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THE ALE BOY'S FEAST



Prologue

A mystery led the old man from the shelter of the trees.

Krawg, raising his picker-staff like a spear, pursued the creature eastward into the open and watched it plunge down the slope toward the River Throanscall. A flash of green wings, an unfamiliar chirp, and the scampering prey was gone, vanishing into the riverbank grasses that stood shoulder-high.

He paused, remembering Captain Tabor Jan's orders.

At the travelers' supertime counting, the counters had come up short. Growling, the captain had handed out shrill-whistles and sent out a search party to comb the surrounding forest for Milora, a young glassworker who had strayed. The seekers were not to move beyond the safe range of a shout as they fanned out through the trees.

But the River Throanscall was an endless sigh as it coursed through the seed-heavy reeds and that familiar music attracted him.

"Bird got away, lucky rascal. Must be rough, don't you think, Warney — havin' wings but never flyin'?"

The snarling reply came not from his friend but his stomach.

"Wish I was carryin' a gorrel trap," he sulked. "Whatever it was, I bet it'd crisp up good in a pan. I'm so krammin' sick of nuts and seeds." He stirred the dry husks of dead leaves with his harvesting rod and watched the river grasses waver. "Could be the start of a story, I s'pose. There once was a bird who couldn't fly, until one day when—"

That blur of glittering green burst from the grasses and bounded toward him. He dropped to the root-rumpled ground.

It was not a bird but a corpulent puffdragon, flinging itself about like a grasshopper in the autumn twilight.

Peering out from beneath his leaf-pasted cloak, Krawg watched while the dragon played. It seemed to jump just for the crackle and crunch of it. But at times, it paused mid-scamper, attentive, its gill-slit ears flaring and one scaly foot lifted like the paw of a hunting hound.

Though it was small and lithe as a housecat, it seemed large and dangerous when it trotted to within an inch of Krawg's nose and spread the sails of those those useless, translucent wings, which made a sound like shaken bedsheets. Hoping puffdragons were as dayblind as common wisdom claimed, Krawg fought the urge to blink.

It blasted a sneeze, and the flare singed the rowdy ruckus of whiskers on Krawg's upper lip. Then the creature wandered off to snuffle through dead leaves for a many-legged meal.

"We'll be seein' more of their kind, won't we, Warney?" Krawg whispered. "Only fire-breathers like that can survive in a forest where Deathweed snakes through the ground."

He thought of the black branches. At any moment one might thrust up through the soil, impale his chest, and drag him into the ground. Twitchy, he rose and walked down the slope, stabbed the marshy ground with his picker-staff all the way to the river's edge. He did not want to think about Deathweed.

"Here's another story I might tell. There once was a puffdragon who leapt before he looked...."

Silverblue water breathed a blanket of mist that beaded on his eyelashes. He'd spent many a day strolling along the Throanscall's melodious strand. But if he listened to complaints from his neck, knees, and back, those days were coming to a close.

The river's rush could not drown out the forest's unnatural groan. Autumn was dawning, but these Cragavar trees were already skeletal, shaking off leaves and shedding their bark, exposing sickly flesh like plague-wracked people begging for a cure. They clacked branches together as if to keep themselves awake.

He tightened his picker-staff grip, desire rotting into resentment. Most creatures of the ground and air had vanished from the Expanse, caught by the underground menace or fleeing its clutches. Krawg had pursued that mysterious chirp, compelled by hunger, and, even more, by a longing to see feathers lift a mystery into the air, to hear a song take to the sky.

So when a cry pierced the dusk, and a solitary shadow winged low over the river — a stark and simple rune written on the sky's purple scroll — he held his breath.

Beauty.

He glanced about to make sure he was alone, then smeared his tears with his sleeve. It was a bird. A bird with tousled crestfeathers and a ribbon tail gliding northward. In his chest, a pang rang like an alarm bell. He wanted to join it there, suspended.

“Ballyworms, Warney. What's wrong with me?”

The bird sailed away, tilting, a kite with a broken string.

“Milora's gone missing, Warney. But you know who I'm thinkin' about instead.” He swiped at the reeds on either side, sending seed-heads sluicing into the river. “And no, it isn't you.”

