

The maid, a woman of middling years and a bubbly attitude, entered the room bearing a tub of warm water and a fresh poultice, along with a roll of bandages and some ointment. Humming a jaunty tune her husband, a well-known poet, sang her the last night, she approached the bed in the corner. The man sleeping on it was, she thought, very handsome. *Maybe if I were twenty years younger. Maybe.* Continuing to hum quietly, she pulled back the covers and removed the bandage on his thigh. "It's such a shame," she said to no one in particular, "that such a handsome, strapping young man should suffer so terrible a wound." She let out an exaggerated sigh. "And the king's own nephew, no less. Ah, I remember when your father was your age." She continued, still talking to the sleeping man. "He doesn't have your height, of course, but he had your looks. Mmm, very, very handsome indeed. I ought to introduce my daughter to you." The maid rambled on about her 'quite pretty' daughter as she washed the gouge on his leg, rubbing the ointment in the infected areas. She stopped for a moment, regarding the wound. "That's worse than it were yesterday, it is. Whatever could the cause o' that be?" Frowning slightly, she felt the injury, probing it with her fingers. Her eyes widened as the veins near the wound bulged and turned black. "Now what on earth is--"

She was cut short as the 'very handsome, strapping young man' shot upright. His eyes were wide with fear and rage as his arms extended like lightning bolts, fingers wrapping around the maid's neck in a tight grip. "Who are you?!" He demanded, his voice quivering with what seemed like fury.

The woman's hands struggled in vain to remove his hands from her neck. "I'm... your... nurse..." She said between gasping breaths, tears forming in her eyes.

The anger and fear vanished from the man's face, replaced in the same instant by shock and a touch of shame. His hands went limp and dropped to the bed. "J... Jenna?"

Jenna nodded her head, frazzled and confused by him. "Yes... yes, master Gerpen. I were just... just changin' your bandage there. Weren't no need for that, I swear there-" She burst into tears, covering her face with trembling hands.

The shame colored his cheeks as he propped himself upright, wrapping his arms around her. "I'm sorry, Jenna. I don't what came over me. The last thing I remember was being attacked, then my leg was slashed open. I woke up and there someone leaning over me. I thought..." He trailed off as Jenna's sobs ceased and she pulled away from him.

"It..." she inhaled deeply, pulling her graying hair back from her face. "It be all right, young master. You just need rest and good healin', is all." She sighed, picking the medical accouterments from the bed and floor. "I just finish up this and be... be on my way."

Jenna did as she promised, cleaning the arrow wound and applying the fresh poultice, then covering it with a bandage. "You rest well, master Gerpen. The king's own physician'll be in on the morrow to see to you." She left, closing the door.

The young man leaned back in his bed, running his hands through his hair. He pinched his eyes closed, wondering why he had, for lack of a better word, attacked a woman he'd known practically his whole life. She had worked for his father, and now she worked for him; doing housework around his estate

and helping the doctor whenever one of the other workers took sick or was injured. He of course expected she would do the same for him. *And she had. So why in the world did I start choking her?*

Why, indeed, boy.

The voice came from everywhere and no where at once, echoing in his head and resounding throughout the room, rumbling like thunder and whispering like a thought.

“Who’s there?”

Silence.

“*Who’s there!*” He shouted to the walls, eyes darting about the sparsely decorated room.

You know who I am, boy. I’ve always been a part of you.

Nervous sweat beaded on his forehead as he slowly turned to the mirror in the corner.

Yes, look closely. You remember me now, don’t you?

Marstýs stared into the silver-backed mirror. His own face glared back, flickering between what he knew as himself and a dark, twisted version with stringy hair and bulging black veins near it’s eyes. The reflection wore his armor, blood-soaked and dented—

—Marstýs blinked.

The reflection stood in front of a burning building, staring out of the glass with cold, empty eyes. Screams and cries for help echoed faintly in his head and—

—He blinked.

He saw himself seated on the throne of Neldomark; a ruler unworthy and false, his father’s blood staining his hands. He was frozen, eyes locked open and body unable to move. Sweat trickled down his face. He took a deep breath—

—Blinking.

The ‘king’s own physician’ was a man so old it made Marstýs wonder how he could still be alive. The man, his slim, wrinkled fingers probing and feeling the wound on his leg, mumbled to himself. He had shown earlier that one did not speak to him unless first spoken to, so Marstýs kept silent apart from the occasional grunt as the man squeezed particularly hard.

Marstýs’s drifted over to where his mirror had been. He had had it removed before the physician came in, saying that as he was bed-bound, he had no reason to be staring at himself. *But that’s not why you really did it, is it?* The strange voice had cackled as the mirror was carried out, telling Marstýs that Abdonya awaited his soul. *Abdonya... the old Estrin word for the Abyss. Could One Who has Might be tormenting me so?* But that could not be. No, he’d been taught that the Lord of Torment and all his servants, including the dreaded Ones Who have Might had been bound in the Abyss after the Second of Seven, that apocalyptic battle that had ended the An’kanemar and begun the Days of Wandering.

“Boy!” The doctor’s fingers snapped Marstýs away from his thoughts. The old man’s face, wrinkles sagging even farther due to his near-perpetual frown, stared at him. “I’ve been trying to get your attention for the past, oh, minute. Pay attention every once in a while.”

Marstýs sighed. “Yes, sir.”

The physician blinked once. “Your leg is healing slower than it should, but that’s not much of a

problem. The problem lies in the cause.” He paused, gathering his thoughts. “Obviously you’re in the prime of your health; you’re young, strong, and am, I assume used to acquiring many various minor injuries during the course of your training as a soldier; am I wrong? No of course not. You are, according to the nurse Jenna, getting sufficient rest, so I am baffled as to why the wound has not already mostly healed. You were injured,” the doctor tapped his fingers, counting, “five days ago, yes?”

Marstýs nodded.

“So it should be closed, not scabbed over.” The old man drummed his fingers against his thigh, tripling his amount of chins as he looked down at his papers.

Marstýs licked his lips. “Could it—”

The doctor’s head shot up, an eyebrow raised.

The younger man blinked a few times in the silence before continuing. “Could it be demonic influence? I acquired the wound—”

“Fighting San’hadar, I am well aware. No, it is not demonic influence, that’s absolute poppycock. Who put that ridiculous idea in your head, young man?”

Marstýs opened his mouth to speak, but hesitated. *It would be unfair to say it was Jenna, and this man will probably not believe me if I tell him voices were coming from my mirror.* He looked away from the doctor. “No one.”

“Right then. If you have no further *medical*,” a strong emphasis went on that word, “questions, I will be leaving.” When Marstýs asked none, the old, wrinkly man gave him a curt nod and left.