

Weeks worth of walk was no stranger to his feet. Calloused and sore, he arrived at a tiny resthouse that was built almost serendipitously at the side of the road to nowhere. The resthouse was covered in sheets of autumn leaves and seemed as though it as it has seen better days to say the least, for it was birthed from shabby workmanship and as well kept as a drunkard's house. The weak rays of the autumn sun shone upon both its sides, where overgrown vines and sickly green moss competed for light. The facade was simple and lacked any architecture, and a part of the wooden door were black rotting wooden planks. Any nobility passing by may very well declare its very existence an insult to their sight and order it to be burnt down- only that no nobles would trod upon these backwater roads.

Despite the discouraging appearances, the prospect of civilized pleasures were ample enough of a reason to hasten his weary feet. He headed towards the resthouse, a hint of bounce in his footsteps betraying his cold expressions. His muddy boots scrunched the crisped yellow autumn leaves to a satisfying and rhythmic tune, there were satisfaction in his footsteps.

Yet there was no pretense. In this time of madness, time of disdain, time of contempt, he knew better and prepared himself. Weeks of wilderness and solitude has not robbed him of his guard. He swung open the doors of the resthouse in a foreign land. A small number of eyes set their sights on his intrusion. Foul whispers about his mother and dirty looks filled with disgust were thrown his way but he concentrated on the sweet smell of ale and cheese hanged in the air, seemingly inviting him deeper into the bar.

As he did so many times before, he ignored the insults and gazes of the locals and trudged straight towards the keeper. The old wooden floor groaned in protest with every step he took. Big claims were made by tiny men, about how they could redecorate his face with considerable disadvantages in a brawl, a few dirty curses were spat out, but they were neither rock nor steel. Words were words, looks were looks- he ignored their childish attempts to jibe. For he knew that he was lucky the patrons made it clear rather peacefully- he was unwelcomed. Other folks might have been not as civilized.

The man made way to the counter and pulled a wooden stool. The keeper made no effort to hide his beady gaze as he clean a wet mug with a dry cloth. It was the keeper who made the first attempt at conversation. "Armed and armoured." He started with a voice similar to a mouse trying to squeak as soft and raspily as possible. "Not everyday a stranger shows up round this parts. Hankering to buy?". It was his habit to observe first, and speak later. The keeper was a bald and lean man. Neither tall nor handsome, just a humble innkeeper, and he looked the part, no more no less. The most that could say of him was his sharp chin to match his sharp opportunistic glance. The man's wallet worried in the keeper's ravenous gaze.

The first words uttered in weeks came in a far lower and coarser voice than the keeper. "Where am I?". The innkeeper bent over to store the mug in the shelves beneath the counter. He flapped the towel gently and lay it on the counter.

"Conversations before an empty stomach can wait, Master. May I interest you in today's meal?"

The keeper said without breaking eye contact, as he wiped the counter in front of the man. They exchanged a moment silence, and he knew the keeper was adamant. He was cleaning the table, inviting the man for a meal, at the expense of whatever coins he was carrying with him. But as with most businessman, information can be easily bribed for. In anyways, he was famished.

"Give me the finest ale, steak, bread and cheese." he ordered extravagantly. He placed his two palms on the table and pushed himself upright, taking in a deep breath, as if he was ready to battle. The keeper knew what he was implying and he started on the offense.

"You seem beaten from the road. How does some pottage stew going with bread and cheese sounds like?" The keeper was determined to squeeze as much coin possible.

"Sounds like more clinks of coin to me. How much?"

"Everything for 5 leaves."

He chuckled. "I assume you're not offering Chiffjorn and a slice of Blanc Royale"

"Of course not, Master. I open but a mere roadside shop." The smile and gaze remained unbroken.

"3 leaves." he leaned forwards to challenge the keeper as he tapped his two fingers to each syllable he uttered.

"Surely you jest, Master. I won't be able to feed myself, let alone my family with that." The keeper said. The man stood up from his chair and began to turn. "A moment, master!" The man, whose back was towards the keeper, smiled briefly. The keeper paused for a moment before continuing. "3 leaves and 8 sliver."

