

“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.” She didn’t elaborate.

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 Threya snapped her fingers, extinguishing it. “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. What are the four duties of a kiln?”

Solon tried to maintain his expression. He never had trouble remembering the first two, but he always got the others mixed up somehow. He figured he’d just start confidently and maybe muscle memory would kick in. His mouth would just form the words... 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. “What is the Undermind?”

An easy question. Solon stood a little taller. “The Undermind is a remnant of the Wode that spread to every corner of the Sunken Sky. When a life ends in the Sky, the soul is not extinguished. It sinks. And the Undermind catches it...”

“like a spider’s net?”

“More like... a whale filtering seawater through its teeth.” Solon almost smiled, he was so proud of the analogy he came up with on the spot.

“Apt. And what does the Undermind filter from the souls? To what purpose?”

“It searches the memories of the souls for information. Anything that might help it answer the ultimate question. Ma’am.”

“And there are many who would do anything to take a glimpse at its progress. What’s the third duty?”

Whatever plan Solon had for landing upon the third duty hadn’t worked. He was drawing a blank. His eyes casted out the window to the sea of clouds outside. “The... third... du-ty...”

Talismans from Threya’s belt hummed and smoked and her reaction was immediate. Practiced. Her own instructor had drilled the motion into her, to the point that she didn’t even need to look down. Solon would get there one day, sooner than she had. She pulled out the *dagaz* talisman and incinerated it. Gold flame spouted from her eyes. Two four-armed man-shaped creatures were walking up the steps to the gymnasium. Where the eyes of a man would be, they instead had crystal visors, 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 accidentally burned down the rose garden 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 cast shadow on two creatures in the doorway. Monsters, as far as Solon could tell. Solon breathed in and to his surprise, his hand stopped shaking. He suddenly felt calmer, more focused. Warm. In fact, he could remember.

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

Solon burned *othalan*. The soot of the talisman swirled into a thread of smoke that reignited white hot and shot out to Threya.

Threya burned *laguz*. Blue hot flames spiraled around her hands, slowly at first and then much faster. The white flame mixed in with the blue.

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

The monsters drew steel.

Threya hand turned to smoke and two daggers shot out into the chestplates of the creatures. One exploded into a blue pyre. The other dropped to a knee, engulfed in flame. The kiln was already behind it. She took the knife from its chest and re-positioned it through its throat. Blood evaporated to steam.

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

“Good. Invaders are a problem with a simple solution.”

Solon grabbed the pitchfork.