

# WHERE DEMONS REST

A. L. LORENSEN



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# FOREWORD

Twenty-five years after the battle of Giant's Quell, a plague swept across the slowly mending pieces of Loralan. Doctors and historians alike have theorized this sickness to be an aggressive, widespread form of cancer that was no respecter of age, race, or gender. However, so many bodies were burned or improperly preserved that further research has so far been thwarted.

Agricultural villages were especially affected by this plague, shaking the foundations of the kingdom's infrastructure. It decimated hundreds in a matter of months, both to sickness and starvation, and showed little signs of abating as the years dragged on. Final mortality estimations count anywhere from 140,000 people to nearly 1.2 million. Again, due to hasty burial processes, these numbers are left to speculation.

With his kingdom on the verge of ruin, King Varkrim II sent any men still breathing to chase down rumors that had been whispered through shadowed corridors and mourner's lips. A treasure abandoned in the ruins of the

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great T'elemeth fortress, said to grant any wish. A demon sword awaiting a new master.

-J. Lashton; *By Her People: A History of Loralan's Common Folk* (265th edition); pg. 437

## WHERE DEMONS REST

“I don’t *care* about a stupid wish!”

“Brin,” Traz leaned heavily on his crutch while he rubbed his brow, his stump of a leg throbbing almost as much as his head. He hoisted his knapsack higher on his shoulder and faced his eight-year-old brother, whose eyes were bright and stubborn beneath the filth on his face. “I already told you. I *have* to go. King’s orders.”

Brin folded his arms—his thread-bare, too small rags pulling tight against his little body—and jutted his chin out. “But he said anyone that *can*.” Brin stared pointedly at Traz’s leg. Or lack thereof.

Traz’s jaw tightened. Pain crawled up his thigh. Brin was right. According to anyone that had a voice for opinion, Traz didn’t *have* to go. He’d heard it more times than he could count. But as he took in the sagging roof overhead, cracked walls, beds that were nothing more than rags, and meager food-stores that had been ravaged by starving vermin, Traz’s duty was clear. The only one with money left to give in this goddess-forsaken village was the king. “Think how much money we could get. We could get you

shoes, and a new bed, and as many apples as you want. Wouldn't that make you happy?"

"I *am* happy, see?" Brin bared his teeth in a terrifying, forced mockery of a smile. His stomach grumbled, and he wrapped his arms around it, ears pink. "See? Even my stomach says so! So now you don't have to go!"

Traz glanced out the entry of their little hut, where the door hung from loose hinges and shot slivers at any that dared touch it. The rest of the village men were almost done with gathering their equipment and saying goodbye to their families. They'd be leaving soon, and no matter how many bribes and favors Traz had paid them, they would leave without him if he weren't ready in time. He had to get going. *Now*. He didn't have time for another power struggle. "Brin, I have to go. Mathilde said she'd keep an eye on you, but you have to feed yourself, and—"

Brin collided with him, bony shoulders clacking against bony hips, hands wrapped tight about Traz's waist. "NO!"

Some of the other men glanced over in annoyance, boring holes of pity into Traz's face. Jaw set so tight his teeth almost cracked, Traz ushered Brin deeper inside their hut and slammed the door behind them. He cursed at the new slivers in his hand. "What is *wrong* with you?" he asked Brin.

"Don't go, Traz! Please don't go!" Brin buried his face in Traz's tunic, soaking it with his tears. "What if you don't come back?"

Traz froze, his heart fracturing in his chest. Although Brin hadn't said it, Traz knew why he was so afraid. They had both watched that day, early in the plague, when the village healers herded their parents to the quarantine huts at the edge of the village. The healers had shoved Brin and Traz back into the home their father had built and told

them to fend for themselves until their parents returned. Before anyone knew what the sickness was. Before they knew there was no way to predict its spread, and that there was no cure. It had been the last time Traz and Brin saw their parents before a rickety cart had rolled them to a mass grave.

Traz's leg ached again, reaching fingers of pain up through his body. That same sickness had already taken his leg. Had taken their livelihood, and had made them watch as whatever meager comforts they had left withered around them. Traz would walk to the Pit and back before he let the sickness rob Brin of anything else.

He eased himself down to Brin's level, wobbling against his crutch for balance, and made his brother look at him. "I'm going to come back."

Brin rubbed his nose on the back of his sleeve. "Nobody's come back from trying to find that sword. Robest told me so! He says a demon kills everyone that tries!"

Traz pursed his lips. Curse that ten-year-old blabbermouth. Robest would grow up to be just as much a gossip as his father, the tavern owner, if he kept this up. "So far, that's been true—"

"It killed all those soldiers! And freed a dragon!"

"You're not wrong, but—"

"Robest said the demon helped *another* demon escape, too! What if there are *two* of them there?"

"No one's said anything about two—"

"But how would *you* know? Everyone that's gone there is dead!"

Traz rubbed his face. "Fair," he said trying to ward off the anxiety radiating from Brin. These were things he had considered himself but had tried to ignore. It didn't matter,

really. Traz's fear and worry and inner cowardice didn't matter. Doing nothing was a sure way to get him killed. At least going to find the sword offered a *chance* of success, slim as it might be. Even when failure could lead to a horrific end.

"Don't go, Traz! Don't let a demon eat you!"

"Brin!" Traz smooshed Brin's cheeks between his palms in desperation and made him look up at him. "I'm not going to die! I... I have a secret."

Brin wrenched his face away and rubbed his tears from his cheeks. "You do?" he asked, looking skeptical. "What is it?"

Traz cast about for a suitable lie to back up his paltry claim. "I'm not after the wish."

"You're not? Then why—"

"I'm going to get the sword for the king, and that's it. Everyone else is going to get their own wishes, but not me. I'll be pure of heart, and that's how I'll win."

"That doesn't make—a-any sense." Brin's cries had turned to breathless hiccups, but at least the tears had stopped. He gave Traz a dubious look. "It sounds stupid."

Traz sighed, deflated, and sat on the dusty floor. "It does, doesn't it?" He held his arms open, and Brin snuggled close to him. Traz wrapped his arms around him and rested his chin on his head. "All right, so I lied. I don't have a secret way to get the sword."

"Good, 'cause it was dumb anyway."

"But I *do* promise I'll come home. I'm not going to die. I've already survived the sickness once," he gestured to his stump leg. "You think I'll let a make-believe demon get me after something like that?"

"It's *not* make believe! And Robest said *everyone* dies, no matter what!"



Traz pulled a face at him. “And who are you going to believe? A skinny bully, or your big brother that’s never let you down before?”

That elicited a ghost of a smile. “You, I guess,” Brin said in a small voice, eyes magnified behind his residual tears. “But only if you don’t come up with anymore stupid plans.”

Traz flicked Brin’s nose with a smile. “Deal. Now let’s go before I get left behind.”

Brin helped him up, and together they walked to the village square.

There was not a dry eye in the crowd of women, children, and elderly that had gathered around the expedition party in the main square. No one tried to hide it. Despair had become a daily habit over the past few years. However, the expedition party stood proud and tight-lipped, trying to portray nothing but confidence for their families. They did a poor job at it, though. Their eyes were too wide, their jaws and fists too tight, and their knees locked so rigidly they threatened to buckle. None of them were heroes. Just men with no options left.

Dravek, the village elder’s son—large and sturdy as an oak tree—stood at the front of the crowd. Next to Dravek was a lithe man wrapped in a stark white cloak emblazoned with King Varkrim II’s scarlet emblem; a courier, too clean and pressed and soft-skinned to belong in a place like Belkit village. To have suffered the way they all had. Most everyone avoided him, casting glances of distaste and distrust over their shoulders. They may have been subject to the king, but their days of reverence had long since passed.

Dravek raised his hands as the sun hit the peak of the nearest hut, watery in the gray dawn. “Men of Belkit,” he said, “I’m sorry, but the time has come.” He twisted a

woven wedding band around his finger. "The sickness has made us too accustomed to goodbyes, but has yet to make them easier. I know that as well as all of you." He straightened his shoulders, and looked each of them in the eye. "But perhaps this endeavor can put an end to farewells that come too soon. Leave your parting wishes, and a rousing cheer for the heroes we are soon to become."

A meager round of support fell limp among the men. Tears continued to course down their families' faces. Traz took in their motley crew, and himself, with a grimace. Skinny, starving farmers and tanners and tavern-owners. Plow boys and shepherds. Not one of them a warrior. Pathetic 'heroes', the lot of them. He hugged Brin close to his side.

Dravek gave them a tight smile and motioned to the courier. "This is Samuel. He brings a message from the king."

Samuel stepped forward, his cloak flapping about him with nary a thread out of place. He looked across the crowd not with the cold indifference Traz had anticipated, but something softer. Kinder. "Greetings from King Varkrim II to the village of Belkit. He has sent me to bid you thanks for your noble service in assisting him in the recovery of the demon queen's sword."

Brin tugged on Traz's sleeve. "How'd it get lost?"

"Robest didn't tell you that?" Traz asked with no small amount of petty victory.

Brin stuck his tongue out at him. "Just tell me."