The man pondered on the offer and he made his decision rather quickly. He took out the payment from a small jute bag and handed over to the keeper, who bowed politely as he received the payment. His eyes sparkled in delight as he felt the burden of the coin weighing down his hands. The keeper recounted the payment obsessively, before regaining his composure.

In a last effort to legally obtain the man's wallet, he asked "Mayhaps, you'd like some ration for the journey ahead?"

"I'll consider it over a full belly." The man replied.

"Well," a flicker of hope shine in the keeper's eye. "Thank you, Master. Please await shortly as I prepare your food." The keeper said as he retreated behind the doors. Indeed, the keeper arrived shortly with the food. The keeper laid the food on the counter, in front of him. A half loaf of bread, a miserable amount of rather delicious looking steak and slices of baked tomatoes with a moderate helping of cheese. The bowl of pottage was a vivid chartreuse color, slices of mushroom, chunks of carrots and clumps of barley grains floating within. As expected, meatless.

The keeper passed him a mug of ale and smiled proudly at him, saying. "Tomatoes on the house, Master. Please, enjoy your meal."

Looking at the food, he knew that the tomatoes was probably going bad, and that the keeper had already, deliberately include the price of the tomatoes in the payment. But he made no comments. 3 leaves and 8 sliver, the man definitely still had earned quite a bit. He took the wooden spoon and tasted the stew, and tore a piece of bread to go with it. Mediocre, but he made no complains- for this was the best meal he had in weeks. Oh how he missed the simple joy of having a warm belly. However, his expression did not betray his emotions. He kept a straight face and continue eating till the food was gone. Finally, he reached out for the ale and drank.

"My belly is full now. So, where am I?"

Ever hopeful, the keeper tried one more time to squeeze out money from the man. "Master, maybe you can tell me about the dry ration first?"

"Thinking takes time- one that I still need for an answer."

The keeper figured that he had already earned money from the man, and it was better to play it diplomatically. With his lips loosened by the coins, he was finally ready to talk, the keeper said "You're quite a distance from any city. Mayhaps you arrived here from Dumavale?"

"Dumavale? No, I came from Ricton." He replied.

"Oh my goodness." The keeper gasped. "Ricton is several tables away, however did you arrive here?"

"On foot, nonetheless." He replied.

A thud interrupted the keeper before he could speak. He looked to the side to see a scrawny and slightly tipsy looking man, whom just slammed his mug on the table. "Pardon, but did you mention you walked from Ricton to here?" The man asked.

"That's right, I left Ricton three weeks ago." he replied.

"Master! Mayhaps you've seen a lady in the forest earlier?" He asked with a sudden interest. His eyes lit with a flicker of hope.

"No." He replied simply. The hope in his eyes quenched harshly upon hearing his response.

"Master, the woods here are unsafe, they're plagued by creatures not of this world." The keeper said.

"I know. Its infested with Ghouls, Nesnas,-" He barely began before being cut by the two man.

"Master! We do not speak the name of the unholy! Lest we attract their attention!" The keeper

remarked sharply to stop him from speaking.

The man flinched not. "Their names don't attract them- rotting meat does."

"Oh master, speaking of the unclean brings misfortune like spreading grime on clean sheets! One don't go attracting all manners of foul creature."

"You're superstitious. I see them as a hunter sees a rabbit- prey." he said to the disapproval of both of them. He unclipped a pouch and threw a bloodied golden ring on the counter. Engraved upon it was the name- Melissa.

"Melissa..." The keeper and the man looked carefully. They looked at each other and immediately knew. "This land's mistress!"

"I saw her south of here, slightly less than a week ago. She was a Draugr- Black, swollen and carried with her the stench of decay, furiously protecting her trove of treasure." He said.

The keeper and the scrawny man stared at him flabbergasted. The scrawny man leaned backwards to look at the worn scabbard hanging inconspicuously at his waist. "You're a dangerous man." He shook his head distantly. "Maybe... maybe you can help me..." He mumbled to himself, before suddenly lunging towards the man, tugging tightly onto his epaulets. "Please... help me, Master!"

