A Fantasy Short Story Collection

The Azrian Anthology: Volume #1

James Speyer
What You’ll Find:

**Kiara - 8100 words**
Caught between her own two perfect visions of hell, Kiara is trapped. Trapped without hope. But is all that about to change?

**The Wraith - 3800 words**
Lost in the mountains, certain death clawing at his slowly freezing body, a young farm-hand has only one thing on his mind: vengeance.

**Progress - 2200 words**
Stuck in a world that never changes, on an island that denies progress at every corner, is their way out of a life that can no longer be lived?

**Sacrifice - 8100 words**
Tradition is everything to the people of Myah’s village, but when tradition is torn away, how will they cope with the wrath of God?

**The Crucible - 1600 words**
It’s a game of wits. Of luck. Of Chance. Opponents face each other, one-on-one. A champion emerges. Only one can survive.

**Hunted - 2000 words**
Alone in the woods. Hounded by hunters, there seems little hope for Driev. Escape means braving the darkness. Will he survive?

**Monsters - 4500 words**
Monsters lurk in all kinds of places. In a nation torn apart by monsters, an overthrown Prince struggles with how best to serve his people.

**Ash and Bone - 3300 words**
Care for it as if it were your own, or all that will be left is ash and bone. Words to remember, as the forest closes in around you.

**Save Her - 4400 words**
Bankamp has seen horrors, but none like this. Neither death nor war could prepare him for what he found deep within a small tavern hidden in the frozen south.

**The Siege - 1500 words**
As the stonecrow sores overhead, the castle crumbles, and the hounds race through the city, one man faces his final moments the only way he knows how.
Once again, Kiara sat on the end of her rustic four poster bed, its frame draped with luxurious cloths of dazzlingly white silk. The bed itself lay messy, the pillows heaved over each other in a crumpled mess. The duvet was slung off the foot of the bed, dangling over its edge and resting on the polished hardwood floor beneath.

She'd didn't how many times she'd sat there, clothes falling limply around her slender form, as she tenderly kissed her latest lover goodbye before watching them leave, cursing them and counting their money the second they were out of sight. Her bright smile quickly turning to a curled and crooked lip. Kiara often wondered who she hated more: the men or herself. But it was always the same conclusion. It was always them.

Sighing, she looked to distract her mind. Gazing down at the palm of her hand, Kiara slowly wriggled her fingers, taking in a deep breath. Something started to spark between them, as if the flow of air between her fingers was creating some sort of unseen friction. The sparks grew bigger, until a flame emerged; a slither of fire that Kiara absent-mindedly twirled between her knuckles.

There was a knock at the door.

In a lurch of panic, Kiara quickly clenched her fist, extinguishing the flame. The knock came from Verva, the owner of the establishment in which Kiara worked. She never waited for an answer and a moment later, her head was around the door, smiling pleasantly.

What did she want?

“Good work this morning, my girl. It’s quiet downstairs now, the parade is starting. Why don’t you go down and see if you can drum up some business for later?”

Kiara said nothing, she just nodded. Verva had learnt to accept no more than this and skulked out, closing the door behind her. Kiara took another soothing breath, lifting her nose to the ceiling, she tried to quell her inner anguish. If there was one thing she hated more than letting men do what they did, it was going into town to convince them to do it.

Heaving herself up, her body clearly rejecting her mind’s purpose, not wanting to leave the solitude of her room, she headed for the door.

Kiara emerged from what she not so fondly referred to as her carefully disguised prison, into a lurid courtyard of redstone walls; walls covered in climbing flowers that wove their way amongst the wooden slatted windows and two-story terraces that sprawled across this affluent corner of the city. The sun-soaked shrine in the centre, a bronze statue of some old dead hero, shimmered in the light. Kiara sneered as she passed the metallic monstrosity. Every time she saw it the, she wondered why nobody else seemed to spot the vulgarity beneath. A hero of the people, standing guard outside a house of pleasure, corruption and despair.

Against the wall of the brothel, Kiara spotted a fellow worker, head between her knees, weeping. Some girls couldn’t handle the life they were forced into. Kiara didn’t pause the comfort her, she wasn’t interested more tedious than she was already subjected to today.

The heat of the high-noon sun pummelled the sandstone paving along which Kiara wandered, bringing beads of sweat to her forehead. Why they called this city Coldmore she’d never know. Eight years she’d lived here, and it was never cold. She’d always thought to ask about the name, but dreaded the idea of an answer longer than a sentence or two.

People liked to talk too much.

This district of the city rose high with more two-story redstone houses. Narrow and constantly splitting off in new directions, the streets were like a maze. You could easily get lost here, easily lose an afternoon, but Kiara didn’t care. It was quiet here. Just how she liked it. A moment’s peace. Time without a man in her ear.

It was remarkable, Kiara mused to herself as she made her way further down the streets towards a growing sound cheers and screams somewhere beyond the maze of houses, that despite being told hour after hour how beautiful she was, she felt anything but.

Not that their opinions would mean much to her under a different circumstance anyway. Kiara had little interest in what most people had to say.

The noise of the crowd grew louder as she took a right down another, near identical street. The shutters of the houses were all thrown open in the warmth of summer. Beautiful potted flowers were placed precariously on window ledges; items of clothing hanging out to dry overhead. There was little fear of crime here, not in this part of the city. The few people she passed were the epitome of wealth. Wearing colourful clothes, neat and well looked after, adorned with jewels that sparkled in the sunlight. Kiara often had to remind herself that this is what she, herself, looked like. As she passed a couple, arm-in-arm, she got exactly what she’d come to expect from the people here. A reserved smile, a nod and a swift look past her. She didn’t much care for the people here. Although truth be told, she didn’t much care for people anywhere.

Finally, she reached the parade. The noise of the crowd was nearly deafening. Loud, unseen drummers played in rhythm to screeches and cheers of hundreds of
onlookers. Ducking around a corner, behind the crowds, Kiara took yet another breath, pulled on a fake smile and streaked out into the herd mass.

Immediately she spotted a former patron, a portly man with a ragged beard, stained clothes and deep pockets. He didn’t much care to look after himself; he let others do that for him. Kiara was on him in moments, draping her fingers softly over his left shoulder before curling around his waist.

“We’ve missed you, Clark.”

Clark couldn’t have looked more pleased to see her. He ran his hands down her arm, looking at her from head to toe.

“It has been…” Clark grumbled with grim, pleasureful sound, “A while.”

“Come and visit me soon,” Kiara winked, getting closer. She pressed her body against his, arms around his waist, resting her chin on his chest and looking up at him with big, dazzling eyes. “Please.”

Clark grinned, food caught between his yellow and black teeth, nodding furiously.

“Good.”

Kiara slunk off his form and turned away. The second her eyes no longer met his, they dropped from dazzling to dull.

Kiara continued to slide across the back of the crowds that lined a wide and open high street. She could hear the clinking of metal and the marching of steel booted soldiers as they made their way through the gathered spectators. Thanks to her short stature, though, she couldn’t hope to see over the much taller men, woman and even large children all clammering to get a look. But she wasn’t after a look anyway. She found the annual parade to be rather harrowing. People once free, sworn into lifelong servitude of a god they had never seen, wheeled up and down in front of the people like cattle at a market. She might spend her day in the service of others, but at least she could enjoy some of life’s more solitary treasures when her work was done; like walking down a busy street without being gawked at.

She carried on, eyeing the crowd for stray men. Men she knew, men she liked. She imagined going back to the palace where the magic users lived. Being with them was like walking into a fiery dance. It was hypnotic, in a strange sort of way.

The women wore bright red robes, glittering with golden embroidery. Their hair was tied up high in elaborate plaits and knots. Each looking nearly identical. What stood out most about these women though, was the fire. As they moved through the crowd, jets of flame shot from their hands, wrapping around their forearms as they swayed to the beat of the drums. The women got even closer, the noise became unbearable. The people on the streets were enthralled by the magic, soaking up every moment of it like it was their last. Kiara had seen foreign Kings and Queens move through the very same streets without anything close to as much fanfare. Nobody was as loved and adored in the city of Coldmore than those who possessed the flame. The trio continued to display their gifts as the carriage rolled on past Kiara, shooting flames into the air and twisting them around each other in a fiery dance. It was hypnotic, in a strange sort of way.

Kiara looked at her hands, then back to the women. She pictured herself up there. In a soft red dress with people screaming and pushing just to get a look at her. She imagined going back to the palace where the magic users lived. Being adored, being loved… being imprisoned by her gift until she died. Property of the city. Property of the people. Never leaving without a host of guards large enough to conquer a nation. Never being left alone. The only freedom in sight being her last breath, brought quicker by the knife to the wrist she’d be tempted by every single day.

Kiara turned away and moved on. She returned to her hunt for patrons, finding much success with those men entranced by the beauties of magic; beauties they knew they could never hope to have. At least they could lay with another beauty, which might just be enough, for now. By the time the crowds of the parade started to disperse she had convinced more than a few to visit her before the week was out. She liked to think she was good at manipulating people, but maybe they were just that desperate.
A slow wander back through the streets was made especially slow by the crowds returning home, all elated by the magic they had just witnessed. Kiara didn't mind the pace. If she'd done her job properly, she'd have a couple men waiting for her when she got back. A busy afternoon was good for the pocket, but bad for the soul. But a soul didn't feed her or keep her warm on those brisk city nights. Still, she found herself taking a few accidental wrong turns down some much quieter alleys. Soon, she found herself in perhaps her favourite place in the entire city.

It was an open-air garden; green, lushious and just a little bit overgrown. In the middle was a small and shallow stone pool that people would occasionally come to cool their feet in, especially on hot days. Visitors to the garden were few and far between though, most preferred the larger gardens and parks away from the suburban streets, and as usual, it was empty. Seclusion was hard to come by in Coldmore, but here Kiara felt cut off from the world. With enough room for only a few people to stand inside, and completely enclosed by the windowless walls of houses, reachable only by a narrow archway that adorned the entrance, it wasn't a well-known spot within the city walls. A single stone bench lay hidden in a small nook, sat up against the wall left of the entrance, ivy encroaching on its corners and climbing up over the lip of the flat-roofed building above.

Kiara dipped a toe into the pool, dampening her sandals, before settling on the bench. She sat, in a daze, willing the sun to set. The more she thought about it, the less she wanted to go back. Another man, then another. The thought made her skin crawl. She could just end it all. Show the world her flames and become adored by the people. Live a life of servitude she could never escape. She was given the opportunity of two worlds, and she hated them both. But at least, maybe one day, she could escape this one. She didn't see how. There wasn't much opportunity for a woman without a husband in Coldmore, and the only thing she hated more than the idea of being a servant to the city was a servant to one person. Reliant on them. A possession of theirs to be flaunted or hidden whenever they chose.

She let a small flame flicker in her hand. So many choices, yet no choices at all. Clapping her hands together she extinguished it angrily. Maybe no choice would be better than having a choice. But her mind couldn't ponder on such thoughts. Unbeknownst to her, wrapped up in her own little world, a visitor had encroached on her space; given away by the clinking of his metal boots. The city guard was standing in the archway, watching her. How he'd snuck up on her Kiara did not know. It didn't really matter, his eyes were lit like the flame she had just extinguished. She looked back at him in horror.

“What are you doing here?” She whispered, her voice cracking slightly.

“I followed you. I thought you would— you know, pickpockets and— make trouble—and”. The guard tried to keep his nerve but couldn't find his words. What he has just witnessed echoed in his voice. His eyes were fixed on Kiara's hand.

A comment like that was not something Kiara would normally let slide, she hated being called a thief. Judgement was all too common in this city, and she made certain those who did regret it.

She was a whore, not a criminal.

For years now, it was the only time she'd let even the smallest part of her mask fall down. But, her mind couldn't go to that place of anger, it was still wrapped in the moment she was experiencing. For the first time in a long time, she didn't just let her mask fall down, she wore no mask at all.

“What are you going to do?” She asked firmly.

“What do you mean?”

“Are you not going to run to the palace and proclaim to have found another gifted girl?” Kiara spoke with an air of disgust.

“Why haven’t you already done that?”

“Not all of us were born for that life.” Kiara glared at the city guard, her worry mixing with a burning anger, but the anger wasn't directed at him. How could she have been so careless? So stupid?

“You prefer to entertain the dregs of humanity in your seedy den than serve in the flame?”. The guard asked, raising an eyebrow. Of course to him, the notion seemed ridiculous.

“Yes, I do.”, Kiara replied curtly.

“Then go.” With that, the city guard stood aside, opening the archway. In silence, he gestured for Kiara to leave.

She was startled by the offer, and rose from her seat apprehensively. She just wanted to run, to escape a moment she hoped never to experience, but this had to be a trick. Her mind was all over the place. She needed to think, to find an answer, but she couldn't. She'd never felt anything like this before. Not once, in over two decades of life, had she ever been afraid like she was right now.

As she moved to pass him, she looked up at the guard, eyes wide.

“What do you want from me?” She was almost pleading with him. Usually, the intentions of the men in front of her were clear, but she couldn't understand why he was letting her go. It was a strange feeling, not be playing a game with the man she locked eyes with.

“I will find you.” The guard whispered softly as he leant in towards her ear. His words weren't threatening. “I serve the flame. You are one with the flame. I will help you see where you belong.”

“Or I will help you see what the flame really is. Just another cage I'm trapped inside.”

Rays of sun spun their way angelically through Kiara's window as her busy afternoon finally drew to a close. She carefully picked up her bed linens and pillows, heaping them together. Pulling her door to, she slung them out into the corridor. Somebody else's problem now.

In the corner of the room was a dresser. Oak, beautifully carved, and so tall it nearly scraped the ceiling. The dresser stood at an awkward angle, crossing it diagonally with its back corners resting against the walls on either side of it, while both of the front corners stuck out into the room. With difficulty, Kiara heaved the mighty piece of furniture groaning as it was slowly dragged across the wooden floor. Behind the dresser was a chair. A small and simple wooden frame, with quilted arms, back and seat. It was the only piece of furniture in the room that was untainted. She placed the chair before her lone window. Sitting down, she bathed herself in the sun's warmth, spreading her arms out so it touched every inch of skin it could. This was her one pleasure in life, that and her secluded

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garden. Before her mind could be drawn to her worries, there was a knock at the
door. She didn’t move, or say anything, she just waited for Verva to enter.

“Something wrong my dear?” Verva said, almost convincing Kiara she was
genuinely concerned. Almost.

“No.” Kiara shut her eyes, staying rooted to her chair. She didn’t give Verva so
much as a glance.

“Some of the patrons, they were… worried about you. Said you seemed
distracted”.

“Sorry Verva, I was just feeling a bit tired this afternoon. The heat. I’ll be back on
form tomorrow, I promise”.

“Okay dear”. Her voice was warm, but there was an undertone to Verva’s
words that Kiara knew all too well. She didn’t run the most successful brothel in
Coldmore by letting her girls lose their edge. “Anyway, you have a guest”.

This got Kiara’s attention. She looked at Verva, dismayed. “But I filled my
quota”.

Her voice sounded desperate.

“He’s not a patron”. Verva backed away from the door as the city guard entered.
He didn’t wear his illustrious armour anymore, but was instead in plain clothing,
with sandals laced above the shin and leather bands around his wrist.

Kiara sat up straight in her chair, watching him curiously as he shut the door
behind him.

“Didn’t take you long”.

“I just wanted to talk.” the guard said softly, his voice calming. Slowly, he
approached Kiara, perching on the window ledge through which the sunlight
poured, blocking it from view. She scowled at him through narrow eyes, but said
nothing.

The guard looked at her with an affectionate smile, Kiara knew why.

“Preach, then”. She barked begrudgingly, settling back in her chair.

The guard wasted no time.

The flame is a gift from God, urrr…

“Kiara”

“Kiara. Each and every one of us is in servitude to it, we owe what we have to
the flame. It is the greatest honour to serve the flame.”

“I’ve lived here many years,” Kiara said, rolling her hand in a gesture to the
ward. She didn’t know his name either.

“Kor.”

“Kor. I know about the servitude, I know about the sacred vows and promises
you members of the palace guard make, but I… I don’t want to be forever in
servitude. But what if it is because she is guiding me elsewhere? I’ve
always felt a pull, ever since I was a little girl growing up in the city. A pull beyond
these walls. Like she’s telling me to follow a different path”.

After a moment of gazing out the window, deep in thought, Kor’s eyes fell back
to Kiara. “You are her voice”. He said quietly, in agreement.

“Yes!” Kiara stood quickly, moving towards Kor. Placing her hand softly on his
face, she stroked his thumb across his stubbled cheek. Kor locked eyes with her,
mesmerised by the woman that stood before him. Kiara too, had what can only be
described as an affectionate look in her eye; far from the cunning thoughts that now
ran through her mind. “And I don’t think I knew, until I met you, what I have to do.”

“What do you have to do?” Kor’s voice was weak and small, taken in by her
sudden show of affection. His eyes drawn to the thumb that now caressed his
cheek.

“We have to leave this place, together.”

Kor took in a deep breath, the words that followed filled with great regret “I can’t,
I’m sworn to the city, to the flame, to her…”

“I am her. You said it yourself. You are sworn to me.”

“If I leave, they’ll come after me. They’ll hang me for betraying my promise to
serve unt—"  

Koria looked at Kiara earnestly, brushing off her comments without a second
thought. She got the feeling not a single word out of her mouth would upset him.
His starry eyes said it all; devotion. She was no longer a person to him. She was as
close to a deity as he could get.

“Do you know what we of the flame believe?”

“Yes,” Kiara replied, dully, blinking back at him.

“Her power passes through you, Kiara. You, like those at the parade today, are
conduits of her fire. Her gifts to the world.”

Kiara sat, pretending to contemplate his words. In reality, she was bored. She,
like everyone else, had listened to crackpots preach about the flame for as long as
she can remember. She never felt she was channelling God, never heard whispers
or had thoughts of divine providence. She could just start a fire without flint and
tinder. But then, she realised, this man didn’t believe that. But he did believe in his
own ridiculous rhetoric.

An idea sparked in her mind.

“What if my destiny lies elsewhere? What if I felt a call, but it wasn’t to serve the
city, but for something—“ Kiara chose her words carefully. “Greater”.

She was back into her act, her mask in full view. She tucked in her shoulders
and head to make herself seem vulnerable. Her eyes grew wider, more innocent
and naive — anything she couldn’t say with words, she could say with a look.

“How do you mean?” Kor appeared unsettled.

“I always felt like my gift was a not meant for me, because I never wanted to
belong to the palace. But what if it is because she is guiding me elsewhere? I’ve
always felt a pull, ever since I was a little girl growing up in the city. A pull beyond
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Kiara pressed her fingers against his lips, quelling his chatter. She attempted to
look like she was being understanding, or at least that she is thinking over his
words. She was not really sure what expression she wore, her mind was too busy
turning over and over, trying to think of what to say next.

“Do you know what happens to me in here? Your conduit of God.” Kiara
pretended to angrily remove her hand from Kor’s cheek.

A great sadness filled Kor’s eyes. He nodded.

“Take me away from here, take me from my prison and help me follow the fire
that guides me. That guides us.” She put her hand to his chest. “Do you not think
we met for a reason?”
Kor fidgeted on the spot. It seemed as if he was desperately searching for words as well. His mouth opening and closing, about to say something, until he finally came out with "We could tell the others, they might understand if we tell them".

"And what if they don’t? What if they force me into the palace. We may never find out what she is really guiding me to."

Kor was becoming flustered. His mind was in overdrive, she could tell by the flickering of his eyes and his incessant blinking.

"So what would we do, if we leave?"

Suddenly, Kiara was caught off guard. What if they did leave? She hadn’t thought that far ahead. Would she end up his pet, or back in a whorehouse halfway around the world? They would have to remain hidden because of his stupid vows. She could leave him, but where would she go? If she had options, she’d have already fled. She thought he was her prison key, but yet another awaited her. Her spark of an idea was now a very small flame. If she didn’t play things right, it could easily be extinguished.

