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Chapter

1

*The Glassmaker’s Apprentice*

0x414F:C:8 – 3:8 – Alignment Standard Time

Sameryn hopped off the table to peer into the open instrument case, his fingertips numb and his heart still racing in time to *Willie’s Weeping Willow*, a ditty so jolly and uncouth that it was a full eight counts after the last note rang true before the spell was broken, and the laughs and grins of the patrons of Old Tin’s Tavern gradually faded back to the casual worry that usually adorned their sun-dark faces.

But not all could be dissuaded from their merriment.

“Thas’ a goodlad” said Barty from behind, as a massive hand enveloped Sameryn’s shoulder. “Can alwaysss count on ye tuh–*hiccup–*tuh finish on a banger.”

He tossed a silver ixpen into the case, which gave a single showman’s twirl before coming to rest beside another silver ixpen, which had been donated by a generous stranger, and a small pile of coppers. Barty gave his best attempt at a sly wink and blessed Sameryn with another hearty slap on the shoulder.

The wink looked more like a wince to Sameryn, which he surely mirrored as the massive man nearly dislocated his shoulder, but he appreciated the old cobbler’s endearing stupor all the same.

Sameryn scooped up his meager wages and dropped them into his coin purse, all except for the silver ixpen, which he kept on hand. Tying the coin purse tightly and tucking it back under his shirt, he walked over to one of the many empty seats, his usual spot near the kitchens. Everyone always wanted to sit near the hearth, and the usual crew sat and played their “last” hands of cards in its warmth, but Sameryn enjoyed the smell of flour, spices, and stewed meat that usually wafted from the back.

Old Tin himself set down a lukewarm bowl of stew before Sameryn, along with a hunk of bread and a half empty bottle of Maravillan red. This, along with a pallet in the basement, and whatever tips the occupants of his inn deigned to give him, were Sameryn’s payment for blessing Old Tin’s lucky patrons with his lilting melodies during the three nights of week’s end.

Sameryn nodded his thanks and began wolfing down the meal.

Not three minutes later, Sameryn was mopping up the last of the stew with the butt of the bread, before stuffing the great, soggy heap into his maw. He appeared to swallow without chewing, a feat Tin always found incredible, and helped lubricate the bread’s journey down his throat by chugging the half bottle of wine, which he’d saved for this very purpose.

Everything was as it should be.

Sameryn took the rag Tin had ready for him and wiped a dribble of wine that had leaked down his chin without a hint of grace.

He had to be quick if he wanted to get a few games of cards in before heading home.

He went over to join the men and women by the hearth, and went through his nightly ritual of convincing them to play just one more hand. They recited their parts of the ceremony with a practiced air, insisting they had to get home so that they could start the same sorry cycle again the next day.

Of course, they ultimately obliged him, and Sameryn had Tin break his silver ixpen into ten copper ones, spending one immediately on another bottle of red for the table, this one full. Sameryn then began to share some of the stories he’d read in Bon’s books, as was his role as bard in training, and one more game of cards became two more, then five more, and what was left of Barty’s silver ixpen dwindled to three copper ixpens, then a small pile of copper pennies, and was ultimately expended by the end of the night’s games.

Luckily, Sameryn had been wise enough to save the other silver coin he’d stashed away. Or perhaps he had simply forgotten about it.

It had been over an hour and the hearth was all embers as night’s chill was settling in to reinstate its dominion in the last warm corners of the quiet town of Lindhen.

Sameryn would not be staying in town this night. At least, not in the town proper. As it would be Lundas the next day, or rather, this day, Sameryn would be walking the few miles back to Bon’s rather than leaving in the morning, as a sensible man might. But Sameryn preferred the night’s cool breeze to the morning’s snapping bite. And with a belly full of wine and stew, and a tantalizingly unfinished song that had come to him in a dream to occupy his thoughts on the road, the next hour would not be an unpleasant one

As Old Tin was sweeping the floor, and Sameryn’s companions were stumbling out of the old tavern, Sameryn noticed a group of men that were still sitting in the corner of the room, engaged in a quiet, yet fierce discussion.

He’d seen them, of course, while he was playing cards, and he was pretty sure it was the one with the green cloak, mashing the tabletop repeatedly with his index finger that had tipped him his first silver ixpen earlier in the evening.

Sameryn wasn’t sure what it was about the party that drew his attention. Travelers were common enough in Lindhen, as the small town rested beside the Olde Road, which connected the Blood Road to the north with the Fisher’s Road to the south. Anyone coming from the coast who was making their way to Maravilla, or the lands beyond, would have to pass through Lindhen.

And though Old Tin insisted he ran a *tavern,* not an inn, Sameryn knew he had a couple spare rooms above that he rented out to travelers who were tight on coin.

Suddenly, Sameryn realized what was off about them. Not one of them was wearing a sword. Nor a dagger. As Sameryn stared, he realized he couldn’t make out a single glint of metal anywhere on them. Sameryn tried to swallow, but his mouth had suddenly gone dry. He’d heard of men like these.

Witchtakers.

Why where they in Lindhen? Adan hadn’t heard of any occult activity in the area.

Not wanting to attract their attention, he shuddered, and made his way out of the tavern, nodding toward Old Tin as he threw on his cloak and shouldered his kindwyn case.

Sameryn made his way past the town’s buildings, which were still settling into their usual midnight repose, groaning as they turned and twisted, trying to find a comfortable position in which to bed down for the night.

Nyxi, the small, slightly green tinged moon, was out this week. She wouldn’t be joined by her younger sister Nyxa for another week yet, but they would only share the sky for three nights before Nyxi grew tired of her sister’s constant singing and slipped out of the sky for the rest of the year, marking the last Moonfall of the year, and the beginning of the Nahvi festival.

Sameryn made his way to the Olde Road, and took the central boulevard out toward his home. He passed by the High Priest Tullymar’s sprawling manor and her enormous horse ranch, which was both the economic and geographic center of the province, and provided jobs for over a third of Lindhen’s residents. Idly, he wondered if his friend Tul, the High Priest’s son, was asleep in one of those rooms.

Sameryn knew that would depend entirely on whether he had managed to sneak out to spend the night with Marna, one of his mother’s servants.

“The White God grant you favor, Tul, son of Tullymar,” Sameryn said to nobody, and his attention went back to the unfinished melody which had been taunting him for weeks.

As Sameryn left the manor behind and the distance between him and the horse ranch grew larger, the passing houses grew less and less tightly packed together, and more unique in their construction.

Nearly identical brick-and-mortar buildings with ceramic shingled roofs gave way to older cobblestone shacks and wooden farmhouses.

One could see Maravilla’s influence on the town’s architecture grow weaker and weaker as one journeyed to the southern edge of town, where the occupants of Lindhen had been most concentrated before their lands had been conquered by the Ixpántan empire.

He passed by the edge of the town proper, though there wasn’t really anything to overtly declare it so. Once, in passing, Bon had pointed out to him where the Ixpántans had decided to redraw the town’s borders. They still technically lived in the province of Lindhen, just not the township, a distinction which made little difference to Sameryn, though Bon had explained that those who lived in the town proper paid higher taxes.

Finally, Sameryn made it home and strode past Bon’s empty stable, then approached the pigpens, careful not to step in any of the filth which somehow always extended past the confines of their wooden enclosure.

He made his way along the side of the old building, a sturdy two-story number built from burgundy *zumei* planks. Wooden homes, built upon cobblestone foundations with slanted thatched roofs laid out in the Olde style, were not uncommon in the region that made up the old center of Lindhen.

What did make Bon’s home unique, however, were its two, mismatched chimneys. One was the usual cobblestone affair, hanging over a lonely hearth which never saw much use. The other was made of fortified brick, once a bright red, now a sooty black, protruding from Bon’s studio.

Sameryn, however, wasn’t looking up at the chimneys. If he had been, he’d probably have levelled a carefully chosen curse in the old man’s general direction and made his way to the front door.

He levelled a curse anyway, though this one was sloppily hacked together, directed at the pigs asleep in their hut as he slipped in the mud and only barely caught himself on the fence. Wincing at the thought of the splinters he’d have to carefully remove before bed, he carefully picked himself up and finished the trek to the less creaky door in the back, grateful that his kindwyn hadn’t tumbled into the filth.

He was feeling quite self-righteous as he made his way toward the back door. Bon would certainly be grateful that he slipped in without making a ruckus this time, and Sameryn would be sure to mention it in the morning over breakfast.

Sameryn creeped up the porch and carefully opened the less creaky back door.

Here, however, he discovered that his stealthy journey, so rife with peril, had been wholly unnecessary as a blast of dry heat radiated from the inside of the home.

Past midnight, and the old fool was working his bellows.