He glared menacingly at the scrawny man, clearly offended. The scrawny man let go quickly, dropped to his knee and groveled. "I'm sorry Master. Please, I'm desperate, desperate enough to do anything. If you're strong enough to survive the infested road of Shamuta, you surely would be able to help me!" The man was slightly disgusted. It was shameful how the scrawny man was acting, bawling, kneeling on the ground.

"Stand, then speak." the man ordered in mild annoyance.

"Seanan... My dear, sweet Seanan..." the man mumbled repeatedly, spacing out. The barkeeper spoke on his behalf. "These woods, master, they're not for the living. We dispose of our dead due east from here."

The man crossed his arms and shifted a bit, showing no intention of replying, rather, to let the barkeeper continue.

"It's not safe to linger there, for those blasphemous creatures plagues our cemeteries. The best we can do is to dump our dead inside the woods. While most of the corpse are eaten by whatever creature stalking the woods, but on unholy nights, fresh corpses reanimates into creatures of foul." The barkeeper took a short breather. The scrawny man spoke softly, and miserably. "Seanan, she never had eyes for me, none. For her heart was captivated by that. Accursed. Whoreson." Anger lit his lifeless eyes as he enunciated each word with intent that could scare rabbits to death. His mood swung rapidly "My heart bleeds for her and that conman

she calls love. A whoremonger, that Baldwin, patronizing and dealing with tramps. He's been cheating Seanan of her coin! She's been hopelessly captured by the net of lies he's spun." He started getting emotional and started crying.

"Miguel, its okay." The keeper consoled him.

"Let me guess... this Baldwin, he died horribly and Seanan went into the woods to find him." the man said.

"Two days ago, we were visited by a strange lady that made everyone nervous. She was a syedieor, and a skilled at that. When she arrived, she offered her services to the nearby villagers in exchange for commodities. She accepted payments in trades, for she was not interested in Karensi- Leaves and Sliver was nothing to her. Many a villagers were suspicious, but there were those that were in possession of cheap trinkets or magical plant that caught her attention. She was rather assertive and made them offers that they can't refuse. But the more she coerced people into trading for her services, the more the villagers felt that she was honest, to say the least. Soon, people began approaching her for abilities. Husbands asked her to make their women glow and other men asked for plunder. On sunny days, children would ask for rain and thunder to avoid chores, and she would occasionally and whimsically abide by their childish request. We soon found out that she would not judge, a request is a request, no matter how nefarious. We're all good folks, but Baldwin's enemies were aplenty, and they engaged her services. Dying would be too easy, they said, and they requested her to torture Baldwin eternally." The keeper replied.

"So he was cursed with malicious intention."

"It was as you said master- he was turned. He was cursed to never be satisfied by that which he lust for the most." the keeper said. "Seanan, she learnt of what has had conspired. It was said that in order to reverse the spell, she was willing to give all that she had for him, believing that true love can break the curse, but he was a man with a heart of stone. He only lust and hunger- not love."

"I take it that the lady has left the village?"

"Yes, unfortunately, cursing Baldwin was her last request. She vanished from the village three nights ago."

"What did this Baldwin turn into?" The man asked.

"With all respect, good Master, I would die rather than know. But, whispers from those who saw says that he looked- dead. Skeletal but covered in rotting flesh, filled with putrid pus- as though the dead came alive. His body looked twisted and he supposedly ran off into woods four legged."

"So he wasn't turned into a draugr... Interesting... So tell me, did anything unusual happened lately?"

"You mean him? Not a single soul have seen Baldwin ever since he fled." He answered hopefully to help, but it wasn't the answer the man sought.

"No, not him, but the local area- was there a large animal spotted nearby? Did the area become more arid? Things like that."

"Oh... Now that you mentioned it, it seemed like the beasts of the woods have been more hostile lately. And people who ventured into the woods occasionally come back with some sand in their boots, that seemingly disappear after a few days time."

"Sand? Tell me, was he killed- did he die? Was he dead before being raised as a monster?" The man asked.

"I'm not sure your meaning, Master. He was turned into a monster." The keeper replied, puzzled.

"I believed he turned into either a wight or a ghoul. I need to know if he turned into a wight, or a ghoul. A wight is still living; the curse still can be reversed." The man replied.