"We’d have to." Her mind was blank. "We’ll have to…"

"We would need a plan," Kor said, saving her from her bumbling. "A way to survive beyond Coldmore. A way to follow the fire that guides you."

Time to think, that was what she needed. Maybe Kor was not the key, but perhaps he could bring it to her, like a well-trained dog.

"Yes". She smiled. "Together, we can find a way to follow the path"

"By her grace, we live". Kor chanted, closing his eyes and looking to the ground in prayer.

Kiara got in a swift eye roll before he looked back up to her, that same sickness of devotion still washed across his face. A look that she has seen on countless faces at the parade earlier that day. He smiled back at her faintly and gave a slight bow, like the good little soldier he was, before turning to leave. Just as he reached the door, he looked back at her.

"Could I see it again?" He asked sheepishly.

Kiara gave him a crooked smile as she dashed over to him. She placed her hand on his right shoulder and moved in close, her lips against his ear. She then lifted her left hand, lit a fire on her fingertips and spun it around right before his eyes. As he watched the fire, she kissed him on the cheek and whispered in his ear "don’t tell a soul"

Stepping back slowly, she gave him with a deep, vulnerable, tender look; a look she gave all her best paying and least detestable patrons. The ones that always "don’t tell a soul".

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Stepping back slowly, she gave him with a deep, vulnerable, tender look; a look she gave all her best paying and least detestable patrons. The ones that always came back for more. She knew how to fake just about anything, even love.

"Nobody has ever seen the real me before."

A statement that was still very much true.

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Kor visited Kiara often from that day onwards. The second night, he bought two wooden sparring swords, passing their meetings off as training sessions paid for by Kiara, to help protect herself against rowdy customers. Those that served the palace could not own personal wealth, nor lay with whores, but they needed an excuse to meet. Kiara was forced to donate wages to the poor house on the other side of the city in return for Kor’s time, much to her disdain — or delight, as she made sure Kor thought.

With their romantic little cover story, as Kiara put it, they had all the time they needed now to plan. Well, Kiara would attempt to plan as Kor denied her at every opportunity, calling her ideas nothing short of unrealistic or foolhardy. Kiara had to admit, the excitement of a chance to escape her prison drove her mad with creative ideas. She also had no idea what they would do. She knew they needed money, and lots of it, but no idea how to get it. She had to figure out how she could use Kor for something. He must have a use.

She would lie awake, going over potential move after potential move. She dreamed of one thing: freedom, and sunshine, maybe by the coast. No man to care for, no man to please. Nothing but herself and the power to do what she wanted. She’d always thought of her magic as a curse, but maybe it was a gift after all.

Maybe it could take her away and give her what she always wanted.

Kor’s affections for Kiara grew rapidly, and she was all too aware. But this is exactly what she wanted. She greeted him like a long-lost lover every time he came through the door and spent her time with the guard perched on his lap, talking to him softly and whispering sweetly into his ear. After a few days, she got even closer. After a well-orchestrated and tender moment, where she revealed she’d nearly had her head lopped off by bandits while travelling as a girl, she leant in and kissed him, gently at first, then with a fervent passion. Kor, like the good little follower of the palace that he was, tried to resist, to keep his vows, but it did not take long before he relented. Kiara was far too good at being something worth getting close to. Sometimes she worried he’d see through it all, but every day he came back to help her, oblivious.

Soon, now completely besotted, Kor took to visiting her at all hours, whenever he could. She almost felt bad, knowing he could be outside the window, listening while she was with a customer. She worried he might do something rash and impulsive, as fools in love did, and ruin her plans. She warned him not to come by while she was with a customer. She worried he might do something rash and impulsive, as fools in love did, and ruin her plans. She warned him not to come by while she was with a customer. She worried he might do something rash and impulsive, as fools in love did, and ruin her plans. She warned him not to come by while she was with a customer.

With their romantic little cover story, as Kiara put it, they had all the time they needed now to plan. Well, Kiara would attempt to plan as Kor denied her at every opportunity, calling her ideas nothing short of unrealistic or foolhardy. Kiara had to admit, the excitement of a chance to escape her prison drove her mad with creative ideas. She also had no idea what they would do. She knew they needed money, and lots of it, but no idea how to get it. She had to figure out how she could use Kor for something. He must have a use.

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faked deaths, of kidnapping and even thievery from the palace itself. She wanted to make this whole idea seem almost delusional. A tragic and unconquerable quest that gifted them a bond of true love. She wanted to disconnect him from the outside, to make him feel as if they only had each other. As if all other forces were working against them. This vow was the final chain in the link she needed to break. And this was the way to crack it.

It took time before she finally caught him off guard. It started innocently enough, with another inane idea. This time, she got him into her bed, complaining of a sore stomach and chill. It was warm out, it always was, but she wanted him close — closer than ever before. As they lay, entwined in her bed, she spoke of life beyond the city together. Of days spent under the shade of a tree or listening to the chorus of gulls by the water’s edge. She threw in some religious bullshit about the flame and a flash of her fire for good measure. She was impressed really, no man had ever resisted her this long, but then no man faced death if they fell for her seduction. Except maybe if their wives found out. Even Kor, though, was no match for Kiara in the end.

She was just too dangerous of a player.

When he left, she didn’t feel that usual hatred. She sat perched where she always did, watching as the door closed. She didn’t feel joy, or happiness either, something the look on his face told her that Kor clearly did. Instead, Kiara felt accomplished. She’d done what she set out to do. But she also felt something else. She’d never tolerated a man like she tolerated Kor. The feel of his skin against hers didn’t make it crawl. The feel of his breath on her neck didn’t make her shudder. She’d never tolerated a man like she tolerated Kor. The feel of his skin against hers didn’t make it crawl. The feel of his breath on her neck didn’t make her shudder. Maybe this was love.

Exactly thirty-three days after she met Kor, her prayers were realised.

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A cool breeze whipped the air as Kiara wandered through the alleys in the early morning. The only ones awake beside her were market stall owners, trundling down the stone streets with carts laden with wares, ready for a busy day of selling useless trash nobody wanted. A polite smile and nod were all they would get out of Kiara. She never used to wake this early, but it was a common occurrence these days. Her mind was so full of thoughts that the moment she woke she was alive with a fire that burned brighter than the one that flowed through her fingertips.

Kiara entered her favourite little garden, her piece of heaven in amongst the overshadowing city streets. She dipped her feet into the cold water and sat back down on the bench where Kor had first found her. This was a fond moment for her. She didn’t much care for memories, but she liked this one. The moment she found herself wondering mind.

The clinking sound of metal plates rattling against each other alerted her to Kor’s arrival. He stood in the entrance to the garden. Kiara drew a stone from her pocket and smirked. Carved into the rough surface were the words garden and sunrise.

“Didn’t you get enough of me last night?”

Kor was not wearing his usual expression of love and devotion. Instead, it was sullen and wrapped with anxiety. He seemed restless, tapping his fingers and looking over his shoulder.

“What is wrong?” Kiara patted the seat next to her. Kor shook his head at the invitation. A jolt of nerves hit Kiara with a sensation she felt only being penetrated with an arrow could mimic. Had he caught her out?

“I can’t stay,” Kor said quickly, with another look over his shoulder.

Usually Kor was a man of few words, Kiara liked this about him, but she wasn’t looking for curt sentences today. Not as beads of sweat began to form on the back of her neck.

“Tell me.” Kiara rose quickly and almost glided over to Kor, her long flowing dress grazing the grass that crept its way through the sandstone tiled floor. She got closer to him, testing to see how he reacted. He didn’t move in to meet her, but didn’t pull away either.

Kiara waited on his next move. She didn’t like this; not being able to read somebody.

“I have a way out for us.”

Kiara stifled a sigh of relief and instead looked at her lover with eager eyes. As much as she wanted to probe, she knew that wasn’t the way to play this one.

“Then why are you sad?” She offered, feigning concern as best she could.

“I’m not sad. I’m worried.” Kor locked eyes with Kiara, holding a stern gaze. She could see it in him, something was wrong.

“If it’s dangerous, we’ll find another way.” She couldn’t risk losing him, not yet.

“It’s not dangerous, and that’s what worries me.”

“What is going on, Kor? Talk to me.”

Kor pulled Kiara in close to him, not romantically but to make sure nobody could hear his words. “You mentioned two nights ago, stealing from the palace. I can do it.”

“What?” Kiara gasped. Her plan was a joke, a ploy to keep him in her bedroom longer.

The palace army is marching out of Coldmore as we speak, with most of the city guard. Only a few of us will remain. I can take a few jewels and we can leave. It will take days before they realise they’re gone. We’ll find a buyer far from here and escape. Then we can do whatever you need to follow the fire inside you.”

Kiara was feeling emotions she’d never felt before. She wasn’t prone to happiness or elation quite like this. The closest she came to joy was her evening sunset, and even then that was more about letting go of the day than anything else. Before she let herself be swept up in the moment, she remembered that the man before her was worried about something. She had to remember she was supposed to care as to why.

“That’s amazing, my love. But what burdens you?”

“It’s not right. Coldmore doesn’t go to war. We don’t march outside the walls. We haven’t for a hundred years. The city has never been this empty. I shouldn’t be able to just steal from the palace and have things go unnoticed. Something feels very wrong”
It is not your job to worry about war and politics. You're a servant of the flame, so help me serve her.

Her words didn't seem to ease Kor's concern. She pushed further.

“This could be part of her divine will. To help us escape. To give us a chance. To let us realise whatever purpose drives me.”

Kor pursed his lips. Kiara could see it in him. He wanted to believe her words, but he was too much of a stubborn soldier to give up his fear. It mattered very little though, his mind seemed made up.

“We leave tonight, when my watch ends. It will give us at the very least until morning before they notice I've gone, much longer for the jewels. Gather enough supplies for five days on the road and meet me at the stables by the southern gate at sunset.”

And with that, Kor was gone, swept away in uncharacteristic fashion. His unusual behaviour didn’t quite resonate with Kiara as perhaps it should. She was too gleeful to be worried, although she knew she ought to be. Tonight she’d leave her prison and be free, if all went to plan. She’d always known she didn’t want life within these city walls, but she never knew of the freedom she could actually have, not until she met Kor.

It was all within her grasp.

It was after midday when the horn blew. Kiara had just finished entertaining her fourth client of the day, clients who were receiving a service above and beyond the norm — Kiara just couldn’t contain her excitement.

She peered out of her open shutters and down the streets in search of the source of the noise. People were running through the alleys, looking nervous; almost fleeing. Many were ushered inside houses and doors slammed. Then the horn blew again. She had no idea what it meant. Without a knock, Verva flung the door open, crashing through it so hard it nearly snapped off the hinges. The brothel owner was frantic. In a panic. She spoke a few words and disappeared in an instant. Her face was red and awash with sweat.

“The city is under attack, hide.”

Kiara looked back out the window. She could see now, the fear on people's faces. She started to notice the terror in their eyes and the panic in their movements as they moved through the alley below her window. Rushing to her dresser, she dragged open the top drawer and pulled a knife from within it, which she promptly tucked into an open seam in her dress. Ducking under her bed, Kiara removed three planks of wood to reveal a crawl space just big enough for her. All the rooms in the brothel had one. You could never be too careful in this line of work. She tucked herself inside and lay there as time ticked on. For quite a while, she heard little but muffled voices and rushing around outside.

Kiara didn’t really feel terror. It wasn’t an emotion that came naturally to her, but she was worried. Worried about how this would affect her plans. What if there was an attack, and what if Kor was slain before getting her the jewels? In the darkness, trapped beneath flooring and between structural beams, a place even Kiara found the be slightly claustrophobic, it got even quieter. She started to wonder if it was all a false alarm. The horns had stopped. There was nothing but silence beyond her window.

Just as she started to wonder about creeping out from within her crawl space and sneaking a look outside, the screams started. Screams of women pierced the streets and found their way into her little hideaway. It was hard to make out the other sounds. Clashing metal, men roaring and knocking that sounded like doors being cracked open. While inside the brothel remained quiet, through her window she could hear a cacophony of chaos.

Coldmore was a peaceful city, a place that hadn’t seen conflict in centuries. Whatever brutality unfolded beyond her bedroom, Kiara knew it was not what the people deserved. She wasn’t really saddened by it, but she knew there would be no justice in what sounded to be the most painful of deaths.

As Kiara’s mind wandered back to how this would affect her escape that evening, something entered her room with a thud. Through a crack in the floorboard, she could see that the door hadn’t opened. They must have entered through the open window.

On the second floor?

Somebody was definitely walking around inside, the clinking of heavy metal boots gave them away.

“Kor?”

Kiara's heart fluttered. He wasn’t dead. They could still make it work. Throwing off the panels, Kiara emerged from beneath her bed. Before she could stand, Kor gripped her tightly, damn-near crushing her up against his uncomfortable armour plate.

“I thought I’d lost you,” Kor said, his voice quaking.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” Kiara said, patting him down to look for the jewels, hoping it looked like she was checking for wounds. She tried to seem scared, she nearly forgot that she should be. Her movements were jagged, very jagged. Was she overacting? Before she could finish her search, Kor grasped her by the chin and kissed her.

“We need to go now,” Kor said, releasing her. “We’ll take the rooftops, I know a safe way out.”

“Have you got the jewels?” Kiara didn’t care how it sounded, she needed to know.

“No,” Kor said with a frantic look over his shoulder, marching to the window and checking each side of the alley. I was trying to take them, as the alarm rang. They caught me, Kiara. They came rushing for me, and the others saw me.”

It was all Kiara could do not to slap the incompetent fool.

“But without them, what will we have?”

Kor squared up to Kiara, looked her dead in the eye and said calmly “We have your flame, we have each other, we have our love”.

Her heart sank. No jewels, no freedom. Her dreams shattered with Kor’s words. It was over, but she couldn’t leave.

“We should stay and hide. It’s too dangerous out there.”

“I won’t survive this Kiara, not if I stay. If I don’t die in the attack, I’ll be hung for trying to steal palace property. I know a way out, but we have to move before it’s closed. It’s the perfect cover. We escape, then the army returns. They’ll think I died fighting. They won’t ever look for us.”
Kiara released him with a long and obvious groan. For the first time, she revealed her true face. She gazed at him dully, her affection and passion replaced not with disdain or anger but with simple annoyance. She could no longer hide what she felt, and why should she? Kor looked back at her, perplexed by the expression that greeted him. He had only ever seen a kind, gentle, vulnerable face gazing back at him. This sudden move jarred him, he seemed lost. As unseen, but strongly heard, violence erupted in the streets, Kiara was aware she has given herself away. But she didn’t care. Kor was not only useless to her now, but he was a liability. He couldn’t be trusted outside the city alone, and what might he say so his life would be spared?

“They’ll think you died fighting.” Kiara commented, musing on Kor’s works. There wasn’t a hint of emotion in her voice.

“Kiara?” Kor uttered, his singular word riddled with confusion.

“Why do they call it Coldmore?” She asked. “It’s never cold…”

Swiftly, without hesitation, she pulled the knife from beneath her dress andrammed it into Kor’s neck. With a soundless gasp, his knees buckled and he dropped onto the hardwood floor. He reached up weakly and tried to grapple with the handle of the blade, his hands slipping across its slender form as they became coated in blood. His panicked, desperate eyes fell up to Kiara, who stood over him, watching calmly.

She gave him a small, warm and genuine smile. “You did die fighting. Fighting for my freedom”.

“My love?” Kors choked words were hard to make out.

She didn’t respond, instead simply watching him with a slight tilt in her neck. Like an animal gazing at something they didn’t quite understand. With a final slip of the hand over the blade’s handle, Kor collapsed, mouth agape, into a heap on the floor.

Kiara crouched down beside Kor’s wide-eyed body and withdrew the blade from his neck. She wiped it across the leather patches between his armour plates as she continued her faint smile.

She began to stroke his bloodied cheek.

“Thank you,” she whispered, endearingly. This is perhaps the most tender moment she’d had with Kor; from her point of view anyway. She really did mean the words she spoke. After a moment, a scream outside reminded her of what was happening in the city beyond her room. She quickly returned to her hiding spot under the bed and listened as the siege continued to unfold outside.

Careful, as to not catch the woodwork around her, she cupped her hands together and let the tiniest of flames burn inside her palm. Slowly, another smile spread across her face. A bigger one this time. An almost joyful grin. Today she lost something — and that was okay. This wasn’t the end of her story, she would find another way. Kor had helped her realise there could be more. She knew her freedom was out there, she just had to find another to help her take it.
“How does it look?”

Carefully, I gripped my companion by the shoulder and pulled him away from the slippery stone wall. He left behind stains of blood on the cobalt rock; strands, thick and black, sticking to where he once rested. In the flickering firelight, what little I could see was pure horror. Three deep gashes, each about three inches apart, were scored across his back from left waist to right shoulder. A mess of torn flesh, muscle and tendons, he had been ripped to the bone, right through his thick furs and leathers. In the freezing temperatures, the blood seemed to flow less willingly, but this made the injury no less grim. Slowly, I let him roll back to his resting place against the wall of the cave. The heat from the fire warmed the rock that encased us, forming droplets of water that either dripped from the jagged ceiling or slid their way down the curved wall. I wiped my hands on the moisture, trying to remove some of the blood that coated them.

“I’ve seen worse”.

“On a gutted pig?” He chuckled breathlessly, his voice rattling.

“You just need rest. The wound will heal enough by morning.”

He gave another, hollow laugh and smiled, a crooked, disbelieving smile.

“You make it pay, won’t you?”

“We will.” I insisted, putting my hand on his shoulder.

I looked the dying man in the eye, hoping that some of my confidence would inspire him to keep on fighting. He just gazed back, his eyelids drooping. I could tell he was tired. So very, very tired. He didn’t seem to have the energy to fight, or to even care that he was facing his last moments. Harsh winds wailed past the entrance to the cave. A blizzard was tearing through the night beyond our little shelter. I could feel the bitterness of the frozen world outside. The dwindling fire a meagre offering compared to the unrelenting nightmare of snow; little protection against the sharp, icy winds that crept their way into our abode.

By the time dawn broke, I was huddled in the deepest corner of the cave, trying to remove some of the blood that coated them.

We’d found our hideaway halfway up the side of the valley the night before. As night fell, a lucky break in the barrage of snow meant the dark rocky archway caught my eye, a striking contrast against the white world that surrounded it. In a rush of cries, blood and panic, we’d scrambled inside. There was no sign of that now. No sign of the frantic night before. The snow made everything so elegant; so calm; so clean. I had no idea where I was going now. I had no idea what I was going to do. The man that lay dead inside the cave was the smart one; my problem solver. The man that lay dead somewhere in the snow before me was my navigator; the one who could tell me where to go. I was just the muscle. The farmhand with a large sword and the will to swing it.

And I was alone.

My father had always warned me about coming into the mountains. There were two truths in life, he used to say: That the mountains were no place for farm folk, and that Uncle Ryle was a no good swindler. I’d learnt as a boy that my Uncle was not a swindler, he was just better at business. But many years later, I was finally learning my father wasn’t wrong about everything. But I had a purpose for being here; we all had a purpose. And we knew there were risks.

There was nothing left for me now. Nothing left but to finish what we started. I dug my boots into the snow beneath and trudged on. Where I was travelling — east, north, west, I had no idea — but I knew what I was looking for. I knew what I was hunting. Wraiths left behind a sort of luminous mist wherever they moved, like the shimmering trail of a slug. This was how we knew what had slaughtered the people of the village. This is how I knew what had killed my father. Often the trails meant it was easy to avoid the wraiths, but I wasn’t looking to avoid this one.

We’d found it already, or I should say, it had found us. Its bright frosty-blue eyes had emerged from in the encircling blizzard last night, appearing as if from nowhere out of the gloom. I immediately took a swing and missed, but it didn’t. It took out my navigator with a slash off its left claw, falling away into the blizzard, lost in the night forever. In the same movement, the beast carved up my companion with the right claw. There was no chance to defend ourselves, no chance to fight after that. We just had to run. It had now taken everyone from me. The last survivors. My family, my home. I couldn’t even go back to the farm, not really. Growing food on the frozen plains that lay in the shadow of these hellish mountains was damn-near impossible. Getting the conditions right in the frigid temperatures, where ice never left the ground, took a lifetime of experience and my father had not yet managed to
teach me all I needed to know. Twenty-two years apparently was still not enough to
be a farmer in a world ruled by frost. All I had now was my goal, our goal. To kill the
beast that stole my future.