"Another demon freed the queen from a fortress thirty years ago. They say he lost the sword while fighting the guards."

"Not a very good demon, is he?"

"Must not be."

Samuel motioned to a cart full of sacks. “You will find provisions of ale and the finest warrior’s fare the kingdom can offer.”

An audible gasp sounded from the villagers. Traz’s stomach grumbled. *Food*. Real food. Not rations tainted by grubs and time. Traz had no idea what was in those sacks, but his mouth already salivated at the thought.

“Do you think there are any apples in there?” Brin asked, mouth dangling open as he looked at the sacks.

“I wouldn’t doubt it,” Traz said.

“*Lucky.*”

“The rations you will receive now for your journey,” Samuel said. “You will receive your gold payment after the sword is recovered.”

A man just downwind of Traz leaned to his neighbor. “Be nice if we got paid now so we could give it to our families in case we—” he cut his words off before he could finish the thought. His wife’s hand had clamped on his arm like a claw.

“A meal is payment enough,” she said through clenched teeth. “Though it is certainly the *least* Varkrim could do for us.”

“I promise, your provisions will be divvied out in but a moment,” Samuel said over the murmurs and rumblings. “I must finish my message, and then the rest is to do with as you see fit.”

The crowd grew quiet again, and Samuel nodded his thanks. “King Varkrim has dispatched ten other villages on this same mission,” he said. “When you reach T’elemeth, King Varkrim urges you to spend the night with your groups and not search the ruins until morning. That is when it will be safest.”

“And how does our *esteemed* king know this?” An older

woman stepped through the crowd, gray hair in tatters and back stooped with grief. Traz remembered her from days when she would swap recipes with his mother. Graim was her name. She'd had nine sons. The sickness had taken seven, and now her last two were in the group ready to depart. The life had left her a long time ago, clouding her eyes and making her bones brittle with bitterness. Traz couldn't blame her. "How many villages have you sent to their ruin before ours?"

Samuel tightened his jaw, his eyes soft with empathy. "I'm afraid I am only here to relay the King's messages. I cannot answer for him."

"I bet you *are* afraid, holed up in your palaces eating meats and pastries while the rest of us die for the kingdom that can't protect us." She raised her head as high as her stooped back would allow, all the lines in her face pulled taut with anger. "How many of us died in the Giant's Quell? You don't hear about the hundreds of common people sent to slay the demon queen's dragon with nothing but rakes and saws for weapons. We were naught but fodder, but we did our duty. We fought our fight and were trampled beneath that black dragon's claws. We bled him to his last drops." She straightened, lips pressed tight. "But who are the heroes? The knights bedecked in glittering armor that wrapped chains around him as they waded through *our* blood."

Graim's sons wound through the crowd to get to her, trying to quiet her as they tossed alarmed glances at Samuel, but Graim waved them away. "And even after all that, you couldn't keep that dragon and his mistress locked away properly! T'elemeth fell because of this kingdom's stupidity. All that death for *nothing!*" A ragged, phlegmy cough ripped through her words and body, rattling in her

lungs. Traz had heard that sound before. The sound of death clawing at a sickness sufferer's throat.

Graim hunched over to curb the fit, but looked at the courier with blazing eyes. "Why should we give the wish to a kingdom that despises us, when we could use it to build our own?"

Silence settled like a shroud over the crowd as all eyes turned to Samuel. He watched them, face agonized. Moisture filled his eyes, and his spine seemed near collapse. He opened his mouth, words hovering at the corners of his mouth. But then he slammed it shut, stiffened his shoulders, and looked away from Graim. "King Varkrim urges you to—to make merry when you reach the ruins. He thanks you for your service to the kingdom. But... But I—" His voice broke, and he turned his back on the crowd. "I would not condemn you for using that sword as you see fit."

No one said anything; couldn't form the words.

Dravek moved to redirect the crowd, but another man beat him to it. Troth, an overindulgent regular at the local tavern. "Let us dwell on that sword when we get it. Best not let these supplies go to waste! Let's go, men!" He threw them each a pack. A few hit men in the face in their daze. Traz nearly toppled over from the weight of it, but Brin caught him.

Dravek took control and called them into formation. The men snuck the food supplies to their families before forming haphazard lines. Traz handed his entire pack to Brin. "This will be too heavy for me. Take it."

Brin's smile nearly split his face at the red, shining apples nestled at the top of the bag. He handed the biggest one to Traz. "You have to eat, too."

Traz smiled and tucked it into a pocket, blinking back

tears. He hugged Brin and kissed him on the top of his dirty hair. "Be good for Mathilde. I'll be back before you know it."

Brin melted into him. "I love you, Traz."

"I love you too," Traz said. He choked back the emotion that threatened in his throat.

Brin stood back and puffed out his chest, trying to stop his quivering lip. "Go be a hero. I'll keep the house safe while you're gone."

Traz smiled, his eyes misty. "I know you will, buddy," he said. He ruffled Brin's hair and limped into formation.

When they were all organized, they waved a final goodbye to their families and marched away from the village. Their procession started small. Quiet. Only punctuated by the sound of their footsteps, ragged breaths, and a few tears. Most had never left the village, especially not since the sickness had broken out. A swell of anxiety washed over Traz. What was he doing? What were *any* of them doing? This wasn't just stepping out to find food or search for more healers. This was *magic*. Magic and fairy tales and wars and dragons beyond anything he had ever known. But he couldn't stop now. *Wouldn't* stop. He pushed aside his terror and continued his march.

The moment they took their first stop to rest, Troth broke out a store of ale. "We may have given away our food spoils, but this is *ours* to enjoy. Drink up while you can, lads!"

Everyone glanced to Dravek, and he nodded once. They all dug into their bags and withdrew the amber bottles. As the alcohol flowed, tensions released from the men's shoulders and hearts. Songs and crude jokes spilled from their lips in broken syllables, and even as they began their march again, their revelries did not stop until they reached T'elemeth two days later.

As the sinking sun dyed the clouds scarlet, the group crested a hill and took their first look at T'elemeth. A shudder ran down Traz's spine. The stories told around the village—terrifying as they might be—had not done the place justice. A sort of presence hung about the valley below, heavy and dank and draped across the skeletal, blackened trees like a funeral shroud. The burnt forest stretched the entirety of the valley, save for the center where the scorched, crumbling ruins of a fortress huddled around a great, yawning pit like broken ribs. A pit meant for a dragon.

“One dragon did all this?” Traz asked himself.

“Scared?” Troth asked, cheeks pink with alcohol. “I’d tell you to go home, but I don’t think you’d survive the journey.”

Traz’s face paled with anger, but he couldn’t say anything, especially not when he feared the same thing. He curled his knuckles tighter around his crutch. No. He *would* make it back, however he could.

“Standing and staring won’t do us any good,” Dravek said, already making his way down the hill. He motioned the others to follow him. “Come on. We have a wish to find.”

“Are we sure we have to take it to the king?” Troth asked. “I’ve got some wishes I’d like to make. Ones with lots of gold.”

“You’ll only get to wish after *I* do, Troth,” someone else chimed in. “I’ll wish to be the richest king in the world. You can have whatever money’s left over.”

The other men joined in.

“I’d wish to live forever! No more worrying about the sickness for me!”

“I’d wish for land that grows spices and sweet meat all year round!”

“I’d wish for the most beautiful wife in the world.”

Traz ground his teeth. Drunken idiots, all of them. What if the sword only had one wish to give? Or maybe two? They’d waste all the magic before they had a chance to do any good with it. Traz couldn’t risk it. He had one wish, and one wish only. And he’d fight off anyone he had to to get it. Looking at all the faces, though, beaming with alcohol-laced enthusiasm, he saw a danger lurking in their too-bright eyes. The sickness had cast misery in a wide-net across the kingdom, and these men were willing to shed blood for any small happiness they could muster. Traz would have to be careful. A demon would not be the only danger in T’elemeth tonight.

As they approached the treeline, a shabby figure came into view. A dusty bard waited for them at the edge of the black forest, bedecked in bright, ill fitting greens and yellows. He had a face that was neither old nor young, probably a performer’s trick. No hair, but scarlet tattoos and symbols curled their way across his bald scalp, cheekbones, nose, and jaw. They undulated in the fading light like charmed serpents waiting to strike. Traz supposed the bard had painted them for dramatic flair. The man’s eyes caught his attention more than the painted lines, though. Thick, dark eyebrows hooded small, milky eyes that darted sightlessly from one sound to the next. He was blind.

He smiled at the group’s approach. “You are the first to arrive,” he said. “What village do you hail from?”

“Belkit,” Dravek said, crossing his arms. Traz saw him wrap his fingers around the hunting knife he kept sheathed around his ribs. “Who might you be? And how did you know we were coming?”



“Ambrose is the name,” the bard said. “I have been watching villages come in waves for many months, now. I thought I might offer my services to ones so brave.”

“We have little money.”

“A single coin and drop of ale is all I need for my time.”