His reply was met with an extreme outburst. "Reversed?! That man does not deserve to live! It doesn't matter if he is a human, wight or ghoul, he deserves to die!" Miguel spat on the floor in fury. The germaphobic keeper glanced at the floor.

The man looked to the Miguel and said "Then, I take it that you want me to kill him?"

"Kill him? If possible, torture that beast." he said venomously as a grim cold anger boiled in him.

"I may consider helping, but I don't work for free." The man replied.

He hesitated as though as reality just came back to him. "Ah, yes. But of course..." he said, snapping out of his focused anger. "I don't have much to pay you with, Master. What is the price you seek?"

"Four hundred leaves." He said flatly.

"Four hundred leaves?! That is absurd!" The man cried in protest.

"Four hundred leaves is the cheapest you will get from anyone willing to take on this job. You are talking about killing a monster that was magically enchanted. I can't tell from what you've said, if there is any consequence that may befall me should I kill him. Will I be cursed as well? What kind of creature will I be facing? A ghoul or a wight? A ghoul is mindless and easy to kill. But a wight? A wight has intelligence in its action, a much more fearsome foe."

"But still, Master, Four hundred is a tad too much." He tried to bicker.

"Fine, three hundred and fifty leaves. Take it or leave it." The man considered for a moment. Finally, he accepted. "Three hundred and fifty leaves it is. For when you return with Seanan."

"Returning with Seanan was not part of the deal. It was about killing Baldwin." The man replied. "We aren't even sure if Seanan is still alive."

"Take that back! Seanan can't have died!" Miguel pointed at his chest, clearly offended.

"Three hundred and fifty leaves- with or without Seanan." he said.

"Fine, just please, try your best to bring Seanan back-" he swallowed his anger hard. "even if it must be her corpse. She deserves better than this..." Finally, the agreement was made, and the conversation was over. The keeper took a mop to wipe clean the spit, as the man walk out the roadside inn, ignoring the whispers of the patrons gossiping about their commotion.

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The deciduous trees rustled in the breeze, swaying gently as they shed their golden leaves. The afternoon sun hid shyly behind the soft grey clouds and occasional flock of migratory birds sang their avian songs. The dirt road was damp with humus and with each step, he felt the earth draining more and more of his stamina as he sink deeper into the soil. Yet he was already used to it- he simply trudge on from the road into the foliage, where the leaf litter scrunched under his feets and cushioned his steps. He steadied his breathing as he walked hurriedly towards the cemetery, hands on the hilt at all time.

Before long, he arrived at the cemetery the innkeeper had told him. It was opened and fenceless, broken gravestones and opened grave holes strew across the yard. Surely the result of graverobbers or the supernatural. The peasants were poor and so is the cemetery- it was too poor to raise a draugr. A good thing for the villagers.

He observed his surroundings carefully- he was safe, for now. He knelt on the floor as he lit a censer. He drew his sword out of the scabbard, pouring a small stream of oil on to it as he sharpens the sword with a whetstone. Next he applied a thin coating of bloodletter, so thin in fact it made him seemed like a miser. Yet bloodletter is expensive as it was potent, he made sure to use it sparingly. Finally, he sheathed his blade and drank a concoction. Finally, he meditated. His mind slowly began to clear as he stayed as still as water. The smoke from the censer filled his lungs and the fluid of the concoction filled his veins. As his heart rate fell, his senses heightened and he became more aware of his surroundings. He psyched himself up, his breathing turned into a hypnotic trance.

Such was the professional habit that he had developed over years of experience. Several fleeting minutes passed. His senses peaked. The cicadas became deafening, the petrichor invaded his nose. His pupils contracted painfully in the autumn sun, and he felt the wingbeats of birds perched on the trees taking off in their gracefully flight. Finally he stood up. The change in the

proprioception and vestibular senses would have made any man jumped and topple over, but he was a professional after all, and years of experience had allowed him to control his newfound strength with the finesse of someone picking up an ant without crushing it. He sniffed, and his nose perked, a mixture of putrid stench of rotting flesh and the sweet scent of lavender suddenly became olfactible to him. He sniffed around to determine where the trail of smell was leading to and he followed the scent with a quicken pace, starting from a jog into a run.