“*Bon!* *What the hell*?” Sameryn called, though he knew he’d get no response. He set his kindwyn case onto the kitchen table, gentle as a lover, and strode toward the forge, shielding his face and bracing himself for the heat as he opened the door.

Inside, the old man was adding red-lead to the frit, the not-yet-fully-processed molten glass made of sand and other minerals which would be quenched, purified, and remelted until Bon was satisfied with the purity of the crystal.

Knowing better than to sneak up on the old man as he was handling molten glass, Sameryn waited until Bon had submerged the glass into a slightly acidic bath and the hissing of its furious heat died down.

“Bon!” Sameryn barked, intending to startle the man.

The careful glassblower didn’t flinch, however, instead carefully turning the large orb of glass around and beginning to skim the impurities off its surface. Sameryn wondered when the old man had noticed his arrival.

“When you first walked in, lad,” said Bon with a sigh, looking up at Sameryn for the first time since he entered.

The old man had an uncanny ability to predict exactly what Sameryn was thinking at times.

Uncanny, and annoying as hell.

“Why in the Black God’s name are you still up? Didn’t goodman Vick tell you you needed to sleep more?” said Sameryn testily.

“That old bat is hardly fit to treat horses, let alone humans,” said Bon even more testily.

“Oh, and what do you know about horses?” said Sameryn, his voice now rising.

“Almost as much as your mother, I’d wager, and that’s saying something!” retorted Bon, now almost yelling.

The two stood glaring at each other in solemn silence for nearly five seconds before their laughter broke forth into the sizzling air.

Needless to say, the two were quite fond of each other.

Sameryn sat down at a table near the entrance and let the heat of the forge reheat his bones.

Bonwyll had retired his formal practice decades ago, but still kept up the art as a hobby, giving his fantastic creations away as wedding gifts, or to people whose smiles he found particularly charming that day.

Although Sameryn knew much of glass blowing from his life with Bon, he had no love for the art.

His love, of course, was for music.

As he gazed into the glowing frit, which Bonwyll was now studying carefully as it melted down once more, Sameryn’s mind wandered to the dream he had a few weeks ago.

He didn’t remember much about the dream, other than that it was very bright and that the song that had been troubling him had played at some point in the dream.

It struck Sameryn as significant.

Perhaps, it was something he’d heard before, and he just couldn’t place the where or when of it.

He struggled to remember the whole tune, a fast, but quiet number. Sameryn remembered its hypnotic beat made him think of a snake slithering across the surface of a pond.

Idly, he considered going out to the kitchen and grabbing his kindwyn. Maybe he could wheedle the song out from the recesses of his mind and into the open air.

But Bon pointed to an old iron punty on a table near Sameryn, and he knew it would have to wait.

Sameryn sighed, donned an apron and goggles, and got to work helping his stubborn adoptive father finish his latest creation.

Chapter

2

Sameryn carefully laid his kindwyn into its velvet-lined case. It was a magnificent instrument of finely polished spruce, a gift that his friend Tullymar had commissioned for him for his thirteenth Moonfall. With six strings of taught straight-gut, and another three of corded metal soaked gut for the lower register, it struck quite a different tone and timbre from the traditional Ixpántan court lute.

With only single strings, a longer neck, and a sleeker body, the kindwyn was a traditional Elorendhenian stringed instrument, usually accompanied by a basswyn, piper, or vocalist, when it wasn’t played solo. Bon had told him that the instrument historically held a pivotal seat in the great symphonies of Cadmenton, the city that Maravilla had been built over when Ixpánta had annexed the small nation of Elorendhen some eighty years past.

Sameryn could still remember the High Priest’s outrage when she learned that her son had spent over four gold ixpens of the King’s coin to buy his friend a heretical musical instrument. It was impossible to forget that displeasure when it inevitably reappeared on her usually stoic visage every time Moonfall came around and Sameryn put on a small performance for the Nahvi festival. It was a mark of her gracious equanimity that she allowed him to perform with the kindwyn at all.

The instrument was truly a kingly gift, one Sameryn knew he could never repay his friend in value. But as the son of the effective governor of Lindhen, Tul could afford such niceties without a second thought. Besides, Sameryn had repaid Tul’s gift with his own gifts that were, if not equal in value to the kindwyn, at least equal in the displeasure they wrought from his mother the High Priest.

Since they were lads, both Sameryn and Tul had taken pleasure in the smoking of the green and purple varieties of pipe flower which grew natively in the countryside of what was formerly Elorendhen. And just like the kindwyn was a heretical relic from a culture that had supposedly been quashed, the smoking of pipe-flower was a practice that the Ixpántan nobility frowned upon, but had no real power to eradicate.

And how could they? “That plant could thrive in a damp stone cave,” Bonwyll had always said. In fact, Sameryn wasn’t sure how the plant hadn’t already spread to every corner of Omnara.

Central to the smoking of pipe-flower, of course, was the pipe itself. While pipes of all sorts were traditionally made of wood or metal—he had even heard of some made of ivory—Sameryn had perfected the process of making pipes of crystal.

His first pieces had been pathetic, of course. “Barely functional,” Bon had sniffed upon seeing the first attempts. But the old man had a lingering fondness for the herb himself from his youth, and had helped Sameryn refine his technique until the pieces he made were undeniably gorgeous, with impossible swirls of colored glass flowing within the translucent crystal in dazzling ribbons.

And every Moonfall since Tul’s gifting of the kindwyn, Sameryn presented his friend with a new piece to add to his secret collection, and they made a tradition of christening the pipes together out in the woods away from the prying eyes and noses of the High Priest and her soldiers. In the starry glade by Odun Creek, only Nyxa’s triumphant violet gaze could shine down upon them, and her faint hum provided a low drone to accompany the lithely dancing melodies and pleasant coughing fits that adorned the autumn breeze.

The making of crystal pipes was perhaps the only glasswork that Sameryn actually enjoyed, and thus were how he made his living. He played music at Old Tin’s, of course, but the work wasn’t steady and the amounts he made were a pittance compared to what he could get for one of his fine pieces from the right true-blooded Ixpántan merchant travelling by the Olde Road. A single sale could net him over a fifty times what he made on a good night at Old Tin’s.

Besides, he only played at the inn—the tavern—a few nights out of the week, when travelers would be passing through. Nobody travelled the roads throughout the week, of course. Merchants were a strange lot—everyone knew that—but they weren’t mad.

And so, after Sameryn had packed up his kindwyn in its fine leather case, he stashed his set of carefully packaged pipes in a shabbier, but equally functional rectangular case, and began his journey into town.

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“Ugh, what is that stench?”

Sameryn jerked up from his idle strumming at the distant sound of the young woman’s voice. He’d been practicing by the side of the Olde Road for hours now, and ever the performer, he knew a cue when he heard one. He quickly took stock of the situation.

She road in a glossy black carriage, grimacing predictably at the smell of horseflesh that permeated the air. The inhabitants of Lindhen frequently joked that they had all been born with an immunity to the scent, as if horse-breeding was bred into their blood. This sentiment, of course, ignored the fact that their province had only been breeding the equine beasts for a few generations. The more elderly folks of the town spoke of days before the great horse ranch had come to dominate the town’s economy and society.

Those unaccustomed to the indelicate scent of horseflesh and horse manure, however, particularly the travelling gentry who made up a sizable portion of those who journeyed through the Olde Road, often made a show of how revolting they found the stench, and made a point of giving disparaging looks to the townsfolk who ambled by. Sameryn found this particular breed of sub-nobility to be among the worst type of human refuse the White God ever deigned to send through Lindhen.

Naturally, he was delighted to see the woman. He could see she rode alone, with only her driver as escort. From the man’s stiff demeanor and the way he ignored his passenger’s complaints, Sameryn could guess he was a simple man, hired specifically for the job and not a member of her family’s own retinue. Sameryn guessed the poor man was probably exhausted by his charge’s griping and moaning, and would be no obstacle if Sameryn wanted to offer a solution, even a questionably legal one, to her problems.

“Ho, lovely maiden!” he called out. “If you seek a reprieve from the foul scent of beasts of burden, and wish to settle your road weary stomach, I can show you a–”

“Is that a *glass* pipe?” she asked incredulously, eyes going wide at the sight of the display.

*Well, that was easy*.

“It is! You see, I am apprentice to the great glass smith, Bonw–”

“How much for the violet one? Driver, stop, damn it! Can’t you see I’m speaking to the boy?”

The carriage lurched to a halt, and Sameryn took note of the driver’s now white knuckled grip on the reigns.

Sameryn swallowed her patronizing words—she couldn’t be a year older than he was—and kept his smile ever gracious.

