’t want his grandson loitering around.

I sighed.

The countless hours I’d spent with them both, nights sharing laughs while we cleaned the Pig, evenings I’d sawed my strings for them… Fishing trips on the beach. The friendships we’d made.

Gone.

Like so many others before.

I could hardly blame him. Could hardly blame Old Loc, and he’d only heard the beginning. There was plenty yet to come.

Kavan gave me a sympathetic smile. “You did sell your services to a devil, you know? I suspect that makes you a poor role model, least by the measure of most parents and grans.”

I snorted my reply.

“Yes,” a woman’s voice said.

I glanced up to realize it was the Oak Mother.

“A curious thing, that,” she said, casting a sideways glance at Kavan. “I’m rather disappointed you did not insist on hearing the story in its entirety. The church would very much like to know what depravity led to such an action.”

I stared up at her but did not reply.

“The church?” Kavan asked. “Or a particular Oak Mother?”

“Is it not one and the same? Am I not the voice of the church here?”

“So you are,” he replied. “But come now. Not all who deal with devils are depraved.”

“In many lands, those who cavort with devils and demons are cleansed by fire, Supreme Enchanter.”

“And all by the hands of your church,” Kavan replied, giving her a wicked smile. “I suppose we should consider it fortunate that your cloister hasn’t conquered the entire world, lest Garbhan be ash, incapable of telling us his tale.”

“For such crimes as his, what more does he deserve?”

“Remains to be seen,” Kavan replied.

“And it shall remain so, for your willingness to allow him to keep that bit of privacy.”

“Does he not deserve that much? He’s played fair with us thus far.”

“He deserves nothing but a holy cleanse.”

It was strange, listening to them talk about me as if I were not there. This last comment, though, made my hackles rise. It came as little surprise that an Oak Mother would want me cleansed for my work with the devil. But to speak of cleansing me before my face, it was… It was barbaric for one who was supposed to be pure.

Before I could speak up, though, Kavan came to my aid. He chuckled right there in her face. Right there in the face of a senior member of the most powerful church in all the world. Then he spoke words she would surely think sacrilegious. “That’s the problem with zealots, you know? You can be so wise and so well-meaning, yet your blind spots could blot out the sun.”

The Oak Mother’s eyes narrowed. “Tread carefully, sorcerer, for though the church has agreed to ride along to see this wickedness rectified, there is a limit to what I will tolerate.”

“And that, my dearest Oak Mother, is exactly what I mean,” Kavan said, keeping his tone neutral, if not soft. “You’re so confident in your convictions that you’d risk folly for the sake of a perceived insult. Yet you know well I hold you in the highest regard. And this man here, our dear Garbhan, we know not why he made the deal he made, but I’d dare say it must have been something powerfully important. At least to him. Where

you see only wickedness, I suspect, were the truth revealed, you might find some empathy, if not sympathy."

"Then let us hear it," she said, sneering at me.

I shook my head.

"And so you see," Kavan said, motioning toward me. "We are left to make assumptions. I would like to think he acted as he did for noble reasons. You, though…"

"There is no reason noble enough for transacting with a devil," she replied.

"Thus making my point," Kavan said. "Your views are much too rigid, my dear."

"Those of faith must remain solid so that those who are flaccid may yet find redemption."

"Save your holy inquisition for someone other than me, my dear lady."

"And me," I said, joining the conversation.

They both turned to face me.

I narrowed my eyes at her. "You may hold me in whatever contempt you so desire, Oak Mother, but don't pretend you would do me any favors. I have seen the blessings of your church and I'd have none of them. Truth be told, between my devil and you, I'd consider him better company."

At that, Kavan threw his head back and laughed.

The Oak Mother did not. Her scowl hardened.

Worse still, her champion, the inquisitor, moved closer, hand edging toward his sword.

"Let us simmer," Kavan said, still grinning. "Our business is not yet through. If the Holy Tree wishes to participate, it must tolerate us sinners a bit longer."

With a harrumph, the Oak Mother turned and headed back toward her seat, her champion on her heel.

"Hmm," Kavan said, glancing over at me. "Perhaps it would be best if we did not antagonize her so."

I raised an eyebrow at him.

"Yes, yes, I meant me as well," he said, rolling his eyes. "You would not believe the time I've had herding these soggy cats. We'd have been better off bringing along a nursemaid or some stiff nanny. Don't tell 'em I said that. Speaking of which, probably best not to leave them idle too long. Shall we get back to your story?"

Despite my reluctance, I gave him a nod. No point in putting off the inevitable.

Kavan informed the room we were about to begin again and folks resumed their seats while Old Loc finished refilling mugs.

For my part, I considered where my story would take us next.

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Second Movement

The Road

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Dirty Toes

We'd been walking near on an hour when I could stand it no longer.

She'd let out a gasp for the third time, cursing the stones stabbing into her feet.

You see, she wasn't wearing those fancy blood-red shoes the wizard had gifted her. She was carrying them over her shoulder, walking the old road barefoot. The bottle of firewater was in her other hand.

I'd tried to ignore it. Tried to remember what Blackthorn had said about not asking questions. But I couldn't take this bit of madness any longer.

"Why don't you wear your shoes?"

She rounded on me, eyes wide, as if she were surprised I was there. As if she'd forgotten about me entirely. Like she'd forgotten she'd just claimed ownership of my debt.

We stared at each other for several moments.

Finally, I pointed at the shoes. "They'll protect your feet from the gravel."

She scoffed at me, as though I'd just uttered the daftest words she'd ever heard. "I go on dirty toes for to save my shoes from gravel."

"But that…"

She turned about-face and started forward again, humming a tune to herself as she skipped along. The shoes remained on her shoulder, and the bottle, now with but a few drops left, sloshed as she danced.

Whatever in all the hells was this?

I go on dirty toes for to save my shoes from gravel…

So, she'd rather bang up her feet than damage her pretty new shoes?

"But shoes are for protecting your feet," I protested.

She whipped around again, scowling something fierce. “Shoes don’t grow back.”

“I… What?”

“Shoes don’t grow back,” she repeated.

“Shoes don’t grow back?”

“T’was what I said, so it was. Will it be repeating back everything I sing?”

“I…” I paused, staring at her. “So, you won’t wear your shoes because…you don’t want to damage them, but your feet… You don’t mind harming them because they will heal.”

She grinned. “Feet skins grows back. Shoes do not. So…”

“So you go on dirty toes to protect your shoes from gravel.”

“That’s the measure. Glad you are not a complete dullard, my dearest man pet.”

She turned and set off again.

That was…

Right. Ask few questions, Garbhan.

Well, when she tore up her feet, I wasn’t bloody carrying her, I knew that.

Unless she commanded it.

There was that.

So far, she’d commanded me nothing, which meant my debt wasn’t draining.

This could be a problem.

A damned weighted one.

Sighing, I continued plodding on behind her.

After a time, she finished the last of the firewater and tossed the empty bottle over her shoulder. I wouldn’t have been bothered, except the missile came right at my head. I barely got my hands up in time, which was fortunate, because I was sure if she’d knocked me cold, she wouldn’t have even noticed. I could imagine her skipping along, only realizing hours later, if at all, that she’d abandoned me.

This I considered while rubbing the smarted spot on my forearm where the bottle had struck.

I scooped up the discarded thing, too. Why waste a perfectly good bottle? We could use it for water, after all.

And where was her travel pack? She had no bedroll. No blanket. No change of clothes.

She traveled only with her gifts from Blackthorn: the bottle, the clothes, and the blood-red shoes.

What was wrong with this woman?

I tried to push my worries from my mind. I just had to get through this and be done, for however long it took.

We spoke not another word until finally, as the sun began to droop, she turned off the road and staggered into the forest. “The sun it is setting, best we find a place for bedding.”

I had wondered at this, for had I been traveling on my own, I’d have long ago set camp. It took time to gather kindling and build a fire. Longer still to find chunky logs for slow burning. Especially without an ax. I had begun to think she intended to march right through the night. With everything else I’d seen, it would not have surprised me.

She marched along, stomping right through the thicket, cursing it all the while, until finally she stopped and nodded, as though she’d found the perfect spot.

She most certainly had not. The trees were thick, and there was scant room to set a fire.

Despite that, she turned, looking at me expectantly.

I supposed I should have been pleased she’d remembered me. Instead, I was annoyed.

“Yes?” I asked.

She sighed and rolled her eyes. “Has your brain gone damp? Set up our camp.”

“I… All right, then,” I replied. That, at least, had been a command. Hopefully one that would work off a measure of my debt. In fact, the more she bossed me about, the better off I’d be.

I moved through the thicket, grumbling as I scooped up kindling at random. I had to remind myself that I had no one to blame but myself. And I was still, perhaps, better off in the hands of this wild woman than those of my devil.

Speaking of the wild woman, Maudlin watched me while I worked. Not speaking. Not bothering to help. Just watching, as though I were such a curious thing.

Such was my mood and discomfort at her stares that I cared little about the state of the fire. It needed only to burn. I bundled my twigs together with little regard and made for my tinder-box. I considered, but only for a moment, testing out the charm Blackthorn had given me, the one he'd claimed could start a fire. Such magic as that… I had borne witness to plenty in his company, but to perform such a wonder myself…

Alas, my caution was high, and I thought it best this woman not know the measure of the gifts he had given me. So, it was the old tinder-box, her watching me all the while.

Once the fire was set, I dropped back on my haunches and rummaged through my pack, retrieving some dried beef and a couple of apples. Maudlin took the beef without comment, but stared at me like I was a toad when I tried to pass her an apple.

"It'll keep you from getting ill," I said, nodding at her. "Learned that soldiering."

Her eyes narrowed.

I shrugged.

"So, uh, listen," I said, considering my words. I didn't really want to talk to her, but the subject of my debt needed to be addressed. Needed to be understood. "About my debt."

"Curse."

"Fine. My curse. There's something you must understand."

"You are my pet, no? What else is there?"

I glared at her then, full on. "I am no one's pet. I am in your service, nothing more."

She quirked an eyebrow at that. "Simmer your feathers, old hen. No need for ruffle and fluffle."

"I am not…" I took a calming breath. "I need you to give me specific commands, you see? Like you did with the camp. I need you to tell me to follow you in the morning. Order me to follow you all day."

"And this will clear your debt?"

I nodded. "Yes. Only by your instruction."

"Hmm," she said, a thoughtful look upon her face. "And why would I wish to do that?"

"What? Whatever do you mean?"

"Why would I wish to give up my new pet so easily?"

“Because…” I stared at her, dumbfounded. “Because that’s the right thing to do. To help me.”

She barked out a laugh. “I am not here to help you. You, man-buck, are here to help *me*.”

“But I cannot help you if you don’t tell me what to do. Don’t you see?”

“I see much. Never fear.”

“Oh, I certainly fear.”

“Good.”

And that was that. The end of our conversation.

It grated on me. Tore on my nerves. Yet I remained silent, for though I had never been a clever man, Blackthorn was, and I remembered well his warnings.

But it seemed this woman would keep me trapped for as long as she could.

It galled me.

Had she no decency? No care for others? Blackthorn had said he respected her greatly, though I couldn’t fathom why. She seemed but a cruel and petty madwoman.

I turned from her and stared into the fire, keeping my brooding thoughts to myself.

As the night deepened, she reached a hand toward me. “My bedroll?”

“Your…bedroll?”

She rolled her eyes again. “Still he repeats like a goose. The wizard should have warned me this one was as thick as a board.”

“You don’t have a bedroll,” I said, blinking at her. “You brought nothing save your shoes and the bottle.”

“The bottle!” Her eyes lit up, then skittered about. “Where is it?”

“Empty,” I said. “You finished it. And then you threw it at me.”

“I did no such thing.”

“You did indeed.”

“Does he dare to call Maudlin a liar?” Her words were spoken slowly, with a hint of malice.

I swallowed the lump in my throat. “No. Fine. It was an accident, I’m sure.”

“Sure, is he? And about the bedroll? Does my pet have one for me?”

“No, your *pet* does not.”

“A poor servant you are.” She shook her head. Then she glanced over at me, and the look on her face… It put chills down my spine. It was that look of a hungry wolf again. “Perhaps we’ll have to share your bedroll, then.”

“You…wish to share my bedroll?”

She shrugged. “The night is chilly and these woods are a bore. Would you not seek to bring me some enjoyment?”

“But I thought…”

“It thinks?”

“It most certainly does,” I replied, scowling at her. “I thought you were with your Tom.”

“With him?” she glanced around. “My Tom is not here.”

“Yes, I know that. But I thought… He is your lover, is he not?”

“That and more, yes.”

“And yet you want to share my bedroll?”

“Yes?”

“But…”

“But?”

“Well, what would he say if he were here?”

“He would say nothing, for we’d be in his bedroll, rutting like rabbits.”

“Okay, but what would he think about you rutting…with me?”

She shrugged. “Probably he’d ask how I enjoyed it, if he said anything at all. My Tom is often quiet, keeping his thoughts to himself. Wise is he. Does not bore me with so many questions.”

“So…” I was trying to wrap my head around all of this. “So, you are lovers, and you are dedicated to him, and he is…dedicated to you?”

“Something of the sort, yes.”

“But he would not care if you lay with another man?”

“Why should he?” she asked, raising an eyebrow. Then she cast me one of her wicked grins. “Aw, I see. Are you claimed by another? Does she not allow you fun of the flesh with others?”

My thoughts danced backward to a time long before, when I had thought I might have belonged to another. But alas, that was long ago indeed and had proven most untrue. I shook my head. “I have no one.”

“Then what is your fuss?”

“I… I don’t rightly know. It just seems…wrong to sally about. Especially with another bloke’s lady.”

“Ah, so you are prudish, then? Saving yourself for the right lady? Are you but a cute little virgin man-buck?”

“I am not… I have lain with women.”

“Then is it your parts? They do not work?”

“They work fine, thank you very much. It’s just… I don’t rightly know.”

“You don’t find me attractive?”

Again I caught the venom just barely dripping off her words. Blackthorn had been wise to warn me to keep my wits. I still did not know the measure of her ways, but it was clear enough I’d traipsed into dangerous territory.

“You are very attractive,” I assured her. “Very attractive indeed.”

“Then?”

That question again. As if it were all so simple. As if finding her attractive and her being willing were reason enough. Mayhap it was. But I feared it might be a great mistake just the same. The wizard had given me no warning about this. And frankly, despite her charming appearance, her brash and selfish way lowered her by my estimation. Not that I’d be so daft as to speak it aloud.

But I wondered at this dilemma. Would bedding her better or worsen our time together? Physical relations often carried a weight of their own.

And what of this Mad Tom? When we found him, would he truly be so casual? I knew not.

Yes, this seemed a slippery and dangerous ground indeed.

“Hurry along,” she said, snapping her fingers. “Bring your bedroll, lay me down, and see to my pleasure. I command it. There? Solves whatever is stopped up in your sodden skull, doesn’t it?”

That…

That made my decision for me.

I shook my head. “Doesn’t work that way.”

“Doesn’t it?”

“Should have checked the fine print.”

“The what?”

“There are rules about this curse of mine. You cannot direct me to kill in your name. You cannot direct me to harm innocents in your name. You cannot demand sexual acts of me.”

She stared at me, puzzled, then furious, as though she’d been tricked. “What good is that?”

I stared back at her, fighting back my own anger.

Finally, I sighed. “Apparently none.”

I unstrapped my bedroll from my pack and tossed it to her.

It landed unceremoniously in her lap while she stared back at me.

“You can have my bedroll,” I said, meeting her gaze. “But you’ll sleep in it alone.”

“Hmm,” was all she said.

Much to my surprise, though, it wasn’t disappointment I saw on her features. Nor anger, even. She seemed…pleased.

Had this been some sort of test? Could this mad woman string so many thoughts together for such a game?

I shoved my pack closer to the fire to use as a pillow. It had been a long while since I’d slept through a chilly night without so much as a bedroll, but I had my thick cloak, and in my days of soldiering I’d slept under much worse conditions.

As I struggled to doze, too many thoughts racing through my head.

Then, much to my surprise, Maudlin spoke, her voice silky and soft. “Dream well, Garbhan.”

I blinked, staring up at the stars, wondering if I had imagined it. Finally, I replied, “You as well, Maudlin.”

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Sawing Sorrow

I awoke with a start.

Two years of soldiering had taught me to sleep light. Two years in the wizard's comfortable home had not broken the habit.

Even if it had, I would have awoken still, for such a baleful sound as I had ever heard ripped through the night.

Deep and terrible it was. Such a sorrowful squall.

At the first, I thought it was a coyote. Somewhere deep in the forest, they were calling back at the cry. Weeping in return.

But alas, no, the sobs were not originating from creatures deeper in the forest. It was coming from my own camp.

I rolled to my side, looking for Maudlin in the dying firelight.

Her form was curled up like a babe, head turned away. Yet there was no mistaking it. The sound came from her.

Her sobs.

Maudlin was crying.

Shedding such terrible tears into the night.

For a moment I wondered, as a foolish man might, whether this was somehow due to my rejection. But no, that was a daft notion indeed, and I washed it away quickly. These tears had nothing to do with me, and I knew it to be true, sure as I knew anything.

These were the sobs of loss. Terrible loss. The cries of one living with the ghosts of anguish. Pure misery. Sorrow sodden. Pain of such a magnitude as I might never have known, and I had known plenty.

These tears were for her Tom. Her one true love, long lost to her.

I watched for a few moments, unsure what to do. My malice was forgotten, my annoyances put aside.

Such pain…

I thought to reach out to her, to cradle her in my arms, but… No, that didn't seem right. Some intuition told me that to interrupt her was to seek her wrath. I felt like an invader. An intruder into her deepest and darkest emotions. I did not belong here, and she would not welcome me.

Yet I felt at a loss.

I knew not how to help her.

The fire crackled beside me as her sobs continued, carrying out into the night. And still the coyotes called back, as well as other critters, an answer in solidarity.

An idea struck me, one which seemed both wise and foolhardy all at once.

Yet that same intuition which told me not to speak, nor to approach, was the same intuition which bade me to carry out this deed. Again Blackthorn's wisdom had come to grace me.

Without a word, I sat up and reached for the teardrop case.

I withdrew my instrument as well as its bow and began slowly playing.

One of the softer melodies.

A tune of sorrow in equal measure, or as close as I could come. For the wizard had agreed that the violin could indeed summon all the sorrow in the world. Mayhap I could do a bit of magic myself after all, and draw some of Maudlin's pain from her, at least for this night.

And so I played.

I played for the night.

For the coyotes and critters, still calling back from somewhere in that deep dark.

And for Maudlin.

My song became one with her sobs, melding the two into a single tune.

And after a time…

Her sorrow stilled.

She sobbed no more.

As I played on, her breathing steadied, the rise and fall of her chest a more natural thing. Her legs straightened, taking a more restful pose than that of an anguished babe.

As I neared the end, lessening my speed into lengthy drawls, at long last I could hear her softly snoring.

The night was silent as I finished, save for the crackling of the fire. My song had subdued the coyotes, the critters, and Maudlin’s sorrow, or so it seemed.

Its work accomplished and the spell complete, I returned my violin to its case and eased myself back to sleep.

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On the Road

Maudlin did not speak of what had occurred in the night.

Nor did I.

Mayhap it would have been better if we had, for surely leaving such things unspoken was unwise. Yet despite my glimpse into her intimate moment, we were not fast friends, and Maudlin was not the sort to dwell.

No, with the morning light, she was once more the strange woman I'd met the day before. Impulsive. Blunt. Short-tempered. Especially the latter. It seemed she wasn't built for mornings. Of course, with the amount of firewater she'd consumed, I was surprised she'd awoken at all.

There was another worry.

As I said, I'd been known to carry my spirits well enough. But had I knocked back an entire bottle of that wicked stuff, I'd have been down for days, if not dead. I expected her to be a hearty mess.

I worried whether she'd even remember the day before. Would she come awake, slop out her guts, and then ask who I was? Might she wonder what she was doing in the middle of the forest with a strange man?

She did none of these things.

If anything was a blur, she made no point of telling me. Nor did she spill her guts, lest it was when she slipped off to relieve herself.

Aside from being more short-tempered than the day before, nothing had changed.

We spoke not a word as I readied my pack and smothered the fire. The only hint of her temperament came as hard scowls, breathless grumbles, whispered curses, and a few mumbles.

As we set off, I held out a strip of salted beef for her.

She took it without comment.

In fact, to say she “took it” doesn’t quite put it right. She leaned her head forward and used her teeth to pluck it from my hand. Chewing while grumbling, she started back for the road, me at her heels.

All the day long we walked, no words between us.

At times, she skipped and hopped, seeming as happy as the sun. Other times, she was as gloomy as a storm cloud. There was no predicting her moods, and little sense in sparking conversation. She seemed happy enough to simply continue moving along.

When we made camp that next eve, we spoke little, but once more I gave her my bedroll.

She motioned toward it, silently asking if I wished to share it with her.

I shook my head.

She scowled but said nothing.

And once more, I awoke in the night to her wretched sobs. Again I took out my violin and played until she was soothed into slumber.

We passed a few hamlets and villages, but she showed no interest in stopping. That chafed me a bit, for I wished to secure another bedroll and more food. It surprised me, too, for I had expected her to stop in each hovel for a drink, given her behavior on that first day. But it seemed her mission would not allow her to slow until dusk came. Always, and to my chagrin, I had to set our fire in near darkness, for Maudlin would say we could afford no delay. Tom was waiting. Somewhere.

After a fashion, a part of me wondered if the bloke was even real, this Tom. I passed the time wondering about it. Wondering who he was, and why it was that Maudlin was so in love with him. I wondered about her, too. Where she came from. Who she was. How she came to be so…her.

No answers were forthcoming, and as Blackthorn had warned, it would be best if I didn’t ask too many questions. Already I had learned the wisdom in this.

So, our days and evenings passed in near silence.

Two lonely travelers, together, yet so far apart.

She spoke to me very little, save for an occasional insult or to boss me about.

I rather preferred the bossing about, since that ate some measure of my debt, albeit in rather small bites. She was quite careful about that, ensuring she never gave me a task that would take too long.

One night, though, a few days in, as we sat around the fire, having just finished our sup, she surprised me.

She asked me a question, one which seemed to come out of nowhere.

I had just taken out my violin when the question came.

“What say you about the death of the Shining Serpent?”

I blinked. For a moment, I wasn’t even sure she was speaking to me. Yet there she was, her dark eyes studying me, waiting for an answer. I cleared my throat and asked, “What?”

“What say you about the death of the Shining Serpent?” she repeated, then motioned at my violin. “Surely you have a thought.”

I considered, but only for a moment, then shook my head. “Apologies, but I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She stared at me, blank-faced. Then she blew up. “You have not heard of Lucian Locklear, the Shining Serpent? Nor the mystery surrounding his death?”

“I cannot say that I have.”

“But you…”

“I what?”

“The song you play…”

Her voice trailed off and I realized she meant the sorrowful song I played each evening to put her to sleep.

She wouldn’t say it out loud, so I did. “It’s one of his? I play one of his songs?”

She nodded.

A silence passed between us, then she gave me a sharp look. “What sort of music man are you, anyway?”

I shrugged. “I don’t consider myself as such. Only recently learned to play. Was Blackthorn who taught me. I know little of musical…history, or…where the songs came from.”

“For shame,” she said, looking away.

“I would be glad to hear of him, though,” I said, if only to placate her. “To pass the time.”

She turned back and glared at me again. “’Tis is not a story to merely pass the time. It is a great mystery, known the world over. One I intend to solve.”

I gave her another shrug. “Then you may as well tell me of it, for surely it’s my lot to help you, is it not?”

“And what help could you be in such a quest, eh? Have you the sharp mind of an inquisitor tucked away in that otherwise seemingly dull skull of yours? Perhaps you’ve done some great investigative work before, have you?”

I pointed my bow at her. “If you wish to behave like a smelly arse, then I am happy to consider the matter concluded and will return to my playing.”

She replied with a haughty snort, and for a time, I didn’t think she would say more. Finally, though, she let out a heavy sigh and turned to face me once again.

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The Shining Serpent

“Lucian Locklear, the Shining Serpent, was a minstrel of the highest order. A traveling bard of the greatest renown. He was revered by the powerful. The envy of kings. The heartbreak of queens. Yet he often chose not to walk among them, for his voice belonged to the commoner. Do you understand?”

“You mean to say regular folk liked him?”

“Just so. He was a voice for the people. For paupers and peasants. Those who heard him say that his voice held a power of sorts, but even that paled against the tunes he wrote, which in turn fell to the wayside compared to his cutting lyrics. He had a way of writing, so he did. Words what struck like a viper. Lines as sharp as the executioner’s ax. Poems made song, what could strike a heart like an arrow.”

“Well, I have not heard his voice, nor seen the words, but if either were a match for that tune, the one I know, then I can easily believe the rest, for that melody is something powerful alone.”

“Indeed. As such, many a king, and queens, princes, princesses, would-be emperors, and power-greedy, hopped-up nobles tried to tame him. He would not have it. His talents were such that every lord and lady wished to keep him as a pet, lavishing him with gifts, and many of extraordinary value, offering him wealth beyond measure. Once, it was said, he was even gifted the infamous Serpent Sword. But despite these gifts, always, he slithered away, back to the people. His people.”

“But you said he was dead?”

“Aye, so they say. And under curious circumstances. But you are getting me ahead of myself. Do not rush me.”

“My apologies.”

“So it was that he was loved from land to land, wherever he traveled. And his renown grew. But with admiration comes jealousy, and with love comes hate. When one makes too many friends, so shall they find a balance of enemies. His troubles began when he was invited to the kingdom of Eborakon to perform alongside his old friend and fellow minstrel, Giant George. Have you heard of him?”

I shook my head.

She let out a dramatic sigh. “Truly, Garbhan. You have no right to play that instrument, as poorly educated as you are.”

“I will not argue it,” I said, shrugging. “So, who was, or is, this Giant George?”

“A famed singer, known for his barreling baritone. He was a giant of a man, they say. Big as a bull. But his voice was something near magic. The two had long been friends. In fact, it was Lucian who helped get Giant George his start. Oh, sure, the Cloarrinwurst family would tell you otherwise, for it was they who patroned Giant George, but it was Lucian first who took him on the road for a time. Helped him gain his own renown.”

“And who were they?” I asked. “The Cloarrinwurst family?”

Her eyes narrowed at the interruption but she gave me an answer. “A family of influence in Eborakon. A crime family, or so it is said.”

I nodded.

“So, once Giant George had some renown of his own, the Cloarrinwurst family became his patrons. They put him before all the nobles of Eborakon, and even the king. And they could pay him a better wage than the road ever could.”

Again I nodded.

“So, when Giant George was at the height of his own fame, the Cloarrinwursts extended an invitation to Lucian to come to Eborakon so that the two might perform together once again. As I’ve alluded to, Lucian didn’t care much for performing for rich tits, not to mention the king of Eborakon was rather sore at him. For while the Cloarrinwurst family had Giant George, the king wished to patron Lucian. Lucian had refused him. So it was dangerous for him to be in Eborakon at all.”

“But his friend had asked.”

“But his friend had asked,” she said, echoing me. “Lucian arrived the day before the performance and attended a fancy party that evening hosted by the Cloarrinwursts and his old mate. Now, it is said that the Cloarrinwursts could put on quite a foray, so the drinks were flowing and spirits were high. At some point, Lucian decided to walk outside for a breath of fresh air.”

I leaned forward in my seat, feeling the story was about to take a turn.

“As he came outside, a small group of ruffians surrounded him. Now, here is the beginning of the mystery, for such as these had no business in that part of the city, nor would the Cloarrinwursts allow such types to run amok in their territory. Yet there they were. They demanded Lucian’s money and possessions. He refused. You see, our minstrel was no pushover. He was a bonny lad and a canny scrapper. He set into his attackers. But they were ready. One near the back let loose an arrow. And then another. And another. And another. And one more.”

“Five arrows?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. “That seems excessive. One should have done the trick.”

“Aye, but as I’ve said, our minstrel was made of tougher things. The arrows struck but didn’t lay him low. He fought off his attackers and forced them to flee.”

“He fought them off with five arrows in him?”

“So he did, and they thought him dead for certain.”

“Wasn’t he?”

“No. This was not where he died. The Cloarrinwursts called a physiker and he was treated for his wounds. All thought he would die for certain, but in the early hours of the morning, he came awake. Came awake and realized what you must surely suspect. Someone had set him up. Who else, if not his friend or his patrons?”

“The king?”

“Aye, he may have thought that, too, but we shall see soon that the king wasn’t so vindictive. At least not so much as to have him killed. But you’re right, at the time, he could have suspected any of them. Only one thing was for certain: he was still in grave danger. So, despite his wounds, he slipped away and across town, to the home of another old performer friend. And that was where he stayed while he healed from his wounds.”

“Fascinating.”

“We are only just beginning. As word spread that the Shining Serpent had been attacked, so too did the king find out that he was in Eborakon. Still salty at being passed up as a patron, the king put out a bounty. He wanted Lucian, but he wanted him alive. So says the king, ‘I have a woman who claims Lucian Locklear, the Shining Serpent, attacked her, and witnesses aplenty.’ ”

“And do we know whether it was true? Might Lucian have attacked her?”

She shook her head. “Of course we cannot know it true. Perhaps it is. But we are still far from the true mystery.”

“Fair enough.”

“So the king puts his bounty out on Lucian, and our minstrel knows, injured as he is, that he cannot manage a long journey. He cannot escape the kingdom. Also, given the bounty and claim, he does not fear the king intends him murder. No, this is a punishment for refusing his patronage. But in the king’s care, he knows he’ll be safer from assassins than where he currently resides. And he knows that if Giant George and his patrons were involved with his attack, they’ll figure out where he’s hiding eventually.”

“So, he turned himself in.”

“Aye. And the king had his wounds seen to and placed him in a prison, where he could await his trial.”

“Trial? Did the king not simply drag him in and declare his guilt?”

“Of course not, you goose. The king cared nothing about the charges. He still sought but one thing.”

“He still wanted to be Lucian’s patron.”

“Precisely.

“So, the king stitched him up and then just held him?”

“Yes, and in the meantime, other dejected suitors made their own moves. While Lucian was stuck in a cell mending, with nothing to pass the time save some old texts written by the philosopher Nikolaos, his wealth, stored across many realms and in many powerful hands, suddenly became misplaced by each and all of those hands. You see, even those who guaranteed his wealth also wanted his patronage. Many figured if they ‘lost’ his coin, then he would have no choice but to accept *their* patronage to get it back. So many fools.”

“For all of them to move at once, though…”

“Not all at once. Over the course of months, as word spread. See, they must have believed that Lucian could have bought his way to freedom. If they withheld his coin…”

“Then he would have to accept their patronage to get the coin to buy his freedom.”

“Precisely. Even property was seized. Lucian had no house of his own, but when he came into wealth, he purchased a lavish manor for his mother in the kingdom of Ifox. The queen there, also bitter at his rejections, had the local lord claim an enormous debt against the home, threatening to take it. And in all this time, where were the many friends of Lucian?”

“Not to be found, I take it?”

“Perhaps they, too, were pressed. Threatened. Or mayhap they weren’t such good friends after all. Who can say? What *is* known is that while he rotted in a prison, awaiting his trial, all he had worked to earn was about to be lost. Now, in the kingdom of Eborakon, there was a long-standing law, one which not only furthers our story, but also helps to explain why all of his wealth went missing in the way it did. Eborakon had, or likely still has, a law pertaining to the imprisonment of the accused. It’s one of those laws meant to fill the king’s purse while also aiding those of the upper class so they don’t have to await their trials rotting in a prison cell like a peasant. Instead, one of their mates comes along, or a family member, and forks over a hefty sum of coin. Then the accused may be released to await their trial in the comfort of their own home.”

“So, when Lucian was arrested…” I said, rolling it through my mind. “If one of his friends came along with some of his wealth, they could have bought his freedom…but none came, because the sleazes who held his money also wanted to be his patron. They had him over a barrel. Refuse, and they continued to withhold his wealth. If he agreed, he could be made free, but would be forced into their patronage.”

“Exactly so.”

“But the king,” I said, scratching the back of my head. “Surely the king wouldn’t have wanted Lucian to escape so easily.”

“Assuredly not. That was why his bond was set at one thousand gold coffins.”

I whistled. “That is no measly sum. A greater amount of wealth than I’ve seen in all my life.”

“Yes, but Lucian had as much. Just no access to it. It was all gone. Poof.”

“So, what did he do? Did he take on the king as his patron?”

She shook her head. “No. Likely, his pride got the better of him. Mayhap he feared staying in Eborakon where his would-be killers might find him again. A different solution presented itself.”

“Oh?”

“Have you ever heard of the former knight Sadhbh?”

I shook my head.