We weren’t even sure why it was in the village. Not in my lifetime, nor my
father’s, nor his father’s before him, had a wraith left the mountains. He used to tell
me all about them, as the hearth crackled away. The stories had grown even longer
of late, with the new mining going on in the mountains. They brought to the village
some new stone fuel, and with it, the fire burned longer than ever — which meant
the stories just kept on going. Stories of monstrous creatures in the mountains.
Bloodthirsty demons of an old world. My father would regale me with tales of
wraiths cutting down weary travellers and seasoned knights alike. He himself had
never seen one, nor had anyone I knew, but we all knew what they were. The
stories were as old as time. The miner’s work got me asking even more questions
about my father’s rules, though. Why were they allowed into the mountains if they
were so dangerous? Apparently, a combination of military convoys and fire-wielding
sorceresses kept them safe from both the elements and the wraiths. I was a bit
disgruntled with the notion that I was so incapable when they were not. Those
feelings had long since passed.

I wandered through the frost-touched valley for what seemed like an eternity.
The land was beautiful, but baron. There was no food, no warmth, and no life, save
the snow-laden pine trees that reached on for miles. I was feeling weaker and
weaker by the minute. I had lost our supplies in the rush the previous night. The
pack of food was now buried under inches of snow. I knew I’d never find it. I didn’t
bother to search. Between dazzling brightness and dreary gloom, depending on
how covered by clouds the sun was, I started to feel my resolve wane. I wanted to
quit, to give up and leave this glorious, deadly place behind. But I couldn’t. I thought
of the mangled bodies of my family. The guilt was overwhelming. Had I been there,
not out in the city chasing women, I might have been able to fend off the beast.

The village wasn’t home to many able young men, only three, and none had
been around when it came. Then I thought of my companion in the cave, the frost
surely still biting at his quick freezing corpse. The guilt was worse still. As they
wep over their families, my heart filled with rage. I felt the anger wash over me,
masking the pain — I knew that now, as the cold bit at my own heart and began to
tear the fiery anger that burned inside. I had to almost drag our navigator into the
swarm where I once stood, burying the land deep enough to cover me several
inches of snow. With haste, I followed, just fast enough to outrun the dispersal of its trail.

Whatever had just happened transformed the landscape. It was as if I was
standing in a totally different place. But that was not what interested me most.
Down in the pit of the valley, where the freshly moved snow now lay, I could see
something moving. Ducking behind a tree, I peered around to watch. A lone wraith was moving around frantically in the canyon below, similar to a fly
trapped in a jar. It was slamming wildly, dashing from tree-to-tree, cutting through
them with ease. It was hard to make out its features, so far away was it, but it was
definitely a wraith. About the size of a man and floating a foot or so above the
ground, it left glowing trails of frosty-blue dust in its wake. After a moment of what
seemed to be sheer panic, it let out a shriek, a piercing almost metallic noise,
before darting away, dragging its low slung claws through the dusty, unsettled
snow. With haste, I followed, just fast enough to outrun the dispersal of its trail.

Except for the massive slashes across his torso where the wraith had cleaved him
as he worked in the fields, my Father looked as he ever did when I found him. I
expected the draining of life to look more dramatic, but maybe it wasn’t something
you could see.

I continued to struggle on through the wilderness, my feet sliding into inches of
fresh snow with every step. My pace was slow and staggering. I had no direction in
my mind, just eyes peeled for the sight of that luminous foggy trail. Bitter breezes
sailed through the trees constantly, hitting me from all angles. Beneath my thick
furs, I was covered in leather padding wrapped in yet more furs. Beneath that were
tight linens tucked into my boots and gloves. I was used to the freezing
temperatures and knew how to keep them out, but in the mountains, where winds
gathered speed as they whipped through the deep valleys, even I was succumbing
to the pain of the cold. The steel greatsword, heavy on my back, was not helping
either.

Nothing much changed all day, other than that I progressively shrank into
myself, residing to the fact that I would simply wander these frozen wastes until I
collapsed and died; dead wraith or not. I wasn’t even sure I’d be able to fight the
monster alone when I was fit and healthy, not least now when I was ragged, tired,
cold, weak and hungry. But what else could I do? I didn’t know my way out the
mountains, even if I was coward enough to run. And yes, I’d thought about it. But
then, things changed. It began with a bang. A horrible, low rumble that emanated
from far away in the mountains, shaking the very ground around me and knocking
snow from the branches overhead.

It lasted only a second, but was like nothing I’d ever heard before. Then, on the
far side of the ravine, through the wiry trees, I saw cracks emerge in the snow, like
splits in an ice-bound lake struck with a pick-axe. With a groan, the snow started to
slide, slowly at first, but quickly picking up pace. It was crashing towards the
deepest part of the valley — exactly where I stood. Heaving my stiff legs through
the dense snow, I ambled frantically towards the other side of the valley, fear
driving my frozen body to move faster than it should. I went up higher and higher
until I could go no further; blocked by steep rock walls. Looking back, I saw snow
swarm where I once stood, burying the land deep enough to cover me several
times over. The force of the drift had brought down trees and uncovered a great
expanse of bare rock on the cliffs of the valley’s far side.

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something moving. Ducking behind a tree, I peered around to watch.

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before darting away, dragging its low slung claws through the dusty, unsettled
snow. With haste, I followed, just fast enough to outrun the dispersal of its trail.
Ignoring my presence, my stance, my willingness to fight. It was just leaving. I was towards me, slashing its talons. The wraith simply turned and started to glide away.

I gripped my sword with both hands, thin, curved and sharp. There was no muscle, flesh or skin on the wraith. Nothing holding its bones together but a thick fog of glowing blue dust that clung to every inch of me. My breath was slow and shallow and I could no longer feel my strength evaporated in that moment. My body was so battered, so achy, so cold that it hurt. I couldn’t bring myself to rise. I could just lay here and die. I steeled what little resolve I had and rolled over to face the sky. Above me I saw blue, but I wasn’t the soft blue of a clear sky. It was darker, and shimmered in the sunlight. The wraith was above me, its long, gangly, claw-ridden arms either side of my head. It gazed down, arching its spine, peering at me. I prepared myself for the end.

Yet again, the wraith shocked me.

I was about to find out if that were true. As it approached, the beast’s gaze bore into me. It moved slowly, seemingly rummaging through a bush of succulent red berries on the edge of the expansive lake. If I was to fight it, I was to fight it now, before I lost a single ounce more of my strength. The fires of revenge lit in my heart again at the sight of the wraith, they would keep me moving — even if the cold was trying hard to turn my bones to ice. My desire to slay the beast was all my mind’s eye was fixated on; that, and getting to the juicy berries on the bush behind it. We farmed these berries all the time. They grew on the slopes of the mountains just outside the village in abundance, although most were unreachable up the side of great, snow-covered crags. They were delicious and hearty. They’d keep me going a little longer. With my heart pounding and my palms sweating despite the bitter, bitter cold, I drew my sword with a clatter of steel.

The wraith spun around in a smooth, gliding motion, its glowing blue eyes immediately found me. They were empty, soulless; without any humanity or emotion. They just glowed a hollow glow. Its eyes were set inside a narrow, elongated and pointed skull, grey and bare. A skull more like an ox’s than a man’s. From the skull grew a spine, of large bones as big as a fist that slowly trailed off into smaller pieces, until one, pointed bone hung about a foot from a ground. Just below its head, two arms sprang seemingly from nowhere. Attached not to shoulder blades nor its spine. To the arms were fixed giant claws, each longer than my forearms, thin, curved and sharp. There was no muscle, flesh or skin on the wraith.\n
Nothing holding its bones together but a thick fog of glowing blue dust that clung to its form. Legend has it that a stroke of a sword through the spine would sever the magic that bound this ancient monster together, and the wraith would simply crumble.

I was about to find out if that were true. As it approached, the beast’s gaze bore into me. It moved slowly, seemingly cautious. Stopping and starting, edging closer. I gripped my sword with both hands, raised it as steadily as I could and prepared to swing. But about ten feet away, the wraith stopped. It let out a hollow snort. Again, the noise was metallic, an unusual raise it as steady as I could and prepared to swing. But about ten feet away, the wraith stopped. It let out a hollow snort. Again, the noise was metallic, an unusual

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“No!” I screamed, my voice echoing across expanse before me.

It didn’t even turn around. It just kept moving towards another patch of berries nearby. I’d had enough. I started to run. The snow thinned by the lake’s edge, allowing swifter movement. I held my sword high. I was going to kill it. I was going to take my revenge. One slice, across its back. It was too easy. But I was going to do it. For my Father. For my companions. For th...

My foot caught the lip of a concealed rock beneath the snow and I tumbled forward, sword flung from my hands. I landed face down in the snow, and my strength evaporated in that moment. My body was so battered, so achy, so cold that it hurt. I couldn’t bring myself to rise. I could just lay here and die. I steeled what little resolve I had and rolled over to face the sky. Above me I saw blue, but I wasn’t the soft blue of a clear sky. It was darker, and shimmered in the sunlight. The wraith was above me, its long, gangly, claw-ridden arms either side of my head. It gazed down, arching its spine, peering at me. I prepared myself for the end.

Yet again, the wraith shocked me.

After a moment of curiosity, it moved on, far more interested in the berries than me. Hauling myself to my feet, I grasped at my sword on the ground beside me, dug it into the ice and used it to prop myself up as I stood panting, watching the ancient being. I didn’t understand. The wraith leaned over the bush, using its claws to cut away thicker branches and dead foliage. Taking a long, jagged breath, it made a sound like howling wind blasting through a cave. How it breathed without lungs I’ll never know, but it seemed to do so all the same. The bush rustled as the wraith inhaled, and began to wither, the berries turning from a cherry-red to moulidy black. Their plump and juicy shape sagging and oozing. The wraith moved on to yet another bush. There were plenty in this exposed part of the mountains.

The scene unfolding before me was nothing like what I expected a wraith encounter to be like. It was… peaceful. The fires of my rage, my desire for revenge, were all but extinguished. Instead, I felt the cold creeping up inside my body, taking every inch of me. My breath was slow and shallow and I could no longer feel my heart beating in my neck. I wondered if it was beating at all. What drove me no longer did, but now I had no reason to go on. I could no longer feel my legs, my hands gripping my sword, or anything else for that matter. I just felt the ice. Ice in my veins, ice in my heart. I caught one final glimpse of the wraith, draining the life from another patch of berries, before my hand slipped from the hilt and I felt the snow envelop me. What followed was a haze. I could feel myself moving, snow rushing over my shoulders, down my back and into the crevices of my boots. I was being dragged. My eyelids were heavy and frozen shut, but I could see light flickering beyond them.

Then, darkness.

I was no longer being dragged through snow. I was on a much rougher surface. I tore my eyes open and cast a look around. I found myself in yet another cave, now propped up against the wall, just as my companion had been. The navigator crouch over me, grinning. He reached beneath his shredded fur cloak — it was
slung over his shoulders haphazardly, its proper form destroyed by large gashes all across it — and pulled out a handful of berries. He pushed them towards me. I took them without a thought, without even a thank you.

“I thought you were dead” I croaked, after scoffing down the sweet berries.

“I thought you were dead” The navigator replied, nodding to the tracks that lay outside the cave; the marks of my body that he’d dragged through the glistening snow.

“I slew the monster”.

“What?”

“The beast was just there, looking at a bush. It didn’t even notice me sneak up. I took your sword and cut it in half. The stories are true, you know? One swing was all it took.”

When would I stop feeling it? This all-consuming guilt. Sadness overcame me, the mourning feelings I should have had for my Father, instead of the unbridled anger. The anger that had cost too many too much. The navigator could see the look on my face, the look of regret, sorrow and devastation, not the joy and retribution he’d been seeking. I didn’t feel anything I thought I’d feel. I just felt more pain.

Pain for another life lost for no reason.
How do you make progress in a world that doesn’t change? You don’t. Every now and then, though, I catch myself thinking about what my life would be like in a different world; one where progress hasn’t been declared an enemy of the people and locked away out of sight and — most people’s — minds.

A world where I could change.

I am a terrible fisherman. I know this, my father knew this, everyone knows this. I don’t like water, I get seasick and I’m impatient. My market stall always has the thinnest offerings — unless the water had been uncharacteristically calm that day. Yet I am a fisherman by trade and will be one until the day I die. That’s what it’s like on the islands, where you are no more than what you were born to be.

Even the royals have no say in the matter.

For as long as we have known, a single family has ruled the people of our secluded, water-locked nation. Brother marries sister to keep the bloodline pure, and their offspring do the very same. There is, and has only ever been, one royal family; nobody new ever takes power. Nothing ever changes. Their only threat is the randomness of nature. A brother and sister have been known to produce only male or female heirs, which is a problem. Famously, a King and Queen of two centuries past had eight sons. Their sons then had to be tasked with fathering a pair of siblings; a new King and Queen capable of carrying on the family line. A difficult task without a sister.

It was a worrisome time for our people, but with the help of aunts and nieces, the reign of the family continued. Insurance policies are always in place, of course; extra sons, daughters and cousins standing by to take up the mantle, should the current monarchs die or prove baron. It’s all the same blood, after all.

It may sound strange, but the system works. We are an affluent nation. A nation of stability. A stability that comes from a foundation of knowing that we all have a part to play; that we all have our jobs to do. If we were to change that, if we were to inspire progress, that foundation would be ripped from beneath our feet, and we’d end up like the unstable nations ruled by an ever-changing roster of royals.

A brother marries a sister to keep the bloodline pure, nobody is allowed to break rank. Visitors are not only rare, but are never allowed to stay. We don’t take newcomers to the island. To live here you must be born here. New additions would require new work, new lands, new wives or husbands. That would mean change.

But I had to move forward. I had to.

While others celebrated the life of their ruling class and scoffed at the foreigners for their unusual and seemingly reckless economic and social practices, I yearned to be part of their world. I hated what I did, yet I was trapped without hope nor chance of escape. For anything close to that, I’d need a wife, then a child, then old age. But none of that was on the horizon. The only thing that was on the horizon was the sight of fellow fishing boats as I bobbed across the warm waters, my head spinning, my stomach churning and a pool of vomit slowly floating away from my little one-man wooden vessel. Although I hated my little boat, I did sometimes
consider it my last resort — I could just sail away. The punishment for abandoning you duties was worse than you might think, though. All my remaining family would be slaughtered, the gaps left behind would be filled by the servers, a group of people whose profession it was to fill in for those that couldn’t work, be they ill, jail, injured or dead, until a new draft of newborns could be trained and succeed our roles. There was no way to avoid your service to the island, not unless you wanted to pay a terrible price. Faking your death or getting ‘lost at sea’ was no promise of mercy from the royals either, and our current rulers, benevolent as they claimed to be, where more than ruthless enough to hang a family on unprovable charges.

Tormenting citizens was the only interesting thing they ever got to do.

I was doomed to a life I loathed in a world not meant for me, but then, as I floated along, trying to keep the contents of my stomach very much within my stomach, I was struck with an idea. For the first time in my life, I felt like I’d made progress.

My dream, since I was a boy, was to develop some form of magic. Most of those blessed, or cursed as islanders would say, were born with their gifts, yet on that rare occasion, some found it caught them later in life. Magic on the islands was seen as a dangerous thing. A force for change — a challenge to the ruling class. A threat to our fragile existence. An enemy that must be eliminated.

Those with magic were not killed like the unwanted children, however. Our rulers were too God fearing for that. But, they couldn’t stay here. Magic wielders were shipped to capitals cities on the mainland, places where they were worshipped, not shunned. It was the only way off the island — that or to be an unwanted royal. Too many royals meant a need for more wealth in the monarchy, which meant a shift of wealth distribution across the whole island, which meant change. But you couldn’t kill a royal either. Their blood may be needed. To save on costs, those on the furthest edges of the family were sent overseas too, although they didn’t enjoy the same warm welcome as the magic wielders.

Yet I was not blessed with either royal or magic blood. Magic was rare, very rare, and those that did possess it had very obvious gifts. You’d find either element-wielders, those that could conjure flames from mid-air or ice from stone, or see-ers, individuals granted visions of the future or distant lands. Both types of magic were easy to test and recognise, and seemingly impossible to fake. Or were they? Of course, there was no way I could feign a jet of fire spitting out of my fingertips, but, as my mind wandered over the horizon, letting more and more fish slip through my net, I wondered if I could work a plot cunning enough to appear as if I’d made a prophecy come to bare.

To me, it was all simple enough. So simple I spent days scolding myself for not thinking of it sooner. One happy result of being stranded at sea most of the day, with a desire to focus on anything other than the choppy waves, was that I had found methods of distracting my mind. Unlike many of my kin, I’d taught myself to read. When you were unable to stand for fear of falling over in a fit of dizziness and nausea, remaining clamped in the corner of your boat with a book was the most appealing option you had. As it turned out, reading was a powerful ally in the world of scheming. I could access knowledge that so few others knew existed. Our library was small but full of history, including plenty of scrolls and even the occasional book on two subjects I found most interesting: magical occurrences, and poisons.

The greatest prophecies, the ones that never failed to get the see-ers of the island banished, were always tragic in their end result. Death was a recurring theme, but should I claim to foresee the death of my neighbour and they turn up with a knife in their neck, suspicion might just overcome the royal’s fear of magic. I had to be more subtle — and poison, I had discovered, was the most subtle killer of all. I’d read all about the vilest and vicious of poisons. Poisons that could kill with just a drop. Poisons that could kill without a sound or symptom. I had to face a very serious question though:

Was I a killer?

The answer, sadly, was an overwhelming cacophony of no’s echoing inside my mind. I was desperate to leave my life behind, just not at the cost of another. But poison did not always have to kill people. Livestock was just as vulnerable, as were crops and food stores. But the whole thing had to be dramatic. It had to get people’s attention if I were to bewitch the public, inspire hearsay and convince the royals I was a danger to their world. Happily, a few scrolls existed on the art of acting, left behind by a very learned old theatre performer.

So what did the scrolls say I needed for a good performance? A crowd. I chose my location wisely. A bustling market by the water’s edge during a warm summer’s day. People were out in droves. Then I had to make it believable. Candid recounts in the books and scrolls I’d read spoke of how see-ers gripped by powerful foresight would collapse into a heap, muttering inaudible words and confronting their bodies. Finally, I had to follow through. I had to carry on the performance to reel in my audience. The true see-ers would wake in a daze and utter words of prophecy, before becoming unnervingly energised and without recollection of the moments prior, instead, slowly coming to remember their vision over the next few minutes. And so, after a multitude of practices hidden away at home in the dead of night, I began.

A plague was coming, a monstrous plague, I believe my exact words were, before I snapped back to life. It’s hard to know if I did a good job, but those crowding around me seemed alarmed and fearful, which I took to mean that I had followed the old performer’s words well enough.

The acting was the hard part, making the prophecy come to fruition was far easier. Mashing up the glands of poisonous fish and mixing them weeds for added potency was challenging, not least because of the smell, but far less taxing than being a live performer. I concocted a deadly liquid to spread across the lower farmlands in the dead of night. By morning, the crops wilted and began to rot, the poison did not always have to kill people. Livestock was just as vulnerable, as were crops and food stores. But the whole thing had to be dramatic. It had to get people’s attention if I were to bewitch the public, inspire hearsay and convince the royals I was a danger to their world. Happily, a few scrolls existed on the art of acting, left behind by a very learned old theatre performer.

I was quite surprised by its effectiveness.

Not an hour after sunrise I was taken, strung by the wrists and spread across a wooden wrack, set before the royals. And with that, I achieved what nobody on the island had done for centuries. I progressed. I worked my way out of a hole I could not bare to exist within, and I was free.
Hunted

Rain hammered the slatted wooden roof, making the most terrible racket. The well-sewn thatch seemed to keep out most of the downpour, although some drips crept into the dark corners of the hut.