The fact that her family had to hire a driver meant that their own must have all been busy, or that their business had fallen on rough times. But even a lesser merchant’s daughter was a rich woman when passing through Lindhen, especially one of Ixpántan descent, if her dark skin was any indicator.

It was an odd wonder that regardless of the skin color of their parents, a true-blooded Ixpántan was always born either pale as ivory or dark as ebony. Which color depended on which God had been presiding over their birth. To be favored by one God or the other didn’t matter to the Ixpántans, aside from certain religious rites. But to be mixed, or worse, a barbarian, certainly did.

By her ruffled dress which bared her shoulders, Sameryn could guess she had been travelling by the Fisher’s Road to the south, perhaps returning from a vacation. Her disheveled hair bespoke a hard journey. Indeed, a long road was a long road, for a queen as well as a peasant.

“I’d usually charge eight silver ixpens, but for you, my lady, six will suffice.”

She was obviously not a lady in any sense of the word. True nobility rarely travelled by the Olde Road, as any business they had would almost certainly be to the east, toward the capital, not toward the south. But the way she sat up a bit more primly showed him that she had no problem pretending she was of high birth, particularly if some uncultured country rube thought her so.

She hopped out of the car without calling for the driver—another obvious sign she was no noble’s daughter—and strode toward Sameryn’s stall.

Of simple wooden construction, and draped in a fine black velvet cloth, the slim table was the perfect platform upon which to rest his creations. Glass pipes of all sizes, shapes, and colors lay on small wooden supports. Some were small as her little finger, while others were as long as his arm.

The making of those long slender ones was a particular point of pride for him. They were too thin to add much decoration, but were surprisingly robust for their delicate appearance. He liked to demonstrate their strength to inquisitive, educated, or simple-minded customers by taking a hammer to the bowls. They always clapped delightedly as the crystal rebuked the impact, though Sameryn had to hide a secret smirk, as a light tap from the hammer on the mouth of the pipe would shatter the entire piece in an instant. They were mostly for show, anyway, as they were obviously impractical for everyday use, and even more so for travelling.

At the moment however, the merchant’s daughter was enamored with one of his moderately sized pieces. It was comprised of a violet glass interior with swirls of indigo around the stem, all surrounded by a thin layer of completely transparent crystal. The crystal glass on the outside would make the piece highly robust, and protect the softer violet glass it encased.

“Might I hold it?” she asked with a look of wonder, her noble’s persona utterly abandoned.

“Of course! You may bless it with the touch of your lips if you so desire,” Sameryn said with a suggestive hint in his tone.

She glanced up at him, and for a moment he wondered if he’d gone too far. She might be road ruffled, and a bit tarty for his taste, but she was still undeniably beautiful, and probably wouldn’t appreciate flirtation from some horse peasant.

He wasn’t surprised when she put it to her lips, however, and pulled through it to see that it worked as it should. Those unfamiliar with Bonwyll’s work, as all the young folk who travelled through the town were, couldn’t believe that a pipe could be made out of glass. If only they could see some of the wonders the old glassblower made in his spare time these days.

Her eyebrows jumped a bit as the air whistled through the piece smoothly. As she pulled back, he could see her mouth silently form the word, *wow*, and his smile widened a bit.

“How much did you say it would be?”

“A mere ten silver ixpens, my lady. I’m sure a piece like this could fetch a higher price in the city, but for the convenience of buying it on what amounts to my doorstep,” he gestured toward Barty’s fine Ixpántan styled shop just down the street, “I wouldn’t dare charge you more than that.”

He noticed the driver’s eyebrows rise at the sudden price hike, and even gave Sameryn a small smirk as the woman stepped back into her carriage to retrieve her purse, but he said nothing.

Good man.

She came back out of the carriage and set down a gold ixpen. “I haven’t that much silver, can you make change for a crown?”

His eyes widened at the sight of the coin. He realized he might have misjudged her family’s financial situation. Badly.

“I’m afraid I can’t, my lady, though there’s a money changer in town, just two blocks down the road. I can lead you to her; the office isn’t far.”

“No need, I’m sure my driver can find her. I’ll be back in a moment.” She snatched the coin back up and climbed back into the carriage, and actually flashed a smile at him as the driver flicked the reigns.

*Gods below, did I misjudge her entirely?*

As she drove off, he picked up his kindwyn and began plucking the strings, attempting to wheedle out the song that had been bothering him the last few days. As he strummed a chord in between two cheery plucks, he froze.

*That was it*.

He played the notes again and the song finally came to him. The one that had been dancing at the edges of his mind for weeks now.

He began to play it in earnest now, and laughed as the music filled him; he could remember the dream from which it came. He had been walking through an arid landscape, with red and black sandstone pillars casting long shadows by the setting sun. Despite the time of day, he remembered feeling incredibly hot, sweating profusely as the sun attempted to wring him dry, and could remember the feeling of the scalding sand radiating through his boots.

He ran through the landscape, afraid of burning his feet, and only stopped when he came across a long snake-like creature with fins slithering along the surface of the sand, slithering in time to the song that echoed in the dream, the song he was plucking and strumming at that very moment.

The rhythm was fast, but not lively. It was smooth, like the quick, gentle rhythm of the creature’s *whisk-whisk* as it slithered away from him.

Relief flooded him as he played the song, a joy that eclipsed his happiness at making such a fortuitous sale. It was the joy only a musician could know, and he closed his eyes and basked in it’s whimsy as he strummed away, oblivious to the world around him.

There was something primal about this song, something that made him want to start hopping about, as if his feet were once again on that hot sand.

Now that he finally held it firmly in his mind after it had eluded him for weeks, he didn’t want to let it go. He played feverishly, the notes coming faster and faster. It was more complex than he initially thought, though he had the melody down now, the more he played, the more he realized that there was more to this song than he had initially remembered.

As he played, he began to feel the heat from the strings through the callouses on his fingertips. He could feel the warm sun on his face from that dream. It was as though he was plucking not just the song from those strings, but the entire dream with it.

Idly, he wondered if there was anyone around to hear it. This song was worthy of performing at the Nahvi festival. Perhaps he would show it to Marella sometime soon. Maybe–

“Oy, lad! Your table!”

He snapped back to the moment, and suddenly became completely disoriented as the song slipped away and the daydream vanished. It took him a moment before he realized what was happening.

The velvet cloth adorning his stand was *on fire*.

And not just a corner, or the side, but the entire piece of fabric. It was a conflagration, and he thrust his kindwyn away from the flames by reflex before remembering that he should probably step back from the flame himself. He carefully kicked the instrument’s case away from the flames, utterly dumb-founded by what he was seeing.

His initial worry died down as he realized the flames likely wouldn’t harm the table, let alone the pipes. It would take a blaze much hotter than a burning cloth could produce to melt the pipes down, and *zumei* wood was known for its flame retardant properties. The moist grass below wouldn’t allow the flames to spread past the confines of the table, so it was a simple matter of waiting it out, and allowing his racing heart to slow down.

Barty trotted over; he’d been the one who’d called out to Sameryn. He, along with a few other townsfolk—Inser Den, Ethon Gonwater, and Hil Menten, the owner of one of Lindhen’s finer inns, all came to see the commotion. Sameryn could see some of the patrons of the inn poking their heads out of a few windows to get a glimpse of the dying flames.

“Did you see what happened?” Sameryn asked Barty.

“I did—well, I mean, I didn’t. Not really. I *saw*, but I didn’t *see*. One moment you were sitting there, plucking away that catchy tune on your lute. I called Ehren over to hear it; it was quite something.” Sameryn tried to ignore the man calling his kindwyn a *lute.* “And when I came back, the whole table was up in flames. Or at least, I think it was. It must have been. It was witchcraft, if I’ve ever seen it.”

“And have you seen much witchcraft?” asked Ethon, a lanky stableboy from Menten’s inn who had come to find out what happened.

“Now, don’t start with me, boy, you know I’m a goodman who fears and respects the Gods. But that was witchcraft, I tell ya. By the Black God, that was witchcraft.”

Sameryn’s mind was racing to find an explanation. What had he been doing? Playing a song? What was on the table? The pipes, the stands. Nothing more. Then he finally relaxed as he realized what happened.

“I don’t think it was any type of witchcraft, Barty,” Sameryn said. “Bon’s told me about things like this; with certain kinds of glass, you can start small flames if the sun is aimed just right. Everyone knows velvet’s quick to burn; it was probably just rotten luck. I’d just locked in a fine sale, and the Gods were probably making sure I didn’t have too fine a time with it.”

Ethon and Inser murmured in agreement, eager to latch onto an explanation that was familiar. The townsfolk of Lindhen were a superstitious lot, but the justice of the Gods was something they understood. Witchcraft on the other hand…

“I don’t think so, lad. That weren’t no small flame. It went up like that,” Barty snapped his calloused fingers for emphasis.

