

Tales From The Bear and Lion

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TALES FROM THE BEAR AND LION

Collected Fantasy Short Stories

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Note: Following each story I have provided a short commentary discussing the process and creation of the story.

Jar of Hearts

*Old Man Dudden,
He's comin',
Old Man Dudden,
He's comin',
Lookin' to fill his jar of hearts.*

-- Children's Song

III

Leaves crackled beneath running feet as terror forced the youth through a darkened autumn wood. Moonlight shifted, and shadows played across the footpath as a chill wind nudged the naked branches overhead. The familiar scent of crushed ferns and new sweat filled the air.

Wide blue eyes stared into the darkness, searching. Uncertain feet snapped twigs, and skittered across the loose pebbles of unseen creek beds as the youth dashed madly forward, his hands extended before him in a vain effort to detect unseen thrusts of the forest.

The commotion of his passing barely registered with him, the pounding of blood in his ears far too thunderous. He crashed through patches of bramble and small stands of stunted saplings, but felt very little over the thumping of his heart in his throat.

He was being followed, pursued by a dreaded legend that the village boys often mocked; one he'd even scoffed at while dancing in a ring with his friends. Now the fairytale, that man forced to drag his twisted right foot as he worked to fulfill an ancient and horrible debt, was out there, trailing through the wisps of autumn fog. And he clutched to his side a large jar with a rotted cork stopper, the contents of which had the fleeing boy stumbling in his effort to escape.

Cutting sharply to his left, hoping it would lead back toward the village, the boy felt his feet slide out from under him as mud turned traction elusive. He toppled to the leafy forest floor, his arms shooting out to break his fall. As he struck the earth, sorry thoughts filled his head, hopes cultivated by the unlikely position in which he found himself. Someone in the village had to be looking for him, had to have heard his clumsy gallivanting and would come rescue him. A distant voice in his head chirped about the futility of such wishful thinking. He should never have ventured out past the common field; never should have stepped slowly, feigning bravery, into the North Wood. Especially not this night, when Old Man Dudden was said to travel the land, filling his jar of hearts.

A shadow rose before the boy's eyes, a wall that made the dark of night impossibly darker. The sounds of movement, the slow and meticulous soughing of a cripple, drew him up to his knees.

Moonlight broke through the bare branches overhead, tumbling down to land upon a withered face, lighting it in a milky glow. Lines cut vagarious across that leathery skin, and patches of thin wispy hair lay across chin and cheek. The eyes were cold and blue, hateful in that small illumination dripping from overheard. They stared down at the boy, gleaming with ghostly venom.

It was impossible to look away from those eyes, large balls of ice like frozen ponds on a barren land. And the longer the boy stared, the clearer he could see himself there, trapped behind those solid blue-white orbs.

Old Man Dudden stepped forward, his body twisting as he struggled to pull his right leg along with him, the appendage a terrible burden. The contents of the jar clutched to his side shifted as he moved; the watery refuse lining the bottom slurped sickly within the glass confine.

“Another heart,” Old Man Dudden said in a hollow, tired voice. He lifted a clawed hand and reached for the boy, a frigid whisper leaving his throat.

The boy tried to scream, tried to give substance to the fear immobilizing him. Nothing rose from his clenching throat but a faltering breath. The hand fell upon his chest, both icy and hot. The sensation wasn't painful, but the boy didn't dare glance down. It was quick, a slight tug that caused the boy's back to arch. And then, as Old Man Dudden claimed his prize, the forest rose up to claim the boy, a kind and pitiful gesture. It pulled the youth into the loam, into the tangles of roots that scratched through the earth, wrapping him in a stiff embrace.

The cork left the jar with a hint of a pop, and the shaking hand of a man long damned deposited the wet muscle inside. Stopping the jar once more, Old Man Dudden turned to shamle away, his thoughts dark as he counted what he carried. Too many hearts.

I

A perfect sun burned in a perfect sky above a long stretch of highway. Age was difficult to place upon the lone woman travelling the lane. The pastel blue of her dress went untouched by the dirt of the road as it swayed out around her ankles. Her long hair blazed red in the afternoon light, loose and flowing around a face that spoke of years yet shined with the light of youth. As she followed the rising of the road leading to a quaint village she happened upon a young woman, one balancing the end of her teen years, sitting in the short grass beside the highway. The girl's eyes were red with hard crying, and still her tired weeping shook her willowy frame. Small hands were folded in her lap, tangled in the stained apron bunched between her legs.

“Whatever is the matter, child?” the woman in blue asked as she stepped off the road.

The young girl glanced up and wiped at her eyes. For a brief moment she marveled at the beauty of the woman come to her aid, and all at once felt shame at the concern etched on those flawless features. “I am sad, lady.” The girl turned her eyes down. “My heart is broken.”

“Broken?” the lady in blue asked as she took a seat beside the girl.

The young girl nodded, the action tossing her earthy hair in slow motions about her heart-shaped face. "I thought he loved me. Or that he would love me." Here she gave a small, wounded laugh. "I was foolish."

"That is the bane of the innocent," the woman in blue said. "Tell me your story. I have heard many troubling things lately. Your tale will not burden me more."

The young girl ran the back of her hand across her eyes, trying to create a semblance of equanimity. She gave up quickly. The images inside her, the whirling of emotions that tugged at her heart would not allow her to pass her story calmly. So she began, struggling for clarity of words that were pushed around wracking tears.

"His name was Dudden." The memory brought a faint lilt to her voice. "It was along this very road he traveled, smiling like the day. I was here, picking flowers for a wreath that would decorate my parents' door. I do it every summer. And he came upon me as a storm comes upon a dusty field. I am not ashamed to say that I was drawn to his face, to the line of his jaw and the brightness of his green eyes. Call it youthful ignorance if you wish, but I loved him from that very moment on."

The woman in blue placed a hand on the young girl's back and gave her a gentle pat. "It is not ignorance, child. Trust me."

The girl looked up and gave a heavy smile. "He was so good with the village boys. So caring. He gave them the whole of his attention, sparing me a smile now and then. It was wonderful how well he got along with them. There was love in his heart." She paused, sniffing. "We walked that night down to the lake, right up to the water's edge where we skipped rocks. He was not very good," she said with a laugh. "So I showed him how to properly throw a stone. It was in that moment that I felt a connection with him, that a part of me had been given over." She shook her head. "Later, I gave more. I wanted to receive the same affections he'd bestowed on those boys." She lifted her head, eyes strained. "How could he leave me after that? After what we shared?"

"Men are curious creatures, child," the woman soothed. "Some, I would offer, a bit more than others. But you mustn't let this eat at you. You must use it as a lesson. Some things are far too valuable to give away simply because you're smitten with a pair of eyes and the arbitrary angle of a man's cheekbone."

"I am embarrassed," the girl admitted. "And it pains me all the more that you had to suffer my telling."

"It is fine, child. Sorrow is not best left in the heart." The woman in blue stood, casting down a smile that penetrated the girl's heart, pulling forth a hidden joy. "I think this man will soon learn the folly of what he has wrought."

"The gods?" There was nothing of hope in the girl's voice, only a dejected tone of pain.

“They do not look kindly upon those who disrespect those worth respecting.” And with that the woman dressed in soft blue turned and moved down the road, her smooth steps taking her from the girl much as spring rains took winter’s face.

II

His step had always been light, his whistle a pure and clear thing to draw ears. Who wouldn’t cross the face of the world with a ready smile and hopeful heart who found all things within his reach?

Dudden was a lively man, a man born with the symmetrical visage of a statue, and with eyes that cradled the light of a spring forest. To his utter pleasure, women adored such beauty. But, added to his looks, Dudden carried in his mind a wit capable of fulfilling a woman’s most passionate fantasies.

He’d been a merchant’s guard once, for a beautiful young girl who’d admired the scar on his neck he’d received while shaving. He’d been an actor, proven by the clearness of his voice and his ability to recite a single page of that great play *Andore and Illiat*. He’d been a swordsmith, a soldier, a sailor. He’d been a mystic, a prophet, a priest, as well as holding other titles that entitled him to glimpse the mysteries of the world. Through it all, he’d claimed many professions with the ultimate goal of bedding the woman awed by his history and musings.

But the woman before him now would need a steadier hand, a more finely tuned tale of heroism, and perhaps a lofty bit of articulation.

She was highborn, obviously. If not the cut and color of her dress, then her faultless skin and rich red hair proved her heritage. There even seemed to be a shimmer about her, as though the sunlight itself circled her, savoring the nearness of her body, giving an unreal life to the soft blue of her long dress.

“I have traveled many places,” Dudden said in answer to her question. She had found him at rest, sitting beneath the thick boughs of an elm, chewing solemnly upon an apple. He looked like a wanderer, she’d said. Was this true? “But never in all my days have I been so privileged as I am now.”

“Oh?” the lady said with a tilt of her mouth.

“You are surely the fairest woman to grace this earth. And if I may, I admit a measure of aptitude in this assumption. I served in the Kommorean army for three years, and in that span I travelled the whole of that northern nation, and the chill air never brought to me a beauty of your caliber. In the south I sat on the court of Emperor Pansu, and no lady of noble birth could stand at your side and deserve her place as a woman.”

Here, the lady lifted a single brow.

Dudden stumbled over his breath. “I apologize. You see, I can’t find the exact words to say what I want to say. And, as a man who once wrote three books outlining the history of the gods, I find my failing descriptive prowess embarrassing.”

“I see no reason for that,” the woman responded, her voice airy and melodious. “You seem like a man who has done much, a man youthful and untouched by a life that surely hasn’t been easy.” Here she twisted her words, as though questioning Dudden’s honesty.

“I’ve had a difficult time of it, true enough,” Dudden responded, lifting the corner of his mouth in a half-smile. “But I come from good stock. I’ve traced my ancestry back four hundred years to the conqueror Ariin Dosean. He held the world in his hands before turning thirty.”

The woman nodded. A strand of hair pulled loose from her ear and hung before her face. “I am familiar with him. That is blood to be proud of.” She gently pressed the strand back, her dark eyes watching Dudden with a newfound intensity.

“Could I escort you down the road?” Dudden asked. “This stretch of the highway can be a dangerous place.” He extended his hand to her, encouraging her acquiescence by flexing the muscles of his outstretched arm.

“Actually,” she said, ignoring his arm, “I was thinking that maybe we could find some privacy nearby.” She stepped closer, resting her hand lightly on his forearm. “Perhaps you could, in another fashion, convey exactly how beautiful you think I am.”

Dudden felt his arm begin to shake at her offer, and quickly he lowered it. He nearly swallowed before realizing his mouth was dry. “Certainly, my lady.” He lifted his arm again and took her hand, leading her away from the road and through the thick foliage that made a natural wall between highway and forest.

They moved through the trees, circumventing a small pond that had settled down in the midst of the wood. Frogs were pumping their throats, and the frightened ducking of turtles beneath the water filled the air. Dudden ignored it for the most part. His heart was filling his throat, and he battled himself to ensure that the hand pulling the lady along didn’t sweat.

A clearing emerged as the trees backed away, settling to bunch up off to their right. The grass wasn’t low, but it wasn’t high either. And it was soft. Dudden lowered the lady to the ground, settling himself beside her. He moved his hand along her leg, sliding it up her body to her face where he took her jaw and leaned forward to plant a careful kiss upon her mouth. She leaned into him, accepting his affections. Her hand slipped around his back and she pulled him down to her.

The sun lumbered overhead, passing as it did with an hour. Dudden removed himself from the woman, admiring her body one last time before his passion for her wilted. And as he stared, horror slowly twisted his glistening face. Where once her skin had been soft and even, it now looked rough and wrinkled. And, indeed, the more he watched the more her skin aged until she lay before him as a shriveled old woman, not even an echo of the young lady he’d just lain with.

He backed away, eyes moving across the impossible body propped upon the earth, revulsion filling his breast. "What are you?"

The woman smiled, her face sunken, teeth yellowed and black. "I am what your actions have made me. A bitter thing; a woman who finds no comfort or joy in herself." She pushed herself from the ground and stood before him, her nakedness a triviality. "You will make amends for the things you have done, for the horrors your selfishness and vanity have created."

Dudden was still backing away, shaking his head.

"For every heart you broke, I demand one in recompense." As she spoke, her horrible façade faded, morphing into the softness and eternal perfection of the divine. "You will not rest, and you will not know love until this task is complete."

Dudden turned to flee. But in his rush he didn't notice the gopher hole behind him. His foot fell in the hole, his momentum twisting his leg to a horrible angle. The snapping of his bones filled his ears. He cried out as he toppled to the earth, the pain of his now ruined leg enormous, overtaking any thoughts of escape.

The goddess was standing above him, the summer sun bringing her body into terrible clarity. "They will be the hearts of boys," she intoned, the sounds from her throat seeming to fill the whole of the world. "Adolescents with all of life before them. In this, you can take no pleasure. In this, you can find no vindication."

His head shook as he tried to deny the request. His eyes blurred as the pain riding his body filled him with an unquenchable agony. At the same time a greater hate filled him, quickly overshadowing his prior ambivalence for women. "I will not," he managed, a feeble gesture of defiance. No matter what, he could never bring himself to such actions. Boys were the strength of civilization; girls only worthwhile when their skirts were up. He clenched his teeth, refusing to listen to the call flooding his mind.

The goddess smiled. "You think this is for you to decide? Your life is in my hands now, granted to me by your wayward touch upon the heart. The guise of love is not a means by which a man should satiate the burn of his loins. It is a precious thing, a tender thing, a fragile thing. And you have sullied it with clumsy touches and idle thrusts."