Outside, through the doorless timber frame, rain could be seen splattering against the muddy ground in the patches of moonlight that broke through the thick clouds above. An ever-growing pool of water lay just beyond the building's threshold, inching closer moment by moment. Crates and barrels were stacked high against the walls, with little room for anything else, or anyone. In what space there was, hid Driev; crouched down and rooted to the spot. He dare not move, he dare not make a sound. Despite the rain lashing down outside, he feared that any noise or movement would alert his hunters. The beasts were vicious and highly-skilled predators. If he was caught, he'd be torn apart and feasted upon. Their thick coats protected them from the harsh weather, and their carnivorous mindset meant that, despite the conditions, Driev knew they'd still be out there, in the forest, seeking him out. The vast wilderness that spread out all around him seemed to be almost swarming with them. His only hope was to sneak through and make it to the mountains, where they wouldn't chase him.

He should move, he should go now under the cover of darkness and rain, the hunters had weak eyes after all. But he was terrified. Up in this little hut, atop a lone hill, he was vulnerable, and he knew it, but what if got lost out in the forest? What if he was seen? He could feel the fear rising within him, and desperately tried to bring his senses down to a calmer state. A blind panic was the last thing he needed. The beasts were vicious and highly-skilled predators. If he was caught, he'd be torn apart and feasted upon. Their thick coats protected them from the harsh weather, and their carnivorous mindset meant that, despite the conditions, Driev knew they'd still be out there, in the forest, seeking him out. The vast wilderness that spread out all around him seemed to be almost swarming with them. His only hope was to sneak through and make it to the mountains, where they wouldn't chase him.

Immediately, he was battered by the cold, brutal rain. He was already drenched, having been fleeing through the forest for much of the night, but it made the lashing of water no less pleasant. He dove off, down the slopes and into the woods. So dark was it that most of his movement was lead by touch alone. He reached out to feel for tree trunks, moving carefully as not to collide with bushes or low-lying shrubbery, nor crunch twigs or nuts laying on the forest floor. Driev carried on through the wilderness, slowly, as the unrelenting downpour showed no sign of reprieve. He could feel a weakness building, he was desperate to rest. He'd been hunted since dusk, and with dawn only a few hours away, had been moving non-stop for far too long. The gnawing feeling of hunger didn't make things easier. But he had to ignore the hunger, ignore the weakness. Fight his urge to falter and trick it into thinking he was strong. He didn't have the energy to waste on such trivialities as worry. Every move through this pitch black forest could be taking him closer to his hunters. The predators could be around any corner, any tree trunk, waiting to strike. His eyes were darting in all directions, seeking out any tiny piece of light he could find.

The darkness felt so close, so tight.

There was a constant feeling that something was behind him. About to reach and grab, pulling him down into the abyss. Occasionally he would give in to the paranoia, only to spin around to more darkness. He wanted to just run. To sprint and hide. But to give into the feeling would just make more noise; an easier target. In this nightmare, with all his senses on edge, he had to fight that feeling of adrenaline, to avoid his instinct to tear through the trees and escape as fast as possible. The occasional patch of dim moonlight breaking its way through both trees and cloud felt like sanctuary. He could at least escape the total darkness, and gain what he felt was some sort of control. Any sound — a rustle of leaves, a heavy drop of water hitting a leaf the wrong way — would cause him to jump, move forward faster or catch his breath. Driev wanted nothing more than to be out and away from here; to feel safe again. Safety though, was a long way off. Dawn would bring new challenges. Yes, he would be able to see better, and keep a lookout for his hunters instead of hoping they weren't mere steps away, but they'd also be able to see him better. He'd have to move much more carefully through the trees. He couldn't just make slow and steady progress like he was now. Not that he'd be able to move much faster, even if he wanted.

The cold of the night was wrapping around his core, making his movements sluggish. As time went by, and nothing leapt out of the darkness to finish him off, Driev started to feel hopeful. He might make it out after all. Then, up ahead, he saw something. The only thing he could possibly see in all this darkness: light. It wasn't moonlight though, nor the sun creeping its way over the horizon. The light was small, flickered and clung close to the ground. A fire. At this point, anything could be there. Driev had no idea who started the fire, or if they were still there. He approached, ducking between the trees, careful not to be caught in the light of the fire.

Soon, he came to the edge of the forest, reaching a clearing. Surrounded by the wilderness was what appeared to be a burial site. Wrought-iron fence, some 10 feet high, topped with jagged spikes, encased a small selection of dirt graves, marked
by stone tablets and the occasional assortment of — now drowned — flowers. A large pair of gates, chained shut but ajar, were set along the fences’ edge closest to Driev’s hiding spot. Within the burial site stood four wooden poles, half as high as the fence, topped with a large sheet tied to each one of them at the corner. Beneath the shelter was the fire, burning away, protected from the onslaught of rain. And, beside that, Driev could make out the shape of a lone hunter. The beast, keeping warm by the fireside, appeared to be fast asleep. Laying down, covered in its thick coat, it was hard to make out their size and shape, but Driev could tell it was a hunter. Digging into the ground beside it was a hand-craft metallic weapon; its two razor sharp edges shimmering in the light of the fire. The tell-tale sign of a hunter.

Rearing up on his hind legs, gripping the soggy bark of the tree in front of him with his sharp, scaled claws, Driev tried to get a better look at the vicious predator now sleeping so peacefully by the fire. They appeared to be male, adult, with a face covered in dark patches of fur. It was rare for a Lokar to get a good look at one of these hunters for so long. Most contact involved either death or fleeing from it. Slowly padding down, silently, onto all fours, Driev faced a choice. He could slip by and into the mountains beyond, their dry, rocky peaks now becoming visible as dawn fast approached, or he could take advantage of this opportunity.

A sleeping hunter, right before him.

He could become the hunter, he had the potential to save many Lokar from a fate he nearly met that night. It was not in the nature of his kind to be violent, but it was not often you found a vulnerable predator such as this. A sharp wind whipped around the trees, rattling the chains of the gate. It startled the sleeping creature, but it soon fell back into their deep stupor. For Driev, this was the decider. If those large, metal chains didn’t wake the beast, his gentle webbed footsteps wouldn’t either. Skulking out from the trees, he edged his way forward, step by step, keeping low to the ground. His body, slippery from the torrential rain that continued its assault on the wilderness, he carefully dragged the gate open as far as the chains would allow before sliding his slender form between the gap.

He was in a cage now. Trapped with his fiercest predator. Softly, he approached the crackling fire until he hung over his prey. Gazing at the weapon momentarily, a weapon he’d seen cut down many a Lokar in the past, he considered trying to lift it, but thought better of it. He did not know how to wield it, nor if he could even lift its presumably mighty weight. Beside the beast, Driev looked small, it was longer than him by around two feet. A grunt from the creature had him stumble backwards with a jolt of fear. He couldn’t wait, he had to do it now. The cold air was slowing his body down. He wouldn’t be able to escape or fight back if they woke. Back up beside the hunter, he gripped his claws tightly together, so the points of his talons created a sharp trio of what he hoped would be a fearsome weapon. If he could crush the shell of the toughest beetle, surely this would work?

As quickly as he could, Driev raised up on his back legs, claw high, then slammed down towards the ground, driving his talons into the beast’s exposed neck. With a squirt of blood and a desperate attempt to inhale through its now carved up throat, the hunter lurched up. In a flight of terror, it tried helpless to breathe through the hole in his neck, as Driev withdrew quickly, slinking back out the burial site before the creature could react to him. He watched, from behind the gate, as the hunter grasped at his wound, blood coating his hands and chest, trying to drag in deep, dry breaths to no effect. Within moments, it crumpled into a heap, still and lifeless.

Elated by a sense of accomplishment, Driev once again made for the mountains beyond the forest, making quicker progress in the light of dawn; his newfound confidence allowing him to move more recklessly than he perhaps should. The fish had just slain the shark, and he couldn’t wait to let the others know. It was unheard of, for a monster such as the hunter to be struck down by one of his kind. In their history, he’d never heard of anything like it. But then, he thought, the hunters were ruthless and relentless, now.

Had he just shown them the Lokar were something to be feared and left alone, or a threat that needed to be taken care of? Fear unlike anything he’d ever experienced, not even while being hunted down in the dead of night for his own meat, gripped him. Would the beasts see that it was their own acts that led to such violence, or would they see it as an act of war? New and previously unseen aggression. The prospect of their wrath was without equal. Their weapons, tools, intellect and numbers made them an impossible foe to match. As Driev finally reached the safety of the warm mountains and sanctuary he had craved all night, his heart was heavier than ever. Should he tell the others? And if so, should he be bragging of his conquest, or warning them of impending catastrophe?
Patience and a level head above anything else. Easy victory, more often than not, it proves folly. As is the nature of the game, very some, confidence has been enough to intimidate their opponents and led to an their breastbone. Often, it pays to leave your ego beyond The Crucible. While for sleeveless top, will fall just as easily as their match when a blade is driven through assailant, muscles barely contained within his required garment of a black matches; but this rarely ends well. A mighty man, towering above his small, spindly earth in front of them is a longer, steel sword. You cannot kill an opponent with the dagger, so long as they remain seated. You can kill them with the sword, though, even if they do not move. Going for the sword means you stand, and are vulnerable. Your opponent can strike a knife blow, often thrown, and kill you. The game only ends when one challenger falls the other. It is a bloodsport without mercy. While sat, you are given no food; no water. You cannot take a break, you cannot sleep, you cannot take your eye off your opponent. A slip, a mistake, a yawn too long, and your rival can grab the sword and slay you. But, you must be cautious. Winners have been known to feign a tired eye, or a lingering blink. Seemingly unprepared, but in fact ready for the kill.

It's a game of wits, a game of risk and a game of luck. Having an off day is something we all do experience; maybe we're feeling unwell or are just not ourselves. But an off day in the Crucible of Steel will likely be your last. And most matches last that, a day. Some can go on much longer though, until fatigue or dehydration wins out. In a recent match, lasting just shy of four days, one of the challengers fell asleep, unable to keep his heavy eyelids open any longer. Perhaps he welcomed eternal rest after the torment of The Crucible. But, when his rival stood to grasp the hilt of the blade, his weakness caught his knees, his dry mouth burned fiercely, and he fainted. The thud he made hitting the floor woke his opponent, long enough for him to inch his way over to the sword and bury deep within his opponent's neck.

The Crucible of Steel turns everyone weak, even those thought strongest of all. No mental fortitude, no years of training, can prepare you for days of no sleep or water, while another sits just out of reach, willing your imminent demise. Many fear exactly that, looking weak in front of the crowds. So, instead, they elect for quicker matches; but this rarely ends well. A mighty man, towering above his small, spindly assailant, muscles barely contained within his required garment of a black sleeveless top, will fall just as easily as their match when a blade is driven through their breastbone. Often, it pays to leave your ego beyond The Crucible. While for some, confidence has been enough to intimidate their opponents and led to an easy victory, more often than not, it proves folly. As is the nature of the game, very few live long enough to become a legend of the sport, yet those few that do honour patience and a level head above anything else.

The people who set the matches like to put these victors against each other when possible. They like to see how winners work against other winners. Some rivals chat, some stare blankly at each other or avoid gazes. Others try to talk to a stone faced figure. Even the best bookmakers have trouble predicting match results. Friendly-souls have severed many heads. Quiet, stoic and threatening types have both taken home streaks of victories and just as often been dispatched within 20 minutes.

Not that the spectators complain of quick matches though. Off all the sports we watch and endure, The Crucible of Steel is perhaps both the dullest and the most exciting. There is nothing like the tension of two combatants, locked in a fight to the death, watching each other intently, waiting to strike. But there is also nothing so dull as sitting on a wooden podium for days, waiting for one single masterstroke. It is thought a match will usually last an hour or two, or a day or more if it goes beyond that. Many spectators will watch the early moments, then leave to go about their normal lives, returning every now and then to check in. Only those placing large wagers will stay for the entirety of the fight; them, and the families of those fighting. They are always sat behind their loved ones. They weren't allowed to be within easy viewing; it thought it gives the contestant an advantage in morale.

It was quite rare for families to be in The Crucible of Steel though, mainly because combatants didn't usually have loved ones to witness their triumph or execution. Most were convicts or prisoners, given an opportunity at freedom if victorious. Depending on the crime, you may have to win more than one fight, though. Cossar the murderer was famously tasked with seventeen wins, one for every woman he killed. He lost fight two… Others enter for the glory of their house and home, a right of passage for warriors, although this practice is dying out. Too many good fighters training their whole lives to die for nothing. Some combatants play for money. It pays well to win, and if poverty is your only fortune, The Crucible could feed you for a few months, even years if you defeat a champion. Then there are those very few, unhinged humans, offering themselves purely for the thrill; the risk.

One such fight, between two combatants who fought each other for no more than sheer joy, is touted as the longest on record. They entered on a cool morning, paraded before the hundreds of spectators, before taking up position in their small, open-air colosseum. Because they weren't poor, they'd both eaten well before the match, and favourable weather, including some nourishing rain, allowed them to carry on their tense duel for days on end. Five days after entering, they were both still sat there. Bleary-eyed, swaying slightly off centre, rubbing their lower backs in pain, but very much alive. True fans of the sport had been camped out ever since they overtook the previous record. Waiting for that killing blow. Tensions started to
rise mid-afternoon of the sixth day. Things were looking bleak for the two men. Both had sobbed and cursed their decision. The mental decay of no sleep, combined with the reality of the situation — that one would die, yet neither had to — had finally sunk in. A light breeze licked the air, and suddenly one of the men’s noses began to twitch. The prevailing wind had caught him and he was struggling to suppress a sneeze. People drew in closer as he scrunched up his nose, bit his lip and tried desperately not to let it out. But he could hold it no longer, he closed his eyes, let out a mighty sneeze and before he could open them again, had a 30-inch blade struck through his stomach. It was hard to have sympathy for a man who had thrown his life away for the sheer experience of The Crucible, but he was still given a champions burial for his heroic efforts in the arena. The victor collapsed upon exiting the match and died, presumably of exhaustion.

He was buried facing his opponent, so they could continue their epic match for eternity.

Considering the fact one of the duelists had been victorious, it seemed odd to leave them battling for the rest of time. Yet, it is the poetry and supposed romance of this event that really draws people in. A prisoner gaining his freedom, the widow making her living. People loved an underdog story, they also loved a champion. It was as much an act of wonder as it was a ritualistic way of controlling the population. Prior to their match, the combatants hold rallies before crowds, describing their life and talking about why they were entering. Some spoke with fear, some spoke with desperation, others with pride, excitement or hope. It was very theatrical, especially when a performer decided to get involved. A leading lady of a local troupe had been caught stealing jewels from drunk patrons stumbling home after a show. She’d opted for the fight, to allow her to get back to the stage and continue to do the work she loved, as she emphatically put it. She created quite a stir with her flair for drama in the run-up to her ‘big show’. She died rather dramatically, too. Taking to the sword with a characteristically wide and over-acted swing, she caught a knife to the throat and bled out slowly, whimpering. It was something of a relief. The streets were quieter for it all being over.

She’d tried to get through the event using her theatrical skills. Acting as though she was already victorious. It didn’t work. Champions over the years have told others of how they managed the situation mentally. Some try to blank out the experience, thinking of nothing, instead just watching for movement or weakness. Then there are those that try and build their bodies into a state of heightened fear. Pumping the adrenaline, they can keep alert and move fast. Others said the terror would ruin them. Instead, they try to disconnect themselves from the experience, acting as though they aren’t actually involved in it at all. Running stories through their minds. One even spoke of how they would describe The Crucible of Steel in great detail in their own head, recounting its history, its structure and how the game is played, as if playing the part of a guide to a foreigner. Telling them about how it all plays out.

Anything to make them feel as if they weren’t actually sat there, waiting to die.
It was unusually quiet on the old dirt road, even for a brisk morning like today. The occasional swinging palm tree and softly blowing reed was the only movement I could see streaking off on the long path before me — that, the slowly bobbing head of my young mare beneath me, and the churning ocean in the corner of my left eye. It was probably another sacrifice drawing the crowds away from the roads, that or farmer Lezron’s sheep had got out again, and he’d got half the village rounding them up. Although with his new wall, I suspected the sheep probably weren’t roaming the northern hillside. I shivered, and it wasn’t the breeze sweeping in over the towering coastal cliffs that caught me.

I rode slowly, in no hurry to see the ready-to-light pyre, nor hear the echoing screams of another poor soul dragged out onto the shimmering sands of low tide. So far out did they take their prize, that the sacrifice took place halfway to the horizon. Still, it didn’t stop the screams reaching my ears, carried by that usually so welcome sea air. Sometimes I wished they did it closer to the land. At least then it would be hidden below the cliffs, and wouldn’t have to see it, although I dreaded to think what smell would waft over those plunging ridges. But my anxiousness was for nought. I came across the rise that separated my view from the sprawling beach beyond, to see no crowd, nor a human chained helplessly to a pyre. I did see a pyre though, freshly made and towering in the distance. But it stood bare, with no chanting crowd gathered around it. The tide had even started to come in, I must have left late, and its wooden base was becoming ever more consumed by the sea. The waters were quickly advancing on it, stroking its edges and reaching deep into its heart, slipping through every crack and crevice between the planks of wood and pieces of unwanted furniture that made up its ominous form.

This was an unusual sight. A freshly made pyre going unused. What was going on? With a kick of my shin, I veered off the beaten track and skimmed my way on. I must have left late, and its wooden base was becoming ever more consumed by the sea. The waters were quickly advancing on it, stroking its edges and reaching deep into its heart, slipping through every crack and crevice between the planks of wood and pieces of unwanted furniture that made up its ominous form.

As I took up my place within the agitated mob, a hand caught my own and spun me around.

He was pleading with the grumbling crowd “Please, there is nothing to be done”. He was not, however, an intimidating man. Around eighty villagers stood spread out in the aisles closest to the door, all wearing grim or angry expressions, their attention drawn towards the Father who stood on the raised altar. Robed in dark red garments lined with black embroidery, hooded and adorned with crimson markings on his face, the Father was quite an intimidating sight. He was not, however, an intimidating man.

He was pleading with the grumbling crowd “Please, there is nothing to be done”. As I took up my place within the agitated mob, a hand caught my own and spun me around.
“What you doing here, girl?” My neighbour, wrinkled old Marken, glared up at me over his crooked nose. Clawing back his long thin, scraggly grey hair, he revealed narrow, disapproving eyes. “This isn’t your place to be.”

“What’s going on?” I ignored his callous tone and sneering expression.

“And you would care, because?” He hissed. I was trying to listen to the words of the Father but Marken’s heavy breathing wiggled its way deep into my ears.

“Just because I don’t have the stomach for your bloodsport, Gremlin, doesn’t mean I don’t care about what happens in my village”.

Marken snarled and shuffled away without another word. As he left, I caught the words of the Father. I couldn’t have missed them this time.

“It is final!” He bellowed, clearly fed up with the crowd. “You have no say. Ignore the decree and you’ll be hung for heresy”.

“It’s a bloody outrage!” called one of the villagers.

“Has to actually watch the prisoners instead of burning them.” I laughed.

The Father shrugged. “True. The town’s jailer won’t be too happy, though. The Goddess blesses you, may yo-”

“I seek the Goddesses’ blessing!” I called after him. He became rooted to the spot, sighed a heavy sigh and spun around.

His face was dull, tone irritable. “The Goddess blesses you, may yo-” He paused when he finally took the time to actually see who he was speaking to.

“What are you doing here?”

“What is going on?” I approached him as he sat on the steps of the temple and beckoned for me to join him. As I shuffled to sit beside him, the murmuring crowd could be heard, out of sight, leaving.

“Hawk from the capital this morning.” The Father handed me a small rolled up wooden bowl before her, drowning in a pale yellow broth and surrounded by a chunk of bread lay in a wooden bowl before her, drowning in a pale yellow broth and surrounded by floating vegetables; a spoon was dipped into the liquid. It seemed untouched.