“Ah, well, here enters the next character in this tale, one of great importance. You see, Sadhbh was once a knight of Ifox. The champion of the crown. He was said to be a mountain of a man and most fierce in battle. An axman without equal, or so they say. Something happened, though, and he forsook his knighthood and struck out on his own. He was both cruel and canny, was Sadhbh. As charming as he was fierce. A natural leader of men. It didn’t take him long to form his own gang, his own crime family, Fane Daertha.”

“Fane Daertha?”

“The condemned.”

“I see.”

“Fane Daertha was growing in power in Eborakon, swiftly seeking to rival the Cloarrinwurst family.”

“Oh, no,” I said. “I think I know where this is going.”

“T’was not any of Lucian’s friends, family, or allies who came to his aid. It was Sadhbh. Using his own influence, he bullied and bought himself a visit into the prison, right under the king’s nose. It is not known what was said between the two, but an agreement was made. In a few days’ time, the debts against his mother’s house were paid, as well as the thousand gold coffins for Lucian’s release.”

“I can’t imagine the king was too happy.”

“Nor the Cloarrinwurst family, who cried foul that after they’d welcomed him into their fold, he would go work for their rival.”

“They would be so bold? After their role in his attempted assassination?”

“Ah, but who said they were involved? To that point, they still claimed their innocence.”

“Of course.” I shook my head. “Should have figured. What happened then?”

“Lucian became a member of Fane Daertha. Became the very face. And under Sadhbh’s patronage, he gained more renown than ever. Yet also, he changed. It is said that he became more violent. Paranoid, even. And at the same time, more brash still. Started wearing that magical sword of his everywhere he went. The Serpent Sword. You see, even in the king’s prison, rumors made it to him that Giant George had bragged that he knew who was behind the attack. Worse, the rumors claimed that Giant George was laughing about it. Gloating that Lucian had been knocked down a peg. Fresh out of prison with a newfound penchant for violence and a patron well acquainted, Lucian became dangerous indeed. He openly declared that it was Giant George and the Cloarrinwursts who had attempted to kill him. He made threats. Told all who would listen that he would see the lot of them pay. And he spared no kindness for the king, either, nor anyone else who opposed him. Fane Daertha’s influence grew further still. They became more dangerous. More feared. Yet also their numbers grew by the day. Having Lucian on their side made others wish to join.”

“Just because he was a famed musician?”

“Aye. There are two parts to this you must understand. First, as I have said, Lucian was a voice for the people. Where he went, many followed. When he became the face of Fane Daertha, recruiting became a breeze. And there were other musicians as well. Once Lucian accepted patronage, others sought the same. For the writing was clear enough for all to read: Fane Daertha had the greatest musicians in all the lands. So despite its origins, steeped in crime, violence, and cruelty, Fane Daertha’s musicians were the best paid and most sought.”

“Can’t imagine that made Giant George or the Cloarrinwursts happy.”

“You imagine correctly,” she said, nodding. “They were none too happy indeed. And if they were behind that first assassination attempt, they must have been more angry still. They, too, made their threats.”

“So a blood feud between minstrels?”

“Something like that, yes,” Maudlin said, nodding again. “As things continued to escalate, a new rumor came about, spread by Lucian himself. He had a chance to perform at a great festival. Giant George’s wife, a famed singer in her own right, also performed there. Shortly after, Lucian proclaimed to all the world that he’d had roll with Giant George’s wife.”

I blinked, surprise by this sharp turn. “Was it true?”

She shrugged. “So Lucian claimed. So did she deny.”

“And Giant George? What did he say? What did he do?”

“Nothing. He made no statement. Said nothing.”

“What do you think?”

“I think Lucian rutted with the wench,” she said, grinning. “But that’s just my own speculation. Whatever the case, George remained quiet, almost withdrawn, while many among the Cloarrinwursts grew louder still. They wanted blood. But then, so did many others.”

“Lucian must have known that,” I said, considering. “He must have known that this would end poorly.”

“And so it did. Yet, for a time, it seemed Fane Daertha would take over the entire bloody world. The heights they had risen to… Sadhbh, known for being a fierce warrior, turned out to be a canny businessman as well. But he may also have been a seer, for condemned is what they were indeed. It all began to unravel in Gulistan.”

“Gulistan?”

“Aye, at the Great Games of Gulistan. Invited by the king, they were. He wished to have the most regarded musicians in all the world perform for the many ceremonies, events, and banquets. Who else but the mighty Fane Daertha? So, Sadhbh gathered a great many of them, including Lucian, who by then had his own gang within the gang, his own little band of minstrels and misfits who stuck close around him.”

“Interesting,” I said. “Do we know if this bothered Sadhbh? That Lucian had his own crew?”

She shook her head. “Sadhbh only ever claimed to love Lucian like a brother. Said they were the closest of friends.”

“Others dispute this?”

“There are a great many things disputed about all of this tale. But let us not get ahead of ourselves, for we are nearly to the moment.”

“Apologies,” I said, silencing my questions.

“On the first night of the great games, Sadhbh, Lucian, and several others were invited to watch a bout between two champion boxers. This was to set off the games, you see? And so they went. But as they entered the coliseum, a member of a rival gang was spotted, one who’d clashed with a member of Lucian’s own private posse.”

“A Cloarrinwurst?”

She shook her head. “No, another gang entirely.”

“This is all becoming a lot to keep track of.”

“Just wait. So, upon spotting this rival, Lucian charged through the crowd and pounced on the man. Several others among his entourage jumped in as well. They took the man down and beat him senseless, right there before the gods and so many witnesses.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing,” she said. “The guards separated them and sent Fane Daertha on their way. They were the guests of the king, after all. And so they simply watched the bout and then made to leave. Afterward, a few were expected to perform at a banquet across town. So they called for carts to carry them. But herein lies a peculiarity, at least by some measure. Sadhbh and Lucian got into a cart alone.”

“Was that strange?”

She shrugged. “Some seem to think so. I am not so sure. Even if they weren’t so close as brothers as Sadhbh claimed, he was still Lucian’s patron. But some people see it as a clue because by that time, Lucian rarely moved about without his own guards.”

“And where were they then?”

“In other carts, a great line of them, all behind Sadhbh and Lucian.”

I nodded my understanding.

“As they moved across the city, this Fane Daertha parade, they came to a brief stop at an intersection. That is where the thing occurred.”

“What?”

“There was traffic crossing in front of them, so as they were waiting for their turn, another cart pulled alongside them. It was one of those long carriages with the wide doors and multiple windows on either side. The door kicked open and the windows were smashed, then the crossbow bolts flew, one from each window and three from the door. Five bolts. A split second later and a second volley flew. Then the carriage sped away.”

“And Lucian?”

“Nine of the ten hit their mark, or so it is said. Nine bolts struck Lucian.”

“And Sadhbh?”

“None struck him. And an interesting point, that, for Lucian had been seated on the same side the attackers rolled up to. And it seemed they

targeted the Shining Serpent alone. Sadhbh's only injury was from a piece of debris what grazed his head. Otherwise, he was unharmed."

"But Lucian died?"

"Not there and then, no." She gave me another wicked grin. "He was bonny to the last, our Shining Serpent. Sadhbh and the others rushed him to a physiker, where they attempted to heal him. His entourage guarded him the entire time, in case the assassins returned to finish the job. They did not. But after six days, Lucian finally succumbed to his wounds and died."

"Wow," I said, shaking my head. "A sad ending."

"Indeed," she replied. "And one of the greatest mysteries of our time."

"It isn't known who killed him?"

She shook her head.

"No one took credit?" I asked, surprised. "Surely the killers would have wanted to brag, to gloat that they were the ones who killed the Shining Serpent."

"And yet…it remains unknown. In the days following, much blood was spilled. Allies and enemies alike went after one another. And in a few months' time, Giant George was killed in similar fashion."

"Speak true?"

"Speak true," she said with a nod. "So, what do you think? Who was behind it?"

I stared at her, dumbfounded. "I could scarcely guess. I mean, I suppose the obvious answer would be the man he beat at the bout. His gang."

"That is the answer most accept."

"But certainly I could see where Giant George or the Cloarrinwursts could have been involved, if they were indeed involved in the first attempt. Even if they weren't, after he slandered their names and accused them… And the part about rutting with Giant George's wife… They have to be suspects, no?"

"Indeed. But you've only named two of the possibilities often debated."

I considered. "Well, there's the king of Eborakon, of course. After Sadhbh freed him and he escaped with a different patron, I'm sure the king was none too happy. Also, I suppose the queen of Ifox could have been behind it for a similar reason. And I'm sure many others, from what you've described."

"Indeed. And there are more still."

Again I racked my brain. “I don’t know enough still. But…Sadhbh himself?”

Her eyes lit up and she clapped her hands. “Very good. Many believe it was Sadhbh, for it was he who asked Lucian to ride with him alone. And he was known for his violent tendencies.”

“But whatever for? Was there any indication Lucian intended to leave?”

“None confirmed, but some of the other musicians and gang members have claimed as much. You see, in the time since Lucian’s death, their stories have changed. All claim to have been the closest to Lucian. All claim to have known his mind. Yet all their claims vary. But imagine if Lucian did wish to leave. Would he have just done so, or would he have approached Sadhbh privately, out of respect? We may never know the truth of it, but many have suspected Sadhbh.”

“Wait… How long ago did this all happen?”

“Coming on twenty years.”

“Twenty years,” I repeated, clicking my tongue. “So some of the players yet live.”

“Some, yes, though not all. In the aftermath of Lucian’s death, much tragedy occurred. Many of his closest friends and allies were also killed. And there was George’s murder, of course. Sadhbh’s influence fell, and some king or other captured him and left him imprisoned for a time. Without his hand to guide Fane Daertha, most of their musicians were sneak-thieved away by other patrons. By the time he was free, Fane Daertha’s namesake had been made true. His gang was condemned. Dead.”

“Does he yet live?”

“So far as I know. There have been many stories. Violent accounts and so on. Last I heard, some other king somewhere had him locked up. But who can say? You’re still missing a suspect, though.”

“Am I? Beyond Sadhbh, Giant George, the Cloarrinwursts, and many kings and queens?”

“Yes. Think.”

I rubbed my chin, considering. When no answer came, I considered the motives. Why would someone wish him dead? It didn’t take me long to come to an answer. Jealousy. “One of his fellow musicians? One from within Fane Daertha?”

She nodded. “It’s a less popular theory, but it circulates nonetheless. As I have said, there were several other musicians among Fane Daertha of

great renown, a few of whom are still famed to this very day. Some speculate it was one of them who wanted him out of the way."

"Seems as likely as any, I suppose. I mean, the motive isn't as strong as some of the others, but when you consider how the attack occurred… The rival gangs might have known the rout they'd take from the bout to the banquet, but getting the timing so tight would have proven a challenge. One of those among Fane Daertha would have had more intimate knowledge."

"Indeed. But you are still missing a suspect."

I blinked, wondering if she was taking the piss out of me. But no, the look on her face was deadly serious. I considered again.

But this time, I could come up with no other options. I might have given up, but it was so seldom that we spoke more than a few words, and clearly she was quite passionate about this subject… I didn't wish to disappoint her. In the end, I could think of no more. Finally, I shook my head.

She gave me a wicked grin. "Lucian himself."

I stared at her, blinking again. "How? What?"

"You remember how I said he passed the time during his imprisonment?"

"You said he read the ancient texts of Nikolaos."

"Are you familiar with his works?"

I shook my head. "In the army, he was quoted from time to time, but I can't say I ever studied his works."

"Ah, well, you see, Nikolaos wrote about a great many things. Strategy was among them. How to defeat one's enemies. And one of the tactics he wrote about, and at length, involved faking one's death."

"Speak true?"

"Speak true. Some suspect that while Lucian was rotting away in that cell in Eborakon, he became fascinated by Nikolaos's works. Whether he read that bit then, no one knows. What is well known is his fascination thereafter. Some of the final songs he wrote were about Nikolaos's ideas and theories."

"Did he sing about faking his death?"

"Of course not, for then no one would suspect it at all. It is more the timing of the thing than anything else."

"Hmm," I said, biting my lip. "I don't buy it. Sounds more coincidence than anything. And certainly Lucian made enough enemies."

“Indeed,” she said, nodding. “I long thought the same. But there is one thing that his former friends, musicians, and even Sadhbh all agree on.”

“What’s that?”

“In the final year and months of his life, Lucian wrote music like a man possessed. In fact, many of his most famous songs came in the brief span of that year. Here was a man who’d been making music for years, with many great tunes to his name. Yet in those final months, he wrote more new songs than in the rest of his life combined. They say he was always working on something new, hammering out song after song. While the others drank wine and chased women, he’d be in the corner with a piece of parchment, dabbling out lyrics. Then his instrument would be in his hand and he’d come up with a new tune. Then another. And another. Always showing and sharing. Working as though his last days were coming.”

“Huh,” I said, considering. “That is…peculiar. Is it not possible that he may have simply been worried about all the enemies he’d made? You said he was paranoid.”

“Indeed, he was. Many of his songs focused on death. His own death. And that’s why many brush away this theory. They believe that with so many enemies, Lucian must have known his time was limited. Have you ever known an artist, Garbhan? A painter, composer, or poet?”

“Not many. But a few.”

“And the ones you’ve met, have you noticed they have a hunger about them? One which cannot be sated?”

I nodded.

“And what do you think they would do, if they knew they were about to die?”

“They would create.”

She spread her hands apart.

I nodded. “I don’t think it’s enough to sway me one direction or the other.”

Shrugging, she said, “So now you know the mystery of the death of the Shining Serpent.”

I nodded, then quirked an eyebrow at her. “And just how are we going to go about solving it?”

“Ah, yes, that,” she said, seeming thoughtful. Then she grinned again. “I haven’t a clue.”

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A Change of Scenery

If I had hoped that the tale of the Shining Serpent would be the catalyst to companionship, I would have been sorely disappointed.

After the tale was told, she went back to the way she'd been.

The days passed in silence.

I tried at times to engage her in conversation. Those attempts fell by the wayside.

So we continued on, stopping only at night, and always sleeping in the forest.

With no bow to take down game, nor time to forage, nor ever stopping, our food supply was coming quickly to a bitter end. Even when we passed a traveling merchant, she'd not spare me a breath to make trade. No, it was always forward. Always onward until the sun was nearly dead.

Only once did we pause as we passed some gathering of merchants on the outskirts of some town. There were many people, as if it were a fair of some kind. I had expected her to march on through, but there was a merchant with some rather fine shoes on display. Maudlin, of course, stopped.

I stood to the side, wondering if I might have time to trade for some food. I was so focused on that, I didn't hear the man walk up on me.

"Have you accepted the blessing of the tree, brother?"

I spun to find a middle-aged man wearing the vestments of a speaker for the Holy Tree. His robes were dusty and well-worn, likely the traveling type.

I stared back at him, unsure how to reply. It was well known that in some lands, the wrong answer could land one in a heap of trouble. I didn't

see any templars about, however. The priest appeared to be alone.

My mouth seemed intent to move before my brain caught up. Instead of answering his question, I asked one of my own. “Say, brother, what do you think happened to the Shining Serpent?”

He raised an eyebrow, studying me curiously. “Are you asking me, as a man, or are you asking the position of the church?”

It was my turn to be surprised. “Does the church have an official position?”

“It does,” he said, nodding. “The church’s position is that it matters not, for Lucian Locklear was a sinner, a man who squandered his gift for selfish gain. He deserved whatever ill fate befell him, for his greatest sin, in the eyes of the church, was not using his talents or influence to spread the holy word.”

“That is…a position.”

“Indeed it is,” he replied, nodding.

“And what is your opinion? As a man?”

“Oh, I think the Cloarrinwursts got him.”

With that, he gave me a nod and moved on.

I started for the nearest food vendor only to find Maudlin standing a few feet away, one hand on her hip as she glared at me. The other hand held some bottle of dark liquor. How she’d purchased it, I could not know, for I didn’t believe she had any coin of her own.

“Garbhan,” she said, still scowling. “Whatever are you doing?”

“I was thinking to trade for some food.”

“Come along.” She harrumphed at me and spun on her heels, marching on. Over her shoulder, she called, “The land will provide.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

“Then I shall cut out your thighs to make mince pies.”

So, on we went. On and on, never stopping. Never taking time to trade. Marching late into each evening. I thought for certain we’d die of hunger. That we’d never stop again.

That was until one evening, while the sun was still about its dying, a bustling little village came into view.

Maudlin turned to face me, eyes gleaming. “A town!”

I was surprised, for as I have said, we had passed many such.

Never before had she shown such enthusiasm.

But then, never before had we come across one just as the sun was rasping out its final breaths.

This, it seemed, was the only time Maudlin warranted a town worth stopping in.

I was about to ask, but… Then it came to me.

This was more of her strange logic. Just like the shoes.

Maudlin was in a hurry, you see? All that mattered was that she reach her Tom as quickly as possible. Yet she also understood she required rest. And so, to her mind, she must travel all the day long, never stopping until she reached her destination, or until the sun set on her. For in the darkness, it made sense to relent and give in to her silly human need for sleep. So her goal was simply that: to push on as fast and as far as she could by day, skipping each and every town without care. But if she stumbled upon one as the sun was setting, then why not bed down there?

“Come quickly, Garbhan,” she said, waving me onward, eager as a child. “Let us see what sort of drink is about!”

“You wish to stop?”

“But of course, you goose fart of a gander. Let us find an inn and fill our night with wonder and sin!”

“Sin?” I asked.

She rolled her eyes. “My traveling companion is too prude to take me to bed, so it seems I must find another instead. A woman has needs, you know?”

“Oh, I, uh… I see.”

That…strangely bothered me. I couldn’t quite say why. It wasn’t as if I had some feeling toward her. Her eyes might have roamed, but clearly she had heart for but one man, and we would travel until we found him. Yet I couldn’t deny I felt a little cast aside. A foolish notion, to be sure.

Maudlin, it seemed, missed little. She took glee in the poke and the prod. Enjoyed causing a bit of discomfort. “Don’t pout now, man-buck. Had opportunities, you did. Yes, you had plenty of chance, and now I shall find another willing to dance.”

To this, I made no reply.

She wasn’t done, though. “And don’t think I’ve forgotten what jingle jingle the wizard gave you. Enough for a drink and a room, no doubt.”

I glared back at her. “Or, you know, food. We should spend it sparingly. Once it’s gone, I know not how we’ll get more.”

Again she scoffed. “What is money for, if not drinking and whores?”

I stopped in my tracks. “You’re seeking a whore?”

“Who?” she asked. “Me? Never. Maudlin need not pay for the pleasures of the flesh, for it is known round the world she is best.”

“Uh huh.”

She narrowed her eyes. “This you’d know, if you weren’t such a toad.”

“Right. Well, at least we can get some supplies and I won’t have to sleep in the cold for once.”

“What if I bring a lover to our bed?”

“Then I will beat them about the head.”

She giggled and moved alongside me, taking my arm like she was my gal and I were her lad.

It was a strange sort of excitement that came over her.

Should have known it meant trouble.

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Riddles Untold

Riddles Untold.

That was the name of the tavern and inn we found in that little hovel. Couldn't tell you the name of the hamlet, but I remember that. Riddles Untold. It remains locked in my mind, white and hot like a branding iron.

For how could I forget?

By the time we staggered away, many riddles would remain, but few had been untold.

But I am getting ahead of myself.

It seemed this little village was a crossroads of sorts. While the citizens were few, passing merchants, tradesmen, and mercenaries were many, all of whom dined, drank, and drooled in Riddles Untold.

The sun waved its final goodbye as we entered.

It was well-sized, which made sense, for it was a busy place, bustling with life, though most were subdued and quietly dining. The evening was young still so that the river of ale had begun to flow, but not so late for the flood to have swept all sense away.

Our time there started quietly enough. Those first few moments, I sauntered over to the innkeeper and bartered for a room, a couple of meals, and drinks. When the prices were agreed and the key was in my hand, I made for our room to drop off my travel pack, cloak, and shield. My sword I kept. All told, it was but a few minutes. I felt my part was handled efficiently and quickly. But by the time I returned to the bar…

Maudlin had already become the life of the party.

She held an ale in her hand, no doubt snatched away from some poor bloke.

There were a few whores about, working the room, yet they were all but forgotten in the presence of Maudlin. Every man, and a few of the gals, stared at her with hungry, open eyes.

She didn't seem to mind. Hardly seemed to notice.

A group of ruffians was laughing at some joke she'd just made, along with the patrons of the nearest several tables.

She moved about, clinking her mug and sharing jokes, none of which I could hear.

I watched, mesmerized, as she performed her magic, weaving a spell on those poor, innocent fools. Was it truly magic? In a different sort of way. She cast no hex or curse, but the way she worked the room… It was near enough to enchantment.

When we'd walked in, the various patrons had sat in quiet, distinct little groups, keeping to their own. Her presence, though, it pulled them all together as one. She breathed life into the room, demanding all join in revelry and merriment. Within moments, men were calling for refills and raucous laughter filled the air.

The poor old soul running the place slid two mugs my way and gave me a wary glance. I shrugged apologetically, though I'm not sure why. This was his trade, and our arrival would see him drowning in coin, or so it seemed.

It also seemed I had been forgotten.

My traveling companion did not look my way, not once.

I found the one lone table in the corner and sat down with my two ales to keep me company. One had been for Maudlin, of course, but no longer. They'd both be for me, it seemed. I took to sipping and watching.

Before I'd even finished my first, the flames she'd stoked roared like a brush fire, from a quiet tavern to a king's feast. The lads and lasses were carrying on, and the whores found cheerful faces to ply their trade on while a minstrel took up his lute and began to play.

It was a proper party, hearty as I'd ever seen.

I drank alone, thinking this wasn't such a bad thing. Certainly it wasn't what I might have expected. In the wizard's cottage, she'd been both serious, intimidating, and seemingly mad indeed. Just the two of us,

bouncing along the road, she had sloshed between happy and glum. I'd not seen her carry on like this.

Here was the same woman who cried herself to sleep each night, laughing and tossing drinks about, the jewel of every patron's eye. Perhaps it was a good thing, for her spirits were high.

It was also…fascinating.

And a damned sight unnerving.

Once again, and for a very different reason, I wondered just what I had gotten myself into. Not that it mattered much. I was stuck with her until my debt was cleared, and that wasn't likely to happen in short order, for she wasn't keen on seeing it so.

It was vexing.

And so was this.

I didn't care to admit it, even to myself, but I felt a bit put aside again. Forgotten.

A strange feeling, that, for I harbored no friendly feeling toward this strange woman. Yet…

Well, she was *my* traveling companion, was she not? Did that not count for something?

No, I supposed it didn't.

Good to her word, it took no time for her to catch a handsome lad, one who happily took her by the hand and led her up the steps to the second floor, much to the delight of the others. There were cheers and applause all around.

A stone settled in my gut, bothered by the whole affair, though I remained unwilling to admit it.

Contrary to her words, I was no prude. Nor was I the sort who thought only men should derive pleasure from the act. Nor did I think ill of women who were as promiscuous as every damned man I'd ever met. I mean, sure, if I were sworn to a lass, then I would have expected her to stay true to me, just as I would have stayed true to her. But that was… That was for normal folk, wasn't it? The sorts who laid down roots, took vows, and raised piglets.

I'd almost been one of them once. Or, better put, I had thought, as pubescent lads do, that there was but one woman in all the world for me. And it just so happened that all the gods had smiled upon me alone and placed that one, perfect woman in the hamlet of my birth. I had come to rue

my foolishness then, as I knew I would now. That old pain came crawling back. An arrow through my still-beating heart.

While I was in the service of my devil, I'd shared a bed with many lasses, and mostly whores. Mostly paid for in blood. Coin picked from the pockets of those who'd fallen under my blade. I think, back then, I was trying to rut away the pain. Doesn't work that way, though, does it?

But on the other side of it all, I came to a calmer understanding of the ways of the world. I came to cast away the small-minded notions I'd grown up with, but in equal measure, I'd pitched out those newer ideals picked up in the various cities I'd traveled. It wasn't so complicated after all. If one believed it was wrong to fornicate on a whim, then they should not do so. If one felt no moral weight about the matter, then they should do as they pleased, so long as their acts brought no harm to others. That was the way I saw matters, anyway.

Which begged the question… Why was I bothered about Maudlin sauntering off with that fellow?

Was it jealousy?

I pondered it as I pondered over my second ale, the one which had been intended for her.

Here came another bit of wisdom I'd taken from Blackthorn. He would often say that most folk were incapable of seeing the grass on the other side of their piss. A colorful expression, indeed, but what did it mean? It meant that too many folks lied to themselves. Justified their poor behavior. Refused to hold themselves accountable. They couldn't speak truly, even to themselves. I had long considered this, this idea of telling oneself naught but the truth.

And so here it was…

I had no feelings for Mad Maudlin. Not even an inkling. I felt no real attachment to her, and if my debt were cleared, I'd have run from Riddles Untold without ever looking back.

Did I desire her flesh?

Well, I was a man with a working prick, and she had about her an attraction like I'd never encountered, so, yes, of course I did. She had a presence which could not be denied. She cast a spell of desire over all she graced with her presence, despite her mad ways.

So, again, was I jealous of that red-faced man?

No.

Well, yes.

But not in the usual sort of way, I realized.

I wasn't jealous that he was up there, pumping away, while I sat alone with my cup.

It was…something harder to explain. Something hard for me to understand.

You see, already I viewed Maudlin as something…different. Above the rest of us mere mortals. A presence, more than a person, which perhaps was unfair to her. But these things rarely are, and despite how uncomfortable, absurd, or wrong a thought may be, to the wizard's point…that was the grass on the other side of my piss. That poor lad was beneath her, by measure. Unworthy of her time or attention.

That made me chuckle into my cup, for I certainly didn't believe *I* was worthy of her time or attention, either.

And how about that?

Despite my frustrations, agitations, and annoyances, I had come to hold her in some strange regard. Irksome, it was.

At any rate, after some time, Maudlin reappeared, bouncing down the steps with a grin on her lips, and resumed her role as the life of the party. The excitement had only dulled a little when she'd left, but she re-stoked the fire at once.

Her lover was slower to return. Mayhap she had exhausted him. Likely, he'd found her more than he had been prepared to handle.

Whatever the case, the lad would learn, just as I had, that no man, save for Tom of Bedlam, could hold Maudlin's attention for more time than one could hold a pile of sand.

When her plaything returned, his face took on another shade of red, this one not of a lover's delight.

For Maudlin had taken herself a seat on another man's lap. This one was large and brutish, his friends a rougher sort. Likely mercenaries, passing through and looking for work.

The lad, who… Funny thing, that, actually. I wasn't so sure he was much younger than me, yet I couldn't help but think of him as young and foolish. At any rate, I surmised he was part of a merchant's crew or some traveling caravan, for the table he returned to comprised men of various ages, sizes, states, and attire. Not warriors, though there were a few among their numbers who looked as though they could hold their own. Some may

have been stout of heart, but they weren't made of the same mettle as the ruffians.

I had always had a talent for reading people, of gathering their measure with a look. Soldiering had honed my eyes further. And my measure was that the caravaners weren't as nasty as the mercenaries, though they had the numbers. But some of those numbers were old enough to be grans.

None of this stopped the cuckolded young man from staring a vicious hate at the big man in whose lap Maudlin sat. She seemed not to notice her former lover's ire, still carrying on, telling her jokes, and clinking her mug.

The gang leader did, though.

That was when the trouble began.

At some point, the ruffian looked up, eyes narrowing as he took in the menace of the young man. "You have a problem, lad? Or do you just find my face a sight to behold?"

The young man made to rise, but an older, wiser man, one of the grans seated alongside him, gave his sleeve a tug and pulled him back into his seat.

"That's right, Grandpa," the gang leader said through his jagged teeth. "Keep the pup in his kennel."

This time, the young man did rise.

He was embarrassed, jealous, and feeling the fool. And I felt a bit bad for him, to tell it true. Suppose that's why I thought him a young man, despite being close to my own age. The gang leader had seen the same. For here was a man who'd clearly not yet learned the cruel realities of his vicious world. Worse, he had never had his pride beaten out of him. Looked as though he might get both, and in short order. Hardly seemed fair.

And yes, yes, I know. Save me the righteous scolding. He held no claim over Maudlin, nor was it right of him to think he might. Nor was it right of him to sit and seethe in jealousy. But these were things he hadn't learned, you see? Things a young man must come to understand, just as I had, or suffer the consequences ever after. But even those who refuse to learn are distinguished from those who've not had the lesson. You can see it easily enough. Can measure it in their eyes. Can observe it in how they treat others. How they treat lasses they're keen on.

The lad was a virgin of a sort. Not in the physical way, but in the emotional. In his maturity. In those places where it truly mattered. He was not yet forged. The hammer had yet to strike the anvil. Was it fair that the

price of his education be a beating and blood? To have his teeth knocked from his skull? To piss naught but red for days? Or worse, would it be fair for this lesson to be his last? That his naivety and ignorance be paid for with a sharp blade in his gut? Would you have him soaking in his own blood, piss, and bile while he choked out his final few breaths?

Judge how you may, but I would not.

It was in me to take his side, to rise and meet those ruffians in his stead, for I knew their type well. That was an education I had indeed paid for with my own blood. Paid in full. To tell it true, I had been forged. Hammered against the anvil of violence and toil. Call me wicked, but some part of me missed it still, despite my days of peace. It was not the wickedness I craved, but the challenge.

Does that sound a farce?

It was not. In this, at least, I was certain I was seeing the grass on the other side of my piss. I had no desire to hurt anyone. But the challenge? My time in stillness, it had made me wonder… Made me wonder if I still could. It was self-doubt which made me wish to act a fool. Still, I kept my arse where it belonged. At least then.

As the tension kindled toward flame, Maudlin remained oblivious.

Only when the gang leader scooted her off his lap did she seem to notice her former lover stalking toward them.

I held back despite myself.

I wanted to see how Maudlin would handle the situation.

If I were trapped with her, then I needed to know what to expect. Based on what I'd seen so far, there was little telling. She could just as easily have egged them on or kicked off the fight herself. Neither would have surprised me.

Which, I supposed, should have been my clue that neither was the right guess, for she had certainly surprised me at every turn thus far.

She attempted to smother the flames.

"Lads," she said, voice as husky, lyrical, and seductive as ever, "come now, what is all this fuss? Must there be toil between us? Are we not all friends here, my bonny dears?"

The two men glared at each other.

And so did their mates.

The ruffians looked like wolves, hungry and predatory, grinning maliciously at the caravaners.

The caravaners stared back, wary and worried, though I was sure a few were hearty.

“Come now,” Maudlin said again, taking hold of the room. She raised her glass and motioned for others to do the same. “Let us have peace and cheer. How about a little toast, eh?”

By this point, one of the other men from the caravaners had gotten a hold of their friend and was busy pulling the lad back to the safety of their numbers.

The gang leader snorted his derision.

Nasty fellow, that one. I could see it on him clear enough. He was spoiling for a tussle. He was of another sort entirely. Not young or naive like the lad he wished to pummel. No, this one had been forged, and sadly, had come out worse for it. His answer to the cruelty of the world was to give back in equal measure. To be the one who inflicted the pain.

Still, even he, trapped under Maudlin’s spell, resumed his seat and took up his mug. I suspect he wanted to bed her more than he wanted to beat the young man. Lucky day for a fool.

Except…

Maudlin raised her mug and cried, “Let us drink to Tom of Bedlam!”

The room grew silent. Eerily silent.

It was as if her words cast a dark shadow about the place, sucking all the joy straight away.

Mayhap some knew the name. More likely, though, it was the feeling. Something dark and foreboding. Something unnatural. I’d not noticed it when she’d said the same at Blackthorn’s, but that was a sacred place, protected by his magics.

This was…strange.

An odd feeling had passed over me as she’d made her toast, and seeing the reaction from the others, I knew I was not alone in that strangeness. Many gathered in that tavern seemed to have some sort of visceral reaction. Of particular note was the table of ruffians. Two of them shared a quick look, as though they were surprised by the mention.

Only their leader didn’t seem to notice. Or maybe he did. As I said, he’d been forged, and had come out the other side a nasty sort. Prideful and cruel. Where the younger man had felt cuckolded by his presence, so did the ruffian feel cuckolded by the call of this other man’s name.

He snorted. “Tom, you say? And why should I drink to him?”

Maudlin turned to face him, still smiling. “Tom is the greatest man to have ever walked this world. All folk would be wise to drink to Tom of Bedlam.”

One of the others, in fact one of the very same who’d seem surprised by the mention of Tom’s name, tried to get his attention. The gang leader ignored him.

“A pox on Tom,” he said, grinning. “He ain’t here, is he? Nah, come upstairs with me, girl, and you’ll forget that sod’s very name.”

Her reaction was as sudden as it was violent.

In a blur, she slammed her mug against the gang leader’s skull, shattering it and sloshing ale about.