“Well, I doubt anyone here is practicing witchcraft, Barty,” Sameryn said as he tried to put thoughts of the Witchtakers out of his mind.

Within a couple minutes, the cloth had burned up, leaving the rest of the table more or less unharmed, save for a bit of char on the surface. He was dismayed, however, to see the pipes were not left completely unscathed by the flame. They had a dark layer of char on them as well. If he could scrub them with soda, they would return to their former shine, but at the moment they were in a sorry state.

And of course it was at that moment that the merchant’s daughter, or whoever she was, returned in her glossy black carriage. She pulled up to the stand, peering down through the opposite window from the one he had initially seen her through.

“Gods, what happened here?” she asked with mock concern.

Sameryn thought how best to answer.

“Witchcraft!” barked Barty, causing Hil to smack the cobbler upside the head.

“Not witchcraft, I assure you,” said Sameryn, as the woman’s eyes narrowed, “Just an unfortunate result of keeping fine crystal out on such a sunny day.”

She looked up at the gray sky and frowned. Then, she noticed the charred pipes.

“Oh, no!” she cried in genuine dismay. “It’s ruined!”

“It’s a simple char, my lady, it can be cleaned away with no issue, a simple scrub of soda will clear the char, I assure you!”

She looked quite skeptical.

“I’ll clean them myself! If you’ll permit me to visit a friend in town, I can have your piece cleaned in a few minutes.”

“Your friend? Isn’t that your house right there?” she pointed toward Barty’s shop, which Sameryn was now remembering he’d casually lied about earlier, claiming it was his own home.

“No, miss, that’s my shop!” Barty said, beaming. “It’s a wonderful establishment, if you’d like to stop by after, perhaps have any torn slippers mended.”

Sameryn could’ve stabbed the cobbler.

Her eyes narrowed in suspicion. “No, I don’t think I will. Driver, let’s move on; I think these ruffians are trying to swindle me.”

“No, wait!” cried Sameryn. “I can have your piece cleaned in moments, my lady, I assure you! I’d give it to you for eight ixpens, for the delay.”

“Four,” she replied.

Sameryn bit down a curse.

“Six, it’s the lowest I can go for the work, truly.”

“Driver?” she called casually.

“Okay, four!” he said, utterly defeated.

Her scorn vanished like lightning and she flashed a warm smile at him.

*Gods, I could not have misjudged her more.*

“I’ll wait here while you gofind that friend of yours. If you take more than five minutes we’re leaving,” she said.

Sameryn picked up the pipe, which was still quite warm, trying to avoid eye contact with any of the dispersing townsfolk. He tried to flash Barty a dirty look, but the man was oblivious to the glare, and truthfully, Sameryn couldn’t stay mad at the cobbler. Barty was one of his greatest supporters when it came to his music, along with Tul and Old Tin.

“Hil, would you mind?” he asked, getting the innkeeper’s attention.

“Of course, lad, of course. We have some soda in the back.”

“I’ll need a brush too.”

“Shan’t be a problem, lad. Oy, Ethon!” he called to the departing stableboy.

The boy was all elbows and ears, and Sameryn was reminded of a pendulum when he swung back around to take heed of his master.

“Can you wash a brush right quick and bring it in for us?” Hil asked.

“Sure thing, Hil,” he called, and trotted off to the stable.

As Sameryn followed Hil to his house, the gray-haired man murmured a question that Sameryn couldn’t quite hear.

“What was that?” he asked.

“Do you know who that is?” Hil asked, still keeping his voice low.

“You mean the woman? I took her to be some merchant’s daughter. Do you know her?”

Hil shook his head as if in disbelief.

“That’s Adelmira, lad,” he said, giving her name extra emphasis as if Sameryn should recognize it.

“And she is…?”

He grimaced, but kept walking determinedly.

“She’s the daughter of Cardinal Ignasio, boy. She probably has more wealth to her name than everyone in Lindhen combined, and that’s just in her own personal holdings.”

Sameryn tried to take in this new information as they went around the back of the inn and Hil began to rummage through a cupboard.

“How can that be?” asked Sameryn. “She behaved like no lady I’ve ever met. By the Black God, Barty, why would she be buying a pipe if she was a Cardinal’s daughter? Pipe flower is no respectable pastime.” But he knew it was a weak argument; his best friend Tullymar was the son of a High Priest and he smoked more pipe flower than anyone he knew.

“She behaved like a lady, because she *is* a lady. She can behave however she’d like, particularly with her bodyguard close at hand.”

Sameryn struggled to take this all in.

“You mean her driver?” he asked.

“Her *driver*? That *driver* is a High-Legion trained soldier, and could probably take on all of the High Priest’s guard himself if he saw our town as a threat to his mistress.”

Sameryn lowered a sardonic eyebrow at the man as Ethon lumbered in with the still dripping brush, and a bucket of water besides.

“You’re just mocking me, now,” Sameryn said, “You don’t believe everything they say about the High-Legion, do you?”

Hil nodded to Ethon in dismissal, who scampered off back to the stable in back, as Sameryn grabbed the brush and soda and squatted near the bucket.

“You weren’t here when Invierda, the last High Priest, was found guilty of high treason, lad. The King sent two High-Legion soldiers into the manor to seize him. His guard tried to protect their master to the end, and a bitter end it was. You know what was left of them when the Legionnaires left the manor, dragging the screaming High Priest between them?”

Sameryn paused from his scrubbing. “You know I’ve heard this story, Hil, but–”

“Ashen smudges on the tiled floor, lad. One for each guard, housemaid, and servant who lived in that home. One for Invierda’s wife and one for each of his three children. They say the youngest one, a baby girl, left only two small smudges in her silver cradle where her tiny feet had stood.”

Sameryn shuddered and touched heart, then brow. He didn’t believe all the stories they told about Legionnaires, but he realized that Hil’s theory about the women had some merit. It was extremely unusual for a wealthy woman to be travelling the roads without an armed escort. Particularly if she would be travelling by the Blood Road, which she inevitably would be if she was passing north through Lindhen.

Suddenly, he remembered the smirk the driver—the Legionnaire—had given him when he had raised his price.

A thought occurred to him.

“Do you think it was him? That *he* made my stand catch fire?”

Hil frowned.

“Huh, I hadn’t considered that. It might just have been. Who knows what those men—and women—are capable of?”

Sameryn couldn’t help but shutter again, realizing how close he might have been to being executed on the spot.

*Two small smudges in her silver cradle.*

He glanced down at the pipe, which was once more a gleaming expanse of violet.

“I’d better get this back to her,” he said through a lump in his throat.

“I’d run if I were you, lad,” said Hil.

Sameryn took the innkeeper’s advice and ran back, now dismayed to see that the glossy black carriage was still waiting for him.

Panting, he tried to regain his composure, and held the pipe up toward the carriage window as he approached. The woman, Adelmira if Hil was correct, lifted the piece and inspected it critically.

She raised a single brow, as if surprised to find he hadn’t been lying to her about the char.

Sameryn couldn’t help but glance up at the driver, looking for any sign that he was more than he appeared.

The man was staring back at him with brows furrowed, as if doing the same.

Sameryn quickly averted his gaze, afraid to maintain eye contact with the man, and instead focused on his dusty boots.

*Damn Hil and his stories*.

“I’m impressed, boy,” she finally said. “You’ve earned your ten silver.”

He couldn’t help but , unable to keep the wonder out of his eyes.

“You see, Dieno?” she said, “How can you say it wouldn’t be worth it when you can get this reaction out of them? Look, he’s shaking!”

Sameryn felt his cheeks go hot as the beautiful woman laughed unabashedly.

“Oh, sweet boy, here,” she said, holding out a clenched hand.

Instinctively, he reached his palm out under it, and not a moment to soon, as she let the contents of her fist drop into his outstretched hand.

A single gold ixpen.

It was more money than he’d ever owned. *Far* more.

She giggled delightedly, obviously finding great entertainment at his shock over receiving what she probably considered a pittance.

“Would you like to join me for the first bowl?” she asked, still grinning.

Sameryn had no idea what to say to this. This couldn’t be real. He had to be dreaming.

*Wake up, wake up.*

“Well? I’m sure I could find another one of you countryfolk to spend the evening with. My father wanted me to find this Tullymar and see if he might be worth my attentions. You know how odd it is for a woman to name her own son after her? High Priest or not, it seems unreasonably vain to me, don’t you agree?”

Sameryn was still speechless, the gold coin growing hot in his hand.

She rolled her eyes at him. “Here,” she said, tossing another coin to him, which he caught.

A second gold ixpen.

“Either hop in or point me towards another cute boy who might entertain me. Or cute girl, for that matter, I’m not picky. Is that your lute? It’s an odd design; is it a country variant?”