The group’s tension eased as Ambrose and Dravek chatted. A blind bard could do them little harm. Traz leaned on his crutch, fighting the ache in his foot and up his leg. New blisters had formed on his hand and the ball of his foot, and he wasn’t sure if his boot sole would survive the journey back. He munched on the apple Brin had given him. The sweet gush of juice shocked his mouth and almost elicited a smile. Brin. This was all for Brin. Soon he would have all the apples in the world he could want.

Ambrose had seemed to come to an agreement with Dravek. He stood, brushing filth from his costume and casting his unseeing eyes across the group. “If you’d like to follow me, I can show you to your campsite.”

Dravek raised an eyebrow. “You know the way?”

“Why should we follow a blind old man like you?” Troth asked, making a face.

The bard smiled serenely, never showing his teeth. “You’d be surprised how long I’ve been here, and what I’ve seen with these blind eyes.” Something about the words chilled Traz’s blood.

Ambrose waved them on, and, with no other ideas on how to proceed, they followed, passing beneath the scorched trees with a quiet, terrified reverence. Those still drunk grew sober quickly. There was no sound—their footsteps muffled by ash—except for the tinkling of bells. Traz looked for them until he saw them draped across the fractured canopy. They were *everywhere*, strung together across

every tree-limb they could reach, their silver stark against the rotting wood.

“What do you think they’re for?” one man asked barely above a whisper.

The man next to him shrugged. “It’s magic. How am I supposed to know?”

“They’re meant to ward off demons,” Ambrose said. Traz couldn’t believe the bard had heard the remark so well. “They also mask the sound of the demon sword.”

“Sound?” Traz asked before he could stop himself.

“The sword wails whenever there is death nearby. The more death, the louder it screams.” Ambrose looked back, eyes darting back and forth. It almost seemed as if he could see *through* Traz. “Some say the demon created the sickness just to lure more people to their deaths, so that it can use the sword’s own call to find it.”

Dravek cuffed the back of the bard’s head. “Enough. We have enough ghosts without you filling our heads with more.”

No one said anything else. The hairs on the back of Traz’s neck stood on end. Could it be true? Was this all just a ruse to lead them to their deaths? The feeling of eyes watching him prickled up his spine. His heart pounded against his chest. *Run, run, run!* But they kept moving; deeper into the forest that seemed intent to swallow them whole. What other choice did they have? They would get the sword, and its wish. *Traz* would. No one breathed a word, save for the bard, who hummed to himself.

When they finally exited the tree-line, they each breathed a collective sigh of relief, as if anvils had been lifted from their shoulders. They settled around and set up a fire, each too nervous to be caught in the ruins alone after dark. As they sat, more groups arrived through the forest

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from every direction. The village groups nodded to each other uneasily, but otherwise kept to themselves. Ambrose bowed away from the group to wish the others welcome. More fires sprouted in the dark. Clouds rolled over the sky and blotted out the stars and moon, and as the rest of the world grew quiet, the ale began to flow and the music began.

Dark in the deeps of T'elemeth  
Lies a sword 'twixt life and death.  
A wish it grants to those who ask  
But 'tis no easy task  
A demon waits to steal it back  
And claim your final breath

Sparks fizzed into the starless, overcast night as men roared the notes, their cheeks red from the bonfires's heat. Ale overflowed their mugs, dripping glittering amber drops into the hissing flames. Laughter erupted. Bodies staggered between each other, patting backs and clanging mugs. Traz tucked his leg as far beneath him as he could to keep from getting tripped over.

*Idiots, he thought to himself. We couldn't have made ourselves anymore obvious to a demon.*

Yonder to ruins  
Forward to fate  
Ride ye, oh brave ones  
Past demon's death.  
Onward to victr'y  
Your truest wish to make

The other campfires scattered about the dark plains

sputtered like fireflies. The uncertain light shared glimpses of the eager, anxious faces gathered around them. Ambrose stood at one of them, swaying and singing as he played his mandolin. Traz's heart sunk at the sight. In their drunken stupor, it had all become a game to them; a festival of bravery and strength and magic. For a moment, they had forgotten about the wish, and he had a feeling that lapse would cost them dearly.

"To the ruins of T'elemeth!" Troth raised his mug to the looming tower behind them, eying the crowd. "To the treasure she holds just for us!" A round of cheers erupted around him.

Traz scoffed. *Us?* No such thing. He knew enough about greed and power to know that the moment the sword was found, all friendships and bonds of any kind would crumble as completely as the ruins behind them. He had to be the one to find it first. Even if he had to tear the hillside down to its blackened roots.

"What makes us think we can find it?" Another man swayed precariously from his generous helpings of ale and blinked at Troth with bleary concern. "A demon lost it thirty years ago. A *demon*. If he can't find it, then why can we?"

The camp quieted, casting uneasy glances the man's way. Though they may have felt the same, their drink hadn't loosened their tongues as readily. No one liked the doom sucking the warmth from their alcohol-laden blood.

"Countless men have died on this very plain from those thoughts." Dravek rose to his feet, the words a deep growl in his chest. He nearly drowned out the firelight with his massive frame. "So many hundreds have run themselves through on the gentle sword of doubt." He swept his gaze across the gathered men. None could meet

him in the eye. “If you continue those thoughts, you will find no better fate than they. Swallowed up in the demon’s maw.” A somber, dreadful hush settled over them at the thought. Dravek left them in silence for five counts before he spread his arms wide. “Each one of you has lost someone, either to the kingdom or to the plague. I intend to find that sword. Get my wish. Return home a hero. Whatever the cost. And I know you intend the same.”

A half-hearted cheer of agreement grew into a fervent roar of brazen bravado as the men realized what he had said. The wish no longer belonged to the kingdom. It belonged to whoever could find it first. Another roar. Another collective draft of ale. Traz refrained.

“Not *everyone* can be a hero, can they?” Troth sneered in Traz’s ear when Dravek wandered back into the crowd. “Little cripple got to slow us down the entire way, didn’t he? And for what? To watch the rest of us find the sword before you can crest the hill?” He poured a trickle of ale over Traz’s head. “What *is* your wish, little leach? Hoping to keep your little brother from abandoning your sorry self?”

Traz turned toward the man, jaw clenched. The ale sunk deep in his hair, burning his scalp. “Leave Brin out of this, Troth.”

Troth blinked owlishly at him through red-rimmed eyes. He cracked a grin, his alcohol laden breath nearly suffocating Traz. “Y’know, I think I figured it out. I know why you came. You’d be the perfect demon bait! Useful to everyone! It’ll take that monster at least a few minutes to gnaw through that wooden leg of yours.” He tapped Traz’s crutch with his boot, his cackle filling his lungs with flem until he choked. “Thanks for your sacrifice. You’re a genuine hero!”

Anger flared in Traz's cheeks, but he couldn't—*wouldn't*—retaliate. He collected his crutch and hobbled away.

"Better get your runnin' practice in!" Troth said. "Won't do you any good!"

Traz's hand clenched around his crutch and he tightened his jaw until his teeth ached. He had to stay invisible. They would forget about him in the sword-finding frenzy. He could wait it out and then find the sword in peace.

Or he could search for it now.

The thought raced through him and curdled his stomach. Maybe he could find the sword before any bloodshed had to happen at all. But, as he looked at the looming, silent walls, dread prickled his ears and made them ring. Every whisper of breeze was the rustle of a demon lurking in the brush. Every dark, impenetrable corner a hiding place for death. Traz's mouth ran dry, and he kept walking. He didn't know how far he dared go, but he had to at least try.

Traz stubbed his foot on a protruding piece of wall. The jolt frightened him more than hurt. He dropped to the ground with a curse, heart hammering in his ribs. His crutch clattered beside him, and he nursed the injured toe. "Rotting pile of rubbish!" He kicked over the offending debris.

"I couldn't agree more."

Traz jumped violently and smacked his head against the wall behind him. Dazed, he tried to get up and run, but forgot he was missing a critical appendage. He fumbled his crutch, tripped forward, and crashed into another wall. It collapsed beneath him, and dust plumed around him. *I'm going to die here! Brin, I'm sorry!*

No. No, no, *NO!* He had promised. Not even the Pit would keep him from getting back home.

Strong arms grabbed him by the shoulders and wrenched him from the wreckage.

“Hands off, demon!” Traz shouted, his voice cracking. He swung and missed. He scabbled around for something, *anything*, to use as a weapon. This was *not* how he died.

“I’m no demon, boy,” a voice said, mild but firm. “But I could understand the confusion.”

The dust settled, and Traz’s heart stopped. The thing was the most horrible, disfigured attempt at human form he’d seen. It wore tattered clothing, and a scabbard strapped around its waist. Burn scars bubbled over its eyes, nose, and cheeks, the skin puckered and blotched with angry red marks. It had no eyebrows and a gaping hole in the right side of its head where an ear should have been. White tufts of hair poked out from the few unburned spots on its scalp. Its eyes were the only things untouched. Gray, clear, and calculating.

Traz finally wrapped his fingers around his crutch.

He swung again, full force. Crutch whistling through the air. No questions. No hesitation. Just pure panicked instinct. Adrenaline flooded his ears and rushed blood to his face.

The demon caught the crutch before it made contact and watched Traz with a crooked smile. “What was that for?”