“You okay, mother?” I asked, perching myself on a chair across from her.

She held a vacant stare, looking off into nothingness. A chunk of bread lay in a wooden bowl before her, drowning in a pale yellow broth and surrounded by floating vegetables; a spoon was dipped into the liquid. It seemed untouched.

“Not hungry?”

She pushed the bowl towards me.

“What’s wrong?”

She looked at me with a glare. I could feel her disdain. Mother didn’t usually mind my ways of the unholy, as she would often call them. Just a youngster questioning her surroundings, but I could tell she wasn’t in the mood for my contrarian viewpoints today.

“It’ll be okay,” I said earnestly, reaching my hand out towards her. She took it lightly, her gruff expression softening. My mother had a harsh face — pointed and narrow, with hair scraped back in a tight bun, but her eyes were kind when she wanted them to be.

“I know you didn’t agree with them. But our Goddess demanded it of us. Now we face her justice. Her terrible wrath”. My mother’s voice was wrapped with worry, it was almost shaking.

The Father shrugged. “True. The town’s jailer won’t be too happy, though. Plenty of coin he’ll be losing”.

“I’ve tried to argue that the people could use their money to buy livestock instead, but they’re adamant that the inscriptions depict people, and so nothing less will do.” The Father groaned and rubbed his face with his hands. The crimson markings smeared and came away on this palms. I grinned as he cursed loudly.

“I worry how it will affect them. How they’ll handle it. The word of Our Lady is valuable to them, but the word of God is more so. You’ll have to be my eyes in the village, watch for any strange activity. Not that they’ll do anything with you around.”

“The town’s jailer won’t be too happy, though. The Goddess blesses you, may yo-”

“Don’t you tell her I’ve got you spying or she’ll be down here to put me on the pyre.”

The Father smirked.

“She’d be hung for heresy!” I said, mockingly.

“If I know your mother, she’d still do it.”

The ramifications of the capital’s decision were immediately felt. When dawn broke over the village the following morning, I threw open the shutters of my attic-bound bedroom to oversee numerous glum and lost souls, wandering about seemingly without direction. I found the whole situation ridiculous in all honesty, sacrifices were held but once every few months, they weren’t a daily occurrence, why should it affect our day-to-day lives? As I tiptoed along the beams that crisscrossed the ceiling on which my makeshift, wall-less, bedroom sat, and swung myself down the ladder to the floor below, I noticed even my mother was still troubled by the events of the day before as well. She sat at the table of our shabby, yet cosily little abode — a small, one-story timber house with little in the way of furniture, save a few cheap wooden chairs, a table, two cabinets and a bed in the corner.

“You okay, mother?” I asked, perching myself on a chair across from her.

She held a vacant stare, looking off into nothingness. A chunk of bread lay in a wooden bowl before her, drowning in a pale yellow broth and surrounded by floating vegetables; a spoon was dipped into the liquid. It seemed untouched.

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“I know you didn’t agree with them. But our Goddess demanded it of us. Now we face her justice. Her terrible wrath”. My mother’s voice was wrapped with worry, it was almost shaking.
“But Our Lady is the one who decreed it. The voice of Goddess Azra herself. Surely you can trust her to keep us safe?”

“Rulers can make mistakes, dear child.” Mother replied with a grimace.

By the time the week was out, the village was a very different place. People were on edge, living in constant fear. If something went wrong, a sheep died suddenly, a leak appeared in somebody’s roof, it was an omen; a sign that God was angry, and she wanted what she was due. Prayer wasn’t once a week now, it was every morning and every night. The Father was awash with visitors to his temple. I would catch him, exhausted outside. Sleep wasn’t easy when there was a constant banging at your front door. He was close to curing the decision, we both were. As much as we hated the barbaric, ritualistic burnings, our friends and loved ones seemed lost without them. The rug had been pulled from beneath them and they were still stumbling about, trying to find their feet. There were anger, tears and sheer bewilderment. The aged in particular were at sea. They’d known this way their whole life, and many now feared for their place in the afterlife. Two weeks on from the change, with the cloud of an imposing God’s wrath still very much floating over the village, the Father called a special sermon.

He spoke from scrolls he’d dug out of his library, hoping their words would bring comfort in these confused times. The Father now spent his days trying to soothe and console people, and his nights searching for answers.

“Your servitude is not born of simple ideal. It is born of true belief, that only you can decide how best to show your faith.” He said regaling the crowd, a tatty piece of parchment spread aloft before him. He would constantly spin around, talking to all those that surrounded his circular altar. The temple was packed out, as it always was these days.

“Divinity has no right answer, nor wrong answer. Divinity is within your heart. A cruel and twisted heart can still follow the teachings of God.” He continued. “But that heart shall face the holy judgement.”

The Father rolled up the parchment and looked around at the herd of wide-eyed followers. “You hear that? From the world of ancients, a scroll of God’s will. A sacrifice is not what she needs. She needs a pure heart. She needs you to follow your own path to her.”

The crowds began to look around to each other, uncertain of what they were being told. There seemed to be a sort of acceptance, nods of agreements, although certainly still an unease about the air. People were smiling and friendly, as they had been before the decree had reached us, just a bit more timid; a bit more awkward.

In one of the back rows, two men were arguing in hushed tones. Inaudible, but you could still catch him, exhausted outside. Sleep wasn’t easy when there was a constant banging at your front door. He was close to curing the decision, we both were. As much as we hated the barbaric, ritualistic burnings, our friends and loved ones seemed lost without them. The rug had been pulled from beneath them and they were still stumbling about, trying to find their feet. There were anger, tears and sheer bewilderment. The aged in particular were at sea. They’d known this way their whole life, and many now feared for their place in the afterlife. Two weeks on from the change, with the cloud of an imposing God’s wrath still very much floating over the village, the Father called a special sermon.

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The crowds began to look around to each other, uncertain of what they were being told. There seemed to be a sort of acceptance, nods of agreements, although the looks of worry were no less obvious. The mood was sombre, for all except two. In one of the back rows, two men were arguing in hushed tones. Inaudible, but clearly heated. They were hunched over, ducked behind the pew in front of them. A loud cough from the Father caught their attention. One of them was the grizzled old Marken.

“Out, both of you.” The Father barked. He’s seemed to have found his voice in this time of crisis. I was impressed.

The two men carried on squabbling as they left the temple, letting the heavy doors swing closed behind them with a crack. The Father carried on trying to abate the crowd’s concerns, yet by the time everyone was leaving, there was no mistaking the unease in the air. Words of comfort might take the edge off, but they were still, in their eyes, angering a being of almighty power. After a long trudge out of the temple at my mother’s side, far ahead of the group behind us — after all the commotion, I was careful to keep my distance — we came across one of the men that had been arguing. He was sat on the dirt-encrusted knoll overlooking the path, waiting for his wife.

“What was that all then?” My mother asked sharply.

“Marken wasn’t taking to kindly to the idea of the Father. I was telling him we have to give him a chance,” the man said, testily. “The bastard wouldn’t shut his mouth all the way up here. Said he was having none of this nonsense. Said he’s going to find his son out eastward. He’s abandoned us. I’m sorry to say gal...” He turned to me “But he took your horse.”

I was so preoccupied with the story that I hadn’t noticed my mare was no longer tied to the post I’d dug into the earth. I’d ridden her down here so I could head to town, and the market, after the sermon. I looked to the floor, saddened. My mother slung her arm around me.

“The old fool will die on the road” my mother replied coldly, “and good riddance.”

She lead me away, back towards the village. My heart was heavy. I rather liked my horse. I’d had her three years. Mother always said don’t get attached. That she was worth money and we had little, but I wasn’t good at listening to my mother on the best of days. Upset, I went to bed early, not getting up even for the heavy knocks at the door or to question my mother when she returned home later than usual. It was unlike her, but the whole community was acting differently at the moment, and I was starting to become disinterested in the whole thing. Now somebody had stolen the only thing I could talk to, and have listen to me without being judged or mocked, save the Father, and I wasn’t in the mood to humour their little tantrum anymore.

But I didn’t have to. The morning brought with it new life to the people. Sleep and the sermon seemed to have helped reinvigorate their spirits. There was certainly still an unease about the air. People were smiling and friendly, as they had been before the decree had reached us, just a bit more timid; a bit more awkward than usual; but a knock like the one they received would do that. I had hope. Hope for a world without sacrifices where our village could live in peace with itself.

I took my mother’s horse to town that morning, stopping off at the temple to encourage the Father to keep looking for similar scrolls, that the people were improving. His elation was hide to mask. The effects had been so sudden, so severe, we both were too busy putting our lives back in order after the turmoil of the past few weeks to worry about trade or visits to town.

Town, otherwise known as Clockworth Harbour, was a bustling trading port set in the shadow of some overhanging chalk cliffs. It was the meeting point for many smaller villages spread across the coast, and both the hub of trade coming for the islands beyond the horizon, and also the cities further inland. Clockworth was by far the largest settlement I’d ever visited. A mix of many wooden houses, warehouses, taverns and huts, all connect through muddy streets and encircled by spiked timber
fencing, it was not my favourite place to be. It was rough and dirty. If it weren’t so
dank I’d have probably moved here years ago. I enjoyed the liveliness, the shouting
merchants, crowds of people and worldly curiosities lining the market stalls spread
across the entire town, but it lacked the colour I’d grown accustomed to. And the
people could be quite... unsavoury. Everything was either brown or grey in this
town. Even the sky overhead seem drearier.

I made my way through the crowds, the hoofs of my mother’s large steed sloshing
through the mud, heading towards the docklands. Despite their detestment
of my heathenistic ways, the village was a bright and kind community when it
wanted to be, and they had all banded together to buy me a new horse. A satchel
of coins was tied to my waist, and I sought out a trader of mares. I wanted something
a bit lighter and gentler than the giant upon which I rode. I found him, by the water’s
edge, horses to his left, drinking from the shallows or wading in through the water,
and bales of hay to his right. He paid no attention to me as I drew closer, instead
focusing on a carving he carefully scored with a threatening looking blade.

Dismounting, I rounded on the horses for sale. One, in particular, had caught
my eye. The moment it saw me, it wandered over, caught a few feet away by the rope
attached to its front leg. This was my horse, my mare. Gently stroking her, I shot a
glare over at the trader.

“Where did you find this horse?”

“Wandering the fields south of the town border.” He replied in a dry tone, his
gaze remaining fixed on his carving, “50 coin, 55 with a saddle.”

“This is my horse,” I said forcefully, untying the rope bound tightly to her leg.

This got the trader’s attention. He rose quickly, leaving the carving but keeping
his knuckles firmly gripped around the handle of his blade. He approached me,
brandishing the knife. His face was splattered with dirt, as were his ragged old
clothes. His bent nose, cold stare and crooked lip didn’t inspire much warmth. He
was starting to break.

“Fourteen” I replied proudly, still holding my tone.

“Fourteen” he repeated, harshly. Pausing, he looked me up
and down. “How old are you?”

The trader grinned a half-toothless grin. “Maybe we can work out some other
way for you to pay for my horse.”

“Fourteen” I repeated strongly, looking up at him, although my nerve
was starting to break.

The trader leaned in, his dark and beady eyes locked with my ever more timid
stare. “50 coin, 55 with a saddle.” He repeated, harshly. Pausing, he looked me up
and down. “How old are you?”

“Fourteen” I replied proudly, still holding my tone.

The trader grinned a half-toothless grin. “Maybe we can work out some other
way for you to pay for my horse.”

He stroked the side of my neck, before moving his hand lower, trying to drag the
corner of my top off my shoulder. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end, I
shuddered as he moved his hand down my arm. I closed my eyes and took a deep
breath.

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I rode mother’s steed back to the village, my mare trotting happily alongside us,
kept close by a length rope tied loosely around her neck. I wasn’t going to pay five
coin for a saddle, even if my own horse did cost me 50. On the road home I came
across the man who had argued with Marken shortly before the old bastard had
stolen my horse. He seemed aghast at the sight of me.

“I thought we sent you to buy a new horse!” He boomed, laughing, as I sidled up
beside him.

“The trader found her near the water by Clockworth. Refused to hear that she
was mine, had to buy my own horse!” I spoke with annoyance in my voice, but in
truth, I was just happy to have her back, and happier I’d been able to pay for her
with coin.

“Least she’s home now, ay?” He replied with a smile.

Continuing on to the village, I was glad he’d taken the news so well. I was
worried that the villagers would be angry to hear their coin was spent on a horse
that already belonged to me, especially since we weren’t exactly the wealthiest of
folk. I was tempted by another mare, simply to avoid such problems, but I couldn’t
be without her, not when I knew she was mine to be had. Surprisingly, the mood
amongst all those I came across was decidedly similar. They were all very much
surprised to see me back with the very mare I’d been robbed of, but seemed
pleased all the same. I was almost taken aback by the niceties, surely somebody
was bothered by the whole affair? I suppose the Father’s words of twisted hearts
must have been ringing in their ears. If they couldn’t appease God through
sacrifice, they were determined to do it through kindness. Not that I was
complaining. People were being far friendlier towards me than they ever were
before. I was even starting to feel a bit less like the black sheep by the time I
reached home, after stopping for the twelfth time to explain my story to bewildered
passersby. Maybe they thought, now the killing had stopped, they could bring me
back towards the righteous path. I was tempted, I had to be honest. I never
considered myself a non-believer, but their practices went beyond the bounds of my
disposition; and my stomach.

Dinner with my mother wasn’t our usual muted affair. I felt like talking, so much
running through my mind.

“But why wouldn’t he sell her?” I mused as I chewed through a lean leg of lamb.
Meat was not something we enjoyed often in the village, but the spirits of the
farmers had been so uplifted by the Father’s discovery that they’d given everyone a
piece of their recent slaughters. The generosity of the people seemed to be
overflowing since yesterday’s sermon.

“He was an idiot.” my mother replied curtly. “Don’t dwell on it my girl, just be
thankful you got her back”.

“Yes but...” I continued. “To find her out on the road like that. It meant he rode
her to Clockworth, I assume to catch a ride to the islands, and just left her. Surely
he wasn’t that daft? He rode off with nothing but the clothes on his back, he’d have
needed money.”

“It appears he was that daft” Mother retorted, leaning over the table to ladle
some more broth. “Enough of this chatter, I detest talking about that creature.”

“The village seems very happy,” I remarked, changing the subject — still eager
to talk. “The Father really woke everyone to the idea of a more merciful God, didn’t
he?”
“She is as she says she is. We follow her guidance and hers alone.” Mother replied, almost chanting. “Her word is law.”

I should have figured it out then, but I didn’t.

Like a half-wit, I carried on believing all was well. I went to sermons frequently, got involved in the community more and became a part of our thriving little village. Everyone seemed happy; everything seemed like it was right. It was three months on when things started to take a turn. People were becoming distant again; agitated. There seemed to be a cloud hanging over us once more. Nobody said it, nobody bored the crowds with their fears of impending judgement and wrath, but it sure felt the same as before. Everyone started to behave weirdly. My mother would pace around the house. Not in the house. Outside the house. Late into the night, wandering in circles. I’d wake in the morning to find her asleep on a stack of hay leaning up against the wall. When I asked her what was going on, she evaded, mumbled and trailed off. I pressed her, tried to call her out on her obvious avoidance tactics, but she was a stubborn little barb, my mother, push too far and she’d sting you hard. After about a week, I woke to find her asleep in her bed. Nestled up, all cosy in the corner of our single, open room. Wrapped in a blanket, she looked quite content. That morning the village was back to its chirpy self. The clouds of unease faded, and people got on with their lives like they had before. It was as if nothing had ever bothered them at all. I was well and truly puzzled, for all of three days. Then it hit me; pretty damn hard.

Swinging the door open at the crack of dawn, on my way down to the coast to hunt for crab meat and search for herbs from the cliff walls, for which my mother, the local chemist, would use to make sleeping drafts and drinks to soothe pain, I was knocked aside by one of the villagers as he walked past carrying a crudely constructed wooden coffin. I hit the wall of my house with a thud, much to the impatient. He gestured for me to get on with it.

“Sorry, my dear girl!” The coffin bearer cried, carefully laying the clearly empty item beside him before rushing over to help me up.

“It’s alright,” I said, brushing myself off whilst eying up the coffin. “Who died?”

“Poor old Widow Millo.” The man replied, solemnly. “She’d been sick for some time now, but gave the last of her strength last night.”

“That is a shame” I replied softly. The widow had a bright heart. She’d never been a fan of my heretic ways, but recently we’d grown closer, now I had joined the true path, as she called it. Yet, it was odd. I had seen the woman not five days prior, disinterested in our conversation. She looked quite content. That morning the village was back to its chirpy self. The clouds of unease faded, and people got on with their lives like they had before. It was as if nothing had ever bothered them at all. I was well and truly puzzled, for all of three days. Then it hit me; pretty damn hard.

“How did you get that made so quickly? The markets won’t be open yet.”

“Oh.” It seemed a strange thing to do, but it wasn’t exactly the sharpest or finest of coffins. “Well, good job not waking me! I’d have thought those hammer blows would have carried over the entire village.”

The man gave a stunted laugh before turning on his heels and walking in the opposite direction. But where he moved away, I stayed rooted to the spot. Working over what had just happened in my mind.

The next thing I knew, I was hammering on the door of the temple. Locked this early in the morning, I was met by a sour-faced Father, who edged the door open a hair to peer out and see who it was. Noticing it was me, he let it swing open and, with a yawn, perched on one of the wooden pews. He was draped in his usual robes, but not yet managed to put on the full makeup. He looked bleary-eyed and impatient. He gestured for me to get on with it.

“They’re sacrificing each other.” I blurted out, unable to put the words in a better order in my mind.

“What?” The Father asked with a raised eyebrow, seemingly amused.

“Widow Millo, she’s dead.”

“They told me she was sick. I was due to see her this morning. Very unwelcome news, but I think you’re stretching.”

“The day after Marken disappeared, everyone was happy again.”

“I gave them a reason to be,” retorted the Father, resentment in his voice.

“They found my horse running in the wilds. Why wouldn’t he sell it?”

“He wasn’t the smartest of people, Myah.”

“Listen to me. Marken disappears, the village is happy. Three months later, around the time of sacrifice, everyone gets edgy. Then, everyone is happy again. Then, suddenly, Widow Millo is dead of sickness. The farmers apparently built a coffin this morning, without the knowledge or tools. Without waking the entire village hammering nails into solid wood.”

“Coffins aren’t exactly the toughest thing to build, and they probably just made it slowly. Marken’s leaving was a pure coincidence. The village was edgy because it was the usual time of sacrifice, but nothing bad happened, again, and they realised it was going to be okay, again.” The Father was clearly not interested in what I was saying, rubbing his tired eyes and speaking dully.

“You’re a fool,” I shouted, marching away and slamming the door behind me. Quickly I peered back around it for one final remark. “Who do you think’s next, ay? How about the heretic girl, or the Father who opposed their values of worship?”

Angrily I marched up the curving quarry path, but by the top, the anger had abated, and I was just scared. I was alone in my thoughts. The Father would be the only one who would ever believe me. Without him, I was truly without a chance of stopping whatever the villagers were doing. I needed his help, but what could I do? Surely I would be a target. Maybe not the next victim, but if they did this every few months, eventually it would be between me and somebody else, and I would lose. The Father was in danger, too. As much as he participated in the sacrifices, he constantly voiced his concerns about them and his desire to have them ended. He was also a man of faith and wouldn’t question the orders of those who claimed to be the voice of God. I could see them thinking us both a threat. But which was more?
Time passed as it did before. A period of happiness and contentment, but I was wary this time. The smiles, the generosity, were they just luring me in for an easy kill? Again, as expected, as we drew ever closer to the usual time of sacrifice, the mood darkened, although not quite as bad as before. I was nervous, a sense of foreboding hung above my bed every evening, as my mother trolled around the house into the dead of night. Seemingly waiting for something. This time though, I was awake with her. I watched her, through the cracks in the wooden-panelled walls, as she’d circled the house. Then, without warning, she was gone; failing to make her usual pass by my room. I quickly scrambled out of bed, slid out the door and was away into the night.