The man fell right out of his chair, landing on the floor amid the dust and spilled drink.

It has oft been said that bullies are all bark and no bite. That is a lie. Some bullies have plenty of bite. This man was one such. Despite the ferocity of her attack, a strike which would have knocked cold most men, he was back on his feet in a moment. Red-faced and fuming, ale dripping from his chin, he stared down at her with murderous intent.

The tavern went silent.

“You’ll pay for that, you little whore. You’ll pay for it dearly. Ain’t no Tom coming to save your pretty arse, either. By the time I’m done with you, he won’t have you, anyway. No man will.”

It didn’t escape my notice that the young man attempted to rise once more, perhaps thinking to play the hero of old and come to the damsel’s rescue. Again, one of the older caravaners grabbed hold of his wrist, staying him.

Maudlin, though, under the gaze of this fierce brute and his mates, seemed entirely unbothered.

Much to my surprise, she called my name.

And there I’d thought she’d forgotten about me.

She didn’t look my way when she said it. She kept her gaze on the brute.

“Garbhan, dear?”

“Hmm?” I replied, not liking how every eye in the room turned toward me. I wasn’t used to being the center of anyone’s attention.

Maudlin, voice as silky as ever, said, “I believe this is a matter for you, is it not?”

That… That made me laugh.

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Games

It seemed I was alone in the jest.

As I chuckled to myself, the rest of the tavern stared at me as though I were the one who'd lost my wits. Perhaps I was.

Even the tough-nosed brute came up short, confused by my display.

Maudlin alone seemed unsurprised by my outburst. She looked annoyed. *Good.*

See, it wasn't just this one thing, the absurdity of her seeking my aid in a conflict she'd brewed and served. No, there were layers to this comedy turned tragedy.

With the exception of Maudlin and the tavern master, with whom I had bartered, no one else in this bloody tavern had known I'd existed until that moment. And here the others were, worried about violence, while I chuckled into my cup like some beast dragged in from the wilds.

It came to me then, my mistake. I had sat back, seeking to learn how Maudlin would handle the situation, hadn't I? In return, she'd done much the same. That was what I found so damned funny.

Maudlin was testing me, just as I'd sought to test her.

But there was more to it than that.

Even then, with the stakes so high, she did not command me, nor did she ask. If I had rushed to her aid, some dashing hero, then no measure of my debt would have been cleared.

This was, perhaps, my first hint of the brilliance hidden beneath that mad veneer.

She knew what she was about. She wasn't merely seeking to trick me. No, she was testing my wit. My resolve. Seeking to understand my foibles

and what might make me jump.

As the tavern eased ever toward the edge of violence, Maudlin and me, we were waging our own war. Our swords had already crossed, though they remained unseen. The onlookers awaited some terrible brawl, never knowing one was already in flight.

It would be unfair to say that she thought me some sodden do-gooder. More that she wished to know the truth of the matter. Was I an upstanding, honor-bound fool with delusions of grandeur? Or was I something a bit colder?

She had played her card, and so it was time for me to play mine.

I grinned at her. “You need but ask, my lady.”

Her eyes narrowed. *Good.* This round went to me, then.

Sadly, the ale-soaked gang leader chose that moment to interrupt. It was to be expected. No one had paid him any mind for several seconds, after all.

“You’ll sit over there and keep your mouth shut, if you know what’s good for you. Or maybe you’d like to watch? Maybe you’d *all* like to watch me tame this whore. Maybe I’ll force every damned one of you to sit there and smile while I rut this bitch ’til she bleeds.”

I paid him no heed, my eyes firmly fixed on Maudlin.

Her eyes were locked on me.

The game was still on. It just didn’t involve the surly mercenary, and he failed to see it.

“Yeah, that’s what I’ll do,” he said, grinding those jagged teeth. “I’ll take her right here in front of you lot. I’ll break this bitch over the table for all to witness, so you all know what happens when you—”

Maudlin was so swift, I doubt but even a few registered her movements. Her hand was but a blur, the blade of it crushing his windpipe.

The man staggered back, doubled over, and coughed and hacked while he tried to remember how to breathe.

Well, that solved that problem. He’d not be beating or raping anyone, least not for a short while.

His mates, though… Well, that was another matter.

They rose from their seats, itchy hands scratching toward scabbards.

I considered jumping into the fray then, for a bit of violence was all good and fun so long as we kept it to fists and feet. Once the blades came out, though, things would deteriorate to permanent stakes.

I felt a hint of fear in my gullet, too. Yes, I very much wondered whether I still had that bit of soldier in me. Or that killer who'd roamed about doing a devil's bidding. But I also had sat ever on my arse at Blackthorn's home. Had I gone soft? Was I about to learn my lessons in the harshest of ways?

But also… I had always felt nervous in the before parts. The lead up. Always hated that bit.

I steadied my will and leaned back in my chair, as if I didn't have a care in the world. Even took another sip of ale.

"*Garbhan*," Maudlin said, her tone reproachful. As though she were a mother and I a lad who'd just tracked dog shit across her newly cleaned floors.

I responded in kind. "*Maudlin.*"

"You are failing in your duties, pet," she said, changing tactics. Now her tone was more matter-of-fact. "I am rather disappointed in you."

"You need but ask," I replied, smiling sweetly.

Two of the mercenaries made to check on their leader. The others started toward Maudlin, eyes wary.

She didn't seem the least bit worried. Her focus was on her annoyance with me.

"You'll not hurt her!" her former lover said, rising from his seat once more.

And once again, the older caravaner had a hold of his sleeve, intent on keeping him from stepping into the coming storm. Good man, there.

"Pipe down, ya' sodden brat," one of the gang members said. Guessed he was second in command. With the boss on the floor, it was his time to shine. He had a big beak of a nose, this one, and so I thought of him as such. Beak Nose. "Lest you want me to take a belt to your wee bottom."

As was intended, the younger man's face turned from apple red to a darker shade of plum.

At the same time, the tavern master called out, "Not in here, lads! If there's to be a scuffle, take it outside!"

"Shut your pie hole," Beak Nose said, whirling on the tavern master. "We'll bloody anyone we damned well please and anywhere we damned well please. And you'll clean up the mess afterward with a fat smile on your cheeks, or you can join them."

“Bored now,” Maudlin said, turning away from the mercenaries. She plucked an ale right out of a spectator’s hand and marched toward me, scowling.

“Hey, where do you think you’re going, whore?” Beak Nose said, giving chase.

The others followed. All of them. Turned out there wasn’t much the two could do for their boss. He was still busy with that whole breathing bit, so I guessed they figured they might as well join their fellows in… What, exactly?

Was their plan truly to beat this woman and do worse still, right here in front of everyone? It wasn’t much of a plan as far as plans went, but I doubted they’d really given it much thought. They were but vessels on a raging river, trying to paddle some dignity back into their sinking boats.

They were nearly caught up when Maudlin strolled past me.

She refused to meet my gaze, but with an exaggerated sigh, said, “Garbhan, would you be a dear and take care of this little problem for me?”

My own grin deepened, for I had won the game.

An understanding had passed between us.

Yet I’d not rest on my laurels. Something told me that in the company of Maudlin, I’d be forever pressed. She’d not relent and would ever seek to bend me to her will. More tests would come. This I knew.

Just then, though… I was onto a different bit of sport.

I am ashamed to admit I felt myself as giddy as I was nervous. As I alluded to, there was in me a hunger for violence. Not for harm or wickedness, but a never-ending battle between self-deprecation and self-confidence.

Beak Nose led the way, his eyes still firmly fixed on Maudlin. He was about to pass me, and then he’d be on her.

Surging to my feet, I struck out with my mug, hammering into his long nose.

Both shattered.

He crumpled, eyes glossed over, crimson pouring down lips. Beak Nose was done.

Five to go.

I’d not catch the rest unaware, and no doubt they were bonny brawlers. They made their living toiling for coin. I had once, too, but it had been a good long while. I was well out of practice and outnumbered. But I’d

jumped into that prideful river with them, and there was nothing left but to paddle.

So, paddle I did.

The nearest man took a swing, which I dipped back to avoid, then stepped in, aiming my fist for his jaw. He turned his head, causing me to clip the edge of his chin instead. I'm sure it smarted, but not so fiercely as my poor knuckle.

I didn't have time to apologize to my appendage, for the merc to my right took that opportunity to swing as well. Once again, I was forced to duck back, his blow glancing off my shoulder instead of my face.

I kicked out with my foot, hammering his shin.

He took a step to the side, his right, my left, and directly into the path of his mate, who was also throwing a punch just then. I'd like to say he clobbered his hobbling comrade, but it was not so. It merely put him off balance so that his fist struck naught but air.

You may wonder about the others. They were piled up behind these, waiting for their turn. There wasn't much room for us to work. Our bout had set off amid several tables, the patrons sadly trapped with us, no way to escape. Those clear of the melee emptied their seats, fearing our wildfire might spread over them. Others stayed where they were, cheering and shouting.

Much to my surprise, it was me they were cheering for. How about that?

At any rate, as the two mercs tried their luck on me, their fellows were trapped behind them, awaiting their turn. They may have considered going around the tables, but if the thought came to them at all, it came too late. For that other young man, Maudlin's first lover, could stomach his restraint no longer. He must have given the slip to the older caravaner while I wasn't paying attention, for when I caught sight of him again, he was free and hammering into one of those near the back.

He was a big fellow, the young lover, and struck the unsuspecting gang member with a mighty blow that sent him reeling into another of the ruffians, who in turn spilled into the lap of a husky man who'd likely intended to remain a spectator. Plans change.

In a matter of moments, I still had the two, but the brash lover and the husky fellow were keeping the rest busy.

I'd never been much of a boxer, but I rather favored the change in odds.

For my part, I landed a wicked blow on the snoot of one of my attackers. I'd like to think it would have dropped most blokes, but these lads were bonny indeed.

As he recollected his senses, his mate, the one I'd kicked in the shin, threw another punch at me. I dodged it easily enough, then put my boot into his shin again.

He cursed and instinctively reached down, lowering his noggin. A mistake, that, for my fist was waiting. I caught him in the jaw and sent him spilling over a table, which toppled under his weight. More shattered mugs and spilled ale. A tragedy, to be certain.

The other merc had refound his senses then, but it seemed he understood things weren't going as well as he'd hoped. His eyes darted wildly, looking for an escape. A mistake even greater than that of his mate, for his attention should have been on my fists.

I shattered his nose again, reveling in the lightning bolt of pain that shot up my arm, for it certainly felt worse on his twice-booped snoot.

I felt alive.

Reborn.

No, that wasn't it. I was… I was whole. A man remade. Reforged.

But for a moment, I feared my fun was over.

The husky man had handled his business and moved in to help the young lover with his. To my surprise, the younger man had held his own, though he'd certainly wake up with a shiner.

Where was Maudlin in all this?

I glimpsed her heading up the stairs, her hand in the grip of yet another man.

Rolling my eyes, I glanced around once more, delighted to find my game was not yet concluded after all.

The gang leader had risen to his feet again. Seemed he'd learned how to breathe after all.

I started toward him but came up short.

He had drawn his sword.

So much for keeping it to fist and foot.

I sighed, hand reaching toward my own. It would be a lie to say this didn't offer me a hint of a thrill as well. Again, it wasn't blood I craved, but I'd taken to working through my forms again. That was nothing compared to having a sparring partner.

And here was the real thing.

Life or death.

Did I still have the skill? In my soldiering days, I'd been a fair swordsman, one of the best among the lads. And I'd earned the title of bonny brat, not solely for my swordplay, but also because I was said to be fierce in battle. I didn't know about all that. Hard to judge one's own merits fairly. But the lads had thought it so, and I had taken it as an honor. Did I still have what it took to play the game?

Or would this wicked fool finally put my debt to rest?

There was but one way to find out.

"Where is she?" he asked, heading whipping about. "Where is that whore?"

"Right here," I replied, drawing clear my blade.

He met my gaze, but hesitated only for a moment. It was that river, you see? He was still floating down that river of pride, and forget about paddling. His vessel had taken on too much water, and he was scooping it out with a mug when he clearly needed a bucket. I was to be his bucket.

The tavern grew silent. All understood the game had changed.

His mates were out cold or groaning over their injuries. The fight was all over, save for this.

He charged, but not with utter abandon. He was skilled, this one. A canny cutter.

But so was I, once upon a time.

Our blades met, the song of steel like music to my ears.

I hated to admit it, even to myself, but just then, the grass on the other side of my piss was this: I had missed it. Oh, how I had missed it. The toil of swordplay. That sweet song of steel. The way my anxiety and terror melted away as I fell into the dance. Fear giving way to focus. Consequences of the highest order. My skill against his. Life or death.

My opponent was surely my better. If he wasn't more skilled, he was certainly more recently practiced. Yet he saw something in my eyes. Saw that this was no mere trifle. More than a little bother. That alone was enough to shake a man. And he may well have seen the joy that came over me. Might have sensed the lack of care I had for my own cursed life. For that was the truth of it. Away from the peaceful home of the wizard, what did I care if I lived or died?

There was my debt, sure, but it was a near certainty that Maudlin would get me dead somewhere. Why not here? And of my debt? Should I live, then I'd worry over it still, but if I died, I had nothing to worry over whatsoever.

It shook him.

Took the air from his sails.

For I could see in his own gaze that he very much wished to live.

I'd have let him cry off. I'd have let him walk away without so much as a mock, for I understood life was only lived once. But his pride damned him to stay. Demanded that he finish the game.

A foolish thing, pride.

His blade struck again and again, and I parried each, the dust knocked off with every blow. If my foe had come full tilt from the outset, his arrogance intact and my arm covered in cobwebs, then I'd be a dead man now, I tell you true. But he did not. As we danced, the skill came back to me, all while his arrogance shrank, putting us on level ground.

He came in low, seeking to take my leg. I parried the blow, then rammed my elbow forward, slamming it into his cheek. He staggered back, staring at me in horror.

I thought he might cry off.

But still, his wounded pride drove him forward.

He swung in a wild chop. Too much weight to parry, I side-stepped and replied with a meager jab. No real threat, just enough to force him back again. Instead, he swatted my blade aside and stepped in, thinking to muscle me. He met my knee instead. It cracked against his own.

A whoosh of pain erupted from his lips, vacating his lungs. I wished to keep it that way.

Lowering my shoulder, I drove into him, seeking a chance to pop him in the gut. A man couldn't fight without air. Perhaps I could wind him further and remove his blade, then all parties might yet live.

It wasn't to be.

He swung his sword back around, forcing me to retreat, then resumed his breathing.

I cursed.

A bit of arrogance came back to him then. He may have thought me distraught by his canny play. That I was disheartened I hadn't yet killed

him. Quite the opposite. I was annoyed I'd lost the chance to end this thing without bloodshed.

The return of his arrogance brought back a bit of his skill.

He came in strong, blade moving in a blur, and so, when I saw my opportunity, I took it.

It saddens me to recall.

He was a wicked man, no doubt. His threat of rape was enough that I'd not mourn his passing. But…

It was that look in his eyes. Pride and triumph.

He had not realized I'd killed him. He didn't know…

Not for several seconds.

See, when we'd parted that last time, he'd grazed my shoulder.

He stood back, grinning at his handiwork, arrogance returning to the height of its summit.

I frowned back, my joy fading. I already knew, even if no one else did.

And I remembered then why I had put down my sword.

Why I had sought to bury it in that trunk. Whatever pleasure may be derived from the challenge, it is short-lived, even when the game is won. At least for me. I took no joy in dealing death.

The brute's grin soon drooped, eyes glancing to the crotch of his leggings, where a dark stain had formed.

Gasps sounded from around the room as others noticed. As they all saw.

I had caught him in the groin, where that big vein lurks, right there in the crook.

He stared up at me, eyes wide and pleading. Begging me to undo what I had done.

I could not. I held no such power.

And this… This was the price of playing foolish games.

We all watched him sag, then finally fall to the planks, his lifeblood seeping out.

I never knew his name, but he was…

He was the first man I killed in the service of Mad Maudlin.

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Night Cap

An awkward silence hung over the tavern as we watched the mercenary bleed out.

I knew well what came next. Had I been alone, I would have left that very moment. I would have slipped off into the darkness and traveled long into the night to avoid the hangman's noose. But I was not alone. Maudlin was upstairs with a new lover, and I knew not which room.

Cursing my lot, I glanced around, studying the stunned faces.

It was the tavern master who broke the silence.

"Ha!" he cried. "Serves the bastard right!"

I blinked, surprised by his sudden outburst.

Several others joined in, shouting their cheers.

What in all the hells?

Over the next few minutes, I would learn that this gang passed through on the regular. They were known throughout the region, and many here moved about the same ground. They were not well-loved.

So it was that my actions led me to be something of a hero among the other patrons.

Along with several hearty men, I helped escort the rest of the gang outside. Those who could walk, we shoved. Those who were out cold, like Beak Nose, we tossed. All ended up in the dusty street.

As for their leader?

The tavern master suggested we drag him to a pigpen out back.

"The pigs will take care of him, so they will," he said, nodding with satisfaction. "That all right, Harold?"

Harold, a heavyset man who was presumably the owner of the pigpen, agreed straight away. “Aye, fine by me. Will save me on slop. They’ll make quick work of the blaggard.”

I was surprised, for I knew well the stench of dead men. An unholy stench it was. Not the sort of smell folk would want in their village, but I made no fuss. I was but the killer, not the mayor of the damned hamlet.

As the killer, though, I felt a responsibility to help haul the corpse. A couple of other fellows chipped in, including Maudlin’s first young lover.

We carried the dead man out and around the corner, leaving a trail of crimson in our wake.

Once we rounded the corner, though, and found the pigpen, I understood the tavern master’s plan and Harold’s quick agreement. There were a good twenty or more of the chunkers, snorting and rooting about. And old Harold was right. The beasts would make short work of him.

We tossed him in and left him to his fate.

As the others made to leave, I lingered a moment longer, studying the corpse as the pigs snorted and sniffed at him.

After a moment, I realized the young lover had remained as well.

It’s funny that I kept thinking of him as a young man, for again, he was near enough to my own age. As was the man I’d killed. But it was clear that the years we’d lived had not been the same.

“Are you having regrets?” he asked.

I shook my head. “No, not regrets. Just seems there may be a lesson here. One I’ve learned too many times.”

He raised an eyebrow.

I pointed. “Fool about and find yourself as feed for pigs. No mound. No mourners. No one to remember you fondly. Maybe it doesn’t matter when all is done, but…”

“Seems a sad end, just the same.”

I nodded.

“I’m Brecc, by the way,” he said, holding out his hand.

I stared down at it for a moment before I finally took it. “Garbhan.”

An awkward silence passed between us and I shifted my gaze back to the pigs.

Finally, he said, “Suppose I owe you thanks. I don’t think, uh… I don’t reckon I would have done as well as you. If it… If it came to it.”

“Then perhaps it’s best you learn to control your temper, eh?” I glanced over at him, giving him a serious look. “You know, it’s not my place to say, but…”

“Carry on,” he said with a nod. “I’m listening.”

“That woman,” I said, glancing about to ensure we were still alone. “She’s not for you, you understand?”

He looked down at his shoes but gave me a nod.

I continued, “I think you’re a bit like me. Or rather, you are as I once was. Come from a small hamlet somewhere, where folk pick a mate and stay together for better or worse. The rest of the world… It’s not like that, you see? That’s not how things work elsewhere. You can’t expect everyone to follow the same notions you grew up with. That woman is pledged to another, and deeply so. But she enjoys the pleasures of the flesh. And that, my friend, is all it was, you understand?”

Another silent nod.

“You nearly landed yourself in a heap of trouble over a gal who thought nothing more of you than a quick rut. That can hurt a man’s pride. But hear me well that it is a foolish pride, and if you try to press the issue further, you’ll find only heartache or worse. Best you let it lie as it is. And in the days to come, when you wonder whether you might have won her over and forever, know this: the answer is no. It was always no.”

I had droned on long enough, and it wasn’t for me to solve the problems of the world, nor his. And I felt a bit of a fool for prattling on. I was not a clever man, after all. Certainly not the sort to give advice to love-struck fools.

But after a time, he nodded and looked up at me. “I hear the wisdom of your words. I hear it well.”

I gave him a nod, not sure what else I might say. Then a thought occurred to me. “Come. Let me buy you a round.”

“Thanks,” he said, forcing a smile. “But it may be better if I head back to our camp. The tavern life isn’t for me, it seems.”

“Mayhap so.”

“Tell me one thing, though,” he said, biting his lip. “That toast she made… She cheered to Tom of Bedlam.”

“So she did.”

“And you called her Maudlin.”

“Aye.”

“Is it truly her? Is she *the* Mad Maudlin?”

I paused, considering. As Blackthorn had told me, her name was known. Just not by me.

“That’s my understanding,” I said, choosing my words carefully. “What have you heard about her?”

“Not much,” he replied, shrugging. “A bit here and a bit there. Some say she’s a powerful witch, and him some mad sorcerer. Others say she is a barbarian queen in exile, and he her king. We hear different stories on the road, you know? Figured they were just tales, though. I wouldn’t have guessed she was real. But if she’s truly *the* Mad Maudlin…”

“Then you can walk away knowing you made love with a woman of renown?”

He snorted laughter. “Sure, I suppose, but that’s not what I was thinking.”

“Then?”

His face sobered and his gaze returned to the corpse in the pigpen. “I was thinking I am lucky to have escaped with my life. Very lucky indeed.”

With that, we wished one another well and I started back toward the tavern while he headed off to the edge of town where the caravan had made their camp. My heart was lightened, for he had now learned his lesson. He’d been forged. If he made the same mistakes again, it would not weigh on my heart, for I knew he knew better. The rest was up to him.

Back in Riddles Untold, the mood had returned to a cheery state, but not with the same luster as before.

The tavern master had set about scrubbing the blood from the floor while the minstrel played and the few remaining whores sought to ply their trade. Many men offered to buy me drinks while many of the ladies offered their services at a discounted rate. The second was more tempting than the first. After the bloodshed, I thought it best to keep my wits about me. I was done with ale for the eve, but flesh? After so long, I could damn well use a rut. Yet…my mood remained soured, and I refused them each in turn.

My thoughts were on what the caravaner had said. That he had been lucky to survive Mad Maudlin.

I had strong doubts I’d be so fortunate.

She returned a short time later with that same bounce in her step. Straight away she sought to stoke the fire and bring back life to the tavern, but the arrival of death had put a cap on the merriment. There’d be no

inferno. Not again. The mood was more like a big log on a fire at the end of the night. It would burn, sure, but it was a slower, measured thing.

Maudlin scowled at the lot of us, fighting back against the tide. It was no use, though, and she made her fun by drinking herself stupid. As if she could drink an ocean, and that her false joy would wash over the room and bring everyone to her level.

It was not so, and after a time, the more ornery and drunk she became, the more people slowly faded away. There were several lads who kept their interests high late into the night, those who hoped she might yet take a shine to their advances and slip away with them upstairs. But alas, it seemed she'd had her fill. They failed to see her false flirts for what they were, thinking they may yet have a chance. And perhaps they did, but I rather thought not.

For my part, I tried to keep to myself, but it seemed I'd earned some manner of celebrity over the ordeal, and several folks made a point of coming to speak with me. I wasn't used to the attention, but did my best to feign polite interest and forced gratitude at the offers for drink.

When at last I saw Maudlin stagger and stumble, I decided it was time to step in, debt or no. Several of the lads scowled at me as I was a bulwark against their advances. But none complained aloud, for I had killed a man in their presence.

Perhaps it wasn't my place to intervene, but I saw it like this: if Maudlin wished to rut with every bloke in the tavern, that was her business. But when she was so deep in her cups that she could not string together a coherent thought, then… Well, it became something else, didn't it? She could no longer decide. And that, to me, mattered. It mattered greatly. That was when it was my place to step in, or so I decided.

I moved alongside her and wrapped an arm around her waist.

She looked up at me, eyes glassy, and burped in my face. "Gar…bha…n."

"Come along, Maudlin," I said, urging her forward. "Let's get you to bed."

Several of the lads made to protest, but with a sharp look from me they fell silent.

Maudlin, for her part, said something else. Or tried to. It wasn't coherent.

Nor could she walk, not even with my help.

I sighed and scooped her into my arms like a bride.

She continued to mumble her protests, but those gave way to snoring before I had even reached the stairs.

I carried her all the way to our room and unceremoniously dumped her on the bed.

At the start, I had intended to let her have the bed. For propriety's sake, I would sleep upon the plank floor, grateful just to have a roof over my head.

After the events of the evening, I cared little for propriety and figured I'd earned a night in the comfort of a bed. Drunk as she was, I didn't figure she'd be bothered. Even if she was, after having carried her, and all the trouble she'd caused, I didn't care much what she thought about it.

I stripped to my leggings to the tune of her snoring and then crawled into the other side.

The commotion woke her and she sat up with a groan, then made short work of removing her own clothes.

That annoyed me, though I couldn't say why.

In the darkness, she asked, "Garbhan?"

"Yes?"

She reached for me then, trying to crawl atop me. Her lips sought mine and I took in the wretched stench of stale ale. Her hands went under the sheet, seeking to find me.

I pushed her away.

She remained silent for a moment, then let out a huff and turned, putting her back to me.

I stared into the darkness, mind wandering.

Only when I heard her snoring again did I try to ease myself into sleep.

That was short-lived, however, for it wasn't long before the sobs began.

Cursing, I crawled out of bed and reached for the teardrop case.

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Intermezzo

“Guess you still had it in you after all.”

Blinking, I came back to myself. Back to the current me, the one sitting in the Tickled Pig.

Kavan sat across from me, that mischievous smirk on his lips. “I don’t find it much of a surprise, considering what trouble you gave my friends here. And something tells me your sword arm is as covered in cobwebs now as it was then. Likely, more so.”

I grunted a reply.

“It is a tragic tale, though,” said a woman from among the sorcerers, the same who’d healed my wounds when I’d arrived. “That you had to pick up your blade again strikes me as deeply sad.”

“Aye, but to travel with one such as Maudlin,” one of the knights said. “A small price to pay. They say she is as beautiful as you have described. To turn her down…”

“Daft,” another of the sorcerers said.

“Honorable,” the knight replied, giving me a curt nod. “To not take advantage must have taken a restraint lost on many men. Why, though? When she offered herself freely?”

“Were you not listening?” the healer asked, turning around in her seat so she could scowl at the man. “She did not offer herself freely. She demanded it. Quite the role reversal, if you ask me. Fitting that he would have declined. Sad that you don’t understand why.”

The knight flushed under her rebuttal, but before he could reply, another of the wizards spoke up, this one an aging man with a silver-streaked beard.

“Yes, yes, but what of her magic? Forget beauty, for it is no deeper than the skin. Her magic, though… You saw none of this in your travels?”

I raised an eyebrow, recounting what I had said thus far. It was quite strange, this spell they had me under. Once I began speaking, I felt as much a listener as I was the teller. Mayhap it was deeper than that, even, for as my words rattled on, I could see it all in my mind. It was as if I were re-living it all in truth.

Shaking my head, I glanced up at the man. “I don’t believe I ever I said that.”

“Yet you’ve mentioned no magic.”

“Nor had I seen any to that point, lest I didn’t recognize it for what it was. Which is quite likely, for though Blackthorn had taught me a thing or two, I was still very ignorant of the ways of your craft.”

“But this is the tale of Mad Maudlin!” the sorcerer protested.

“Not so,” Kavan said, interjecting. “Mad Maudlin is a player in this tale. *The* player, perhaps, for it is she and Tom who hold our greatest interest. Yet…it is Garbhan who is telling us this tale. It is his story, told from his own mouth. And as Blackthorn told him, he was not from our world, was he? Not from the world of witchcraft and wizardry. But rest assured, I believe we are far from a conclusion.”

I nodded.

“What I want to know,” said the Oak Mother, “is how you didn’t lose your head traveling with that woman. By the way you tell it, she seemed a handful.”

“That she was,” I said, my mind drifting back to my memories. “That she was…”

After a time, Kavan clapped his hands, regaining the room. “Well, then, since we’ve come to a natural pause, shall we take the time to relieve ourselves and refill our mugs?”

“We would have this tale done,” said a metallic, baritone voice. I realized it was from one of the dwarves, speaking from beneath his black helm. “Why stop now?”

“Because the night is still young,” Kavan said. “And though we have far to go, I don’t think it’s worth the risk to rush it.”

“I see many tired eyes already,” replied the dwarf. He motioned toward Finnegan. “That lad there seems quite ready for his bed. How will we make it through this long night of yours?”

Finn’s head shot up and his eyes fought open. “I’m fine, sir!”

Kavan chuckled. “I’m sure you are, young master, but your presence is not required. You may go tuck down in a bedroll, if you so desire.”

“No, sir,” the lad said, shaking his head. “No, I want to hear more. I want to hear what else Cian… I mean, Garbhan… Well, I want to hear the rest of it.”

Old Loc shook his head at his grandson, but didn’t send him off to bed.

Kavan chuckled again and then turned his attention back to the dwarf. “We shall go on for however long we must, my friend. We will hear this story in its entirety, even if it takes days.”

The dwarf’s reply came in the form of a stiff nod.

“Right, then,” Kavan said. “Let us have a break.”

“I have to piss,” one of the knights in the back shouted.

The supreme enchanter raised an eyebrow. “So see to that, Sir Knight.”

“With this storm?” another replied. “Or do you expect us all to share a piss pot?”

Several other folk grumbled their agreement. There was an outhouse out back, behind the building, but that would require stepping out into the fierce rain, and we couldn’t all use it at once. As for piss pots, Old Loc kept a few on hand, but not enough for a crowd this size. No, it would have been best for the ladies to make use of the outhouse while the lads pissed outside as the drunks usually did. I kept these thoughts to myself, though. My enemies could sort out their pissing and shitting.

“Ah, I see,” Kavan said. “Fear not, my friends, for I have a suspicion the storm will calm as you pile out to relieve yourselves.”

That caused many eyebrows to rise, including my own.

I tried to note which of the others seemed surprised.

There was a pecking order to this ensemble, and I wished to understand it. Clearly Supreme Enchanter Kavan was running the show.

If I had to guess, that ancient sorcerer, Gelonde, was second in command. Whether that had been agreed, or he’d been chosen, or it was merely the stature of his presence, I put him at number two.

By that logic, then, I would almost have to name the black knight third, for certainly their presence outweighed Gelonde’s or Kavan’s, yet they rarely spoke and the others avoided them. Which I supposed made them muscle, in a way. Yet I doubted Kavan even held any sway over them. No, that black knight was more of a wild card, standing to the side of the rest of

the entourage. Their place in the pecking order was whatever they chose for it to be.

But it seemed to me that those three were the most powerful.

Yet I also doubted any of them were seeing to the storm. That seemed a mighty bit of power, surely something which required total focus. Someone or several someones not present? Seemed likely. Yet they must still have been in communication with the supreme enchanter. Interesting.

But back to my original focus.

I believed I understood Kavan's and Gelonde's places in this pecking order. That black knight, too. It was the others I was studying, seeing who was surprised by the revelation that the storm would wane so folks might relieve themselves. Not the warriors, mind you, but the other mages and sorcerers.

Roughly half gave themselves away, including the Oak Mother. They'd not expected such a show of power either, and felt themselves a bit beneath it. I felt like inviting them over to my side of the party, for certainly I'd expected none of this.

"Garbhan, you may also relieve yourself," Kavan said. "We'd not have you suffer. Not yet, at least."

He followed that up with a wink I did not much appreciate.

I replied with a grim nod and rose slowly to my feet.

"Who'll keep an eye on him?" one of the knights asked.

"I don't believe we have anything to worry about, do we, Garbhan?" Kavan said. "You'll not try to slip off or pull any shenanigans, will you?"

I shook my head.

"There, see?" Kavan asked, turning his attention back to the knight. "Nothing to fear."

"He traveled with Mad Maudlin," the knight said. "And though he said he was never a clever man, already we have cast suspicion on that claim."

"Indeed," Kavan replied. "Your point?"

"I'd prefer he had an escort."

"So escort him, Sir Knight."

The knight grumbled and rose from his seat.

I grimaced as I caught sight of the crest stitched over the tit of his gambeson. It was in the shape of a flower. A Scabiosa. The crest of Safal.

By the gods…

This knight's king and kingdom were a part of my tale, and surely he knew that.

He glared as he made his way over. "I'll be right behind you."

"So long as you don't piss on the back of my trousers," I replied, not bothering to meet his gaze. "I doubt your friends will appreciate being stuck with the stench all night."

He snorted and shoved me toward the door.

As I walked, I couldn't help but feel as though I were being watched. And of course I was being watched. There were plenty of eyes upon me. So, why the strange feeling? Why that unnatural prickle on the back of my neck?

