

Tales from Netherün



Quill & Read



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Welcome to Netherün



Tace Samoset

Sweetheart



Sweetheart



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he boat jolted and swayed under me. Apart from the Sea Fortress rising out of the water like a giant fist, there was nothing else for leagues. Nothing but ocean and sky and the far cry of birds.

I cradled the lead weight in my bound hands. Royal guards had joined it by a thick, tightly knotted rope to my bare ankles. They'd taken the boots. Too good to waste, I guess. The boatswain jerked his head to one of the guards and they drew back the gated railing at the edge of the deck. Rough hands grabbed my arms, pulled me to stand, and dragged me over to it.

There's a saying among folks of the Fortress that no one knows light like the man in the dark, and none knows beauty, like he who has lived in filth. I guess that qualified me better than most. It was a pitiable job working in the dungeons. The ladling of grub, the shovelling of filth. The echoing groans, the mind-lost misery. And yet, it was there, amid the dark and the dank and the stench that I discovered beauty and light.

If I was bound hand and foot because of what I found, then I've little to regret. At least that's what I tell myself as I teeter over the ocean lapping against the hull. It seemed from the start my brief life had been drifting like the tide towards this moment. All that is lacking—is a hefty shove.



None knew of my parents, and if I had kin, they never claimed me. My earliest memories were of being owned. Aye, owned. In the Dung Quarter all manner of devious methods of making coin were hatched, and exploiting oddities like me, for the benefit of easing the boredom of those who lived in the Fortress, was a mite more profitable than most.

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I was Dewaré's favourite exhibit. He said he'd won me as a babe from a once-was pirate. The old sea-bandit was too pickled in the head to play his cards right, or to pass on anything of my past.

Of an evening, Dewaré would lead me out of my unfurnished chamber, have me dress in a costume of sorts, and make me sit in a room festooned with pirate paraphernalia; shells, ropes, parts of old ships, while a small group of mostly shod Fortress folk came in to gawk at me.

I'll admit, I had my quirks. From the first, it was my eyes. While the good folk of the Fortress had neat dark ones, mine were a strange colour. Silver-blue with a fiery rim of green that circled the iris. Strange, I know. I was trained to tilt my head back under blazing torchlight so they could have a full-faced, half-chuck gawk at me.

Why I was the way I was; no one knew. Dewaré said I must have deserved it, and in the absence of any other answer, that notion took root. Besides, everyone's reactions to me felt like a punishment.

Mother-types were the worst. The men would guffaw in blank amusement or swear in shock, but the women would utter the unutterable, 'Oh preserve us!' or 'Hideous, just hideous!' or worst of all, with their pointing fingers all a-tremble, 'Poor dear, he could *almost* have been beautiful excepting those.' But even mother-types get bored with a child that grows into a young stripling, and men of the Fortress have no curiosity for such at all. Far more bizarre oddities were needed to satiate their curiosity.

Fortunately for Dewaré, in the change between boy and manhood, more fearful peculiarities came thick and awful upon me. I'd always had the tiniest membrane of skin between my fingers, but as I grew, it did too, becoming thicker and more pronounced until Dewaré could take out an advertisement inviting all and sundry to see 'The Foul Webbed Fiend.'

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I won't repeat the verbal ejaculations my viewers accosted me with.

By now, I'd learnt through repeated lessons there was no escape in the Fortress. As sprawling and jumbled as the castle and the town were, the walls that kept the ocean out were just as adept at keeping me in. I had no caring benefactor to run to, no justice system to ply my case in, nor any money to buy myself out. Escape meant a frantic sprint through the streets with a heavy-handed beating after. Nothing more.

Until I found the blade.

It was something Dewaré always kept on his person. Once, when he'd drunk too much, I secreted it from him as he hurled me into my chamber.

The next morning, he found me in a pool of blood, my fingers cut free of their webbing and my profit-making days over. He beat me blind and threw me out. Ahh, the painful bliss of freedom.

I lived with my tender hands shoved deep in my pockets and my eyes cast down for a week and took the first job I could find. Night duty in the castle dungeons.

Finally, I was off the street and on the right side of a cage.



Along with the warning that an escaped prisoner would seal my doom; the job came with a broom and a pair of hide boots tall enough to reach my thighs.

I stared at the boots and then at Feckle, the yellow-toothed dungeon-sweeper who had just pulled them off and handed them over. 'Why would I need these?'

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‘You’ll be working in ‘The Deep. ‘Tidal down there.’ He grinned, and nasty lines crept over his face. ‘Re-thinking it all, are ye? Down in the wet, with the oddments and the soddments?’

‘The what?’

‘That’s a-right.’ His voice wheedled. ‘You wouldn’t be the first to give it all in. No *shame*, in admitting you’re a spineless fool, frightened of the dark, and the cold, and the *freaks*.’

‘I’m not scared. I just don’t understand.’ I peered down the dank tunnel. ‘What’s kept down there?’

Feckle threw back his head and cackled until he began to wheeze and thump his chest. ‘You’ll see,’ he rasped, ‘enjoy your night.’ He handed over the fat ring of unmatched keys and shuffled out the iron gate onto the dusky street.

My first duty was doling out dinner. I trundled a cart down the tunnel with a stack of tin plates and a bucket of grey slop that looked like porridge but smelled like rotten marrows. I didn’t envy the poor wretches their fare as I slapped it out on their dishes and slid it under their doors.

The dungeons were built into an ancient tower and the tunnel spiralled past the dry cells—pickpockets and latch breakers—down past walls forever in a cold sweat and doors that rarely opened —murderers, molesters, and unrepentant pirates—until it ended at a huge rusty sea gate. Here, I gained my first glimpse of the ocean.

I still have no clue how long I stared from the gleaming tongue of briny silver that licked back through the gateway into the hypnotic roll and heave of glittering dark that stretched away to the starlit sky, but it left me with the overwhelming sense of my smallness. I wasn’t sure I liked the feeling, but now I knew it, I was certain it would never shift.

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I sucked in a breath leaned against the walls. Better keep your head. Get the job done. Don't get lost in the ... and here my eyes would drift back to the infinity stretching away from the gate.

I tore my eyes away and focussed on the feel of the walls, the smell of the tunnel and the rusted state of the prison doors. They opened onto empty cells with salt climbing up their walls and drying in a thick crystal line at knee height all around the chamber. Now, I understood the significance of my boots. Half of every day or night would see these last cells submerged. Doubtless, I'd have to sweep them out and scrub off the salt regardless of their useless state. Why their doorways weren't bricked in, I couldn't say.

An echoing clatter from an approaching cart startled me. It wheeled round the tunnel and I had to shove myself hard against the wall to get out of its way. Two castle guards sneered as they passed. On the cart was a large, bolted box and the tips of ten fingers peeked through the cracks in its wooden boards. The guards splashed through the tunnel and turned into the last cell.

'Wait!' I called.

Ignoring me, they unshackled the lock on the box and splashed out of the cell into the tunnel.

I stood in their way. 'I said wait!'

They stopped, rolled back their shoulders, and stared down at me. That's when I saw the perfect, unsoiled red of their uniforms and the gold insignia brandished across their chests. The King's very own bodyguards.

I clenched my fists and took a breath. 'That cell will be underwater come high tide. Obviously, it's not to be used. I suggest you move the prisoner further up—'

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‘This fool’s new,’ one said to the other, without taking his eyes off me.

The other raised an eyebrow. ‘Lock her up, boy. If you value your life. That little oddity is currently the King’s favourite.’

‘What?’

‘Reckon he’s deaf or daft?’ the one asked the other as they splashed past.

Their clipped footsteps bounced through the tunnel until all that remained was the hushed slap of ocean against rocks and the echoing moan from an inmate further up.

I could feel the scrutiny of whatever was watching me from inside the box.

Only a special cruelty would shut a creature into such a cell. But who was I to set myself against the King’s guards?

‘Forgive me,’ I murmured as I pulled the door closed and rattled through every key to find the one that fit the lock.

I ladled out the slop and slid it under the door. Silence. Nothing inside moved. I peered through the crack between the edge of the rusty door and the wall. The moonlight shafted through a high-up grate and turned a patch of flagstones white.

I sighed. Fortunately for whatever was inside the box, the tide seemed to be ebbing away. It was time to gather up the emptied plates and tend to whatever sweeping needed doing.

It was dawn when I broomed up the last of the dirt and straw and grime off the tunnel floor and headed up to the entryway to hand my keys over to

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Feckle. The ugly old codger was skulking on the other side of the gate with a sarcastic smile hovering in the wings waiting for some cue from me to bring it on stage.

‘Swept the whole tunnel?’

I nodded.

‘Kept the rabble locked and bolted?’

‘Of course.’

‘Gave over the vitals?’

I unlocked the gate. ‘Aye.’

He sauntered over to the trolley and fingered the washed plates. ‘Gathered up every single one?’

‘What are you playing at?’

His eyes crinkled, and the waiting mirth surfaced. Then with mounting triumph he counted each plate.

I was one short. The last dungeon. I hunched my shoulders and strode down the tunnel away from Feckle’s triumph. No empty plate sat outside the door. I peered under it and saw the slop untouched on the dish.

I stood up and squinted through the crack by the door. The morning light sliced through the grill and lay in golden lines across the loveliest being I’d ever seen.