"Damnit, shit." He mumbled out, as he hopped across thick deadfalls and evaded the columns of trees in his way. He sprinted faster, each step more forceful than the last, his boots leaving deeper impression. The clinks of his chainmail became more fervent, his breath heavier, as sweat began to form. Then heard a faint crack ahead, snapping him from his thoughts and taking him by surprise, halting to a sudden stop. He stay as silent as possible, hiding from whatever was ahead of him and focused on the sound ahead. He heard a rhythmic shuffling noise and short rapid breaths. From here he could smell the lavender, mixed with a tinge of acrid, musky smell of a maiden sweat.

She was still alive. He sighed a breath of relief and approached her slowly, announcing his presence as conspicuous as possible. She was wearing a purple dirndl and her hair was braided neatly.

She noticed his presence before seeing him. As any sensible and cautious lady alone in the forest would do, she picked up a rock from the ground, arming herself. She took small steps as she frantically looks around for signs of movement, hands clutching tightly onto her basket of lavender flower. She heard his footstep and stopped dead in her tracks, startled. He walked slowly into her peripherals and when she saw him, she sighed deeply to herself.

"Seanán?" He said as gently as possible, while trying to approached her.

She was cautious to reply, as though as she suddenly remembered that even humans could be a threat, but she spoke. "Who are you? And how do you know my name?"

"Are you safe?" He asked her as friendly as he could, in an effort to gain her trust.

"Ah, yes, I'm fine." She said in a soft surprise. She did not expect the stranger to ask for her wellbeing."

"I'm approaching you now, don't be alarmed." He informed her. He cleared his throat and waltz towards her casually. Either she felt no threat from him, or she was just too tired from being tensed. Whatever the case was, she let her guard down, her defensive posture dropped, just as the man wanted her to.

"So, who are you, stranger?" She asked, with a much more cheery tone now.

"My name is not important. I was sent by Miguel to fetch you back." He replied.



Her face sank slightly. "I see." She studied him for awhile, and quickly came to the conclusion. "Your sword and armor gives it away. You weren't actually sent here for me isn't it? They must've told you about the monster." Her voice now lacking in any hospitable tone, echoed harshly. Any trace of smile was gone and her gaze was now but a cold deep glare.

He looked at her for a moment, and decided to be honest. "I'm here for you both. And I'm halfway towards my goal."

"How much?" She snapped back.

"How much what?" He knew what she was asking, but he feigned ignorance. He was met with nothing but silence. "Three hundred and fifty leaves." he answered after awhile, realising that Seanan was not as gullible as he thought she was. Her eyes widen in disbelief, and her expression told him that the answer came as a shock to her. She looked at him suspiciously, but she decided that he could be trusted. "Three hundred and fifty leaves is expensive. Does it really take that much money for you to kill him?" She asked.

"Its three hundred and fifty leaves to risk my life. Rather little if you ask me?"

"Four hundred leaves then. I know he wants you to kill Baldwin, but I'll pay you more if you can reverse his curse. Think about it, I'm paying you more, and you don't even have to risk your life."

"That's not true, reversing a curse can something be far deadlier than the quick embrace of death. However, as much as I would love to help you, I can't guarantee that." He said.

"And why not? Is it because it is easier to kill a monster? Or are you unable to reverse the curse?"

"You assumed that I'm capable of reversing it?"

"Yes I did," she bit her lips, realising her presumptuous attitude "but if you can't, then protect me. I can try to reverse the curse." She said, holding out her basket of lavenders. "Lavenders, they are magical, aren't they? They soothe the souls and fills the hearts with love. She told them that he needs love in his life if they were to reverse the spell."

"Don't be foolish, it's not that simple to reversing a curse." He belittled her.

"It is that simple!" She suddenly raised her voice in indignant. "I know what she did! She cursed him such that he will never be satisfied by that which he lust for the most. I know Baldwin better than anyone else. He has difficulties trusting woman." Her eyes darted downwards. "But deep down inside, he wants give his love, just like anyone else..." She spoke softly. "I just know it... I can see it in his eyes, when he look into my eyes." She retorted in a fit of defiance and anger. "You don't know anything about him."