Traz’s heart pummeled his chest, his eyes bugging with adrenaline even as the blood fled from his face. “What do you want from me?”

“Easy, boy. I’m no monster. I won’t eat you. I just want you to leave.” It relinquished its hold on Traz’s crutch and sat next to him, arms and legs splayed as if it were on a picnic. It tucked the sword behind it, and chuckled at Traz’s scandalized face. Traz scooted a few inches away. It didn’t

seem to notice, but took in the view of the ruins and surrounding fire-blackened forest beneath the patches of moonlight that forced their way through the clouds. “You here for the treasure?”

Traz said nothing.

The demon raised an eyebrow—or at least the part of his face where an eyebrow *should* have been. “Well,” it pointedly directed its gaze to Traz’s lack of a leg. “You’re certainly the strangest treasure hunter I’ve ever seen.”

Traz bristled. “Have you seen *yourself* lately?” He couldn’t help it. The words tumbled out, all the resentment toward the other men that thought he didn’t belong fueling each syllable. How dare this *creature* doubt him, too? But as soon as the words were out, he knew it was over. No demon would ever let an insult like that slide.

But it just laughed. Long and loud. “Can’t say I have, but I’ll take your word for it!”

Traz watched closely for any indication of an attack. A hand to the weapon at its side. Magic forming. Would Traz even know what magic looked like, though? When nothing happened, Traz eased into a sitting position. Maybe... Maybe this was just a man after all.

The man scratched his scalp, small flakes snowing onto his shoulders. “How old are you, boy?”

Traz furrowed his brow. He still didn’t trust the man, but that seemed a harmless question. “Eighteen. Why?”

The man ignored the question. “You have anyone special waiting for you at home?”

Traz pressed his lips together. Absolutely not. Brin would stay out of this. “Maybe.”

“I told you I won’t eat you.”

“Because *that* doesn’t sound suspicious at all!”

The man laughed again. “You remind me of my brother.



He didn't trust anyone. It kept him alive for a long time." His eyes got a faraway look in them, and he dropped his gaze to his hands. "At least it should have." He shook his head and looked back at Traz. "You strike me as a brotherly type. You must have a brother or two at home. Is that it?"

Traz balked, mouth wide-open. How had he picked up on that so quickly? Traz tried to recover his shock, but it was too late. His reaction had been as good as any other answer.

"No parents?" the man asked, not unkindly.

Traz scowled. "No parents. Got taken by the sickness. But you probably already know that, since you're so smart."

A shadow passed over the man's face. "I'm sorry." The shadow receded, and he picked at his teeth and flicked away whatever he found. He didn't look at Traz. "That why you're out here, then? To die for your little brother's sake?"

Traz swelled with anger. Troth. Dravek. Now even a perfect stranger. None of them had any faith in him. He could stay quiet to the others' abuse, but this was too much. "I won't die. And you better watch your tongue with me, old man, before I bite it out."

"Oh hoh, we've got ourselves a scrapper, do we?" He glanced at Traz with an expression he couldn't read. "And how does this scrapper intend to fight an *actual* demon? I'll warn you, a crutch will just make it laugh."

Traz wanted so *desperately* to throw back something substantial, to make *himself* feel better, if nothing else, but he couldn't. It wasn't an underestimation when it was true. The fury died within him. He deflated with grit teeth and turned away.

The man sighed, a tired but regretful sound. "Been awhile since I've had company. I forget how to keep it." He looked at Traz. "You got a name?"

Traz scuffed dirt with his heal. “Does it matter?”

“Wouldn’t ask if it didn’t matter.”

Traz rolled his eyes, already tired of this game. “I’ve only got one if you do.”

“Nelson.”

Traz blinked. He hadn’t expected him to answer so quickly. “I’m Traz.”

Nelson looked at him with a furrowed forehead and a curled lip. “What kind of name is Traz?”

Traz gasped at him. Not even his *name* was safe from scorn? “Same kind of name as Nelson!”

The man chuckled again, a sound that infuriated Traz even more. “You’ve got me there, I guess.” A full-body shudder made him twitch. He muttered something under his breath with a scowl and drew a small bell from his trousers, absently rolling it between his scarred hands.

Traz’s stomach dropped to his toes. “Are—are you the one that strung all those bells in the trees?”

Nelson stopped and clenched the bell in his left hand, where he was missing a pinky and ring finger. “Maybe.”

Traz’s mouth went dry again. Unease dripped across his shoulders. “Is it true that you hung them to... to hide the sound the sword makes?”

“Among other things.” He stashed the bell back in his pocket and didn’t give Traz a chance to ask any more questions. “You got a wish for the treasure?”

Traz massaged his missing leg. This conversation had already exhausted him, and he was ready for it to be over. Nelson could keep his crazy. And his bells. Uproarious laughter broke through the night from a camp. “Why should I tell you? You’re out here for a wish, too, and only one of them’s getting granted.”

“No need to worry about me. I’m not going anywhere near that thing.”

Nelson’s voice was low, almost too quiet for the venom he injected into the words. An involuntary shiver ran down Traz’s spine. Nelson had that experience in his voice; the sound of being ripped from something he couldn’t replace. The same sound Traz had when his parents died; when the healer told him... he rubbed his stump.

Nelson gave him a piercing look, as if he sensed Traz understood him. “Do you know how the sword came to T’elemeth?”

“Of course. Everyone does.”

Nelson pursed his lips as if that answer wasn’t good enough. “They all say that, and yet they still choose to come back here.” He met Traz’s eyes, his face set in grim lines. “Let me make sure you understand the price of your treasure.” He stood and motioned for Traz to follow him.

Traz contemplated refusing to go. But something about Nelson’s voice, and the way those unnerving gray eyes looked at him, indicated he didn’t have much of a choice. He struggled to rise, situating his crutch and one good leg beneath him. A shaft of pain shot through him, and he wobbled, fighting back panic. The healer had warned him the sickness would get worse over time. The aches and pains had been coming more frequently. Traz had just hoped it wouldn’t have been at such an inopportune time.

Nelson was patient as Traz got himself under control. Traz couldn’t decide to be grateful or irritated.

When Traz was finally ready to move, Nelson set out toward the dungeon pit, slowing his pace just enough for Traz to follow comfortably. He zig-zagged erratically through the ruins, eyes never leaving the ground. Traz

withheld a grimace and ignored the pattern. How much more of this man's insanity could he—

His boot caught something. Bells shrieked, and pain erupted in his bones. A blinding light flashed in his eyes, and then he was on the ground, gasping for breath as residual flashes blazed through his eyes.

Nelson leaned over him, the moon's light highlighting the crazed tufts of hair along his scalp. "What, did you think I do that dance just because?" He helped Traz up and got him situated with his crutch. Once the shock had worn off and he had sucked in enough oxygen to be coherent, Traz saw the strings of silver bells laid carefully across the ground and stuffed into every crevice.

"Are those... *traps*?" he asked.

"I would hope so," Nelson went on his winding path again, muttering odd things to himself while he rested his hand on the sword at his side. "Just be grateful you aren't a demon. They're much worse for him."

"Don't see how they could be." Traz made sure to follow Nelson's footsteps exactly, no matter how crazy he knew he looked.

They walked that way for several more minutes until they reached the center of the ruins; the dragon pit. Traz kept a dubious eye on the massive, seemingly unending void as they neared it. The camps had stayed far from it for good reason. Updrafts billowed from the depths of the earth; breath from the abyss. They circulated a miasma of foul stench that Traz recognized all too well: the smell of death. Black, slimy moss crawled its way through the opening, and when Nelson stepped on it, it peeled away with his boot like rotting corpse skin. Traz kept his distance.

Nelson leaned out over the pit, perilously close to falling headlong into it. "I was here when they brought the

demon queen and her beast.” He fell silent, his eyes glazed as he toyed with the carrion moss. “It was a colossal, black dragon spewing flames as searing as the depths of the Devil’s Pit. His mistress was a tiny thing—looked only a few years older than you—but her power was darker than his hide.” Traz could almost sense the memories playing behind Nelson’s eyes.

Traz waited in the eerie stillness for Nelson to continue. He didn’t. He had lost him. Traz should have left then. *Wanted* to leave. *No one* had survived the attack on T’elemeth. Nelson was delusional, and a waste of his time. But, despite himself, curiosity burst from his mouth unbidden. “Oh yeah? Then can you tell me how they got free?”

Nelson blinked and pulled absently at one of his tufts of hair. “One of her servants came to save her.”

Traz furrowed his brow. He hadn’t expected a response, much less one so matter-of-fact. “If a *demoness* couldn’t get herself out, how would a servant do her any good?”

Nelson crouched at the lip of the crater and pulled his bell out again. He held it loosely in one hand and let it run across his fingers, one at a time, back and forth. “You know the Ancient Laws. Magic bound is magic beaten. She couldn’t do anything for herself in chains, but if someone loosed her bonds, that would be it.” Nelson shrugged. “I don’t pretend to understand how it works. That’s just what the books say.” He let out a shuddering breath. “The servant convinced T’elemeth’s sorcerer that he was a monk aiming to bless the prison to keep the demoness’ powers at bay. The fool prison sorcerer let him in.” Nelson met Traz’s eyes, the moonlight casting strange, silvery shadows across his uneven scars. The hairs on the back of Traz’s neck stand on end. Groups of men filled the empty corpse of the prison grounds, but he

and Nelson felt alone in the world. The night had grown unnaturally still.