I threw myself back against the tunnel wall and waited for my flush to fade. A vast quantity of astonishing copper coloured hair spilled over her shoul-

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ders, down her back and pooled on the floor where she knelt, but apart from it, she was as bare as the day she was born.

I stifled the urge to look again. I'd already suffered too much perverse curiosity to wish indulging it myself. The problem I now had, was the dish. It lay just shy of my reach.

I leaned my forehead against the rusted door and stared down at the toes of my boots. 'Excuse me?' I said, quiet and low, so as not to startle the girl.

I heard a gasp and the sound of scattered movement inside.

'I see you've not eaten your vitals.'

No answer.

'I need the dish back.'

Silence.

'You need to eat or...'

Nothing.

'Or, at least, slide it back under the door.'

Still nothing.

'Please?'

The stillness beyond the door stretched. I sighed again. I'd need to open the door to fetch it.

I found the key and slid it into the lock. A moment later, I pushed the groaning door open an inch, two inches, and then I was inside with my back

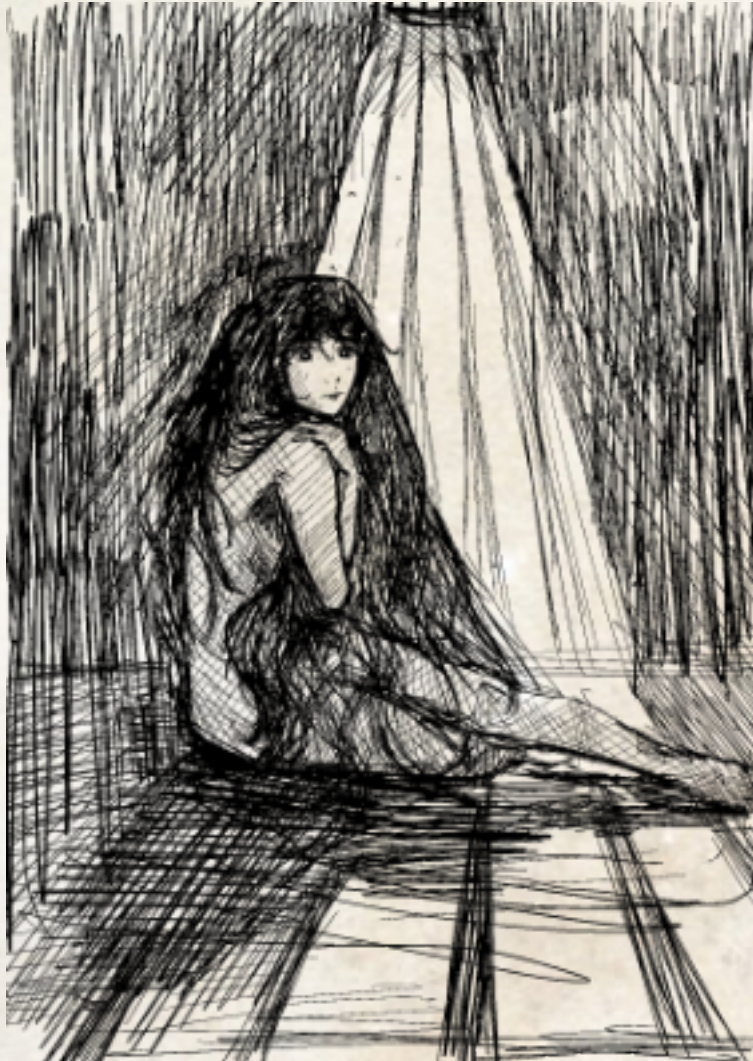
Sweetheart

pressed against it. The patch of light where she'd sat was empty. Hiding in the box, perhaps.

I needed the plate.

With my back still pressed against the door and my fingers clamped on the keys, I edged the plate closer with the tip of my boot.

A gasp by my shoulder. I jerked to. She stood with her back against the wall, scarcely a breath away from me. I could smell the salt in her hair and she was staring at me with astonished silver-blue eyes, rimmed with a fiery circle of green.



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For an awful moment, neither of us moved. She stared at me, and I stared back.

Then I snatched up her plate and wheeled out the door like a frightened rat.

A hundred different possibilities rushed through my head as I ran up the tunnel. But the one that came back again and again was that whatever cruelty Fate had rightly dished me was unfair applied to her.

I was a wretched, trembling mess by the time I got to Feckle and tossed over the plate. Whatever snide hay the old man made of my scattered senses I didn't care. I opened the street gate and walked away.

'Wait!' Feckle yelled as I passed.

I swung about. 'What do you want?'

'The boots for one and the keys for another! The King's guards will come to fetch her soon.'

That stalled me. 'What will they do with her?'

He smirked. 'Do with her? They'll take her up for the King's amusement. He's a grand fancy for oddities. The more bizarre, the better, and she's by far the best we've ever found.'

I blinked as the blood drained from my face. I clenched my hand around the keys. 'She is little more than a girl and you lock her in a dungeon not fit for a murderer, then parade her like an animal for the king. Why?'

'A girl!' Feckle sneered. 'You're wrong in the head.' He tugged the keys out of my hand and nodded down at my boots.

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I snorted and kicked them off.

He bundled the boots under his arm. ‘Mark my words, that—is—no—little—girl.’



I stalked back to my lodgings at the inn and tossed and turned on my bed mat all day. It was not sleeping in the daylight that troubled me. It was a memory. One of the few I liked.

When I was a boy, Dewaré often tethered me to himself, like a pet on a lead, and made me walk by his side through the streets with a garish mask on. It was a way of making a spectacle and of awaking the kind of curiosity about me that brought him more money. Each day we passed by a bread stall in the bailey, and he would stop to buy a nettle loaf. The baker always looked past my costume, right into my eyes, and said ‘good day’, as though I were a regular boy. Dewaré thought I longed for the attention of the street, and that was why I so eagerly readied myself for our foray outside. In truth, it was that moment with the baker, and of being treated like an anybody, that made me feel more like a somebody than anything else in the dreary fakery of my existence.

It was difficult to capture with words what that moment was like. A gust of warm air after being so cold I’d turned numb, perhaps? Pulling away and slinking back into my stony world was a punishing thing, but even so, that flash of cordiality was worth it.

I pondered that memory all afternoon and, after a chat with the innkeeper’s daughter and a promise of money from my first wage, tucked a small and rather grimy parcel under my arm as I headed off to the dungeons.

I slid the plate of food and the parcel through the slot at the base of her door and waited. No sound.

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I sighed and tracked back along the curving tunnel round the centre of the tower, picking up all the finished plates the inmates had slotted back out. I washed them in a bucket and set them in a stack on the trolley, then fetched the broom and swept the tunnel floor from the street gate all the way to the sea gate.

Yet again, no empty plate sat by the door of the last cell.

I knelt and looked under the door. The food sat dead and cold and growing a thick grey skin just out of reach. The parcel was gone.

I bit my lip and slid up to peer through the crack in the doorway. She stood dressed in a rather tattered nightdress that once belonged to the innkeeper's daughter, with her face pressed against the wall listening to the sea wash against the other side.

I needed the plate.

I unfastened the door, slid inside, and shut it behind me.

Her eyes locked on me.

I nodded and cast my eyes down. Partly from habit, but only partly. Everything about her tilted me off balance. 'Evening,' I said, oddly hoarse.

She kept on staring. I could feel it.

'I need your plate.' I jerked my chin at where it sat on the floor. 'You need to eat, or... or you'll sicken and...' I looked up at where she stood in the streaming moonlight. 'Please eat.'

She tilted her head to the side, frowning at me. She stepped away from the wall and, one cautious step after another, drew nearer to me.

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I pressed up against the door. If it came to it, I was taller by a head and had more muscle. She wouldn't get past me. I knew too well of the watery execution set aside for any guards who let a prisoner escape.

'I see you found the parcel,' I mumbled.

She kept walking as though my words meant nothing.

'Is it to your liking?' my voice hitched in an awkward way that made me flush.

Another step. She was only a foot away now. Still no words. A beautiful mute perhaps.

She reached out her hand.

I sucked in a breath. Between each of her fingers, lay a membrane of skin. What hideous game was Fate playing? Her hand closed around my wrist, and she pulled me gently from the door, drawing me, step by step, out of the dark into the moonlight.

Here she stopped and stared at me with her wide silver eyes. I glanced away to safety, but her fingers lifted my chin and pulled it back into the light. I had no strength to disobey. It was different to Dewaré and the others. Nay, it was more than that, not merely different, but a kind of opposite. Her scrutiny held no mockery, no amusement, not a hint of it. Instead, it was wild and desperate.

Her fingers trailed over my cheeks. Even on pain of death, I couldn't muster the will to tug free of her. She frowned and brushed my face again, as though words lay in her movements. Words I was failing to understand.

'What is it?' I whispered.

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She pulled up my hand and stretched out her fingers as though to touch her fingertips to mine when she gasped and blinked twice in horror at the cuts trailing down each side of my fingers. She pulled my hands up and kissed my palms and pressed them to her cheeks as tears slid down her face. A grievous sound, like nothing I'd ever heard before, came from her chest.

I tugged free and stepped back from it. I would shake apart if I heard that painful keening anymore. I swept her plate off the floor and was out the door with it locked behind me before I could draw another breath.

I sat in the chamber annexing the street gate rocking with my head between my knees.