He glanced at her with a tinge of pity. "And that is exactly why my judgement is better. You're too biased towards his salvation." He said, "and that means that you're extremely vulnerable." She

glared into his epicanthic fold eyes with disdain. She drew a short and mean dagger from within her bodice, held it with two unsteady grip and pointed at him. "I'm willing to stop you, stranger." She said, voice trembling in fear and anger.

He looked down at her amateur stance, face with a tinge of contempt. "Drop your table knife before you hurt yourself with it, idiot." He sneered.

"I'm warning you, don't kill my Baldwin." She tried to conceal her fright unconvincingly.

Eventually he gave in and shrugged. "Look, I came prepared to undo his curse- "

She cut his sentence "Lies! Miguel would never ordered you to!"

"Do I look like a dog to you? I'm being serious. here" He walked past her.

"Where's your lavender then?" She retorted, circling to face his back, still in her amateur stance.

"What would you have me do with it? Crossdress? Prance and frolic around a field of poppies, woodland critters following my wake? Spread my legs and pleasure the beast? Was that what you were thinking? That that's love? That that'll cure him? This is why folks dies when they take matters into their own hand- because of old wives' tale." He replied, juggling the dagger and catching it by its hilt. Panicked, she looked at her hand, only to see it gripping at nothing. She gulped, her dagger was stolen from her without her realising it.

"Listen to me, I will do what I can to save him, as long as he still can be." he walked up to her imposingly, her dagger gripped firmly in his hand. She was frightened and terrified. Just being close to him suffocated her. How could she stand her ground against such a dangerous man?

"I- I- I-," She stammered. Her pushed the dagger onto her hand. She wanted to, but couldn't reply. She simply stare at her dagger, a spell tag pierced squarely in the middle.

"Burn this only when you need to. The ashes will let your overgrown knife inflict some form of pain on the supernatural. Now go. Return home and try to stay out of my way." He ordered her, knowing full well that she will not listen. But she nodded, and left obediently without a word. He sighed a breath of relief. He looked at her walked a fair bit of distance, wondering how long would she take before coming back to her senses, before returning. Was he able to resolve the curse of Baldwin before she comes?

He decided to put her out of his mind and continued to trace the faint rotten smell, picking up his pace yet again.

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As he ran after the smell, the vegetation became less and less sparse. Before long, he arrived at a uncanny clearing in the forest. The clearing was rather small, roughly the size of an average town hall. He was sure he was deep in the woods, yet the clearing was unnaturally arid. Gravels

littered all around the sandy clearing and the autumn sun glare down viciously at it. The entire area was an abnormally localized desert. The entire area was like a wide shallow pit and in the center of it all- a broken tombstone and grave. The tombstone looks new, grey and uneroded. Yet it was broken- rubbles crumbling down, the grave hollow and empty.

A shiver ran down his spine- he enhanced senses warned as him felt something approaching him from far ahead. He squinted his tiny eyes and made out a large hyena. A spotted hyena that ambled ominously towards the clearing, biting macabrely onto a severed hand. The iris of the creature was a sickening yellow, and its gaze never left him. The hyena moved into the grave where it layed down and licked its its black spots. He gulped reflexively as after observing closely, he realised that the spots on the hyena were not of fur, but decaying and rotting flesh. The hyena stripped the flesh off the severe hand grotesquely, eyes still fixated towards him, as if to make sure that he was properly watching the morbid performance the hyena was conducting. The man however, felt no disgust when the tendon snapped under pressure of the incisor, or when the hyena licked the strings of muscle of the bone. He simply stood at ready, his hand placed firmly on the hilt of his sword. Before he knew it, a thick blanket of fog covered the entire clearing.

The man knew, there was intelligence behind its action. And there he was, the hunter, standing at the top, away from the grave, looking at the rabbit that was the hyena.

"You're already dead, aren't you?" He said, expecting no replies.