Staring north, he watched the bird merge with the darkling boundary, the Forbidding Wall, which stretched from the western coast all the way into to the impassable Heatlands of the east. Those mountains loomed as formidable as the front line of an army. In ancient tales that all four houses embraced, they were all that stood between the Expanse and a terrible curse.

“We're not forsaken in the wild anymore, Warney. We're the king's helpers now. So why do I fret as much as ever?”

House Abascar's King Cal-raven—was he lost? Slain by beastmen in the Core? Caught by Deathweed? Jordam the beastman had returned to Bel Amica without him, reporting that Cal-raven's mother had been slain in their attempts to free Cent Regus slaves.

After several days of silence, Abascar's Captain Tabor Jan announced he'd take a small company and make the journey that the king had planned, following his map to find that mysterious place where Cal-raven hoped to establish New Abascar.

“So what happened to you, Warney?” grumbled Krawg. “Why'd you go missing on departure day? The captain wouldn't wait. And now here I am, on my way north toward Fraughtenwood, with nobody to try out my stories on.”

He scribbled in the air with the picker-staff. “Once upon a Keeper's footprint, a naked child was found...”

The reeds upriver suddenly rustled. For a moment, Krawg thought it might be a memory. They rustled again.

“Freakish teeth of Grandmother Sunny!” He turned his picker-staff so that the apple-hook end was behind him. He’d sharpened the blade end in case he ran into something fierce. But his three practice throws had fallen short of the targets. He didn’t want to miss again. “Let it be something feastable,” he muttered. “Not something nasty and green.”

A cool line of sweat trickled down behind his ear as he took a step forward.

Nothing dove into the water. Nothing bolted back to the forest.

His feet began to sink into the sludge. *You’re more scared to see a child than a monster.*

Reaching, he carefully parted a curtain of grass.

At once, he remembered his purpose. For there she lay, the missing woman, curled in sleep on a broad riverstone. She still wore the winding white glassmaker’s wrap around her head, but her woolen cloak was dark and heavy — a gift from House Bel Amica’s Queen Thesera. Milora, the glassmaker’s daughter. Milora, mother of that rambunctious child Obrey.

If Milora’s little girl was any older, I’d swear she was Auralia.

Krawg drew out the shrill-whistle and put it to his lips.

That’s when the puffdragon, which Krawg suddenly noticed lying in Milora’s embrace, flicked out its forked tongue and drew back its lip from its flame-blackened teeth.

He screamed into the whistle.

The dragon burst from Milora’s arms and was gone. The woman leapt to her feet. And Krawg stumbled and fell with a splash into the shallows.

Milora flailed like a puppet on unsteady strings.

“Beggin’ your pardon, my lady,” Krawg blurted. “Everybody’s lookin’ for you.”

Milora’s eyes narrowed. Then she lifted Krawg’s picker-staff and offered him the apple-hook end. He took it, raising himself from the ground’s dark glue. “I just meant to rest a while,” she said. “But there’s something about the river. It makes me feel safe. Close to home.”

“You hurt?”

She ignored him, looking up toward the mountains. “Any news of the king?”

“Out here? How would it come to us?”

“He’s alive,” Milora insisted.

“I reckon you’re right.” Krawg tried to smile kindly, as if to reassure a troubled child. But then he remembered seeing his smile in a Bel Amican mirror, and decided against it. “Come with me. Tomorrow, we’re takin’ you and Obrey back where you came from.”

“If you know where I came from, you know more than me.”

He led her uphill toward the trees. “Thought that glass mine in the mountains was your home. And you went to House Bel Amica because you had a fever.”

“I was poisoned. The Seers wanted to bring the glass miners to Bel Amica and control them. Frits refused. And suddenly I got sick.”

“Cruel, them Seers.”

She shrugged. “They said I had bad blood, and that they’d cure me. Said they’d bring back my memories too.”

“But they didn’t. Did they?”

Milora pulled something off the edge of her cloak—a scamperpinch. It scissored the air with curved, shiny claws, and its many legs flailed. “Look,” she said, strangely unoffended by the ugly marsh-dweller, curious as a child. “He wants a hold on something.”

“How many years you spent?” *Twenty five*, he thought.