“It all... happened so fast. One moment, he was with us, the next moment, the prison doors flung open and *she* was there. Terrible and beautiful all at once.”

Traz leaned forward, heart in his throat. Something about the way Nelson spoke—the wistful, haunted look in his eyes—made him start to believe that Nelson wasn’t as crazy as he appeared. These were not stories of a deranged mind. These were *memories*, real and tangible and horrifying. Traz couldn’t tear himself away.

“We almost had them.” Nelson’s voice was far away, a haunted expression on his face. “But that witch she... she turned her sword on her servant. She ran him through without a second thought. I’ve never heard a man scream like that. Before or since.”

Traz hardly breathed. “A wish,” he said; a whisper mostly to himself. “She granted him a wish, didn’t she? Why else would she do that?” So it *was* real. All of it. Relief washed through him and nearly brought tears to his eyes. He hadn’t left Brin for a fool’s errand.

Nelson looked at him like he had grown three heads. “Does dying on a blade sound like a wish to you?”

Traz took in the keep’s shell. Dark, looming, mournful, and shattered. Stone didn’t come apart like that on its own. “What happened?”

Nelson pursed his lips, frustration pulling tight at his scarred face. “I think I’ve told you too much.”

He moved to leave, But Traz caught his sleeve. “Nelson, *please.*”

Nelson sighed, fingers twitching as an unintelligible grumble bubbled from his throat. He adjusted the sword around his waist and settled back into place, “The

demoness spoke her vile tongue and darkness gathered around her servant. Blinding white flames burst from her sword and engulfed him. My guards tried to stop her, but her dragon mowed them down.” He rubbed his eyes as if rubbing away the impressions of the dead men. “In the chaos, the demoness removed her sword, and the servant was on his feet again. There was this... *presence* about him. Something otherworldly.” A shudder ran through Nelson. “We should have run, but we didn’t. Before we got our wits about us, though, his mistress gifted her sword to him. He turned into pure terror.”

Traz’s eyes widened. His heart thumped wildly. “The sword can really do that?”

Nelson’s features darkened. “Does that sound *appealing?*”

Traz clutched at the knotted trouser leg beneath his stump. “If it can do that, then...”

“Then what?” Nelson’s voice was gruff and hollow.

“I... I have...” The words turned to lead into his throat. He couldn’t say them. Couldn’t tell this perfect stranger that the sickness that had taken his leg would eventually take his life, too. That he was afraid to die. That he was afraid to leave Brin alone.

“A wish?” Nelson asked, his voice flat. Another shudder ran through him, and he tucked his chin to his chest, muttering something again.

“Yes,” Traz said. “That wish is my only hope. The sword can help me, can’t it?”

“No.”

Traz’s heart stopped in his chest. “What do you mean, no? It brought a *man* back to *life!*”

“And killed *three-hundred men* in a matter of minutes!” He pointed to the pit, then spread his arms wide, taking in

the blackened surroundings. “It did *this*. The demoness escaped on her dragon, raining hellfire on us, and left her servant to do as he pleased to cover her escape.” Nelson gestured to himself, to the scars and mutilations. “Her servant destroyed *everyone*. He lost his mistress’s sword in his deranged state, but still continued to slaughter. I was the *only* one left alive. It’s been nothing but a curse.” He picked at the leathery, burnt flesh on his arm. “I stay here to discourage others from treading on *his* territory. They won’t listen. Never will. Say I’m the fool. But who’s the one that’s survived this cursed place longer than anyone else?” His eyes roved the burnt stands of trees, as if searching for the demoness’ servant. He came back to Traz, his face impassive. “The sword does not grant wishes. It claims sacrifices. And in the end, all it gives it will take again, tenfold. The *wish* you seek is nothing but a lie.”

“You don’t mean that.” Traz couldn’t feel his fingers. The blood had drained from them and raced to his face.

“I do,” Nelson said without remorse. “Wishes and magic cannot bring you riches and influence and immortal life. If they could, do you think I would be in this pile of death, looking the way I do?”

“No. *No!*” Traz shuffled back a few steps, chest heaving. “You’re lying to me. It *has* to be real—” He stopped. Burning realization dawned on him. “It is real. It *is*, and you *know* it is, because you’re looking for it yourself, aren’t you?”

“Don’t have to look when I already know where it is.” He drew the sword at his side, just enough for Traz to see it. A hilt with two dragon heads on the finger guards, their sapphire eyes glittering. The grip was made of pale, twisted unicorn horn. Power swirled around it, and whispers reached for Traz. Another shudder ran through Nelson.

Traz looked at him, mouth agape. He couldn’t stop



shaking. "That's... that's *it*?" Something took him over. Swelled in his muscles and joints. Rage? Fear? Lust? He leapt for the sword, his crutch forgotten in the dirt. A scream tore from his throat. "*Give it to me!*"

Nelson clubbed him across the sternum with his arm. Traz fell back, winded and gasping.

Something changed in Nelson. He sheathed the sword, chest puffed out and shoulders flung back. He reared his head back, glaring down the length of his nose at Traz. The rims around his eyes glowed a deep shade of purple. Lightning arced across his skin, jolting Traz and making his mouth buzz. "You *dare* challenge the sorcerer that brought about T'elemeth's fall?"

Traz fell back farther, heart frozen in his chest, terrified not only of Nelson, but whatever had seemed to take over his body. "You—*what*?"

Nelson took a step closer, the lightning now coalescing into a single, swirling orb. A perfect, miniature storm hanging suspended between his palms. "Listen close, Traz, for I will only tell you this once. I have *no need* for tricks; for mind games. I was taught to kill, and I do it well. You cannot stand against me..." he twitched again and muttered some more. His eyes widened and his magic dissipated. He took a step back, shaking his arms and his face pale. "And *I* cannot stand against the demon, or the power that whispers from this sword. Not for long." He took in the breadth of the plains before him. "I stayed here to bury my friends and all the fools that came after them throwing their lives away for a lie." He looked Traz in the eyes, steel gray to brown. "Please do not become one of them."

Traz couldn't stop heaving for air. His crutch threatened to tremble from his hands. Sweat tumbled down his brow as more voices whispered in his mind. "I won't listen

to this anymore,” He couldn’t tell who he said that to. He staggered back, chest heaving. Nelson tried to approach him, but Traz spat at his feet. “You *are* crazy. I don’t know what sword that is, but it’s not the one I’m after.” It couldn’t be. *Wouldn’t* be. The sword he was looking for could heal and mend and save. Not take over his mind and body so quickly, like a monstrous parasite. He had to believe that. “I’m *going* to have my wish. Try to stop me and see what happens.”

Nelson sighed. “It won’t be I, Traz, that tries to stop you. The demon abides no one trying to steal what’s his. As soon as the fires go out like candles being squelched, and a single keening note breaks the night, you’ll know he’s upon you.”

Traz fled, skidding and slipping through the corpse moss and tripping over crumbling walls.

“I will be here to help you, Traz, should you survive the night.”

Traz didn’t care. He had to get away. Away from the madness. Away from the soul-crushing truth he refused to believe. The wish *was* real. It *was*. And not even a sorcerer could convince him otherwise.

When he hobbled back to the others, shaking, steaming, and begging for some sense in the world, no one acknowledged him. Not even Troth, who had set his sights on someone else to terrorize. Just as well. Traz couldn’t say what sort of control he had over himself; he was just as liable to break into tears as he was to break a man’s jaw.

Traz couldn’t get the shaking under control. It was almost as if he could feel the sickness clawing itself up from his missing leg, gouging deep furrows of death in his bones as it made its way to his heart. Death was not far off for him. It lurked in the shadows, waiting to turn his own body

against him. And now, the one thing that could help him care for Brin...

Traz shook his head. *No!* It *had* to be real. There was no other option for him. No other option for Brin, alone and penniless, waiting for Traz to return.

Ambrose wandered back over to them, smile pulled too tight against his lips. He bowed to Dravek, the bells on his tassels jingling. They reminded Traz of Nelson's demon repellent, and his mood soured even more. *Stupid, crazy geezer.*

"A song for a coin?" the bard asked Dravek.

"Of course." Dravek motioned him to a seat and called the men over. They gathered around, elbows on knees and eyes wide with ale-soaked wonder.

Ambrose clasped his hands in front of him and leaned forward with them. "I offer an older song of T'elemeth, and the sword that rests here." He glanced at Traz, the milk-white of his eyes stark against the fire's gold. "You there. What is your wish?"

Traz sneered at him and turned away. "To be left alone."

He chuckled, a sound somehow devoid of any warmth. A perfect performer in all but feeling. "Your wish is my duty, young master." He tuned his instrument, the plucked strings making Traz's teeth ache, and then began his song, low and strained and melancholy.