The hyena snorted and jumped out of the grave. He drew his sword in an arc, and pointed at the hyena as they circled around each other, each waiting for the other to make a move. The hyena snarled as it lunged at him with supernatural speed. He pirouetted to the left, narrowly avoiding the hyena's claw- or so he thought. He fell back from the impact, and quickly stood up, one hand instinctively holding on the his waist. The searing pain staggered him and he looked down briefly at his wound in distraction. It was bleeding, but most of the impact was absorbed by his leather chainmail. A deep long slash ripped apart the armour, rings scattering over the floor, revealing the leather underneath it, ripped apart opened and frayed.

"Shit." he cursed, as he uncorked a vial of golden sap and lathered over his wound. And he did so without looking away at the hyena, for he knew that if he looked away, he may very much die. But the hyena was no more, for it had melted, its body taking a sinister form, a disfigured rotten corpse, an abomination- its mere existence a blasphemy to all that is good and living. It had transformed during its lunge, catching the man by surprise, and that was how it sunk its claws into his ribs.

Its body was covered in decay, bile and burns, unnaturally green pus oozing out of its skin. It writhed in pain and agony, face convulsed in torment and hate, its action dictated by madness. The man stood up, and opened his eyes in renewed focus. The ghoul attacked him with its venomous unguis, only to be deflected by the man's skillful play of his sword. The ghoul relentlessly pressed on its attack, alternating between its left and right claws, but it was too

predictable, and none of its blow landed. The man took the opportunity and locked his sword in between the claws, and directed its arm in an unnatural position, forcing the ghoul to roll and topple. He took the brief window of opportunity to land a few glancing blow, which was the best he could do. The ghoul had much vigor left in it, and let out a blood curdling roar, which staggered the man, as he took a huge audible blow thanks to his senses being heightened. It bounced to sky and tried to mount the man, but he quickly rolled away, avoiding the impact of the fall. It was clear that he could not overpower the beast, and fighting it in the clearing was as good as courting death.

So he retreated. He poked at the ghoul and landed a feinting strike, before escaping into the forest. The ghoul had a different idea, one which did not involve his dinner running away from him, and gave chase. It roared loudly and the sand around it started to fall towards the grave. The man lost his footing and fell onto the ground. The ghoul waited patiently, like an antlion waiting for the ant to slip into its pit. But the man knew better, this was not his first ghoul encounter. He ran towards the ghoul, challenging it with a roar. The ghoul was a mindless creature, acting only in instinct, tried to grab hold onto the charging man. Yet the man somersaulted across the grave and using the momentum, he ran out of the pit.

Or he would have if not for the unrelenting ghoul. Angered that his dinner literally slipped its grasp, it roared yet again, the sand started tumbling faster. The combination of the aural assault and the quickening pace of the tumbling sand stole one footing from his steps- the final footing he needed to jump out of the pit. Yet the man, with his heightened reflexes, performed a maneuver that no human could hope to achieve. He tumbled into a roll, and leapt right out of the pit and ran back into the woods. The ghoul was even more infuriated, and began giving chase, leaping out of the pit in one bound. The ghoul landed on the edge of the clearing and sniffed and looked around to find the man missing. But it gave chase nonetheless, as it instinctively knew that it was faster, and would have caught up to a bleeding and injured man.

It pounced after the direction the man had taken in his escape for a lengthy duration before it grew suspicious. It came to a halt. Inside it, instincts whispered within its bestial heart, that it should had already caught up with its dinner. But reality was often disappointing, and here it prowled, with dinner nowhere to be found. In a blind fit of anger, it let out its monstrous scream again, before thrashing, taking out its primal rage on a few poor trees. The dinner however, perched safely above the trees, looked down at the ghoul. Time was on his side, and he made excellent use of it. He timed his next blow properly, leaping out from the perch, falling with both his hands holding tightly onto the hilt of the sword, landing and piercing the ghoul's shoulder. The sharp and sudden pain caught the ghoul by surprise and it reacted by swinging so violently that the man was tossed aside, landing back flat against the trunk of a tree. The ghoul- bleeding profusely, thrashed around in a futile attempt trying to remove the sword. Although his body complained, he bit hard on his lips and with sheer willpower, he managed to move agilely. And with one swift arc of a motion, he pulled his sword out by slicing through the ghoul's arm effortlessly. The ghoul staggered, watery blood flowing out profusely. The bloodletter had thinned the ghoul's blood, and with two more fatal slash, the ghoul will collapse under bloodloss