Dudden managed to pull his leg from the hole, and he sat before the magnificence of the goddess as a broken thing, both physically and emotionally. Already he could feel the knot in his heart as a craving for young lives filled him. Would no one step forward to save him? Would the other gods truly allow such a curse to find fruition?

The goddess shone brighter and brighter, forcing Dudden to raise his arm before his eyes as pain scoured his skull. Then came the darkness. Not darkness for lack of light, but a darkness that took the place of hope, of happiness, of the timid anticipation of the future. With the departure of the goddess, Dudden's life vanished. She had tied her strings within him, secured them more readily than any lie he'd whispered upon an ear.

END

Commentary: This story was inspired by Christina Perri's song of the same name. I was listening to the song one day and couldn't help but visualize her words, and they came to me as the image of Old Man Dudden carrying a jar. From there I had to ask myself why he had the jar and why those specific contents, as well as what happened in his life to place him in that position. And because I brainstormed the story from the end to the beginning, I decided I would present it in the same fashion. That's why you are given the scene with Dudden taking a boy's heart and then shown what led him to that point.

The Eyes of Illiat

The man was over the table, draped like a bulging lime cloth. He had been long in his cups, spending too few moments on breathing. There had been a tenacity in the way he tipped his tankards back, as though the wine couldn't flow into his throat fast enough. It was misery being drowned.

The youth, sweeping a far corner of The Bear and Lion tavern, had never seen such drinking. There were whispers in the room, low, spoken only into palms, but they were all for the man downed by wine.

Whoever he was, he'd taken a back table, one distanced enough from the hearth that the chill of night raged through a window, the fire but an impotent observer. By the blush of the man's face, the table might have been chosen judiciously.

Garann leaned his broom upon the wall and crossed the tavern floor, interested by the dress of the man, by the careful rise and fall of his chest, and of the way the other patrons had settled on giving the stranger a fair amount of space. Garann was a collector of stories. One day he would use bits and pieces of people's lives and pen the greatest play the world would ever know. That was his dream, at least.

"Damned fool," one man said as Garann passed.

"Poor fool," another corrected. The scent of beer and spirits was cloying, filling Garann's nostrils and throat as he passed the tables. The natural scent of straw filled in the soft gaps left by alcohol, an odor Garann tried clinging to.

The stranger's face lay upon the table, tinged in scarlet, the right side pressed into the wood. The eyebrows were a heavy black, thin and expressionless. They matched the trimmed but disheveled black hair topping the man's head.

Garann was mindful of the men and women seated at long benches, enjoying The Bear and Lion. Those that were not quietly gossiping were leaning back in uproarious laughter, while others turned to spit on the straw-sprinkled floor. Along his course he had to duck from the long-crossed paths of serving girls and their tray-encumbered arms. He tried smelling them as they passed, nearly as young as he, short into their teen years; too many smelled like lilacs and hard perfume, and too few like apples.

As he passed the benches and reached the open floor between the common customers and the stranger's table, the man stirred, faintly, perhaps aware he was being approached. It was a small tremble of his outstretched arm, a slow rock of his hips in his seat. Garann paused and watched as a bleary eye popped open to stare directly at him, a blue as bright and muddled as the frozen water of Bitler's Pond.

It seemed a tremendous struggle as the man lifted his head, neck searching for balance. A metal tankard rolled off the tabletop to give a dull clank as it struck the floorboards. "Can you liken a woman's breasts to the moon?" the stranger asked, his voice wavering from too long in drink. Garann shook his head, uncertain in his reply. "Her nipples to the sea?" Garann thought for a moment on that one, wondering if it was actually a possibility, then shook his head as he decided it was not. "I can," the drunk man muttered hotly. "But I cannot, for the life of me . . ." He stopped and blinked in what seemed an effort to coalesce his thoughts. He lifted an arm and gently brought it down atop the table in a frustrated motion. ". . . can't," he continued, "describe her eyes." His mouth scrunched up in a mass of lip and chin. New hairs hinted at a beard.

"Who?" Garann dared to ask. He was moved by the man's earnestness. And a little more than interested in the drunken stupor before him. He'd seen men taken by their drinks, but they were often slumped upon their tables, snoring. Or they would wander toward the corners and attempt to relieve themselves before Tuud and his cudgel provided them with a swift and discourteous exit.

"Who?" the stranger questioned back, appalled at the fact he would have to explain. "Her! Doesn't that tell you all?" He tried to straighten himself, tilted back in his chair, then swiftly gripped the edge of the table and steadied the swaying of his slender frame.

Garann shook his head.

"Have you seen the careful manner in which deer drink from a lake at sunrise? That is the way she moves. Have you ever heard the sound a shooting star makes as it crosses a cloudy sky? That is the way she breathes. Have you, boy, ever stood beneath a waterfall and drank yourself sick on whiteberry wine? *No*? Well then, perhaps you do not know her." He raised a single brow, suddenly curious.

"Sit," the stranger said as he gestured to the seat across his table. Garann accepted. "How old are you?"

"Thirteen."

"Ah. A ripe age. Fresh for the picking."

Garann squirmed a bit as he tried riddling out the man's meaning. He was certain there was a suggestion of something inappropriate, but couldn't find it.

"A tale, then," the stranger said stiffly. "From the silver-lined lips of I, Andore, the poet who cannot summon words." He turned and looked out of over the floor. Raising a hand, he shouted, "Drinks!"

Garann glanced out over the gathered. A few men turned their heads but quickly averted their eyes once they found the source of the voice. He suddenly felt ill at ease. But a poet! His heart jumped at the opportunity before him, while at the same time wrinkling with embarrassment.

“I write,” Garann said.

“You?” Andore said.

Garann nodded. Then his voice flew from his lips. “I know more words than all the boys in the village together. Master Uthen lets me sweep his floor in exchange for teaching me. He used to live in a real city, and he went to a real school. I’ll write plays and they’ll be performed by troupers all through the country. They’ll even be played for the king himself.”

Andore cocked his head to one side. “That is an ambitious undertaking. One better left to men distrustful of coin.”

Garann didn’t follow. By his dress, Andore was obviously wealthy. But Garann chose not to press the issue. Andore’s tongue was growing a bit sharp, no need to provide a place for its sticking. “Why are you drinking alone?” Garann decided to ask.

“Eh? Alone?” Andore appraised the common room, seeming to notice for the first time the measured distance of the other patrons. “I’ll be,” he said to himself as his eyes continued to scan the room. He turned back to Garann, eyes heavy as a summer evening beneath those dark brows. “Misery isn’t the most amicable of companions.” Sensing Garann’s growing puzzlement, Andore leaned conspiratorially over the table, bringing his face within inches of Garann’s, then whispered so only Garann could hear. “I’ve seen the loveliest woman to taste breath. And they refuse to take part in my emptiness, my curse. It’s that, or they can’t stand the smell of—” he looked at the room and raised his voice to a shout “—divine shit!” His eyes lingered on the patrons. Garann could feel his neck warming. Andore turned back to Garann and said, matter-of-factly, “I was shit upon by the gods. Can you smell it?” he asked gravely. He sniffed the air. “Smells a bit like adleberry wine. Figures.”

A sense of unease came upon Garann. He knew people were watching them, laughing at them. Why had he wandered over to sit with this man, with this drunk? Hadn’t he learned his lesson before, when that noble from up north almost stabbed him for being a “Nosey little inbred”?

Garann’s mouth opened to excuse himself, but Andore spoke quickly, intimately. “Illiat, who danced at Bathen’s tomb until the gods were pleased and returned the young warrior’s breath. Illiat, who the world gave a city.” Each time he said her name his voice took on a new quality, a new strength, as though he’d never touched a drink in all his life. “Illiat,” he said once more, “the woman no human hand has ever touched without being burnt away.” He lifted his palms and glared at them, openly furious at their mortal shortcomings.

“It is as though my organs have been removed,” he said as he lowered his hands from before his blue eyes. There was a tortured silence crossing his face. “I have no lungs, so cannot breath. I have no stomach, so I cannot eat. And my heart . . . it is still there.” He placed an open hand upon his chest, pressing in the fabric of his cloak. “I can occasionally feel it beating.” He paused to listen, turning an ear just so. “But it is a small thing in lieu of the clangor it once made.”

He pulled back from the table, face quizzical. “The bark of an oak tree after a summer storm. Is that what her eyes are like?” He shook his head. “Overturned soil. Not the black kind. Rather, the kind that has harbored crops, that has known the struggles of families, that has felt the rough drag of a plow and the strong hooves of horses. Are her eyes that color? Damn it! No!” He thumped the table with a fist. “Drinks!” he yelled out once more.

Garann could feel the poet’s frustration as though it were sparks from an unwieldy flame. This inability to describe a woman’s eyes was a poker stabbing the roaring fire of his inadequacy. There was usually only one solution to such a situation: more wood for the fire. So Garann decided to toss a few logs of his own into the conversation.

“I’ve seen a leather strap worn thin through much use,” Garann said. “It was a burnt umber, like the thick roots of a mulberry.” Andore opened his mouth to speak, but Garann raised a hand, stalling the reply. “The strap was old and supple, but still it stung. It was sharp, and moved about the body with a terrible will. I’m haunted by that strap, by the smell of its oil, and the tears it could pull from my eyes.”

“Is that what it is, then? Her eyes are like a band of leather that’s taken to the backsides of obstinate youths?” He cracked a smile and barked a sharp laugh. “You’re right.” He laughed again, long and blustering. “You are damned right, boy.”

Ree, a brown-haired serving girl, came up to the table, two metal tankards balancing upon a tray. She set them down and passed a startled eye at Andore’s slow giggling.

“Thank you, Ree” Garann said as he lifted one of the drinks and took a tentative sniff. Wine. Rich adleberry wine, the type few could afford. Garann took a quick drink. The taste filled his mouth, and his head swam at the medley of fruits and spices.

Andore had gathered himself, and his breath, and lifted his drink in cheers. “To men and words, and the employing of both to know women.”

Garann lifted his tankard and the two mugs met over the table with a soft ring. Andore pulled his drink back and took a deep draught. Garann did the same, choking a bit as his swallow was a bit more ambitious than his throat could handle.

“And wondering how the pleasures of life are often followed by pain.” Andore gave a rueful smile at his musing and downed another mouthful. His eyes then turned toward a near window, admiring the block of night framed by soft linen curtains. Watching Andore’s face, the longing of his expression, Garann sensed the man was watching events happening miles away. No, not miles, years. Or at least years in terms of what the poet’s heart had come to know.

END

Commentary: Andore’s drunken stupor gave me this story. I was sitting down one day, just scribbling out some random lines, mostly passages of description. The one that stood out to me

immediately was one of a poet draped over a table, weary with drink. Almost as soon as I jotted that passage down I knew where the story would go. This would be about a man pining for a woman he couldn't have, a woman so beautiful and intoxicating that the poet had no choice but to drown his emotions with alcohol.

I'm sure you noticed the reference to Andore and Illiat in Jar of Hearts. That particular tidbit was added later, after this story was written, as I was searching for the title of a play for Dudden to brag about.

Andore and Illiat

The world was a long, red-brown hell. Andore knew that, and feared such knowledge, even before slipping free of the un-dreaming sleep of wine.

He forced one eye to a slit, cautious of the thin sunlight coming in through the curtained window beside his bed. He groaned, rolled over, and pulled the woolen blanket over his face. Light was never a pleasant thing to Andore's mornings; his nights' dedicated inebriation saw to that.

As he lay there, head pulsing with the beginnings of a raging headache, he reached for the deep sadness filling his breast. It was there, waiting, a squatting darkness that stank of agony. The sorrow was a special kind of torture, one he willed only on himself. It was loneliness and longing and futility all bunched together, a collaboration that had Andore curled in on himself beneath his blanket.

Eyes closed, he watched her dance inside his head, a child of the new world, an untamed wildress that made ghosts of mortal women. Illiat, a creature destined to drive him mad like she'd done so many men throughout the ages.

Even in memory, her beauty was fast and sharp. Her limbs were long and supple, the skin pale by millennia spent dancing under the heavens. She moved as though donning slippers of air. But there was nothing upon her feet, much to the delight of grasses and dirt and rock. Her hair was colored with sunlight, shot through with glittering beams, and when she would move, her head would shimmer as though the tresses were braided with the finest, cleanest diamonds. Firm breasts hung upon her chest, rounded and strong. They moved with her as she rolled and turned and swayed, accentuating her lithe frame.

And her face, lovely as adleberry wine was sweet. Cheeks glowing, nose small and straight, eyes . . . Andore could see them clearly. She wore sunbursts in her brown eyes, and the contrast was haunting. He had thought they were the color of tree bark after rain. But that wasn't entirely right. He'd called them overturned soil, hearty and full of life. That too fell flat. Then, last night, the tavern's sweeping boy Garann, who'd found Andore in a less than cognizant state, had offered they were the color of a leather strap, quick and wicked. Andore had readily agreed. But he'd been drunk then.

Her eyes were all those things, and still so much more. They pierced him now, watching him from a lost time, from a current nightmare.

Tossing the cover away, he found it wet with tears. He batted at his cheeks petulantly and greeted the small morning light with a snarl.

“You are jealous,” he said, “because you can’t shine as bright as her. Cannot warm a heart as she does. So you pester me!” He growled the last, lifting his feather pillow and throwing it at the window. It struck the white curtains tenderly and sent them fluttering.