At this, he finally found his voice.

“It’s a kindwyn, my lady. It is something like a lute.”

“It’s very finely made, how did you come by it?”

“My friend Tullymar, actually, the one you mentioned–”

“Oh, get in damn it, must I beg? I’ve been on the road for two weeks with nobody but this loaf of a man for company,” she said, gesturing vaguely toward the driver.

She popped open the door, and with one last glance at the driver, who was still frowning at him, Sameryn hoisted himself into the cabin.

Chapter

4

Chapter

3

Sameryn felt sweat soaking through his torn linen shirt as he sprinted through the vibrant red and blue foliage, bizarre plants he could never have imagined covering great boulders. The air was moist and thick, yet somehow unsatisfying. No matter how hard he breathed, he felt like his lungs ached, screaming for relief.

In the back of his mind, the low thrum of great drums played in time to his frantic strides.

Hearing the beast’s thrashing approaching quickly from behind, he threw himself over a log and tumbled onto the spiky foliage on the other side.

The rabid beast came flying overhead, it’s bulbous segmented appendages a writhing mass of hatred. It turned on the spot, several of its arms reaching out to reorient its body so that the mass of filmy red eyes could all turn on him.

*It’s just a dream. It’s just a dream.*

Though repeating the fact didn’t seem to change the very real sense of dread he felt in his stomach as the beast clicked its beak and descended upon him. He felt that razor sharp beak clip through the back of his neck–

And awoke with a start, tumbling from his pallet onto the hard, wooden floor. He was fine, however, as his hard head had broken the fall.

“Y’alright up there?” he heard Bon call from below a moment later.

“Yeah!” said Sameryn, picking himself up from the unyielding hard-wood and crossing to open the window to feel the fresh morning air’s rejuvenating embrace.

Sameryn had been plagued with odd night terrors for weeks now. This last one felt so real, and he could vividly remember the feel of that creature’s beak clipping into his spine. He felt the back of his neck, sweaty, but unbeaked, and shuddered.

He snatched up the small branch he’d taken from an old pine a few days ago and tore off the last handful of needles it had to offer. He tossed the remains of the branch out the window and began chewing the needles vigorously as he crossed the room toward his wash basin. Tossing his sweaty under-garments in the corner, he quickly washed what needed washing, threw on fresh clothes, and spat the chewed up needles out the window before slamming it shut and trotting down the stairs.

Bon glanced up at Sameryn. “Oats are cold.”

“You know I don’t like ‘em hot,” said Sameryn cheerily, pouring in a bit of honey and giving it a good mixing before digging in.

“So, you have the list?” Bon asked, looking doubtfully at Sameryn as he shoveled oats down his gullet.

“Yes, yes,” said the lad, between bites of the mash. Bon idly wondered how the boy managed it all without choking. “Three barrels of white sand, one of soda, and a scoop each of red, green, blue, yellow, and violet oxides.”

“Medium grain,” Bon reminded. “Yes, yes, always medium grain,” said Sameryn.

“And a cart to haul it back in, obviously. I’m tired of loaning that piece of shit from old Jak every time we need to resupply. His unearned sense of superiority over that shit cart… Do you have everything you need for the road? I figure Tullymar will have plenty of food and pipe-flower for the journey, but I want you to be prepared, just in case. I wouldn’t be surprised if that boy forgets to bring water, like some fool boys I know…”

Sameryn looked up, surprised. “Did you ask Tul to come?”

Bon chuckled, shaking his head. “No, but call it a hunch. If he doesn’t join you, I’ll give my next crystal bouquet to Arta Wynden.” At this, Sameryn *did* choke on his oats, and it took him a moment to not die, then another to regain his composure. Arta was a saucy seventy-year-old widow from town who was never very subtle when it came to insinuating what she would do with Bon if given the chance.

“Well, poor Arta’s gonna have to make do without you for a bit longer. I told Tul about the trip two weeks past and he’s been badgering me about it ever since, as if I can just drop everything and go like…” he trailed off, realizing what he was going to say.

“Like he can?” Bon finished. “You know it’s not his fault his mother is who she is.”

“I know,” Sameryn said quickly

Tul’s mother, Tullymar II, was the presiding High Priest and effective Governor of Lindhen, appointed by the Holy King’s order. Although Lindhen was by no means a large province, as one of the Holy King’s principal citizens, Tullymar II’s word was treated as law so long as it didn’t contradict the Holy King’s Code.

Which of course, it never did.

Tullymar II was generally agreed to be a fine woman. She was quite friendly and got along surprisingly well with the common folk in town, considering her status.

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As Sameryn bade Bon farewell, he began the mile or so walk to Tullymar’s manor. Bonwyll hadn’t kept horses for years, but it wasn’t for his lack of wealth. In fact, although he never discussed these matters with Sameryn, he was sure the old man had a neat fortune stashed away from his years as a master craftsman in the city.

And the truth was, the horses would’ve certainly been more of a burden than they were worth. Although Sameryn would need a horse to get materials from the city, the governor had an enormous stock of fine animals and frequently loaned them to her citizens, often free of charge.

She took her duties as High Priest quite seriously and considered caring to the needs of her people one of her most sacred responsibilities. During the grand harvest, she would loan out all but her most prized beasts to help the lowlier of the farmers harvest their crop and bring it to market.

And although Tullymar and Bonwyll didn’t get along too well personally, the governor didn’t see why it should keep her from helping Bon maintain his craft. Indeed, as Sameryn neared the manor, he could see some of Bon’s gorgeous wind chimes fluttering near the entrance to the grounds, their impossible patterns glittering as they gently swayed in the autumn breeze.

One of Tullymar’s soldiers, Mitch, if Sameryn’s memory served him right, was standing at the gate on guard duty in the usual black and white livery. He was about to inquire what business Sameryn had at his Lord’s manor, when Tul’s head, engulfed by a mop of curly brown hair, popped out of a third story window.

“YES!” he called out, “It’s time, my friend! Time to go out and discover what this great green world holds for us!” He beamed, and as he yanked his head back inside, Sameryn could hear him call out, “Be right down!”

The guard made no attempt to hide his sigh.

Within moments, Tul was out the door, still beaming as he belted his sword to his waist and pulled on a rich indigo cloak. He called out, “Come!” and he gestured for Sameryn to follow him around the manor to the fields in back as if Sameryn were another of his mother’s servants.

Sameryn obliged, however, as he knew Tul meant no harm by it. It was just the way he was. And the two began to stride toward the three-thousand-acre farm where Tullymar kept her stock.

The High Priest kept over a thousand horses at any given time and employed over a third of the entire province of Lindhen in some form or another. And although Tullymar II loved the beasts, there was a good reason she, along with several other High Priests, raised the animals. The Holy Kingdom of Ixpánta had by far the largest cavalry in the known world. And it had to, if the King’s Eternal Conquest was to continue unimpeded.

As Tul led Sameryn towards his own personal stock, he called out for his two finest destriers to be saddled. As a man and woman rushed out to prepare the horses, Tul pulled Sameryn aside with a sly grin and showed him what was in the money pouch at his waist. Expecting to find a respectable heap of gold, Sameryn was impressed when he instead found a fine-looking bunch of green and purple pipe-flower.

Sameryn grinned back mischievously and knew the ride to Maravílla had just gone from an arduous chore to a miniature vacation.

“Do you have enough for the trip,” called a low feminine voice from behind, and Tul paled as he whipped around to find his mother, High Priest Tullymar II, stepping out through a salon in the back of the manor.

Realizing his mother couldn’t have seen what he had been showing Sameryn, Tul instantly composed himself and, without skipping a beat, replied, “Perhaps we could do with a few more crowns. I’ve heard food and board is at a premium in the city these days.”

The High Priest sighed and shook her head as she handed a small handful of gold coins to her son from somewhere in her white-trimmed black robes.

“Are you sure you don’t want an escort?” Tullymar started. “I hear of more trouble on the Blood Road from practically every other missive I receive from the city.”

“Mother, you know I can handle myself and Sameryn if a few brigands make the mistake of accosting us,” he said, patting the sword at his side. And Sameryn knew it wasn’t just fanciful boasting.

Although Tul was a bit of a goof and enjoyed rebelling against his mother, Sameryn knew that the years of mounted combat training his mother forced upon him must have left some impression. Even the extensive instructions on courtly behavior and politicking weren’t completely lost on him. Though he chose to ignore them often.

“Besides,” Tul continued, “You know those missives always exaggerate. Scribe Halyn loves to embellish everything.” He mimicked the contents of what must have been her last missive in a childishly lofty voice, “*The crops were devastated by fyrebeetles in Mansig. Without any aid the province will be bereft of order by moon’s end.* Well, I heard from Jak at the pub last week that he had just met a trader from Mansig and…”

He cut off abruptly as his mother’s eyebrows came down in a dark frown, and he realized his mistake.