Sword of feather  
 Sword of bone  
 Cursed be thy wielder  
 Lest thy wielder be they born

Sword of darkness

Sword of love  
The lives you reap  
Be the lives you keep

A DEEP BONE shudder ran through Traz, clawing icy tendrils through his chest. He'd never heard this song before, but it shot through his heart like an arrow. All he heard were Nelson's words, ringing like a death knell. *The sword does not grant wishes. It claims sacrifices. And in the end, all it gives it will take again, tenfold.*

Sword of Mother  
Sword of Daughter  
The Ancient Laws you tear apart  
To bring back life from whence it starts.

Sword of curses  
Sword of pain  
Lost to prisoners' ruins  
By prisoner's pow'r

THE FINE HAIRS along the back of Traz's neck prickled. He looked to the ruins, looming like the spines of a massive beast. No sign of Nelson. But something was out there. Watching. Waiting.

Sword of shadow  
Sword of mist  
The servant searches

WHERE DEMONS REST

With madness as friend

Sword of power

Sword of night

To your mistress one day you'll return

And together the world will burn

THE FIRST FIRE WENT OUT. So quick and subtle Traz almost missed it. There was no warning. No last-minute whispers. No shuffling as men climbed into their bedrolls. It was simply silent, as if someone had stomped a firefly. Silent with a single, fading note. Traz almost didn't notice it, except for a brief pause in the bard's song at the exact moment. An odd sort of... mist?... seemed to trail from his skin. A trick of the firelight. It must have been. Traz hugged his crutch to his chest, trying to breathe even as his heart beat a drumming warning in his chest.

*Run. Run. Run.*

It was fine. It was late. Men were going to put out fires and sleep. It was the way of things. Perfectly reasonable. Perfectly normal. No hidden monsters waiting to pounce in the night.

But then the next one went out at another pause. Closer this time. No preamble. No dying down to a gentle glow. No hiss of steam as water and dirt were thrown over it. Just a keening note; something unearthly moaning in pain. The fire had been there one moment and gone the next, silent as a graveyard.

*Like a candle gone out.*

The bard smiled and continued with his tune. Traz bolted upright faster than he ever had in his life, missing

limb and all. No. Nelson couldn't have been right. He *couldn't* have. But Traz didn't dare gamble his life on his pride. He heaved himself to Dravek, who was sharing another drink with Troth while they listened to the bard. "Dravek, I need to speak with you. *Now.*"

Dravek waved him aside without so much as a sideways glance. "Not now, boy."

Traz pushed Dravek's dismissal aside and gripped his arm. "*Now, sir.*"

The bard glanced at Dravek, an odd light in his clouded eyes. "You should listen to the boy." A smile too stiff pulled at his face.

Dravek's lips pursed. "And you have outstayed your coin."

The bard shared a look with Traz. An odd, unfeeling look that froze Traz where he stood. The bard blinked, and the moment ended. He helped himself to a mug of ale without another word.

Dravek stood with a scowl and turned to Traz, towering at least a head-and-a-half over him. "Consider yourself blessed that you're not worth my time. Otherwise, you'd be pulp where you stood for speaking to me that way."

Traz was too terrified of the monster in the dark to be afraid of the one before him. "The demon. It's here."

Troth shouldered his way into the conversation. "Oh? And what makes you the expert in such things?"

Traz ignored him. "Dravek, there's something out there. The other fires are going out." Even as he spoke, another fire went out without so much as a puff of smoke, leaving an empty, soundless void in its place.

Troth laughed and slapped Dravek on the back. "Hear that? Poor tyke's scared of the dark!"

Nelson's voice played in his mind. *They won't listen.*

*Never will. Say I'm the fool. But who's the one that's survived this cursed place longer than anyone else?* Traz knew he sounded ridiculous. He had called Nelson crazy, and now here he was. Guilt battered him in the chest. Frustrated tears welled in his eyes. “*No! I'm telling you! Something is out there! We have to leave! Now!*”

“And now he's *cryin!*” The group roared with Troth's own laughter. “Don't worry! We can keep the fire goin' *all night* just so you can sleep, wee lad!”

Traz leveled a glare at him, a lump of helplessness in his throat. “Troth, you have a family at home, don't you? I'm trying to make sure you get *back to them!*”

“Who are *you* to tell me how to get back to my family?” Troth curled his lip and spat at Traz's feet. “I don't need *your* help, weakling. I'll do just fine when I come home to them with barrels of coin behind me.”

Traz ignored him. He knew they would never listen to him. But they respected Dravek. If he listened, they would follow. Traz looked to Dravek, hoping—*praying*—that at least *he* would listen to reason. “You said yourself that hundreds of men have died here. Wouldn't it stand to reason that *something* is killing them?” Another fire went out. This time, Traz heard a single strangled cry.

Dravek didn't. He waved him off and turned away. “Nothing but pure greed that killed those fools. I don't ascribe to ghost stories, boy, and neither should you.”

“But you'll trust a legend about a sword that *grants wishes?*” Traz tried to drag him back. “Dravek, unless we go *right now*, all of you are going to *die!*”

The blow came in a single explosion of anger, catching Traz off guard and leaving him sprawled on the ground. His crutch skittered away from him, and his head and cheek throbbed. Dravek loomed, heaving in breathless anger over

him. “We were *dying* at home, too! What shall we tell your brother when he falls to the sickness and finds out his brother abandoned the one thing that could save him?”

Traz reeled back, the words more devastating than any blow, the shadows of his parents last footsteps echoing in his mind. No, not Brin. He couldn’t fall sick. *Wouldn’t.*

“I lost my wife to the sickness. And if it hadn’t been that, it would have been starvation. I will gladly face the Pit itself before I let others die like her, and before the kingdom goes unpunished for its silence.” Dravek kicked Traz’s crutch over to him. It thwacked him on the brow. “Leave my sight, filthy coward. If I ever see you again, a demon will be the least of your worries.” He grabbed Traz by the shirt-front and pulled him to eye level. “And if you get in my way tomorrow, there will be so little left of you that even the crows won’t bother.” Dravek threw him back to the ground and kicked a cloud of dust in his face.

Traz didn’t see their fire go out. Only a curled, unearthly smile on the bard’s face as black mist curled from his skin. One moment, the roaring warmth of the fire singed Traz’s skin. The next, gooseflesh erupted across his arms as a deep, bone-numbing cold fell with the curtain of darkness. Almost as one, bodies dropped to the ground. Troth fell at Traz’s foot. Dravek collapsed across Traz, sightless eyes wide-open, still filled with spitting hate. A keening note held suspended over the air, shattering the night, before it fell silent once more.

Traz screamed and shoved the corpse away. The sound seemed muted somehow. Unreal and unearthly. Traz couldn’t suck in breath. His shirt felt too tight for his chest, clawing up his throat and strangling him. He saw Dravek. Then his parents. Same eyes. Dull and without spark. Blood pooling behind them as droplets spilled from their mouth.



Traz shoved his knuckles into his mouth to keep from screaming. *Not again. Not again!*

Something laughed out in the darkness—or at least, what Traz could only assume was a laugh. It was a sound that flooded the inky darkness, hissing like the tide washing out to sea. Implacable. Unstoppable. “Tell the others, boy, that T’elemeth belongs to me, the servant of Mother Night’s last priestess. This is the fate of those that trespass.” And then it appeared.

The demon.

The *bard*.

The bright clothes melted into frayed brown robes, and its skin lost all color save for the twisting, undulating markings across its face. Drenched in wisps of dark energy—*magic*—it looked at Traz with those horrible eyes, sharpened teeth pulling apart in a sadistic, twisted grin. “You wished to be alone, maggot. I grant you your wish. Their deaths are enough to make my mistress’ weapon sing. There is no reason to save you from your chosen despair.” And then it swept away onto the plain, toward the other unsuspecting fires.

The weight of the air lifted as soon as it left. The darkness’ grip on his chest eased. But the guilt did not. *Had* he wished for this? His words to the bard—bitter and ignorant—came back to him from across that fire.

*What is your wish, boy?*

*To be left alone.*

But *was* it his fault? Or had the demon meant to kill them anyway? The thoughts and guilt piled on him and threatened to suffocate him, but he shoved them aside for now. He had to. It was the only way he could survive for Brin.

Traz sat in a horrified daze for more time than he

knew how to keep. What did he do now? Would... *it* be back? Bile rose to the back of his throat as his heart rammed his ribcage. How could he *dare* to think he would survive, surrounded by all these men that had fallen in one swoop, without sound or warning? This was the end, wasn't it? He was a sitting, one-legged duck out here. The demon would shred him to pieces the moment it came back, and—

He dug his fingertips into his eyebrows, trying to drive the panic away. He couldn't think like that. Not with Brin waiting for him to come home. He had to do something. Find some help.

*I will be here to help you, Traz, should you survive the night.*

Traz shakily gathered himself and took one last look across the group. The moon finally peeked its face from behind clouds and cast skeletal shadows across their faces. Traz's heart quailed. So many families were now without husbands, brothers, sons, and fathers. All for a single wish.

Traz left them there, their phantoms permanently etched in his mind.

