

The Empty Ones

"In the night, the Empty Ones come," the boy admitted, voice barely above a whisper. There were no empty ones as far as the priests of the One were concerned. There were no Empty Ones or leech souls or hollow eyes or weasel spirits. All they were was superstition. Superstition was the gateway to heresy and Hask was not about to become a heretic. He lived with the priests, practicing, and praying with them that one day, when he was old enough, they would accept him into their ranks. But as dearly as he cared to be good and right and approved of, he also knew what he had seen that night and many nights before.

He had still been reluctant to say it. The women, dyers and weavers from town, their hands stained permanently indigo from their work, always said there was power in words. Naming the formless things of the dark gave them the power of being. And, so, he had hesitated, but the man who was asking had reassured him that he would not be punished and had pushed him to speak the full truth. That man was the high priest. So, Hask answered.

"You see the Empty Ones," the high priest confirmed. He was large and dark, made even darker by the elaborate robes of his rank, which he wore in white-speckled blacks and indigos. His eyes were ocean blue against his skin, like puddles on a fallow field. There was nothing Hask would not tell him. There was nothing anyone who followed the way of the One would conceal from him. He was the symbol, the confidant, the enactor on this earth. His name

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from birth was Ione Mai Ayath, but everyone called him "Grandfather" since his anointing as high priest, which had occurred long before Hask was even born.

He sat in silent thought for a while. He appeared to be taking Hask's words very seriously. Hask did not know if this should make him happy or concerned. He clasped his small hands at waist level and shifted nervously. While Grandfather sat, he was left standing.

"This is not the first I've heard of the matter," Grandfather let slip. "Women from the city have told me they have seen Empty Ones creeping around the docks and near to our building. I believe you, Haska," he concluded gently, trying to comfort the anxious child with his use of the diminutive.

Hask's fingers fell apart and his hands dropped to his sides as he reacted to this surprising response. The other priests warned vehemently against superstition, but the high priest himself believed these things were true? How had this situation come to be?

Could one honestly ask such thing of the high priest while retaining a proper degree of respect? It didn't seem possible, so Hask did not speak.

But Grandfather did not need to hear the words. He could read the question right out of the boy's wide eyes. "It would be best for you not to speak of this to anyone else, Haska. Most of our priests have not seen the Empty Ones and they would treat you improperly over something they do not understand."

Hask's lips parted, dry and pink. Maybe he could ask. This might be his single opportunity to take such a leap of faith. It seemed to him that he and Grandfather were more

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alike than he had ever realized. He sucked in a deep breath through his mouth and exchanged the courage he drew from the air for words. "If the Empty Ones are real, why aren't the others allowed to believe?"

This was a wise question. Grandfather leaned back slightly, slouching. Perhaps he had taken Hask for more of a child than he was. He closed his eyes, considering his answer, and then opened them, seeing the boy anew. "Because the Empty Ones are unholy things and not seen by everyone. It is a slippery slope from belief in the true night terrors that a select few can see and an undifferentiated belief in all the rumors and superstitions that flit across the continent. Not everyone can be counted upon to understand the difference. I do not speak of what I see because it is easier this way. It has been the same for a long time and for very many others before me."

The words were not simple, but Hask felt he grasped a basic understanding of what Grandfather was trying to say. "Does anyone else here see them?"

"Not to my knowledge, but I've never asked. I do my best to avoid speaking of such things. It's not something to worry the other priests about."

"But what if the Empty Ones do something? What if they hurt someone who can't see them? How do you explain it?" Hask worried. He had felt the ill intent of the Empty Ones as they slithered along the outside of the building, eyeing him with their eyes that were not eyes, but only holes of white in the midst of a liquid darkness.

"They only harm the ones who can see them," Grandfather said. He had not wanted to tell this part to the boy if it could be avoided. His hand twitched, drawing Hask's attention to a

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small scar running horizontally across his knuckles. They had done that to Grandfather sometime in the past. The half-conscious movement of his old injury was practically proof of it.

Hask's thoughts were divided between a fear of the Empty Ones and what they might do to him if he were ever caught out at night and tangled up in their sneaking grasp and a sense of concern and wonder that at one time, they had managed to leave a mark on Grandfather. It reminded him that Grandfather had not always been the high priest. Before Hask's time he had been a mere priest, toiling away in a town in Shirikh, and before that he had been a boy, young and feeble just as he was. Which of these things had Grandfather been when he suffered this ancient injury? Was he strong enough now to resist them or was he still at risk of attack?