I glanced over my shoulder and caught sight of that devil's face, leering at me from the hearth. The black knight.

Well, that explained it. I swallowed down the lump in my throat and tried to ignore them.

Stepping out into the dark proved a relief, for no matter how dire my circumstances, it was an improvement to escape that cold gaze, even briefly. Whatever was going on in the head behind that mask, I didn't care to know. I much preferred knights and wizards who merely wished to torture and murder me. That may have sounded snarky, but there were worse fates than either of those, and the sort of folk who wore devil armor dealt in such.

Kavan's words proved true and we found ourselves beneath a dark, rainless sky. There was a drizzle, of course, and still a bit of wind, but as promised, the storm broke long enough for us to handle our business.

The moon and stars, too, made an appearance, the clouds above us parting so that they might let some light through. How polite.

As was also promised, the knight of Safal remained ever at my heel as we joined the others, stretching out along the side of the building.

I chuckled to myself, which drew a few sharp looks from my captors.

"Something funny, chum?" a grizzled warrior asked from nearby. "Care to share with the rest of us?"

"Aye," I said, chuckling. "Was just thinking…a gathering such as this, all you mighty folk. It's the stuff of legend, wouldn't you say? The sort of thing they'd write about in the history books."

"Perhaps," the man replied.

"So, do you think this part will make it into the annals? Or in the fables told ever after? All you tough nuts, having a wee together?"

To my surprise, my jest garnered a few chuckles. I liked to think they all found it funny, but a good few of them couldn't risk their hard-cased reputations on a chortle.

At any rate, we finished our business and made our way back.

Just before we reached the door, my escort, the Knight of Safal, took hold of my arm and leaned in close. "Don't get comfortable, Duhallow. You are not among friends."

"Could have fooled me."

He gave my arm a squeeze and his eyes narrowed. "I know what you did in Safal. I know about your business with my king. How it ended…"

I met his stone-cold gaze with one of my own. "If you know so much already, then why come?"

A wicked grin replaced his scowl. "Because before this is over, I'll have the pleasure of watching you die. My only regret is that I doubt they'll let me do it myself. Too many of us in that line."

With that, he gave me a shove toward the door.

By some fortune, I kept my footing, straightened my tunic, and stepped inside, still smiling.

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Third Movement

The Caravan

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Sore

It was a cruelty.

With the morning sun, my head thrummed with a terrible ache, though I had consumed but a pond compared to Maudlin's ocean. Yet she seemed fine.

She stood, fully dressed, hands on her hips, studying me as I dragged on my own clothes. "Quit your pouting, you sorry sod. If you can't handle your cups, then don't drink so much."

I was just pulling on my boots then, but paused to glare at her.

"What's that look, you sourpuss?"

"You…"

"Yes?"

"You would stand there and accuse me of not handling my cups?"

"Yes."

"You, who I had to carry to bed?"

"Is that how I got here?" she asked, glancing around. Then her eyes widened. "Did we have a go?"

"You don't remember?"

"I do not." She shrugged. "Oh, poor Garbhan, you must have been as much a disappointment in bed as you are as a traveling companion. What a shame. I had high hopes for you there, at least."

"We did not…" I took a calming breath. "We did not have a rump."

"Is that why you're sore at me, then?"

I glared at her for a time, considering unloading about all the mischief she'd caused. But alas, my wool-filled mind finally remembered who it was

I was addressing and knew it would be a worthless exercise. So instead, I shook my head and said simply, “No.”

I could tell she did not believe me. I also did not care.

Ignoring her, I made myself ready and followed her out the door.

Downstairs was a milder mood than the previous eve’s. There were a few folk about, and many eyes wandered our way as we came down the stairs, though no one seemed inclined to meet our gazes.

Maudlin took in the crowd, then glanced over her shoulder at me. “Well, they seem a boring bunch. Not quite how I remember them.”

“Do you remember them?”

At that, she turned completely around, facing me straight on. “You *are* sore with me! *Ah*, my little pet. How quaint.”

Grumbling, I stepped past her. Over my shoulder I asked, “Shall we break our fast here, or do you wish to get on the road?”

“Depends,” she said, strolling along behind me.

“On what?”

“On whether our escort is ready.”

I stopped, coming up short. This time, it was me who turned to face her. “Our escort?”

She sighed. “Must you repeat every lyric I sing? It’s rather boring, you know?”

“What escort?” I asked again, trying to maintain my patience.

“The one I secured for us last night. Have you already forgotten?”

“You never told me.”

“Well, I can’t be bothered to tell you everything, now, can I? You are *my* humble and dedicated—albeit very pouty—pet. I am *not* yours. It is up to you to keep up, is it not?”

“Maudlin.”

“Garbhan.”

“I had to kill a man for you last night.”

“That seems hardly likely. You made it quite clear that I cannot ask you to kill for me.”

I stared at her.

She stared back.

Finally, I said, “Let us not speak further. Let us just be on our way.”

“Oh, my,” she said, nodding. “You *are* sore with me indeed. Whatever might Maudlin have done to earn such ire?”

I didn’t reply.

“You know I can demand that you tell me?”

“Please do, for the more you ask of me, the sooner I can be done with you.”

We stood as such, staring at one another. A few moments passed before I realized every eye in the tavern was watching us. I wasn’t sure how much they might have heard, but they were certainly curious about the fuss.

Maudlin stuck her nose in the air. “Garbhan, my pet, you will apologize for your hurtful words. I fear I must insist.”

“Must you?”

“I must. That was quite rude. Apologize.”

“I am sorry,” I replied through gritted teeth, hoping to the gods that this challenge might remove more than a slither of my debt, for effort’s sake.

“Apology accepted.”

Satisfied and smug, Maudlin turned and marched toward the door.

Though I was loath to do so, I shook my head and made to follow.

Outside, she finally saw fit to explain. The “escort” she’d spoke of was none other than the caravaners, the same ones we had met the night before. Apparently, at some point she’d convinced their leader to let us travel with them for a time.

As she finished explaining this, she gave me a big grin, which faded away a moment later. Her eyes narrowed once again. “You’re *still* sore?”

I blinked at her, not replying.

She threw up her hands in frustration. “Is there no pleasing you, Garbhan? Need I provide you dance and song?”

Again I found myself staring at her. This time we were parked in the middle of the dusty lane, drawing eyes from every passerby.

“Wait,” I said, shaking my head. “Do you think I’m sore about the escort thing? You think I’m angry you didn’t tell me about it?”

“Well, yes,” she said, speaking slowly. “I can’t fathom why else you’d be trite.”

“Truly? No other reason at all?”

She shook her head. “None that comes to mind, though I’m beginning to think you are as sensitive as a little boy. Don’t worry, though, my precious toy, we’ll roughen you up on the road. Get you tough as the back of a toad.”

“Sensitive, am I? Well, let us keep that in mind the next time you need me to fight a gang for you.”

“Did you?”

“Yes!”

“Ah, right. I think I remember that.” She began chuckling. “Was good fun, was it not?”

“Good fun?”

“Repeating.” She rolled her eyes. “Bored now.”

She turned and began strolling down the lane. I raced to keep up. “Maudlin, you slipped off with a lad, but—”

“A lad? Was he handsome?”

“Now who’s repeating?”

She rolled her eyes. “Was he handsome? I seemed to remember a lover, but…I can’t quite picture his face.”

“That may be because there was more than one.”

“Ah,” she said, nodding. “Makes sense, then. I think one was fair. The other was a bore. And one… You know, I think one refused me. Imagine that. Some lucky lad ignored his chance with Maudlin. What a fool.”

I crossed my arms, staring at her.

“Wait,” she said, studying me. “Was that you again? Ah, good. I’d lose my head if two men refused me in the span of a week. Better to know it was just my traveling prude. Tell me true, Garbhan, is your noodle soggy? Is that the fuss?”

I rubbed my forehead. “Let me see if I understand this. One of your toys nearly got himself beaten bloody by the man you thought to trade him for, and you don’t remember him? You don’t recall the young man who nearly got himself bloodied fawning over you?”

“Why should I? And I don’t recall asking any man to get bloodied for my benefit. Well, except for you, of course. But that’s your lot in life, isn’t it?”

“You took him upstairs, had a bit of fun, and when you returned, you found another man straight away, leaving the poor fool jealous as a git.”

“So?”

“So, he nearly picked a fight with a brute who would’ve beaten him senseless.”

“Doesn’t sound like a very smart lad, then. I bet he was the bore.”

“Do you not care at all? That your wiles might well have gotten him hurt?”

“Why should I? As I said, I asked no one, save you, to fight for me.”

“That doesn’t…” I sighed, taking a slow breath. “You must have known what you were doing. You must have realized the impact you’d have on him.”

“Many men have fallen for me. Many men have fought for my attention. Fools all. Maudlin belongs to one and no other.”

“And did you bother to explain that? Did you bother to tell that poor fool it was but a tryst?”

She raised an eyebrow at me. “Should I have composed a sonnet for him as well? Whatever are you singing about, Garbhan? You make no sense. What wrong did I do?”

I took a slow, calming breath. “I’m not accusing you of wrongdoing. You’re right. It’s not your place to ensure your lovers are not fools. Even so, do you feel no sense of accountability for what occurred? A man is dead for your fun.”

“Truly? Not one of my lovers, I hope. Hate it when that happens.”

“Not… No, it was not one of your lovers. It was the gang leader you smashed in the face with your mug.”

“Surely that didn’t kill him.”

“No. I did.”

“You killed him? Why would you do such a thing? I didn’t ask you to kill anyone, Garbhan. Against the rules, you said. I have remained true to contract. Wait… Is that what you’re fussed about? *You* are sore with *me* because *you* killed a man? My dear Garbhan, you shouldn’t place blame on others for your own actions. Accountability, my dear. It’s important.”

She strolled on again, whistling to herself as she went.

I could have stabbed her just then, to tell it true. For how could she not see where her actions had led? How could she absolve herself of it without a second thought?

Cursing, I followed along behind her, in no hurry to keep up. It would do me no good to lose track of her, but also, I realized it would do little good to speak of it further. In fact, I didn’t wish to speak to her at all. Though I must admit, I was curious about her decision for us to join a caravan. Was she simply tired of my company? Whatever the case, I let it

lie, for if I'd learned anything by now, it was there was little chance of getting a straight answer from her.

So, I followed at a short distance, neither of us speaking as we approached the caravan.

Our arrival was not met with cheer.

Folks stood about, casting wary glances as we approached. That was a curiosity, for the caravan folk, at least those I'd met in the tavern the night before, seemed friendly enough.

Along with the somber welcome, I realized there were many more than I might have expected. There were some ten or more wagons between them, not to mention several carts and mounts. It was quite a parade. I had expected a small batch of traveling traders but found a roving community, a hamlet in motion. This was not unheard of. Just not what I had expected, based on the handful who'd ventured into Riddles Untold.

If Maudlin noticed any of the strange looks cast in our direction, she didn't let on. She strolled straight through the camp as if she owned the place.

At last I recognized the face of the elderly man from the night before, the one who'd tried mightily to keep Brecc out of the fray.

He, too, had a wary look about him, but forced a smile at our approach.

"Welcome, my friends. May your wheels ever turn."

"Our thanks, Pack Master," Maudlin said, dipping her head. "May your feet ever find the softest ground to tread upon."

His smile seemed more genuine then, and I came to understand this was a customary greeting among traveling folk. It was no surprise Maudlin knew the language of the road, but it seemed unlike her to play by anyone's rules, save her own.

His gaze turned to me and he stuck out his hand. "I don't believe we've been properly introduced. I am called Jodon, a humble pack master."

"Garbhan," I replied, taking his hand. I might not have known the language of the road, but I'd been with the wizard long enough to know that in these parts it was customary to give your trade along with your name. I had no trade, though, save for following a mad woman about. That hardly seemed fitting, so instead, I said simply, "An honor to make your acquaintance."

"The honor is mine," he said with a stiff nod. "That was quite the performance you put on last night."

Maudlin’s eyes went wide. “Garbhan put on a performance?”

“With his sword, my lady,” Jodon explained. “Those ruffians… Well, we’ve crossed their paths often enough and have made a point of avoiding them. Though I suppose they may be less fuss now, thanks to you.”

I nodded, unsure what else to say.

“You really did kill a man?” Maudlin asked, turning toward me. “With your sword?”

“Well, it wasn’t with my soggy noodle,” I replied.

“Garbhan, dear, do try to maintain a sense of propriety,” she said, shaking her head at me. Then she turned to Jodon. “My apologies for his wretched language. I’m not sure he’s all right in the head. Did he really kill someone?”

“Aye, he did,” Jodon said. “Was a fierce duel, by my reckoning, though I’m no expert.”

“Huh,” Maudlin said, glancing at me. “I thought you’d made that up. A shame I missed it.”

Perhaps seeing my discomfort, the pack master changed the subject. “Most of our folks are breaking their fasts or tearing down camp. There’s a communal pot there by the big fire, if you find yourselves hungry. A few of us are just about to head back into town to gather a few final supplies. Won’t be long and we’ll be ready.”

Maudlin stamped her foot impatiently.

“This does not suit you?” Jodon asked.

“I had hoped to be on our way sooner,” Maudlin said, then forced a smile. “But I’m sure it will be fine. I’ll find some way to amuse myself in the meantime.”

With that, she sauntered off to explore the camp.

Jodon watched her go, then turned his eye on me. “Have I made a mistake?”

I couldn’t bring myself to lie.

“Almost assuredly.”

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Pack Master

I joined Jodon and a few of the others on the supply run.

We also needed supplies.

Since Maudlin hadn't bothered to tell me, I didn't know how far she intended to travel with the caravan. We needed to make our own way. She may not have had a care, but I wasn't keen on taking advantage of their kindness.

The group was hearty and friendly. A couple of them, including Jodon, had been at the tavern the night before. They seemed to have no heartache over my presence, and their earlier wariness seemed to melt the further we parted from camp.

So it wasn't me they were bothered about.

It was Maudlin.

She was the source of their concern. That was curious, for Jodon had invited us, had he not?

I considered whether I should attempt to change Maudlin's mind. A better question, perhaps, was whether I could. In our time together, I had convinced her to see things my way seldom enough.

But of my first question, considering the discomfort of the caravaners and her penchant for trouble, I wondered if we might be better off going our own way.

These thoughts bounced around in my skull until my pack was full once more and I owned a new bedroll. The others made quick work of gathering what they needed as well. In short order we marched back the way we'd come.

Jodon motioned for the others to move on ahead while he loitered alongside me.

It seemed he wished to speak.

Once we had some space, he forced another smile. “Garbhan, might I ask you a question of a sensitive nature?”

“I suppose.”

“How well do you know your traveling companion?”

I considered. It wasn’t clear what bush he was beating about, but I saw little harm in honesty. “Not well. I only met her a short time back.”

“Speak true?”

“Speak true.”

“And yet you seem…”

“I seem what?”

“A doting friend,” he offered. I didn’t miss his mischievous smile.

“Not at all. My reasons are mine own, but understand that I have little choice but to remain in her company, Pack Master.”

“Ah, I see,” he said, though his tone implied he did not. “And is she… truly Mad Maudlin? *The* Mad Maudlin?”

“Brecc asked the same last night.” I shrugged. “I am to understand that she is.”

“Very good,” he said, seeming somewhat relieved.

“Is it?”

“Oh, yes. And she certainly fits the bill, but, well, one can never be sure, can they?”

“Jodon,” I said, stopping to stare at him. “I apologize if I am being too forward, but I fear I don’t understand what you’re playing at. You ask if she is the true Mad Maudlin, yet it was you who invited her along, was it not? Yet also your folk seem mighty wary of her. What am I missing?”

He raised a bushy eyebrow. “Apologies. I assumed she told you.”

I snorted. “Better to assume she tells me very little.”

“I see,” he replied, eyes looking ahead. “Well, I suppose you’ve learned enough about your traveling companion to understand why my people would be nervous. As for why I invited her… Have you heard of the Paling Forest?”

I shook my head.

“It’s a place of some renown. They say there are spirits there. Or… darker things. I don’t buy into such guff, of course, but, well, that’s where

we’re headed. Plan to pass right through. Many among the caravan are worried. Some are quite frightened, to tell it true.”

“So, why go? Surely you could choose another path.”

“Most certainly. But we are running behind and must reach Trasal before the festival. Our traders and craftsmen always make good coin there. Too much, perhaps. We’ve become reliant. The profits will cover a third or more of a year’s expenses. We dare not miss it, for even our way of life runs on coin. If we stick to the roads, we’ll never make it on time and our spaces will be forfeited. Not to mention the whispers of the road tell us the path ahead is beleaguered with bandits. That bloody butcher fellow. Have you heard of him? The Butcher of Barlington?”

I shook my head.

“Nasty fellow by all accounts.” He sighed. “At any rate, if we cut east through the Paling Forest…”

“You may make your festival on time.”

“May even arrive early, and without the bother of bandits. I’d not care to meet the Butcher.”

“I see. And how does Maudlin figure into this?”

“Well, she is a witching woman, is she not?”

“Can’t rightly say. I’ve seen her perform no magic, though I’ll admit I was in the company of a wizard when I met her.”

“Speak true?”

“Speak true.”

“Hmm,” he said, combing his long, gray beard. The way he did it reminded me of Blackthorn, actually. Ah, but I missed the old codger.

Jodon continued, “Well, so as it was, a few of us were sitting in the tavern yestereve, having some drinks, when you two came strutting in. Barely noticed you, for I was busy pondering this very mess. I have no fear of the forest and all that talk of spirits. Just talk, is all. But among my caravan, there are plenty of men and women, all of whom are stout-hearted and sensible sorts, mind you, who carry a mighty terror for superstition. As the drinks flowed, so came the murmurs that your companion was *the* Mad Maudlin. My head, addled with ale, came up with an idea. I thought… I thought… Mad Maudlin could certainly handle any spirits in the Paling Forest. She’d not be afraid. And if she were with us, the others might not be so afraid, either.”

“And you found out we were heading east as well.”

He nodded. “With the drink heavy on my skull, it seemed a wonderful idea. I invited Maudlin to join us. And you, too, it seems, though she didn’t mention you at the time.”

“Of course not. And in the morning light, without so much drink on your mind, how did your people receive the news?”

“Not so well,” he admitted. “It seems they are more terrified of the superstition around her than that which hangs over the forest. There’s just no winning sometimes, is there?”

We walked a little further while I considered. “Pack Master, I hold little sway with her, but if you’d like, I can try to convince her we should go our own way.”

“Nonsense,” he said, waving the notion away. “It has already been agreed. I’m sure it will be fine.”

“Did you not bear witness to the tavern chaos?”

“I did. But the forest yet looms. And though I fear bandits and tardiness over whatever awaits us in the forest, I still believe the others will feel better with her about. They just have to get used to her, is all. Besides, my caravaners are a hearty lot, but if we are to run into bandits as well, then I think your sword arm could be quite handy.”

“I don’t know,” I said, biting my lip. Again, I wasn’t sure how much I should share. Jodon seemed a decent man, so at the risk of sounding like a madman myself, I said, “I have seen things, Pack Master. I once thought as you did. That all superstition was but guff. I have learned I was wrong. Give me bandits over haunts any day.”

He raised an eyebrow at me. “Aye, well, much of my crew feels the same. So you can see why I invited her.”

“I suppose,” I agreed, but then realized he’d paused.

When I glanced back, there was a pained expression on his face.

“What is it?” I asked.

“There is…something else you should know. Something that puts you and me and my caravan all at risk.”

“I’m listening.”

“This butcher fellow… There is another reason I invited you, and yet another reason why doing so may place us all in danger. Rumor has it that a man called Tom came through these parts some time back. Had some business with the Butcher. There are all sorts of stories, of course, and while I trust not a one of them, they all have one thing in common.”

“What’s that?”

“This Tom and the Butcher had a falling out. A rather nasty one. The Butcher has been asking after his whereabouts, having his people scour the countryside for anyone who knows anything regarding the whereabouts of Tom of Bedlam. Now, most folk know the name Tom of Bedlam as more of a folk story than a real person. Same as Maudlin. So, I suppose people think it’s just someone running about under the guise of that name. Nevertheless…”

“Maudlin toasted to Tom of Bedlam,” I said, sighing. “In a tavern full of folk.”

“Just so,” Jodon replied. “If word of that makes it to the ears of the Butcher’s brigands, and rest assured the story of your duel will travel far and will travel fast… If the mention of that toast moves along with it…”

“Then this Butcher and his brigands will be hunting for us.”

“Yes,” Jodon said. “That is…another reason why I have not gone back on your invitation, though it puts us at risk, too. Without that warning, the two of you would have marched straight into the Butcher’s lands. This way, with us, going through the Paling Forest, you may avoid him altogether.”

“But why risk that for us?”

He sighed. “Because, lad, it feels like the right thing to do. And as I’ve said, traveling as we are, through the forest, we’ll avoid their territories. That’s safer for both of us. Going through the forest, though…”

“You hope Maudlin can help if there is indeed some supernatural threat.”

“That’s the measure of it, yes.”

I considered, biting my lip. “When I share this news with Maudlin, she may wish to part your company anyway. Not for your safety, but for any news she can get about Tom. She might just have us march straight to the Butcher.”

Jodon’s eyes widened at that. “Then do yourself a favor, lad, and do not share this with her. Keep it between us. For I promise you, my friend, you do not wish to incur the Butcher’s wrath. None of us do.”

I nodded. “So, to the forest, then.”

“To the forest then. And hope we can get everyone through in one piece. That is, assuming we don’t crest the hill and find my camp ablaze.”

I chuckled at that. “I’d be more worried about her having declared herself the new pack master and driven the others on without us.”

“I wouldn’t have thought it possible before meeting her, but watching how she worked the room yestereve, maybe I should be worried.” He paused, his smile shifting into something more serious. “You will try to keep her in line, won’t you?”

“Not a chance,” I said straight away. “It is I who is in her debt, not the other way around. As I said, I hold very little sway. She is not beholden to me in any such way.”

“Well, Garbhan,” he said, slapping me on the shoulder, “it does me well to know that you may have made a mistake greater than my own. Come, let us see what madness she has wrought in our absence.”

We crested the ridge to find…

Quite the opposite of madness.

There was Maudlin, the center of attention, of course. But there was no fighting, nor bickering, nor rutting, nor even drinking. Yet a cheer seemed to have taken over.

Maudlin danced about, hair full of flowers, with a small girl atop her shoulders. Four other girls, their hair full of flowers as well, gave chase. All were giggling.

Several of the adults stood around, chuckling at the sight, honest joy on their faces.

“Huh,” Jodon said, stopping in his tracks. He glanced over at me. “That’s, uh…not what I expected.”

“She does that,” I replied. “The unexpected.”

“Well, perhaps this wasn’t such a poor idea after all.”

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The Caravan

Traveling with the caravan was a welcome change.

Growing up, I'd heard about wandering folk. Some said they were merely travelers, people who'd not put down roots. Harmless types who went about their way. Others, though, had different opinions. Some had called them thieves. Some of the same had called them wicked. Baby stealers and witching types. In my time soldiering, I'd met a few, but had never gotten to know them as I did Jodon's crew. They were good folk, as hearty as they were stout. Hardworking and caring, ensuring no mouth went unfed. And they were pleasant, too.

They had merchants among them, and tradesmen and tinkerers, too. Shoemakers and seamstresses, carpenters and craftsmen. All sorts. They roamed from town to town, hamlet to hamlet, offering their wares and skills in small doses. Each kept their own pay, save for a small amount which went into a coffer Jodon held. That'd be used for the good of the group. If things didn't go so well in one place, he'd ensure there was food enough for everyone in the communal pot. If a child became sick and the parents didn't have the coin, Jodon would take from the coffer to purchase elixirs. Always, he looked after his little flock. Always, they looked after each other.

It was a simple life they led, traveling about, never staying in one place for long. There were some who'd been with him many years, but occasionally new folks joined while others broke off to put down roots. The ever-revolving wheel, they called it. Their way of life. It was not such a bad thing.

Many traveled with their families. Jodon's sons, both full-grown, had wedded, and with children of their own, had their own wagons and

followed right behind their old man. They seemed fine folk, too. But none could match the Pack Master's dear wife. Nell was a mother to all. She fussed over everyone, including me, and I'd only just arrived. It seemed the care she carried could only be challenged by the warmth of her charm.

Even that first day, the very moment Jodon introduced me, she surprised me with a hug.

"You're the lad who saved our Brecc yestereve, are you not?" she asked, her face buried in my chest.

"I…suppose so," I replied, glancing at Jodon for aid.

He merely chuckled.

Nell looked up at me then, grinning. "Why, your clothes are quite threadbare, dear. Jodon! Jodon! Do we have a spare tunic for this young man? And look at your ribs. Why, have you been eating at all? We'd better find you some food straight away!"

And so it went.

Yes, joining the caravan was a pleasant change indeed.

I felt lighter for it. Certainly better than just Maudlin for company, the two of us sulking along the road, her snapping at my every word, me annoyed with each of hers. Eating our silent meals, each of us more alone than ever. Her sobs in the night, and my efforts to saw away said sorrow.

It wasn't just me, though. Maudlin's mood was much improved by the company.

She behaved herself, even. Somewhat. Surely by the time we parted with them, there'd be some mighty fierce heartbreak from men and women alike. Likely, a few divorces, too. Brecc, I noticed, kept his distance.

What surprised me most were the little ones.

That scene we'd walked into, her with flowers in her hair and playing with the girls, was not a singular occurrence. All the children took to her straight away, whether their parents liked it or not. And I'd daresay a great many did not. In fact, those parents who protested the loudest found their pups all the more enamored by her. She traveled with an entourage, did Maudlin. By day, they'd follow along in her wake or just beside her, singing songs and sharing laughs as they skipped down the path. By night, they'd pile around her at the fire, all to be dragged away by their folks when it was well past their bedtimes.

Jodon was wise, for he offered her no drink and made sure none of the others did, either. It seemed no bother to her, though, and she became…

something else.

I couldn’t quite describe it then, and I’m not so sure I can now. Maudlin’s spirits were high. Sure, she’d complain a bit about how these pleasant folks were a bore, but she didn’t seem so restless. Despite her words, I think she enjoyed their company, too. Maudlin seemed at home wherever she was, yet I had a suspicion she actually felt that way among traveling folk.

As for the two of us?

A pleasant break it was. We seldom spoke. She had the children and I walked alone, at least when we first set out.

Halfway through the first day, Brecc came to walk alongside me. I welcomed his company. And it seemed I’d taken his measure correctly. He was but three years younger than me, and he’d also grown up on a small farm in a sleepy hamlet. His family was also lost to him, killed by bandits while he’d been in town trading potatoes.

That was about where our similarity ended, for he’d not been a soldier, nor had he sold his services to a devil. No, Brecc had stuck around for a time, feeling lost and alone, despite the kindness of his neighbors. But a farm is hard work to manage alone, and the ghosts of his family were ever present. So it was that, when Jodon and the others rolled into town, Brecc sold his family farm, pocketed the coin, and joined the caravan. They welcomed him with open arms. Took him under their wing and took him to the road. He’d never looked back.

It turned out he hadn’t come to walk beside me merely to tell me his life story. He’d only told me all that while he worked up the courage to ask a boon.

I noticed the way he rubbed his hands together, the nervous smile on his ruddy cheeks, the way he didn’t quite make eye contact. I didn’t rush him to it.

Finally, he worked up the guff. “I was wondering… I was wondering if I might ask a favor of you, Garbhan.”

“You may.”

Yet he did not. It seemed his nerves got the better of him then, his eyes scanning the trail ahead and the backsides of those in front of us.

“What is it?” I asked, amused by his hesitation.

“It’s… It’s a silly thing,” he said. “You will think me a fool.”

“Hmm,” I said, shrugging. “I certainly will if you don’t go ahead and tell me. Out with it. What’s on your mind?”

For a moment I thought he’d tuck back into his turtle shell. Instead he said, “After my family… After they were murdered… I bought myself a sword. Not for revenge, you understand? But, well, it’s like this… My old man was a peaceful sort. Mum, too. They owned no weapons. Didn’t know how to defend themselves. And I always think that if they had…”

“Then mayhap they’d still be alive.”

“Just so.”

I sighed, considering. “It is a sad world in which we find ourselves, where a simple farming family need worry over brigands. But trust me, Brecc, it does little good toiling over what might have been. That is a path to madness. I know it all too well.”

“Sure, but…” He paused, biting his lip. “Well, I bought the sword, right? Bought it so I might defend myself, but…”

“But you don’t know how to use it.”

“Not a lick. There are a few among the caravan who have swords, but none who’re willing to teach me. Always, they say I should practice with the bow. Better to defend one’s self.”

“They are not wrong. It’s certainly better to keep your enemies well away from you.”

“Sure,” he agreed, “but you’re a fighting man. You know you aren’t always given a choice.”

That much was true. Couldn’t argue it. So instead, I paused in my tracks and met his gaze. “Are you asking me to teach you?”

“I am,” he said, not quite meeting my gaze. “I know it’s silly, but…”

“It’s not silly,” I said, starting forward again. “Not silly at all.”

We walked in silence for a few more moments while I considered. I still wasn’t sure how long Maudlin intended for us to travel with the caravan. Certainly not long enough for me to show him a great deal.

My mind wandered backward, back to when I was in the army. I’d never thought myself much of a teacher, but my old captain had tasked me with helping new recruits from time to time. We’d had proper instructors, of course, but my skill with the blade had made me a candidate for some one-on-one mentoring for those recruits who were struggling. He’d never asked me to lend my expertise with the spear or bow, for I had none. But the

sword and board? Yeah, I'd helped quite a few inexperienced soldiers find their way.

"All right, Brecc," I said, nodding. "After camp is set this eve, we can begin. Just keep in mind, I doubt I'll be around long enough to turn you into a proper swordsman, nor am I an expert teacher. But I can show you the forms. Can teach you the basics."

He nodded enthusiastically. "That would be wonderful."

"But," I said, holding up my hand, "only if you vow to mind your temper."

He raised an eyebrow.

"Yestereve," I said, studying his face. "You let it get the better of you. If I hadn't been there, you would have taken a thrashing, to be certain. Best case, you'd have ended up beaten and bloodied."

"I handled myself well enough."

"Yes, you did. But how would you have fared on your own? Better yet, if you had been wearing a sword on your hip and thought you knew a thing or two, what might have happened?"

He opened his mouth to speak, then shut it again. The shiver that worked through him told me he understood. Knew well what I meant.

I went ahead and said it out loud anyway. "You may well have been the one who found himself in that duel. And you'd be dead. Mark well my words, for that ruffian was my better."

"But you won," he said, shaking his head. "You defeated him. How could he be your better?"

"Because skill with the blade is only one aspect. A necessary one, sure, but there is more to it. Much more."

"I fear I don't understand. That's why I need a teacher."

"My mind has been trained for battle. I have experience. Far too much, to tell it true." I paused in my tracks again, turning to face him once more. When I knew I held his gaze, I spelled it out. "I won because I was prepared to die. My opponent wasn't."

As we started forward once more, Brecc kept his thoughts to himself for a time, thinking over what I had said.

Finally, he asked, "So, in order to be a fair swordsman, I must be prepared to die?"

"To survive any battle, you must be prepared to die."

"That seems…"

“Wrong? Counter to what you might think?”

“Yes,” he said, nodding. “For isn’t the purpose to survive?”

“Sure. But think on this: before we started this conversation, you were nervous about asking me to teach you, were you not? What happened? How did you behave?”

“I, uh.” He paused, rubbing the back of his head. “Well, I suppose I beat around the bush a bit. Took my time getting to it.”

“Because you were afraid I would laugh at you.”

“Suppose so.”

“Fear made you hesitate. But what if you didn’t have that fear?”

“Then I suppose I would have just asked outright.”

“The same is true of battle. If your worry gets the better of you, you will hesitate. Might hold back when you’d be better served moving forward. Worse, your mind gets all jumbled and tangled. You focus on everything except your opponent.”

“That makes sense, but how might one rid themselves of such fear?”

“You don’t,” I admitted, shrugging. “It is ever there. Ever present. What you learn is how to ignore it. How to control yourself. That’s what I meant when I said my mind was trained. They tried to teach us in the army, but it was my time in the killing fields what made the lesson stick. I am not without fear, nor do I wish to die. But…”

“But you control your fear?”

“I accept that this battle…every battle…could be my last. I accept it, Brecc. I accept that I may well die. Once I’ve accepted it, then, and only then, can I focus entirely on my sword play. Only then can I fall into the steps. Instead of worrying about death or injury, I can focus entirely on the dance.”

“It makes sense,” he said, nodding. “Sort of like an actual dance. If you’re too worried about making a fool of yourself in front of a lass, you’re more likely to misstep. But if you just… I don’t know… Just do the dance, then it’ll go fine. Probably.”

“Just so.”