Catching sight of her wandering off through the village, arms crossed, elbows-dug into her sides anxiously, I followed. I had to be careful of my footsteps on the dirt, stone and twig encrusted path below, she wouldn’t be happy if she caught me. She was heading for a flickering light atop of a gentle hill in the distance; where farmer Lezron kept his sheep. The outline of the dark horizon was just visible in the moonlight. My mother wasn’t the only one moving towards the hill. As a door in front of me creaked open, I quickly leapt behind a market cart sat chained to the house. With more footsteps behind me, I crept around the gap between the wall and its wooden frame, peering out into the night, hidden from view. Dozens of villagers were heading up towards the flickering light, knocking quietly on doors and whispering to others.

“It’s time.” I heard one say.

As the village masses congregated on the hillside, I managed to slip in behind the last of the crowd and follow them up the pathway, through the lines of houses of our unassuming little village, towards the top of the hill. Between the village and the open pasture of the hillside was a low-lying and jagged stone wall. After watching the last of the villagers hop their way over a particularly low section of it, I edged my way over and crouched in its shadow.

There they all were, nearly every member of the village, save the youngest children. They gathered around a lone tree bathed in the light of two flaming torches hanging from its branches. They encircled the tree, kneeling before it. Once the final person took their place, neck bent low before the tree, low-mumbling broke out — soft chanting. Suddenly, a hand caught my shoulder. I leapt up with a jolt, breath she’d just torn from my lungs. The front two men went first, taking the weight of the box, before the two behind swung their legs over to join them. The box bumped against the stone wall as they went, and, as it did so, let out a metallic rattle.

So taken by the events, or perhaps muddled by the darkness, I hadn’t noticed the still-kneeling crowd shuffled apart as the troupe reached them, making a narrow path between which the men could walk through. Reaching the base of the tree, they carefully placed the box upright, so it stood just taller than they were. From the crowd, a man stood, while those carrying the box took up their place kneeling beside their kin — all except one, who remained rooted beside the tree. This man was cloaked in a long robe. I couldn’t see his face but I knew who it was. Eventually, he turned to face the crowd, handing the torch to The Father beside him.

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“In the light of Azra, I give myself to her and the flame. I give myself so my wife may eat, so my children may grow old.” His voice was harsh but quaking, I could hear the fear in it. It carried its way down the hill to me in the breeze, clear as anything. The Father handed him a vial of liquid, which he gulped down quickly, before taking out what seemed to be a long cloth that had been buried in his legwear. Slowly, he wrapped it around his face, covering his mouth. It then dawned on me what the wrap was for - so the sleeping me wouldn’t hear the screams. He stepped inside the box and shuffled around to face the crowd, bits of hay and grass
falling onto the ground in front of him as he moved. He placed his hands in the bands locked to chains either side of him, rattling the links as he did so. The Father, one hand still gripping the torch, snapped a clasp shut on both of them, sealing him in place. Slowly, the Father moved behind the box and lowered it, gently, until it lay on the ground; the man no longer visible. He held the flickering fire overhead, then dropped it in.

I stifled a gasp as I watch the flames immediately flick up into the air. Flecks of fire-encrusted wood spitting up from the already roaring blaze. The fire went up fast, it was likely the box had doused in some kind of hard-liquor from town. The man inside was clearly writhing in pain, the box shook from side-to-side violently. Then, as the fire started to consume the surrounding wood, it fell still. I watched on, in horror, as the fire softly crackled, flames licking up into the air in a gentle breeze. The people of the village simply knelt as one of their own burned before their eyes; watching as smouldering ash drifted away into the night.

I lay in bed, eyes wide, as my mother crept in and swiftly fell asleep, her low-rumbling snores making me ever more angry with each peaceful inhale. This was the third time they’d taken one of their own. Tomorrow, they would all be happy again. Beaming sweetly, offering me bread and asking about my afternoon. The thought of facing them disgusted me. That man was so afraid. Yet, then another thought swam into my head: he was also so willing. He gave himself without hesitation. He gave himself because these people cannot stop.

In the morning, I found myself yet again at the doors of the temple. I’d rushed passed all those gleaming faces; faces I’m sure turned sour the moment I passed. Wondering if my cold shoulder and pace to get out of the village meant their secret had been discovered. The Father opened unbarred the door to my scowl, and immediately knew what I was there for.

“How long have you known?” I demanded, forcing my way past him.

“I didn’t know about Marken.”

“But Millio?”

“Yes,” He nodded, shamefully.

“But if you burned her, why the coffin?” It seemed an odd question, out of the many in my head, but it shone brighter than the rest.

“Cover our tracks. From you, from any passersby or whispers”.

“I thought you wanted an end to the sacrifices?”

“Oh, I did. I do. To throw the fire on Dullan like that, to watch his eyes scream out pain that no sound could ever convey, is something I will take with me until I die.” The Father breathed out heavily. “But the people will not stop, Myah. This is their way of life, it always has been, and it always will be. They will die for it. You saw that last night, and you will see it if we’re ever discovered. But they are prepared to hang, rather than risk God’s wrath. God’s wrath is eternal, and when eternity is on the line, nothing more is to be considered.”

I crouched down, my head full of thought. I felt like the screaming that should have come from that burning box was now coming from my own mind. I didn’t know what to do.

“Why don’t they just keep buying more from the jailor, then?”
“We make our own path, right?” I said, kicking out and forcing his hand off my leg. I didn’t look back, I just carried on riding.
My mother once told me that monsters are not born, they are made. I used to take that very literally. Believing that, somewhere, monsters were being sculpted like clay pots and thrown into the world to terrorise us all. As I grew older, I realised what she really meant. I watched from a cage as my brother strangled her to death. That made him a monster. I heard the yelps of my father as my sister cut him with shallow slices, ensuring his last moments was as painful as possible. That made her a monster, too. But one man’s monster can be another’s hero. Monsters are like beauties, they fit into the eye of the beholder. My brother and sister are monsters to me, but not to others. The slaying of my mother and father brought about a new order to our small corner of the world. Cultists, a group with a single burning desire to appease their own monsters of the underworld, took control of my brother and sister, and indeed every inch of land under the rule of my family.

Our kingdom sat on a luscious peninsula on the western corner of the world. The joint that linked us to the mainland was narrow and set atop towering cliffs, as were most of our shores. An impregnable iron gate; set between thick stone walls, kept our kingdom out of the reaches of the wilder folk that lived in the lands outside our territory. For where we had water and life, the world stretching beyond was baron; an arid desert of sand and bone. Many had sought to take our kingdom; marauders, desperate and unhinged. All had failed to break the gates or climb the cliffs, but that’s not how the cultists seized power. Their words, not weapons, won them their war. They poisoned the minds of my siblings. They came as traders; allowed passage through the gates because they carried no weapons, nor spoke no ill but offered great knowledge and riches. Their disguise was perfect. Once inside, they sort to corrupt all three children, but not all could be taken in. I quickly grew suspicious of their fixation on death, rituals and monsters, and I was cast aside for it. My younger siblings were not so apprehensive. I warned my parents, but they dismissed it as a phase; exploration of the mind and spirit, my father said. They’d become so used to the threat of the sword, so condition to the stupidity of war, they’d lost sight of how wars are truly won and lost. The task before them was simple: hunt the monsters and bring them back to be laid before the God as a feast worthy of deities. If they failed to feed their God, his wrath would be terrible, so they said. He would destroy the heavens above, leaving nothing in the afterlife but darkness. This was how they justified their mission; or rather, their control. Thus, the monsters sought monsters to awaken a monster. A very different place. A culture of barbarism followed them. Brutish and violent. They drink, they fight, they murder in the street. When people like that meet with the civilised inhabitants, the barbarians win. For a time, the streets were mayhem. Our peaceful little villages transformed, from well kept thatched homes with beautiful flowers adorning the windows to places of ruin. Families were kicked out of their homes, which were then ransacked and torn apart. Tents sprung up across villages and its outskirts. Before long, my particular settlement looked more like a war camp than the picturesque little fishing village it used to be. Most villagers had fled further inland, to some of the quieter areas of the peninsula, though none were truly safe now the gates were firmly open. But I couldn’t leave. I lived in a cage, the same cage I’d spent most my days inside since the cultists overthrew my family. I was here, along with those residents who’d also been forced to these shores — most of which were loyalists to my family, given the choice of death or ‘tribute’ — for one purpose: to slay monsters.

These were not monsters like my siblings, these were monsters of the sea. The cultists worshipped a few gods, but the greatest of them all was a giant with an unpronounceable name. The fanatics believed that, if fed the most monstrous creatures of all, the giant would step down from above and walk in the realm of the living. Fish wouldn’t feed him, nor would corn or even cow; it would take true monsters. What would feed him were terrifying beasts few had ever laid eyes on. The task before them was simple: hunt the monsters and bring them back to be laid before the God as a feast worthy of deities. If they failed to feed their God, his wrath would be terrible, so they said. He would destroy the heavens above, leaving nothing in the afterlife but darkness. This was how they justified their mission; or rather, their control. Thus, the monsters sought monsters to awaken a monster. Well, that wasn’t strictly true. They never sought the monsters themselves.

I don’t see them often anymore, I’m not sure what role they play in the cult, but when I do, they use the word ‘spared’ a lot. I don’t feel it’s a word that summarises their choice in keeping me alive. Imprisoned would be something of an accurate description; captured, perhaps. They keep me on the furthest northern shore, with most of the other tributes. Our numbers grow day-by-day, the cultists allowing those who once attempted to attack our kingdom, the marauders, passage and sanctuary, in return for service to their unholy activities. Their existence within our world has made it a very different place. Before the cultists took power, our peninsula was populated by a few thousand people. Mainly farmers or fishermen, civilised and peaceful. Now, as the dregs of the desert have bled inside the walls, it has become a very different place. A culture of barbarism followed them. Brutish and violent. They drink, they fight, they murder in the street. When people like that meet with the civilised inhabitants, the barbarians win. For a time, the streets were mayhem. Our peaceful little villages transformed, from well kept thatched homes with beautiful flowers adorning the windows to places of ruin. Families were kicked out of their homes, which were then ransacked and torn apart. Tents sprung up across villages and its outskirts. Before long, my particular settlement looked more like a war camp than the picturesque little fishing village it used to be. Most villagers had fled further inland, to some of the quieter areas of the peninsula, though none were truly safe now the gates were firmly open. But I couldn’t leave. I lived in a cage, the same cage I’d spent most my days inside since the cultists overthrew my family. I was here, along with those residents who’d also been forced to these shores — most of which were loyalists to my family, given the choice of death or ‘tribute’ — for one purpose: to slay monsters.

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Monsters

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I woke to a hot streak of blood lashing my cheek. Above me, two men stood, in the midst of a fight. One held a makeshift dagger in his hand, its blade glistening with blood, while the other clutched his wounded arm. The two were circling, waiting for the other to make a move, kicking up dust from the dirt floor at each other, before feigning lunges and springing back into place. Gripping the cold metal cage bars on which I leant, I heaved myself upright and strode right between the two men. They were both bald and slim; like every man kept in these cages. Skin and bone, but with broad shoulders. I eyed each one of them in turn, shaking my head. My narrow gaze and stoic expression was all they needed. Both backed off each other, nodded in my direction, and then in each others, before retreating to different corners of the cage.

"Drop it," I said quietly, but a firm inflexion. The man wielding his makeshift blade opened his palm and let it fall to the floor. Too late was my intervention though. The overseer had arrived, rattling the cage.

"What are you rats doing?"

The overseers were from the lands beyond the wall, further even than the marauders. We didn't have many here, but they made their presence known. Seven feet tall, their faces were rounded and their bodies effortlessly muscular. They had a brutal look about them; dangerous. This one had wild yellow eyes, which flickered around the cage to all eight occupants. He let out a snarl from his curled lips, the corners of which had two, very small tusks poking out from beneath tough and dry mounds of skin. Carefully, he unlocked the door to the cage, bent down and entered, a large cleaver in hand. The overseers were a weird sort of person, thought to have been mixed with another species somewhere in their ancestry, although nobody was quite sure what. This one alone could easily take us all on without his weapon. He glowered around the cage, catching sight of the wounded man.

"Fightin's for dogs!" He roared, smashing a fist twice the size of a normal man's against the rusty bars. He spotted the makeshift blade on the ground, before casting another, even angrier look around. His eyes came to rest on me, and the blood on my cheek.

"Does the princess need lessons in making friends?" he said, in a sharp, vicious tone. I watched as he leant over to pick up and examine the blade and soon I found him towering over me. I saw the attacker, the man who had whittled the makeshift knife and slashed our cellmate, rise to claim responsibility. Out of sight of the imposing figure, who's malicious gaze was fixed on my face, I raised a hand and gestured for him to stay quiet. The blame was on me now, another's voice would relieve myself through the bars of my cast-iron prison. I dreamt nightly of being free of this place. Away from it all. It was all I wanted. I didn't want to fight. I didn't want to rebel. I just wanted to be free. The grey clouds had started to clear, and the cold sea air was starting to warm just a little bit. As dawn broke on the fourth day, the overseer arrived, flanked by a marauder, to march the tribute down, through the dilapidated old town, to the docks. There we met with other overseers, marauders and a small army of prisoners, and were loaded into a group of ten rowing boats. Each boat was manned by eight rowers, four on each side. At the bow of the boat was a large, mounted crossbow. The formidable piece of weaponry fired a single bolt. Thicker than a human leg and tipped with a barbed, serrated arrowhead, these machines of death existed for one purpose: to slay giants. The crossbow was operated by a marauder, with an overseer sat in the middle of the boat, ready to load the immensely heavy metal bolts, should they be needed. They very rarely were. Not in all my time at sea had I seen anything that needed such a bolt.

Once aboard, the prisoner's legs were chained to the floor, but arms kept free to manoeuvre the ores. I watched my wounded cellmate warily as he sat down. Our injuries were recovering, slowly, but I was still struggling to walk and I knew this trip would take its toll on him. I hoped the overseer would show mercy, although I wasn't confident. He stood there, a long, curled whip in hand, cleaver attached to his belt, watching as we pulled away from the harbour in unison with the other boats and headed out to open water. Behind me was a new member of the crew, a young lad from north of the peninsula, taken into service of the cult; probably for some horrifyingly unjust reason. I didn't like to ask how people ended up in the cage anymore, it didn't help and it just made my blood boil. The cultists were getting ever more desperate for a meal to offer their God, bringing in more and more people to their hunt for less and less meaningful reasons. Some of the
followers were growing restless, with a number of executions having taken place over recent months of those calling the leaders of the cult false prophets. With ‘heretics’, marauders and subjugated locals under their rule, the cultists lead with an iron fist. Life in the cages, and the villages in which they sat, seemed rough, but from the stories I had heard, life beyond them wasn’t that pleasant either.

We spent all afternoon bobbing up and down, seeking out a prize worthy of the cult’s demands, and finding nothing. The sound of the ocean sloshing against the boat was only broken by the paddling of ores, the groans of men and the crack of a whip when somebody’s pace fell behind. I could see the wounded man beside me, struggling through the pain; red-faced and dripping with sweat. Eventually, it was too much. His wound was oozing blood, he let out a yelp of pain and hoisted his ore out the water, leaning against it so it wouldn’t drag the others back. The boat started listing off course without his input. Growling, the overseer gripped him by the throat and squeezed. Tears streaked down the man’s face as he choked.

“If you didn’t want to deal with the pain, you should have moved faster!” The overseer bellowed, throwing the man down against the deck. “Now row!”

Another crack of the whip followed, with that in turn followed by an agonising scream. Blood streaming down his shoulder, he kept rowing. The sight of him tore me apart inside. It was impossible to watch. The pain must have been unbearable.

In the distance, the tip of a mountainous island loomed above a fog that surrounded it. The marauder pointed to it “Steer clear of the mist, we run aground in there and we’ll all drown”. The boat started to turn, running parallel to the mist that lazily rolled its way towards us. Suddenly, the boat jolted sideways.

“We’d been hit.

The hump of a massive creature — an animal that must have measured some seventy foot, out matching our little bout by about four times — rose out of the ocean, knocking our craft, before disappearing into the surf as the beast dove into the depths. As it slid beneath the waves, two spined fins on either side of its body cut through the water, creating dramatic looking ripples like somebody had just run through it with a sword. Moments later, another beast broke the surface nearby, then another behind us, and two more ahead of us. We were in the thick of them; a group of the massive animals heading straight for the mists of the island.

“Is this what we’re hunting?” The newest member of our crew asked, peering out at the impressive looking animals as the last one disappeared under the shimmering blue ocean.

“No.” I answered quietly, “These are what our monster hunts.”

“They’re going into the mist” The marauder shouted, snapping around to look at the overseer.

“Well…” The overseer grumbled. “What are we waiting for? Follow them!”

Soon, every boat in the convoy was being rowed into the fog. It clung low to the ocean’s surface at first, but as we got deeper in, it built into an all-consuming mass that surrounded us. Eventually, we couldn’t even see the boat closest to us, all swallowed by the freezing grey mist. The air felt thick in my lungs as I, along with the other rowers, slowed the pace to carefully drift through the dense patches of fog. Both the overseer and the marauder were looking around warily, for sight of monster or rock.

The silence was striking. In the midst of the fog, seemingly alone, with enormous sea creatures hidden somewhere beneath the dark water below, even in the boat I felt vulnerable. For a while there was nothing, we just floated gently, in a state of tranquil unease. Again, the creatures started to rise from the water around us, before dipping back below. They seemed totally uninterested in our being there. They also moved very slowly, not in the frenzied state of an animal fleeing for its life. There were no monsters to be found here.

Then came another knock, as one of the beasts surfaced right beneath the boat. We lurched backwards in its wake. We the boat could steady, the marauder lost his footing and was thrown forward and into the icy depths. The overseer immediately jumped up to reach for him and in this moment, I was overcome with instinct. I caught sight of my wounded crew member. Looking faint, weak and helpless. His armed coated in blood, his face pale. I saw in my mind, the overseer as his drove a blade into my aching leg. I pictured the cages, I thought of my brother and sister. Of my home that lay in ruin. Without another thought, without hesitation, I snatched the cleaver from the overseer’s belt, raised it high and slammed it into the overseer’s neck. Still leant over the side of the boat, he let out a muted gasp before slumping over the side and falling into the water beside the marauder. I kept my hand clutched onto the cleaver, wrenching it from his body as he fell.

“What are you doing?” Came the cry of the marauder through splutters of water. Quickly, I hacked at my chains and broke free. As the hand of the marauder clenched the side of the boat, I took off its fingers in one, bloody swipe. The man fell back into the waves, his howls of agony broken by choking and desperate coughing. Standing over the side of the boat, I heaved the bolt that was wedged into the crossbow under my shoulders and threw it into the water. It was so heavy I could only hurl it a few feet, but it was enough to come crashing down on the marauder’s head. I couldn’t tell if it knocked him out or killed him, but it didn’t matter. He floated limply, head down in the water, beside the body of the overseer. If the blow didn’t finish him, the water would.

After so much panic and noise, there was now silence. I stood and watched as the bodies floated away, disappearing into the mist, as if being pulled into the afterlife. All that was left was a trail of blood floating on the surface of the water.

I turned to greet the stunned faces of my crew. They watched me with a mixture of expressions. Most shocked, others scared, but soon the atmosphere changed.

“Yes!” Bolo grinned. “Yes! It’s time boys!”

Bolo sparked something in the men. A sense of freedom filling their minds. They looked at me expectantly, as if waiting for some speech. I didn’t know what to say. This wasn’t a rebellion. Was it?

“We must be ready. Someone may find the bodies or see us without an overseer.” The words were clearly not what the men expected, but they were unanimous in the nods and grumbles of agreement all the same.

Cleaver in hand, I broke Bolo’s chains and helped him to his feet. Together, we slotted a bolt into the crossbow, while the others watched on. As we winched back the firing pin, something caught my ears. I beckoned for all to fall silent, not that a word was being said or sound being made.
Through the silence, we could hear the paddling of another boat. It was getting nearer.