The high priest saw Hask's gaze on his scar and realized his unconscious action. "I was still in Shirikh at the time," he explained, "The war was having a very unpleasant effect on the supernatural elements of the area. I probably brought the attack upon myself by venturing out while the war mages were still pummeling the area. I didn't know much about the Empty Ones at that time. I only knew that I could see them. It was after I escaped with both my life and my sanity intact that I decided to learn."

It was hard for Hask to imagine Grandfather being young and foolish, but he would try his best.

"I had to learn in secret, from the witches and wizards of Catalonica who passed through the area. They speak openly of many things we hold in secret in Sylesia. In Catalonica, no words are restrained, and every man and woman are free to engage with whatever beliefs appeal

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to them. As such it is a very open place, full of ideas constantly in flux, but it is also a difficult place, where you must decide for yourself how and what to believe, relying on the eye of truthful seeing the One has placed within you. I asked them about the Empty Ones and they told me what they knew. My knowledge might be missing a few things, but compared to what I had before, it's a veritable encyclopedia of fact and theory. And I do know what's the most important- I know how to protect one from their dark touch."

"And me?"

"I will teach you too," Grandfather agreed, "You must not be allowed to remain at risk. I will teach you how to protect yourself, and, also, how to protect others. But it will take more time than I have to offer you now, Haska. For the time being, this will have to do." He reached around to the back of his neck and unfastened the silver clasp of a pendant hanging around his neck, silver on a leather cord, that had gone unnoticed by Hask until this moment, lost in the folds of his robes.

Hask dutifully dipped his head and allowed Grandfather to fix the pendant around his neck. He looked at the charm. It was a strange symbol he did not know the meaning of, curved then pointed, coiling back around itself and holding a small clear crystal in its center. "It would be best to keep it hidden under your shirt," Grandfather advised. "It would be easier not to have to explain it to your teachers."

"That's true," Hask agreed and slipped the strange token into his tunic.

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"Now go back to where you belong and rest easy, Haska. When I find the time to teach you more, I, myself, will seek you out."

Enveloped in a feeling of muted curiosity and respect, Hask thanked the high priest and headed immediately back to his quarters.

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During the day it was easy to feel good and strong, protected by the strange charm, but when night came, things were different. Hask stayed up long after the other acolytes and priests that shared these quarters with him had drifted off to the sleep. He couldn't tell how late it was because they didn't ring the hours at night while everyone with good sense or good intent was sleeping, but it felt late, much later than he'd ever lain awake before. It wasn't anything as mundane as sickness or insomnia keeping him up, but their presence.

Hask lay in bed flat on his back, willing himself not to look at the large oval windows through the charcoal-colored gloom. There were Empty Ones out there, crawling up and down the walls. If they found a crack or an open window they would slip in and slink around, seeking out their prey. They wouldn't go for him now- he trusted the pendant that Grandfather had given him that much. But without it, Grandfather would be their target. "Grandfather can protect himself," he said out loud, trying to reassure himself. One of the other acolytes stirred in his sleep.

Hask lost his nerve. He looked out the window. Just like he had expected, there they were. Instantly, they knew. They knew he was there. They knew he was awake. They had no

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hands, but still they beckoned to him. "Come, come, open the window," he imagined they were asking him. "Come, come, let us in. We won't do anything to hurt you."

They were liars. He looked away and closed his eyes. I can't hear you (even though you aren't talking). I don't see you (so I'll pretend that you're not here). But he was kidding himself after all. It wasn't sight or sound that made him aware of their existence, but a sixth sense that would not be stifled, no matter how many of his others senses he voluntarily shut down.

"We will find a crack. Even a tiny one you cannot see is big enough to let us in. We will find the one we smote before. He is vulnerable now. We will smite him again."

Hask shivered. He could force his eyes closed no longer. They were looking for Grandfather. They had marked his hand before, and they bore a heavy grudge. He had struck them, for his sake and for others', he had taught others to do so as well, but worst of all, he had kept to the traditional path of the followers of the One. He could see them, but he taught others to deny them. The power of fear came through belief, and he was undermining their strength. Ione Mai Ayath was the fiercest opponent they could imagine.