He moved atop the bed like a broken toy, the hinges weakened or useless, the paint old and worn and chipped. Placing his bare feet upon the wood floor of his small rented room, he lowered his head, cradling it with his palms. He pressed knuckles into his eyes, clearing the remains of heartbreak, then ran fingers through his dark hair, straightening himself to a respectable degree.

“This is not a device of man,” he said to himself as the pain within his breast sought to explode. “This sting was no mortal mind’s doing.”

There were times when he was uncertain whether or not he would survive the yearning in his heart, the deep ache that filled him with each breath taken. A full year had passed since he’d found her in the Eastern Wilds, and yet he’d not found a single day where she backed from his thoughts. A single day! Hours could not pass that did not see him pining for her. Stories abounded of her curse, of the beauty she was that followed men for the rest of their days. Those stories had become Andore’s reality.

“Balain shambled across the face of the earth,” Andore whispered to himself while tugging the wrinkles from his gray tunic, “eating and drinking only when hunger and thirst pulled his thoughts from her. He drowned himself in the Far Ocean.

“Judei would cut himself, lining his arms and legs, opening his face and chest, all in an attempt to outweigh the deep pain for Illiat that drew him from the eyes of men. He died in a pool of his own blood, of his own doing.” The names were familiar to him, a recitation that he followed religiously. There were more, of course, but he only said the two in the mornings--the others being hardly palatable at the youth of day.

He had resolved that he would not end like those men. He would not grow so weak and weary that life abandoned him.

He would not allow death to let him forget her.

With a tired motion he tugged his boots on. He was always tired now. It was his dreams, he knew. In them he chased her through wildflower fields, danced with her in the false illumination of night, and made love with her beside blue rivers and vaulting mountains. And they sapped his strength so that upon waking his muscles were as granite blocks, almost worthless in the locomotion of a human body. At times he shambled, much like he pictured Balain had. But he never cut himself. He had a better remedy than that, a far more pleasurable means in which to blunt the hollowness of her distance.

At the foot of his bed stood a dented metal flagon. He reached down and lifted it, feeling the weight of warm mulled wine inside. Pulling it to his lips he drank deeply, forcing the spices down his throat. Red rivulets spilled out around his mouth. He pulled the flagon back and drew a deep breath, choking on the taste of air. Could he but constantly drink.

He felt his arm shake, and glanced down at the pitcher held in a tight grip. The red wine inside rippled. It was like staring at blood. Had Judei seen this very thing as he opened his veins to empty his life out around him?

The flagon fell from his fingers, struck the wooden floor, and toppled. Adleberry wine rolled out, pooling along the slats. Then, slowly, the liquid drained through the cracks to the room below. Andore's arm still shook, an uncomfortable shiver that touched his breast.

"Balain could do little other than fawn over her," he said, watching the wine. "Judei died because of her. What chance do I have?" His drink was smeared across the lifeless wood, an undefined shape, a twisted blob of chance. "I'm as erratic as spilled wine," he said, clutching his arms tight against his chest, eyes searching for some recognizable pattern within the liquid.

Why? he asked himself. *Why did they suffer so? Why do I let this be?* But he knew. There was no shaking her. Illiat, who stained men's minds. "What if I went back to her?" he thought out loud. It was madness. It was illogical. But so was this adoration owning him. Illiat was a wild creature, a child of the fey, a daughter of gods. But the idea stuck. "What if I captured her as she's captured me?" It was her nearness he craved, that ability to touch her that he was presently denied. Of course, her touch was fatal to mortal flesh. But a quiver awoke inside him, a timid hope that lit his soul afire. "I will go to her," he concluded, ignoring the impossibility of the enterprise. "I will take Illiat as my own." It was an unattainable goal. Illiat wasn't easily found, she was happened upon; a serendipitous encounter. *If it takes the rest of my life, I will find her again.* And, deep down, where common sense couldn't reach, he knew he would die if ever that goal was achieved.

He rose from the bed, a sudden verve to his motions. After tucking his pant legs into his boots he left the room, shouldering his faded satchel that held his cloak, and descended the tight stairway leading to the common room.

The Bear and Lion was empty of patrons this early in the morning. Though whether because it was too early to rise or everyone had already risen and left to go about their business, Andore couldn't tell. He'd been granted a room on the second floor, a gracious gesture since the lone inn of the small town was brimming with cantankerous travelers.

There were but two occupants in the once-packed room, seated together at a long oak table near the quiet hearth. Andore recognized the boy from last night, Garann, the future playwright who had shared Andore's wine and tale of woe. The man huddled with the youth was the tavern owner Master Uthen. With a thick finger he jabbed the page of an open book that lay upon the table. Garann leaned in close, peering hard at the page. The boy shook his head. Master Uthen gave him a sound slap. Garann's heavy brown hair jumped at the blow, and the boy cowered into his shoulders. Andore marched across the floor.

"Breakfast?" Andore asked amicably as he neared, gaining Master Uthen's attention. The robust man glanced up from the table, frowning with the whole of his pudgy face. He twisted upon the

bench, facing Andore. The apron stretched across his paunch was a dingy yellow splotched in browns and greens.

“An hour ago,” he said shortly. “No doubt cold by now. Probably a bit fly-ridden, too.” He swatted at something before his face.

Andore gave a smile. “Nothing like a few flies to spice up a meal. Besides,” here he took a seat next to Garann and gave the boy a wink, “I’ve seen Bandorian tribesmen eat a paste made from crushed flies. I figure, if one people can subsist on such a diet, why can’t I?”

“It won’t be free,” Master Uthen said.

“Never expected it.” Andore pulled a silver coin from his pocket and slid it across the table. “Some wine, as well? Adleberry.”

Master Uthen peered suspiciously at the coin, as though it were somehow different from all the others Andore had passed out last night. With a *hurmph* he nodded, took the coin and stood. “Keep your nose to that page, boy,” he said to Garann as he moved to retrieve Andore’s meal.

Once the man passed through the door behind the bar, Andore reached for the open book. “What do we have here?” he asked to himself as he pulled it close.

“*The Trials*,” Garann replied, almost wearily.

Andore took in the page Master Uthen had been so insistent upon. “*The Trials*?” Andore said mockingly, emphasizing the obvious significance to which the book owned its content.

“Of King Bathen and Queen Yildain,” Garann said.

“*The Thousand Swinging Men*,” Andore said with a nod. *Bathen, whose life Illiat danced for.* He bit his tongue to silence the thought.

“Is that a story about the trials?” Garann asked.

Andore shook his head. “No, that is the *reason* for the trials.” He skimmed the opened page. “How much of this have you read?” It was nonsense.

“Not much. Master Uthen was just touching upon it. He wanted me to understand that King Bathen and Queen Yildain had been given unfair trial.” Garann pulled the book back from Andore’s hand. “See, here.” He pointed to a paragraph. “The magistrate had refused to let either of them speak. Both were bound in heavy chains, and their mouths closed by metal bands.”

“And who should have stepped in to see the trial performed to the standards of the law?”

“Well, because the king and queen had no heir, the Council should have been in charge.”

No heir, Andore thought, *because Bathen was numbed to the sight and touch of mortal women; numbed even to his own hand.* “And the Council was nowhere to be seen?”

“They weren’t allowed inside the hearing.” Garann turned back to the book, eyes scanning for proofs of his words. Andore snatched the book and closed it. Garann peered up at him, frowning. “Master Uthen will give me the stick if I don’t learn this.”

“Master Uthen will soil your reason with such drivel. King Bathen and Queen Yildain were disallowed defense for an altogether different motivation than a lack of fairness.” Andore turned to the boy, looking him seriously in the face. “Were you ever told bedtime stories?”

Garann nodded enthusiastically. “Of course. That’s what convinced me I wanted to write plays. Like Tell and his bow of liquid gold. Or Allihandrian and--”

“Yes, yes,” Andore said, interceding. “Of course. Now, did you ever hear of the Shassans?”

Garann’s face took on a somber cast. “Fairytales.” He reached for the book again but Andore slid it just out of reach.

“So you did. Good. Then you’re aware of what the Shassans were capable of?”

“Sure,” Garann said, shrugging. “With a look they could rot apples fresh on the tree, or muddy well water with a breath, or cripple children with a laugh.”

“That’s all?”

The boy smiled. “You know very well it isn’t. I see what you’re doing, but the king and queen weren’t addled by myths. They spoke with their own voices, not those of ghouls.”

“You are certain of this?”

“As certain as gnomes don’t live in gardens, and mares don’t birth foals with horns on their foreheads.” He cracked a condescending smile.

“Interesting examples.” Andore handed Garann back the book. “Have you ever been outside the village?”

Opening the book, Garann searched for his lost place. He shook his head, distracted. “One day I will, though. I’ll travel to a real city and attend a university. I’ll learn about all the great playwrights and authors.”

“And from their lives you’ll learn the secrets of grand tales and heroic adventures,” Andore finished for him.

“Of course,” Garann said with a sour twist.

“When there were no universities, where did men go to learn of stories and their makings?”

Garann frowned at the question. “I’m not sure. Nowhere?”

“Perhaps in the case of Casson the Mad,” Andore replied with a smirk. “But, not exactly the answer I was looking for. You see, they *lived* their tales. How better to describe a city built of gold than to walk its streets? How to show fear and excitement if not to feel them? Boy, the masters didn’t become masters by studying. They did it by living!”

Garann was shaking his head. “They had to have learned their words first.”

“The words came, in time,” Andore said. Here, he hesitated, knowing that what he was about to offer was completely irresponsible. But . . . “Do you want a story?” Andore asked, seeing the sudden dejection filling the boy, and refusing to be answerable for the dashing of youthful dreams. “A story all your own?”

“More than anything,” the boy answered, rapt. He turned on the bench so to face Andore, readying himself for a telling.

But Andore shook his head. “Not from me,” he said. “From out there.” He pointed to an open window, the linen curtains flapping beyond the pane. A small wooden building stood across the street, and above its roof lifted distant green hills capped with long-limbed trees. The early morning sky was layered in pastoral colors, yellow and orange and blue and purple. But the spring beauty was nothing to Andore, a pile of rocks and wood and sunlight.

“Leave?” Garann questioned.

Andore turned back to him, nodding. “With me. We will find you a story.”

The door to the kitchen banged open and Master Uthen stepped through to the common room. One hand balanced a wooden platter, the other held a flagon. He placed them before Andore, then pulled a dirtied cloth across his sweaty brow. “Enjoy.”

“I have no doubt,” Andore replied, reaching for the knife. He plucked a sausage from the platter and put it in his mouth. He tasted wood. A long swallow of wine followed.

* * *

Manure and straw filled the air, Andore’s nostrils, and his throat. A roan mare whinnied and shook her head in the stall beside him as he methodically saddled his mount.

Polly was pleasant for a beast, neither overeager nor languid, a median that Andore found quite pleasant as he often took to the roads with a head splitting in half. There was a keen companionship between him and Polly, one forged over the present year by late night wanderings and earlier morning excursions. She seemed to understand him, and her slow rolling gait suited his often numbed sense of balance.

He gave her a brisk pat along the neck. "Ready for the road?" he asked. Her tail lashed about her flanks, and she snorted in response. "Good. But we won't be alone." Her long head twisted, nostrils blowing. "I know you don't like strangers. Try to be nice." He gave her one last slap on the neck. With a gentle nudge, Andore had Polly clipping upon the straw of the unkempt stable as he led her from her stall.

In the quiet of the day, Illiat came to him in visions. She twirled and stepped and laughed quietly, eyes blazing with a preternatural glow. Desperate, he pulled the wineskin from beside the saddle and squirted a mouthful. It was still cool, and he held it a moment between his cheeks before swallowing. Illiat's specter spun once before fading, but not before casting a coy grin over a bared shoulder.

Polly snorted, drawing Andore's attention. Garann was standing outside the stable, framed in the opened double doors, looking into the gloom from the afternoon light.

"Good to see you, lad," Andore said, replacing his wineskin.

The youth shuffled in, eyes adjusting to the dimness. "Is it really just like that?" he asked. "We saddle up and leave?"

Andore considered a moment, then nodded. "Just like that. It's how stories begin, don't you know?"

"I suppose."

"Did you talk with Master Uthen?" Andore asked. Garann shook his head. *Good*, he thought, *wouldn't want him chasing after us*. "And your father?"

Garann glanced down, embarrassed. "He won't miss me," he said to the floor.

Andore didn't press the issue. "Then we ride."

Outside the stable stood Garann's mount, a small sorrel gelding thick with dust. "Needs a bit of a brush," Andore said, "but he'll do."

"Makke's a fine horse," Garann said. "Never complains."

Andore passed an eye to Polly. The horse was watching him. "You could learn something, you know." Her tail swished. "Up, boy. This journey won't start itself."

As they aimed to leave town, Andore detoured from the main road. The side street he turned down was thin and stank from crushed manure, but Andore never wrinkled a nose. He stopped at a square building topped with a disarrayed thatch roof.

“One moment,” Andore said as he dismounted. Leaving Polly with Garann and Makke, he made his way around the building to the back. There, tethered to a wooden stake, waited a pack mule, baskets settled on each of its flanks. Andore untied the beast’s rope and led him back to the boy and their horses.

“Whose is that?” Garann asked when Andore returned with mule in hand.

“Ours. Who did you think was going to carry the food and wine?” Andore tied the mule’s line to the back of Polly’s saddle and mounted. “And now we’re officially off.”

They both settled into their saddles and moved through the village north. High clouds filled the blue sky, shielding the worst of the summer sun. The earth beyond the village was thick and wooded and green; the village fields grew off to the south, leaving the north untamed.

The wineskin was a close companion as the day lengthened. More than once Andore found himself carelessly edging Polly off the road.