Traz found Nelson almost exactly where he left him, staring out over the valley. Only half the fires remained now. Traz couldn't think about the other faces gathered around them, waiting for a morning that would never come.

"It's an unnatural feeling, isn't it?" Nelson asked without looking at Traz. "Watching people die from the very thing you warned them about. A danger they could have avoided if they only believed you."

Traz couldn't shake the skeletal shadows from his mind. "Nelson, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have—I *should*—"

Nelson raised a hand and cut him off. "Shoulds serve no purpose but to let you wallow in self-pity. I should know. I

failed my duty the night that demon freed his mistress, and I've spent the last thirty-years trying to make it right."

Traz had no response to that. He swallowed back his tears and nodded.

"Good. We can grieve and atone later. For now, we have a demon to stop, and with your help, I think I may have a plan that will work."

A scream punctured the night and the sword at Nelson's side thrummed a wailing note. Traz jumped and nearly lost his crutch. The scream died almost instantly, strangled in a gurgling throat. The sword's note did not.

"Poor fool's faster than most. He got a chance to try to run," Nelson mused. "Almost a mercy to die not knowing what's killing you."

"That was close to here." Traz could hardly get the sound out.

"Let's go. There's work to be done. Let's build ourselves a fortress."



TRAZ'S FAITH in Nelson deteriorated with each new wall that went up on their "fortress". Nelson had buried the wailing sword in the back corner and built a shoddy pile of debris around it. The keening never stopped. Traz dragged a rotting pallet over to their haphazard lump of broken wall and old barrels and then stood aside to give Nelson a dubious look. "Nelson, I don't think this will be sturdy enough to keep a demon out."

He took a step too far and Nelson gripped his arm. "The traps! We don't have time to be mucking about!" Nelson opened their "doorway" and motioned Traz inside. "It will do. Get in before we're out of time."

Traz scrambled inside and crammed as far into the corner as he could to allow room for Nelson. Nelson crouched down, eyes boring into Traz's. He was quiet for a time, and then asked. "You really would do anything for this brother of yours, wouldn't you? Even face down a demon?"

Traz furrowed his brow, unsure where the question was supposed to lead. "Of course."

Nelson smiled, his muscles straining beneath his thick scars. He leaned back and took in the swathe of muted moonlight. "My brother said the same thing before he died. He shielded me from the worst of a fire blast. Couldn't save my face, though." He laughed, and then wiped a few tears away. "It'd be nice to see him again." He tossed something to Traz. Traz caught it, and it jangled softly in his hand. Nelson's demon repellent. "Only enough magic for one person to be protected by that bell, and I'm done watching people add their bones to this rotting crypt."

It took Traz two blinks to register what Nelson had said. When he did, his eyes went wide. "Wait, Nelson! No!" He rushed to the entrance, but Nelson had already shut him in. He tried to claw through the debris, but magical wards kept him tucked away inside. He had just enough leeway to catch Nelson by the arm. "There has to be another way! We can hide together and wait 'til morning!"

Nelson smiled again. He patted Traz on the arm. "Thirty years experience has taught me that there aren't as many options as we think." He spoke a few words, and a spell climbed up Traz's arm and covered his mouth. Traz tried to protest, but no sound came out. "You're young and willing to change. And, most importantly, you're willing to help others do the same. That's more than I could ever say for my sorry self." He pulled his arm from Traz's grip. "What-

ever you do, take care of your family. And above all else, do not let that demon have his sword.”

The last fire went out.

The sword’s throbbing note grew in pitch and intensity and rang in Traz’s ears. Time stretched far beyond its normal limits. Traz felt nearly crushed by the nothingness beyond the sword’s sound. His heart battered him. Nelson let go of him and moved out into the open. Traz couldn’t tell if it was moments or hours later when a disembodied voice shattered the stillness.

“I know you.”

The demon materialized in front of Nelson, bathed in silver moonlight.

“You have hidden well these thirty years. Where is your protection now?” The instant it opened its mouth, Traz’s heart twisted in knots in his chest. His head pounded with adrenaline and abject terror. He couldn’t tell if he was breathing anymore. Dravek’s and Troth’s and all the other men’s faces swam in his mind.

The demon craned its neck to take in its surroundings, as a tyrant would survey his domain. Traz covered his mouth to keep from screaming.

The demon caught Nelson by the throat, long, wicked nails carving furrows into his skin, and hoisted him off his feet. Nelson choked and struggled uselessly against the demon’s grip. The demon touched Nelson’s face with its free hand, exploring every crevice and scar. It laughed, the sound so quiet but penetrating that it shook the ground beneath Traz. “You’ve changed, my friend. Who has hurt you so?”

In response, Nelson spit in its face.

The demon didn’t flinch. Instead, it grinned. It was the most horrifying contortion of a face Traz had ever seen.

“Grudges never die, do they?” The grin dropped off the demon’s face in an instant. “I thought I killed you.”

Nelson choked out a laugh. “You thought wrong.”

The demon’s nostrils flared, and its milky eyes flashed scarlet. “Where is the sword? I heard it’s cries for me, but you have hidden them.” It shook Nelson. “I cannot return to my mistress without her sword!”

Traz glanced to the sword. How could the demon not hear it?

“Why? She betrayed you. She took every bit of humanity from you.”

The demon scoffed bitterly. “*Betrayed* me, you say? She gave me life. I have all the power I could ever want.”

Traz’s heart clenched again. He thought of Troth. Of Dravek. Dead where they stood.

Nelson chuckled. “Except for her sword.”

The demon’s jaw twitched. It dug its talon-like fingernails deeper into Nelson’s neck, drawing small beads of blood. “My mistress gave me a place. I need that sword to claim it.”

Nelson tsked. “Not really belonging... when you have to... pay for a seat at the table.”

The demon growled. “Spare me your sermons. I have no need for them. Tell me where to find the sword!”

Nelson cackled. “Thirty years... and you think an old... burnt husk can find it better than... an *all-powerful* demon? Does your... mistress know you... doubt... the power she... gave you?”

Traz’s mouth was as dry as old parchment. He licked his lips and clenched sweat-slicked palms around the bell. What did that crazy old man think he was doing? He was going to get himself killed!

The demon's lip curled up in a snarl. "You don't have it, do you?"

Nelson cracked a smile. "Nope."

The demon smiled. "Then your use has ended."

A flash. An explosion of dark mist.

Traz screamed as Nelson fell. No blood. No gore. One moment, he was struggling against the demon's hand on his throat. The next, he was limp. Broken. Shattered on the ground. Just like the others.

Traz shocked himself when the sound broke through his throat. He clutched it, angry tears pouring down his face. Of course the spell had broken. Its caster was dead.

And the sword keened into the night.

The demon looked up, milk-white eyes scanning the ruins, darting sightlessly back and forth. A smile tore at its lips. "There you are." It moved toward the sword.

Traz snatched it. A flood of voices scoured his mind the moment he touched it; hissing, whispering, screaming all at once. For blood. For vengeance. For rescue. Traz staggered back and nearly dropped it. Was *that* what Nelson had heard every moment that sword had been strapped to his waist? How did he string coherent thoughts together?

The demon's smile vanished. "So, the worthless sorcerer has a friend, does he? Keeping my prize from me now, too, are you? Show yourself, wretch!"

*He cannot hear me when you hold both me and that silver bell.* The sword's voices coalesced into one that hissed through his mind, soft and goading.

"What do you mean?" Traz muttered before he could help himself.

The demon whirled toward the sound. Traz froze and didn't dare to breathe.

*The bell is enchanted. It repels demons and their dark magic, and protects all that touch it from their detection.*

Traz would have breathed a sigh of relief if he didn't fear the demon would hear that, too.

*This is your chance, Traz. Run away with me now, and I will grant you anything you wish.*

*"Show yourself!"* the demon shrieked.

Traz did. His feet moved of their own accord to the fortress' entrance. Was he the one doing that, or the sword? It didn't matter. He clawed his way out of the fortress and stood before the demon, head held proud and bell clutched tightly to his chest. Every inch of him quivered with rage and guilt. His fault. His fault he had left Brin alone. His fault he couldn't convince the others to run. His fault Nelson had to give up his protection. But not his fault that they were dead. This demon still had their blood on its hands.

And Traz couldn't let it touch anyone else.

The demon whirled at the sound of the hideaway collapsing and charged, robes billowing about it and magic poisoning the air. Traz braced for impact, but it never came. Instead, mere inches shy of reaching Traz, a light flashed, and the demon whirled away, screaming as if burned. The bell glowed fiercely in Traz's hand. The demon howled some more and glowered in Traz's direction. *"That wretch!"*

Traz looked at the bell in awe. It really *was* demon repellent. He looked at Nelson's crumpled body and tightened his grip on the bell. And Nelson had given it to him - a perfect stranger - willingly. Traz had to repay that sacrifice.

The sword buzzed in his hand. His body shook and his vision hazed around the edges, scarlet tinged with black. The sword pulled at his arm, yearning toward its master, but Traz drew it back. He had a plan. He thought. He hoped. A stupid plan just like the ones he had promised Brin he



wouldn't use. If Nelson's bell worked, then Traz had to trust that everything else did as well.