“What would you guess?”

“Nineteen,” he said. He’d learned it was wise to subtract.

“Wish I knew.” Milora touched a finger to her temple. “Crack in my head. Lots of years have spilled right out. Somewhere along the way.”

They walked on in silence, back into the trees where Krawg beat at the bracken in search of the path he’d made. Then he turned to offer the staff as a walking stick. “Surely your papa knows.”

“Perhaps. I can’t... I can’t remember him.”

Krawg began to chew at his lip. Wasn’t Frits waiting for them just ahead in the camp?

“All I can tell you,” she said, “is that Frits found me on a mountainside. That way.” She pointed north. “He woke me and asked me questions. I reached for what any head should hold. But the shelves were bare. I could only tell him this — I’d been looking for somebody. But that, too, was gone.”

“You still don’t remember?”

She smiled on a secret. “I do remember. It came back.”

He kicked at bracken. “Don’t leave me strung up in the hangers, now! Who was it?”

Milora raised her fists up high, stretching, and the front of her dark woolen cloak parted to reveal her gown, which glittered as if it were made of dark scales. She had woven it from the silky flakes brushed from the outer layers of brownstalks. She sighed, smiling softly, and whispered, “Cal-raven. King of House Abascar. I recognized him in the Bel Amican glassworks.”

Krawg opened his mouth, silent as if a bristlefly blocked his throat.

“You’re wondering why. Well, I felt a rush of heat when I saw him, like I had hold of something for a moment. But it slipped away. And what would it matter? Cal-raven’s a king. To him, I’m just a homeless stranger whose memories were knocked from her head.”

Krawg shrugged. “We’re all homeless out here, in these wicked woods.”

“I certainly agree with you there,” she replied.

Krawg wondered again where Warney had gone. He took a swing at a hollow mud-pod, an abandoned owl nest that swung like a pendulum on a dead vine. “Everything’s gone but those puffdragons, darting about and chewing up the peelin’ bark.”

“Kindling for their bellies,” she said. “Aren’t they marvelous?”

Krawg flinched.

Faint red flowered in the distance — torches circling the camp.

“Milora!” Obrey came hurtling through the bracken in mad excitement. “We thought you’d gotten lost! Were you lost?”

“What’re you doing alone away from camp?” Krawg growled. “It’s too dangerous for little girls!”

Obrey, smug, folded her arms. “I escaped.”

Milora laughed. “Who — or what — are you supposed to be?” Even in the dusk, it was evident that the girl had been braiding coils of red bark into her hair.

“I’m House Abascar’s queen,” Obrey announced. “If King Cal-raven comes back, he’ll need a queen to make him happy.”

“Well, little queen of Abascar, I hope you’ll pardon me for being late.” Milora gave Obrey a playful shove. “Go on. Tell the others we’re coming.”

“It’s straight to the dungeon for you!” Obrey shouted, striving unsuccessfully to look serious. “That’s where crooks belong!” Then she burst into giggles and happily fought her way back through the winding weeds.

“Somebody’s been dreaming,” Milora sighed. “Comes so easily to her.”

“A few more nights, you and your daughter’ll be home in the glass mine.” Krawg stepped up to the edge of the camp’s broad clearing.

“It’ll be good to see the workshops again,” she said. “But you’ve got me all wrong. Frits’s glassworks aren’t my home. I wandered there. He calls me Milora because that was his daughter’s name. She died.”

“Milora’s not your true name?” He scowled. “Somebody must’ve knocked you on the head with a rock.”

“Well, maybe when I sleep you’ll hit me with another. Bring everything back.” She took his arm and rested her head on his shoulder. “Thanks for rescuing me from that vicious dragon,” she laughed, her voice warm with affection. “You’re a good man, Krawg. You feel like... family.”

Krawg was so startled, he didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

As Milora pulled away to chase after Obrey, Krawg paused to examine his thorn-shredded leggings. As he dabbed at the crisscrossing scratches on his legs, a sudden memory seized him. He didn’t have his picker-staff. And Milora wasn’t carrying it.

He turned around in dismay, afraid that he’d lost it. But no, there it was.

He went back several strides to uproot it from the ground, and then gasped, holding it out before him with two hands.