The dark ceiling, white in the day and gray at night loomed over him. Hask stared at it, tracing every line in the plaster with his eyes. A crack smaller than he could see. How many cracks that size could be found in the stone and plaster of the temple? How could the Empty Ones not find a way in sooner or later? The fear was making him frantic. Hot beads of sweat formed on his cool brow.

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He couldn't just lie here. There had to be something he could do. He could not find the holes nor could he patch them, but he could go check on Grandfather and stand guard over him against the time when the Empty Ones would inevitably come. That much he knew- sooner or later they would come. They were insistent that tonight would belong to them. He didn't know how he knew so. He just did.

Hask stood up on the bunk and jumped down to the ground, landing, cat-like, crouching, with his knees bent. There was no reason this should be any different from any other time he rose in the middle of the night and went off for a drink of water or to visit the washroom, but his intent informed his every movement. He did not want to wake anyone else in the dormitory. He stepped into his slippers and tiptoed, thankful for stone rather than wood beneath his feet. Stone could not creak but remained solid and silent at each step. The flip-flop of his slightly oversized slippers was amplified in his ears, along with his rushing heartbeat. Together they sounded like a stream, restlessly flowing, uncovering tiny pebbles of worry in his mind.

He closed the door of the dormitory behind him and let out a thick breath. A few yards had never felt so long, but, fortunately, no one had awoken. The rest of the temple would be less densely packed- all the better for his chances at sneaking unnoticed to the threshold of Grandfather's quarters.

Surrounded on all four sides by stone, Hask felt safer. He could still feel the Empty Ones out there, congealing around the temple dome like a mess of old jelly, but they were further from

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him than when only glass separated them, so he felt less pressured by their unspoken threats. Seeing was not believing, but it was certainly a good part of fearing.

He flip-flapped along with determination through the curved outside hall that encircled the holy sanctum toward the other side of the building where Grandfather's quarters were located. He was the only priest in at the temple allowed the luxury of having his own room. It was still a small and modest chamber. Grandfather took the responsibilities and example of his position very seriously. He was the only high priest Hask had known, but the records showed he was an upstanding man in a long line of dedicated high priests. Corruption at this level was practically unheard of.

Just before touching the doorknob, Hask froze in his tracks. Under his loose white night robe, the strange pendant was beginning to feel hot against his skin. The increase had started out gradually enough- he had assumed it had begun because of a spike in his own body heat as he warmed up with fear, but now it was warmer than his flushed cheeks- it actually seemed like it might be able to burn his skin. He reached into his robe and pulled the pendant out by the cord, holding it away from his body. Its physical appearance had not changed, but he was certain that he could almost see the heat radiating off of it in glimmering waves like he'd seen over the dried-out fields of indigo on the hottest days of summer.

He was afraid to put his finger to it and see if it was safe to touch, but he knew he would have to come to some decision. It would be awkward to proceed with the charm held cautiously

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away from his body. If he looked at the twisted bit of metal very closely, he thought the waves might be weakening again, but he waited a moment longer to be sure.

Readying himself to quickly withdraw in case of injury, he stuck out one finger and pressed it to the metal. It was warm, but not hot. He felt a curious flow of energy pass between the pendant and his fingertip, but he couldn't make heads or tails of it. Was that mysterious warmth created by his own body or the crystal in the necklace? Hask wasn't ready to come to any decisive conclusions over its origins, so he reluctantly placed the pendant back on his chest. Since it didn't matter if Grandfather saw it, and he figured it was unlikely he would run into anyone else at this juncture, he laid it on the outside of his robe to create a slight buffer zone between the foreign object and his skin.

He grasped the knob once more and opened Grandfather's door without interruption. There were no lights in the room, and although the halls had been heavily dimmed, they were marked at regular intervals with fragments of flame encased in amber, known as honey lights for the color they gave off, so Hask's eyes took some time to adjust to the even darker conditions. There were the shelves packed full of books. There was the writing table and the chest filled with clothes. And there, sitting up, but leaning over with pain or sorrow, was Grandfather.

"Grandfather!" he exclaimed, not even noticing how much louder his voice came out than he would've wanted it to just one minute earlier. His concerns overwhelmed his discretion and he rushed up to Grandfather's side.