‘What’s wrong with you?’ Feckle muttered through the bars.

I sat bolt upright, hands fidgeting and knees bouncing up and down. ‘Nothing,’ I lied.

‘It don’t look like nothing. You look right scattered.’

I shakily unlocked the gate and let him in.

He shrugged his way in and stopped. ‘Whose vitals is that?’ Feckle stared at the full plate on the trolley.

‘I’ll clean it up now.’

He wheeled on me. ‘No. You need to tell me which cell it came from. There might be a dead body in one of them, and I’d *rather* you rake it than leave it for me.’

‘There’s no dead body.’

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‘Well, you still ’aven’t told me which cell it came from. Let this go on too long and there will be a dead body, mark my words! I’ve been in this game long enough to know the first signs,’ he pointed at the plate, ‘and as sure as my name’s Feckle, that is chief among ’em.’

I raked my hands through my hair and felt them sting. ‘The girl in the last dungeon.’

At this, Feckle exploded into a red-faced running stream of expletives that only paused when he drew breath. ‘You ruddy well have to *make* her eat. Got it?’

‘I tried.’

‘You tried!’ he snorted. ‘Useless, pretty, milk-sop of a boy. Tried! For good and all, where’s Dentan or Bever, or Mackwit when you need ’em? They knew how to force their will. You were likely too *scattered* by her to even have a will!’ He turned and surveyed me. ‘That’s it. Isn’t it?’

I glared and my fingers twitched with the urge to smack the toothless old monkey.

A greasy grin spread across his face. ‘If something happens to her, trust me, I’ll make certain the castle guard know who to blame. Understand?’

‘Aye, you do that.’ I flung off the boots and dropped the keys. ‘The cook should be flung off the top-most tower.’ I picked up the plate and shoved it in his face. ‘What even is this? Whale vomit?’ I thumped the plate back down. ‘Leave you to lick it clean, eh?’ I slammed the metal gate behind me.

‘Touchy-touchy!’ he sang, as I strode away.



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I sat on my mat with my back against the wall, staring at the crusted lines of healing flesh running up and down the sides of my fingers. What, by sea and sky, was I doing?

My mind wandered out the shuttered window and floated over the wet-market to the dungeon. What was she thinking now? Was she being trundled up to the King's court? Did they shackle her to a table and gawk at her eyes and her hands as they had mine? Did they put her in a vile costume or...?

I closed my eyes. There *were* worse things...

I got up and paced the room, clenching and unclenching my hands. Mustn't think on them. There were ways to make a sensible man do rash and dangerous things, and that kind of rumination was foremost among them. I sank against my wall. What if she didn't eat tonight? That would be three nights in a row. Had she eaten anything since they found her? How long had that been? And *where* did they find her? I stared out my window. Dewaré knew of all the other oddities on show in the Dung Quarter, 'the competition' he called it. He never mentioned that there were others like me. Why? I slid down the wall and rolled my head back to stare up at the roof beams. Too many questions. Not enough answers.

I must have slumped over with my cheek pressed against my knee, for when I woke, dusk was settling. I shook myself awake and bundled out the door and down the stairs.

'Did your sweetheart like it?' someone called.

I whipped round. 'What?'

The innkeeper's daughter was wiping a glass with a rag. 'You dopy-headed thing. The dress, of course! Did she like it?'

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‘What did you call her?’

‘Your sweetheart.’ She laughed, ‘Don’t tell me it was for your mother! I won’t believe it.’

‘Ahh.’ I laughed bleakly.

‘So? What did she think?’

I began backing out the inn door. ‘Didn’t rightly say.’

‘All the same, you owe me a shuck before the week is out!’

‘No fear.’ I called from halfway down the street.

Feckle unlocked the upper gate and dropped the keys on the ground as he passed me. ‘Quite the tide tonight. You’ll be needing them boots, I wager.’ He jerked his head behind him.

One boot drooped out of the wash bucket, and the other hung from the rafters. Cantankerous old bat.

At the end of the tunnel, her dungeon door lay open and the cell empty. Not back yet.

The ocean water was already swilling through the gate, licking up one flagstone at a time. I stepped into her cell. Moonlight streamed in on the patch of floor she’d pulled me over to the night before.

The clatter of cartwheels echoed down the tunnel. They were bringing her back. Best not to idle here like I was waiting for them. I was just about to slink out the door when I saw something grimy, white and sodden, thrown against a shadowy corner of the cell. I nudged it with my boot. Torn cloth.

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The rattle of wheels stopped just outside the door. Too late. I pressed myself into the darkest corner and held my breath. The guards backed the cart in and looked out as though expecting someone—me perhaps—to come tripping down the tunnel to wait on them.

‘Where’s that deaf and daft filth-shoveller?’ said one.

The other went over to the door and bashed a fist against it. The booming sound startled the girl in the box.

Both the guards looked at each other and back at the box. Something malignant passed between them and they sauntered over to it, one eyeing the door, the other—the box. One leaned in and muttered something unspeakable through a gap in the boards. The other laughed.

Enough was enough. I blew out a breath and backed out of the shadow sweeping a thick pile of brackish filth into the middle of the cell.

Both men stepped back as though I’d caught them picking a pocket.

‘Oh, you’re back then?’ I said with as much convincing surprise as I could concoct.

They stared at me as though I’d lost my senses.

‘Forgive me. Did you call or something? My hearing’s shot through. Me old folks blame the proximity to the sea. Sickly as a kid. Used to wake up in agony. Blood and puss all over my pillow. Ruined me for sound, it did.’

They stood like scarlet statues staring at me like I was a stink they’d stepped in. One of them nodded to the box and pulled out the keys. ‘We unlock it, and you fasten that door, got it?’

I squinted at them. ‘Eh?’

Sweetheart

‘The door.’ One pointed at it.

The other shook a key at me. ‘You lock it.’

‘Oh. Yes, of course! Wouldn’t want anything to escape. Would we now?’

‘Not if you value your life.’

I blinked like a dolt and shook my head. ‘I don’t think... I even know your wife.’

The men muttered a chorus of obscenities aimed at me as they unlocked the box. I ignored them good-naturedly and swept the filth out the door, ready with my set of keys and a daft grin to bolt up behind them.

They sauntered away, and I sagged against the wall muttering my own invectives as they passed out of hearing. I unbolted the cell and strode inside and locked it behind me. The box’s door was still closed.

‘They are gone now,’ I whispered.

No movement.

I stood waiting. Without a name for her, I felt like one of them. Ordering her in and out of boxes and treating her like a thing, an oddity, a spectacle without a soul. Then I thought of the innkeeper’s daughter.

‘Sweetheart?’

A tiny movement inside the cage encouraged me. I gently eased the hinged door open and after glimpsing her for a moment dropped my face. If I wished, and I didn’t, I could have counted all her ribs. Her clothes were gone.

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I held out my hand. She took it and I helped her limp into the moonlight, here she sank to her knees and leaned her head against the wall.

I pointed to her cheek. A shadow sat across it that looked mighty like a bruise. 'Who?' I whispered.

She glanced at the door.

Curse them to the deepest abyss. 'Why?'

Her gaze shifted across to the sodden pile of rags against the wall.

The dress I'd given. I sat back and raked my hands through my hair. I didn't have words bad enough for them.

I drew a paper covered parcel out of my pocket and held it out. 'I bought you something.'

Silence.

'It's a pastry.'

I tore the paper open to reveal a crumbling mess that had once looked somewhat like a pie and set it on the flagstone between us.

She frowned weakly at me.

'Well, I didn't exactly *buy* it. Got it on trust, actually. Don't own a coin to speak of.' I shrugged. 'Got a job though,' my shoulders sank, 'and a growing debt to pay. But you don't need to know about that.'

I stared at my hands, they were trembling again. 'You've got me yammering like a fool. You do that to me, you know.' I raised my eyebrows and blew out a breath. 'Wish you could speak.' I glanced back at her. By the stars in the sky, she was lovely. But there was no getting carried away. I couldn't see much

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past the bruise on her face or the shadow her ribs cast. I dropped my face to the flaking pastry in its crumpled, greasy paper. 'Would you try some?'

She glanced from me to it and back again.

'Surely, you've had something like this before?'

A tiny furrow creased her forehead.

'It's not too bad.' I pulled off a piece and ate it. 'See? Quite nice. Bit cold but, otherwise...' I let out a long sigh and shook my head. 'Please... please eat something. I'm begging you.'

She stared at me. Perhaps it was something in my expression, or something she could feel in my words. She took a morsel in her fingers and lay it on her tongue. Her face contorted, and she drooped against the wall with her eyes closed in sickly exhaustion.

Around her seawater trickled through the grooves between the flagstones filling the cell with glistening rivers. In no time it would flood. I had to get her out.

'Sweetheart.'

She glanced up at me.

I couldn't help a weak smile. She recognised the name I'd given. 'I have to get you warm.' I pulled off my overcoat, draped it over her shoulders. 'And somewhere dry. I'm going to have to move you up a few cells. Alright?'

It looked like she understood me. When I put my arms around her, she leaned into me and lay her face against my chest. I pulled her off the floor and stood. She had the ghastly weight of a child. I could hold her in one arm as I juggled the keys and unlocked the massive door of her cell.

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In all this, she was as quiet as a sleeping babe, but as soon as I turned and took a step out of the rising tide towards dryer ground, she contorted and the hideous moaning sound I'd heard before burst from her chest. Her hands flew out and her fingers raked against the side of the tunnel to keep me from taking another step.