The picker-staff was no longer a dull, dark wood. It sparkled, glazed with some kind of glittering golden dust. Flourishes of red grass tassled the ends.

He searched the shadows between the tents for another look at his new friend, and a surge of wild hope blazed up behind his ribs like a flame within a lantern.

Chapter One

The Wayward Mage

Like anxious road-sweepers, dust columns whirled between the purple dunes, brushing bones, branches, and snakeskin aside in their hurry.

The muskgrazers, shaggy as haystacks, ignored the whirlwinds. They hung their hairy heads and thrust curly, sinuous tongues into the grit, probing for burrow-birds and redthistle bulbs. After the dust phantoms passed, the cattle shook clouds of debris from their golden hair.

A large and featherless dustowl raised a taloned foot, seeking to snatch flea-mice from a muskgazer's matted hair. If the owl was quick, she could catch one as it scurried around a haunch or a knee. The muskgrazers, yearning to be free of the itchy, tickling pests, permitted the owls' attention.

Watching from beneath his black, wide-brimmed hat, the carriage driver lounged under a dead parch-tree, taking refuge from the late-afternoon sun at the herd's edge, resting and waiting for his pursuer.

In this bleak and barren country, hunter and hunted could, using farglasses, track each other's movements more than a half-day's travel away. When the driver had noticed the stranger approaching, he determined to wait. No sane man would pursue a carriage across the desert on foot unless he was desperate.

A sleek red hiss-lizard perched anxiously on his shoulder, watching the top of the northernmost dune. When the stranger appeared, wrapped in a bright red tent of a cloak, stark against the curling wave of evening stormclouds, the reptile tasted the air with her forked tongue.

Few things amused the driver more than muskgrazers interrupted while grazing. This bright-robed newcomer bothered them. Or maybe it was the advancing storm. Whatever the trouble, they were suddenly eager to move off, skating on the long bone-railed feet that kept them from sinking in sand. But their tongues were still deeply rooted in the ground. Stuck, the muskgrazers choked as they sought to retract those thick, purple lines.

Rain began to fall as the approaching stranger slid down the dune. "A ride," he shouted. "I must drink at Mad Sun's."

The driver's voice was made of dust. "I'm bound for House Jenta." He raised a Bel Amican rain canopy as if to shield himself, but his mind was on the hidden blade in its rod.

"Take me to Mad Sun's and I'll buy all you can drink. Then, take me to the Jentan harbor, and I'll give you more besides."

"Boating to the Wildflower Isle? Is it true those lonely Jentan ladies are anxious to find good husbands?"

“Don’t presume to know a mage’s business.” There was a growl behind the mesh of the stranger’s dark, featureless mask. “I’m not asking you why you’re off to bother with those Aerial tyrants.”

Nervous, the driver’s lizard wriggled down between his vest and his shirt. “You don’t consider yourself one of the Jentan Aerial?” The driver laughed quietly. “Are you the infamous mage who turned against his brothers?”

The stranger brushed sand from the sleeves of his cloak. “You would have abandoned them too. Who could live among such villains? The Jentan mages tricked their own people into moving off the mainland, then stranded them on that island.”

“You’re off to join the island uprising?” The driver knelt and tugged the wooden wedges out from under the carriage wheels.

The stranger didn’t answer. Instead, he pointed to the departing muskgrazers. “I’ve traveled for days without a glimpse of a creature. But down here, they’re still moving in herds. Is the desert discouraging the spread of the Deathweed?”

The dust-owl remained, her head turned sideways, her gaze shifting from the stranger to the driver and back.

“That owl knows me,” said the stranger.

The driver sensed a smug smile behind the mask. “Maybe,” he shrugged. “Or maybe she’s just hungry. But who am I to doubt you? You’re just like the tales say. You travel alone. You commune with the animals. What an honor to meet you, Scharr ben Fray. And out here, on the hairless chest of nowhere.”

The owl blinked her apple-sized eyes, opened her leathery wings, then rose awkwardly into a zephyr and was gone.

“An Abascar man, then?” said the stranger. “The accent says so. But I don’t remember you from my years of counseling King Cal-marcus.”