“And the man you fought last night, then? He was too worried about dying?”

I nodded and swallowed back my regrets, remembering the fear in his eyes. That moment when his arrogance had given way to terror. “Yes. At the start, he was confident. Believed he was my better. And so he was. But

when he saw that I was unafraid? That fueled his own fears. Had he better trained his mind, then I would have been the one who fell. Count on it, for I was sorely out of practice. Still am. To tell it true, I fear I was mighty lucky. I wasn't so sure I even had the mettle for it anymore. Still not sure I do."

"Well, you sure seemed like you did to me."

I gave him a half-hearted smile. "Just the same, I am lucky to be here. It's been a good long while since I had to face a foe with steel. If I found myself against a tougher opponent… Well, let us just hope that doesn't happen, for I am not so sure I'm built for it anymore. Not sure I'd have what it takes to go up against a real opponent."

Brecc quieted again while he chewed on my words. That was all right. I needed the time to consider them as well. For that was the truth of it: I'd gotten lucky with the brigand. Had I had a worry for myself, that duel would have gone another way. I could only hope that I didn't find a tougher opponent, and no time soon.

I feared that was where Maudlin would lead me.

That she'd put me in such a position again, and the next time I wouldn't have the mettle for it.

That was my fear.

And it irked me.

Irked me something fierce.

My time in the wizard's home had softened me. Had allowed me to be at ease.

My time with Maudlin would not be so gentle.

There was little I feared more than finding that old killer who lived inside me again.

Yet, there was one thing…

A greater fear. I was afraid that if I came to have need of him, he would not be there.

Pushing away my brooding thoughts, I returned my focus to Brecc. "So, that's the measure of it. If you want me to train you, then I need your word you won't act such a fool again. That you'll control your temper and not use what little I offer as fuel to get yourself killed."

"Done," he said without hesitation. "You have my word. I will do nothing so foolish, and I will only ever draw my sword in the defense of myself or others, and only if the need be so great."

"Then we have a deal."

“That other part, though… Putting the fear aside… I don’t know about that. I don’t know if I can do it the way you can.”

I replied with a forced smile, but inside… Inside I thought much the same.

I’m not sure I can either, Brecc. I’m not so sure at all.

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Around the Fire

When Jodon called a halt to the day's march, the caravaners set to work with a fury.

Where our stroll across the land had seemed measured, here they bustled about like so many ants.

Wagons were moved around, forming a great circle. Some set to work gathering wood for fires while others began working on dinner. It seemed some would keep to themselves, setting their own fires and making their own meals. A larger fire was being set near the center of camp, and there, I suspected, would be the communal cookpot and a shared supper. Whatever the case, people milled all about, pitching tents, preparing their carts, and whatever else went into planting roots for the eve.

My part in all this bustle was quite simple. Maudlin and I had no tents, just our bedrolls. So, once I'd found a clear spot for us, I stood about, feeling helpless as I watched the others work. I felt I should pitch in some way, but everyone seemed to be happily going about their chores, and I saw no place where I might be of use. Glancing about, I saw that Maudlin was still amusing some large swath of children, so in that way, she, at least, was contributing, though it was merely keeping the children out of their parents' hair for a time.

Finally, I dropped my pack and joined the folks hunting for firewood. Simple enough.

The entire camp was set up in no more time than a long breath, and pots were being placed on the fire soon enough, supper being prepared. Brecc found me then.

“It’ll be a bit before food is ready,” he said, offering me a nervous smile. “And we have some daylight left, if… You know…”

I glanced up at the sky, noting the first traces of blood. We had some time.

Nodding, I told him to fetch his blade. Then we moved a short distance from the others, yet still within eyesight.

That seemed to bother him.

It was meant to.

“Can we move a little further out?” he asked, casting glances over his shoulder.

“Are you embarrassed?”

“Well,” he said, pausing to rub the back of his head. “A little. Yeah. I don’t want them to think me a fool.”

“Then there is no better place for your lesson than here,” I said, shrugging. “We could certainly walk into the privacy of the trees and I could show you some forms without an audience. But remember what we talked about? Here, within view, you’ll have to contend with your mind. You’ll have to battle it. Believe me, Brecc, if you ever have to use that damned thing, you’ll be better served by that skill than the sword.”

He nodded his understanding, though it was quite clear he didn’t like it.

I started simply. How to hold the blade. How to position his feet. How to understand the momentum of his swings. The basics. There’d be no sparring that eve.

At the start, a few of the others cast curious glances our way. Brecc was bothered at first, but I kept him to task. Eventually, he seemed to calm a bit.

That was, until a group of two men and a woman meandered over, watching up close.

He seemed to lose himself then.

That was all right, for the sky was truly bleeding, and I was ready to call it quits.

To my surprise, one of our watchers spoke up. The woman. “You teaching Brecc how to sword?”

I raised an eyebrow at the strange way she asked it, but then nodded.

For a moment, I feared they’d come to poke fun. If they had, it might well have ruined Brecc on the spot. He might have given up then and forever.

But that was not why they'd walked over. It was not to take the piss out of him. In fact, in the days to come, I would learn that few around the caravan ever poked fun at one another. Only around the fire and after a few ales. All in good spirits.

No, these had a different sort of request.

"Can you teach us, too?" the woman asked, hands on her hips. "We'd like to learn how to handle ourselves. Dangerous life out here on the roads."

"Do you have swords?" I asked, thinking it unlikely.

The woman and her comrades glanced at one another and one of the men spoke up. He was closer to middle-aged and was wire thin. "Nay, but there a few about the camp. They'd certainly let us borrow them. We was just thinking…"

"They say you slew that fellow back in town," the woman said, jumping in. "Said you was some sort of master swordsman."

"I don't know about all of that," I replied.

Before I could speak further she continued, "Well, that's what Maudlin says. She says you're the finest swordsman for a thousand leagues."

I blinked at that, wondering what other fibs she might have told. Maudlin hadn't even been there to see me fight the ruffian. How could she know anything about my skill with a blade?

Realizing the onlookers were still waiting for an answer, I shrugged. "That's an exaggeration, to be sure. I am a fair hand, though. Taught by some of the best. This was Brecc's ask, however, so as long as he doesn't have a problem with it, then neither do I."

"No, of course not," Brecc said, grinning. "That'd be wonderful. The more the merrier!"

"All right, then," I said. "If we have time during the midday break tomorrow, we can do a little work. If not, we'll do it in the evening again, once camp is set."

"Why not both?" the woman asked. "Looks like a good bit of fun."

I could but shrug, my mind still wondering at Brecc's delight in their participation. As nervous as he was about the whole ordeal, I thought for certain he'd want to keep his lessons private.

But that was something else I would come to admire about the caravan folk. They often did things in groups, sharing burdens and learning together. Most evenings, some would break off to sew or knit. Any who wished to join, be they woman or man, was welcomed. The experienced would teach

and guide the novices. There were musicians, too, and they'd often play around the fire, trading old instruments back and forth. Again, they welcomed any who wished to learn. Herb gathering, hunting, skinning, cooking, mending wagons, or treating wounds: all done in groups. Always, they shared their knowledge and carried their burdens together.

So it would be with my sword lessons, it would seem. From one student to four in a single day. I wasn't so sure I was up to the task, but there was no harm in trying. It would certainly give me something to do to pass the time. And a way to feel like I was contributing in some way, at least.

That decided, we made our way back toward the giant fire at the center of camp, where dinner was being served. Several folks had dragged over chairs from their wagons or carts, forming a great circle. Several logs, trunks, and whatever else could be used for seating were hauled out as well.

Maudlin was still surrounded by little ones, which was fine by me. I had little desire for her company. I much preferred to sit alone, so I picked a fat log with plenty of vacancies around it.

To be surprised for a second time in short order, Brecc joined me. Not long after, the woman came along as well, and then a few others. Before I knew it, I was part of the giant circle, as though I were one of them.

We dined on a mix of roasted squirrel and hare, all of which had been harvested throughout the day as we traveled. There were some bonny archers among the caravan. A fine soup had been made as well. A mix of vegetables and herbs, some of which had been plucked from the roadside and others which had been purchased in town.

It beat my usual evening meals, at least of late. Since Maudlin had been so hard-pressed about moving onward and in a hurry, we'd run low on supplies. I'd been forced into rationing. Most evenings I had supped on a bit of dried beef and had the same again the following morn to break my fast. Despite that, I'd still argue the communal pot fed me better meals than most taverns. I was reminded of home. Of my mother's cooking…

And then I was grateful again that I was not without company, for those thoughts were better left in the dusty attic of my past. Best to be forgotten. Ignored. There was little joy to be had in remembering.

When the food was finished, a bit of ale was passed around. Not much, mind you. The caravaners were kind and hearty folk, but they were also serious, too. There'd be another day of hard travel the following morn. They had no time for slobbering drunks.

Yet the evening was not without its merriment.

A lute, a flute, a mandolin, and a hand drum were brought to bear and our camp was filled with the warmth of song, a jig fit for a fair. A few even took to their feet and danced. Most merely clapped along, or closed their eyes and took it in.

At the conclusion of each tune, a cheer went up, followed by applause.

Once they'd played us a few melodies, their instruments went away and Jodon stood, motioning everyone to silence. When he knew he had our attention, he spoke. "We have made good progress today. No signs of weather to worry over. No trouble to contend with. As it stands, we still intend to brave the forest, for that will allow us to reach Trasal in time while staying clear of the bandit-filled roads. We passed but a few travelers today, but none reported any trouble ahead. I think we are in good shape and our wheels yet turn. Questions?"

I was somewhat taken back by this strange speech, but it took only a moment for it to all settle in. A nightly ritual. Jodon speaking to his flock. Throughout the day, when we had passed travelers coming from the direction we were headed, Jodon, one of his sons, or another of the men had always stopped and visited. I had assumed it was to gather news, but I hadn't expected Jodon to relay it to everyone in this way. It made sense, though. Each day, whatever news had been learned, he would share it around the fire, making sure everyone knew the state of things.

A few motioned that they had questions and Jodon pointed at one, seemingly at random.

This was an older fellow, and like most, I hadn't had the chance to learn his name.

He asked, "So, no sightings of the Butcher or his brigands? No rumors?"

Jodon shook his head. "They made no mention of the Butcher, and we were sure to ask. Best we can tell, if we cut into the forest as planned, we should circumvent their lands. Should be able to avoid his lot entirely."

"Aye, but the forest," a middle-aged woman said, speaking out of turn. "Gives me shivers just thinking about it."

"I understand," Jodon said. "But going through the Paling Forest will get us to Trasal on time and allow us to avoid the Butcher of Barlington. Furthermore, it has been decided and agreed, and I would not have us rehash it again."

There were a few nods of approval at this, as well as a few grumbles.

Jodon ignored both. “Now, if there are no other questions, I’ll hand it over to Nell.”

When no one else motioned with a question, Jodon took a step back from the center and his wife moved in, taking over. “First order of business, I know everyone has been worried about little Ren. I am happy to announce that his cough has broken. His mother plans to keep him in the wagon for a few more days until we see him back to full strength. Some have been worried about Jon after his tumble. I’m happy to say it appears he simply rolled his ankle. We are blessed that he did not break it. He’ll be off his feet for a few more days, so if anyone can pitch in to help Melinda, it would be greatly appreciated. As for supplies, we’re all stocked up from town this morning. Jodon caught a wonderfully fair price on potatoes, so we have them in great store if anyone needs some. And by now, surely you’re all aware that Maudlin and Garbhan have joined us. If you have not done so, please welcome them. That is all I have. May our wheels forever turn.”

With that she scooted back from the fire once more and Jodon stepped forward again. With a clap of his hands, he said, “If that concludes our business for the day, would anyone care to kick us off? Does anyone have a tale they wish to tell?”

I thought this a strange turn, but again, I knew little of their customs. I knew not the ways of the road, nor its language.

All around, hands went up. Many, it seemed, had a tale they would tell.

Jodon pointed first to a burly man with a big dark beard and serious eyes. I believed he was a builder of sorts, but I had not yet learned his name. Fortunately, Jodon corrected that for me straight away. “Ah, Anen! It is so rare for you to share, I feel we must start with you.”

Anen’s voice was a barreling baritone, but his words were crisp. “Many thanks, Pack Master. I would tell ye the tale of Calian Tree-Breaker, if ye would hear it.”

“Aye, so we would,” Jodon said to a chorus of agreeable nods.

It seemed at least a few knew the story, yet there was no lack of enthusiasm.

The big man sat upright, glancing around the fire, ensuring he had everyone’s attention.

Then he began…

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A Campfire Tale

"Calian was a child of the road, like so many of us, but he was a quiet lad. Shy. Kept to himself much of the time. He was kind, though. Never mean-spirited, even as a lad, or so they say. But because of his nature, some of the other kids gave him a hard time. He never seemed to fit in with other children. And so he found little joy in his learning. Didn't take to the hunting. Didn't take to skinning nor trapping. Cared naught for working leather nor steel. No good with a hammer nor chisel. It seemed there was no job suited for him. He feared that even among the folk of the road he might find no place of his own."

"What'd he do?" someone in the crowd called.

Others mumbled their agreement.

Anen continued, "Well, he tried and tried, is what he did. He tried and tried to find the thing that suited him. Always, though, he fell short. There was a great fear in him. A terrible fear that he might never find his way and one day might be asked to leave, for all who travel the road must earn their keep. But the road was all he knew. The caravaners were his people, even if those of his own age didn't accept him. There was one, though, one who treated him as an equal. A young lass called Mareen. When the other kids wouldn't let him play, Mareen would come along and make up a game. When the other kids called him names, it was Mareen who told him not to listen."

"Three cheers for Mareen!" one of the men called. "Hip hip!"

"Aye," Anen said. "But as they rolled ever onward toward adulthood, Mareen grew to be quite fair. She became the apple of every young lad's eye. Such is the way of things. And Calian's fear grew greater still, for he

came to understand that he loved Mareen. That he cherished her with every bit of his heart. Yet he had no skill. No craft. Not like the other lads. Worse still, he never figured himself for the handsome sort, and his shyness pushed him away from courting her in the way the others did. And so, he carried that big fear about him. Fear of staying to see her marry another, yet equally afraid to leave. Of being cast out."

Anen paused to take a sip from his mug.

As he did, one of the little girls sitting with Maudlin spoke up. "He should have just told her he liked her!"

A few laughs went up from around the fire.

"Aye," Anen said with a chuckle. "You are right, little one. Though someday you may not find it so simple as all that. At any rate, Mareen had herself a pup, one her parents found on the roadside when it was but a babe. Mareen grew up alongside that old dog. It was hers and she was his. No question. Where Mareen went, so did her dog. But one day it went missing."

"Not the puppy!" cried another of the children.

"Yes, the puppy," Anen said with naught but patience.

"I don't think I like this story," the child said, glancing up at Maudlin, who merely shrugged.

"Do not judge until you've heard the rest of it," Anen said with a wink. "So, anyway, Mareen wakes up one morning and she can't find her dog. It won't answer her calls. As the camp is preparing to break down, her father and a few of the others take her into the forest to go searching. Calian goes along. Well, it doesn't take them long to find the poor thing. That old dog had caught the scent of squirrel, or perhaps a raccoon. We'll never know for sure what sort of tricksy critter it was, for it was long gone. The dog had chased it right inside the hollow of a great tree."

"Into a tree?" a little boy asked.

"Aye," Anen said with a serious nod. "You see, this was a very big tree, and part of it was hollowed out. Whatever the dog was chasing, it led the poor bugger right inside the hollow. The critter must have gone up, and so, too, did the dog. That old pup tried its best, climbing up through that hollow until it got itself stuck. They tried to pull the dog free, but it was wedged too tight. And the tree… Well, it was so large they saw no way to chop the dog free. The men figured it would have taken six of their best choppers and a day or better to see the task done. But they didn't have the time, for it was

winter, you see? There was a great storm on the horizon. The pack master wanted to get the caravan safely tucked in the nearest town before nightfall. And so…they had to make a hard decision."

"They didn't," one of the men called from the other side of the fire. "Surely they didn't leave it."

"What else could they do?" Anen replied, spreading his hands. "Should they have risked all to save one dog? The pack master thought not. Some believed it would be best to put the poor thing out of its misery. Mareen would hear none of it. The girl was distraught, of course. But her father dragged her back to camp, kicking and screaming. The caravan made ready to leave, but Calian… Calian couldn't stomach the pain in Mareen's eyes. Couldn't stand to hear her sobs. So, he made a decision."

Again he paused, but this time no one spoke.

"Calian knew what he had to do," Anen continued. "First, he told his parents he would walk with Mareen that day to comfort her. And since he so rarely sought the company of friends, and because he was a good lad, they took him at his word. Instead, he put on his warmest clothes, grabbed a bit of dried beef, borrowed his father's tinderbox and his old chopping ax, and set out on his own. He knew the risks, mind you. Knew about the storm. But there was in Calian that greater fear that he would never find his craft and would forever be a burden. Was his life so much to risk to see Mareen happy again? He thought not. So, as the caravan rolled on, he slipped back into the woods alone, headed back to that big old tree and that dog trapped inside."

"But was he any good with an ax?" asked one of the women.

Anen shook his head. "Like all other pursuits, he'd never taken to chopping. But he remembered the lessons. Remembered how he was taught to hold it. How he was taught to swing. So, he set to work. Very carefully, he began to chop. Small strokes at first, barely biting into the timber. But he chopped and chopped. As time pressed on, he fell into something of a rhythm. Behind him, those clouds still threatened snow, but he cared not. He just chopped and chopped. He rested only when he had to, pressing on until the storm came calling. Just before the snow started to fall, he took a break to build himself a strong fire. Then he shed his cloak and jammed it up into the tree and around the dog as best he could to keep it warm. Then he picked up his ax once more and chopped and chopped."

"For how long?" one of the others asked.

“All day and all night, and into the next morn,” Anen said with a shrug. “Or so the story goes. By nightfall, when the caravaners were tucked safely in the city, his parents finally realized he was missing. It didn’t take them long to figure out where he’d gone, but with the storm raging, snow falling, and a mighty wicked wind, it wasn’t safe for anyone to go looking. So, the next morn his father, along with Mareen’s, and a handful of others, took the few horses the caravan had and rode back to their old camp and the old tree. And do you know what they found?”

“What?” several people asked at once.

“There was Calian, hunched over his little fire, with Mareen’s old dog cradled in his arms.”

“It was alive?” a woman asked. “The dog? It was all right?”

“It was. And Calian, too, if you care.”

There were a few chuckles at that.

“They’d had a long night, Calian and that dog, but once he’d freed it, he held it near the fire and together they made it through that bitter night. Even when his father showed up, Calian refused to let go of the dog. Refused to let anyone else carry it. So, he mounted up with his dad, still cradling the dog, and rode all the way back to meet the others. Well, you can imagine everyone turned out to see what news the men brought. All had feared the worst, especially Mareen. But when she saw Calian cradling her dog, she let out a shout of joy and raced in to hug them both. Calian was not surprised by this. He was, however, quite surprised when she kissed him right on the mouth.”

“Eww!” called one of the little girls.

“Gross!” cried another.

Anen chuckled again. “Yes, well, that’s what happened. And you know what else? Until that moment, Calian had never worked up the courage to tell her how he felt, but just then, he’d certainly showed her. He’d showed her by risking his life to save her dog. And she understood, too. She understood that he couldn’t say the words, but he didn’t need to, for she loved him also. So she confessed her love to him right there on the spot. And when the spring came, the two of them were married.”

“But what of his craft?” one of the men asked.

“Ah, well, I thought that would be obvious,” Anen said with a grin. “He became Calian Tree-Breaker, did he not? And so much more. Chopping that massive tree was no easy feat. The men all sang his praise. That gave the

lad confidence, and so he became the caravan's tree feller. The best chopper there ever was, or so it was said. The end."

"Wait!" called a little boy, who rose to his feet and put his hands on hips. "That can't be the end. You didn't say they lived happily ever after."

"Ah, but you're right, young master," the storyteller lamented. "And you'll be glad to know that in fact they did. Learning that he was good at one thing gave Calian the confidence to give other things another try. And this time, he found he was better than he'd first thought. It was all just in his head, you see? Because he'd believed himself a failure, he'd never given anything his full effort. Always before, he'd tried new things thinking he'd be no good before he'd ever started, and so it was true. But after he chopped that big old tree and saved Mareen's dog, he found he could do almost anything he set his mind to."

"And what became of him then?" an elderly woman asked. "You did tell the lad they lived happily ever after."

Again Anen chuckled. "And so they did. He would go on to become the pack master, and a fine one at that, for that same caravan was the very one which raised me. I was but a boy and he an old man then, but I can remember his smile, and Mareen's. They were like grans to me. And I can tell you true, the two of them grew very old together and had a very happy life."

"But what of the dog?" a little girl asked. "Was it there, too?"

Anen blinked at her, coughed, and said, "Uh, yeah, well, of course. The end. May our wheels forever turn."

"May our wheels forever turn," many echoed.

Everyone around the fire gave their applause, and I did as well. It was a fine story, after all, and gave me something of a glimpse into this world of theirs. The way of life on the road.

There were more stories after, different caravaners taking turns. Always it started with the teller asking Jodon if he would hear their story, and always Jodon politely agreed. There were a great many stories. Many were about caravaners from days past. Others were of a different ilk. One involved a maiden tricking a sea captain, stealing his gold, and using his sword as an oar. Another was about a man who slew his own brother for jealousy over his wife. There were a great many.

One surprised me, though.

When there was a lull, Brecc called out, “Pack Master, might you tell us the one about the Shining Serpent’s sword?”

There were a few mumbles of agreement. And a few groans, too.

“Bah,” said an older fellow, waving it away. “We all love the story, but it’ll have us debating the mystery of his death all night again.”

I stole a glance at Maudlin, who’d perked up at the mention of the Shining Serpent.

As the others debated the merits of debating the Shining Serpent’s death, Brecc leaned closer to me. “I’ve always liked this one. Jodon and Nell got to meet him, you know? Got to see him perform.”

Before I could reply, the crowd simmered around us and I looked up to see Jodon motioning for everyone to quiet. When they had, he offered Brecc a smile. “I will tell it for you, Brecc, but I will keep it brief, if it pleases you?”

Brecc nodded, all enthusiasm, like a big kid.

Again I wondered at the years between us. They could not have been so many. Certainly, though, they had been lived differently. You might think I looked down on him for his somewhat innocent nature. It was not so. If anything, I felt a tinge of jealousy, for my years had been hard-lived. I wished I had retained that same child-like wonder. But it was not so. Not for me.

Jodon rose and began to circle the fire.

Everyone grew silent, waiting for the pack master’s tale.

Finally, he began.

“It was some twenty odd years ago when I met the Shining Serpent.”

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The Serpent Sword

"You met him? Lucian Locklear? You *met* the Shining Serpent?"

Maudlin's response was so fierce, her words so sudden, that they took everyone by surprise. Even me, and I'd half-expected her to act out during this tale. No sooner had the words left Jodon's mouth than she was on her feet, that terrible gaze locked on the poor pack master. Several of the children around her let out surprised yelps. A couple even fled for their parents.

Jodon blinked at her, caught off balance, same as the rest of us.

"Why…yes," he said, offering her a friendly smile. "My apologies, Maudlin. Had I known it would cause you such a reaction, I might have given warning."

There were a few chuckles at this, for in the pack master's tone was a gentle rebuke for interrupting his story, and not in the whimsical, good-natured way the others had for previous tales. Most folk would have been embarrassed. Not Maudlin. She cared nothing for what they might have thought of her. She had bigger worries.

"You must tell me of it," she said. "You must tell me all of it."

"Of course," the pack master said, bowing. Then he motioned toward Nell. "My dear wife was there with me at the time. We'd be delighted to tell you the tale in its entirety, but here, now, around this fire, it has been told many times over, so I'd not bore everyone with the entire story."

I thought Maudlin might protest, for there was her scowl, the one she used when she was near enough to an outrage. Instead, a smile formed on her lips. "But of course, Pack Master. My apologies. Quite rude of me. I'm quite the enthusiast about the Shining Serpent, is all."

“Ah, well you are in good company then, my lady,” Jodon said with another short bow. “You will find many among our troupe happy to converse with you about him at length, Nell and myself among them.”

“That would be wonderful,” Maudlin said as she made to sit again. “Apologies for interrupting your story. Do please continue.”

“Gladly,” Jodon said, a thoughtful look on his face. He gave his beard a tug for good measure. “Now, where I was? Ah, yes, it was some twenty odd years ago in a land very far from here. We rolled into a quaint little town, a bustling place, teeming with life. They were having a fair of sorts, as it were. And it just so happened that we came into the area at the same time as the Shining Serpent.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said an elderly woman, rolling her finger. “Come on, Pack Master. You promised to keep it short.”

“Not so short!” Brecc called back.

A few laughs were shared among the group. It was all in good fun.

My eyes glanced to Maudlin, though, seeing, as I feared, that she was glaring an awful hate at the woman who’d jokingly told Jodon to get on with it.

Jodon, good-natured as ever, continued as if he hadn’t been interrupted yet again. “Well, once we heard the Shining Serpent was to perform, practically the entire caravan was in an uproar, all of us wishing to attend. And you know we never like to leave the wagons unattended. Never more than half. This was a rare exception. A few of our elderly members hung back, not caring about seeing some serpent man sing, or so they said. You know how old folks are.”

Again there were several chuckles, for Jodon was no spring chicken.

“At any rate, we gathered round with the townsfolk to see the show.”

“How was it?” an elderly man asked.

It was Nell who jumped in this time. “Oh, come on, Aron! You were there!”

“Well, I know,” Aron said, giving her a toothy grin. “But I like the way Jodon plays it up.”

“Embellishes is more like,” Nell said, shaking her head.

“My love! You wound me,” Jodon said, hands over his heart. “Was it not the greatest bit of music we ever witnessed? Ever heard? The Serpent’s voice was a gift directly from the gods, his tunes such that they could tame

the wilds of nature. It was exquisite. Extraordinary. Astonishing. Mesmerizing."

"Yes, yes," Nell said with a roll of her eyes. But then she smiled. "It was all that, wasn't it?"

"Aye," Jodon said, hands on his hips. "And I quite clearly remember you telling me that I was fortunate that it wasn't so many years earlier, for you would have left me for him right there on the spot. I remember that clearly enough."

"Nell!" one of the other women said.

Nell's face turned beet red. "I don't think I said that."

"You surely did," Jodon said, then glanced up at the stars. "Or may the gods strike me dead!"

"You stop with that kind of talk!" Nell replied, voice stern. "Get on with your story, you daft old man."

More laughs were shared.

"Yes, yes," Jodon said, making a shooing motion at his wife. "It was a fine show. Best we'd ever seen, and I could spend all night telling you about it, as could I spend the following day telling you about meeting the man. But it was the sword Brecc asked about. The Serpent Sword. So, I will move us right along. Suffice it to say that we had a chance to meet him, and what a pleasure it was. To tell it true, I was quite glad Nell was aging and settled by then, for certainly I could not have competed."

As he said that last part, Nell crossed her arms. Jodon merely winked at her.

"So, anyway, when we had the chance to meet him, we were somewhat reluctant on account of being traveling folk. Those who roam higher society rarely pay us much mind. Not the Serpent, though. He was delighted to find we were part of a traveling caravan, for he, too, knew the ways of the road. He was a traveling minstrel himself, after all. We talked long into the evening, so we did. He regaled us with story. Treated us as equals. He…"

Jodon paused, seeing the look on his wife's face.

"The sword, love," she said, offering him a smile. "You promised to keep it short and tell about the sword."

"Right," Jodon said, tapping his nose. "So, he was wearing it. After his show, he'd strapped it around his waist. And it was there, right there on his hip. Such a sword… All I could see was the handle and pommel, but that was where the true beauty lay. It was all golden, the pommel the head of a

viper, its grip the body of a snake, and the cross-guard, it looked as though the snake's lower half was coiled around itself. A marvelous piece of work. Absolutely stunning. To tell it true, I could spend half the night talking about the sword, describing it to you."

He paused and glanced over at Nell, who gave him an expectant look.

I realized then that their banter was all part of the show. This was as much Nell's story as it was Jodon's, and the caravaners found it quite amusing. I suspected this was how their stories went every eve.

"But alas," Jodon said with an exaggerated sigh, "I haven't all night, have I? Its beauty was without equal. And Lucian… He was kind enough to tell me about it, though, he wouldn't confirm whether it was truly a gift from a sorcerer, druid, or some wicked devil. Only that it was priceless to him and he kept it with him always. And he paid me a favor he seldom gave to any others. Because we were traveling folk, he said we could be trusted and he let me hold it."

As he spoke, Jodon raised his hands up for us to see.

I spared a glance at Maudlin, who was entirely enraptured.

"These very hands," Jodon continued, looking at his own fingers as if he were seeing them for the very first time. "These very hands held the Serpent Sword. And me being no swordsman, I know little about blades, but I can tell you this: I doubt there is any finer sword in all the world. Its edges were razor sharp, its blade keen and polished to reflect. It was magnificent."

"What of the magic?" a man asked. "They say it was magic. Could you tell?"

"What would an old pack master know of magic, eh?" Jodon asked. "But I tell you true, it wouldn't surprise me one bit if there was some magic over it, for again, I have never seen such a sword as that. And I'll be forever grateful that the Shining Serpent was friendly enough to let me take a gander. The music. His kindness. All of it. What a night…"

"Is that it, then?" another man asked. "That's the whole story?"

"Well, that's the short version," Jodon said with a shrug. "Afterward, we went back to camp and Nell and I made our final son. There he is there."

Most everyone laughed at this. One exception was the horror-stricken young man Jodon pointed at. Another was Nell, who all but fainted.

More stories were told after that, and more instruments were played. Having moved on from the Shining Serpent, Maudlin had no interest in them, her attention returning to the little ones.

It was a long and peaceful eve.

One I relished.

And I looked forward to having more such nights, and found myself quite glad Maudlin had decided to join Jodon’s caravan.

When at last the time came to turn in, I figured I’d be on my own. To my surprise, though, Maudlin followed me to where I’d set out our bedrolls, all of her minions having been sent off to sleep some time earlier.

She said not a word, nor paid me any mind as she lay down. I may not have even existed so far as she was concerned, but I was certainly thinking about her. More specifically, I wondered how the caravaners would react if she took to wailing in the night. Would she wake them all with her horrible sobs?

I made a decision then and took out my instrument, hoping I might solve the problem before it ever arrived. Playing softly so as not to disturb the others, I attempted to lull her to sleep. To my joy, it seemed to work and Maudlin dozed off, sleeping peacefully.

I could but hope that would remain true throughout the night.

I could but hope that my song did not bother anyone else, for certainly most of the camp would have heard it. That was a worry for the morn, though.

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Rolling Along

"Was that you I heard playing in the night?"

I paused, glancing up to see Nell had strolled over. I had been eating some boiled oats from the communal pot, breaking my fast. Maudlin had already disappeared by the time I'd awoken, likely off collecting flowers and catching frogs with the children. I'd not expected anyone to approach me.

Nor was I looking forward to this conversation.

I'd rather hoped no one would comment on my playing, much less the camp's matriarch, for how I could explain? How could I say that my traveling companion sobbed herself to sleep each night and it was only my sawing what stemmed the tide?

I forced a smile and gave her a polite nod. "Sorry. Apologies if I made too much racket."

"It was quite lovely, actually," she said, grinning at me. "One of the Shining Serpent's tunes, yes?"

Again I nodded.

"Well, you did it justice, Garbhan. And I must say, although it was a sad one, it was quite nice. Lulled me right to sleep. Jodon, too. Some of the others made comment as well."

"Hope I didn't bother anyone."

"On the contrary. I have heard no complaints. Only compliments."

This surprised me, for I'd had little in the way of compliments in my life. Fewer, even, that didn't involve my sword arm.

"Would you mind playing it again tonight? Maybe every night? Or would that be too much to ask?"

“Certainly,” I said, feeling an immense sense of relief. “I would be happy to.”

“Wonderful,” she said, then wandered off.

I watched her go, wondering at this strange turn. There I had been worried, but it seemed Nell had given me just the permission I needed to ensure Maudlin fell asleep without terrorizing the rest of the camp. It was almost as if Nell had somehow known… But of course, she could not have. This was just a fair bit of luck, and that came seldom enough that I appreciated it when it did.

When camp was broken down, we set out at a nice, even pace, and I walked alone. Or at least I started that way.

Before long, a few of the others who were on foot came to join me. They were friendly folks, and none treated me as a stranger. On the contrary, they treated me as though I were one of them. It was strange, feeling as though I were a normal sod, trotting along.

I rather enjoyed it.

When the midday stop came, Brecc, the woman, and the two men from the night before made quick work of eating and gathered round me for their lessons. What surprised me more was that another man and woman had joined us.