I took a step back into the wet, and her frenzy stilled. 'What is it?'

She stretched her arm out towards the sea gate, fingers wide as though reaching in vain for the moonlit ocean beyond.

I shook my head, 'I can't,' I whispered. 'That's death for us both.'

She took my face in both her hands and shook her head with a ferocity I couldn't understand.

The tide was rising around my ankles now. 'We can't stay here. If anyone comes and finds us in the tunnel like this...'

She dropped her face and sank exhausted against my chest.

I waded back into her cell and shoved the door closed behind us. The streaming moonlight turned the rising water into liquid silver. I waded over to the cart, pushed the box cage into the water and hitched us up onto the flatbed. She curled into my arms as the water rose around our little wooden island.

The moonlight faded and the sky outside turned pale. I watched the way her face rose and fell against my chest. What was I to do? The webbed fingers of one hand lay curled under her cheek. I breathed in the tang of salt in her hair. I'd so hoped for freedom—sliced myself up for it—and yet, by some cruel trick of feeling, I was now as trapped as she. But as the sky tinged with orange and the ocean water reached into the cell and lapped once against her foot, something magical happened. As soon as the seawater touched her, glint-

Sweetheart

ing scales of iridescent blue and green folded out of her skin and wrapped around her ankles, they kept on and on wrapping up her calf until she was encased up to her waist. Where her feet had once been, a wide blue tailfin rippled in the slow drift of water. All this, without her waking once.

I sat for who knows how long, with my heart a-stutter, my mouth hanging open and my hands trembling where they clutched the side of the cart.

All I could think, was one thing. She was so beyond me. So utterly and completely beyond me. A moment before, fool, fool, fool that I was, I'd thought I was doing her some kindness by staying with her through the fading dark that was certainly coming, but now I knew the dreadful truth. I belonged to a world of scum and filth; she to a world of nethered dreams.

I edged out from our onetime embrace, careful not to wake her. She slept on, still wrapped in the shabby overcoat I'd wound around her, her copper hair draping over her hands as I waded through the water to the door.

I shut it and turned the key in the lock—just like a traitor. I paused half-way up the tunnel and slumped against the wall. How had I thought I could give her anything? An inkeeper's daughter's cast-offs? Paltry street fare? My comfort? It was ridiculous. I—was—ridiculous! A boy who'd grown up in a cage and lived and breathed captivity, what freedom had I to give?

She deserved better than me.

I stumbled up the tunnel and out into the light by the street gate.

Feckle was waiting for me. 'Well!' He drawled in delight, 'Look at you!'

I stared at him as though for the first time and remembered his words. *Mark my words, that-is-no-little-girl.* In his malignant way, he had tried to warn me.

Sweetheart

‘I’ve a piece of news for you.’ He pulled a sliver of wood out from behind his ear and used it to pick his yellow teeth.

I sagged on a stool to pull off a boot. ‘What is it?’ I whispered.

He sniggered, licked his lips and picked at another tooth. ‘They’re moving her on.’

My hands went slack and I stared at him. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Been sold.’

‘What?’

‘King’s bored with ’er. They’ve found him a two headed monkey from some far isle. He’s got a new pet to gawk at.’

I grabbed hold of the gate and glared through it. ‘What happens to her, then?’

‘I toldja. Been sold. A tidy sum too.’

‘To whom?’

Fackle shrugged and flicked something off the toothpick. ‘Some consortia from the Dung Quarter. Oddity merchants, brothel owners, those types, I imagine.’

I stepped back from the bars and blinked at him.

He rattled the gate. ‘You going to open up or what?’

I backed away, shaking my head. I snatched up the boot and was hopping and hobbling into it as I blundered my way back down the tunnel.

Sweetheart

I peered through the gap between the door and the wall. She was still asleep with the long sinuous folds of her tail draping off the cart into the water. I eased her cell door open, and taking hold of her cart, gently wheeled her through the wet out into the tunnel and sat it before the sea gate. The sun was just letting go of the horizon and cloaking the sky with pink and gold.

I pulled out the keys. There was only one large enough for such a massive lock. It opened the street gate. I blew out a breath and slid it into the rusty lock. I grunted with the strain of turning it, but by sheer will, or perhaps some magic, the latch slid open.

A clatter of sounds echoed through the tunnel behind me. Angry voices. Footsteps. They were coming.

I bent over her face. 'Wake Sweetheart,' I begged. I threw all my weight against the gate. Its rusty hinges groaned in protest, crumbled some and swung open. I sidled past into the tunnel just as she roused. She pushed herself up on one hand and stared out at the unbroken view of sea and sky as a wave rolled in and frothed past the cart.

Behind came the echo of footsteps. I backed further in, ready to meet whatever was hurtling my way.



I held the weight carefully. Strange, all I could think as I balanced on the edge of the boat, with the sea pulling away to the bluest of skies, was not to drop the heavy thing on my foot. Would break bones for certain. Odd, I know. Soon, it wouldn't matter.

I glanced back at the boatswain, who gave a nod. All that was needed now was a hefty—

Sweetheart

The blue rushed up to meet me, slapped me in the face, and rolled over my head in a rush of frenzied bubbles.

I held my breath as the weight pulled itself from my hands and dragged me writhing through the cool blue light, into the dark and the cold. My chest burned fit to burst with pain, my ears screamed and my fingers, the cuts still so new, seared like I held them over a flame.

And still the weight pulled me down. My ears shrieked until the desiccating agony of my lungs overwhelmed them. I writhed against the weight until it thudded into the sea floor and anchored me. Chest on fire, I blinked, mutely up at my disappearing bubbles until they wriggled out of sight and all I could see was the the dark blur of the ship, bobbing like a cork against the rippling sky above.

Strange, through the searing pain in my chest and the cold ache of dying limbs, I thought of my unpaid debts. The Innkeeper's daughter would curse me. The baker of pastries— The pain inside rose and burst like a torturous tide drowning out my scrambled thoughts and I dragged in a thick watery breath.

Cold rushed in and shuddered through me. Not just my lungs, it flushed through my veins to my very edges, mind throbbing, the tips of my fingers tin-

Penance

Bronwyn Eley





e was just a boy. Nothing like his brother, who had been strong and capable. A hero she and her comrades had looked up to for years. But Armaghan was dead, lying at the feet of his younger brother, the one no one thought would amount to much, not next to the Son of the Dragon.

Only this boy, Jebran, was their hope now. He was the Son of the Dragon.

Daewynn watched the boy's face closely, the way he stared back at Shabaz, their aldar, confusion sweeping across his brow. Had she looked the same way that day she'd been adopted from the orphanage?

She remembered being confused, torn, unsure of her next move. She'd made her decision, in the end, to leave her friends behind for her new life.


They paid the price of her silence.

Shabaz turned at the waist and waved Daewynn over. With a silent nod, she began to move through the crowd, sheathing her sticky sword as she went. The closer she got, the lower her head bowed. Finally, pulling to a stop, Daewynn sunk low before Shabaz.

'Son of the Dragon,' Shabaz said, addressing the boy, 'this is Daewynn, one of my most devout acolytes. She will take care of Armaghan.'

Daewynn averted her gaze to the body of their fallen leader, though she could feel Jebran's eyes burning into the side of her face. Not the first body she'd seen. That day, on the beach with her friends, she'd not known what the small, white objects were at first.

Skulls, her friend had explained. Later that friend disappeared. As did several others before she fled the island with her new family. In a way, those friends of hers – long dead now – were the first people she killed.




Daewynn signaled to several of the others, who came forward to help her with the body. Jebran made a small sound when his brother's stiff form was lifted from the sand. They locked gazes. Daewynn froze. How could she look anywhere but at the boy's terrified eyes? He was older than she'd been when her life changed, but his responsibilities were far greater. The mistakes he could make more dire. The fall that much further.

Daewynn followed Armaghan's body across the beach. They went slow, moving around the countless sea of fresh corpses, avoiding the pools of blood, the broken and discarded weapons.

Armaghan deserved more than to die here, they all did.

But death had been part of her life since that day on the beach. Since she learned what death was, even though her birth parents had both perished when she was young. Daewynn wasn't sure she truly understood what death meant until she wrote a letter to Henly, the milkman who'd kept her in good spirits all those years she'd been trapped at the orphanage.




It was Henly who told her the bad news. That more than a dozen children had disappeared from the orphanage, many of her friends included. She hadn't said their names since she found out. She believed saying them would bring a curse down upon her.

There had been whispers on the island about how many of the orphans suddenly found new homes, that it didn't seem logical or likely. But no one could ever prove anything, so the Matron carried on in her dark ruling manner for many years.

Nearly twenty years had passed since Daewynn left the orphanage. Matron was probably dead by now, but Daewynn wouldn't be surprised if someone told her that Matron lurked those halls to this very day.

'Lay the body there,' Daewynn instructed. Armaghan was placed gently in the sand. Without needing instruction, the men who'd carried him hurried off into the trees to find dry kindling and fresh water. Daewynn waited until they were out of sight before she lowered herself onto the ground next to Armaghan.




She tilted her head so they were eye-to-eye, though his were closed. He'd been a handsome man. Strong muscles, wide shoulders. She remembered his smile and the colour of his eyes, both like a long-forgotten dream, though he'd been dead a mere hour.