“I lived there. Once. Before the collapse.” The driver stood and urged the stranger up the rope-ladder steps and into the carriage. “You must have been too busy to notice.” He followed into the shelter.

As the canvas closed, muffling the sound of the rain, the stranger spoke softly as if casting a spell. “A hundred years I’ve been away from my homeland, counseling kings, questioning birds, digging up mysteries. I’ve missed Mad Sun’s. My stories will buy my drinks. You’ll see.” He did not remove his mask.

“You talk like I should pay for the privilege of carryin’ you.” The driver could see the stranger’s boastful smile now; the glowstone’s light caught the glint of teeth behind the mask’s dark mesh. “If you’re the prodigal mage of House Jenta, you’d better be ready to prove it. At Mad Sun’s, they’re rough on posers.”

He climbed through the slit in the canvas at the carriage front to seat himself on the driving bench, then affixed his rain canopy to shelter him and seized the storm-slick reins.

“You’re carrying a lot of bricks,” the passenger mused. “Building something?”

The driver ignored the question. Soon he heard the stranger rustling around in the carriage, unstacking and restacking the bricks to see what might be concealed in the piles. He smiled and spurred the horses on.

The horses flinched at the lightning that smote the sand. The storm pummeled the desert until it ran out of rain. They pressed on a day that would have been silent but for the

passenger's snoring, and then through another cool night, watching stars streak across the sky as if frightened by the moon. They passed between pillars of stone upon which desert monkeys danced and screeched, and sand-spiders scurried out of the horses' way.

By sunrise, they were moving among mirages of ghostly green trees and deep blue pools. They steered around vast mirrors of new glass formed by lightning strikes. And they crossed the paths of two more carriages, whose drivers glared at them suspiciously.

At midday, they'd paused in the lee of a massive stone tooth, and the horses slurped from the water stored in the heavy pouches of skin at their throats. The driver shared a packet of grains and seeds with the passenger, but never glimpsed his face.

That afternoon, they came alongside a swarm of writhing dust-wyrms just beneath the sand's surface forming a turbulent line that wound between the dunes. The wyrms were poisonous and violent; travelers did not dare cross a wyrm-stream without a bridge.

So they rode on until they sighted a simple stone arch—not a natural span, but a stonemaster's bridge—that offered safe passage. Beyond, they descended a slope toward a cluster of stone huts. Horses, vawns, and beasts of burden were bowed low by the heat outside a large pavilion of bricks and branches. A storm of voices, a clamor of dishes, and the heavy autumn scents of cider and beer wafted from the windows.

The hiss-lizard returned to the driver's shoulder to whisper in his ear. He stroked the creature's rugged back, dampening his finger with the cooling oils that oozed out between the scales, and then drew lines across his burning brow.

"Sharpen your stories," he called to the passenger. "We've come to Mad Sun's."

Jayda Weese, manager of Mad Sun's, rose from beneath the blankets spread in the shade of the parch-tree behind his bar. He rolled and lit a leafwrap, clenched it between his teeth, and muttered, "Yup. More customers."

"Someday the youngsters will do the work for us." The leisurely yawn under the covers belonged to Meladi, his wife. "And you'll get to kiss me all day long."

Weese shrugged himself into his leather vest and tied his curtain of yellow hair into a cord. "Yup," he said.

He walked through the back door and passed through the steamy kitchen with a nod to his workers—Hunch, the hulking custodian and carpenter who only ever asked him questions, and Rik-pool, his fast-handed dishwasher.

"Two," he said, meaning the customers he'd heard approaching.

He thrust a heavy curtain aside and stepped into the narrow span behind the bar, inhaling the heavy haze of beer, sweat, rainwet skincoats, dust, and hot grease from fried gorrel strips. The sensation always caused a few moments of happy dizziness. Every afternoon, the place became an oven, heated by the sun and the flaring tempers of the angry drinkers who circled the five round tables. So long as it was hot, so long as they were engrossed in debate, they'd keep on drinking and Weese would be happy. He hummed an old Jentan soldiers' song as he gathered empty clay goblets from the bar.

Two travelers pushed through the swinging doors and crossed the sand-swept floor to the bar. They drew glances from all directions.