“I – I mean,” Tul stuttered, attempting to backtrack, “as I was *passing by* the pub. Old Jak was just outside, having a smoke and…”

He trailed off as his mother raised her hand to her brow, clutching her forehead as if dealing with a massive headache. Which Sameryn figured she very well might be.

“Truly, mother,” he continued bravely, though Sameryn thought his friend should just leave it alone. “It was as I was coming back from the tailor just last week. You remember, I had gone to be fitted for–”

“Enough,” Tullymar whispered.

“But–” Tul tried to finish.

“I said ENOUGH!” she exclaimed, causing the grooms to look up at the High Priest with worried frowns. They finished tightening the last straps and hastily tapped their brows and hearts with a murmured, “From order, life,” then scurried off, clearly hoping to avoid witnessing any part of what was to come.

The High Priest had regained her composure, however. “We will discuss your sins when you return from Maravílla. I don’t wish to delay young Sameryn any further, and I’m sure he’s eager to be off.” She flashed a warm smile at Sameryn, who bowed politely.

The smile vanished as she turned back toward the manor and barked, “Josophell, Aronin!” Two soldiers trotted over from their posts to stand at attention before her. “My son and his companion are journeying into Maravílla for the week. By the Blood Road. They are delayed and will be leaving promptly. I want you two on your mounts and after them as soon as the morning shift ends. I expect you to catch up to them by midday. You will protect them with your lives, should they encounter any trouble along the way.”

Tul looked as if he wanted to argue, but blessedly, he kept his mouth shut. The two guards, splendid in their ebony-accented steel plates, nodded grimly and touched their sword hilts, then their hearts, in a traditional Otuist salute.

“From life, war,” they intoned in unison, speaking the first mantra of the White God’s creed.

“From death, growth,” the High Priest replied, speaking the first mantra of the Black God’s creed.

Tullymar II gave her son one last warning glare, then strode back to her manor. With that, the soldiers left to finish their patrol.

Tul glanced apologetically at Sameryn, who merely shrugged, and the two made their way to their destriers in silence.

Chapter

4

Tul glanced over at Sameryn, trying to catch his friend’s eye as they trotted their mounts down the Olde Road. The dirt path was all that remained of grand highway which had wound from the southern border of Elorendhen, the country which had been annexed by the Ixpántan Empire over a century ago, and through the province of Lindhen before lazily curving eastward toward the ancient city of Khanin, which had been razed to make room for Maravílla.

Now however, with the advent of Imperial rule, the Olde Road had fallen into disrepair, as the arrow-straight Blood Road had been extended through the new territory, slicing through great swaths of the Olde Road, leaving those pieces to be reclaimed by the Black God.

Tul finally got Sameryn’s attention and raised an eyebrow at him with a questioning grin. His friend rolled his eyes and nodded, grinning back at him, and the two pulled to the side of the road.

Tul began to pull two wooden pipes from his cloak, when to his surprise, he noticed Sameryn already had his own in hand. A fantastic glass piece with swirls of brightly colored crystal twisting together in a way that made each one impossible to follow. Obviously, Bon’s creation. He made a mental note to ask Bon what it would take to get one of those for himself.

But he didn’t hesitate to put his spare wooden bowl away and pull the musky pouch from his belt to begin packing his bowl. He then tossed it to Sameryn, who caught it lithely and began the same ritual.

Having packed their bowls, Tul produced a steel striker, which he used to light both their pipes, before tucking it away.

He took a quick puff, then grabbed his waterskin, preparing to proffer it to Sameryn.

Right on cue, Sameryn began coughing, as he wasn’t as used to the harsh smoke, and Tul offered the skin to Sameryn, who grinned in between coughs and took it gratefully.

“Am I so predictable,” said Tul, nodding toward Sameryn’s pipe.

“The day you stop smo–smoking is the day I work up the courage to ask Marella for a cuddle at Khin’s Hill,” Sameryn said between coughs. Khin’s Hill was the premier location for young lovers to steal a few private moments away from disapproving eyes.

“Oh, come on now,” said Tul. “I actually might quit smoking someday, while you and Marella…” he trailed off jokingly and received a lighthearted elbow in the ribs for it.

Marella was a girl two years Sameryn’s junior with whom he’d been besotted since her family had moved in from the city a few years back.

Personally, Tul didn’t see what the big deal was. Sure, she wasn’t too bad to look at, if you were fond of the wide eyes and light skin shared by all true-blooded Ixpántanos – he himself was mixed – but her once noble family had been driven to leave the city due to bankruptcy. He couldn’t figure out what Sameryn saw in her. Maybe it had to do with her voice. Sameryn was a musician, and he was probably looking for a partner to perform with.

Feeling content, his minds warm and fuzzy, the two tapped out their spent bowls and continued onward down the withered remains of the Olde Road.

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By midday, they had made it to the Blood Road. A stretch of unbroken, unerring, solid black rock, it was smooth as granite, though it was certainly neither granite nor any other mineral Tul knew of. The stone could not be broken by conventional means, whole companies of cavalry travelling by it without leaving a single scuff mark upon the smooth surface.

The means by which the road was created were unknown to him, and it was a secret that likely not even his mother knew. However, if one looked deeply enough into the glossy dark surface, on a very bright day, one could make out the faintest tinge of color. It was not truly black, but a deep, deep red, and it was this subtle ruby hue that gave the Blood Road its ominous name.

Before they crossed the threshold onto the road, they broke for lunch. Finding some flattish boulders to rest upon, Tul unwrapped a small pile of fluffy, well-seasoned flatbreads from his provisions, while Sameryn supplied a pair of smoked pork sausages. They wolfed down the meal contentedly, Tul sharing his friend’s penchant for waging quick and decisive wars against his meals.

The flatbreads slaughtered and sausages thoroughly routed, Tul prepared to remount, but Sameryn caught his sleeve.

“Forgetting something?” his friend asked with a raised eyebrow.

“What the guards?” said Tul, “Mother said they’ll catch up with us. Though, come to think of it, I’m shocked they haven’t yet. What do you think–”

But he cut off as he noticed Sameryn holding out the charm he’d pulled out from under his shirt. Dangling from a leather cord, it was a simple piece of painted steel, only an inch across, in the shape of two hollow triangles, one black, one white, fused at one corner so that they pointed inward, toward each other.

Tul sighed but obliged his friend. They each went down on one knee before the Blood Road, and Sameryn began the ancient Otuist *duosancta*, a prayer which required two people to properly recite.

“Let the Black God reign!” proclaimed Sameryn.

“From life, war,” said Tul, touching heart, then sword hilt.

“From death, growth,” Sameryn responded, touching hilt, then earth.

“From war, order.” Hilt, then brow.

“From growth, chaos.” Earth, then heart.

“From order, life.” Brow, then heart.

“From chaos, death.” Heart, then Hilt.

“Let the White God reign,” Tul finished.

The two stood solemnly, then mounted their destriers, and crossed the threshold onto the Blood Road.

As they crossed, Tul felt like his body was being stretched, as if the universe was tugging him backward, attempting to pull him from his mount. It was over in an instant, however, and the two began trotting down the smooth, dark surface of the Blood Road.

The sun was getting low in the sky, and Tul could tell Sameryn was getting extremely anxious. “They should’ve caught up by now,” his friend muttered for the eleventh time.

“I’m telling you, she must have called them off. She was just making a show for the servants, pretending she has some control over me. Does it all the time,” he assured his friend. “Come on, let’s have one more bowl before we get to the city.”

Sameryn agreed, though by the way he kept looking back down the road after they finished, Tul was fairly certain it had only made his friend more anxious. They were getting ready to mount up for the last time that night, when they both paused at the sound of a distant gallop.

“About time,” Tul exclaimed, turning around. He was shocked it had taken this long for his mother’s soldiers to arrive. His shock was overshadowed however, by confusion, as he noted the odd scene before him.

Instead of two mounted knights, what they saw was a single horse, with a slumped figure astride it.

“Mount,” said Tul, feeling his stomach drop, though as he turned to do so, he saw Sameryn was already climbing into his saddle. They trotted forward toward the black courser, which was tittering nervously, and finally got a good look at the rider. It was indeed Josophell, one of the guards her mother had sent, though he looked oddly stiff in his slumped posture. Once he was close enough, Tul began to suspect why. A thin layer of frost seemed to have condensed on the man.

“Shit,” Tul hissed, pulling closer. He heard Sameryn empty his stomach, and almost did the same. “Josophell,” he tried to say, though nothing came out. He pulled up closer, the training he’d scoffed at for years tumbling around in his mind, and felt at the man’s neck, checking for a pulse.