She touched his cheek, still warm. Sticky with blood. Some his own or perhaps some belonging to the men he'd killed in battle. Daewynn reached for her waterskin and uncorked it. Tearing off a section of her own shirt, she began wiping the blood from his face.

He deserved at least that much after what she did to him.

When his face was clean, Daewynn placed her hand on his cheek again and leaned close. 'I'm sorry, Armaghan.' Her lips quivered a moment as she worked up the courage to say what needed to be said. 'With your blood, I will be absolved.'




Daewynn closed her eyes and saw the faces of those who had promised her absolution. They'd met in a room kept dark on purpose. Their leader, Fiskk, blinked rapidly and did not stop, as if his eyes hurt from the light of the lone candle. They weren't artificers she'd seen, but they were the first ones to pay her any attention. For a price, they could fix anything.

The price was blood. It didn't matter who, they said, but the blood price was high. When she heard of Armaghan, that his army was not too far from where she scavenged for salvation, they sent her a message. That the blood of the Son of the Dragon would be the last that she'd need.

A low rumble met her ears. Daewynn opened her eyes and stared across the beach at the army now moving, preparing for the next stage of war. They would rest here on this island for some time, looting and taking from it what they could.

Fingers trembling from the cold that sunk into her body, she reached into her pocket and withdrew the stone. The same bright yellow as the day she'd been given it, somehow untainted by the blood she soaked it in. She rolled it between




her hands for a moment, the crystal the length of her palm and middle finger, sharpened to a point at the top.

Almost as if it were a weapon itself.

Daewynn pulled up Armaghan's shirt to reveal the wound that had killed him. Deeper than she'd intended, though killing was a hard thing to predict. She pressed the stone to his blood, holding it there a moment. Waiting for the stone to absorb the son's life.

As she pulled it away, the stone was clean. It was always clean after, unlike her.

Next, Daewynn unsheathed her sword and held it before her. Still bloody from battle. The blood belonged to a dozen men and women, all of whom she'd killed during the battle. Daewynn placed the stone on the blood, moving it up and down the blade, making sure it knew how many lives she'd taken.




Arms trembling, she lowered the sword into the sand, the red against the yellow – two colours she'd known her whole life. Daewynn looked around. She'd grown up in a place like this. By the beach with her friends, orphans like her, she never thought she'd find happiness. Once she'd been adopted, she found it for a time.

But then her guilt found her.

Angry, restless... she saw the shine of hope leave her adoptive parents' eyes when they realised they'd picked the wrong orphan.

She went to school, got her education like all the rest of the privileged children. Even went to study healing sometime after, but she only made it a year before she was driven away by her own shame.


Daewynn curled her fingers around the crystal. Fiskk's promise held her only hope. It seemed backwards – to be taking lives in order to absolve her guilt over the lives she'd destroyed as a child... but those had been innocent children. These people – Armaghan and all the rest – they'd chosen a life of fighting. Of



death. They all stepped onto this beach accepting the fact that they might not go home. So if it were between Daewynn taking their lives – or someone else who could get nothing significant from it – then why not allow it to be her?

The men returned soon after; Daewynn was already halfway done cleaning the body of their leader. They could never know the truth of her being here. They were a spiritual people and Shabaz, for all his praying and blessing, was far darker than people realised. He'd be the first to try and kill her for what she'd done.

But Daewynn could not pass up the blood of the Son of the Dragon. Besides, they had the younger brother, Jebran. Each side had something to gain from her actions. The boy seemed perfectly suitable to replace his brother – perhaps not in strength, but in power and influence. All these people needed was someone to call their Son of the Dragon, so as long as Jebran lived, she could leave them behind knowing she'd not destroyed all.




Armaghan was burned by the edge of the sea, under a blaze of reds and oranges as the sun departed. Daewynn stood just behind Shabaz with the others, head bowed in respect, silence capturing their tongues as Shabaz spoke his prayers for their fallen leader.

Daewynn brought the crystal out again and held it between her hands. Closing her eyes, she listened to the lapping of the waves, remembering the last time the beach had meant so much to her. That morning she and her friends had found the skulls, an asterpox had come up onto the beach. If it weren't for that creature taking what they'd found, maybe her friends would have lived long enough to escape that island.

Shabaz finished his prayer and the procession echoed his words. Daewynn forced her lips to move but no words came out. She had no right praying for the man she'd felled.

When Armaghan was reduced to ashes, Daewynn and the others collected up the remnants and took them out into the shallows. Daewynn was covered in him, and in the ash of the fire that took him. As she lowered herself into the



water, she let a sob escape. 'Take it away. Take her guilt with him. She dropped her head and waited as wave after wave gently pushed into her, washing her clean of the ash.

As the others stood, she forced her trembling legs to stand, to take her back to the others. She kept her gaze low, knowing that if she looked into Jebran's eyes right now, she'd break and confess the truth. He stood very still in the shallows of the water. Daewynn passed right by him, muttering Shabaz's prayer, offering the Son of the Dragon her devotion and condolences.

Her tongue pressed heavy in her mouth with the truth, but if she told him, she'd not only risk her life, but she'd break his heart even more. Jebran would go on believing his brother was killed in battle. It was an honourable death, not like the one she'd given Armaghan.

The procession departed, Shabaz and Jebran leading the way. Daewynn waited until they had gone, feet buried in the sand, gaze on the brightening moon. She took several deep breaths before sinking to her knees. Bringing out the crystal, Daewynn pushed it into the sand before her, sharp tip pointing to the sky, and closed her eyes.


'I have collected the blood,' she whispered. They told her she would be able to hear no matter where she was in the world, no matter where her quest took her, but sometimes she doubted. Sometimes she wondered if she were nothing more than a mad woman on the beach talking to herself. 'Surely it is enough now? The Son of the Dragon is no more, his life mine, his blood within the crystal...'

Her long pause held no answers for her. Daewynn frowned, heart thudding in her chest.

'Is it enough?'

For a painfully long moment, all Daewynn heard was the lapping of the waves. Then a single word pushed into her mind, slamming into her heart like a blade.

No.



Daewynn gasped. ‘How is it not enough? I have the blood of the Son of the Dragon. Countless others. I haven’t stopped collecting for nearly a year now. Surely this is it!’

Her chest spasmed.

The Son of the Dragon still lives.

Daewynn froze, pulling her eyes open and staring up at the moon. ‘No. You cannot mean...’

The Son of the Dragon still lives.

‘But Armaghan was the Son of the Dragon!’ Daewynn said.

The Son of the Dragon still lives.

Daewynn buried her face in her hands as those words finally faded. She wrenched the crystal out of the sand and stared at it in the moonlight. Clean and beautiful, no evidence of the blood it possessed.


Just one more.

The words sparked like fire along her skin. Daewynn hissed, dropping the crystal into the sand below. She stared down at it, wondering at its beauty. Had she ruined yet another beautiful thing? Though she wasn’t the one who’d bastardised it in the first place. Fiskk and his followers had promised her this was the way of it, that she deserved her penance alongside her peace. That this crystal and their plan would be her salvation.

‘Daewynn!’

Daewynn’s heart spiked in her chest. ‘Lukin?’

But the beach was empty. Of course it was. Her mind was playing tricks on her. It could not be Lukin. She’d not seen him since she was a little girl, on a beach not so dissimilar to this. He’d vanished in the days leading up to her adoption. If she’d said something then, maybe he’d be alive.




Daewynn sunk into a crouch and picked up the crystal. ‘Forgive me, Lukin. I will make this right, I promise.’

She took off down the beach towards camp, avoiding those who called out for her, avoiding their eyes. She waved them off, claiming exhaustion. But she had to prepare. Shabaz’s acolytes had a tent of their own; it was empty but for one other. Already asleep, curled on her side, specks of blood still on her face.

Daewynn stepped lightly, removing the worst of her bloody clothes and changing into her only other pair. As she went to strap her sword to her side, she hesitated. It was far too heavy and cumbersome for a quick getaway.


Daewynn placed it on her cot before glancing around the room. The woman still slept soundly. Just beneath her cot she’d placed her personal items – a book, a bundle of cloth, and a small dagger. Daewynn slunk towards her as quietly as she could and picked up the blade.

‘Daewynn.’



She spun around, hand gripping around her new dagger. But it was just one of the other acolytes, poking his head through the tent. Daewynn settled, putting on a smile. ‘Yes?’

‘Shabaz wants to see you,’ he said.




The smile fell from her face, this foreign language she’d been speaking for so long now betraying her. The words eluded her. Only when he raised a brow, prompting her, did she find what she needed. ‘What for?’

He shrugged. ‘Not sure. Come on, he’s waiting.’

Daewynn’s face was numb by the time they reached Shabaz’s tent. Did he somehow know? Though if they did, wouldn’t she be dead already?

Shabaz was washing his face when she entered. He patted his skin gently with a cloth before turning to greet her. ‘Daewynn, I have need of you.’ Daewynn bowed, a sign that she was his to command. He offered her a small smile. ‘You must watch over the Son of the Dragon tonight.’



She stilled. ‘Me? Watch over him? I don’t understand. His guard –’


‘I’m not asking you to protect his life,’ Shabaz said. ‘His guard will be outside his tent as usual. No. I need you to watch over his soul tonight. Send him to sleep with prayers. Ease his suffering, as I’ve no doubt tonight he will not rest well.’