"I have your sword!"

The demon screeched with a sound no human could ever achieve and charged at him. Traz slammed back with the bell's wall of protection. The demon yowled and lashed out, but its claws raked past Traz's face without touching him. Another burst of light, and the demon's howl turned into an ear shattering shriek as it stumbled away.

Traz ran. Or ran as best he could, shambling through the ruins at pell-mell pace. He didn't remember where Nelson had led him. But if he squinted close enough against the moonlight, he saw the tracks Nelson had worn down over his thirty years through the black moss and dried grasses. And somewhere between them, traps awaited.

*I will lead you, the sword said. You and I will rule this land together.*

The demon followed Traz, stalking like a wolf, nose to the air and ears tuned for the barest noise. It kept its distance from Traz and the bell, but its eyes burned with silver, raging fire.

"Thirty years, and it's been under your nose this whole time!" Traz said, goading it closer still. "What would your mistress think?"

The demon screamed, combusting in fury. "I will have my prize, pest! You do not know the thousands I've killed. A worm is nothing to me."

"Kill me, then! Or has a lowly sorcerer beaten you?"

"I have beaten him! Who is the one that lies dead in the ashes of his failure?"

"And who continues to fail?" Traz didn't know where this stupid, unhinged bravery came from. Nelson, probably.

Just batty enough to be genius. He hoped he could do him justice.

“ENOUGH!” The demon launched itself at Traz, wreathed in blinding white flames and speaking in a hissing, guttural language that Traz had no intention of understanding.

*Let me guide you, the sword said. One step to the left is all you need.*

Traz’s body moved on its own. One step too far. He snagged a circle of bells, and the trap sprung on him like monster jaws snapping shut. The jolt and pain and blinding light shot through him at once. He kept his grip on the sword, but lost the bell. The sword laughed in his mind.

Traz fell beneath the demon’s weight as it collided with him. His chin struck the ground and his brain clattered in his skull. He lost focus in his eyes and saw only the vague shapes of the demon’s markings. Its claws dug and ripped into Traz’s skin as it crawled up his body, dragging itself blindly toward the sword.

Traz cried out and scrambled for the lost bell, but the demon took his head into its palm and ground his face into the gravel. “Do you know how many I have killed for this sword? You are *nothing*, and will die as nothing.”

“I’m... *not*... going to die here,” Traz said, voice gasping through the pain.

The demon wrapped its fingers over the sword hilt, the other hand prying Traz’s away from the grip. In that shared touch, Traz saw nothing but nightmares. Rivers of blood seeping deep into the soil. Legions marching against each other, their blades ringing with death. Mountains collapsing. Villages burning. Great, white wings blotting out the sky and leaving a lifeless world behind.

Traz screamed and flung himself to the side, dislodging

both of them from the weapon. Traz snatched it and fumbled for the bell. Where was it? Where *was* it? His hand brushed the cool silver just as the demon flung a roaring, searing wall of magic at him. It turned the crumbling walls and carrion moss to ash and left a deep furrow in the earth behind it.

Traz braced himself against the impact, clutching the bell to his chest. He thought of Brin. And prayed.

The wall exploded, filling the air with crackling fractures of lightning and magic as it arced around Traz. The impact sent him flying back into a broken, charred tree, the bell burning so hot in his hand it left a brand. The hollow bark collapsed around him, and the impact left him with white spots flooding his vision and a ringing in his ears. He'd dropped the sword.

For a moment, the rush of adrenaline and nausea and blinding lights drowned out everything else. And then, as his senses returned to him, so did the screaming.

Traz picked himself out of the tree and felt around for his crutch, every inch of him begging to be put out of its misery. He found the crutch in shambles, shattered against a rock. So instead, he found a gnarled branch and hobbled his way back to the demon, every inch of him screaming to run, to hide, to, sweet Mother Night, *stop* so he could tend to his wounds. But he didn't. He pressed on and found a pathetic sight.

The demon screamed and howled in a cage made of string and bells, tears pouring down its face as it tried to reach for the sword. Mere centimeters from its clawed fingertips.

Traz approached, and it seemed to sense him. It looked at him, its face screwed up in the most horrific mask of rage and hatred and malice. "One day," it seethed, "I will find

you without that protection, and that is the day you find out what genuine pain is. I will take great pleasure in educating you.”

“And who will come to release something like you?”

It smiled in its inhuman way. “Greed and power will always seek us out wherever we may rest.”

“Feel free to rest here as long as you like.” Traz picked up the sword and implanted into the ground, just tantalizingly close enough to drive the demon mad. “I’ll make sure no one comes to find you.” He walked away with its howls ringing in his ears just as the first rays of morning light peeked over the ruins.

It was only when the demon was out of sight that Traz’s body quaked, as if all his bones might come undone. The only thing keeping him upright was his crutch. The plains and ruins swam before him in dizzying, muddy colors. He bent over and retched, emptying his stomach of absolutely everything. Not that there was much there to begin with.

Lightheaded and dizzy, he made his way back to Nelson. Tears and great, heaving sobs threatened in his chest as he passed the doused fires and the bodies beside them. He couldn’t think of that now. It was too much. He averted his eyes and tried to push their glaring, accusing faces to the back of his mind. But they lingered. There would be time enough to bury them. But Nelson, of all of them, deserved the first proper send off.

Traz’s eyes watered at the thought. Why? Why had that stupid old man risked everything just to save him?

Traz limped to the body. It hardly looked real. More like a broken rag doll left abandoned in the dirt. He eased to the ground, tears falling, and checked for signs of life. He knew there would be none, but he had to try.

“Chasing him... down like a love hungry... bull. Never thought of that.”

Traz leapt back, heart in his throat. It couldn't be. How...? What...? “Nelson! I thought... but you were—” It didn't matter. He was *alive!*

“Don't... celebrate just... yet. I'm not long for... here...”

Traz helped Nelson sit up a bit. The older man's breath wheezed in his chest, and his limbs quivered feebly. Every movement seemed to cause him great pain. “What are you talking about? Use your magic!”

“Magic won't save me... this time.” He patted Traz's hand. “As the Ancient Laws... say. The dead... must... remain with... the dead.”

Traz's hold tightened on him. “But you're not dead yet.” Even though every word sounded like the greatest effort Nelson could muster. Even though his heart beat slower with each moment. Traz knew the sound of a dying man. That didn't mean he had to like it any better.

Nelson smiled, his gray eyes glittering in the sunlight. “You're right. Still have time enough... to do... one thing.” He haltingly ground out a few words Traz didn't understand — the language of magic. A floating orb appeared in his hand, glowing bluish purple and swirling with energy. Traz let out a sigh of relief. Nelson had enough magic to heal himself. Traz bowed his head, sending a silent thank you to whatever gods would hear him.

“What was... your wish... Traz?”

Traz shook his head. “Doesn't matter anymore. I won't come near that sword again.”

“Tell... me...”

A bitter tear of disappointment slid down Traz's face. He should have known. Nothing in this life came free. Even so, he... “I wanted to be healed,” he said, fighting back a

lump in his throat. "I wanted to take care of my brother!" The tears spilled then. Hot and fast as he choked on his emotions. "And now... he'll have to watch me die. Just like I've watched everyone else die. I just... I wanted to protect him!" He covered his face in his tunic and wept. His parents. Dravek. Even Troth. All the men dead on those plains. They would haunt him until the day he died. And now, whether or not he wanted it, he would haunt Brin one day. And leave him all alone to live with those nightmares.

"You've done well, Traz."

Traz shook his head, still hidden in his tunic.

"Look... at... me..."

Traz did, and Nelson's magic blinded him as he pressed it into his face. It absorbed into his skin—raced through his veins like freezing fire—and the pain from his illness stopped. The creeping fingers of death vanished.

Nelson slumped against him, hacking and wheezing, his entire body wracked with each breath.

Traz tried to drag him upright again, shock freezing his tears in their place. "What did you—that was for you!"

"Slowed... sickness. Not gone... but... you... should live... long time, now."

Traz blinked. "Wh—what?"

Nelson smiled again, every gap in his teeth prominent. He patted Traz's hand. "Say... 'lo to... Brin. Take care of... him."

More tears than Traz ever thought possible spilled down his face. He *felt* it. Felt himself gaining years back that he never thought he would have. Words failed. How did he possibly convey his gratitude for the gift Nelson had given him? "Why? Why *me*?" Nelson curled his fist around the bell, still in Traz's hand. "Remind me... of... my brother. Had

a... debt... to pay." A laugh gurgled from his throat, even as a tear slid down his mottled cheek.

Traz swiped a hand under his nose and dabbed at his eyes. "You're crazy, old man!" He laughed with Nelson, but his breath hitched in his chest. "How can I even *begin* to thank you?"

Nelson tapped a finger on Traz's chest. "You... be good... kind... protect sword... like you... already have... will have thanked me... tenfold. Promise?"

Traz nodded, feeling wholly inadequate for such trust. "I promise."

"Good." Nelson fell into his final rest, and Traz wailed into the morning dawn. Alone with his demon's wish and a sword he would never use. Healed from his friend's blessing, and with a promise to keep.







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