He knew it was hopeless, but checked anyway. Rock hard.

The man was frozen solid.

“From death, growth,” Tul whispered to the icy corpse.

“Is he…” Sameryn asked shakily, wiping the sick from his chin.

“Ice. Demon’s work” he said, regaining his composure as his thoughts ordered themselves. “We need to leave. Now. The city’s not far. Whoever did this probably won’t risk getting too close to the gates.”

Sameryn nodded, though he looked as if he might be sick again. They galloped onward, and Josophell’s mount, clearly relieved to be among other beasts he recognized, followed closely behind them.

Night had fallen by the time they neared the gates, and Tul could make out guards pointing and exchanging quick words, one of them yelling to another who ran into the guard tower to find a superior, who appeared by the time they neared.

The soldiers approached cautiously, hands on hilts, as Tul neared. Before the commanding officer, whom Tul had identified immediately, could say a word, Tul pulled up his left sleeve, displaying the tattoo of the same dual-triangular symbol hanging around Sameryn’s neck, and spoke imperiously:

“My name is Tullymar the Third, son of High Priest Tullymar the Second. This is Sameryn, son of none. Our two guards were accosted some time not long ago on the Blood Road by a sorcerer, perhaps more than one. We are unsure of exactly when or where. One, Aronin, son of Arnold, is unaccounted for. The other, Josophell, son of none, dead before you. By the authority of High Priest Tullymar the Second, I conscript your guard into her service, that you might bring whoever dared break the King’s Code to justice.”

With one smooth motion, he drew his sword and levelled it at the commanding officer. Without hesitation, the officer dropped to one knee and drew his thumb across the blade’s edge, intoning, “From war, order,” and smeared the blood across his brow.

The other soldiers knelt and repeated the refrain, touching their sword hilts, then brows. They righted themselves quickly, then trotted to the nearby stable to acquire mounts.

At this, Tul noticed Sameryn, who had been watching the affair with wide eyes.

Sameryn stared back at Tul, who was filled with a determination Sameryn had never before seen in his friend. Gone was the lighthearted, mildly arrogant joker he’d always known. In his place stood an ordained priest of Ixpánta, thirsting to run down the heretics who dared insult his High Priest and challenge his faith with their witchcraft.

The soldiers gathered their arms stoically, ready for their hunt, for the greatest crime against their King had been committed this night.

Someone, likely still walking free under the shroud of darkness, had performed magic within the borders of Ixpánta, which meant they were possessed by a Demon.

There was no greater offense against the King’s Code, which was a simple document. It stated the following:

Any citizen who suspects that they or someone they know has been possessed by a Demon is to inform the King’s Inquisition immediately.

Any citizen who suspects that they or someone they know has been possessed by a Demon and does not inform the King’s Inquisition immediately is to be hung.

Any citizen found engaging in Demonic worship is to be burned.

So naturally, nobody in the Empire, possibly aside from those who could perform it themselves, knew a damn thing about magic. The citizens of the Empire would probably not believe it existed at all, if not for the tales of sudden disappearances of friends and family who had been unfortunate enough to draw an Inquisitor’s attention, and extremely rare occurrences like what had happened tonight.

One soldier, an ensign no older than Sameryn, proffered a torch to Tul, who took it without a word. Sameryn shivered and looked away from the flame. Another soldier brought Tul a spare leather jerkin and chain vest, which he donned just as silently, pulling off his cloak to make room for the armor. Tul trotted over to Sameryn and handed him the bundled cloak, which by the smell of it, also contained his pipe and flower.

“Get inside the city friend, there’s no reason to involve you in this. Without plate, I’ll make a point not to get involved in any close combat. The men should be able to handle whoever did this.” Though Sameryn could tell by his friend’s grimace that he wasn’t entirely confident in those words, with Demon spawn out in the darkness.

But Tul turned to survey the ranks that were forming swiftly before him, all mounted in ebony armor, the white trim gleaming by their torchlight.

The whispers of overlapping prayers blended in cool air.

Sameryn, who had virtually no training with the slightly curved sword belted to his waist, could hardly argue with his friend’s advice. The unsharpened blade was a religious artifact, not something he’d ever intended to use in battle.

His training had been with the kindwyn, and it would be a poor tool for war.

As he prepared to make his way to the front of the group, Tul turned toward Sameryn a last time. “I’ll find you at Marra’s inn tomorrow. I know I don’t have to warn you not to take the Blood Road back alone. Ensign!” he turned to bark at the same man who had given him the torch. The man froze, then turned in a brisk motion, almost tripping. “If I do not return by the morrow after next, ensure that my man Sameryn has an escort ready to return him safely to Lindhen. He will be transporting important goods that are of principal importance to the province.” At this, he gave Sameryn a quick wink, and Sameryn was relieved to see some sign of his old friend.

The ensign nodded and began to say, “From order, life…” but Tul had already turned and started galloping back down the road, the small company following closely behind him.

“Can I…get you anything, sir?” asked the ensign, looking up at Sameryn with uncertainty in his eyes. He clearly had no idea who Sameryn was, but had assumed, based on his proximity to Tul, that he might be another man of high rank. Sameryn shook his head. “No, I’m fine,” he said.

Although it felt like several hours, he realized it must have only been about an hour since they had stopped by the road to smoke that last time.

Now conscious of the smell that was probably emanating from the rich cloak he held, he turned his mount away from the ensign, and made his way into the city. He tossed everything but the cloak into the first alleyway he found.

Chapter

5

Sameryn finally got to his room at what he estimated was two past midnight. Old Tin had a clock he claimed was true, but Sameryn suspected it was an hour or so behind, so his patrons might stay and enjoy an extra round or four.

Too lazy to deal with his sweaty underclothes, Sameryn stripped bare before snatching his wool blanket off the floor and crawling onto his cozy pallet.

He pulled the blanket up around him; despite the forge’s warmth still dampening his brow, he knew he’d need all that warmth once autumn’s chill settled into the room.

He closed his eyes and, exhausted from the night’s work, drifted off to sleep.

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When he woke, the first thing he noticed was his breath crystalizing in a cloud above him.

The second thing he noticed was that he was no longer lying on his pallet in Bon’s house.

The third thing he noticed was that he was still utterly naked.

It was not the first dream he’d had recently where he was fully conscious of the fact that he was dreaming.

A waking dream, some called them.

Some people were prone to waking dreams, and Sameryn figured he must be one of those people. He’d only had a handful, and only remembered a couple of them vaguely. The most recent one he’d had was the source of the half-remembered song he’d been trying to reconjure over the last few days.

He stood up and looked around. It was a forest, to be sure, but not one he recognized.

By the lush foliage on the trees surrounding him, he figured that it shouldn’t be so cold. He was used to Lindhen’s autumn cold leeching the vibrant color from the *zumei* leaves, and the great junipers’ once bright spring growth ripening to a dark green in preparation for the winter snows.

The trees here held vibrant hues of green and gold, and many appeared to be in full bloom. Though, as he looked closely, he realized the trees weren’t quite like those he recognized.

There were some similarities between these trees and the ones he knew, but most were simply *off* in some way. He noticed here a stout tree with the unmistakable leaves of an oak, but with smooth bark, as if carefully sanded and polished. There, a maple, but with leaves with sharp edges that he somehow knew would draw blood if he ran his fingers across them.

He bent down to examine an odd red mushroom cap that appeared to be floating a few inches off the ground.

“*Siria’du me kansa, ir’bakta?*”

Sameryn spun around.

A woman faced him, wearing a single flowing garment of white linen, and a curious expression on her youthful face.

Sameryn had never seen anyone like her.

Her skin was a pastel violet, her eyes glossy pits of onyx, with no whites. Sameryn could see pointed canines poking out from under her upper lip, like a house cat might have. She was beautiful, if not a bit unnerving. Those eyes were simply *odd.*

Suddenly reminded of his nudity, he did the only sensible thing a fit young boy might do in a situation like this, and struck a pose, leaning against a nearby tree.

This was *his* dream after all, and if he was going to be fully conscious for it, he knew *exactly* how he’d like to spend his time in this odd forest. And frankly, he’d appreciate the warmth.

The woman tilted her head slightly as she looked him up and down.

“*Ume dichu Narzha, du tinse?*”

The words came from her, though her mouth didn’t move as she spoke. Still, Sameryn knew they were *her* words somehow.

He didn’t know how to respond to this… question? Was this not the point when the fair maiden was supposed to lead him to a secluded pond, or possibly a lush cave, and they spent the rest of the night in each other’s warm embrace?

He shivered, and began to feel like a dolt holding his pose in the frigid air. Figuring the cold couldn’t be doing his sexual appeal any favors, he stopped leaning on the tree and folded his arms across his chest.