“You know,” Garann said as Andore sheepishly moved Polly out of a tangled thicket, “Farmer Hod once got so drunk he drove his cart, horses and all, into Bitler’s Pond. Drew the whole of the town with his screaming and splashing.” Garann gave a laugh, one Andore couldn’t return. But he did set the wineskin aside for the moment.

“Listen,” Andore said, steering the boy’s thoughts elsewhere, “remember the land, and the way the sun moves across the sky. What’s that over there?” He pointed to a windmill spinning atop a near mound.

“The church’s windmill,” Garann answered.

“And there?” Andore asked, finger wagging toward a series of hills.

“The old barrows, where the bones of the dead rest untouched.”

Andore continued his questioning of landmarks as they moved further from Garann’s home. When the boy could no longer answer, Andore provided. In the west there was the Brown River, running south. They passed a small hamlet that Andore called Willow’s Watch. Then came Cold Dell in the east, the Gray Swamp to the northwest, and the Broken Tower of Far-eyes alongside the road they traveled.

“Why are you telling me all this?” Garann asked.

“You should always know the way home. Home, where your feet know where to take you when the wine has taken your head. It’s where help is never more than a spilled cup of milk away. No matter what there is in the world, no matter where you are, home waits patiently for you, even if only in your heart.” Andore thought a moment, then added, “If you ever find yourself alone, and a stranger approaches, tell them you’re traveling to the Quiet Monastery.”

“Why?” Garann asked.

“Rape doesn’t seem as appetizing when the prey’s diseased.”

Night came upon them quick that first day. Next to a patient creek they hobbled the horses and mule, and unrolled their blankets. A small fire filled the camp with shifting light, and Andore sought to empty the remainder of his wine.

“Talk of heroes,” Garann said. “Of old kings and long forgotten bones.”

Pulling the wineskin from his lips, Andore raised a brow. “A campfire tale? This story of yours is damned before it’s written,” he said, shaking his head.

Tossing a twig into the fire, Garann said over the snapping, “I won’t add this part. Only the exciting parts.”

Andore nodded. “And deny your audience reality? You can’t just cram all the good parts together and call it a story. There has to be context, emotion. You want your audience to feel for your characters, to sympathize with them. How would you accomplish that without proving their humanity?”

“Then I will add it?” Garann questioned slowly.

“No,” Andore replied. He tilted the wineskin up and took the last drops on his tongue. Licking his lips, he looked into the slender flames rocking over blackened branches, and spoke.

“Carliel climbed the icy heights of Mount Veir, seeking the homes of the gods. At the summit of his mountain, he found no palaces, no cottages, no buildings at all. It was just the range laid out before him, bright snowy peaks and deep dark defiles. He wept in his failure, his tears freezing upon his cheeks.

“It was in this moment of anguish that an eagle came to him. The bird’s body was black as the defiles and its head white and marvelous as the mountain peaks.

“‘Why do you cry?’ the eagle asked, coming to perch on a crag, the beating of its wings filling the air with a dusting of snow.

“‘I came in the hopes of seeing where the gods live,’ Carliel answered, ‘but all I see is nothing.’

“The eagle cocked its head, curving beak golden. ‘Nothing?’ it queried. ‘It is no wonder you can’t see the abodes of the gods.’ One clear blue eye blinked.

“Carliel recomposed himself and glanced around again, searching the thick snowdrifts, peering into the hazy clouds bunching around the mountains. Once more he despaired.

“‘It is useless,’ he cried. ‘There is but snow and air and rock.’ He brushed at his face and the hard tears fell as beads.

“‘It is useless because you gaze with your eyes,’ the eagle admonished. ‘You try to see what *must* be there, and overlook what *is* there.’

“‘I am not of your kind, sagacious bird. Tell me simpler.’

“The eagle shook its snowy head, eyes sharp with anger. ‘A fool does not become a wise man when taken by the hand.’

“‘Then surely I must perish,’ Carlief said, the sting of failure hot in his chest. ‘I devoted my life to this one thing, and it is but a dream still.’

“‘A dream . . .’ the eagle said, contemplating. ‘And what are dreams?’

“‘They are visions,’ answered Carlief. ‘Hopes and desires.’ Then he added, sourly, ‘They are nightmares.’

“‘You are unfulfilled in this dream, so it frightens you?’

“‘A life wasted. I built myself to see the palaces of the gods, and they are but an illusion.’

“The eagle regarded Carlief a moment, its eye unblinking. ‘Do you know what these palaces look like?’

“Carlief shook his head. ‘No. But they must be majestic, and tremendous, and opulent. Nothing less for a god.’

“The eagle rocked its head in agreement. ‘And it is this you wish to perceive?’

“‘More than a wish! A need! To take in that which the gods call home would satisfy me in life.’

“The eagle stretched its great wings, the dark feathers hiding the sun, shading Carlief’s sight. The man was momentarily grateful, having been molested to no end by the harsh light at the top of the world. Then something caught his eye. Distant, the snows shimmered myriad hues, sparkling as though dressed in pearls and emeralds and sapphires. The mountains were magnificent, thrusting up from the earth to watch from the skies, knowing the tops and bottoms and insides of clouds. A merry whistling found Carlief’s ears, the wind and crags fashioning a melody often beyond the ears of men.

“‘I can see it now!’ Carlief’s wide eyes drank in the unfathomable scope of the world, of the heights of snow-crested mounts to the soft darkness of the lowest vales. ‘It is wonderful.’ And more tears came to his eyes, hardening upon his cheeks until he wore a glittering mask.”

Garann made no move to speak at the tale’s conclusion. “The end,” Andore amended.

“Eagles can’t talk,” Garann said matter-of-factly.

Andore frowned. “That’s not the point of the story.”

“It’s too far-fetched,” the boy added.

Wearily, Andore rubbed at his eyes. “Get some sleep, lad,” he said, gesturing vaguely to Garann’s blanket. He himself stepped away from the fire and made to the mule. Retrieving a second wineskin, he drank deeply and went to his own blanket. There he curled up with his drink, fighting to bring only darkness to his sleep.

* * *

The days that followed were dreary ones. The first morning out, heavy gray clouds moved in from the west. As the twosome moved steadily north, so too did the thunderheads, marching ponderously like malformed leviathans, showering them continuously with cold rain for three days. It was thick sheets that hid the world beyond Polly. It grew so that Andore forgot the sight and feel of sun. But the world had finally taken on a vision of his heart, so he complained only mildly, with chattering teeth and a clenching of his cloak beneath his chin. But he kept up his work pointing out familiar sights, anything that Garann might be able to latch onto when he had to make his way home.

When finally the rains broke, they stank of mud and horseflesh, and longed for fire and warm food. Their first dry camp in four days was made at the edge of a dark wood, the boughs of which refused even the new-falling sunlight entrance.

Before a crackling fire, both had doffed their clothing and sat only in smallclothes, enjoying the heat of the flames while their tunics and breeches and satchels dried. The horses were hobbled, and nibbled at the high grasses racing away from the forest. Their pack mule stood unmoving, looking at nothing with a dull apathy.

“Not a single town,” Garann grumbled, the line having become a favorite of his.

“I told you, lad, we’re on a trapper’s road now, not a trader’s.”

The youth was the portrait of misery. Andore knew that if his own heart could be painted, it would be a half-naked sullen boy drying before a sorry fire.

Pushing his boots a little closer to the flames, Garann gave a long sigh. “I never imagined it would be like this.” His eyes were shining gold-brown in the firelight.

“Really. What exactly did you imagine?” Andore wrung out his once brilliant emerald cloak. It had lost its true color long ago, fading to a gaudy lime. He’d thought of replacing it, but the little coin he managed to collect was better spent on wine.

“Something less insufferable.” Garann sniffled and wiped at his nose with the back of a hand. “I don’t see Cail the Lengthy sleeping in the rain, or Bern the Brief, or even Casson the Mad.”

“I’ll have you know, Casson invented sleeping in the rain. Why else do you think people called him mad?” Andore grinned, but Garann kept a seriousness about his face.

“When are we going to do something I can write about?” Garann said irritably. “If this is how you find stories, I’d prefer to sit dry and content at a university. At least there I wouldn’t be wearing mud as a second skin.”

“Right, and you wouldn’t know the smell of it, or how it itches, or how it makes you feel as you scrap it off. Can’t you see, lad? I’m giving you things you’ll never discover sitting behind stone walls. Sure, you can assume what mud on your skin might feel like, but what if your audience knows the truth of it? They denounce you as false, as a charlatan. Trust me, you *need* this.”

Garann scratched a length of dried dirt from his leg with a fingernail, frowning. “Have you ever been denounced?”

Andore paused at the question. *Have I? Lad, I’ve been run from towns, locked in dungeons, and felt the coarseness of hempen rope around my neck.* “Once,” he lied. “And I don’t mean for you to make the same mistake.”

“What was it for?” the boy asked. “What was it you didn’t know?”

A town’s inane superstition, a king’s arrogance, and a lord’s failure to find humor in his own shortcomings. “I didn’t account for the simple man, or his simple life. There are too many things taken for granted, or made into japes that farmers and fishwives take to heart.”

“Such as?”

Garann’s simple roots sprang to Andore’s mind. The boy still had the look about him: tanned face that might have been powdered in dirt, heavy hair about his head, and dark eyes that were far too ignorant of the wide world. “Corpses. I made light of the dead.”

Garann gave a disappointed shake of his head. “Bad luck, that.” Then his eyes lowered, curious and knowing at the same time.

Andore plucked a length of grass from the ground and stuck it between his teeth. As he mulled over Garann’s indoctrination, he concluded that before the boy ever laid eyes on Illiat, he would first have to lose his superstitions and misunderstandings.

“Do you know where we are?” Andore asked. He had purposefully withheld the name of the forest and field.

Garann was scratching at his toes. He glanced up at Andore, then at the woods, then turned his attention to the rolling land beside them. Shrugging, he said, “North.”

Andore frowned. "North, yes. But I was looking for something a little more specific."

The boy bit at his lip. "Four days out. Uh, the rain made for slow going; there's no telling how much or how little ground we've managed to cover. But if you want an answer, I'll say Sappenfield."

"Well guessed, but wrong. Sappenfield is still a few days out. This is Marre Wood," Andore said, gesturing to the forest. "And that," he said, pointing to the field, "is Marre Green."

"Lord Marre?" Garann asked, voice almost picking up.

"Indeed." Andore watched the boy, hoping a flicker of recognition crossed the youthful face.

"Didn't he . . ." Garann paused, struggling to find his thoughts. "No, he was the one that bought the slaves from the Black Wastes."

Andore groaned. "That was Lord Blackflesh."

"Oh, right. The name," Garann said. "Then Lord Marre sold his wife for a milk cow? Because his town--"

"--Are you toying with me?" Andore growled. "Sold his wife for a cow? Lord Anteen Marre burned the old Greenwood with hundreds of people tied to the trees. What you see of Marre Wood is what is left of the Greenwood. And what you see of Marre Green is where the trees and living bodies were burned to ashes."

Garann shivered, and Andore swallowed his elation.

"So, we're atop their graves?"

"In a matter of speaking. Their remains are surely a part of this stretch of earth."

Garann wavered where he sat, then twisted and retched loudly. Turning around, wiping at his mouth, eyes wide and frightened, he squeaked, "We shouldn't be here. We shouldn't be here." The tan of his face had fallen pasty.

"Calm down. I had not planned to stay but for a spell. Now, I think it best we see the night through."

"The night!" Garann questioned. "They will take us. They will come from the earth and carry us away. Everyone knows that. Graveyards are no place for a living body."

"Do you see any headstones? Do you see any graves? This is a very different place than what you know from home. Tonight, you will see what I mean."

Garann was shaking his head. Then all at once went still. “See? What do you mean *see*?”

“I’m going to give you something to write about.” Andore gave a smile that Garann found difficult to take in. The boy turned his hazel eyes upward, toward the slowly falling evening sun. His lips moved in prayer. Andore would have sworn the boy was pleading for the sun to stop in the sky.

It wasn’t long until their fire and a smattering of stars provided a stingy illumination. Andore reclined upon the ground, swilling wine and watching the fearful countenance of the youth who’d somehow managed to edge his way around the fire closer to Andore’s side.

“Are you afraid?” Andore asked, taking another pull from the wineskin.

The boy’s large eyes turned on the poet. “Fear is a wise man’s greatest asset.”

Andore nodded. “And a brave man’s necessity. I did not ask for an adage.”

“It is wise to know fear.”

“Then you are afraid?”

Garann didn’t answer, and Andore took the boy’s reluctance for what it was. *Fear is a powerful thing, lad*, Andore thought. *It’s more potent than love and courage and honor*. He would not give his thoughts to Garann, not yet. True fear was what had molded the great warriors. They had been youths once, ignorant of the world. And it was ignorance that killed a man quicker than any weapon fashioned by the hands of men.

It was some hours before the night gave up its secrets. Garann had been on edge, eyes flickering to the shadows of the woods at their side, hands scratching at the bare earth around his legs. Then, with the first signs of something unnatural, the boy lost himself.

Andore spied it first, the slow coalescing of the distant darkness. The firelight hampered his vision, and he thought it only a trick of the eyes. But that darkness began to shimmer with an ethereal indigo. Faint blue wisps, almost like smoke, danced within the hard shadows.

“Gods!” Garann tried whispering.

Andore glanced at the boy. Garann was watching the west, watching as a hundred shadows moved in step, their cores pulsing with that dim light. His head shook, the mess of brown hair tangling in on itself.