“Stay low, let them get close”. I said, dropping down, so that I could only just see over the top of the artillery. The others followed my orders without question.

Creeking through the fog, I saw a lone boat heading towards us.

“Hey!” the marauder manning the crossbow called out. “You see anything?”

The boat drew nearer.

“Hello?” they called out again.

In a quieter voice, carried over the water, I made out the words: ‘Looks like there’s nobody in the boat.”

The sound of ores breaking against the water grew louder and faster as a whip crack sailed through the air. They were nearly upon us now, soon they’d see the men lying in the boat, the lack of marauder and overseer and me, a prisoner walking free, manning the crossbow. Spinning the weapon around so it was directed at the boat, I sprang up to check my alignment and release the firing pin.

The bolt flew straight and true through the still air, spearing the marauder, spattering the crew with blood, and sending him flying backwards. The bolt split the hull of the small boat and water soon poured in. The boat was sinking quickly, the overseer looking around wildly, trying to plug the leak. He hoisted the impaled marauder up and threw his blood-soaked corpse into the ocean; which was a mistake. Even more water poured in, the rowers were panicking, their feet chained the boat. They scrambled helplessly, trying to undo the locks, crying out in fear, pleading for help. I watched helplessly, as the boat sank further and further down. I was frozen, shocked by the horror unfolding before my eyes. In a mighty show of strength, the overseer gripped the side of the boat, tore off a piece of wood and leapt into the water, using it to stay afloat, leaving the trapped crew to die.

“Save them!” Called out a voice from behind me, but I knew it was no good.

The chains were beneath the waves now. No strike, no matter how precise, would slice fast enough through the water to smash those chains. There was nothing to be done but watch as the boat dropped lower and lower beneath the water. Soon, the panic-stricken men took their final, gasping breaths, before behind dragged under. The last one to go locked eyes with me. Eyes full of nothing more than utter terror. My body, my mind, my heart; it was all numb. I watched him slip beneath the waves, moments later, bubbles rippled on the surface, then all was quiet.

“You!” bellowed the floating overseer. “What have you done?”

Quietly, without a word or show of emotion, I leaned over and beckoned for Bolo to hand me another bolt. He did so, silently; he wasn’t smiling anymore.

The whole boat was silent, unable to process the horror they had just witnessed.

“Break the chains,” I whispered as Bolo hoisted the bolt into my arms, handing him the cleaver.

Whilst I loaded the weapon, he moved around, cracking the chains of all the crew. I drew my focus upon the overseer, who was not ignorant to my plan. He hurriedly started kicking his feet, trying to move away and into the safety of the mist. But he was heavy, cumbersome and very immobile in the water. In the time it took him to turn, I had the weapon loaded. It wasn’t a direct hit, but the bolt was so heavy it cracked his skull as it slid over his head. More blood poured into the water as he drifted lazily away from his wooden raft.

I turned, sat and faced the crew, tears streaming down my cheeks. They said nothing. No words of condemnation or consolation. They just watched me with stunned expressions. Then, the sound of more ores.

“We have to move. Try and free more”, came a quiet voice from the back.

“No.” I sighed, defeated. “We cannot risk it.”

“But, our freedom?” Bolo protested feebly.

“Are we not free?” I retorted, rattling a broken chain in his direction.

“The people? Our home?”

I said nothing. I just got up, sat by my ore and started to row. Slowly, the others joined me. My whole body shook. I expected to feel pain, anger, anguish, guilt. But I just felt nothing. My body and mind were numb.

Soon, we found ourselves leaving the mist behind, and left with a choice nobody wanted to make.

“What do we do now?” asked Bolo.

I didn’t know what to tell him. After a long pause, It was our new crew member spoke up.

“We should follow the coast south, make landfall outside the wall, find some-”

But his words were cut short. Heading straight towards us was a figure, a beast of the ocean, but this wasn’t another of the giants we’d seen today.

It almost slithered across the surface like a snake, moving from side to side. Only its scaled back could be seen, along which ran three long jagged ridges. It only just poked out of the water but was clearly far larger than what we could see.

The creature’s length was near impossible to guess, but as it passed us, seemingly oblivious to our presence, the shadow beneath the waves looked to be larger than any warship I’d ever seen. Twice or three times that, in fact.

The monster descended, its back slinking beneath the surface, as it headed off towards the island shrouded by mist.

We all watched on, unable to believe our eyes.

“That’s what we were hunting,” Bolo said to our newest crew member, after another long silence.

“Must have been drawn by those massive fish things” the young man mused.

Or blood,” I uttered coldly under my breath.

We carried on rowing, following the plan of heading south and finding shelter on the coast away from the reach of the cultists. I couldn’t help but think, as we gently sailed towards freedom, about monsters.

The massive creature, hunting its prey.

The outcast brother and sister who betrayed their ignorant family.

The fearful cultists appeasing a vengeful God.

The supposed Prince of the people, whose bloodlust left his men without a hope and took others to their grave; not before he abandoned those left behind to servitude as he sought his own freedom.
I wondered, if monsters were not born but made, if I just crafted one that could satisfy the hunger of even the angriest of Gods. Was I the biggest monster to haunt this land, even if I were not the size of great warships?
Care for it as if it were your own, or watch it melt to ash and bone. Words that echoed in my mind as I edged my way through the forest. The trees were spread sparse, and lay bare. Their dark, silvery trunks clinging to the ground through exposed roots; roots that wove their way across the grim, grey dirt. I had to be careful not to trip as I walked, the entire forest floor was laden with them.

The air was still. Not a sound floated through it, save the crunch of my boots on the dry, dead ground. And that's what this place was, or at least seemed: dead. There was no colour, no life. The forest seemed empty, devoid of anything you might expect to see in a woodland. No animals, no water, no sunlight breaking its way through the canopy. The lack of leaves would have left the whole forest to bath in the warm glow of the sun, were it not hidden beneath perpetual cloud.

I came to a steeply crested dirt mound. Either side were trees, jagged roots and felled decaying logs. It seemed to be my only way forward. In my attempts to scramble up, I lost my footing and fell forward. I wasn't quite sure how, my foot felt planted one second, then as if the ground was gone the next, but it didn't matter. I had made it over the rise but landed on my stomach in the dirt. Peeling upright as quickly as I could, I frantically checked my pocket. To my relief, there was no harm done. My prize was safe. Dusting myself off, I continued onwards, heading deeper into the forest.

"Nasty isn't it…"

I flew around, a haunting voice catching me by surprise. My heart in my mouth, my breath caught in my lungs, I found myself peering down at a haggard old woman, head spun with dry and curling white hairs. She was sat against the base of a tree, wore a tattered old white dress down to her feet, no shoes and a crooked smile.

"To be caught off-guard by a scary old woman in the middle of a forest" she continued, her smile broadening. I nodded frantically in agreement.

"What brings you out here?" She pressed. "Alone".

Her expression was warm but her eyes were cold. They were like the forest around me. Lifeless and empty.

"Nothing".

"Nothing?" She replied, skeptically. "I doubt that very much."

"What are you doing out here?" I asked, trying to turn the conversation to her.

"Hm? Oh, just sitting."

"Sitting?"

We looked at each other, an eerie smile on her face, what I imagined to be nerves on mine. "I better head this way," I said after a pause, edging away from her.

"Oh yes, you better had." The old woman croaked. "It'll be getting dark soon."

I nodded awkwardly at her, scurrying away. Before I could move out of earshot, I heard her call.

"Must be very valuable, whatever is in your pocket."

I turned back to answer, to lie or question her knowledge of what lay beneath the fabric of my clothes, but there was nobody to respond back to. The woman was gone.

With every hair on my body stood on end, I carried on. I had to be there soon, or must at least be getting close. She was right, though, it was getting darker. It was impossible to know how high the sun was in the sky. Between myself and the clouds was a high floating mist that wafted through the treetops. It scattered what little light crept its way through the clouds, destroying all indication of the placement of the sun within the sky. All I knew was, I was losing light. I shuddered at the thought of being caught out here in the dark. Waking to a wrinkled old crone standing over me, fumbling at my pocket and scared me half to death. She'd already done that once, I suppose if she came back and did the other half she'd finish the job.

I could feel the fear etching its way into my body. A strange sensation of heat on my skin, despite the cold. A feeling of movement in my stomach, without any food inside it. And a distortion behind my eyes; the world was the same as how I always knew it, but somehow looked different at the same time. Like I was seeing more detail, my unconscious mind looking for things it normally wouldn't. Like creepy old ghost women.

I didn't want to be here anymore.

The only way out was forward. I marched on, watching my footsteps carefully. I would seemingly trip every time I looked up, like the roots beneath me were tricking my eyes. Where I thought was clear was suddenly not. This forest was shapeless, aimless, it just kept going. But then, my heart sank, as I came to a familiar sight. A crested dirt mound, this time with scrapped boot marks down the rise. I approached it cautiously. To either side were trees, felled logs and jagged roots. There was no mistaking it. Carefully, I climbed, watching my feet as I went. With a hop I sprang over the ridge and immediately cast my eyes around the trees, turning back to check for old, haggard strangers. But there was nobody.

"Nasty isn't it…"

I gasped as a jolt of shock struck me deep within my chest.
“To be caught off-guard twice by a scary old woman.”

Slowly, I turned back around. There she was, stood barefoot in the dirt. Hunched over, neck twisted, peering up at me through the spirals of hair falling down her face.

“What’s going on?” I demanded, eyes darting around the forest for other potential surprises. The woman had not been there mere moments ago, and the trees were spread so far apart around us that there was no way she could have appeared from behind one of them.

“I would like to see the treasure you carry”. She said softly, wearing the same broad smile.

“It is not for you,” I said, trying to strike my tone with some form of confidence while carefully shielding my pocket with my hands.

The woman’s smile dropped to a sneer. She folded the hair out of her face to reveal a harsh and angry expression, yet those eyes still held nothing but emptiness. No emotion, nothing. “There is only one reason people visit this forest. Only one reason they travel so deep.”

“Get away from me, crone!” I wailed, sprinting round her, my hands still covering my pockets. I ran deeper and deeper into the forest, zig-zagging between the gnarled roots as fast as I could. I kept the pace for as long as I could, constantly switching between tracking my movements across the floor — careful not to trip — and looking up for signs of repetition. Eventually, after a fairly lengthy, yet cautious run, I started to tire. I wasn’t the most physically fit of individuals. I came from wealth, I didn’t have to be.

Panting, exhausted and pleading with my own head for signs of the creature that I sought, I came upon a particularly dangerous looking patch of roots, stretching on ahead of me into the far distance. They spun up in all directions, curved and twisted, some even looping twice over before burying themselves back into the ground. It seemed like they were fleeing the very earth itself.

I looked around the desolate landscape. No sign of women, or crests or anything familiar; except a brutally grey and unappealing forest. I broke off my pace and opted for a slow walk through the entangled roots. Eyes firmly at my feet, I made steady progress for all of thirty seconds, then I glanced up.

There is was. The crested dirt mound. Right before my eyes. How? What had happened to the swarming roots? There was no way I’d made my way through the tangled roots as fast as I could. I kept the pace for as long as I could, constantly switching between tracking my movements across the floor — careful not to trip — and looking up for signs of repetition. Eventually, after a fairly lengthy, yet cautious run, I started to tire. I wasn’t the most physically fit of individuals. I came from wealth, I didn’t have to be.

But she wasn’t here. I couldn’t see her anywhere. I stood for a good few minutes, in the dead silence of the forest. Waiting for her to appear. She didn’t come. I could feel my mind slipping away from me. I was becoming desperate. The sun didn’t appear to be moving. It was still fading, and had been for what seemed like hours. I couldn’t see a way out. How could I escape a forest that could change its shape at a moments notice? Nobody had warned me this forest played games with you. That a witch lived between its deathly edges and tangled roots.

Slowly, I reached into my pocket and pulled out my prize. A mottled green egg, slightly larger than a chicken’s, lay in my palm. I held it out before me, gazing at its smooth shell. I felt a coldness behind me. Not a breeze, more like that cold feeling of placing your hand near frozen water. An aura.

The woman appeared. Shuffling past my shoulder, she came to a kneel in front of me. She too gazed at the egg. Again she wore that same smile. Again her eyes, though wide and fixed upon the egg, were lifeless.

“Leave it here, and I’ll let you go”. She whispered, eyes still fixed upon the striking little egg.

“I know what happens if I let go of it.” I whimpered. I was afraid, but not more afraid than I was of dying, cold and alone in this forest.

“Do it.” She urged.

“Go on. Take it from me.” I said, a pleading note clear in my quivering voice.

“Just put it on the ground.” The witch breathed with a gesture towards the floor.

“Why don’t you just take it?”

“Put it on the ground.” She was becoming agitated again. The smile wiped from her face. Her anger was building. “Put it on the ground and leave!”

I watched her for a moment, wondering why she wouldn’t just take the egg. Then, cautiously, I reached out with one hand. As I slide my hand towards her skin, it floated away like mist. She really was a ghost; an apparition.

“You have no power here,” I said under my breath. “You can’t do anything to me.”

“I can trap you in this place until you’re too weak to carry on.” The witch screeched at me. “I’m giving you a chance to leave here alive.”

But the wheels were turning in my mind. I was starting to piece it together. What was happening. Not how it was happening, mind, that part still eluded me, but what was causing my confusion, my lost sense of direction and inability to avoid the crested dirt mound. I could see the witch growing anxious, she twitched as she crouched before me, watching me intently.

“You can only control what I cannot see,” I said finally, cracking a small smile.

She gazed at me, blankly for a moment, seemingly lost for words. When she spoke, she didn’t say what I thought she might. She didn’t ask me why or how I’d figured it out. No, instead, in the softest, and weakest of voices, she just said: “Please don’t.”

I rose quickly. I kept my eyes on the horizon and I walked onwards, straight through her. I did not let my vision waiver from the direction in which I walked. I stumbled. I tripped and fell. Cut, bled and bruised. But she couldn’t trap me if I didn’t take my eyes off the path.

“Wait!” I heard her voice behind me. “Look!”

“No!” I called out, not turning my head even an inch.

I had a newfound sense of confidence. I’d beaten her, I’d beaten her magic and her tricks. I felt a surge of energy within my body, my fear turning to determination. From behind a tree ahead of me, she came into view. She appeared to be sobbing, or at least, sad. I refused to look at her directly, my eyes were looking nowhere but dead ahead. As I walked past her, she started to scuttle along beside me.

“Please!” She begged. “Please. Drop the egg and leave. You are making a mistake.”
“This is my task. This is how I look after my family.” I replied firmly, shaking off her feeble attempts to sway my decision and pull me off course.

“I cannot take it anymore. Please, don’t do thi-” But she was cut short. We’d arrived. I had been so close for so long.

Before me was a clearing in the forest. Within it lay deep crater entrenched by roots and fallen trees; within the crater itself, was what I set out to find. The creature hummed softly. A low, baritone noise. It was an almost perfect half-sphere, about the size of a small cottage, sitting dead centre, in the heart of the crater. Its skin was a harsh pink mixed with tinges of brown, and all over its body were placed long, barbed spikes. I reminded me of a more jagged looking sea urchin; a delicacy we often treated ourselves back home. It had no face, eyes, nose or anything else you’d normally associate with an animal. I supposed they may be under its striking shell.

A quick glance at the witch told me she was devastated by my find. She shrank down onto all fours, clutching the lip of the crater, looking down on the otherworldly beast in the pit below.

“I can’t…” She moaned. “I can’t go through this again. Please don’t make me”

“It is not for me to help you,” I replied harshly, fed up with the trickster’s tactics. “I am here for a reason, and I will see it through.”

I left the sobbing woman on the edge of the crater as I slid down its ridge, towards the animal. It made no movements towards me, nor did it react to my presence. The smell was horrific. Like rotting food and gone-off meat. As I reached its massive form, I placed the egg on the floor beside it. The egg shattered into a sliming mess, a gleaming blue stone. Clambering into the ooze, I grabbed the mucus-encrusted stone and made my way swiftly out the crater, using fallen trees and roots to haul myself up to the edge. Sitting on the lip of the enormous pit, I wiped the slim off the gem with my clothes. It was a perfect circle, a glowing blue pearl. The size of my cupped hands, it shone without any light reflecting into it. I couldn’t have asked for anything so stunning. This gem was perhaps the most valuable single item anyone could get their hands on right now, and it would keep my family in great wealth for a century.

I left the forest, nearly skipping, overjoyed. The gem was hidden beneath my clothes, I couldn’t let anyone know I had it. Not until it and I were safely home. Nobody but the inner circle of my family knew of this place. If anyone were to discover it, our fortune would be ripped from beneath us. Soon, I came to the crested mound, but this time I was facing the other way.

“I used to be young and beautiful you know.” The Witch was waiting for me, on the other side of the crest. Some of her silver hair had fallen out since we last met. She looked more wrinkled, was hunched over in a cruel arch and spoke with a very weak and croaking voice. “You’ve taken this all from me.”

“Everything must have an end”. I replied, matter of factly, now very much unafraid of the deathly figure before me.

“And what will you do when I’m gone. When this is gone?” She gestured to the forest around her. Decay hung in the air, the trees were looking wilted, the bark of the roots cracking. “I cannot take much more.”

“I don’t care,” I said honestly. “What I care about is getting what I need right now. And I have what I need. You’re still here, aren’t you? The forest still stands. We’ll try and give you longer to heal this time... Maybe that will keep you going a little longer.”

“It’s not enough.” she sobbed.

“It’s all I can give you.” And with that, I left. I walked away from her. Hoping I would never have to hear from her or see her again. Somebody else would have to come back here, of course, but I wasn’t going to be me. I’d be long dead.
Late was the hour in the dark but restless tavern. Dim light sparked from candles hung by rusted chains cast silhouettes of the worst kind across the slowly crumbling timber-framed walls. Men in deep and drunken stupors, beards sodden and eyes glazed. Others were cloaked in the shadows of the darkest corners, figures sitting lone and sullen. Grimest of all patrons were perhaps were the younger men, who chorused in raucous cheers and drank with bright spirits, in this, the dingiest and contemptuous of places. Yet the darkest trick of all the tavern had to offer was not the clients, but instead those that served within it.

The barman, the only man to pull a wage from the wreckage of a tavern, handed out drink without thought or acknowledgement of those who ordered. He simply swept the money flung upon the bar and poured. He was a grizzled and unsightly creature. Sunken eyes, wide-faced, thinning hair, boils clinging to his crooked nose and an unkempt, almost wild, beard. But he wasn’t the worst sight to behold.

Three rakishly thin women, allow narrow faced, hair as thin as the barman’s and draped in the cheapest of linen dresses swept between the tables, clearing drinks away whilst mopping up the drool and vomit. Not one could make a pass of the tavern without being groped, or leered at, or shot a putrid comment. Every now and then, men would wander to the barkeep and barter for time with the woman; his daughters. The barman would always oblige. Each time they would protest, but he would hear nothing of it and they’d be led away. Maybe they used to kick and scream, but not anymore. But even this, was not the worst of it.

Bankamp was not a native to the part of the world. He hadn’t been this far south in all his many years, he’d been keen to avoid it, but a job was a job. He knew people this far below the world were different, he’d met a few before. The nights were longer and darker, the snowfall was near constant and the temperature so low that only the toughest, most hardened animals of people could survive. He had resided to acceptance of the place he was in. Yes, he detested it. Yes, he would be glad to be rid of it, but as the blizzard churned outside and the ale kept his body warm, he would make his peace with the dreary surroundings and sickest of people. It was only for a few days. Keep his head down and his mind on greener pastures. This was his plan at least. But then she appeared. The brightest of faces that lay off the hall, letting it swing with a creak, and beckoned for Bankamp to enter. Inside was much warmer, but no kinder on the eye. Stone walls, stone floors, wooden rafted ceilings that groaned under the weight of men walking about the
tavern overhead. A fire burned in a hearth, smoke rising up a narrow chimney and out into the cold night. A small bed lay in the corner, a thin mattress upon its frame, with a solitary tatty sheet and no pillow. The girl closed the door, walked slowly to the bed and started to undress with her back turned. Bankamp caught her by the shoulder as she unbuckled her clothes.