“Do you speak the common tongue?” he asked.

She stared at him for a long moment, and then her lips moved for the first time as she tasted the words, “Common. Tongue.”

As if she was getting used to the feel of words in her mouth.

“Yeah, the common tongue. The Ixpántan language? The language I’m speaking right now?…Who are you?”

“Who, I, you” she said quietly to herself, appearing to concentrate intently on the words.

Sameryn didn’t like the way she repeated the words, as if they were pieces of a puzzle.

He was going to turn when she mirrored his question, “Who are you?”

“My name is Sameryn. And yours?”

“Sameryn…” she said, musingly again.

*This is useless*.

He realized he was probably freezing because he hadn’t pulled his blanket up before falling asleep. He wanted to wake up and adjust it, but he couldn’t rouse himself from this dream. In fact, he couldn’t even break the woman’s deep black gaze. There was something about the depth of those eyes that was keeping his own dark brown eyes trained intently on hers.

“You are Sameryn,” she said simply.

“Yes…I said that already…who are you?”

“Why are you here?” she said, ignoring his question.

Sameryn was now quite disturbed by her ability to speak his language, but why should he be? This was still *his* dream, after all. “This is my dream. Why wouldn’t I be here?”

“This is not your dream. This is my prison. Why are you here?” she said again, her brows now furrowed menacingly.

He felt a shiver run down his spine at the expression, one totally unrelated to the cold, and decided he would forgo any intimacy with this dream woman even if she tried to initiate it. A prospect which he felt was now extremely unlikely at this point. This dream was *odd*. Odder than the others he’d been having recently.

Still unable to break her gaze, he took a step backward.

She matched him with a step forward.

“It *is* your fault I am here,” she insisted.

“What–of course it is. I dreamt you here.”

She cocked her head at him curiously, and began walking toward him in earnest. He now found himself completely unable to move his legs.

“Are your people safe now? Do they curse our names? Do they worship us? Are my brothers all dead? My sisters? Have they saved your worlds?” More quietly, to herself, she added, “Have they conquered them?”

Sameryn began to feel genuinely worried by her words. This dream made no sense to him.

“I–I don’t…who are your people?” Sameryn stammered.

“Dead then,” she whispered, though she was close enough now that Sameryn could hear it. Her eyes became glossy at the words, and Sameryn felt a profound sadness settle in his heart, as if their locked gazes were portals that allowed her despair to leak over into him.

“I would see your world, Sameryn. See what their deaths brought for your people. Will you let me see?”

Sameryn didn’t know how to respond to this. Why couldn’t he wake up?

“Please?” she asked, her eyes now truly watering.

“Of course!” Sameryn blurted out, wanting nothing more than to help her in any way he could.

This was absurd. He was talking to a dream. He was *consoling* a dream.

At this, she smiled for the first time, an expression which only served to make her dark eyes appear even more unnerving. But it was gone in an instant. She closed the distance to Sameryn, close enough now that her scent began to ensnare him as surely as her gaze. The scents of pine needles, honey, and charred wood blended together in a way that sent another shiver down his spine.

“Thank you, Sameryn,” she said quietly, a look of pure sorrow framing those black eyes once more. She reached out and pressed her palm to his chest, their gazes still locked, her hand unusually hot. The heat of it began to radiate through him, warming his cold limbs.

At the same time, he felt a deep anguish which seemed to seep from her eyes *into* him, building slowly into a river of passion. His own eyes watered, and he felt his own sorrow quickly surpass anything he’d ever felt. It was unbearable. How could she stand there when there was no light left in the world? When there was nothing but that loneliness?

Though some part of him knew it was absurd, he knew that had someone pressed a razor into his palm at that moment, he would have slit his own throat to escape that pain.

Her gaze seemed to drill deeper into him, anger and self-hatred now joining the torrent of sadness and loneliness, welling up inside him, filling him.

“Stop,” he said weakly. “Please.”

“I need to see,” she whispered.

“Anything,” he tried to say, but all that left him was a sob.

For a moment, he thought he sensed hesitation from her, but it passed, replaced by a more intense resolve.

The flood of emotion was somehow still accelerating, and new emotions joined the torrent. Confusion. Anxiety. Guilt. Lust. Joy.

The latter was no reprieve from the flood of emotions. They scoured his identity away, dwarfing his sixteen years of life experiences with what felt like thousands upon thousands of years of existence.

He awoke back in his room, still sobbing, and utterly oblivious to his urine soaked blanket.

As he wept, he could think of nothing but the overwhelming sorrow the dream had left within him. He wept until his tear ducts ran dry and his sides ached. Until he could no longer swallow.

He wept until the sun rose, and the roosters began their morning calls.

He wept until the noon-bells rang and he could hear Bon going about the usual day’s activities downstairs.

It was the saddest dream he’d ever had.

He remembered nothing of it.

Yet, it was the saddest dream he’d ever had.

Chapter

3

“You look like shit, lad,” Bon said, dumping his dirty bowl into the soapy wooden tub in the corner of the kitchen.

Sameryn looked up at the man and scowled.

“You know, one can get *too much* sleep? I know I worked you hard last night, but it doesn’t do you any good to sleep in so late.”

Sameryn grunted, cutting into his pan fried pork sausage and plums with a table knife and two-pronged fork.

“What are your plans for the day? Still gonna see Marella?”

Sameryn nodded, though he was struggling to muster the energy to bring the first bite to his mouth.

When Sameryn was young, perhaps seven or eight, he had

Or rather, looking past the plate.

“Well, if you’re gonna grunt like that you can go join your fellow grunters as soon as you finish.”

With that, Bon began heading back to his forge.

*Stab him*.

Sameryn blinked, fork frozen in place halfway to his mouth.

“What did you say?” Sameryn asked?

Bon turned. “I said when you’re done with that food I just lovingly prepared for you, you can go out and…what’s wrong, boy?” Bon’s look changed to genuine concern in a heartbeat. “You alright, son?”

Sameryn was shaking.

“Hey, what’s wrong?”

Sameryn looked up at Bon, who had rushed back and was pressing a wrinkled hand to his forehead.

“It’s nothing, I just thought…” Sameryn didn’t know how to finish the sentence.

“Just thought…?” Bon prompted, brow still furrowed.

“I just had a bad dream last night,” said Sameryn.

Bon frowned, then sighed understandingly.

Sameryn realized how he must have interpreted that sentence.

“No, not about…them. You know I haven’t dreamt of them since I was a boy.”

“You’re stilla boy, lad,” Bon said gently.

“You know what I mean,” said Sameryn a bit impatiently, “I can’t remember what the dream was about. None of it. Just that it felt horrible.”

“We all have dreams like that sometimes,” said Bon, “Nothing you can do but pick yourself up and move on. Whatever it was about, it can’t touch you here while you’re awake. Besides, you can’t afford to dwell on it today. Aren’t you seeing Marella tonight?” Bon winked suggestively.

“Ugh, don’t do that,” said Sameryn, “Just…don’t. Besides, you know I’m not *seeing* her. We’re just gonna practice her song for the Nahvi festival. I don’t know why she feels we need to practice anymore; she sings it perfectly, and it’s an easy enough piece to play.”

“Yes, it’s a mystery,” said Bon.

The sarcasm was lost on Sameryn, however.

Just like that, Sameryn seemed to forget about his dream, and Bon nodded to himself. “You can save cleaning the pens for tomorrow if you’d like. It’d be a shame for you to drag pig shit into Marella’s rooms. Just make sure they’re fed and have plenty of water. They’ll probably be fine since it rained a few days ago, but you know how Bitha can drink like a camel.”

“A camel?” said Sameryn.

“Yeah, like from the Ebara Epochs, remember Duna and Intin road camels through the desert? The odd beasts that were always spitting?”

“Oh, yeah, that’s right.” Sameryn remembered the story, though it had been a few years since he’d read the Ebara Epochs, a book of short stories from the Koren Empire that Bon kept in his study.

“I’ll be in the forge, call me if you need me.”

Bon headed back to the forge, and Sameryn quickly devoured the rest of his sausage and plums.

Despite Bon’s generous offer, Sameryn knew that if he was going to do a thing, he might as well do it right. He saw to the pigs’ needs, shoveling the muck out and feeding them slop. Indeed, Bitha appeared to have drunk a sizeable portion of the water, and Sameryn pumped water from the well and made sure they were well watered.

He was glad he hadn’t washed up that morning, as by the end of the work, the smells of stale sweat and pig shit were competing to see which could make him feel more uncomfortable. He went upstairs and washed up thoroughly, using an expensive bar of soap with pine and juniper scents that he only pulled out for special occasions.

And meeting Marella was always a special occasion.