shortly. Heightening his senses strained him both mentally and physically. As the overload of information firing in his brain's synapses comes to an end, he slumped down in pain, taking a deep breath in the moment's respite as the ghoul thrash about weakly, before succumbing and falling to the ground. Even so, it still spasmed, as an act of rebellion against its impending demise. The ghoul died in a lacklustre fashion, and none will miss its short tyrannical rule- None save for Seanan. It didn't take superhuman senses to hear her crying, running heavy steps through the foliage. He grabbed her wrist and twisted it without hesitation. Her palm opened up, dropping the dagger in her hand. The sudden turn in her momentum caused her to fall.

She landed with a thump, wincing in pain, but she did not cry. She simply laid there in silence as he pinned onto her. He looked at her with weary eyes and in silence. The man huffed in exhaustion as he slowly released her and stood up, turning his back towards her.

"You lied to me." she said coarsely as she tried to stand up.

"No, I did not." He said blandly.

"You told me you'd save him! You'd undo his curse!" She shouted.

"I said," he emphasized again "as long as he could be saved." He emphasized.

"Which he still could be!"

He was tired, and he didn't feel the need to explain anything to her. She lunged at him weakly, and the both fell onto the ground. There she clawed at his armor, biting it in stark defiance. "You murderer! I'll kill you! Give me back my Baldwin!" she cursed in a muffled voice. She continued her futile attempt at hurting him, even though she started hurting herself. She clawed until her fingernails broke, and she bit until her gum bleed, but still she persist, desperate for revenge. He gritted his teeth, and hit her in the head, fainting her. She slumped over onto the ground, her body unconscious. Finally, he sprawled in silence. Fatigue soon robbed him of his consciousness and he slumbered to a deep dreamless sleep.

The golden ray shot like an arrow to his eyes. The sun was setting by the time he woke up. The setting autumn sun beamed its final golden rays, which intruded his sleep rudely. He squinted his eyes reflexively as his eyes slowly acclimated to the glare of the rays. He stood up to see that nothing had happened while he was asleep. Seanan was still unconscious, but the small wounds in her gum and nails had already clotted and she was drooling in her sleep, snoring periodically as the mucus formed from her cry earlier had dried, restricting her from breathing properly. Her beauty, in his eyes, were mediocre. An average village maiden, he thought, as ignorant to the world as a frog in a well. He slung her across his shoulder and trudge his way back to the inn by the roadside.

He swung open the door, and a similar set of eyes looked his way. This time, there was no snide comments or dirty looks. There was only silence. He threw the head of the Ghoul on the floor and laid her on the nearest vacant table. Both the keeper and Miguel swiftly made their way

towards her unconscious body.

"Is she-" Miguel asked hurriedly.

"Shhhh. She's sleeping." He said in a hoarse voice, for he had not talked since waking up. He pointed towards her chest, rising and falling, to further prove his point. Miguel embraced her head and placed his forehead upon hers as he broke down into tears. The man who was in no hurry to claim his payment, stood by respectfully to wait. The innkeeper approached him with a pouch "Master, your payment." The pouch weighed down his hand with a deep satisfaction and he stashed the sack in one of his pouch. He was offered a room and dinner, to which he took up the offer.

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The ominous third cry of the crows woke the keeper up. He glanced out his window to see the stranger for the last time. He was already faraway, and quickly disappeared in the horizon. The man had left early, with nary a word, for goodbyes were nothing but sentimental custom. The smell of a fresh warm corpse slowly faded as the smell of wet moist earth slowly took its place. He saw the rope was as strong as her grief. Her peaceful smile told him all he needed to know, that at the end of it all, she've come to terms with everything. He muttered a simple sentence of condolences out of either courtesy or habit, and wished Miguel would find the same peace in a different manner. That was all the effort he would put in, for their names and faces were like a single fleeting autumn leaf on the road- inconsequential and insignificant amongst the innumerable people he would encounter along his journey. Though the inn continued to stayed, which each passing year it became more refurbished and prosperous than before and though the keeper became a better cook than he was a man, the stranger never came back to an inn soon called Whoremonger's Respite.