Daewynn nodded. ‘Of course.’

‘Take what you need to make him sleep,’ Shabaz said, waving to a small cabinet that sat on the other side of the room. ‘It will help his mind rest.’

As Daewynn collected what she needed in silence, she couldn’t help but wonder... were her actions somehow approved of by whatever force watched them tonight? This was all simply too easy. Then again, if Jebran was found murdered in his tent, who else would they blame but her?

Perhaps easy was misguided.



Shabaz took her to see the Son of the Dragon. Jebran was sitting on his bed when they entered, hands gripping the edge of his bedroll, eyes somewhere far away. He blinked when Shabaz addressed him, explaining Daewynn’s purpose there tonight.


He didn’t say a word, merely nodded. Shabaz gave Daewynn a long, hard look before leaving the tent. Daewynn imagined how Shabaz would look at her if he knew the truth of what she’d done today.

What she still planned to do.

‘You...’ Jebran began. Daewynn looked up. The boy was staring right at her. ‘You were the one who prepared...’

Of course he couldn’t say it. Daewynn had trouble saying the truth of her friends’ fate for many years. It had taken time to admit they were really dead.

‘I saw to your brother, yes,’ she replied.




Jebran nodded, mouth twisted up to smother his emotions, though she could see the pain on his face. Why did he try to deny it? It was his brother, after all. He was permitted to feel the pain of such a loss.

A loss she had caused. Though who's to say Armaghan would have survived the battle anyway? Jebran's appointment as Son of the Dragon was perhaps destined, which meant his brother was destined to die.

‘Thank you.’


Daewynn shot a look to her new leader. Just a boy, only a few years older than Lukin had been when he'd vanished.

But Daewynn wasn't talking to her long-dead friend. She was talking to the boy that would lead this army. She bowed her head. ‘You do not need to thank me, Son of the Dragon.’



‘That's what I am now, isn't it?’ The Son of the Dragon. Yet this mantle feels more crushing than liberating.’ His gaze widened, as if remembering he had company. ‘I-I'm sorry. What I meant was, I do owe you thanks. He was my brother and you treated him with respect, Daewynn.’


She hadn't eaten in hours, yet her entire stomach was threatening to make an appearance. Daewynn bowed her head again; what else was she to do? Her leader, this gentle boy, was thanking her for taking care of his brother's body.



In silence, she prepared his brew over the small fire they'd lit in the centre of Jebran's tent. The boy lay on his side, staring at the wall of fabric that separated him from the outside world. Were it not for the occasional sniffs, she'd think him already dead.

She handed him the tincture. ‘This will help you sleep.’

He gave it a long stare and then frowned. ‘How can I sleep when my brother is dead, Daewynn?’



She flinched. She wished he would stop using her name. It was as if he were trying to make them friends. But she could never be his friend. She could never betray another friend.

Daewynn sighed when she realised Jebran was waiting for an actual answer. ‘Life is full of loss,’ she said. ‘Of pain. I admit I have not slept well in years.’

Jebran frowned. ‘How long?’

‘Since I was a young girl,’ Daewynn admitted. ‘I lost many friends at a young age. My parents, too.’ She pressed the bowl into his hand. ‘But we still must try to live our lives as if things have not fallen apart.’

Jebran stared at the cup in his hand. ‘Is it possible? Have you managed?’

Daewynn took a steadying breath. The truth of it was the opposite of what she’d tell him. ‘Yes. I have managed to let go of the pain.’

With a small nod, Jebran swallowed the tincture. He released a loud breath as his shoulders sagged. ‘I do not know if I am strong enough to let it go.’


‘You are not alone,’ Daewynn said. ‘Shabaz will not leave you alone in this fight.’

Jebran’s face crumpled. ‘Shabaz cares only for our ancestors’ demands. Gulab cares only about the prophecy. The other warriors care only for glory. Only Armaghan cared about me, and he is gone. I am alone now and forever.’

A wave of sickness hit Daewynn, as hard as any wave in a storm. She faltered, sitting on the edge of Jebran’s bed. The Son of the Dragon frowned at her. ‘Are you well?’

She shook her head. ‘He did not choose to leave you, Jebran.’

The boy lifted his chin slightly, as if the sound of his name so casually spoken, was an affront to everything Shabaz stood for.



Jebran simply nodded, his face crumbling once more. ‘I know. But he’s still gone and now I am alone, no matter what anybody says.’

Jebran’s eyelids fluttered, his body sagging slightly. Daewynn stood, knowing the effects of the tincture were fast-acting. ‘Rest now, Son of the Dragon. I will pray over you tonight.’

He nodded compliantly, sliding down beneath his sheets. He let out a sigh as his head hit the pillow and a sadness washed over his features. His lips trembled. ‘I cannot be the Son of the Dragon...’

Jebran stilled as sleep overtook him. Daewynn stared down at the boy’s face for what seemed like hours, but was only moments. His chest moved as it should, up and down, bringing him the rest he so desperately needed.

Daewynn sat on the edge of his bed once more and opened her mouth to speak. Shabaz expected her to protect their Son of the Dragon on the hardest night of his life. She shut her mouth and pulled out the dagger. It was dark in her shadow, no romantic glint to its metal.

With her other hand she pulled out the crystal. Still as beautiful as ever, never to be tainted by what was buried inside it. Not like the rot inside her, feasting on her soul as well as her flesh. Soon it would eat its way through her very skin and all her sins would come pouring out.

Daewynn rose the dagger, poising it above Jebran.

Jebran. Just a boy. Not the Son of the Dragon. Not some nameless warrior on the battlefield. Not a stranger in a large city. Jebran. The boy who had thanked her for her kindness. The boy whose life had changed in too many ways this day.

An innocent, just like her long-dead friends.

Daewynn pressed the dagger to skin, drawing it long and slow. Splitting, blood bubbled to the surface, glistening red just like everyone else.

Her blood.

Not Jebran's.

Daewynn stared at the cut on her forearm a moment, then the crystal. With a deep breath, she pressed it to her blood. Closing her eyes, she reached for Fiskk, who she knew – somehow – would be watching. Waiting.

'No more,' she whispered. 'Take my life if you must, because my absolution is not worth his.'

There was silence for a while. Then –

Do not do this. You will not rest a day in your life if you do not give us what you promised. You will not –

Daewynn threw the crystal across the gaping tent. It landed with a soft thud at the far end. With a deep breath, she rose and sheathed the dagger. Blood trickling down her skin like rain on a window, Daewynn moved across the tent and settled by the basin. Turning, Daewynn set her gaze on Jebran, Son of the Dragon. She would do as she was bid.

She would watch over him.

The End.

Bronwyn Eley can be found on [Instagram](#)





he
Dogwind's
Tale

Ally Bodnaruk



Ilke took a breath. ‘Let me tell you a tale. A tale about the sea and the cliffs and our little town of Roarke.’

Cherubic faces bathed in firelight watched her with wide-eyes, their scarves tied tight about their necks and their hands buried in mittens. Ilke pulled her own coat tight around. The Dogwind whistled across the moor and the meeting place where the bonfires were lit each year was full of its chill.

The town of Roarke clung to the moor and the cliffs between Thastor and Belmor. From the meeting place, Ilke could just make out the roof-tips and chimneys, stone and thatch, amongst the rocky hills. They looked like they had burst forth from the ground itself, in spite of the moors' objections. Beyond them, more rocky grassland, spotted with wind-twisted trees, and then the cliffs that overlooked the tumultuous Scolorn Sea — Sc’ornsee, as the local tongues formed it. And across it all blew the Dogwind, named for its howl as it blew through the scrappy trees and jagged hills, across the sea to the mountains further north.

Endur had thundered down upon Roarke early this year and even the blazing bonfire being haphazardly tended by the children’s parents was not enough to stave off the biting wind. Ilke could taste the Dogwind in the air, salt and seaweed and a spice that she knew only as nether. As the wind blew and Ilke prepared to tell her story, she could feel the nether gather in anticipation. It surrounded the townspeople — the old shepherding families in their hand-me-down coats and weather-beaten faces and the newer folks, come to the town seeking good prospects in the mine — and settled into their coats and scarves, dusted their hair, and generally layered itself about their persons like fire sparks across brush, hungry for something to burn.

Ilke was only twenty-five tosamnes old, young enough that perhaps the chill should not greet her bones with quite so much enthusiasm. But the mothers of Roarke took great pains to exclaim her waif-ness. All alone in that old hut on the

bluff, they squawked, not even a husband to keep her warm. It's a wonder ... and they would trail off as they remembered how she had come to be all alone in that old hut on the bluff and pat her hand and offer her some trifle from their pantry with a sad smile. Ilke was not bothered. Her mother had taught her well before she died, she could hold her own in Roarke, she knew her role and she did it well. In the depths of endur the town gathered, Ilke called the Dogwind down like the shepherds with their herding hounds and led it to and fro across the moors chasing the nether that clung along the tidal cliffs inland, away from the town.

'Many years passed,' Ilke began her tale. 'Before the mine and the town, but not before the sheep, Roarke was little more than a single hut, perched upon the bluffs. The man who lived in the hut was a shepherd —'

'— as all good-faring folk are!' called one of the men by the bonfire.