The one wrapped from head to toe in red—even his face concealed in a mask—paused and pondered the tables while the glances became gazes. The other newcomer, a carriage

driver with a wide-brimmed hat, slumped against the bar and stared wearily down at its polished wood.

Weese sensed that the drive deserved pity for having drawn this garish passenger across the desert. He gave him a mug of dark, foamy ale. “First one’s free for drivers,” he said in what was his very best attempt to sound welcoming.

“You sound as bad as I feel,” said the driver. “Hard times for soldiers out of work?”

Weese sighed.

It was, he supposed, obvious. He still wore his long yellow hair tied back in a tail in the tradition of Jentan Defenders. But his days of swords and shields were behind him. The word “freedom,” tattooed down his arm, declared that he had broken away from dependence on the Aerial—the society of mages who ruled the Jentan School.

House Jenta’s Defenders had once fought beastmen and thieves. But three generations ago, the mages had changed history. Promising their people that they would flourish if they separated themselves from the Expanse and its corruption, the Aerial led everyone out of the desert settlement and took them in ships to Wildflower Island on the southern horizon.

Then, as Jenta’s island settlement grew, the mages had combined their powers to contain their people there. Returning to the School to pursue their meditations and studies in solitude, they kept only a small company of servants.

In time, the mages’ need for protectors dried up. They were powerful enough to defend themselves, and too self-absorbed to care about sustaining any kind of society.

So the Defenders, men with no society to protect, became self-reliant, hiring themselves out to defend the scattered clans of herdsmen in the desert—cattlemen and shepherds who were similarly abandoned by the house they had once served.

In these days of independence, Weese had become known throughout the southern dustlands as a brewer, a cactus hog roaster, and a club-wielding punisher of reckless inebriates. (A collection of blunt instruments decorated the wall behind the bar.) He was the most beloved brewer in the region for, since the mages’ had lost any care for art, he seemed to be the only brewer left in the region. So he shipped generous amounts of his craft off to Wildflower Island, hoping to cheer the angry, troubled settlers there.

Thus, Weese was the largest sponge for news and rumors in the Jentan territory. He earned as much for his information as he did for his unremarkable drink.

As the driver reached for the glass, Weese pulled it back. “Who’s yer smug, prancing passenger, driver?”

The red-robed stranger had settled on a bench at a round, crowded table, where herdsmen were placing bets on a tabletop duel between two broad-shelled, grappling sandpinchers. The herdsmen regarded the masked visitor quietly, studying his sensational costume.

“He’s not one of them Seers, is he?”

The driver scowled. “Says he’s the prodigal mage.”

Weese snorted. “The third Scharr ben Fray this season.” He released the glass and reached backward, closing his hand over the handle of a polished stick the size of his forearm. Smacking it against his open palm, he said, “It’s gonna get ugly.”

“He’s expecting a hero’s welcome.”

“He might have had one if they hadn’t already bought drinks for the other Scharr ben Fray at that table.” Weese nodded toward the elderly longbeard seated next to the newcomer.

The driver licked a line of foam from the side of the glass. “Why are herdsmen so eager to believe the prodigal mage will return?”

“Simple. They hate the other mages of the Aerial. Scharr ben Fray, he’s different. He’s the one mage who walked away in protest. He went off to serve kings and commoners alike. He made something of his life. He’s the last living remnant of the ancient government that the Jentan Defenders were proud to protect. Some hope he’ll return to restore the house to its past glories.”

The driver looked over his shoulder. “Why do you let these imposters carry on?”

“The prodigal’s myth is powerful. It draws crowds. And crowds buy drinks.”

The driver smiled. “The prodigal’s myth?”

Weese shrugged. “Think Scharr ben Fray’s still alive out there?”

“I hear all kinds of stories,” said the driver. “Killed by beastmen. Killed by the Seers. Killed by Deathweed. Killed in a cave collapse by his own stonemastery. Who knows? The sightings go on. Scharr’s been seen helping House Abascar’s survivors. He’s been seen traveling with a young boy rumored to be the world’s last firewalker. He’s been seen in the shadow of the Forbidding Wall. Some say they’ve even seen him riding a dragon.”