At some time, unbeknownst to me, Maudlin had apparently doubled down on her claims that I was some great swordsman. She’d also told them I was a fine teacher. Why she’d said any of this, I couldn’t know. Whatever her reasoning, between her words, Brecc’s, and a few of the others, it seemed I’d been chosen to teach the others how to defend themselves.

I wasn’t bothered.

Though we certainly didn’t have enough swords.

That was all right, for I wasn’t keen on having sharp blades in the hands of so many novices. Instead, as we traveled, we all watched for fallen limbs what could be whittled into the fashion of a sword. These became our training weapons.

As the days progressed, more caravaners joined in. It was like I said. They believed in doing things together. Believed in working hard and learning new skills. They cheered each other on and offered encouragement.

To tell it true, I came to enjoy my sword lessons. Came to relish those times. Not only did it give me people to interact with, something I had

severely lacked for the past few years, but with each passing day, my own skill came back into itself. Teaching made me better.

And I didn't mind the travel, for as time went on, I rarely found myself walking alone. Always, I had company. Always, I was surrounded by friendly faces.

Each day, I had a full belly.

By night, I enjoyed sitting around the fire, listening to tunes and tales.

And just before I laid down my head each eve, I played my sorrow-laden song, lulling Maudlin and others to sleep.

So it was that, despite myself, I began to truly enjoy traveling with Jodon's caravan.

I felt at peace.

Hopeful.

I should have known better.

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Welcoming Party

We were nearing the Paling Forest when one of Jodon's sons came to find me.

"Garbhan," he said, breathless. "Better come quick."

"What is it?" I asked.

He seemed about to speak but instead shook his head, took a big breath, and turned back the way he'd come, all while urging me to follow.

I raced after him. I couldn't know what to expect at the front of the caravan, but I'd learned to always expect trouble.

And trouble I found.

The wagons at the head of the parade had come to a stop just before a beaten trail which led into a shaded tree tunnel. This was the beginning of the Paling Forest, or so I assumed. But that wasn't why they'd stopped.

There was a small camp off to the side. The men there were known to me.

The mercs from Riddles Untold.

How they'd come to know where we'd be, I couldn't say, nor what route they might have taken. But it was no mystery that they could have gotten ahead of us, for riding on horseback was quicker than pulling wagons.

Standing at the front was Beak Nose. Guess he'd found himself in charge after their leader was eaten by pigs. Also, I wasn't so sure his nickname still suited him. His nose remained fat and swollen from where I'd shattered it, and it looked a bit more like a pig's snout than a beak.

Upon spotting them, Jodon must have immediately sent his son to fetch me, for he was just now approaching the man, along with a few of the

heartier lads.

I regretted not being right up front. Jodon and his caravaners were stout, but Beak Nose and his mates made their living off steel. If they'd come for revenge, they might set right into them. They hadn't gone for their weapons yet, though. Maybe they'd just come around to make threats.

If they saw me, though? Well, they might hasten to their blades.

I slowed my approach, pulled my hood up, and sauntered around the side of Jodon's wagon where I could watch and listen, perhaps without drawing notice.

"Ah, there they are," Beak Nose said, opening his arms in a welcoming gesture. "Just the folks we was waiting for. You know, when you didn't show up in Pine, I thought you must be running behind. But then I ran into some bloke a town back. Said you lot was heading into the Paling Forest. Couldn't hardly believe it meself. Didn't figure you had the grit for all that."

"We have no shortage of grit," Jodon said, keeping his voice amiable. "You'll find we have grit in store and plenty to share."

Beak Nose gave him a wicked grin. "Suppose you do. But, thing is, well, you owe a tax of a sort, you see?"

"I do not see."

Beak Nose chuckled. "Suppose not. Best I explain. You see, after the scuffle there at the tavern, the one where you left me boss to the pigs, well, me other boss, the big boss, he was none too pleased. Said an example had to be made. Said we had to collect a tax, so he did."

Jodon eyed him carefully, pulling at his beard. "All the times we've run into you before, you never mentioned working for another. I thought you were an…independent operation."

"So it may seem. But it's not, you see? No, no. We work for a larger… operation, as you put it. A proper organization. We're respectable like that."

"Are you now?"

"Oh, yeah, see, 'cause the big boss, well, he's known, right?"

Jodon stared at him, not speaking, waiting for Beak Nose to get around to it.

Beak Nose's lips split in the nastiest of smiles. "We work for the Butcher of Barlington."

Jodon, to his credit, did not react. A few of the others gave Beak Nose what he sought, though. Some sharp intakes of breath. A few furtive

glances. Worry made quick work racing across their faces.

Whoever this man was, this Butcher of Barlington, he was well known. And they were afraid.

“And I’m sure,” Jodon said, still keeping his voice even, “that you explained to your boss that my company had no part in your man’s death.”

“Oh, sure,” Beak Nose replied. “Told him it was that stranger, sure enough. And that bitch, for her part. They’ll get theirs when we find them. In fact, the boss seems real interested in talking to her. Yeah, he’s real interested in talking to Mad Maudlin.”

“I can’t see what business that is of mine,” Jodon replied.

“Oh, sure, yeah. That don’t concern you none, Pack Master. But I tell you true, if the Butcher wasn’t out and about, scouring the land for her, why, he would have come to greet you himself. See, he was none too happy with you lot for feeding one of his captains to them pigs. Or how you took it upon yourselves to pitch us in the street. Doesn’t sit well with his reputation, or so he says.”

“And so…?” Jodon said.

“And so he sent us ahead. Well, first, we burned down that tavern. Was the tavern master’s idea about the pigs, wasn’t it? And we took care of that fella what owned the pigs. He don’t have ’em no more. He’s pigless, or so I like to say. And so, then, the boss told us to fetch you up and explain about his tax, on account of the disrespect. Pay up and we’ll call it settled. Refuse and…”

Jodon turned his head a little, studying the man. “I have little doubt that you and your fellows are stout men. But as you can see, there are plenty more of us than there are of you.”

“That’s true, innit?” Beak Nose nodded. “And as you can see, we don’t have our weapons drawn. We didn’t come all this way to bust you up. No, the Butcher wants that for himself, you see?”

“I do not.”

Beak Nose took a steadying breath and tried again. “So, it’s like this… When word got to the Butcher about his man dying, he was none too happy, right? But then he hears about the whore, the one what toasted to a Tom of Bedlam. That got his curiosity up. So, he’s busy with that, you see? He’s got the whole…organization out, looking for those two. Us, though, he sent to find you. Told us to give you this warning, real nice-like. You pass over

your coin, some goods, and a few of the gals, and all is peace between us. But if we go back to him empty-handed, well…"

"Then the Butcher of Barlington will be after us."

"There it is." Beak Nose snapped his fingers. "Knew you'd come around to it, Grandad. So, what's it going to be? We going to do this nice and peaceful like, or would you rather deal with the Butcher?"

There were murmurs from the caravaners, but Jodon held up his hand, silencing everyone.

Finally, he looked Beak Nose in the eyes and said, "The price you ask is too high. Coin, I can spare. Some goods, even. But you wish for us to give up our women? That I cannot do."

"This ain't no negotiation. The Butcher sets the terms, and I'll tell you true. If you meets his wishes, things will go fine. You can roll on and this'll all be forgotten. Refuse, and you know what happens next. He'll ride you down. All of you. Then he'll take your coin, your goods, and *all* your women. Well, the ones worth a rut, at least. The old sows won't have nothing to fret over, 'cept that he'll carve 'em up, same as the lads. Your little ones will live, though. Children are worth a fair bit of coin to the right folk. So, you see, you're set to lose it all, Grandad. Best you give it a good thinking."

"I have already given you my answer, friend," Jodon said. "You need not waste any more of your air. If we are done, then we will wish you well and continue on our way."

Beak Nose's pig-like snout twitched. His eyes narrowed. Despite Jodon's calm words, the mercenary felt slighted. Still felt embarrassed about the way he'd been thumped and man-handled. He wanted his revenge, and he didn't want to wait for his boss to show up. His hand inched toward his scabbard.

There would be blood, here and now. No doubt about it. Beak Nose had no intention of letting the caravan pass peacefully. I could feel it in my guts.

I stepped from behind the wagon and tossed my hood back.

His eyes flicked to me, then widened. "You!"

I continued toward him.

"So, that's where you's been hiding, eh?" He licked his cracked lips, then turned back to Jodon. "Never you mind about the coins, goods, and

lasses. You sheltered an enemy of the Butcher, you did. There'll be no saving your hides. The Butcher will—"

He never finished his threat.

My fist pounded into his previously-booped snoot, booping it yet again.

He fell back on his arse, screaming. Couldn't blame him. Judging by the pain in my knuckles, I'd socked his sore snout something fierce.

His mates reached for their weapons, but I drew mine first and stood before them, ready. They'd not forgotten what I'd done to their captain. And as they stood there staring at me, I knew what it was they saw in my eyes, and I hated myself for it. For it wasn't that old soldier in me. No, it was the man who had once served a devil. That killer, pure and true. Guess he was still around after all.

The brigands stayed their hands, for they knew they stood before a monster.

Yet I wasn't so much of a monster. Not as much of one as I should have been. If I had murdered the lot of them, mayhap things would have gone better for all of us. I did not, though. Whatever decency remained with me, it stayed my hand. Foolish, that.

"Best get the wagons moving, Pack Master," I said, eyes still on the brigands.

Jodon gave the order and the other caravaners cleared out. To my surprise, the pack master stuck by my side.

We waited like that then, Jodon, me, and the gang, all staring at one another while the wagons rolled into the forest behind us.

The caravaners kept quiet as they passed. All except for Maudlin, of course. As she caught up, she called out at my back, "Garbhan! Whatever are you doing? Are you causing yet more mischief? Did I miss another bloody duel?"

I ignored her. Or at least tried to.

"Garbhan!" she said. "I must insist that you answer me."

That, by my reckoning, counted as a command, one that would erase some measure of debt, albeit a little. But with Maudlin, I'd already learned to take what I could get.

"Just some trouble having tracked us down," I replied. "I'll explain when we're done here."

That, apparently, did not satisfy her curiosity. Never one to miss out, Maudlin sauntered over to join us. At least she left the little ones behind.

“What’s this, then?”

I motioned toward the bandits. “You remember our friends from the tavern?”

“Not at all,” she said, shaking her head.

“Well, it seems they remembered us.”

“That’s right,” Beak Nose said from the ground, though he was hard to understand with his hands clamped over his nose to stem the blood loss. “And when the Butcher comes—”

He fell silent as I raised my foot as if to kick him. I didn’t need him to mention that the Butcher was interested in Maudlin on account of Tom. If she found that out, it was more likely we’d go looking for the Butcher ourselves. Better that we continued into the Paling Forest with the caravan.

I glanced over at Maudlin. “Seems they’re rather sore about the man I killed.”

“Ah, see there,” Maudlin said, giving me a knowing look. “This is why I’m always telling you not to go around killing folks, Garbhan.”

“You’ve never once said that to me.”

“I’m almost sure I have,” she said, tapping her chin. “Well, let it be said now. It’s not nice to go about killing folk.”

“I’ll take that under advisement.”

Glancing over my shoulder, I saw that the last of the wagons had rolled by.

“Now, then,” I said, pointing my sword at Beak Nose. “Let’s understand one another well and clear. Your captain started that fight. Not I. You know well that he was to blame. Assuming you didn’t make up this story about your boss, then you go back and tell him the truth of it. You tell him that you lot were to blame and to let it be.”

“Oh, please,” Maudlin said, rolling her eyes. “You’ve hurt his wee pride twice now. He’ll do nothing of the sort. More likely he’ll tell his boss that you ambushed the lot of them. Cowardly little skinks. Best you kill them and be done with it. Hurry along now.”

“Did you not just say…” I glanced over at Jodon, who shrugged, seeming as surprised as me. I turned back to Maudlin. “I have no desire to kill these men.”

“How boring,” she replied, then rolled her eyes. “And noble, I suppose. Let’s steal their horses!”

“Their horses?”

“Yes, their horses! Gods, how I hate it when you repeat what I sing. You sound like a dullard. Yes, Garbhan, I think we should relieve them of their mounts so that we may mount them ourselves. Lest you’re too prude even to mount a horse, that is.”

Jodon sighed. “She may have a point. If they truly work for the Butcher, they’ll certainly ride out to tell him of this. If they’re on foot, we might hold our head start.”

“Yes, that,” Maudlin said, nodding. “That is, of course, precisely what I was thinking. Good man.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “You just want a horse, don’t you?”

“Of course I do, you blasted fool. Have you ever had a horse? Lovely creatures. Besides, you reckon these louts take care of their beasts? Probably covered in lice and fleas. They’ll be better off with us, I tell it true. And you certainly owe Jodon for the trouble you’ve caused. A horse for each of us, and the rest to him.”

I couldn’t argue with her logic. Or Jodon’s. So I sighed and turned my attention back to the brigands. “Well, you heard the lady. We’ll be taking your horses.”

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The Paling Forest

It was a different sort of place, the Paling Forest.

At times I found it quiet and comforting. A forest seldom traveled by man. Secluded and away from all that hustle and bustle. Here there were no armies. No disease. Nor the stench of human filth. It was serene, in its way.

Other times, I felt as if I were being watched. As if all that talk of haunt was more than mere bluster. And with the trees so thick, they often blotted out the sun, leaving our trail shaded in shadow. In those places, it lived up to its name.

But I suspected it was an innocent forest.

Many among the caravan cast furtive glances about and spoke in hushed whispers, ever on edge. Jodon, for his part, remained solid and optimistic, though I suspected that may have been the posturing of a leader, for he, too, often cast about, seeking for signs of trouble.

Maudlin alone seemed unbothered.

For my part, I was more worried about this talk of the Butcher.

Jodon had explained.

The Butcher of Barlington was known, a name to be feared. There were rumors about where he'd come from, but it was Barlington where he'd earned his fame, as well as his name. That was a town some weeks south. A few years back, he'd risen up, building himself a little crew. Barlington, being a larger city, had itself several gangs already. They took exception. But not for long. He'd led a massacre, carving up his rivals. By the time he was through, they were unrecognizable. That was how he'd earned his

name. He killed all the gang leaders, and any who dared remain loyal to them. The rest he took under his own wing.

After he'd taken ownership of Barlington, he'd put his men on the roads. Began his expansion. They'd harass travelers and collect his taxes. Or they'd sell their services as mercenaries. Anything to pull in more piss pennies and silver pretties. It was rumored that even the king of this little nation feared him. Some said he dealt in the slave trade, too, though Jodon wasn't so sure about that. He *was* sure that folks spoke the man's name in whispers. There was plenty of fear regarding the Butcher, and Jodon had kept his caravan well clear of his territories. At least until now.

And there was the rumor about his dealings with Tom. Beak Nose's own words gave credence to that story, so it would seem it was more than mere rumor. The Butcher of Barlington wanted to find Tom of Bedlam, and anyone associated with him. That meant us.

Jodon figured Beak Nose had been bluffing about the whole thing, that he'd made up the story about working for the Butcher. I wasn't sure whether he was more concerned with convincing me or himself. I remained unconvinced.

Sure, Beak Nose wasn't too bright. A bit dopey, to tell it true. But the idea that they'd ridden all this way, hoping to bluff the caravan, simply by uttering a name… No, surely they weren't so daft. It was the price what bothered me. A bit of coin or goods, sure. The caravaners were peaceful sorts, and I had little doubt they had paid highway taxes to robbers before. But the demand for women? A payment in flesh? No, even dimwitted as he was, Beak Nose would have known the caravan would refuse. Therefore, if it had been a bluff, he would not have bothered. More likely he'd have simply ambushed us.

So, while most worried over haunts, I stayed worried over bandits.

We kept a constant guard for both.

Our days passed in an eerie quiet. Gone was the mirth and travel chatter. As we marched, the only sounds were those of the wheels turning, our feet stepping, and the sounds of the forest itself. Our nights weren't so jubilant, either. No tales were told around the fire. No songs were shared. I alone took out my instrument, and only late in the eve to play them all to sleep.

We kept our fires fueled through the nights, and Jodon doubled the guards around our perimeter. He put them in twos all around us so that none

would have to sit awake and alone through the witching hour in that dreary place.

I continued my lessons and more and more fresh faces joined in, seeking to be prepared. It wasn't so much for the bandits, I reckoned, or even for the forest itself. It was for fear of fear. There was something about having a sword and knowing how to use it that could help put the mind at ease. And certainly some ease was needed.

But there weren't enough swords to go around. New weapons were brought into the mix. Many had daggers, but most had carving knives. Several owned wood axes, mallets, or cudgels. There were pitchforks which pretended to be spears. Frying pans wielded as maces. I did my best to come up with tactics for each, treating them as the weapons they most closely related to.

Since tales and tunes around the fire had been suspended, we had more time in the evening to train. And more still joined us, until it was nearly the entire caravan.

We began to strategize battle plans. Jodon's idea, despite his claims that he didn't believe the Butcher was really after us. He reconciled the opposing views by pointing out that since so many members of the caravan were taking my lessons anyway, it only made sense I teach them something of soldiering tactics while they still had me. This was a poor deception, for there were a few former soldiers among the caravan, but none argued the point. Everyone was scared.

And if we indeed found ourselves set upon by bandits, then we needed a plan. I agreed.

So when we camped along the narrow road, thick with trees, we parked the wagons front to back on both sides of the path, leaving us a wide gap in the center. One was parked crossways at each end, creating a fortified encampment up and down the road. Jodon left it to me to determine where folks would stand, how they would defend their positions.

Most nights Jodon drove us onward nearly to dusk, trying his best to get us out and away from this strange place while ensuring our alleged pursuers stayed well behind us. If the Butcher were truly after us, then he and his men would be on horseback. Any distance we could keep between us was a boon.

So most nights we had to camp right on that ancient old road, for the forest was thick with trees on either side. There we would practice the first

tactic I mentioned, creating a massive rectangle of wagons. Occasionally, though, we were fortunate enough to come across a meadow or small clearing. When we did, Jodon would call a stop early, for there we could circle the wagons in a tight ring, allowing our would-be defenders to move from point to point much more quickly. Additionally we could set fires outside the perimeter, increasing our line of sight. Such a position also meant we needed fewer guards so more folks could get a good night's sleep.

Jodon didn't put me on the guard rotation, but I made a point of getting around at night, checking on each pair and spending a bit of time with them. If our travels during the day were muted, the guards posted at night were happy to chat. They believed me some great warrior, so I think my presence gave them comfort, which they sorely needed. Whatever creep could be felt in the forest by day, it was much heavier in the dark.

I had to admit…there *was* something about it.

Something chilling about that forest.

If it had no haunt, it still had certainly earned its name.

There were sounds occasionally, as there were in any forest, but these were…different. Strange enough to warrant mention. More than just twigs snapping or crows cawing. Especially at night.

I'd be standing there, taking in the cool breeze when… Was that laughter?

Other times, it could have been a child's sob.

I couldn't say, and the sounds were so infrequent. When they came, always it was with the wind. As if they rode on it. So quiet and so unexpected, I'd think it my imagination, that surely that whisper on the breeze was nothing more than a tree quaking. Or some critter roaming about in the night.

Still…I couldn't deny them.

And I wasn't alone.

That first day, a few of the caravaners made mention of them. The others had shrugged them off, though I can't say whether it was out of disbelief or a desire not to believe.

The following day, no one admitted to hearing anything strange. But by then, I'd heard them, too.

On the third day, folks opened up about it again, for there was little doubt we all had heard them.

Still, I figured it was likely just nerves. We were in a strange place of superstition, and likely being pursued by some awful bandits. There was stress enough to go around.

Jodon spoke to me about it in private.

“You have heard these sounds?” he asked, keeping his voice even.

I nodded in reply.

“Seems most have,” he continued. “I was wondering…”

“Yes?”

“I was wondering if you had spoken to Maudlin about them.”

This time I shook my head. As I’ve mentioned, Maudlin and I had spoken little since joining the caravan. Truth was, it hadn’t even occurred to me to ask her.

“Might you?” he asked. “Might you see if she can put our worries to rest?”

I didn’t think it such a good idea, but Jodon and his flock had been kind to me, so I nodded and sought her out. It went like this…

“Maudlin, have you heard the strange sounds coming from the forest?”

“Garbhan?” she said, taking me in. “Is that you?”

“Yes, of course.”

“I’d all but forgotten about you, since you don’t find me worth your time compared to these other fine folk. Why, I had even thought perhaps you’d left, that you’d fled from poor Maudlin.”

“Not until my debt is repaid.”

She gave me a wolfish grin. “But of course.”

I repeated my question. “Have you heard the sounds coming from the forest?”

“Sounds coming from the forest?”

“Repeating,” I replied. Couldn’t help myself.

“Only because it was a nonsensical question,” she said, rolling her eyes. “ ’Tis a forest, Garbhan. Have you met one which does not make sounds?”

“I meant the unnatural ones. Have you heard them?”

She blinked and looked at me as though I were a potato.

“The strange sounds,” I continued. “Sometimes it sounds like laughter. Other times…sobs.”

“Laughter comes when one feels joy,” she replied, all business. “Sorrow comes when one is sad. Do you think these feelings are just for us? Do you think such feelings are for you and me alone?”

“Well, no. But…”

“But what?”

“But the forest…”

“What of it? Can a forest not feel sorrow? Can it not feel joy?”

“I rather think not.”

“Well, therein lies your problem.”

“What?”

“Perhaps you should leave thinking for brighter minds.”

I made my way back to Jodon.

“What did she say?” he asked. “Anything that may lessen the worries of my people?”

“Yes,” I replied. “You can let them know she thinks I’m daft. They’ll probably find that quite amusing. A hearty laugh ought to lift their spirits. As to the strange sounds, no, Jodon, I don’t believe Maudlin will be much help.”

And so we continued on, a nervous caravan.

But we’d get answers soon enough.

Along with a good reason to be afraid.

A damn good reason.

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Trouble

Our first warning was a flock of birds.

They flew overhead, cawing as they fled. No strange occurrence, that, until a second flock, and of a different species, did the same. Then another. And another.

A sure sign something was amiss.

I rode my new horse up to the front where Jodon's wagon led the parade.

By the time I reached him, the forest had grown silent. An even darker omen.

"You see the birds?" he asked.

"Aye, and I hear the silence," I replied, eyes scanning.

"Trouble."

I glanced back at him, thinking it was a question, but no, his eyes roamed the trees as mine had. It was a statement.

Finally, he turned and looked at me. "Best we make camp here, yeah?"

I took in our surroundings. It just so happened that we were passing a meadow and the sun was drooping, its eye weighing heavily.

Here, the clearing was large enough we could circle the wagons and maintain a clear view of the tree-line. Of the two fortified positions we'd been practicing, this was the one we preferred. Better line of sight, better coverage for our archers and slingers, and a killing field to boot. In order to reach us, any foe would have to cross open ground. And within a circle, we could cover gaps and reinforce one another much more quickly than if we had to race up and down the rectangle we'd designed for the road.

Oh, yes, if we had to defend ourselves, we much preferred the meadow.

It gave us a solid defensive position against men, but offered nothing if the trouble were some haunt.

Jodon gave the word and the wagons began making their circle, just as we'd practiced. Fortunately, it seemed few had picked up on what the two of us had realized. Most hadn't noticed the birds, nor the following silence, so there was no panic. A few might have caught the note of urgency in Jodon's commands, but the majority assumed this was but another practice run. They were used to following his instructions.

Not one lost their cool. Not yet.

The pack master was at his best, directing folks where he wanted the wagons, ordering others to make ready the fires, and so on. No one questioned him. Not that they often did, but Jodon was a jovial sort, and sometimes, if he gave a direction and it was misunderstood, he'd take time to explain. On this eve, the caravaners took their marching orders in stride, especially as the unease began to spread.

I knew once the wagons were set, I'd have to jump in to ensure our defenders were in the right places. Until then, I had little role to play. So I gave the tree-line a quick study, looking for any sign of movement. When I as confident there was none, I sought out Maudlin.

While the others had worked, she'd found herself a spot on the ground where she was surrounded by an entourage of young girls. They were giggling and carrying on as I approached. It had become a common enough occurrence, but I still shook my head at the sight.

"Maudlin," I said, offering a little wave. "May I speak with you?"

"You *are* speaking to me, you donkey," she replied without looking up. Her companions found the comment quite amusing, but Maudlin, she was all focus, for as I approached, she plucked a flower from the earth and was considering which child to grace with it. Aside from the momentary laugh at my expense, the girls waited with bated breath for the outcome.

"May I speak to you privately, I meant."

"Ugh," she said, finally turning to roll her eyes at me. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

"And I apologize for the intrusion. It's important."

"It almost certainly isn't," she replied, choosing a girl at last. The young maiden lowered her head and Maudlin placed the flower in her hair while the others giggled. I might have expected the others to be jealous at not having been picked, but they showed naught but delight for their friend.

That was the way of caravan folk, or at least these. They'd started early, teaching their little ones to share.

"Just the same," I said, "I would appreciate a moment of your time."

"Oh, bother," she said, rising to her feet. "If you insist."

"I'm afraid I do."

She moved alongside me, brushing grass off her leggings. Her feet were bare, I noticed, and I wasn't sure what had become of her pretty red shoes.

"I swear, Garbhan," she said with a shake of her head, "I often wonder if it is not I who am indebted to you, love, and not the other way round."

"Not at all. It's just…" I paused and glanced over my shoulder, ensuring the little ones weren't eavesdropping. I needn't have worried. They were busying themselves hunting for more flowers and had no interest in the talk of grown folk. I turned back to Maudlin. "I think there's trouble ahead."

"So deal with it," she replied, as if the answer were obvious.

"It may not be so simple."

"It usually is. Don't overthink it, my hearty man-buck."

"But I don't know what sort of trouble it is."

"Then how do you know it's coming?"

"The birds," I said, motioning toward the sky.

"I see no birds."

"Precisely. They have fled. And now the forest grows silent. There's some sort of trouble brewing. I can feel it… Can feel it in my bones."

Much to my surprise, she reached up and patted my cheek, then looked deep into my eyes, studying me. It felt as if her gaze went right through me. "Your bones are not so old as to know the way of things. It is your gut which tickles with intuition. Not your bones. The gut is to be trusted on occasion, but never mistake it for the tale your bones would tell, for there lies truth for certain. And you would do well not to offend them, your bones. But this feeling? It is in your slimy guts, dear. Be it true? Maybe so. Maybe not. Why tell me?"

"Because…" I considered my words. "There is something…unnatural about this place. If it is a haunt of some kind, I thought…"

"There you go again." She gave my cheek another pat, but with a bit more force. Not quite a slap. "What have I told you about thinking?"

Ignoring her insult, I pressed on. "If it is a haunt of some kind, then I would seek your counsel above all others."

"Above all others?"

I stopped myself from pointing out that she'd repeated me. Instead, I replied, "Certainly over any other here."

"You believe I have some sway over haunts?"

"I think you are wiser than you let on. That…" I paused, realizing my poor choice of words as her eyes narrowed. "I mean to say… I think you are wise about such things. Certainly wiser than I."

"Garbhan, you are, as always, an absolute delight. Go and see to your trouble yourself, for it is yours and not mine."

"That's it?"

"Well, no," she replied. "I expect you to put it to rest, of course. That was the web I weaved, was it not?"

"What do you mean?"

She sighed. "Must I sing out every lyric for you? Who was it, do you think, who told the others of your prowess with a blade? Who was it who convinced them you were the right one to teach them? Why else would I have gone to the trouble, if you were not well-suited to ensure they knew how to defend themselves?"

"You… You planned for this?"

"Yes, of course. Don't look at me so. As if you are surprised by my prudence. Have you learned nothing in our time together?"

"But… You never saw me use my sword. You know nothing about me."

This time, her hands cupped either side of my face, holding my gaze to hers. "Garbhan, my daft little duckling, I know all."

I opened my mouth to reply, but one of her thumbs slipped over my lips.

"I knew well what trouble might follow us. I knew well that you were the one who could prepare these folks for it. What's more, is I know your history, though not the specific lines. But I could read it on your face, all the way back at Cuckoo Caroc's. You doubt me still? I know more of you than you know of yourself. I know your fears, love. And I know your doubts. You fear that you are some monster, all while also fearing that very same monster will not come to you when you have need of it. You doubt your worth. You doubt your value. You doubt you're a good man all while striving to be something better. Oh, yes, my dear Garbhan, I know you. I know you oh, so well. I chose you for a reason."

I stared back at her, scarcely able to breathe. All this time… All this time, I'd thought her addled. Some crazed woman dragging me on some mad adventure for no reason whatsoever. Yet here she was, speaking plain,

tearing through my veil. She put to words the very fears in my heart. She knew so much more than she'd ever let on, indeed.

"These caravaners have been frightfully fair to us," she continued. "I would be quite anguished if anything were to happen to them. And so it is you, Garbhan, who I have entrusted to protect them. To teach them. To make them ready. Now, you must do this last part for me. You must fight beside them. Lead them into battle, if needs must. Protect them. That is what I ask of you."

I opened my mouth and closed it again, realizing the weight of her words. The meaning.

It was a request.

One which would erase some measure of my debt.

I could but nod.

"There's a good lad," she said with a final pat on my cheek. "Off you go."

With that, she spun on her heel, rejoining the children at play. Back to picking flowers. Not a care in the world.

I stood, shocked.

She had seen right through me. All this time…

And she was right.

This was a moment of choice.

I could continue to let my fears and regrets drive me, or I could accept myself for who I was. I'd been trained to be a killer, and for my devil, I had been a monster. The beast had been born. There was no putting it down. No erasing it.

But did that mean it could only be for evil?

No.

Defending these caravaners had merit. Using my wicked skills for good was still good.

Oh, yes, Maudlin was right. She was quite right.

It was long past time for me to quit doubting myself.

In that single, shining moment, standing there in the forest, so much bustle around me, I came to understand something. It may seem a small thing for some, but for me, it was an absolute moment of clarity. A rejoining of the men I had been. The farm boy. The soldier. The killer. All could be one. They could be at peace with one another.

Because of her.

Because of her words.

She had known all along what ailed me.

And she had known how to fix it.

That night in Riddles Untold, I'd thought I had won our little game. Thought I had bested her. Outwitted her. No, even then, she'd been plotting. Planning.

It was so clear.

She hadn't been merely scheming. She'd been driving me toward this moment. Guiding me toward the answers I had so desperately sought.

It felt as though some great fog had cleared from my mind, as if a mountain of worry had been lifted off my shoulders, much like when Blackthorn had freed me from my Devil. But this time, it was Maudlin, and she had freed me from myself.

Head clear for the first time in… Well, in a very long time, I turned and made my way toward Jodon.

He'd not missed who I'd been speaking with.

"What did she say?" he asked, voice low. "Will she help us if it's some haunt?"

I shrugged. "Honestly, Jodon, I know not."

"Well, let us hope it is nothing, then, for I can't decide whether I prefer bandits or spirits, truth be told. If it is the bandits, we haven't the numbers. If it is a haunt…I know not what we'll do."

"Best be ready for both."

"We'll have to settle for one, lest you know something about fending off spirits?"

I shook my head.

"I thought as much. A few of the older folk… Well, some among us are from the old country, you understand? Some remember the way of things. They'll burn some smoke, make the signs, and say the words. We can but hope that will be enough. As for bandits, though, we are better prepared." He motioned toward the circle of wagons. "The bows and slings are ready, and I have several hearty lads on watch with them. Several others are gathering wood to make fires up and down the tree-line, so no one, or… thing, may sneak up on us."

"Just as we planned."

He nodded. "But, again, that only prepares us for bandits. If it's a haunt we face…"

“Right.” I gave the tree-line another scan. “Hopefully it’s neither.”
“Hopefully it’s neither,” he agreed.
It wasn’t neither.
Nor was it one as opposed to the other.
In the end…
It was both.

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The Butcher of Barlington

The sun had long abandoned its post, leaving only the moon and firelight to defend us. That was when the trouble finally came.

They appeared like wraiths, shadowed figures on the edges of the meadow, revealed only by those extra fires the caravaners had wisely lit around the tree-line. We were surrounded.

Not by haunts. Nor by ghosts or spirits.

Men. Brigands.

A silence fell over the camp as they made their presence known.

I might have expected a few. Ten or maybe fifteen. Hells, even twenty. There were more than that. Considerably more. Could have been a hundred or better. Well more than I would bother to count. They had raised a bloody army against us.

They began a slow march toward the wagon circle, ensuring we had a clear view of them. Ensuring we knew they had us ensnared.

Murmurs went up among our humble defenders. As I've said, the caravaners were hearty folk, but they were not soldiers. Not tempered for war. It seemed we were well and truly cooked.

I'd done all I could to prepare them. It would have to be enough.