The shepherd's in the crowd cheered, but the miners' discomforted murmurs echoed underneath. The nether turn sharp and bitter. Ilke's stomach twisted, but playful guffaws drowned out the miners' complaints. Ilke pulled a smile across her face. *Play the crowd*, her mother had taught her, *never let them control the tale*.

'Aye, as *some* good-faring folk are,' Ilke said with a wink to the crowd. The children, sons and daughters of shepherds and miners alike, cackled and the nether smoother out, pleased. 'Now, can anyone tell me who lived in that hut?'

'Roarke!' shrieked the children, encouraged by their parents who mouthed the name and nodded along.

'Calder Roarke indeed.' Ilke turned her words in the nether like wood against a grind stone and watched as the ashen smoke from the bonfire began to coalesce in front of her. 'His skin was as weathered as the cliffs. His hair, as grey as the dusking sky. He was crusted with sea salt and his eyes looked like the whorls of the twisted trees that bow in deference before the wind.'

The children, whose restless was second only to that of an unemployed sheep dog, quieted as Calder Roarke, made of smoke, appeared before them.

‘Calder Roarke had been born in that little hut and had grown in that little hut. And just as all of you do with your own houses, he knew every crack and stain. He knew which doors stuck in the wet and which creaked in the dry. He knew that hut better perhaps than he knew himself.

‘After his parents died — as age and the cold make ashes of us all — Calder was completely alone, except for his dogs.’ Ilke flung the word out and the nether responded, a pack of snapping herders made of sparks burst forth from the bonfire and raced off into the dark. ‘Of course, the bravest and most beloved of them was Thistlewhip.’

A short, scruffy dog, long nosed, sharp eared, and made of smoke and flame, loped out of the fire and paced around the assembly. Thistlewhip rounded the circle, once, twice, thrice, before disappearing in an explosion of sparks. The children yelped and barked and clapped.

‘Sheep!’ giggled one of the younger babes. ‘Sheep!’

The elder shepherds in the crowd hushed them as they glanced at Ilke. They had been to more bonfires than Ilke had spun, and they knew the commandments. But Ilke smiled and nodded, because a babe in arms was no threat to her tale. The nether had barely reacted to their cries.

‘You’re right, little one, how could we forget the sheep? The constant and most noble of companions for anyone living in Roarke.’

Thistlewhip grew wool and began to lumber about grazing on imaginary grass. The children, now delighted, broke out into raucous baas. A growing crowd of shepherding folk had turned their attention to Ilke and her show, but behind them she could see the unimpressed and wary faces of the mining-folk.

The mine had opened a scant five years earlier; and once the first tunnels had been dug and the first profits began to trickle in, the population of Roarke had swelled. Prospectors from the wealthy southern towns, workers poached from the mountain mines, and all manner of people hoping to find their fortune had jour-

neyed to the stretch of coastline to which Roarke clung. The only thing the newcomers had in common was their bemusement at the old-fashioned shepherding folk who called Roarke home.

Ilke put on this show every endur as Leafwane tripped into Gloomtide and the Dogwind arrived off the Sc'ornsee. The first calling, when she tamed the wind for endur, as her mother, and her grandmother, and theirs before them, had done, back as far as any could remember. The descendants of Calder Roarke were no artificers by any standard set in the cities, but when they spun a tale, the nether listened.

But five years into the mine and Ilke saw the way the mining folk still crossed the street when they saw her coming, their eyes tense at the corners as if braced for her to turn wild and dangerous. How, she wondered, was she worse than the artificers in the cities to the east or south, when she all she did was sweep and herd the nether away from her town? She didn't do anything *with* it.

Around the bonfire, the night had continued to darken and the townsfolk could feel the first licks of a storm against the coastline. Ilke squinted her eyes against the firelight and looked up at the sky. The moon was still visible and the stars flickered in and out through wisps of cloud. The storm might pass them, or might not, but either way, she had to finish her tale.

She looked back to her audience, who had continued to jeer and bark, and to their parents' faces, painted with fond smiles. Best to continue, while spirits were good. If things turned sour — as things in Roarke now had a tendency to do — it would be a hard endur for them all.

'But even with the companionship of his dogs and sheep, Calder was lonely. One day, when Calder was walking the slopes, he noticed that one of his dogs was missing. This wasn't unusual, as dogs are forever hunting for misadventures on the heath. What was unusual, was that it was his dearest Thistlewhip who was gone.'

'Calder whistled, but heard no response. Every one of his hounds had been trained to bark in response to his whistle, so that they might never be lost on the

moors. So, upon whistling and hearing nary a reply except for the dogs who yipped at his heels, he buttoned his coat, pulled his hat over his ears, and set out.'

As Ilke spoke the nether snatched at her words like a babe reaching for a favoured rattle. It spun them through the smoke and sparks until shadowed images began to form in the air all around the bonfire. Ashe-like trees and dogs and a solitary man formed and held in the air for a moment, before the Dogwind carried them away.

'A storm had blown in that day and its dregs were still buffeting the landscape, but Calder was determined to find Thistlewhip — while he told his dogs that he loved them all equally, Thistlewhip was by far the most intelligent, the most dutiful, and easily Calder's favourite.

'And so, as the wind danced through his legs and tried to make off with his hat, and drizzles of rain clung to his cheeks, Calder whistled and called, up and down the moors until his hands grew numb with the cold and his eyes bleary from the wind.

'He had begun to despair, when he heard, finally, a distant yip. But strangely it sounded as though it was coming from below. He blinked his eyes open and squinted against the fog and the storm. He was within spitting distance of the sea path that led down to the tidal cove. His dear Thistlewhip must have clambered down over the steep, rocky path after some quarry or wayward sheep, and gotten stuck.

'He peered over the edge of the path and down the shambling slope, but the evening fog had drawn in over the shale beach and rock pools and he could see no sign of Thistlewhip. The tide would be low, he knew, but when it rose, it rose quick, and it had already begun its ascent, judging by the moon's position in the sky.'

The crowd was silent as the bonfire roared, the wind howled, and Ilke spoke. She did not need to raise her voice, the fire and the wind would not bellow louder than she. The nether saw to that. But still, even the children quieted and listened

attentively as she described the scene and the nether performed its smoke puppetry around them.

‘Calder hurried down the sloping path, shale and clumps of shore grass tripping and sliding beneath his feet. He stumbled a lot, and his hands grew ice-cold and raw from cushioning his falls on the mossy rocks around him. Every few metres he whistled again and paused to listen for the mellow howl that came in response.

‘When he reached the slick shale beach he saw the fog-blurred outline of Thistlewhip standing next to some rock. But as Calder grew closer he realised that the rock Thistlewhip was by, was no rock, but a person.

‘A young woman, covered in cuts and bruises from the shale she had been cast upon, barely breathing. Her skin was undercut in shades of blue and grey, a dappled tapestry, like the Sc’ornsee on a tosamne day. At first, Calder thought it was from the chill of the sea and that the poor woman was frostbitten, until he remembered the old tales his mother had told him of the seals, their furs, and the people hidden beneath them.

‘Calder stared, until Thistlewhip whined the high, plaintive sound of a dog who has decided upon a course of action and cannot understand why you are not undertaking their desires. Calder launched forward, stuttering out words that might have been a greeting or a plea for the woman to wake. Thistlewhip trotted in a nervous circle. “Fine mess you’ve gotten us into, pup,” Calder grumbled when the woman would not wake.

‘He stooped and carefully lifted the woman’s head off the shale. He bundled his scarf beneath it with one hand and checked her for head injuries with the other. “Your new friend’s got some cuts and scrapes, but nothing that could knock her out cold,” Calder told Thistlewhip. The dog continued to pace. “Course,” he added, “Could be the cold what’s knocked her out.”

‘She was wearing little more than a simple shift, made out of some rough hewn material Calder didn’t recognise and it was soaked through. Calder peered

through the fog, but it still clung thickly to the ground, he could see no sign of a boat that had been dashed against the shore. Unless she had lost her boat, or her boat had lost her out in the waves and she had washed ashore on her lonesome. “No other way to get to this beach,” Calder muttered.

‘Calder was no sour-hearted monster, he’d do what he could for this lost soul, but he worried at how little help he could actually provide. He sighed at Thistlewhip, who had taken to whining and nudging the woman’s shoulder with her gentle black nose. Thistlewhip gave him a melancholy look, framed by her sea-spray fur. “Aye, but you’re a good girl, Thistle.”

‘He ruffled the dog’s ears and took off his coat. The wind and the fog snuck in against his skin, wiggling their way closer to his bones. He shivered as he wrapped the woman in his coat and carefully—’

A hollering took up beyond the light-swell of the bonfire and drowned out Ilke’s voice. She pursed her lips as her control over the wind frayed and the dancing smoke-shadows that had so enchanted her audience fluttered in and out of focus. The not-so-good-faring townspeople of Roarke had made their way to the bonfire. Ilke had hoped they would stay away; a foolish hope, but one she’d held onto nonetheless throughout the weeks leading up to the bonfire. Some of the parents who had drifted over to watch Ilke’s performance cast shuttered looks at the newcomers as they emerged, laughing and jeering, from the night.

She met the judgement-filled gaze of their leader, Poedell, head of the miners union. His face was burnished red, from drink or the wind or both, but his hair was a polished cut Ilke thought might have been fashionable in the southern cities. Once upon a time, at least. Three years he’d been in Roarke, and with each passing season he’d grown more and more argumentative. Ilke had tried to explain the traditions’ importance to him once, and only once. He’d laughed her out of the mining office.