“A dragon? Haven’t been dragons in the world since before our fathers were born.” Weese took the driver’s empty glass. “Enough about rumors. Give me real news, and I’ll pour you another.”

“How’s this?” The driver drew an invisible map through beer puddles on the bar.

He spoke of House Bel Amica on the western coastline. Deathweed had invaded the harbor, forcing Queen Thesera to move her ships south of the Rushtide Inlet.

Then, with beer fizzing on his upper lip, he described turmoil in the Cent Regus Core, as beastmen fought for control after the death of their chieftain. “The beastmen are desperate and dying,” he said. “They’re cut off from the source of their strength. But Deathweed is spreading like the roots of some accursed tree. And if we don’t find a way to fight back against it soon, we’ll all have to find new homes across the sea.”

Weese took away the driver’s grease-smudged glass and gave him a new one twice its size and full to the brim. “What about House Abascar’s survivors? Rumors have them wandering Bel Amica’s streets.”

The driver confirmed it. The remnant of Abascar, he said, now lived under House Bel Amica’s protection, while their King Cal-raven had gone missing during a venture to rescue slaves from beastmen. “Some say he’s been seen haunting the ruins of House Abascar. Like a man who’s lost his mind.”

“I want news,” said Weese. “Not rumors.”

The driver grinned. “You think that story’s strange? Try this one on. A sky man’s been seen over Deep Lake, soaring on bright golden wings.”

“A sky man?” Weese raised his eyebrows. “That nursery story’s still around? It’s tired as talk of the Keeper.”

Hunch, the custodian, moved among the tables with his broom, bent low as if he were watching for some lost gemstone in the dust. As he passed behind the driver, he leaned in and murmured, “Shall I water your horses, son?”

The driver nodded, surprised. "They'll be grateful, I'm sure." Then he leaned across the bar. "Say, what'll you charge me for a bowl of Ribera stew?"

"Ribera stew?" Weese narrowed his eyes. "I haven't heard that name in years. I bought this place from Ribera Dan just before he died. Long time ago."

A mug smashed at the corner table. Uproarious laughter exploded from the drinkers there. Weese, teeth clenched, reached for the wooden club.

The bearded geezer stood and pointed an accusatory finger at the red-cloaked stranger. "Me? A liar? I'm the real Scharr ben Fray. Everybody here knows it!"

A small man with a Bel Amican glass over one of his eyes squeaked in the longbeard's defense. "I'd walk out of here now if I was you. This is the prodigal mage. I'm travelin' with him to chronicle his past for posterity!"

The stranger calmly pulled his mask up from under his chin so that he could take a swig of beer. Then he said, "We'll see if his stories can match mine."

"Shtories?" roared a drunkard. "Forget about shtories? We wanna shee tricks'n'powers! Scharr ben Fray, he talksh to animalsh!"

The herdsmen agreed. It was time to expose the liar with a test. In a flourish that seemed rather magical itself, they suddenly produced two birdcages and planted them on the table before the rivals.

Both men stared at the nervous birds. Both offered interpretations of what the chirps meant. The intoxicated audience quickly concluded that they had no way of verifying these translations. The cages were removed and set aside on the window sill just inside the door.

"Stonemastery," rasped the red rider, turning to shake his opponent's hand. "Which one of us can mold stone as if it were clay?"

The longbeard did not accept the handshake. "I'm not a performing monkey," he barked. "I'm leaving." Then he began to groan, his face reddening, his hands splayed on the table, pressing as he tried to stand.

The herdsmen gasped.

The longbeard's rump remained stuck to the bench.

"He's glued!" someone shouted. "His backside's been affixed by stonemastery!"

The newcomer stood and bowed.

Weese began to tap the club against the bar, thrusting out his chest of sweat-glazed muscles to remind his customers that he was watching.

"Well, then." The driver drained his glass. "My passenger said he'd prove it. Now he'll want to move on." He slid unsteadily from his bar stool and staggered toward the door. "I'll prepare the horses." He waved a friendly farewell to the birdcages. The twittering birds fell silent, watching him go.

Meanwhile, the red-robed stranger made slow progress, his hands raised as if to deflect the praises of herdsmen who followed him to the door.

As Weese calmly dragged a towel down the length of the bar, he looked at the birds in their cages. They were staring out the window, watching the driver.