Jodon, ever the experienced pack master, remained calm. His people had already been given their instructions, but he repeated them again, keeping his voice even. The noncombatants gathered the children and huddled nearest to the fire, staying in the center. A few saw after the animals, who'd also been kept within the circle.

Some made ready their bows and slings. Others took up their swords, daggers, chopping axes, hammers, or pitchforks. Pitchforks, which would

no longer merely play at being spears. On this night, they'd assume the role in earnest, as would that old frying pan turned mace.

We might not have had the weapons we needed, but we had a solid plan. That was what I reminded myself. We *had* a plan.

It would be down to the bows and slings to drop a few of the bastards as they rushed us, but I had no delusions about how many they could get. It wouldn't be enough. Once they rushed us, the missiles would claim a few, but then we'd be in that frying pan ourselves.

Maudlin sat by the fire, still playing with the children. That was just as well, for her presence seemed to calm them. And I could focus on the battle without having to worry over her safety. She was still my ward, after all.

I found a bit of wicked humor in the whole situation. Seemed, in the end, I had merely joined her just to be cut down. Just as I had feared from the start. So be it. At least I could die with a bit of peace in my mind. I was grateful for that much.

But the caravaners… They didn't deserve this.

I made my way to Jodon. "I have an idea."

He looked up at me, daring to show a little hope. "I'm listening, but speak quickly."

"We have to cut off the snake's head. That's our best chance."

He gave me a sharp nod. "But do you know which head that is?"

I glanced back at the brigands, who were slowly tightening their circle around us, not in any hurry. They were playing up their menace. And it was working.

"Shouldn't be hard to find out," I said, biting my lip. "Just make sure your people are ready with bow and sling."

"It will be done."

I marched toward the perimeter of wagons and called out into the night. "Welcome, friends. We've been waiting for you."

That statement, so simply made and without menace, brought them up short. Gave them pause.

A good start.

I regathered my courage and called out again. "Has the Butcher come himself, or is it my old pal Beak Nose who's leading this parade?"

There was a moment's hesitation before the reply came, but it came in the form of a hearty chuckle. It had also come from behind me, on the other

side of the circle. I turned and started that direction, stepping between the wagons so I might see the enemy general.

He was still chuckling when I laid eyes on him. Even by the light of the fire, I could tell he was a big man. Broad as a mule and likely as tall.

His voice rang out, raspy and baritone. “His snout does look something like a bird’s, don’t it? But I’d be daft to leave him in charge of anything, save for shoveling shit. But then… He doesn’t have any shit to shovel, does he? Not after you lot took his horse.”

“Are you the Butcher?”

“So I am. The Butcher of Barlington, they call me. And who might you be? ‘Beak Nose’ said the caravan was led by some old granddad. You don’t sound so old. Did the fellow turn to dust before we caught up?”

“The pack master is alive and well. He is here.”

“Then why do you speak for his caravan?”

“I do not. I speak for myself. And I reckon I’m at least part of the reason you’re here.”

“Ah, I see. You’re the one who killed my man?”

“So I’ve been told.”

“And do you have a name? One that is known?”

“Not known, no. I am no one.”

“Come, now,” the Butcher said with a hint of mirth. “We are all someone, are we not? It’s just that some of us are more someone than others. And you, it seems, have a strong sword arm. What is your name, friend?”

“Garbhan Duhallow.”

“Hmm,” he replied. “Seems you speak true, for I have never heard of you.”

“Then we are well met, for I only recently heard of you.”

This was met with silence, for the Butcher didn’t much appreciate it. Men of his ilk wanted their names to be known. I knew the type well enough. It was part of my plan. Wanted to get him off balance and keep him there.

Tone even, he said, “You’ll know my name good and well before this night passes. Rest assured.”

“And you shall know mine in equal measure, if you insist on folly.”

He snorted. “You, who have wronged me, would dare make threats?”

“I have not wronged you, Butcher. Nor have I made a threat. It was your man who started the fight. Should I have lain down and died for the sake of his pride?”

“You’ll certainly lie down and die for the sake of mine.”

“Then let it be so. You and me. If the issue is between us, then let us keep it as such. I will face you alone, man to man. These caravaners have caused you no harm.”

“No harm, he says? Yet they harbored fugitives from me.”

“Are you the law, then?”

“In these parts? You bet your arse I am.”

“Then again, I implore you: let us handle this between us. An honorable battle. There’s no reason for your men to die under a hail of arrows over a dispute that does not involve them. Or is the Butcher of Barlington afraid?”

Several gasps went up at that, many from the caravaners, some from his own people.

Just behind me, Jodon whispered, “You may be pushing this a bit far, lad.”

I waved him away.

It didn’t take long for the Butcher to reply. “To tell it true, boy, I have little interest in you or this bloody caravan. Is the woman called Maudlin with you?”

I glanced over my shoulder. At the mention of her name, Maudlin perked up. She rose slowly to her feet and started forward, slinking through the dark like an apparition. There was no mistaking her, though. Even in the shadows I recognized her glide. The way she moved, as if walking were dancing.

Turning my attention back to the Butcher, I called out, “And what business do you have with her?”

“It’s less about her and more about her man,” the Butcher replied. “Tom O’ Bedlam. He and I had some business, you see?”

“I do not see how any business you had with some bloke named Tom has anything to do with Maudlin.”

She came up just behind me then, her voice a husky whisper. “See what he knows, Garbhan. See what he knows of my Tom.”

At the same time, the Butcher said, “Well, you see, boy, that’s the thing about business. Sometimes it requires leverage. And if that whore is Tom’s, then I’d have her.”

“Why not just go after Tom, then, if you have some drama with him?”

“Because ole Tom has fast feet. He’s skipped off.”

“And you don’t know which way he went? Where he might have headed?”

The Butcher of Barlington replied with a chuckle. “You give yourself away, Duhallow. Seems that you also seek Tom. Popular man, he is. But no surprise, really. Everyone knows the story: that Mad Maudlin pursues Tom of Bedlam. And if you have her, I’ll be taking her. That much you can count on.”

I glanced over my shoulder at Maudlin. “I don’t think he knows where Tom went.”

“Keep him alive,” she said, voice cold. “Kill the rest, but save this man for me.”

I shook my head at her. “I don’t see that we’ll have much of a choice.”

“Make it so.”

“Maudlin… Would you rather find answers, or protect these caravaners who have treated us so frighteningly fair?”

She stared at me, biting her lip. I knew the answer, of course. There was nothing she wouldn’t sacrifice to find her Tom. So before she could answer, I went on.

“Would you sacrifice them for a mere chance this man might know something? If he knew where Tom went, he wouldn’t be bothering with us, would he?”

Her glare was as fierce as ever, but instead of replying, she reached down to my hip, withdrew my dagger, then turned away and slunk back off into the dark. I wasn’t sure what that meant, but I didn’t have time to worry about her. Or my dagger. Just hoped I wouldn’t end up needing it.

“Come, now,” the Butcher called. “Hand over the bitch.”

“Why are you so interested in her?” I asked. “Or rather, why are you so out of sorts with Tom that you would pursue Maudlin all the way out here? He must have done something awful.”

“Indeed. He committed the greatest crime of all. He came to me as a friend, and I treated him as such. A business partner, even. Then he stole from me and slipped away.”

“Must have been something valuable.”

“So it was. Something not easily replaced. It matters not, though, for to steal from the Butcher of Barlington is to invite his wrath. But that is no

business of yours, and I grow weary of this conversation. I care not for repeating myself, so let me say this for a last and final time: hand over the bitch. Then we might go lenient on the rest of you."

"Might, eh?" I replied with a chuckle. "That's some offer. Here is my counter: as I said before, we can settle this business between us, you and me. Why risk your men's lives? Or is the famed Butcher of Barlington too much a coward for a straight fight?"

Again he laughed. "Fair enough, boy. You think you have mettle enough for the Butcher, then come and let us see it. I was killing men before you ever tasted your mother's teet. I've bested over fifty blokes in single combat. And you think you'd give it a try? Well, I'll give you what you want, for it's been a long time since anyone was daft enough to challenge me as you have. I look forward to this."

"As do I," I replied. Then I leaned back and whispered to Jodon. "Make sure they're ready."

No time to dally, I stepped between the wagons and left the safety of their cover behind me, moving out onto open ground. There was a line of brigands ahead of me, but only one who mattered. The big burly bastard. The Butcher.

Would he be an honorable man? Would he face me alone?

Of course not.

I'd expected as much.

I'd only made it a few steps when he made the motion.

An arrow shot from the dark, but I was well and ready. My shield arm was up and the arrow plinked against steel. The head must have been of a softer metal, bronze even, for it shattered on impact.

I jumped back toward the wagons, keeping my shield up as two more arrows sailed in. Neither came close.

"Now!" I called.

The caravaners let fly. A hail of arrows and stones, all aimed at the Butcher.

It seemed he'd expected treachery in equal measure, for when I looked up, he had disappeared into the shadows. I could not see whether he'd been struck. I expected not.

I called out into the darkness after him, forcing a hearty bit of mirth myself. "The Butcher of Barlington? More like the Piss Pants Prince! This is your boss, lads? *This* is who you serve?"

“Kill them!” the Butcher called from the dark. “Kill them all!”

“Yes!” I called back, still cackling like a madman. “Come on, then! Come on over so we might greet you with arrow and steel. Come die while your Butcher hunkers down, not unlike a virgin maiden! Come and meet death while he pisses himself in the dark!”

The caravaners opened up in truth, then, firing arrows and slinging stones. Even those without ranged weapons began hurling rocks. There was no shortage of arrows returned as well, but we had the wagons to protect us.

Just behind me, Jodon sighed. “Shame that plan of yours didn’t work.”

“On the contrary,” I replied, flashing him a grin. “Went precisely as I imagined. Keep your folks firing and ensure they’re prepared to fight. The Butcher will come for me directly. I’ve wounded his pride. And Jodon… It won’t hurt my heart, nor my pride, if someone sticks him with an arrow or two before he gets here.”

Jodon did not seem convinced. That was all right. He needn’t be.

The caravaners might not have been warriors, but they made their way through life with very little. For traveling folk, that meant hunting. So while our numbers were fewer, and our bulk was ill-prepared for a melee, our ranged attackers were as quick as they were canny. The cries of injured and dying brigands was a sweet tune to my ears.

But as I said, there were far too many. No hope of keeping them at bay with missiles alone.

We’d have to fight up close.

That was all right. We had a plan for that, too.

It had been Jodon’s idea to build a battle strategy, but this next little bit was mine alone, and I was quite proud of it.

It went like this…

As the enemy closed in, racing toward the gaps, they found a few surprises. First, we had tied ropes between the wagons, low to the ground, just about ankle height, and nearly impossible to see in the dark.

Especially with all the clutter we had boxed in around them.

Trunks, chairs, logs, and other bits of junk had been tossed about in those gaps. Not enough to stop someone from coming through, but certainly enough to be a menace. If they made it past those, then they’d find our tripping ropes.

We'd also stuffed clutter beneath the wagons, in case any of them got clever and tried to crawl under.

But what, then, when they got past the clutter and ropes?

Our most proficient melee fighters waited at the other end of the gaps. These I had identified through our many training sessions. Working with them day after day, I knew who had the skill, and more importantly, who had the heart. These wielded swords or chopping axes. They were our vanguard, the front line of our defense. Their job was to keep the enemy out of our encampment.

The rest, though?

They were gathered behind our front-line warriors, ready with pitchforks, shovels, and long sticks. Their role was simple enough. As enemies closed in on the defender in front of them, they would use their long weapons to jab around, or right over the shoulder of their comrade. We didn't expect our "spearman" to count for much killing, but hoped they'd harass, annoy, and slow down are oncoming foes.

As the enemy navigated the clutter, the tripping rope, and being prodded at by makeshift spears, that front warrior, the one with the sword or ax, could hopefully make quick work of them. Certainly they'd have an easier time. That was the hope, anyway.

We had these little groups spread out across every gap, evenly balanced, one sword or axman, with a minimum of three spearman behind them. Within each group, everyone knew who was second in line to take over for the primary defender, if they were injured or fell.

Our best archers were to continue loosing arrows.

Additionally, we had a few experienced fellows, myself included, who were supposed to move around and jump in anywhere it looked like we might be in trouble. At least, I had intended to be a part of that group. Now that I'd provoked the Butcher directly, someone else would have to assume my role.

I decided it could be the entire group whose gap I was currently blocking. I ordered them to drop back and assist elsewhere, but to keep an eye on me in case I fell. Then someone would have to cover the hole.

May not have been wise for me to take a gap on my own, but I was better suited for it than anyone else, and that would allow those other four to spread out and reinforce other places.

Plus, this was the same gap where the Butcher knew I had been. I didn't want him to have any trouble finding me. I didn't know whether I could handle him, and feared it likely I could not, but who else was there to challenge him?

Maudlin's words had stuck with me.

And if anyone here could handle the Butcher, it was that monster who had spent a year doing a devil's work, that same one I had feared would not be there when I needed him, just as I feared living alongside him. No more. We were one, my monster and me.

While I waited, I had plenty of brigands to warm up on.

The first of them closed in, screaming mad and holding his sword too high above his head.

The tripping wire got him.

He fell forward, eyes full of surprise as he tumbled toward my outstretched blade. Not wanting my sword stuck in the pig, I rolled my wrist and sliced upward across his throat as he fell.

Unfortunately, his legs came down on the tripwire, ruining the surprise for his friends.

The next charged in about the same.

No fighter, this one.

I dispatched him quickly enough and booted his dying corpse back into the next in line. Unprepared to catch his mate full-on, the one behind him dropped his defenses long enough for me to leap forward and skewer his neck.

That was the problem with brigands. They often lacked discipline. Too often they simply outnumbered and bullied their opponents. Some simply weren't prepared for foes who fought back.

The next wasn't so brash.

A canny fighter, this one.

He came in cautiously, holding up the line behind him. That was all right. I certainly wasn't in any hurry. I had all night.

He made a few decisive moves, jabbing here, a little feint there. Nothing I hadn't seen before. Nothing that caught me unprepared. Can't say the same for him, though. He certainly seemed ill-prepared to catch my shield with his teeth. Finishing him then was easy.

After watching four of their friends die, the shadowed forms waiting for their turn paused, likely arguing about who should rush the gap. It was only

large enough for one man at a time, and I was waiting on the other side.

To tell it true, I appreciated the respite. Not that I was taxed, but it gave me a chance to see how the others were faring.

One quick head swivel and I knew all I needed.

We had held.

The night was still young, but so far…we had held.

That was all that mattered.

None had broken through.

A few gaps down, Anen, that same burly man who'd told the story of Calian Tree-Breaker, held the gap, his big ole hammer as his weapon. He seemed to be having no trouble.

Brecc was behind him, wielding one of those pitchfork spears. That was for the best. I feared he wasn't ready for the shit just yet.

Each of Jodon's sons held a gap. I'd not wanted to place the pack master's own boys in harm's way, but they'd hear none of it. Nor would Jodon. They were among the best warriors in caravan and that had come as no surprise, considering how tough their old mum and pops were.

Jodon himself was directing traffic, sending reinforcements wherever they might be needed.

Nell oversaw the injured with the help of a few elders. There were but a few thus far.

In fact, it seemed only one gap had been pressed, and to my surprise, it was Maudlin who had jumped in to hold it.

She had the dagger she'd taken from me in one hand and another in her other hand. Didn't know who she'd stolen that one from. Didn't much matter, either. What did matter was the smattering of bodies around her feet. She'd gotten a respite, too, for it seemed the bandits at her gap were no more interested in trying their luck than the ones in mine.

That surprised me.

Not that she was a fierce scrapper. That was no shock at all. That she had jumped in, though? Yeah, that caught me off guard.

All in all, we had done well thus far.

Keeping the bandits out of the center was the key. If even one gap fell, they would race in, and we'd been in real trouble.

We just had to hold the gaps…

That was all.

Just as I dared to have a smidgeon of hope, my fears and hopes were proved true.

The Butcher of Barlington came.

And he came for me.

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Garbhan's Stand

The Butcher arrived without warning or fanfare.

There was to be no more foreplay between us.

He hit the gap like a bull charging in, barreling right past his men.

He swung with such speed I couldn’t even tell what it was he wielded. My shield arm came up and steel thundered against steel, the impact such that I was forced back a step.

That was not good.

If he pushed me back even a step, he, or his men, could slip through and surround me. Worse, they could race into the camp. We couldn’t afford to lose a single gap. If they made it through, it would all be over in moments.

I wouldn’t allow it.

Could not allow it.

I had to make this stand.

I had to.

You see, this…

This *was* my plan.

The very reason I had provoked the bastard.

I may not have been a clever man, but I understood the hearts of men. I understood brigands, men like this Butcher. I’d known plenty of the sort when I was soldiering. They were bully boys at heart. Bully boys, but with a bit of bite.

It’s like I said before. Some folks say bullies are all bark and no bite. That is a lie. Some bullies have plenty of bite, but it’s just that… Well, they’re cowards at heart, aren’t they?

A fool like Beak Nose, he became a brigand because he was too daft to do anything else. If he'd ever had foibles, he'd cast them aside for greed and desire. In such a simple mind, it wasn't a complex thing. He wanted coin, drink, and women. Taking those things was easier than earning them, especially with a strong crew to back him.

The Butcher, though?

Now, here was a different sort of coward.

Wise enough to lead.

Wicked enough to win.

A man like the Butcher knew well what he was doing, or so he might have thought. In the beginning, he'd have been a dog with plenty of bite. A nasty fellow who could scrap with the best of them, and he had a head on his shoulders, too. Figured he'd take what he wanted and force others to bend their knee.

But therein lay his folly.

See, when he began, he had nothing to lose. No fear.

But once he wrapped his hand around a little wealth, he cried for more. And when more came, he cried for more still.

That was the trap.

For the more he gained, the more he had to lose.

As his power grew, so did his fear.

Power and cowardice, forever inbreeding.

That was what I'd gambled on.

It was the very thing I'd tried to explain to Brecc, but with even greater stakes, for though the Butcher of Barlington was feared throughout the land, the fear he held in his heart had to be greater still, for he had so much to lose.

Yes, I'd known he wouldn't fight me one-on-one. For why would he risk it?

No, his plan had been to sit back and let his men have a go at us. He'd have merely watched and directed, like a fat general. Once they'd broken our circle and taken down our archers and slingers, then, mayhap, he'd have waltzed in and slain a few, just to keep up appearances.

I couldn't allow that. Couldn't allow him to sit back and direct traffic. He might have been a fine general. That would have done us no good at all.

Of course, there was also the possibility that he was the sort of depraved sad sack who lusted for violence. Were that the case, then he might have

planned to join the charge all along. But then I couldn’t have known which gap he would charge. That posed an even greater risk.

I had to ensure he joined the fray, just as I had to ensure I knew where he’d be.

I had succeeded.

My bigger hope, of course, was that one of our archers would have tagged him.

No luck there.

But my words to the pack master had been true.

My plan had gone precisely as I had intended.

I’d landed the first blow with my words.

Now the question was whether I could land the next, and this one with my sword.

Lowering my shoulder, I drove back into his bulk, blocking the path. This wasn’t a duel, and such a move put me at risk, but I couldn’t give up that precious ground. Couldn’t let them through.

The Butcher swung again, hammering my shield, and finally, through the dim light, I caught sight of his weapon.

He wielded a massive, two-handed meat cleaver.

Seemed he was keen on living up to his name.

I’d never faced a man with such a weapon, but treated it as I would a battle ax. That is to say, I would rely on my shield arm to protect me and try to sneak in a quick jab when he was off balance.

But the Butcher was never off balance.

He was a powerful man, and damned quick for his bulk.

I could see why his men feared him. And the caravaners, too. Could see how he’d earned his name, though I’d warrant he’d built his reputation with an ax before he’d ever picked up a cleaver. I’d been right to treat it the same, for that was precisely how he wielded it.

And he had the skills of a blasted axman for certain.

I am not ashamed to admit that the Butcher of Barlington was my better.

He was a bonny bastard, I had to give him that much. Certainly the stronger of us, and despite the weight of his weapon, he matched me for speed, too.

And it was a damned certainty he was more skilled.

That became clearer and clearer as the fight wore on.

I saw no openings. No advantages.

His cleaver struck like lightning, the blows against my shield as heavy as thunder.

In war, I'd faced many foes with an ax. Those who wielded them well were a sight to behold. Terrifying. To tell it true, I'd rather face a skilled swordsman than a skilled axman any time.

I had seen plenty of men die, thinking they had but to charge in after a big swing to catch their opponent off balance. Believing their sword gave them the advantage of speed. It was not so, for the butt of an ax could strike as quickly as a dagger. It was a trap. An axman would make a big swing that was sure to miss, inviting the swordsman in, only to smash their nose or pop their skull with the arse of the weapon.

I didn't bite the Butcher's bait.

Didn't fall prey to his invitations.

But that also meant I saw no openings. No chance to strike back.

Again and again his cleaver hammered down on my shield.

All around us, people screamed and cried out. I could no longer tell which were theirs and which were ours.

Around us, the battle raged on, and there was nothing I could do to help the caravaners, save to keep this one beast at bay.

But to tell it true, I scarcely spared them a thought. There was no time.

Again, it was like I had told Brecc. My mind was clear, my focus entirely on the motions and nothing more. For even a single slip of thought, to have paused even long enough to worry over my opponent's prowess… That would have been enough.

And still the cleaver came on.

I could but defend. Then defend again. And again. And again.

Always, my sharp mind hunted for that opening…

There was none.

Except…

A flash of inspiration hit me.

It struck just as fast and hard as that bloody cleaver.

I knew how I might win.

There was but one way.

It wasn't skill or bravery that would see me through, but, as was often the case, a bit of brains.

Well, that and a bit of patience, too.

You see, the Butcher of Barlington may have been bonny, and he may have been my better, but he was also a damned fool.

If you know anything about weapons and warfare, then you may have guessed at his mistake.

I was no blacksmith, but in the army, I'd learned a thing or two about weapon craft. That was thanks to my old captain, who'd harped on about how it wasn't the bravest or best fighters who won, but more often the wisest. Those who understood the game and could keep their wits about them. So it was that he'd dragged our motley crew to the forges and had us take some lessons from the blacksmith.

Back then, it had seemed a trifling thing. Something to pass the time. Our job was to fling swords about, not to make them. What difference could that make?

Quite a lot. And all these years later, that same knowledge came to save my life against the most brutal opponent I had yet faced.

You see, a sword or a battle ax is tempered for abuse. It is carefully forged as such, beaten and hammered into something hard and durable. Has to be, for its lot is to be bashed against shields and clanked against steel.

A meat cleaver, though? It need only to hold up against bone and flesh. It is hammered and shaped, sure, but not tempered for warfare.

The Butcher of Barlington was an axman.

But he'd traded his ax for a cleaver.

It was vanity.

And vanity was, and will forever remain, the deadliest of killers.

I don't know how many times he struck my shield, but I can say that my arm was bloody tired and my shoulder ablaze from the abuse.

At times he'd try to hook the beard over the top of my shield, but I was canny enough to avoid it. That was yet another dirty trick of an axman.

But here was another flaw in his weapon. The meat cleaver didn't have enough of a beard to properly hook a shield, so even if he'd managed, I'm not sure things would have worked out for him.

In the end, I had but to wait. Just had to keep defending. The opportunity would come.

I waited for it and knew the sound as soon as I heard it.

Music to my ears.

The wretched wail of shattered steel.

I reacted instantly.

Can’t say which surprised the Butcher more: that his silly weapon gave up on him, or that my sword lanced his gut.

He was certainly more focused on his cleaver, staring at its broken head, such that he didn’t even react when my sword tagged him.

Only when I drew it back did he finally look down and see.

To my chagrin, it didn’t do him in.

Instead, he roared and lowered his shoulder, seeking to run me over flat. He wasn’t completely lost in his rage, though, and his eyes stayed tuned to my sword arm.

That, too, was a mistake.

For now I had the advantage and could go on the offensive. And I still had my trusty old shield.

Turning my arm over, I punched out, slamming the ridge between his eyes.

That staggered him.

My sword found his groin, then, seeking that big vein.

I couldn’t say whether I struck it or something fouler, but he hobbled back, eyes wide, only to receive another shield blow to the head.

That one… That one finally did the trick.

He fell back into the arms of his men, who seemed more shocked and horrified than he was.

“The Butcher has fallen!” I shouted, right in their faces. But it wasn’t for those men so much as their mates, who were still trying to kill my friends. I tried again at the top of my lungs. “The Butcher of Barlington has fallen!”

His men dragged him away into the dark and all around me the sounds of battle eased.

I’d done it.

By the gods, I’d actually bloody done it.

I’d cut off the snake’s head.

As I stood there, breathing my ragged breaths, scarcely believing what I had done, Maudlin’s voice spoke into my ear. “See, my daft little duck? I told you I chose you for a reason.”

I turned, staring at her, still too breathless to speak.

Her eyes narrowed. “Though I am rather annoyed with you. Didn’t I tell you to keep him alive? I had questions for him.”

I ignored her, turning my focus back on the retreating brigands.

I had killed their leader.
Now the question was whether that would be enough.
It wasn’t, of course.

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Spirits Hot As Lightning

My victory over the Butcher offered us a brief respite, but I feared it wouldn't last.

I used the opportunity to check on the others.

I didn't like what I found.

The caravaners had held. By the gods, they'd somehow held.

But we had not come out unscathed. This would not be a joyful accounting.

Lives had been lost, each of them known to me.

The first I saw struck me the hardest.

Brecc.

He lay on the ground a short distance away, dead eyes staring up at me, as if pleading, begging that I undo what had been done.

I could not.

Many dead lay around him. Most were bandits.

His sword was still clutched in his hand, the blade covered in crimson. He'd gone down fighting. By the look of it, he'd held his own.

That did little to comfort the heaviness in my chest. Did little to ease my weary mind.

I could read the battle by the lay of bodies, something I'd learned across many battlefields.

Brecc and a few others had been behind Anen. The big man's backup.

He, too, had fallen. Not dead yet, but I could see he was rasping out his final breaths. Already his eyes were closed, his entire chest covered in crimson. One of the caravaners was seeing to his wounds, but it was a futile gesture. He'd join Brecc in the afterlife in moments. No more would he tell

the tale of Calian Tree-Breaker, but mayhap, if the gods were so kind, he might see his old pack master again soon. Mareen, too.

I hoped that were true.

I hoped, too, that the old dog from the story would be there as well. As close to a pleasant thought as I could manage.

Anen had clearly given the brigands something to ponder.

In the end, though, they'd gotten him.

Brecc, it seemed, had drawn his sword and taken his place, holding back the horde.

Pride and shame.

Both hit me like a tidal wave.

Pride that Brecc had done his part, that he'd kept his promise to the last, drawing that blade only in the defense of others, and that what I'd taught him might well have been the difference between life and death for us all. For surely if he had not acted as he had, then the bandits would have broken through.

Shame, too, though, for if I had not given him those lessons, if I had not taught him how to wield that bloody sword he still clutched… Would he have jumped in as he had? Or would he have hung back and be yet breathing?

Sadness and fury.

These hit me, too, but they were of the same ilk. No contradiction there.

That Brecc had died and I yet lived…

He was a good man, was Brecc. The sort we needed more of in this cruel world. The sort of man I wished I could have been. As I've said, there weren't many years between us, but they had been so differently lived. I wished I could have been like him. I wished I could have had his innocent charm. Certainly he was more deserving of life than the damned fool who'd raced about waving a sword and cavorting with devils.

Yet there he was, dead by a brigand's blade, and me still breathing.

Hardly seemed fair.

Nor was it.

It wasn't fair that a single life had been lost among these brave souls. Yet as I turned in a slow circle, taking in the camp, I was sickened by just how many had been.

So many dead, and for what?

The caravaners had put up a fight, though. Damn, but they had put up a fight.

Problem was…

I wasn't at all convinced we were through.

Plenty brigand bodies littered the meadow, but plenty still stood. Killing the Butcher had taken the wind from their sails, but they weren't gone. And they still outnumbered us.

They'd regathered by the tree-line, out of the range of our archers. They stood huddled in a mass, talking among themselves.

"What do you think?" Jodon asked, coming to stand alongside me. His eyes were weary, but his chin was held high. He wore a brave face for his people, and I was proud of him for it.

I shook my head. "I know not. If it were an enemy army, I'd say there's a chance they'll retreat. But here I cannot know who'll take charge or what they'll decide."

"You think they'll attack again?"

"I cannot say, Pack Master. They've lost their leader and a good few men, but…"

"But they still outnumber us. And they may want their losses to count for something. If they leave us in peace and word of this spreads… If people find out they were beaten by a caravan…"

I nodded.

"You sowed a seed of doubt, though," he said, giving me a pat on the shoulder. "That was well done. And we certainly gave them something to consider. They must have thought us easy prey at the start, but here we are, still standing."

"Not all of us," I said, not meeting his gaze.

"No. Not all of us. But hear me well, Garbhan: you cannot put this wickedness on yourself. Carry no blame, my friend. It is not your burden to bear."

I turned to face him then. "I brought this down on you."

He shook his head. "No, you did not. That is a falsehood, and don't you dare let yourself buy it, not for a moment. For could I not claim the same? Could I not stand here and take that blame upon myself? No, no. Better that we place it where it belongs, and that's right over there with them. You did not lead them to us. You did not choose this battle. On the contrary, you did all you could to prepare us. If not for that…"

I forced a nod, hearing the wisdom in his words. I just wished my heart could hear it as well, for it did seem that I was to blame. Had I not killed that man in the tavern… Yet Jodon was right. My intellect couldn't deny it, even if my heart argued. I had not started that fight, nor had I started this one. The deaths weighed heavily on me, though, and I feared more would come to weigh me down further.

The brigands made their decision.

They started forward again, a new leader at the head of the pack. His voice called out to us. "It's like this, then. You caravan folk have put up a right proper fight. Good on you. Truly. You have our respect. But we didn't come all this way to walk off empty-handed. Might be you killed our boss, but you are bloodied and beaten, too. You can't hope to stand against us."

Jodon called back. "Make your offer and be done."

The new gang leader stood silent for a few moments, his shadowed form staring at us from across the meadow.

"Fair enough, Grandad. Here it is: give us your coin. Give us your supplies. And give us the one who calls himself Garbhan Duhallow. We must have him. The one who killed the Butcher cannot be allowed to walk free. I'm sure you understand. We must save face. Agree to this and we'll leave you in peace. We'll make no claim on your women, for we know you'll fight to protect them. We'll not take your children to sell as slaves, for surely that'll only end in more bloodshed. And we'll kill no more of your men nor burn your wagons. You can go on. Continue on your merry way. Our business will be done."

I felt a sense of unease. My life wasn't worth so much. Certainly it would be worth the trade. To prevent more bloodshed? Oh, yes, it would be worth the trade.

Yet…was it selfish that I didn't wish to die like this?

Or was I more worried that I would find out the caravaners were not so hearty after all? Did I fear they would gladly trade me away for their own salvation?

And wouldn't that be fair, if the guilt I carried were a true thing? Would it not be fair?

It mattered not. I was not a clever man, nor a philosopher of any sort, but I understood well the position we were in. If they attacked, everyone would die. Or worse.

No, we could hardly trust the brigand to keep his word, but my sword alone was not worth so much.

I turned to Jodon, keeping my voice low. “Accept. It’s your only hope.”

He opened his mouth to reply, but before he could, another voice spoke up.

It was Nell’s.

Turning, I saw the elderly camp matriarch had given up patching wounds and had picked up a bloodied pitchfork instead. Her voice rang out so all would hear. “Eat shit, you whoreson! You’ll not be taking any of ours. Bugger off or come and die!”

“Damn straight!” called another man.

“Garbhan is one of us!” cried a woman’s voice.

Others joined the chorus, all shouting back at the brigands. All defiance. All in my name.

I stood speechless, rooted in place, mortified by the gratitude swelling in my chest. They could have ended their trouble right then, just by giving me up. But…

“And so you see,” Jodon said, his hand coming to rest on my shoulder, “whatever blame you choose to carry, it is not a blame we have given you. And if you choose to carry it, then consider it a theft, for it was never yours.”

I bit my lip and nodded.

Finally, the pack master motioned for everyone to quiet down. When they had settled, he responded to the brigands himself, as our leader. “It would seem you do not understand the ways of the road, friend. Of us traveling folk. I would gladly give you coin and wares so that we might know peace. But one who joins us is part of us. We cannot give up one of our own. It is not our way.”

“Then you will all die together,” the gang leader said. “You can take your foibles straight into the dirt with you, old man. Something for the carrion birds to pick at. Or you can see reason and do as I have said. Last chance.”

“You have already been given our answer. There is naught left but to fight, if you persist.”

“Well, I hope it’s worth it to you, Grandad.”