‘This droll again?’ Poedell’s voice cut through the tale, straining the netherthread being spun in the wind.

Ilke startled, like a mutton bird when a sheepdog ran too close, and the blustering wind caught the smoke display and swept it away entirely. In front of her the crowd rippled. The miners tucked their faces into their coats as the Dogwind bel-
lowed and the shepherds frowned at the sky and the coast.

‘Poedell.’ Ilke put her hands on her hips and eyed the man who had swaggered around the crowd and into the firelit clearing she stood in. ‘You know there are rules about interrupting.’

Poedell sneered at Ilke. ‘Of course, the rules. Then by all means, continue, fair wind-tamer.’

Ilke straightened her spine and set her jaw. How could she continue when he was right *there*, a glower set firm on his face?



All around Ilke and her audience, the Dogwind was filled with nether. It howled across the moor and carried with it tales spat up by the waves of places and people from far beyond anything Roarke could imagine. It whipped through the bonfire's flames, tousled the children's hair, and whispered about scorpions the size of ships and of boats aflame with nether-light; of people who lived on the wind and creatures who built lives beneath the ocean's waves.

Why, the Dogwind howled to Ilke, *why have you stopped?*

'It's not like everyone hasn't heard this godforsaken story before,' Poedell said, voice raised against the wind. He stepped around the crowd until he stood in front of Ilke, glaring down at her, the scent of spirits on his breath. 'Man loses dog, man finds dog, man finds woman, man saves woman. Man and woman — of course — fall in love. And we're done. Why you gotta force them all to listen to it, year after year ... It's a wonder you've any one left in wee ol' Ro'ke.'

He affected the curling twang the elder townsfolk had when he said "Roarke" and his mimicry held no affection. The nether turned the air sour and Ilke had to brace on her next exhale, to make sure the words came out. *Never lose control of the tale.*

'You're welcome to leave,' Ilke reminded him, unsure if she meant the bonfire or the town. Both, most likely. She would welcome never having to see him again.

'Now, now, Ilke, I thought the whole town was welcome at the bonfire. It's tradition after all. Gather round the flames and listen to little Ilke Roarke call up ashes with the nether, instead of leaving them to their peace.'

Poedell had turned to face the crowd during his speech and his face was lit up with flames and vitriol. The wind blustered around them, slapping the bonfire's flames in a way that was no longer playful. Ilke shrunk away from Poedell, jaw clenched, as she looked out at the people of Roarke and tried to judge their reactions. The children looked bored, disappointed that the smoke figures had gone, but their

parents' expressions of quiet interest as they listened to Poedell speak sowed disquiet in her gut.

The nether that pooled in Roarke was raw and unfiltered. Strong and wild. Roarke's wellspring was the seal-salt spray and the crashing waves and the Dogwind was the only way to disperse it. To send it onwards to other places so that Roarke could continue to exist.

The people here supposedly followed the rules. To hush their children and hold their tongues when Ilke spoke to the wind. But tonight they didn't flinch when the Dogwind growled its hunger. It was like they couldn't hear it at all.

Ilke drew her shoulders back and stepped forward. She forced herself to meet Poedell's dismissive glare front on. What good was she if she couldn't keep Roarke safe?

'Traditions exist for a reason,' she said.

Poedell snorted. 'Your traditions will mean nothing if there's no town left. The mine is the only thing keeping this town fed. You think a couple stories told to a nether-filled wind is going to fill the town's coffers?'

'The mine lets out foul fumes. It poisons the wind, the air, the people. It's no good for Roarke!'

Poedell lent in close to Ilke, his nose almost touching her own. 'The only thing poisoning Roarke is the godforsaken nether that lets these people believe you.'

Ilke balled her hands into fists as she struggled to discern the line between her anger and the wind's. Mother to daughter, down through the years and the generations, her skill had been passed. Had anyone else ever had to deal with someone like Poedell? He sowed dissent, he snarled, he ruined, and, worst of all ... he had a point.

Tradition did little to keep little bellies full or the flocks hale when the endurs grew colder and the tosammes drier. Every year the Dogwind grew a little more head-strong and the nether pooled a little deeper. Because of the mine, Ilke wanted to think, but within herself she knew she had felt it before the mine.

Around her, the townspeople muttered and shuffled. The children dragged their fingertips through the leaf litter and their parents began to shiver as the wind picked up in ferocity. Guilt, which had become a familiar companion to Ilke over the years, was thick in her throat. She inhaled, trying to fill her lungs and cleanse herself of her doubt, but in a gust, the wind changed.

The Dogwind stampeded in with a wounded hound's howl. It buffeted the people, and caused the bonfire flames to surge upwards with an almighty *crack*.

Beside Ilke, Podell jumped. His eyes glittered orange in the firelight and they darted towards the coast and the dark night above the sea. Sparks rained down upon their gathering and smoldered on the mossy rocks.

'Best listen to the lass, Poedell,' one of the old herders from near the coast called out as he shied away from the bonfire. 'It's she who knows the wind best and we'd best not be forgetting that.'

'If she's the one with the control, she's the one causing it,' hollered back a miner over the cacophonous storm.

'I'm not—' Ilke tried to call, but her tongue was numb and her head was foggy with the Dogwind's rage.

She was being drawn in opposing directions. Everything within her was drawn taut. This town that she loved and its people who wouldn't listen.

'Oh, very scary, little wind tamer.' Podell's face crumpled from fear into anger as he turned to Ilke. 'You're no better than those scheming artificers in their gilded towers back in Thastor. You think you're better than us, that you know more—'

With the precision of a pickaxe striking rock, the sky split and a blade of lightning struck the bonfire with a booming crackle.

The townsfolk erupted, launching themselves away from the flames, snatching up children, and fleeing into the scrub. The bonfire shrieked and whistled and spat, its flames turned to near-white tongues that licked at the sky like a dog at a puddle on a tosamne day — thirsty and happy.

‘What have you done?’ Poedell cried as he leapt behind Ilke.

What have I done? Ilke wondered. What have you done? For the Dogwind had turned all wolf. It was lean muscle and wild belief and she couldn’t feel the start or end of it.

The rain fell like an emptied bucket, but not even the wall of water that drenched the town put out the hollering fire. The air tasted of salt and spice and Ilke knew that the nether from all over the bluffs was running to the flames, like a river to the sea. If it all reached the fire, Ilke felt certain that something would happen. Something bad. Something that Roarke would not recover from.

She opened her mouth and the storm stole the words from the tip of her tongue. Panic coiled its way up her spine and the crack of a bursting log made Ilke flinch backward. She bumped into Poedell, who shoved her away.

‘You’ll be the death of this town,’ he snarled.

Generation after generation of Roarke women, since the first of them had washed up on that shore, had tamed this wind and this coast. Ilke had been raised on these moors with moss under her fingernails and scraped knees from the rocks. She had stood in the tidal cove, watched the horizon and wondered where they had come from, but known that she would never wish to be anywhere but here.

Her anger was sudden. It lit through her like the storm, but it cleansed instead of destroyed. As it burnt through her, she felt clear-headed for the first time in

a long time. The worst was here, there was no longer any reason to worry. Now, it was time for action.

‘Perhaps you are right,’ Ilke shouted at Poedell, her voice finally her own and her words rising above the wind. ‘But I cannot see a way through when all you do stand as a blockade.’

Poedell’s eyes were wide.

‘Tradition matters. And though I will forever hate its blight, the mine matters too. They can both be true, without excluding the other.’

With bonfire at her back and the storm-sky lit once more with lightning, Ilke wondered what kind of sight she made. Drenched to her skin and surrounded by a nether-wrought storm she had failed to prevent. However she looked, Poedell merely watched her, his hair plastered to his skull and water dripping off his nose. But, he was listening.

Around them, the Dogwind whipped as if straining against the ground’s hold on their feet and the air shivered with nether like a coiled snake.

‘Whatever you have to say, however you suggest we reconcile the two, I will listen, all I ask is that you listen in turn.’ Ilke strained her voice to be heard. ‘But until then, whatever else happens, I cannot leave my tale undone.’

A pause in the wind. Just long enough for her hoarse shout to hang in the space between them. Poedell — jaw clenched and eyes both furious and fearful — nodded.

Ilke took a breath.

The End.

Ally Bodnaruk can be found on [twitter](#)



[Sweetheart](#)

Dewaré: De-wa-ray

[Penance](#)

Daewynn: Day-o-win

Armaghan: Arm-a-gan

[The Dogwind's Tale](#)

Ilke: Ilk

Poedell: Poe-dell

Endur: En-der (winter)

Tosamnes: Tow-sam-nas (summer)

Roarke: Rork (a town in the mountains between Thastor and Belmor)

Scolorn Sea: Scu-lorn Sea (the sea that stretches between Thastor and Belmor)

Scorn'see: Scorn-see (how the locals in Roarke pronounce it)



[Sweetheart](#)

[Penance](#)

Death, funeral, blood

[The Dogwind's Tale](#)

Aggression, belittling, bullying



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We also acknowledge the traditional and ancestral land of the Interior Salish peoples, in particular, the Sinixt, the Syilx, the Secwepemc and the Ktunaxa. We respectfully honour their traditions and culture.