As the new hero and his admirers left the bar, Weese hurried to the table where the longbeard was furious trying to free himself from the stone bench.

“He’s no mage!” the longbeard snarled, spitting a spray of beer. “That wasn’t stonemastery! Can’t you see? This here’s just a plate of fast-drying clay. He slipped it beneath me while I was standing. I just didn’t see him do it.”

“Another imposter?” Weese sighed. “I thought we might really have Scharr ben Fray in our midst this time. Let me get my tools. We’ll set you loose so you can run.”

“Run? I’m not running anywhere.”

In the distance, Weese could hear carriage wheels and the horses’ *trip-trap*. The departing carriage had reached the stone bridge over the wrym-stream.

“That mob? They’re coming back. And they’re going to punish you for lying.”

The old man man’s anger vanished on a sudden surge of fear. He fixed Weese with a pleading stare and stammered, “I’m an actor. Sometimes I... I just like to practice. Why would they punish me?”

“They spent drink money on you.” Weese jerked a blade from his belt and cut a square from the back of the old man’s leather trousers. “And worse, you get their hopes up. They all want to meet the real Scharr ben Fray. He’s independent. Untethered. Won’t take orders from anybody. He is, to all of us betrayed by the Aerial, a hero.”

Just then, the cheers and laughter outside diminished. In the awkward hush, Weese sensed new troubles brewing.

“They’re coming.” The imposter leapt forward, dashing like a young athlete through the bar and out the back door, his hind parts plain to see.

Weese ran to the swinging doors and stepped outside. The mob of herdsmen were not coming back. They were charging toward the bridge. The carriage was rumbling off crookedly into the distance as it had no driver. And the red-robed stranger was on the bridge over the Wrymstream, down on all fours.

“What happened?”

“The driver!” Rik-pool the dishwasher exclaimed, breathless with astonishment. Wiping his soapy hands on a towel, he went on. “The driver kicked the mage out of his carriage. Then he gave the fellow a reprimand. And the mage... he sank up to his elbows in the stone of the bridge!”

Weese blinked. “Wait. You’re telling me that the driver’s a stonemaster?”

“See? That red fellow’s stuck on the bridge. Hands and knees sealed in the stone. ” Raising an eyebrow, Rik-pool added, “Perhaps he’s not the real Scharr ben Fray after all.”

“Of course he isn’t.” Wiping his tattooed arm across his brow, Weese looked out at the escaping carriage. “You think the real Scharr ben Fray would come bragging into Mad Sun’s? He would know that the Aerial has eyes and ears everywhere.”

But that driver, Weese thought. He knew so much about happenings all across the Expanse. And it turns out he’s a stonemaster.

“Poor imposter,” said Rik-pool as the man on the bridge was surrounded by angry drunkards. “He’s gonna lose more than his fancy red costume.”

“I think it’s closing time.” Weese pushed back through the swinging doors. Then he took the heavier front door—the sliding gate that would seal the bar—and mightily dragged it shut. Circling the room, he pulled down the shutters, then jumped over the bar to grab his best fightstick — the one with a concealed blade.

Out front, the red-robed imposter was howling through the herdsmen’s assault.

Out back, to the crack of a whip, the longbeard's vawn was galloping away. *Gonna be an uncomfortable journey for that old fool's backside*, Weese thought.

Slipping out the back, he hurried to the bundle of blankets where Meladi was still, somehow, asleep. "It's time, my joy. I'm taking our carriage. I'm off to tell the Aerial that I've seen Scharr ben Fray."

A hand emerged from the blanket, waving him off. "Bring back that reward. We've got spawn to feed."

In moments, the wheels of Weese's carriage were grinding through the sand. Even though the vawn groaned with effort, their progress was slow. The wagon seemed heavier than usual. Weese noticed this, but did not investigate. His thoughts were distracted.

"Saw him," he sighed. "Finally. With my own two eyes."

Then he fell into fantasies of collecting his reward from the mages, taking Meladi and the children, and escaping to Wildflower Isle, where he could train up young rioters in preparation for the day when the people would take back House Jenta and bury the mages for good.

"Freedom." He flexed his tattooed arm.

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