The moving shadows were incomprehensible shapes at first, swaying across the field like billowing sheets on a line. Then they took their true form.

Garann lurched toward the fire as the first of the shadows morphed into a woman, her face grim and determined. Andore jumped up and tackled the boy. It was a clumsy battle they waged as Garann fought to get to the fire, and Andore drunkenly fought to restrain him.

“Stop it!” Andore said, as Garann struggled in his grip. The boy ran fingernails down Andore’s face. Andore defended himself. He punched Garann, knuckles scraping the boy’s brow. Garann tumbled backward with a cry, away from the flames, and Andore was quickly atop him, pressing him to the earth. “Listen,” Andore said sternly, “the flames will burn you, the ghosts will not. Watch them; it is important. Look at their faces, boy. Remember.”

A line of blood was rolling free of Garann’s split forehead, coursing down his temple. His eyes were unmoving as they stared at Andore. His mouth was slightly parted as he drew in deep breaths. He gave a curt nod, and Andore slowly released him. Garann pushed himself into a sitting position, but never raised a hand to his face. Instead, he looked to the side, to where a great congregation of spirits shuffled by.

There were no shadows now, only apparitions carrying that luminescent blue. And the land beyond the campfire was a sapphire world.

“They cannot hurt you,” Andore said quietly, as Garann took in the sight. “They wouldn’t want to. These are not hateful creatures. They are sad and fallen people. They’ve known pain, lad. Pain like you cannot imagine. The dead are not restless souls.”

“If they are not restless,” Garann asked, turning to look at Andore with concerned eyes, “why are they still here, wandering the world of the living?”

“This world does not belong only to us,” Andore answered. An elderly man, hunch-backed and twisted, walked just at the edge of the firelight. His eyes were empty, his mouth slack. “Never believe that you are privileged simply because you draw breath. There are more things on this earth than you can dare imagine.”

Garann’s eyes followed the old man until he merged with the rest of the dead, losing his uniqueness, becoming just another part of that alien world.

“They all look so sad. How am I supposed to have hope?”

Andore ached to have wine in his mouth at that moment. He bit at his tongue. “They do not want to give you hope. The dead want nothing.” Andore watched the boy’s eyes, needing to see something, a flicker of understanding. He was granted a stream of tears that Garann couldn’t blink away quick enough.

With a heavy sigh, Andore laid a hand on Garann’s shoulder. “The first time is always the hardest. Losing anything is difficult.” He took in the scene again, the unreal bodies pushing back the darkness of night. “It is good that your fear has been replaced. Even if it is with grief.”

The two of them sat through the night, watching the passage of so many souls. There were no words to exchange. No looks to pass. Their attention was all for the destroyed lives filling Marre Green. When finally the first light of morning touched the eastern sky, the blue world of the dead faded like a thin mist. The fire snapped and popped, then went cold, the embers snuggling beneath the ashes.

“We can sleep an hour,” Andore said. He stood and went back to his blanket. Lifting his wineskin, he emptied the contents, swishing adleberry around in his mouth.

Garann still sat, watching the waking world, as Andore closed his eyes, embracing rest.

* * *

When Andore woke, Garann was scribbling furiously in his pad. With a groan, Andore pushed himself to an elbow, then to a knee, then staggered off to relive himself. He watched the boy over his shoulder, noting the unchanging angles of the youth’s face. He was stern now, a man of long years and hardship. *It was just a few ghosts, lad*, Andore thought pityingly.

“Stop,” Andore said, walking back to the small camp.

Garann paused from his work and looked up. “I have to get it all down, while it’s still vivid in my mind.”

“I know. But give me a moment.” Andore sat on the grass and folded his legs before him. He lifted the wineskin and squirted a red stream into his mouth. *It’s going to take more than that.* “I have had a woman tell me she loved me, all the way up to the moment I caught her in bed with another man.” The memory crashed down upon him, the twisted sheets, the lengths of skin . . . the smell. “That is a thing to change you. I have seen a father floating face down in a swollen brown river while his wife wept and his children screamed his name. That is a thing to change you.” He swallowed another red line. “Something like last night prepares a man for the horrors life will offer up. And, unfortunately, you cannot refuse these things. They are to be accepted, with tears or with screaming or with hate, but they must be accepted.” Andore had experienced all three, but as he spoke, he realized that the void inside him stemmed more from the memories of pain than it did the memories themselves. *Illiat has cured me of their pain, but not pain itself.* He wondered if there was humor there. Quickly, as another warm mouthful of wine went to his stomach, he decided there was not.

Garann scanned his pad, pondering his notes. When he lifted his head, he was nodding. “I knew that when I left the village I would change.”

“Then you are wise. Most men think themselves immutable.”

“Only, I didn’t think I would change like this, or so fast.” He took in the sprawling field, a vast carpet of green grass and wildflowers. “There is so little that I know.”

Andore smiled. *How long had it taken me to admit that?* “You speak such shrewd words, lad. You will be all right.”

As they set out that morning, Andore considered his companion. The boy wasn't a stranger in the sense that Andore had never met him; instead, Garann was a different person from the one who'd set out days earlier. The experience in the night had changed him. It had sucked the wonder from his heart, replacing it with an eagerness for knowledge. Part of Andore lamented the loss of the boy's adolescence, while part of him rejoiced.

They left Marre Green far behind, moving with a steady determination further north. Andore continued to point out landmarks so that Garann could hold a sense of direction. Garann continued to monitor a cold silence.

“That darkness far to the east is Blue Gorge,” Andore said. “Legham the Large supposedly split the earth apart with his ax in an effort to free his brother from trolls. Ahead, where those two hills meet, that's the Red Stand. Three thousand men fought each other there, and three thousand men fell.”

“What did they fight for?” Garann asked, his voice thin. He was watching the distant hills with hooded eyes, as though trying to peer across the miles.

Andore shrugged. “What men always fight about: pride, money, power.”

“Men fight for more than that,” Garann responded, never pulling his eyes away from the thrusts of green earth.

“True. Some fight for honor, or vengeance, or love. But hidden behind those most honorable of intentions lies something else, for honor is often pride in disguise, and vengeance is a kind of gain. Then love . . . love is power, lad. Never forget that. Never let a woman convince you otherwise. If you love someone, they have the greatest power over you anyone can ever claim.” Andore's hand shook as he lifted the wineskin and put the nozzle in his mouth. He sucked hard.

“You're putting a blue tint to the world,” Garann said.

When Andore glanced over, the boy's eyes were accusing. “Eh?” Andore shook his head. “I've seen all sides, boy. I've heard all sides. I've read all sides.” *I've lived all sides.* “I am not trying to scare you; I'm trying to prepare you. That youthful glow surrounding you will one day be threatened. You will know darkness like no cave, emptiness like no desert, and pain like no torture. Believe that. Best you ready yourself now.”

Garann grumbled and cast his eyes away from Andore. *Just a while longer,* Andore thought, *and you'll be free of my black moods.*

Their journey became a month and a half of rain and cloudy days, long nights and little sleep. Both were road-weary when finally Andore recognized the land opening before them as the

Eastern Wilds. A timid flame woke inside his breast. He felt a tremble come to his skin, as though his bones had woken from a long slumber.

“This is it,” he said, low so only his teeth could hear. The field was sprinkled with rounded boulders, knobs of stone that broke the surface of the earth like old wrinkled heads. *The heads of giants*. Thin beech trees rose up here and there, branches and green leaves shivering in the small wind from the west. Dismounting, Andore felt a sense of energy for the first time since departing that field a year ago. He hunkered down atop one of the larger boulders, staring out over the field with eyes that knew life. *There*, he thought, *that’s where she danced*. It was a clearing ringed in white lilies and brilliant yellow dandelions.

A lark had sung its natural song, perched there on that low branch, he remembered. Five squirrels had come, nuts in hand, to watch. There had been wolves and deer in audience, sitting quietly side-by-side, enraptured by the exquisite beauty that was Illiat. Crows had filled the trees like a dark cloud, their large eyes following the perfect motions of an immaculate form. And the world stirred beneath her, shuddering in ecstasy. Andore had felt it too, had ridden on the pure pleasure of the earth. She had turned to him, her eyes dazzling in the morning sun; tiny suns themselves. Then she had come. Limbs never moved as hers had, effortless and sleek and fluid. She raced across the ground as a stone might skip across water.

A space had separated them, a space that could have been traversed by a whisper, or a kiss had Andore thought to move his lips. Then she’d smiled, and the softness of her skin grew softer. The sun did not beat upon her, rather it touched her like a timorous child might brush at a dog’s muzzle. And she marveled in such light.

Andore closed his eyes, letting the memory flee. *Please*, he begged, to gods or demons, whoever would hear, *bring her back to me*.

It was four days of heavy clouds before the weather turned sour. Morning came dark, and a chilled rain came pissing down. Andore rolled himself up inside his blanket and glanced up, letting the sky wet his face. He couldn’t help but smile. They were watching, he knew. The gods always watched. And apparently they had to relieve themselves like regular men. He twisted and pressed his face to the wet ground, falling back asleep.

The day he awoke to a clear blue sky and a bright sun beaming, Andore frowned. *This isn’t good*, he thought, eyeing the warm morning with suspicion. The rains had stopped yesterday, suddenly, but the clouds didn’t break. They had lingered across the sky, blotting out the sun, making the world a dull gold. Although he carried misgivings, Andore continued his routine. He took a wineskin out to the field and sat, pulling up the long grasses, watching the wind move across the earth. *She will come*, he told himself. *She will come*.

Even with the promise of sunshine and warmth, Illiat did not reveal herself.

Soon the wine ran out, and Andore was forced to confront the sharpness of his mind, and every memory was a haunt that made him restless as he slept. Garann went ignored in those days of terrible cognizance. Andore would see the boy, pad in hand, but he never made an attempt at

conversation. He'd already done all he could for the boy, from teaching the way home to protecting him from miscreants on the roads. The boy had to fulfill his role alone, while Andore suffered through a deepening loneliness.

At times, a ball would come to his throat, threatening to choke him, as the days lengthened and died without so much as a fey-stirring. Andore would follow the lines of the distant mountains as they cracked the afternoon sky. When tired of that, he would lie on his stomach and watch the tedious marching of ants through the grasses. When tired of that he would sleep. When tired of sleep he would count stars or birds. He often tired of activity.

Illiat spoke, and Casson the Wise went mad. Andore ripped up a tuft of grass, letting the blades slide between his open fingers. The sun was high and hot, and Andore's tunic was damp with sour sweat. *Am I destined for madness? Without ever hearing her voice?* The thought frightened him so that the bottoms of his feet ached. But he held steadfast, ate seldom, and hoped for the return of a wild beauty.

Then she was there.

It was that sudden, like a flash of distant lightning that appeared without the smell of rain. Her return was a lover's gasp.

Andore felt his stomach clench and his heart quiver. There she stood, watching him, large brown eyes shimmering with innocence and wonder.

She smiled.

The warmth that cascaded through Andore's breast was enough to melt his heart. Her smile was a thousand years of peace, a winter's blue sky, a man filling his child's stomach in the morning. It was the first time since their first meeting that Andore was glad he wasn't drunk because he would never have been able to tell the difference between the alcohol and the intoxicating nature of a fey child.

I've done it, Andore thought, his mind racing. His face hurt from how he grinned. *I've made it to her, and her to me.*

Illiat moved.

But she didn't, truly; the world spun beneath her as she started to dance. Her touch was light, airy, as though there were no weight to her body. Her feet were upon the earth, caressing the grasses and soil. Her legs stretched out, long and milk-white, grabbing the world and pulling it to her, the attraction carrying her from place to place with an effortless ease. There was music in her ears, in her head, in her body. The music of breathing. The melody of life. And every motion of her long legs, along with each slow lift of her arms and angle of her wrists, was in harmony with the wind and the sunlight and living creatures.

The golden streaks in her hair twinkled, and her eyes were deep russet worlds where stars and laughter played. Andore laughed in his throat. *I had sought to describe them. Easier I portray a dead man dancing.* He laughed all the more at the image.

She was upon him, again, when her dance ended. Her path to him had been long and twisting and brief. The effort had done nothing to her; her shoulders were impossibly still, a statuette's marble body. Andore could not take his eyes from her. The vision that filled them removed the world and all its trivialities. There was nothing beyond her, beyond that small space containing the two of them, beyond the amusing scent of her. In that moment he longed to taste her sapid flesh, burn beneath the warmth of her immortal body. His arm rose, slow and shy, nearly reaching for her. *No, I cannot love her cautiously.* But she frowned, turning her eyes to watch his upraised hand, and the volume of the action was enough to shake the foundation of existence. Andore stumbled back, arm frozen in its intention. *Illiat, who no mortal hand can touch without being burned away.*

He realized then why she was frowning. Those brown eyes of hers were considering his hand, his fingers. The look was not of disapproval, but rather of sadness. She wanted to be touched, wanted *his* touch, but could not accept it for what it meant. She had danced for Bathen, and had not known him. The story was so clear inside his mind.

Bathen opened his eyes, looking once more upon the living world. Illiat still danced, whirling in the moon shadows that shaped her body in milky perfection. He stirred, as only living men can stir, and rose from his stone bed. Life anew set his body aflame, but he was unfaltering as he moved toward her, fingers aching to know the softness of that twisting flesh.

But when she saw him, returned from where the dead slept, she fled on shoes of air. All Bathen knew after was torment.

Andore stared at this creature of gods and earth. *Her as well,* he thought, knowing she too suffered at the denial of companionship.