“Please, don’t.” He said softly.

The girl looked up at him, dress already half slung over her slender shoulder. She carefully did up her buttons and sat on the mattress at Bankamp’s gesture. He leant down to a squat before her, meeting her eye to eye.

“Who are you?” Bankamp asked, softer still. His voice calm and kind. He feared anything would frighten this fragile young girl. She was not a hardened native of the south. Her skin was too smooth. Her hair too fair.

The girl said nothing, she just looked at her feet.

“What is your name?” Bankamp tried a simpler approach.

“Miya.” The girl breathed back, so quietly he almost missed it.

“That’s a beautiful name.” Bankamp smiled. “I’ve met a few Miya’s in my time, and none so far south. You aren’t from around here, are you Miya?”

The girl looked up and shook her head. Her eyes were filled with tears.

“What happened, Miya?”

Miya’s tear-sodden eyes were pierced with a blast of fire, “They killed him.”

“Who was killed?” Bankamp placed a hand on the girl’s knee, trying to comfort her, but she shook him away. He withdrew swiftly, taking a step back.

“Who was?” He repeated.

“My Da,” Miya answered through gritted teeth. “We came to trade, he went missing one night. They found him dead in the snow. I know they killed him.”

The girl said nothing, she just looked at her feet.

“Why aren’t you doing to me what they do to me?” She asked, breaking the silence. “Fun isn’t she?” He grinned as Bankamp approached, lowering the heavy cask to the ground with a groan. The retired soldier wanted to bludgeon the man with his own barrel of drink there and then, but he held himself back. His patron would have him hung by the thumbs if he disobeyed his orders. The goal wasn’t just to sell or buy from those this far south, the miners and quarrymen, but continued trade. Bankamp found the barkeep in the hallway, lugging a cask towards the stairs.

“I daren’t do that before a lady.” Bankamp said with an air of the respectable tavern owner. “It’s not safe here.”

“Why? You aren’t giving me to somebody else are you?” Bankamp asked, trying to hold back the anger he felt burning inside him.

“I had nobody by Da, and now I have nothing but this place. I tried to run once. I can handle myself, you needn’t worry about me.”

I wish my Da could have handled himself.” Miya sighed, mournfully.

Bankamp recoiled, aghast by the idea.

“You are the strangest man to ever visit me, but maybe that is why I feel safe. Why are you here?” It was the girl’s turn to question her guest.

“Same reason as your father. Same reason any respectable man comes down this far. Trade.”

“You should leave,” Miya warned. “It’s not safe here.”

“I was a soldier, dear girl. A good one. A strong one. That’s why my Lord hired me to come this far and be his voice. I may be older, but I still remember my youth. I can handle myself, you needn’t worry about me.”

“I wish my Da could have handled himself.” Miya sighed, mournfully.

Bankamp looked down upon the girl. She was curled up even tighter now, sheet clung to her narrow figure. Her eyes were closed, but the sadness was still easy to see on her lips and puffy cheeks.

“Miya. Would you allow me to step outside for a moment?” She bolted upright, gripping his arm. Eyes wide and scared.

“I will be back,” Bankamp said soothingly, patting her on the arm and easing her back onto the mattress. “I just need to answer the call of nature.”

“I have a chamber pot beneath the bed.” Miya said through gritted teeth. “Until the sun rises. You’ll know once the fire burns out and the light comes in through the chimney.”

“Please, don’t.” He said softly.

“Will you stay?” She asked with a note that was almost pleading. “I don’t feel safe on my own.”

“You should rest.” He said to her with a weak smile.

“Yet you feel safe with a stranger?”

“You are the strangest man to ever visit me, but maybe that is why I feel safe.”

Bankamp gave a smile, wider this time, and nodded. He rose from his squat and sat on the end of the bed, leaning up against the wall. The curled toes of Miya lay just shy of his legs.

“Why are you here?” It was the girl’s turn to question her guest.

“Same reason as your father. Same reason any respectable man comes down this far. Trade.”

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“I have a chamber pot beneath the bed.” Miya went to reach for it, but the older man stopped her.

“I daren’t do that before a lady.” Bankamp said with an air of the respectable soldier left in him. Miya blushed. He didn’t suppose many she met would have such dignity, or call her a lady.

Bankamp found the barkeep in the hallway, lugging a cask towards the stairs.

“Fun isn’t she?” He grinned as Bankamp approached, lowering the heavy cask to the ground with a groan. The retired soldier wanted to bludgeon the man with his own barrel of drink there and then, but he held himself back. His patron would have him hung by the thumbs if he disobeyed his orders. The goal wasn’t just to sell or buy from those this far south, the miners and quarrymen, but continued trade. Bankamp laughed. “She isn’t for sale.”
Bankamp brought a shoulder of mutton from the barman, roasting it over the fire in the corner of Miya's room. The scrawny girl devoured her food as if she were the monstrous Borg. There was little in the way of fat on her. Her childlike, rounded face was a stark contrast to her arms and legs, so thin Bankamp knew they'd be easier to snap than the kindling he would regularly cast upon the hearth.

"Is there no family for you back home?" Bankamp dared to ask as the conversation moved away from his explanations of the trade he had travelled for. Miya shook her head.

"Ma died many years ago. Grandfather not long before we left. You remind me of him. He was kind." She smiled up at him, before a grin spread across her face. "And old, too."

Bankamp made a look of mock indignation. The spirit in Miya was a marvel to him. How she could live through the horrors she had, and for so long, and still smile a smile so bright that it warmed like no fire ever could, astounded him. He wondered how long that would last once he was gone.

"Do you have family?" Miya asked as she gnawed at the bone clutched between her spindly fingers.

It was Bankamp's turn to shake his head.

"I was born to be a fighter. Raised to be a warrior and I did my duties until my bones were too weak to hold my shield high enough to protect my fellow men. But while I do still have my youth." He shot Miya a peevish glare as she snorted with laughter. "I've seen too much…"

A harsh tone wrapped his words. He looked darkly into the fire as it flickered across his troubled eyes. "I couldn't take a wife. Nor settle to a family. I have to keep moving. It's the only way I can outrun the ghosts that chase me."

"Do they follow you so far south?" Miya was looking up at him with curious wide eyes. Bankamp wasn't sure if she was young and naive enough to believe he was talking of actual ghosts.

"They will eventually." He replied with certainty.

The two remained quiet for a while. The silence broken only by the crackling of the fire and the occasional thud of boots on the floor above. Miya sank into herself, curling her back and placing her head in her hands. He sighed. "Worse than any of them."

"Can you kill the Dinap? The Barman. I want him to die."

"What?" Miya met the gaze of Bankamp as he looked down her. She held a stony expression, determined and earnest. His face was a stark contrast to her arms and legs, so thin Bankamp knew they'd be easier to snap than the kindling he would regularly cast upon the hearth.

"Could you kill another?"

"Yes." The old soldier replied gruffly.

"Could you kill another?"

"Have you killed many men?" Came the muffled words of Miya as she talked into her hands.

"Yes." The old soldier replied gruffly.

"Can you kill another?"

"Can you kill the Dinap? The Barman. I want him to die."
Bankamp breathed out deeply. “I want him to die as well, and I would, if I could. But my Lord does not permit me to do such things. He would see me hang for it, I’m sure. He needs this deal, and he needs this trade.”

He drew his eyes away from Miya, unable to take guilt that washed over him from the look of sadness and disappointment that fell upon her face.

“Is tonight your last night here with me?” She asked, dusting off her dress as she clambered up from the floor.

Bankamp nodded.

“Maybe I should just kill you instead” Miya said with a distinct taunting arrogance in her voice. “Steal all your money and go.”

Bankamp laughed. “Go ahead. There’s a knife in my coat.” He flung his hand towards the door on which his thick fur jacket was hooked. “I have plenty of money on me. But money isn’t going to get a girl like you far around here, and you know it.”

“Can we sleep? I have not slept so well as I did last night since I left home. Maybe I never will again.” The brightness had gone from Miya’s words, as had sadness, fear or any emotion. She seemed cold and distant. She’d let him see a glimpse of the girl she was beneath, but Bankamp knew this was the face she must have worn most days. The face that kept her alive. Hollow, empty but still here at least. Her fun was over, her glimpse of peace and safety faded, and she knew it.

Bankamp jolted awake. It was the screams that woke him. The fire was still burning, but the room was empty. Miya was gone. The door was swung open. Another scream, a woman’s scream, echoed down the hall. It wasn’t Miya.

He wrenched himself up from the bed. As his hands pushed away from the sheets, Bankamp felt them slide on the coarse fabric. Looking down in horror, his eyes full upon blood-soaked palms. They began to shake as he stared at them. He could feel his heartbeat now, crashing around his chest.

Miya appeared in the doorway.

“You were supposed to save me.” She whispered. “You were supposed to take me away.”

“What?” Bankamp gasped back. “What’s going on?”

Miya said nothing. She just reached around the door and grabbed the old soldier’s coat, before disappearing out of sight.

“Where are you going?” Bankamp shouted, quickly wiping as much blood off his hands on the sheets as he could before racing out the door after her. Emerging into the dimly lit hallway, he realised what had happened. As Miya climbed up the stairwell, below her, at the foot of the stairs, lay the barkeep. Bankamp recognised his knife, thrust into the man’s chest. Blood coated his body, and the craggy stone floor around him.

Two of his daughters leaned over him. They didn’t seem sad or distressed, the screams probably of shock more than anything else. They showed no emotion at all, that was until they noticed Bankamp. They backed away fearfully as he got closer to the barkeep. He couldn’t help but notice that their eyes fell upon his blood-soaked hands. He threw a glare up towards Miya whose ankles were visible, just for a moment, before she vanished once more.

She’d got him.

Bankamp quickly knelt beside Dinap’s body, yanked the knife from his chest, wiped it against the man’s clothes and followed Miya up into the tavern. It was empty and shut up, stools resting on tables and tankards all stacked behind the bar. No sunlight was to be seen creeping its way through the buildings cracking facade. The frozen night still gripped tightly to the world outside.

Miya stood by the door, coak in hand. She was just waiting with a calm patience.

“What have you done girl?” Bankamp boomed, storming across the creaking woodwork towards her, yanking his clothing from her grasp.

“I’m escaping.” She responded flatly. Her eyes were still empty. Her calculating mind almost visible behind her vacant stare. “You’ve no choice but to run, and you’ll take me with you.”

“I’ll take you with me?” Bankamp fumed. “You’ve ruined me, you’ve made me a murderer! I can’t return home.”

“You have no home. No family to return to. And you won’t leave me here.”

“And why not?” Bankamp bore down on the girl, his fearsome tone and fiery eyes failed to even gain the slightest of reactions from the girl.

“Because you’re haunted,” Miya said, leaning into his glare. “And I’ll haunt you worse than anyone if you leave me here. Dinap sold me, but he also protected me from the worst of them… but there is nobody to help me now. You don’t know if I’ll live to see tomorrow morning.”

“You don’t know if you’ll live to see tomorrow morning with me either,” Bankamp growled, but once again, she’d got him.

Ripping open the door, he slung his coat around them both and powered through the snowfall, searching the darkness for the light hanging from the porch of the inn. He prayed the wax was still burning.

His jacket didn’t quite cover them both, and an icy chill swelled beneath the furs, biting at his body like a thousand frozen blades. The pain was tough for even Bankamp. For Miya, a small girl in a thin dress, it must have been nearly unbearable, but still she forged on without a hint of weakness. Bankamp pulled her closer as they searched in the darkness. At last, the candlelight, splintered through the cracked lantern glass, flickered in the distance.

He took with him all he had, which was little. A small rucksack of clothes, a saddle bag of food and supplies for the road, and the valuable ore and smelt samples Bankamp had been tasked to bring back for his Lord. Miya stood silently, hands clasped to the window ledge of the small bedroom the old soldier now called home.

“Maybe I never will again.” The brightness had gone from Miya’s words, as had sadness, fear or any emotion. She seemed cold and distant. She’d let him see a face that kept her alive. Hollow, empty but still here at least. Her fun was over, her glimpse of peace and safety faded, and she knew it.

No sunlight was to be seen creeping its way through the buildings cracking facade. The frozen night still gripped tightly to the world outside.

Miya’s stoic silence was broken as she collapsed into a heap mane of the galloping steed, weeping uncontrollably. Emotion, whether it was sadness, fear or joy, overcame her. Bankamp said nothing and did nothing. He just left her to cry, wrapped in the spare furs he’d bought for nights on the road. He didn’t know where they were going. He knew he couldn’t go back to his Lord. Word would spread from the traders. He wasn’t just a troublemaker, he was a murderer, too. His Lord
wouldn't need much more to have his head, and then what would become of the girl? Orphans didn't fare well wherever they were.

Despite his anger. Despite his anguish, he couldn't help but respect Miya. She'd used him, and used him brilliantly. Every word he'd said, every weakness he'd revealed, she'd used without mercy. She had done what he was too much of a coward to do; what he'd wished he had done. She'd freed a helpless child from a world so brutal and vile it made his stomach churn.

Bankamp didn't have a direction, nor an idea of where to go next, but what he did have was fine ore, good coin and something new to keep his ghosts at bay.
A courtyard of fine stone, set in large slabs across a perfectly flat ground. Around three of its edges was wrapped a great hall, two stories high and topped with a slanted tile roof. Its stone was carved just as finely, if not smoother than the slabs. Yet it’s colour was much deeper, and set within it were many small windows, panes split by delicate strands of woodwork. Against the furthest edge of the square courtyard was a castle. A small yet striking stronghold, it’s stonework craggier and much rougher than all that which lay around it. The castle was old and worn, yet still looked sturdy and hardened. It towered above the square, two great blackened turrets sat like billowing smoke plumes either side of a lofty gatehouse topped with ramparts.

The two turrets were connected to the great hall on either side by arches that ran over two corners of the courtyard. Their tunnels led out into much larger fortress the square was set around. The tunnels were the only way in, or out.

On a summer’s day, the courtyard was quite beautiful. Ivy crept from the cracks in the castle’s foundations up its ageing form, as flowers sat on window ledges of the hall brightening the grey stone scene. Today though, darkness clutched the overcast sky and heavy rain battered the ground, deepening the already dark colours and casting an unyieldingly ominous shadow over the expanse. The smell of the downpour permeated the air, hugging the nostrils and damping the spirits. To march around in thick leather and heavy chainmail, all clasped together with a thick steel breastplate and a latched plate girdle was one thing on a dry day, but in the harsh rain, every step was slower and harder. The last thing you wanted on a day like today. Farrow wished for the summer sun. Wished to see this courtyard in its beautiful state one more time, but he knew he never would. In that moment, he was reminded why.

A crack, unlike anything he’d heard before, struck the air like lightning and sent him recoiling backwards. His movement was a stroke of luck, as he narrowly avoided being crushed by chunks of falling stone, large as a man, that had been torn from one of the turrets above and sent hurtling towards the ground, slamming into the pristine courtyard stone and splitting its smooth surface. He looked up in time to see the culprit swoop around for the other tower.

A bird, a massive bird, its wingspan so large it may have eclipsed even the width of the castle itself, dove from above and reached out with enormous black talons, ripping into the stone of the castle’s battlements and tearing them asunder with such ease it was akin to a man running his palm through sand. The birds black, shimmering feathers were jagged, serrated and spun together more like a thick coat of scales than a soft plume: a stonecrow. As it flew away, sending more stone tumbling to the ground, this time from the gatehouse, it let out a cruel and vicious screech. In seconds, the once proud and intimidating stronghold had become a ruin. Much of its upper ramparts torn away. A bastion of safety turned a battered and bruised wreck. Farrow marvelled at the damage so swiftly inflicted.

The doors of the castle swung open. Two men, clad in finely gilded armour, clutching barbed polearms and adorned with golden tabards, streaked out from behind them before the iron was quickly slammed shut and bolted. They paced down the stairs leading up to the castle and inspected the damage. Soon, their eyes fell upon Farrow, who simply gazed back at them.

“What you doing?” One of the men roared through the downpour, pulling off his helmet as rain pinged loudly off the metal. “Why aren’t you on the wall?”

Just as he spoke, the stonecrow made another pass at the castle, tearing yet more chunks from its roof, this time lunging at stonework on the other side of the building. As it took off into the air once more, arrows released from bowmen well out of sight flew through the air, pinging off its wings like chucked pebbles ricocheting off a wall.

The three men, alone in the courtyard, watched as the terrifying creature peeled off and faded into the murk of the low-lying clouds above. Their eyes followed the dark figure through the sky as its silhouette was occasionally outlined in the lighter patches of sky. Then, it was gone.

The two men before Farrow, royal guards of the castle, turned on him once more.

“Well?” The first demanded.

“My mother used to bring me to this courtyard when I was a boy. We’d watch the jugglers and the tricksters do their magic, and listen to the lutes while women sang.” Farrow replied calmly, seemingly unaffected by the anger rising on the guard’s face.

“Have you lost your mind soldier?” He bellowed. “Get back down there and fight.”

“I used to love it here. The bright flowers.” Farrow continued, paying no attention to his words. “I just wanted to come back for a fond memory. One last time.”

“You’ll get your wish!” The other guard said, moving in. “Once this is over I’ll make sure they hang you in this very spot.”

Farrow laughed.

“I haven’t come here because I’m a coward. I’ve come here to die somewhere I love.”
The guards looked at each other and at that moment, the realisation hit them. It was not Farrow’s words, not even the stonecrow that once again appeared above, this time doing nothing but making a sickening pass as it glowered over the courtyard. No. It was the sound of the stampede. Of the boots against the ground as both tunnelled archways began to fill with men. Soldiers, swords in hand.

Their numbers were but a few, maybe a hundred, maybe less. Thousands had swarmed the walls and turrets and battlements not thirty minutes ago, so many had fallen, and most that returned were bloodied and badly wounded. Yet their return was not victorious either, these men were fleeing, and in their wake paced creatures of a nightmare. A dozen hounds, maybe more, the size of horses, broad like lumbermen and teeth gnashing, tore through the stragglers as they barrelled into the tunnels. Their deep black fur made them almost invisible in the gloom of the arches, but their clear white eyes shone through. Even if they hadn’t, the screams would have been reassurance enough that they were there, and getting closer.

The stonecrow made another pass the courtyard filled with soldiers, pressing their backs towards Farrow and forming a defensive line in a fruitless attempt to repel the massive dogs. This time the bird struck the great hall, diving low and tearing off enormous chunks of stone that cascaded down upon the embattled men, crushing more than a few. They were being ripped apart from either side. There was no escape for these men. Tunnels led beneath the castle and out into the wilds beyond, but as Farrow watched the shimmering gold of the royal guard disappear behind the gates, he knew that iron plate upon iron plate would be fixed to the entrance, baring all from a way inside. It wouldn’t take long for the hounds to break down, nor the stonecrow to rip the entire structure to pieces, but long enough for those inside to make an escape.

Those out here, in the tormented twilight, would not be so lucky. None would see dawn.

Farrow etched backwards as one of the mighty hounds broke the swiftly thinning defensive line with a swipe of its razored paw, all while shredding a soldier between its jaws. With a deep and accepting breath, he turned away from the chaos. If he could’ve closed out the horrific noise, it would have been a peaceful scene. Rain simply falling methodically on the empty courtyard floor. Somehow, through the thick spell of clouds coursing above the square, a streak of sunlight managed to pierce the haze. It fell upon a window ledge of the hall, and bathed a patch of drooping flowers sat atop it. Farrow approached, throwing off his steel gauntlets and reaching his hand out into the warmth of the light. He brushed his fingertips against the petals. Closing his eyes, and offering a gentle smile, he tried to sooth his pounding heart and shaking limbs. He took a moment to appreciate his breath, the feel of the soft flowers on his skin. The warm of the sunlight. But then the warmth faded. He opened his eyes, the streak of sunlight had gone, the gloom had returned.

He felt a tug on his shoulder. Then a crunch as his armour concaved. A pressure welled around his sides. The last he heard was the growl.