

“Again.”

Solon relaxed arms and tried to stall with a question. “Ma’am, why did you take the belt?” Maybe she would elaborate long enough for him to catch his breath.

“My mother was a kiln. AGAIN.”

Solon straightened his arms back out. He looked inward, deep, and found his spark. He brought it forward, through his heart. He breathed in... and then out and he pushed the spark to his fingertips and into the wooden talisman inscribed *fehu*. It burned green. The pitchfork wielded by the scarecrow five strides away ignited and the tone of a distant, unseen bell rang out. “So you were like me, then?”

Threya knew what Solon meant. Carrying on his family’s tradition, generations long. The weight of expectations.

The fire spread from the pitchfork to the scarecrow itself and began to singe the straw. Threya snapped, extinguishing it. The smoke rose from her fingers. “Not quite. My mother was the first in our family. She met her instructor completely by coincidence, not introduced like you and I. And she always told me that I could be anything I wanted...” Threya looked out at a ship in the distance sailing over the clouds. It ducked behind a rocky island.

“Anything except a kiln. Again.”

This caught the apprentice’s attention. “Why not? I mean, uh... did she disapprove?”

“She never found out. She died before I made the decision.” Threya wasn’t going to connect the dots for Solon. A kiln is supposed to solve problems, answer questions on their own, and Threya didn’t want to dig up old memories anyway. Didn’t matter anymore. But she could tell Solon’s focus needed a new target if they were going to stay on track today.

“My turn to ask questions, postulant.” Having been formally addressed, Solon stood a little taller.

“What are the four duties of a kiln?”

Solon cringed, but tried to keep his composure. He could only remember the first two, he always got the others mixed up somehow. He figured he’d just start confidently and maybe muscle memory would kick in. Or something. “The first duty of a kiln is to protect the Undermind from those who would interrupt it. The second d-”

“Interrupt it from doing what?”

Solon looked at his instructor and blinked.

“Lost your train of thought did you?” Threya was making a point she hoped Solon would understand later, if not now. “The Undermind sifts through the souls that sink down to its roots, piecing together their memories to devise an answer to the ultimate question. And there are many who would do anything to get a glimpse at its progress. What’s the third duty?”

Solon’s eyes casted out the window to nothing in particular. “The... third... du-ty...”

Threya’s belt hummed and smoked and her reaction was immediate. Practiced to perfection. She pulled out a *dagaz* talisman and incinerated it. Gold flame spouted from her eyes and she saw them: two four-

armed, man-shaped creatures were walking up the steps to the gymnasium. Crystal visors were set into their faces where their eyes would be, but Threya could tell they were looking directly at her student, through the wall somehow, and they didn't seem to be here for a chat.

"Solon, burn *othalan* on me. Right now."

Solon hadn't heard Threya take that tone with him since he blew a hole in the roof the day his parents arrived home early from their trip to Dardani. The consequences were dire.

He fumbled a shaky hand into his belt and the doors to the room burst open. The afternoon sun cloaked two creatures in the doorway in shadow. Monsters, by Solon's measure. Solon breathed in... and his hand stopped shaking. He suddenly felt calmer, more focused. Warm. In fact, he could remember.

"The third duty is to solve the problems tasked to us by the Undermind."

Solon burned *othalan* and Threya burned *laguz*. The monsters drew steel.

"The fourth duty is to never waver in the heat of battle."

The soot of Solon's talisman swirled into a thread that reignited white hot and shot out to Threya, mixing with blue flames that already spiraled like a torrent around her. Threya's hands turned to smoke and two daggers shot out into the chestplates of the creatures. One exploded into a pyre. The other dropped to one knee, but the kiln was already behind it. She took the knife from its chest and repositioned it through its throat. The blood evaporated to steam before it could dirty the floor.

This time, Solon burned *dagaz*. There were six, no, seven more of the creatures creeping up the steps. His instructor gave him a look and spoke again, her tone now just as calm as he felt.

"Good. Invaders are a problem with a simple solution."

Solon grabbed the pitchfork.