“Do you want to hear a story?” Andore asked, his voice seeming to thunder from his throat. For a moment he thought she might sprint away, frightened off like some wary animal before a storm. But she nodded once, her eyes watching him hungrily.

Settling himself on the head of a nearby stone, Andore motioned for her to follow. She folded long legs upon the ground before him, staring up with such wonderment that Andore felt the faltering of his heart. *I have spoken before kings and queens,* he thought. *I have defended murderers and rapists. Yet, before her, I am like a babe before his father.*

When the air deigned to move, her hair danced out around her face, spider-webbing across her parted lips.

“Seven armored men moved,” Andore began, before his voice could betray him, “and seven naked men rested. Four homely girls sang, and four beautiful girls held silent. Between them all lifted a pole of the clearest ice wrapped in ribbons of red and blue and white. Within that length

of frozen water were six ravens trapped in flight. Fourteen men lifted arms of bronze. Eight girls lowered trembling palms. And the ravens imprisoned knew it was wrong to pine for freedom. Still, six captives longed. The men and the girls, with helmets and curls, breathed and gave air to the world. The heat of their life melted the ice, and one raven exploded to night. The remaining five took to their wings, entering their brother as midnight kings.”

Illiat gave a small, disapproving frown. Andore laughed at the sight. “I know,” he said, “but it’s short. *The Birth of the Black Gods* doesn’t have to be true. Stories don’t have to be true to be enjoyed.”

As she watched him, her glittering eyes drinking all the light of the afternoon, Andore climbed from the stone and sat upon the grasses in front of her. Every mortal instinct told him to reach for her, to embrace her. To kiss her. The way she looked at him, the way her lips were parted ever so slightly as she breathed, brought a lightness to his heart, an indifference to his mind. *I don’t care if I die. I have to touch her.* The realization overwhelmed his feelings of affection. He could not leave her, not again.

Hours came, and hours went. The day turned night. Even beneath the stars, Illiat was majesty. Andore knew nothing of sleep or fatigue or want.

They sat together, Andore sharing every story tucked within his heart, Illiat holding her summery smile.

How many times the sun passed, Andore could not say; how many times the stars came out, alone or accompanied by the moon, Andore never knew. Time was Illiat.

“Can I kiss you?” Andore asked, glancing quickly to her lips, that inviting line of her mouth. He wasn’t there for a dalliance. He wasn’t there to achieve something ephemeral. Whatever came about would last the rest of his life.

She did not answer him. Her gaze was resolute.

“I have missed you,” Andore said, the words bleeding from his heart. “I have cursed the light and cursed the dark. I have tried filling the emptiness with everything around me. I want nothing but you.” It felt like the ramblings of a smitten child. *Do I not possess better words?* But he didn’t. There was nothing more he could fashion that would prove himself.

Illiat blinked, then stood, her lissome frame delicate and straight.

Andore followed the long march of her body, stopping at her eyes. They were two brilliant circles, holding a deep promise. He stood, facing her, fearful of what she might do, fearful of what he might do. *This is what I want.*

Illiat wore not but skin, the most remarkable skin. Andore peeled his old tunic free, stepped from his breeches, and cast his smallclothes aside. He stood as naked as she, the sun lapping in waves across him.

He went to her, unhesitant, and they collided with a storm of flesh. Their bodies came together, his arms wrapping around her, his hands winding through her hair of gold and earth. He closed his eyes as his lips slammed into the soft cloud of her lips, and felt . . . everything. The world went white, blindingly white. Then the flames were upon him, riding his bones, his skin, the very sweat clinging to his brow. But he was alive with the fires, with her arms clenched around him, pulling him impossibly close. He kissed her all the deeper, feeling as the world around him burned away like the dry thing it was. Their tongues moved as one in that small space between their teeth.

The rise of her breasts against him was monstrous and sweltering. He could feel every curve of her body as his hands raced across her with a terrible urgency. And she mimicked him, searching his mortal body, knowing its strengths and failings.

Then came the unalterable silence. He opened his eyes and she was before him, smiling gloriously.

I am home, he thought.

Illiat nodded.

Then there was nothing but those brown eyes of hers, aglow with such magic, watching him, gleaming with the lights of infinity.

* * *

When Illiat and Adore vanished, Garann finally took a breath. How long had he held it? From the ache in his chest it must have been a span. But who could breathe at such a sight? Garann was moved, both to inspiration and despair. Hard fast tears came to his eyes as the responsibility settled upon his shoulders. He could pen this story, *would* pen this story, but there was no way in all the hells or heavens he would do it justice.

END

Commentary: Here is where I decided to expand Andore's story. Well, Andore and Illiat's story as it was hinted at in Jar of Hearts. Truthfully, I felt kind of bad for Andore at the end of The Eyes of Illiat, and had to give him his opportunity for happiness. I suppose this was because I was fighting through something similar in my own life, and used Andore's struggle and perseverance to make sense of and deal with my personal hardship. Stories are funny that way, in that you can approach and overcome fictional obstacles that so closely resemble the problems of real-life that you come away with a sense of closure.

You Bury Me

Our entire village lost ... for a wedding ...

The old woman came to the village many years back. This was only a few months before the terrible winter that saw so many people freeze to death in their beds.

She arrived with only a small packed kerchief and a blue-black walking stick, upon which she leaned the whole of her thin body. Her back was painfully hunched, and her grasping fingers were like sticks. She was sadly old then, the kind of age that makes one watch where they place their feet lest they step in their own grave.

Her residence became an abandoned cabin at the end of the long-ignored Creek Road--the creek had been dry for a decade or more, and the road was really nothing more than a few stones and high grass. The shack was nothing more than rotting slates and a poor roof that was bowed with years of wind and rain. How she survived that first winter is a mystery.

There, she kept mostly to herself, wandering the village streets infrequently, and only when it was required. At home she would fashion the most beautiful trinkets: necklaces and anklets and chains that could be woven into hair. These she would carry in her kerchief to the village to trade. She often boasted that her creations would bring the wearer love or wealth or luck. Looking back, we do not doubt her. But many of us turned up our noses, and ridiculed her for such outlandish proclamations. We believed in the grace of God, and His fortunes couldn't be locked away within metals.

There was a daughter of the village, Molly, a bright child, always laughing and running and quick to make a game of anything she came upon. She wore dresses of white, and her golden hair was always curled atop her head, bouncing as she twirled or bobbed a playful curtsy. You could find her in the fields, picking wildflowers for a crown of daisies and petunias and forget-me-nots, or atop the high hill beneath the great oak reading a book of fairy stories. She was a lovely child, and all the village adored her. That's why, some years later, when Molly had blossomed into a woman of hips and comely smiles, we worried. It was summer and, as young girls are so inclined, Molly fell in love.

This was the same summer war sprouted up in the distant east, a terrible fight that came to us on the lips of fleeing refugees, speaking of black-skinned barbarians and babes put to the slaughter. The unnatural summer heat had seen our complaints, but now we had solid reason for our angst. We clutched our sons tightly to our breasts, hoping that blood and steel wouldn't take them from us, that the call of honor and glory wouldn't lead them off to strange lands where they'd find their shoveled beds of earth.

And yet, we were helpless when the soldiers came, clad in their pristine violet capes and finely trimmed and oiled beards, looking like heroes out of stories. They were men who'd never known the field of battle, yet were swift to speak of its virtues.

Molly had fallen in love with the fisherboy Ben, and it was the soaked-in-each-other kind of love that made for short summer days and restless nights. She would sit on the banks of the river while he fished the waters with his father and uncle, whistling in time with the orioles and warblers. Together they were always arm in arm, making up for the moments they'd been denied. Rumors lifted of a wedding. But with the soldiers, went Ben. He had to go, for it was his duty to serve our king across foreign borders. So he left, along with all the other men of age, leaving the village in the care of women and men too old to die upon a blade.

There was no wedding that summer, no swift combining of hearts. Ben told Molly they could wait for his safe return, as it would prove a blessing from God. Many of us knew the truth of his delay: he was afraid to leave her widowed so young if he were to fall in battle. It was mentioned in passing once, and Molly overheard. But she just laughed and smiled and blew it off as a silly thing that only old mothers worry about. Of course he would come back. He had, after all, promised.

Not even a year passed before news of our fallen reached us. Winter was fading, and yet the mood of the village remained lethargic, degenerating into a funereal sentiment. Women stood more often at their open doors, staring off at the eastern sky, the direction their sons and husbands had marched. The men took to their work with monotonous intent, filling their bodies with activity so their hearts would not consume them. It was a sober time, replacing the whimsical days that had given such liveliness to the streets. Few children laughed now, and more ladies could be heard weeping behind closed doors.

Yet none of us seemed to grieve like Molly. She fell ill in those first days, and her beautifully pale skin lost all its vitality. She found small solace in sleep, and would lie abed for days at a time, her covers shielding her from the light of the world. Food went shunned, and she thinned down from the buxom young lass who'd stolen men's hearts a short year prior.

When she first emerged from her mother's home, sorry eyes drifted towards her, and frowns deepened. She was a husk of a woman, eyes barren and lips a stringent line. Where mothers would ponder the east and far fields of battle, Molly kept her gaze trained on the ground. She shuffled about in those early days of her awakening, down to the river where she would sit, murmuring gently to the waters riding the bank. She did not whistle. It was there her waking hours were spent. Entire days would see her seated in the dirt, plucking rocks from the ground to toss into the brown river. That lasted until the old woman came to her.

Few had reached out to Molly, failing to understand the enormity of her loss. Mothers whose sons would never return placed their hands upon her shoulders, or wept openly as they talked of all they would miss. Widowed by the war, women sought to connect with her. But Molly hardly acknowledged them, brushing off their gestures with ill-timed scowls. Her heart desired mending, yet she was content to leave it broken. Then, somehow, the old woman gained Molly's confidences.

They grew close; Molly seeking, as it seemed, a friend as close to death as that of her fallen love. Sometimes they would vanish into the forest, just walk off one morning and not reemerge for days. We all waited at our windows during those absences, hoping to see our daughter sooner, without the old woman, with that same effervescent smile we'd come to know and love. But the nights would come, and the forest felt dangerous and distant. Many of us complained at the closeness of the black tree trunks. And when green leaves fell from the branches, we were quick to rake and set them to fire.

Soon our worry over Molly and the old woman was replaced by news that a few of our men were coming home to us, so to find a proper burial. We were not surprised to learn that one of the returning sons was Ben. It was in our nature, then, to fret over what this would do to Molly. We soon learned.

That very day Molly met with the village Green Mother beneath gray clouds that refused to rain. Her face was the portrait of calm confidence, but her posture was stiff and straight as she spoke, and she seldom lifted her hands from her sides. The Green Mother shook her head often and cast disbelieving eyes away from Molly. But Molly stood steadfast, as resolute as any woman of marriageable age. It was then agreed upon that Molly would marry Ben.

Until that day, we never really knew terror. We'd thought fear was a stretching winter, when the food disappeared and the babes cried with empty stomachs. We thought fear was ravenous wolves descending upon our homes and tearing the throats from our stock and the men defending us. But what was truly horrifying was a broken heart that convinced a woman to wed a corpse.

It was wrong, we knew. It was an abomination before God. And many of us found our way to the church to dirty our knees and steeple our fingers in prayer, desperately trying to save Molly's soul. Men who had not spoken to God since they were children talked to Him like an old friend returned from a long journey, sharing their concerns regarding Molly. And women who never missed an opportunity to speak to the Creator were cautious as they whispered, fearing offense. We were fighting some unholy war, in the church and by our glances and with disparaging shakes of our heads. Gossip was our strongest weapon, as it pulled us together, keeping Molly and the wedding close. The old woman was on our lips as well; she was the catalyst for the upcoming profanity. But we never approached her. It seemed more important that we push our brooms across floors or take the flocks out to graze while sharing our latest observations. "She pointed north, and Molly nodded," "They baked honeycakes last night," "Molly had a basket of lilies and dandelions," we would say. They sounded such mundane things, but we knew there was a terrible undertone to their actions.

It was an unusually chilly morning when the cart rumbled in, bearing the lifeless bodies of our men of war. We gathered around them, looking at the four who'd made the journey home. Four out of the twenty-seven who had left.

They were wrapped in canvas sacks from foot to neck, leaving only their heads bare. It was a difficult thing to take in, and many a throat surrounded a heart.

The preservation attempts had been commendable, but the faces sleeping in the bed of that wagon weren't familiar to us, a year having stolen their beauty. The skin was an odd color, like the bellies of fish. They were not the sun-tanned men we remembered, and their flesh didn't settle properly upon the bones. A few wore horrific scars, proving exactly how they'd been cut down. Ben's body was one of the disfigured. The entire right side of his face carried a long gash that had been clumsily tended and stitched. The reunion wasn't for the light-hearted, and many of us dropped to our knees in agony.

Women wailed, and men fought tears with hard-knuckled fists. But Molly's appearance brought the lamenting to a choking standstill. She went to Ben's body, carefully pushing her way past his sniffing father. For a long moment she simply stared at him, her face expressionless. Then she leaned down and kissed his forehead, her pale red lips pressing into his doughy white skin. "You kept your promise." When she smiled, a chill ran through every breast watching.

Molly was to have her wedding the next afternoon. She had waited a year, and would wait no more.

That night, the village held its breath behind chattering teeth. We sat at firesides and gathered blankets about our shoulders, fending off the incongruous summer cold filling every corner of our little part of the world. Yet, for all the apprehension of the night, there was energy in the air, one that belied the uneasy expectation of the coming day. It was an impossible thing to ignore, that festival-like anticipation riding all of our hearts.