“I hope the same for you, lad,” Jodon replied, a bit of steel in his voice. “For it will not be our bodies alone that feed carrion birds. Many of you

will join us, have no doubt."

"We shall see," the gang leader said.

But as they spoke, I noticed something…strange.

It was behind them, back in the trees. A soft glow.

I thought it merely some trick of light, something from the moon, or the fires burning so bright. Some trick of reflection. Mayhap my weary mind conjuring illusion. Simple delusion.

But…no.

There was something else, too.

Their argument had all but drowned it out, but as they finished, I could hear it more clearly.

Those strange sounds from before.

The melancholy sobs that seemed to come from nowhere.

Those tittering laughs that carried on the breeze.

They were all around us now.

For a moment I thought for certain it was my imagination, but as I glanced about, taking in faces around me, I realized they heard it, too.

A sharp cry sounded from among the brigands.

I looked up to see them turning around, the cry coming from the back of their huddle, very near where that strange light continued growing brighter.

There were gasps and shouts, cries of alarm.

Another bluish light came to life just behind them. And then another.

The first, though… It had taken shape.

The shape of a man. Or a woman.

Couldn't be sure which, but that glowing apparition… It had form.

Looked like a person.

A person made of pure light.

I watched in horror as it reached for one of the brigands.

The man stiffened and screamed as it took him into its embrace, hugging him like a long lost lover.

And then the brigand, he… He came apart.

Where once there had been a man, now there was just…

Dancing light.

As if he had been shattered and made into the stars above.

Or reshaped into a great swarm of summer glow-bugs.

The little lights floated upward and spread apart, filling the trees with their glow.

“What in all the hells?” Jodon asked, voice quivering.

I tried to reply, but found no words. They were lost to me.

“Spirits,” Nell said, her voice shaky, too. “They’re bloody spirits. And… By the gods, Jodon, they’re melting away their flesh.”

“Like lightning,” Jodon replied, breathless. “Gods…”

More of the human-like haunts bled from the forest, reaching for the brigands.

Each time a spirit touched a man, he was pulled in, screaming, to be hugged and shattered.

More stars floating into the sky.

The brigands tried to flee, tried to run. But the haunts were faster.

They swarmed them.

I watched in horrid wonder as Beak Nose—at least I was pretty sure it was him, judging by the length of his snout—was wrapped up and caressed by a pair of those glowing arms. He, too, fell apart and became nothing but stardust.

More and more of them fell.

More and more apparitions floated in from the forest.

There were cries from the caravaners and I turned to see that the haunts were coming out of the trees all around us. They weren’t just attacking the brigands, but circling the wagons as well.

By the time I turned around again, the last of the brigands had fallen, his screams cut off as he was dismantled. Naught but stars drifting through the meadow.

And then it was just us.

Us and spirits.

We stood rigid.

Terrified.

Speechless.

The only sounds in the night were of those strange voices, our own heavy breathing, and the crackling of the fires.

There was nothing we could do.

No way to fight such…beings.

This was it, then.

It had all been for naught.

All those lives lost… And more still to come.

We were helpless.

Doomed.

“Hmm,” Maudlin’s voice said from somewhere just behind me. I hadn’t even heard her approach. “Must have smelled the blood.”

“What?” both Jodon and I asked at once.

The rest of the caravaners were packed in tight, hugging the campfire as the monsters drew nearer and nearer. With us surrounded, they were in no hurry. Didn’t have to chase us like they had the brigands. They could take their time with their cruel business. Could savor turning us into stardust.

“Garbhan,” Maudlin said, tone bored. “Be a dear and play me a tune, will you?”

I turned, blinking at her.

Her face held no jest.

I thought it must be some cruel joke, that she was taking the piss out of me, even then, when we were all about to die. Here were these haunts, stalking our camp, prepared to turn us into glow-bugs, and she wanted me to play her a tune. As if she needed something to pass the time.

It was madness.

But another thought occurred to me then.

Would I rather die with my sword in my hand or my chin on my violin?

The answer came quickly enough.

I pitched my sword and shield to the ground and raced to where I’d left my things, quickly unsnapping my case. There was no time to worry over tuning, nor to fuss about. I simply took up my bow and began to saw the same sorrow-laden tune I played to lull her to sleep.

While the caravaners stared blankly at our oncoming death, I played, and Maudlin…

Maudlin stepped out from the circle of wagons and strolled…

No, not strolled. She danced. She danced right toward them.

She moved slowly and methodically, yet seemingly at random. A dance as I’d never seen, her arms and legs fluid, constantly in motion as she twirled about.

It was beauty.

And it was grace.

Her form, dancing among those floating stars, which had once been men.

The haunts drew up short.

As if they were watching her. As if they, too, were enchanted by her movements.

A voice, sounding like so many children, called out in chorus. “Who is this who would dare approach us? Who is this who would dance for us beneath the moonlight?”

Maudlin came to a stop, just a step from the nearest of them, within arm’s reach.

She stared straight into its glowing face, as bold as ever.

“I am called Maudlin.”

It wasn’t quite a gasp, but near enough, and it rang out through the haunts.

“Maudlin,” the voices called, the word repeating like a dying echo.

The haunt nearest took a step back from her. They all did.

“You are her?” the voices asked, a hint of hesitation in their tones. “You are the one called Mad Maudlin?”

“Yes,” she replied, and began to dance once more.

The spirits drew back further.

“Why have you come? Why are you here? Why have you trespassed into our forest?”

It were as if…

As if they feared her.

It was hard to fathom, having seen what they’d done to the brigands, yet I couldn’t deny there was a tremble in their many voices. They were afraid.

The spirits were afraid of Maudlin.

For the first time, it struck me, pure and true…

We had not come to the Paling Forest by accident.

It was also then, for the first time, I truly came to appreciate her brilliance. Her deviousness.

I had thought it a mere whim, her signing us on with the caravan. That she may have been bored by my company. But no…

This had all been her design.

This, our destination all along.

She had planned to come here, to seek out these very spirits.

Her next words confirmed it.

“I have come so that you may guide me,” Maudlin said, still twirling. “So that you may show Maudlin the way. Do you know what I desire?”

“No.”

“Aw, but do not feign innocence, my dears. I can read the lies of the dead just as easily as those of the living. Speak naught but truth.”

They hesitated.

The bloody spirits hesitated.

“You will… You will find what you seek to the east.”

“This is already known to me. You know well what I ask.”

“We know…”

“Then speak.”

“We mustn’t!”

“Oh, but you must, my pretties.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Please! Do not make us! For you know the peril. You know what he seeks.”

“I do. I know well. Yet I would have an answer. Has he gained the knowledge he requires?”

There was a long pause, as if the spirits were contemplating.

Finally, they said, “Yes. He has acquired the knowledge.”

Maudlin let out a heavy sigh then, as if she’d been holding her breath.

The spirits held their peace.

Moments passed, and I got the sense that Maudlin had something else she wished to ask. Something she was hesitating to put to words.

“Your questions have been answered,” the spirits said at last, as though they couldn’t stand the silence. Or maybe they just wished to be away from her. Mayhap both.

“I have another.” It was Maudlin’s voice now which trembled. “Does he… Does he speak of me? Does he have need of me?”

“Oh, Maudlin,” the voices said, their words laden with sorrow. “Yes, he speaks of you. Of course he speaks of you. So very often. Wishes you were with him, so he does.”

Maudlin let out a cry then, but not one of pain. No, this was pure, uncorked joy. Triumph, even. She laughed. And then she cried, tears of joy and hearty chuckles in equal measure. As if this news were the happiest she’d ever heard.

The spirits waited her out.

“You may go, then,” Maudlin said with a wave of her hand, as if she were a queen dismissing her servants.

“Thank you, Maudlin,” the voices replied. “In the east, you will find what you seek.”

“Worry not, my dears, for I shall certainly find it.”

“That is…what we fear.”

And then they said no more.

The spirits faded as they slunk back into the forest, their glow diminishing until they no longer held shape, mere glowing lights as before. And then, at last, they were simply gone.

All that remained were the bits of stardust, still floating through the air around us.

Maudlin stood as she was for a time, but so did we all. The night was deathly silent, save for the crackling of the fires.

After a few moments, she glanced back over her shoulder at me, scowling. “Garbhan! Whatever are you doing? Who told you to stop playing?”

I resumed sawing strings.

Maudlin resumed her dance.

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Bodies, Graves, and Memories

"It is all right, Garbhan."

I turned to see that it was Jodon who'd approached. Lost in my thoughts, I hadn't noticed him.

He'd come with an answer to a question I had not asked.

I stood over the graves of the fallen. The caravaners.

With the morning light, we'd dug their graves in the meadow, burying them deep beneath the soft dirt. Deep enough that no critters would find them. The brigands, though, the ones who died before their mates had been turned into stardust, we dragged their corpses to the edge of the trees and left them to rot. That included the Butcher. They deserved nothing better, so far as I was concerned.

But the caravaners…

"It is our way," Jodon said, breaking through my thoughts again.

I turned to face him then. "No markers, though? No way for people to know. No way…"

My words fell away as he shook his head.

"We are the people of the road," he explained. "We do not put down roots as other folk do. We do not visit the places of our dead. It is merely utility, this act of burying them. For though their bodies remain, they are no longer here. It is not our friends and loved ones we put in the ground. Not any longer. Do you understand?"

I shook my head.

He sighed. "It is not such a simple thing to explain, but I shall try. Despite what common folk may say about us, many of us believe in the same gods they do. Many of us believe in one afterlife or another. But on

the road… Our homes are our wheels. When someone leaves us, even in life, when they stop and put down roots, they are with us no longer. It is their memories we cherish. The stories we tell around the fire."

I nodded, thinking of Anen and his tale, of all the stories I'd heard around the fires. Often their stories had been of caravaners, some alive and with us. But just as often their tales had been of caravaners long gone, whether living or dead. Some stories were carried back generations. I had come to appreciate their nightly tradition, but had not realized the true weight of it until that moment.

"So you see," Jodon continued, "that is how we honor our people, both in life and in death. We tell their stories. Share what knowledge they shared. Teach and refine the skills they passed on. We honor them with our lives. But we do not mope over corpses, my friend. We do not fuss over permanent markers, for just as we've chosen to live our lives abroad, we do not wish to be tied down in death. We only hope that whatever comes next… If there is some life beyond this one, that it is a place with a good long road, one where many wheels yet turn."

I nodded slowly. It was a beautiful sentiment. As far as views on death went, it was a good one. Simple, yet elegant, in its way. Just like the way they lived.

I'd been raised a farmer's son, but that had never been the life I desired. Nor in death would I wish to forever pull a hoe. I'd become a soldier, and that, too, was something I'd quickly learned I didn't want to do for all my days. Nor in death.

And imagine that: what if my fallen comrades, those who had died in the killing fields, what if they woke up to find themselves forever in another? To toil forever at war? I shuddered at the very thought.

But what of a life on the road, and an eternity thereafter? To move from place to place, seeing the world and all its wonders, always surrounded by friendly faces and hearty folk? To be considered family by those who looked out for one another and shared all they had?

Didn't sound so bad. Didn't sound so bad at all.

But it was not for me. Our time with the caravaners would soon come to a close. This I knew. My lot was to follow a mad woman who scared even the spirits.

Spirits hot as lightning.

I shook my head. Could that be my fate? Certainly Maudlin's misadventures would get the better of me. Would I die some miserable death serving her, only to wake up in the afterlife and find her waiting?

Garbhan! Whatever are you doing? Come along. Your debt is not yet paid. And where is your violin, you daft duck? Did you not think to bring it with you into the dark?

I shuddered yet again, only with more vigor. Such a thought…

The mood about the camp was somber, for despite Jodon's words, the losses weighed heavily.

I liked that about them.

In the army, when we'd won a grueling battle, our commanders celebrated. They passed out praise and medals while us pawns wept over friends we'd not see again. Mayhap I was soft, for it never seemed that securing some patch of dirt was worth the blood we'd traded for it. Here, though, with the caravaners, there would be no praise or medals. No celebration.

There was less rush to get the wheels turning that morn, but when we finally did, we put the meadow and its graves behind us, taking with us only the memories.

For the caravaners, it was the memory of friends lost. Of haunts, and terror.

For me, it was all those things and… And a growing worry.

That those haunts had feared her… Those spirits… *Spirits hot as lightning.*

They had been afraid of Maudlin.

What did that mean for me?

My eyes drifted to where she walked, an entourage of children skipping along with her. However their parents had felt about them traipsing about with her before, they must have been downright terrified about it then. Yet where would their little ones be safer in this forest of strange magic? And after all they'd seen, here were the kids, happy and smiling as they pranced at her hip.

Maudlin alone had been unbothered by the death and strangeness. In fact, her own mood was higher than I'd ever seen. Whatever queer meaning she'd taken from the spirits, it was news she had delighted in.

Was that good?

I couldn't know.

But we left that haunted forest a few days later and I doubt very much that anyone bothered looking back. I certainly did not.

Ahead of us was the city of Trasal. And a parting of ways.

Once there, our time with the caravan would draw to a close.

For them, that meant the festival.

For Maudlin and me? Who bloody knew.

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Intermezzo

“Fascinating.”

I blinked.

For a moment, I couldn’t remember where I was.

It had seemed I was well and truly on that old road, departing the Paling Forest, yet…

No.

I was in the Tickled Pig, and in a time far removed from memory. Yet the weight of the losses felt so fresh. Brecc. Anen. All of them. My fears, too, as well as my trepidation about the path ahead… It still seemed very real, despite me already knowing where the story would go.

It was Kavan who’d spoken. The supreme enchanter stared at me with something akin to wonder.

I blinked again, wiped at my eyes, then sought comfort in my mug. It was empty, though. Must have finished it without even realizing.

“You truly saw the spirits in the Paling Forest?” he asked. “With your own eyes?”

I nodded my reply.

Somewhere behind him, back in the crowd, someone let out a huff. Then a woman’s voice spoke. “Not likely. Come now, what nonsense is this?”

Kavan spun in his chair. “Come now, yourself. For have you forgotten we have him under enchantment? He cannot lie.”

I glanced up to see a woman seated among sorcerers, a scowl on her face. “Are we so sure the charm is still in effect?”

Kavan chuckled and cast a glance over at the ancient sorcerer who'd cast the compulsion.

Gelonde offered a hint of a nod.

Kavan turned his attention back to the woman. "Are you so sure you'd challenge Gelonde's goodwill? You may think yourself up to the task, but personally, I'd rather stay in his good graces."

"Wise," Gelonde said, voice crackling. His lips split into a grin. "I can assure you, my compulsion is doing as promised. Garbhan Duhallow speaks naught but the truth."

"As he remembers it," the woman said, not quite ready to give it up.

Kavan rolled his eyes. "Yes, and I'm sure he's forgotten a detail or two, but I don't believe his mind is so addled that he made up the spirits and convinced himself they were true. Do you?"

"Suppose not," she said, looking away.

A man seated at another table, one of those I'd pegged as a knight, cleared his throat. "I'm more curious about the Butcher. Story I heard was that Garbhan defeated him in single combat while wielding a cleaver himself."

"No," another knight said. "What I heard was that he faced the whole bloody gang by himself. Killed the Butcher, took his damned cleaver, and carved up the rest."

"Alas, gentlemen," Kavan said, spreading his hands. "Sometimes the truth does not live up to the tale."

"On the contrary," a voice spoke from the back.

All eyes turned to the trim figure in sleek black. The dark elf. The assassin.

The rest seemed as surprised by his words as me. I doubted he was the chatty type. Quite likely this was the first time his unlikely allies had ever heard him speak.

I noticed his red eyes were locked onto my own.

"Was a far greater feat than all of that," he said, finally glancing over at the table of knights. "Lest you heard a different tale than I."

An awkward moment passed as the knights glanced at one another, each trying to make sense of the statement.

Kavan sought to set them straight. "I believe what our friend in the back is trying to say is, our dear Garbhan, here, ever a humble bonny lad,

downplayed his own worth in the telling. We heard the story as he lived it, you see?”

I, for one, did not see. Nor did the others, apparently.

“Oh, bother,” the supreme enchanter said, shaking his head. “How to put this?”

He glanced my way, but I was to be no help.

“It’s like this,” he said, throwing up his hands in frustration. “The tale of Garbhan and the Butcher is not as well-known as other tales yet to come, but it is a story which has made the rounds. And as we all know, such a recounting is often embellished. Then the next teller embellishes it again. And so on. Thus, your disappointment in hearing the truth of it. Yet what our friend in the back so eloquently attempted to convey is that our Garbhan was considerably more clever than his own words would have him be.”

As he spoke, Kavan rose and moved about me in a circle, addressing the crowd as though he were on a stage.

“Though a fabulous storyteller he may be, our dear Garbhan is no braggart. No, he is far too humble for bluster. So he did not give himself due credit. How many of you, oh brave champions, have bested a foe with a better sword arm, eh? How many of my magical friends have faced down a greater sorcerer? How many here have outwitted or outlasted a tougher opponent? Many of us, I would warrant. Otherwise we would not be here.”

He moved around behind me then and gave my shoulder a loving pat. Made my skin crawl.

“Yet afterward, when the story is told, whether by you or another, it is made so that you were never in any danger at all. No, you bested your enemies well and proper, so you did. But for those of us here, well, we know better, do we not? For in this room, we have no slouches. No pretenders. No, everyone here has earned their way. And so we should look again at his words, but in another light.”

He paused, making another slow circle.

“First, the old pack master was quite right. If not for the small amount of training Garbhan gave the others, they would not have held the line as they did. More likely they’d have been swept right over. Garbhan gave them just enough. But even with that, none were prepared to stand against someone like the Butcher.”

He made a dramatic show of shaking his head.

“So, what does our hero—or villain—do? He taunts the blaggart. He riles the Butcher into joining the fray and coming right for him rather than cutting a path through the others. Then he tells us that the Butcher was his better. More skilled. More powerful. Faster. So, our Garbhan, what does he do? He calls upon his training. Calls upon his experience and knowledge. While the brute relied on strength, skill, and arrogance, Garbhan relied on his wit. And what of that? Is that not a greater tale than one where he was some unbeatable, heavens-sent, heroic, godlike champion?”

Kavan assumed a thoughtful expression.

“Yes, I think it is. I believe our friend in the back has the proper measure of it. For Garbhan didn’t arrive to the story as some gods-be-blessed hero of old. No, he was simply a cunning man who used his grit and wit to overcome a greater foe. Bravo, Garbhan. Truly. Bravo.”

My eyes flicked to the dark elf, who gave me the briefest hint of a nod.

In another time and place, I would have taken such a compliment as high praise indeed. But just then, I felt nothing but unease. For I wished this nightmare would end, and more… Something told me he wouldn’t be so complimentary when the rest of my story was told. There was a reason he’d tagged along, and it wasn’t to pay me respects. Quite the contrary.

The knight who’d first spoken, though, nodded and raised his mug to me. “Consider me convinced. Seems you were a canny fighter indeed, Duhallow.”

I wasn’t sure how to reply, so I mimicked the dark elf’s motion and merely nodded at him.

“It’s Maudlin who holds my attention.”

For a moment, I wasn’t so sure it was even a voice that had spoken. The words were clear, yes, but…inhuman. They sounded like metal scraping metal, and from within a hollow drum.

It was not a natural thing, that voice. Caused me a jump, and I’m not ashamed to say it, for several of my hard-case captors jumped with me. Many were spooked.

All eyes turned toward the hearth where that hulking form stood, back to us, their gaze staring down into the flames.

The black knight.

The one with a devil’s face for a helm.

I considered it a blessing that the creature had its back to us, for I had no desire to gaze upon that visage.

Sadly, though, it turned to face us.

A lump formed in my throat.

For however bad the others may have been, this creature… This thing… What it represented… It was something different entirely. Something far worse.

I glanced over at Kavan and saw that even he, who was ever in control, let slip a grimace. And he was a supreme enchanter of the bloody Pale, the most feared sorcerers in all the world.

But there were other things in this world. Things which warranted fearing more than any man, whether a master sorcerer or not.

I doubted many among my captors knew what to make of the armored fiend. Doubted there were more than a handful who even understood what the black knight was. Some things were better left unspoken.

And certainly for many, if they'd known the truth of it, they'd have not agreed to come along.

But they felt it, same as me: the oppression wafting off that black plate mail, thick as smoke. The hatred and malice it radiated, something beyond any compulsion a sorcerer could conjure. Even the Oak Mother couldn't hold her gaze on that devilish mask, and it was but a facade. I dared not wonder what might lurk beneath.

Kavan coughed and forced a smile. "But of course. That's why we're here, is it not? To learn about Maudlin?"

The black knight ignored his comment and focused its false face on me. "Always you played her to sleep? Each and every eve?"

The way it spoke, I wasn't sure whether it was a statement or a question.

I could but nod, all while trying not to tremble.

And still, its voice pained my ears, those two blades scraping. "The way you tell your tale, it's as if she held all the cards. Yet clearly you held some power over her as well."

"Very little," I managed, forcing a wan smile.

The black knight said no more.

A long, awkward silence fell over the room. Again, the pounding of rain, the cry of the wind, and a chorus of thunder drowned us beneath its weight.

Kavan, who seemed lost in his own thoughts finally looked up, as if he'd forgotten where he'd been. Clapping his hands, he said, "Right, then.

Let us have a reprieve. I believe we could all use a rest after that. Especially our storyteller."

He was not wrong.

I rose on unsteady feet, ambling toward the door along with the others.

Ever vigilant, the Safal knight fell in step just behind me.

His voice was little more than a growl. "I'm looking forward to where your story takes us next. Aren't you?"

I decided to ignore him and continued toward the door.

I'd nearly made it when his iron grip clamped down on my shoulder. His breath, stinking of ale, was warm against the side of my neck. "I suspect I already know the next part."

"Well, don't spoil it for the others," I said, shaking free of his grip.

For a moment I thought he would strike.

But Kavan's voice spoke up from the middle of the tavern. "Just a friendly little reminder: we do need Garbhan to remain unharmed. Just for a while longer. I'm sure you all understand."

The Safal knight's glare didn't falter, but neither did he attack.

It seemed I was safe, for the moment. As safe as one could be surrounded by enemies.

I stepped out the door, a ring of stars above us once more, the rain having eased. Amazing, that. So much power, and just so we all might have a piss.

Another of the knights, this one bearing a crest I didn't recognize, fell in step beside me.

"You know," he said, rubbing his chin, "I came here believing you to be some great menace. And perhaps I still will by the time we're done."

"Mayhap you will," I agreed.

"But for this part… With the caravan…"

I paused, waiting. A few of others did as well, curious what he might say.

"For that, at least, it seems you acted with honor."

Before I could reply, the Safal knight spoke up. "Bah. There are two sides to every story."

"Aye, and we've heard this one," the other knight replied. "Can you say what the other might be? Do you imagine some way in which the Butcher of Barlington was the hero? By every story I ever heard, he was a bloody

monster. It was good someone put him down. Do you not agree, sir knight?"

"That's not what I'm saying," the Safal knight replied.

"Then what?" the other knight pressed. "What might Garbhan have done differently?"

The Safal knight looked away.

"Thank you," I said, and meant it. "Long have I debated my own actions. Long have I looked back on each part of this tale, lamenting what I might have done differently. The caravan… They were good folk. They deserved none of the trouble that fell on them."

The knight nodded.

We went about our business.

Once more, I chuckled at the sight of all these fierce warriors and mighty mages lined up along the wall to piss beside one another. It was truly a sight to behold, something for the history books.

My humor faded as soon as I stepped back into the Tickled Pig.

I found Finnegan standing beside my chair, eyes full of fear, his arms wrapped around a case of some sort.

A teardrop case.

I realized the supreme enchanter was also studying the lad, a worried look on his face.

Across the room, Old Loc glared daggers at me as he refilled mugs.

What had happened in the short time I'd been outside?

I moved toward Finn. Kavan fell in step beside me.

"Finnegan," I said. "What have you there?"

He blinked at me, eyes wide, then glanced toward the hearth where the black knight stood, its back to us once again.

"He… He said I was to bring this to you," Finn replied. It seemed he wished to say more, but no words came to him.

"Thank you, Finn," I said, taking the case from him.

As soon as his burden was relieved, the lad sped off, moving to stand behind his grandad. There was a mighty fear on him for which I could hold no blame. The black knight scared me senseless, too, right to my core.

"Well, that's…something," Kavan said.

I glanced over to find he was rubbing his chin, eyes glued to the case in my hands.

Whatever this was about, it wasn't part of his plan.

He met my gaze. “Well, shall we see what’s inside?”

Based on the shape, it wasn’t much of a mystery. Yet I couldn’t deny my desire to open it.

I snapped the latches and lifted the lid.

One of us sucked in a sharp breath. I couldn’t say which.

I was frozen, stunned.

Lost in beauty.

It seemed the supreme enchanter was as well, for neither of us spoke for several long moments.

Such a violin…

I’d never seen such. It was an instrument of pure art. Or was it a fine work of art turned instrument? It should have been hanging over an emperor’s mantle, or displayed in some museum, forever protected from grimy hands.

Its flesh was of the purest black, dark as midnight. Dark as the armor of the knight who’d carried it. From scroll to fingerboard, onto the body, and finally to the chin rest, all shared in the deep, dark shadow. Only the pegs, bridge, and nut bore any color, and that of a shimmering white, which almost seemed to glow. And the strings, they appeared as spider silk, glimmering in the lamplight.

I glanced over at Kavan, who shrugged.

My hand started forward, but hesitated. I glanced at him again. “Is it… safe?”

He stared back at me as if he didn’t understand my question. “Depends on whose hand wields it, I suppose. Is that not how tools, instruments, and weapons work?”

“I meant, is it magic? Is it safe for me to touch?”

“Safe to touch, yes. I would think so.”

My hand started toward it again.

“Though there *is* something magical about it, isn’t there?”

I dropped my hand, sighed, and turned to face him. “It may have escaped your notice, Supreme Enchanter, but you are far more versed in the realm of magic than I. Also, you are my captor. Therefore, I am asking you whether I am safe to touch this instrument, and, I suppose, whether you will allow it.”

His eyes remained on the violin while his hand rubbed at his salt and pepper beard. “A wise deliberation. Will I allow it? Why, yes, I think I will.

As to whether it’s safe? I do not believe it will cause you harm. Any hesitation I have…”

“Is because you didn’t plan for this.”

“Spot on,” he said with a stiff nod. “This is *my* game, and I rather like to think I have everything well in hand. But this…”

“What’s life without a little chaos?” I asked, reaching again.

This time, I didn’t hesitate.

Like a mother lifting her newborn from its crib, I carefully removed the violin from its case and brought it out into the light to study. That I was not zapped, cracked, or made into stardust, I counted as a blessing.

And I noticed something else.

Beneath the light, I saw that my first impression wasn’t quite true. It wasn’t pure black after all. Not all the way. As I turned it in my hand, the light rippled across its surface and a shimmering image came to life.

There, on one side of the upper bout, a sparkling, unmistakable form appeared.

A crow’s head.

And it wasn’t the crow alone, I realized.

Between the fingerboard and the bridge was the image of a lone owl, wings spread, as if taking flight.

On the lower bout, opposite the side of the crow, was a sparkling drake’s head. As I moved it back and forth, flames seemed to emanate from the beast’s maw.

And the fingerboard…

The entire length of it showed a sky full of clouds and stars, all of which led up to a glowing half-moon.

It was magnificent.

Magical.

I felt again that sense that I was being watched.

Turning, I saw that the black knight was facing me again, that devil’s visage watching and…waiting.

Around us, the others were shuffling back to their seats, preparing for me to pick up my tale. But this… This was a different message. A different expectation.

I turned my attention to Kavan. “What say you?”

He considered, then glanced over at the black knight as well. Finally, he nodded. “One song won’t hurt.”

My hand reached into the case again to take up the bow. Its body was the same black as that of the violin, but its hair was white as snow. It, too, had a single shimmering image running up its length. An image of a sword.

I ran the bow across the strings once, finding it was perfectly in tune. Should have expected as much. But there was something else I could not have anticipated, an extra layer to this marvel. As the violin let off a cry from that single stroke, the images sparkling on its flesh seemed to glow. A bit of magic indeed.

A new worry struck me then.

I glanced at Kavan. “Whatever should I play?”

He raised an eyebrow.

“I mean to say… This was no gift. That thing… It expects me to play something, doesn’t it? It wants me to play. My gut says I’d best choose wisely.”

Kavan nodded, then gave me a pat on the shoulder. “I think our dark elf friend was right. You are more clever than you credit yourself. Let us see…”

After a moment, he snapped his fingers. “Obvious, isn’t it?”

“Is it?”

“It is.”

I considered.

When the answer came, it seemed obvious indeed. If not for being so weary and worn, it would have come sooner.

“The song I played for Maudlin. That’s what it wishes to hear. The very song I played for Maudlin each night.”

“I think so, yes,” the supreme enchanter agreed.

I took up my bow and considered, nervously wondering if I remembered. In the evenings, I often played around the Tickled Pig, even when we didn’t have customers. I played so often I’d started leaving my violin at the tavern, tucked on a shelf behind the bar. But that song, the song I played for Maudlin… I hadn’t played it in a very long while. Not since I came to the island.

The same gut intuition which had warned about choosing the wrong song now warned that I needed to get it right. Or at least close. The black knight may not have known the tune, so if I erred, I needed to hide it well. Any obvious blunders and…

And what?

I knew not.

It was hardly worth a worry. My life was already over, was it not? I was done up like a proper stew, the meat on my bones ready to slide free. There was no way I would walk away from this, anyway. So, little point in fretting.

I closed my eyes and brought the bow to the string.

And I played.

Just as I'd played for Maudlin all those nights.

Soft and slow, that same sorrow-laden tune.

I lost myself in it.

Lost myself trying, once more, all this time later, and however far away, to again saw away her sorrow. I hoped she might hear it, wherever she might be.

It was now as it was then.

But it wasn't just her sorrow I sought to saw.

It was my own, too.

My fears. My regrets. My mistakes.

Those of then.

These of now.

I played for Old Loc, too. And Finnegan. For the trouble I had brought them.

And for my enemies.

Even for them who would do me harm.

I sawed for their sorrows, too.

I melted into it.

Became one with my instrument.

Became one with the song.

Once more, I was taken away, gone back to some time before…

Just the two of us, Maudlin and me, alone around our campfire.

It had not seemed a joy back then. Yet compared to where we would go and what trouble I was in now…

Yes, I would have gladly gone back to one of those lonely campfire nights. Any of them. Back before the real trouble began.

Mayhap I could hold onto it a little longer.

Mayhap I could freeze time in that tune, forever remaining in some moment of peace.

But no, that wasn't how a song worked, was it?

Somewhere in its depths, a person could lose hold of their sense of time. Could seem lost in it for all eternity. But that was a lie, wasn’t?

For all songs came to an end.

Mine would, too.

But first, I had more story to tell.

Yet I was a coward true, for I decided then I would hide in that song for however long I could. I would hide from these enemies who surrounded me, but more, for a brief time, I would hide from the story I had yet to tell.

It was no sanctuary, that song, but for a time, perhaps, it might offer serenity.

And so I played.

To be continued…

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Acknowledgments

This book would have never happened if not for some very amazing people. Seriously.

If J.H. Fleming hadn't dragged me to the Castle of Muskogee repeatedly, the "Tom of Bedlam" song would have never earwormed its way into my brain.

In the same vein, a big thanks to Asia Lupo, Marc Mills, and Olivia Harding of Music the Gathering for playing such an amazing rendition of the song that it did, in fact, earworm its way into my brain. If I had never heard them play it, this idea would have never existed. And if I hadn't heard them play it so many times, it likely would have never blossomed into reality. Like so many ideas, it would have remained on the dusty shelves of my mind, quite possibly to be forgotten. Instead, each time I heard it, the story stood up and shouted at me louder and louder, until I could ignore it no longer.

If you haven't heard their version of "Tom of Bedlam," you definitely should. As of this writing, you can listen to it for free on their website, musicthegathering.com.

Back to J.H. again for being my editor. You the best.

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About the Author



Phillip Drayer Duncan has written twenty novels and is the only author who has ever sponsored a racecar…probably.

Along with reading and writing, he enjoys kayaking, fishing, video games, and telling dumb jokes. Phillip's natural habitats include the rivers and lakes of the Ozarks, but he may also be spotted at a con or concert. During the cold season, he hibernates beneath a pile of books and video games. He is generally an approachable creature; however, it's best to give him snacks to ensure he won't bite. Cookies are best.

His earliest books were acted out with action figures and scribbled into notebooks. Today, he uses a computer like a real grownup, though he refuses to act his age the rest of the time. If it would pay his bills, he'd be playing with G.I. Joes right now.

His greatest dream in life is to become a Jedi, but since that hasn't happened yet, he focuses on writing and eagerly awaits the next season of *Firefly*. He demanded we mention that he is a best smelling author.

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