We slept, and dreamed unhappy dreams of dead men dancing and young women braiding flowers into the limp hair of corpses.

They dressed Ben in his finest clothing so that he looked a man ready for the start of a married life. The pallor of his skin was stark against the scarlet of his tunic, but it aided in giving the illusion of life. His corpse they seated in a wooden chair, arms and legs strapped down with leather bands. He looked part puppet and part feral animal. They then shoved a rod down the back of his shirt and tied twine around his head. We came and went while they worked, sometimes pausing long enough to inspect the body, other times turning away our noses as the scent of him repulsed us. In his lap was placed a basket of wildflowers and spices, but it was little good in blunting the stench of decay.

The grounds for the wedding were resplendent, exactly what we would expect for Molly. The chairs were dressed in white sheets tied with red sashes. Lining the aisle between seats, alongside a runner of soft white satin, were vases of coral lilies. The archway of braided willow was threaded with yellow-dyed linen and a lively bouquet of wildflowers. Yet, through all the trappings and beauty, Ben's corpse sat like rotted fruit in a salad, breaking the otherwise charming spell. No one could take their eyes from him long enough to appreciate the long white streamers clinging to the trees, or to admire the wash of pink rose petals that tumbled across the green grass as a soft wind moved through the clearing.

We sat our chairs far too stiffly, as though relaxing might speak for our acceptance, would provide the day a semblance of normalcy that spoke nothing of its true macabre reality. The

tension in many of our bodies was simple readiness, so that we could bolt at the slightest sign of danger. It was an illogical caution inside our breasts. The situation, unusual as it was, was nothing to be frightened of. Still, we remained on edge, and tolerated the sickness brewing in our hearts.

Looking back, that apathetic approval haunts us. Our curiosity allowed such blasphemy to occur. And we failed to find anger with God's lack of sympathy.

She came down the aisle between us with a ridiculous smile upon her face. It was not a joyous thing, but a thing of madness, outlined by her jagged cheekbones and sunken eyes. Molly, sweet Molly, of long pigtails and dirtied bare feet, stepped heavily in her ivory dress as she moved to wed a dead man.

The slenderness of her frame was startling, sharp at the hips and elbows and knees. The flowing trail of her dress was like that of crawling apparitions, struggling to keep up with a living skeleton.

The Green Mother looked unsettled, perched there beneath the archway, just a small span from where Ben sat. A breeze came in, fluttering the cloth and flowers above her. She glanced between Molly and Ben, her eyes going wide at each. And when she spoke, she stumbled over her words, words we'd heard her recite a hundred times or more. But ever Molly stood straight. Her smile never left, a bright thing that displayed too much teeth.

The addition of "Even a rose is gray at night" by the Green Mother summed up what we all were experiencing. This was a thing of beauty and affection darkened. What should have been a celebration of love had become an acknowledgment of insanity.

When the ceremony was complete, and after Molly placed her wreath upon Ben's head, the Green Mother announced that Molly had something she wished to say to her husband. Silence covered the gathering entirely. A bird chipped once, somewhere behind us, but even its song cut off abruptly.

Molly dropped to one knee before him, and placed a wiry hand upon his knee, squeezing. She looked tenderly into his gray, sagging face, her eyes searching him with misplaced excitement. Then she spoke. It was almost a whisper, and had we all not been hushed we probably wouldn't have heard her say "You bury me."

No one moved. No one so much as breathed. Something was going to happen, we knew, and not a soul among us wanted to be the one to miss it. But as the minutes dragged on, and Molly remained knelt before him, we could see the disappointment alter her features. Then, the dead man lurched.

Molly stumbled back, shocked, and toppled to her rump. He twitched again, the straps pinning him to the chair proving their worth. His head quivered, as though trying to roll, but the rod shoved down his back held him in place. Then his mouth opened and the most awful guttural cry lifted from his throat. He roared again and shook in his bindings, seeking to break himself free.

Molly leapt from the ground and went to him, cooing softly as she reached out to caress the hard lines of his face. Someone ran and grabbed hold of her, pulling her back. She screamed to be released, but the man only held tighter, fighting her mad gyrations.

Ben grew angrier and frantic, desperate to break his bonds. The time of interest had ended. The women were out of their seats, fleeing in their aprons and bonnets. The old men were hesitant, but stood their ground. Some had found weapons, and armed themselves. Axes, and staffs, and chairs were in hand. They waited for the body to free itself before attacking, maintaining a smart wariness.

Inevitably, the chair broke beneath the weight of Ben's struggle. The snapping of wood sounded like a crack of thunder. And he stood. Despite the wound upon his face, despite the lack of color in his flesh, he stood.

The man holding Molly screamed as she bit him, his blood drawn into her mouth. Free, she sprinted to Ben and threw her arms around him, embracing him as though he were warm of body. He did not hug her back. He stood there, arms at his sides, stock-still and horrified. His lifeless eyes turned to take in the scene, and although he appeared satiated, there was an obvious hunger within him. It was painful to watch as his mouth opened and closed, nothing coming out but grunts and growls.

Molly pulled back from him, looking him over, laughing into the small space separating their lips. The pure elation on her face was enough to make even the staunchest headsman recoil.

Finally, he looked to her. For a moment it seemed he didn't recognize her as his watery eyes jumped in all directions. Then, suddenly, as though all the unspoken fears of the village had been on point, he grabbed Molly and lifted her over his shoulder. The men did not hesitate then; they raced forward.

The dead man turned and fled, carrying Molly off into the woods, the village men in swift pursuit.

The women waited patiently for the men to return with dear Molly. Some even hoped for Ben's corpse. But the days came and went, and not a single body returned from the woods, dead or alive. Soon, the women began to despair that all was lost, that the demon corpse had stolen Molly and murdered their husbands and brothers. Some few held out hope, a hope that faded quickly as the days ran into months, and the months to years. Eventually the women departed the village, traveling in every direction opposite those cursed woods.

We blamed the old woman, knowing she had devised to destroy the lives of those who'd ridiculed her for her trinkets. After the first days when the men did not return from the woods, we went to her shack, armed with rakes and shovels and knives, ready to bestow a grieving justice. But we found her home empty, with nothing inside but a hard wooden cot sprinkled with old straw.

We believed, then, in the old woman's boasts; and those who had traded with her were quick to dispense of their jewelry.

A few of us came to learn the meaning of Molly's words spoken at the wedding. They had not made sense to us then, but slowly we came to understand. "You bury me," she had said. It was her way of letting Ben know it pained her too much to be alone. She would rather he outlive her so she wouldn't have to suffer his loss. They might have been part of the old woman's plan, a curse to draw the dead back to the world of the living. Or they could have been heartfelt, a genuine token of warmth from a woman in love.

END

Commentary: I had begun a story titled Black Star, which followed roughly the same premise but was told in first-person (In Black Star I had planned on having Molly's love resurrected after she wished upon a star). I wanted to write the same story in two different perspectives to see which came out the more powerful. I was halfway through Black Star when I started in on You Bury Me, and the impersonal perspective of third-person (one that was more or less from the town's viewpoint) lent the story a distinctly strange feeling. It was vastly different than being in the head of Molly, and I decided to stick with it and abandon the first-person narrative.

The Last Stand of a Dying Soldier

Late summer winds twisted the heavy pine branches sweeping the side of a seldom-trodden road as a lightly encumbered wagon rolled north. From his seat, Knowlan Brown listened to the susurrus of needles against grasses, and felt the small clapping of his long sleeves as they added a soft patter to the melody of the world. Evening approached, dragging the light of the world beyond the western edge.

Repetitive in the trader's life, Knowlan's eyes sagged, hinting at an early bed. That was before a small bend brought into view a lone traveler, one who stood stiffly at the roadside ahead.

Brigands and cutthroats were common these days, men and women whose lives had been upended by the recent war. It was for that reason Knowlan carried an old sword with him, tucked behind his seat. He was terribly poor at wielding it, but an object such as that could dissuade the less desperate of vagabonds. He didn't reach for the weapon now, opting instead to press his mare quicker.

Coming closer, he could truly see the man. At a distance, the stranger had resembled one of the many lonely commoners roaming the fields and woods. Closer, the man carried a far more lonesome air, one that drew toward utter sadness. Knowlan at first mistook him for a tumbleman, a man who'd fallen so low from his station in life that all he possessed were breeches, tunic, and perhaps a stolen tool. But this man was no tumbleman; he looked far worse, as though he'd recently climbed from a grave and was looking at the light of the world with fearful and astonished eyes. His clothing was travel-stained and aged, covered in red-brown blotches. Dark unkempt hair was flecked with bits of grass and straw. His chin lay upon his chest, as though his eyes dare not look upon the fading indigo sky. Indeed, his entire carriage spoke of a body withered and beaten, only the legs claiming anything of strength as they managed to keep the slender frame upright.

And at the man's feet lay a leather satchel, scuffed and muddied through much use. He was probably a refugee from the war, looking to find his way back home now that it had finally ended after two long years. Nothing of violence echoed from his person, and Knowlan entertained no thoughts of the blade.

Giving the reins an easy tug, he drew his red, Daneara, up short and brought his wagon to a protesting stop, axles in dire need of attention.

"Care for a ride, stranger?" he asked, voice lifting over Daneara's snorting and pawing, and the groaning of his wagon's wooden frame.

The man lifted his head, and dark eyes begged from sunken sockets. A thick beard of black hairs covered jaw and neck, speckled with debris. He turned his gaze down the road, north, then gave a timid nod, a motion that was all submission.

With a bit of effort, Knowlan clambered from his seat, his heavy paunch bringing a familiar ache to his knees and ankles. He felt his jowls quiver and his neck swing as his body took the final step off the wagon to land upon the road. "Let me help you with your things," he said, reaching down and taking up the satchel. There was almost no weight to it, as though the stranger possessed nothing worth carrying.

Knowlan lifted the long bench seat of the wagon and tossed the satchel inside, stowing it with two bundles of clothes and a bag of dried meat and apples.

The two men climbed atop the wagon and took their seats. With reins in hand, Knowlan started north again.

"Thanks," the stranger said. His voice was exactly what Knowlan had expected: slow and without confidence. Thin. Worn.

"Just doing my part during these hard times." Knowlan glanced over at his passenger, studying the man's thick beard and heavy-lidded eyes. It was a familiar cast, one he'd come across many times while travelling this unimportant back road that inched north toward the foothills of the Sparkaan Mountains. He'd taken men beside him before, granting them ease of their legs, and, at times, comfort to their pockets. Sadly, his coin was running low at the moment, a result of highway robberies, and all he could offer this newest drifter was a place to rest his bones. "How far north were you thinking?"

The stranger lifted his head, taking in the early evening sky. His gaze brushed the tops of the pine and elm trees flanking the wagon, their needles and leaves glowing gold in the light of the dying sun. "North?"

"Indeed," Knowlan said with a nod. He brought up a hand and smoothed thinning hair across his pate. "The road's a bit scraggly, twisting here and there to avoid valleys and cliffs, but it straightens out soon enough." His arm gave cursory directions as he spoke. Then he asked, "You weren't planning on making your way north, now that the war's over?"

"I wasn't planning anything," the man replied flatly. He turned to regard Knowlan, a dim light defining the feeble life within his eyes. "Mahood," he said, giving his name and extending his hand. Knowlan took the offering and shook, surprised at the firmness of the stranger's grip, then gave his name in return. Mahood nodded and returned his eyes to the road.

"I see your face," Knowlan began, seeking to spark a conversation, "and remember that place I'm from, as with every man that has passed me these turbulent years." It had been his experience that men without a place needed a bit of prodding before words came easily to their lips. Familiarity often helped loosen a throat. And the struggle Mahood had displayed so far spoke for the effort Knowlan would need to muster.

But Knowlan's assumption died quickly.

"You do not know the place I've come from," Mahood said, face eerily still as he watched the road ahead. The muffled clop of Daneara's hooves filled the sudden silence. And the gentle roll of the wagon had Mahood swaying like a grieving mother. "Tears and heartbreak," Mahood said, "that is where I come from." He swallowed, and Knowlan watched the slow journey of the man's apple fall and rise along his hairy throat. "I was once a very wealthy man," he continued, voice empty of inflection. "Not with coin. It was something of the opposite. I was poor in material wealth, but rich in my heart." His face twisted, warping to show the sickness inside him. His hands were in his lap, restless. "That was before the war; before the end of it, I mean. Before I learned that my parents were dead, that my only child had passed, and of my wife taking another man between her legs." He closed his eyes. "I should have died in that war," he said. The way the words came out sent a shiver riding Knowlan's spine. He'd never heard a man speak so of death.

"I wouldn't have been considered a hero," Mahood said upon looking once more at the world, head rocking side to side. "Just another casualty out of the thousands. But I would have closed my eyes blissful, knowing that I'd raised my arm in defense of what I loved. I would have fallen with those who truly deserved my life." His words continued to come, an uninterrupted stream of pain and remorse, and of a longing that Knowlan couldn't agree to. "Men I once considered friends will never understand what I feel. They who sat happy, ignorant, content on their farms and in their shops and pissing away ale in the taverns. All removed from horrors while I stood on the battlefields, raising my sword and voice so they could spill into their beds and make love to their wives. They have no idea of the ache brought about by war, of the emptiness that comes as everything that makes a man is drawn from him."

A cool breeze came out of the forest, tickling leaves and sending a few spiraling out before the wagon. Knowlan licked dry lips with his long tongue, finding he could do little else with his mouth. He had no words of comfort to impart, nothing of wisdom or understanding.

Mahood had been a soldier, had lived the terrors of the war. But the true horrors hadn't been realized until he'd come home. With a bit of reproach at himself, Knowlan refused to even contemplate the suffering of the man seated at his side.

"I had so many dreams, so many visions that were lies, tools to keep myself from falling apart when men came for my blood." He paused here, heavy eyes scanning the land ahead as though unsure it actually existed. "Peace," he said, pushing the word past his lips. "We fought for peace, didn't we?" He shook his head. "I had peace, of heart, while the terrors of war surrounded me. Now, that the world has a moment to catch its breath, I am tortured." The laugh that came from the man was uncomfortable, a stale wind from a broken crypt.

"I thought of my wife at times," Mahood continued, "carefully rocking my son to sleep as she thought of me, praying to the soft gods for my safe return." He closed his eyes again, opening them by what seemed sheer force. "I treasured the dream of lifting him in my arms, swinging him around so that his toothy smile might light upon me. He would have been three this harvest.

It would have made my effort worth it.” Knowlan watched the man’s hands knot upon his breeches, thick knuckles paling at the agony. “But those dreams are all dashed. My son is in the ground, and I not even privileged enough to toss dirt upon his coffin.” His hands loosened and worked to smooth the fresh wrinkles of his drab trousers. “My wife,” a grim smile appeared on his lips. “She is a terrible blade in my chest, a burden of a memory, too deep to ever be fully removed.” Tears came to his eyes, and they fell down his cheeks in long rows, fed over and over as they ran in thick streams to vanish within the shadow of his beard.

Mahood didn’t raise an arm to swat the tears away. He simply let them fall, remaining silent as his eyes drained of pain.

Finally, the rivulets thinned, and the water upon his cheeks faded.

“I might have been happy dying in the war,” he began again, voice as firm as if he hadn’t just surrendered to heartache. “I would have fallen and slept beside my comrades, beside those men who had fought valiantly so that I might live.” He paused before asking, “Why did they have to succeed in that?” He shook his head, knowing the answer wouldn’t be forthcoming. “I’m certain they didn’t know the living nightmare I’d return to.”

The silence came again, and Knowlan was wary to break it.

Mahood’s brooding wore on for some time, the man content to stare out beyond Daneara’s head. The pain in his eyes wore on Knowlan, but try as he might, he couldn’t look away. Part of him knew it was rude to stare, but another part found it necessary. Mahood needed the attention, the confirmation that his story wasn’t lost on the world. So Knowlan reached out, his hand giving Mahood a firm squeeze on the shoulder.

“If I had died out there,” Mahood said, head twisting to take in Knowlan’s gesture, “I could have savored the pain, knowing I’d possessed the greatest treasures a man could claim as his own. But I survived, and those treasures have been stolen, never to be recaptured.” His eyes lifted from Knowlan’s hand and took the wagon driver full in the face.

Knowlan’s breath hesitated as the pain swimming in Mahood’s eyes was a difficult thing to behold. They were a deep blue, like the southern skies in late summer. But at the corners there was a clenching, a hard fought struggle that spoke of age and sorrow. And the blue of life wavered in the face of such turmoil.

Gritting his teeth, and with an imposing anger in his tone, Mahood said, “I often think about those men who came at me with rage in their teeth, blades high and sharp, voices loud with a false courage, and I can’t help but damn them for failing to kill me.”

The next silence that fell was unbreakable. Even the wind refused to blow across the road. It could still be heard, twining far off through the boughs, reverent only to a degree.

As the pair moved, steadily drawing north under Daneara’s laborious plodding, and as the false yellow sky flowed into the deep red of late evening, they happened upon a threesome of men

standing as a barricade upon the road. Knowlan drew Daneara to a stop. The three men stood before the wagon, swords and axe laying claim to their barrier. It was a sight Knowlan knew well: men and women both, run from their farms or villages, taking up the thieving lifestyle. After a fashion, Knowlan pitied the people. But in another regard, he found them dishonorable cowards.

“This is what war brings,” Knowlan whispered to Mahood, realizing only then that his words were nothing atop Mahood’s understanding of the ravages of battle.

“Down off the wagon,” one of the men ordered, pointing his sword out before him. A long frosty beard hung at his chest, and white hair fell about his head. His companions both hefted their weapons, a display meant to evoke fear.

“There’s nothing here for you,” Knowlan said. “We’re simple men, making way north. Let us pass.”

The brigand disagreed. “No one passes lightly, man. We all have to forfeit something to make it through these hard times.”

“What will you part with?” Knowlan said, willing to play at the banter.

With a tilt of his head, the man considered. “Morals.” He shrugged. “Regardless. You’re outnumbered, even if you do outweigh us. Give over the wagon and your goods, and your lives are yours. We can’t be much more fair than that.”

“Do you have a weapon? Anything?” Mahood asked suddenly, voice low.

Knowlan nodded. “A sword. But it’s old. Nearly worthless.”

“Give it to me.”

There was no argument. He twisted in his seat and reached back beneath the cloth tarp of his wagon. Pulling the weapon out, he thrust it into Mahood’s hands, hoping to be rid of it before the brigands saw him. He would have very much just rather handed his things over and been on his way; he’d heard too many tales of men losing their lives because of their willfulness. But the man he’d taken beside him had vastly different plans.

Mahood left the seat of the wagon and strode to stand beside Daneara, the old sword gripped firmly in one hand. He placed an open palm on the beast’s neck and patted it gently. Puffs of road dust lifted from her hide. The sword dangled loose at his thigh.

“This nation has seen enough fighting,” Mahood said. “Many of its children have gone back to the earth. Don’t be so quick to add more.”

The brigands were visibly startled, glancing back and forth between themselves as they fought to riddle out this stranger's words. They were tanned men, farmers probably, drawn into stealing other people's possession once their own had been legally stolen by the king.

"Times are tough, man, you know this," the white-haired brigand said. "We have to survive however we can. The war took everything from everyone. The king has beggared us all. It might have been a war for peace, but peace will not come until the capital sees to the state of its people. Hand over the wagon, and the two of you will keep your lives." He hefted his blade.

Mahood crinkled his lips and gave a small nod. "You put too much importance on life." He raised the sword and marched forth, planting himself squarely between the brigands and the wagon, then took the sword in both hands and dropped into a ready stance.

Knowlan lifted a hand, thinking to somehow call Mahood off, thinking to stall the imminent scuffle. But words formed only in his heart, never climbing his throat to jump from his lips.

"Have it your way," the brigand said, shrugging. With a curt tilt of his head, he brought his companions to his side and they moved on Mahood as one.

Mahood fought like a wild man, without regard to his life. The brigands' blades found his skin, opening flesh and letting blood speckle the earth. But the wounds didn't seem to slow him. He still attacked, spun, stabbed with all the ferocity he'd begun with.

He began to wane only as the three men dropped back to regroup, each fighting to draw breath. Knowlan hadn't noticed it before, intent as he was on Mahood's recklessness, but the brigands were looking terribly put to. The man with the axe had a long line of blood running down his left arm, a gash as long as his forearm. The two swordsmen's faces were a sight; their hair hung low before their eyes, glistening with blood. Their cheeks bore cuts that streamed thin lines of blood into their beards, which gathered in tight globs before dripping onto their tunics.

His chest swelling like a bellows, Mahood drew in a great breath, steadied himself by giving his head a swift shake, then sauntered forward, ready to engage the men once more.

Disregarding the fact that they'd been evenly matched at three to one, the brigands didn't back away. They moved forward, and the four armed men came together at once in a clash of steel and skin.

Swords rose and fell with a vicious clangor that knocked birds from their perches. A lone axe sashayed through the mix. Mahood was forced to weave between the attacks, taking his chances when they came. First, he found the throat of a sword-wielder, and the man crumpled to the earth, twitching. Next, he opened the axeman's stomach with a smooth slash, spilling the man's innards in a great rush. Then it was only him and the remaining brigand, the one with the long beard now stained red. Both looked defeated, marred as they were with open wounds and clothes that could never be cleansed of all the blood. But they kept their feet, and circled each other with cautious steps. Were this a poem the men would be trading japes or words of challenge. But

there was none of that. Neither man had energy for speaking. So, silently, they faced each other, waiting for that deciding moment.

As though a bell sounded, signaling the start of the end, both the brigand and Mahood moved forward. The swordsman raised his blade and tested Mahood's right. Mahood met the blow and turned it aside, countering with a jab to his foe's midsection. Stepping to the side, the brigand avoided having himself eviscerated, and brought his blade down after Mahood's arm. It took only a twist, and Mahood was able to dodge the swordsman's blow. Then, in a whip-fast riposte, Mahood extended his arms, allowing his blade to reach out behind him and find the last enemy standing. It was the final few inches of the sword that made all the difference. It sought out blindly, yet found the brigand's skull. The tip started at the right eye socket, cutting cleanly all the way across, taking eyes and the bridge of the nose. As the swordsman tumbled backward, striking his head upon the ground, a wide spray of blood erupted from his face.

The fight was done, and Mahood went down to one knee, the sword the other half of his support.

Knowlan nearly leapt from his wagon, though prudence forced him to take the steps evenly lest he find himself with a broken leg. Finding the road, he raced to where Mahood knelt panting. It was a sight. The man was awash in blood, both his own as well as those whose lives he'd taken. And he stank. It was the smell of sweat and death and fresh human waste. Slowly, Knowlan came to realize the smell wasn't Mahood's alone. The men that lay unmoving upon the earth provided their own aroma. The axeman emitted the sour stench of his guts, while the other two men carried the lingering odor of shit.

"It was the one thing I'd hoped to escape," Mahood said between breaths, voice heavy with fatigue. Knowlan assumed he meant the killing, or perhaps the agony that came with taking a blade to the skin. But he seemed to have a far worse memory. "Can't hold their bowels in death," he said. He glanced up at Knowlan, teeth covered in the slickness of blood and saliva. "Battlefields are nothing but the smell of shit and piss, and the sounds of men screaming." He lowered his head and spit out a thick spray of blood. "Sticks in your throat." The sword dropped from his hand and he fell limp to the road, giving way finally to his injuries.

"We have to get you up," Knowlan said. "There might be a farm nearby. Or a village. Somewhere we can get you help." But even as he spoke, hope died in his chest. There was nothing nearby, and the closest succor they'd be able to find wouldn't be reached for a couple of days. Mahood, by the looks of him, wouldn't last to see the night.

Mahood shook his head, rolling it softly upon the ground. It was the weariness of the motion, so slow and deliberate, that brought tears to Knowlan's burning eyes. The deep shadows of the bordering wood lapped at the darkening road, sliding patches of night across Mahood's face. *The hands of Death*, Knowlan thought grimly.

"It's only fitting, isn't it?" Mahood said. "That I beg for death and it finds me so swiftly." His arm rose and his fingers took a grip on Knowlan's bare arm, the blood smeared there felt cold. "Please," he said, "bring my satchel."

Knowlan went to the wagon, lifted the seat, and retrieved the pack. He moved faster than he had in ages, refusing to let Mahood die before his request was fulfilled.

Beside the dying man, Knowlan placed the satchel.

“Open it, please.” Mahood’s head lolled to the side, slow-blinking eyes looking to the leather bag as though searching for life itself.

Opening the satchel, Knowlan was surprised to find that it actually wasn’t empty. There was a small leather pouch inside, folded carefully onto itself and bound with a short length of twine. He gently removed the pouch and placed it on the ground next to Mahood. His fingers shook as he untied the string then slowly unfolded the tucked flaps. What the pouch revealed made Knowlan pause. There was a clump of dirt and what looked like a chipped piece of river rock.

Mahood reached out with fingers of blood, and placed his palm upon the pouch’s contents. Knowlan looked to him, questions in his eyes.

“The dirt is from my son’s grave,” he answered. “And the stone chip I took from his marker.” His eyes, for once, seemed to light up. The evening darkness wasn’t enough to dampen the glow. Then, through a smile sad as twilight, he said, “Poor as they are, these things are all that’s left to me of a life I once cherished.” His hand tightened on the contents, the dirt spilling between his clenching fingers. Then, with a slow escape of a final breath, his fingers unfurled and he lay silent.

Knowlan took it upon himself to bury the man, and give his wounded soul a proper resting place. The three brigands he left alone, dragging them from the road and leaving their opened bodies to the wolves and feral dogs.

It took him well into the deep of night, the lifting of the pick and the shovel, the placement of the body, and the replacing of earth, to bury the fallen man. And as a final act of respect, Knowlan had added the dirt and stone chip to the fresh grave.

END

Commentary: I had come across a heart-breaking poem written by a soldier who’d been stationed in Afghanistan that touched me in such a way that it demanded I write a story. The elements of Last Stand, the cheating wife, the buried child, the lack of connection with former friends, were all part of the reality of the poet soldier. For me, I write stories that have a heavy emotional slant. After reading that poem, and truly sitting back and soaking in what the soldier must have experienced (and I might have wept a bit at the reality of it) I felt like I possessed this urgency, this energy that would allow me no comfort until I did something with it. So I sat down and wrote this story. The first draft came out of me in a therapeutic rush. It was almost as though I was attempting to right that poet soldier’s life through my own words. Yet, when it came to the close, I couldn’t fathom any situation that would manage to heal the dreadful wounds the soldier

must have carried. And maybe it says something dark about me that I consider the fictional soldier's death, and the sacrifice that came with it, no matter how meaningless, a thing of honor and inevitability.

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His Epic Fantasy ebook novel: *The Pale Hand of God (Book 1 of the Paruus Histories)* can be found on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)