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"Hask." Grandfather was trembling and covered in sweat. Just like with the pendant, Hask imagined that if he touched the high priest, he might be burned. Grandfather had thrown back the sheets and wiped his damp brow with the back of his hand.

"Are you hot?" Hask fretted. "I'm sure there's a cool breeze blowing outside." Before he could give it a second thought, he was opening the window.

"Hask, don't-" the high priest moved too late to stop him.

The window was barely raised a crack, but that was enough for both the cold and the Empty Ones. The crystal in the pendant exuded a soft white glow, which kept the bulging, formless Empty Ones from coming in contact with his skin. His eyes were as wide as saucers at the otherworldly sight. He felt like he was moving through molasses as he pulled away his fingers and let the window drop, slamming soundly closed. It was already too late. It felt as if every hair on his body was standing up on end.

The amorphous black blobs stretched and swirled, circling around Grandfather on his bed. Was he too sick? Would he be able to fight them off? "Grandfather!" Hask screamed at the top of his lungs, but his voice was sucked up by the sensation-stealing void of the Empty Ones.

They were like a solid black smoke, enveloping Grandfather. Hask scrambled about, trying to claw his way through them, but found the white glow of the pendant made it impossible for him to dig his fingers into them. What should he do? Risk throwing the charm away just so he could get a grip on these creepy things? Vacillating endlessly just wasn't an option. Hask

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grabbed the pendant and was midday through flinging his arm back to rip it off when a beam of white light emerged from the murky crush of spirit bodies.

His jaw dropped in shock as this beam was followed by another and another. They were the same color as the protective aura produced by the pendant, but with an almost blinding force. "Grandfather?" he asked and found his voice would carry again.

"Grandfather?" he squinted into the blinding light.

"Open the window, Haska. I have to have somewhere to send these cursed worms!" Grandfather's powerful voice bounded out of the hot light. He didn't sound the least bit sick now. Hask scrambled to comply, feeling like he couldn't move fast enough. He jumped back onto the stool, which shook with the force of the jolt, and struggled to hook his stubby fingers under the wooden frame. He had shut it too hard. He tugged frantically, throwing all his weight back to use as leverage against the stuck frame.

It wasn't moving. He was too weak. He pulled again, wiggling the old, battered wood from side to side. Open. Open, open, open. Why couldn't will power alone affect reality?

"Open!" he gritted his teeth and fought the window one more time. He had to be able to this. His hands grew hot, as did the pendant, and the heavy frame flew open under his touch, moved by a strength beyond the limits of his small body. He shook and stared, as the heat faded from his hands, at what he had done.

"Begone," Grandfather commanded. His dark hair and heavy robes were ringed in white. There was only the slightest inward swish of cold night air before the space was filled by

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the bodies of the Empty Ones, repelled by a single flick of Grandfather's hand. Hask stared in awe as the high priest blazed, aflame with power.

"Haska, close the window please," he requested at last, when every inch of the vengeful beings had been sucked out into the darkness.

"Uh, okay," the boy replied, unable to keep his jaw from hanging open. It didn't take any magic to pull the window back down. Though his own actions had been surprising, now Hask didn't take his eyes off Grandfather the entire time he moved. The white power was slipping away to nothing. Grandfather's long hair settled lightly over his shoulders and his sleeves drooped to hang limply around his wrists, going back to normal without the animation provided by his inner power. When the last inkling of eerie light had faded, leaving a scrawny boy standing on a wooden stool and an older man standing on his bed, Hask, overwhelmed by everything he had seen, promptly overbalanced and fell, tipping the stool over.

"Oh, Haska!" Grandfather gasped in sincere sympathy. He hopped down and scooped Hask up in his arms, carrying him back to sit on the bed. "I'd forgotten how draining performing spells can be for the untrained."

Hask didn't answer him, as his head felt rather swimmy for some reason. Maybe the magic. All he could think about was how the loud slap of Grandfather's bare feet had been on the tile and how pleasantly warm he felt. So...that had been a spell he'd performed? Magic, when you knew that's what it was, was rather nice.

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Something wet touched his arm. The sight of blood caused him to pull his thoughts together. Filled with the anxious thrill of the moment, Grandfather hadn't even felt the pain. "Your hand! Grandfather, your scar's opened up!"

"Oh! So, it has!" he cast his blue eyes around for something to soak up the blood, eventually choosing his other sleeve over the bedclothes. The scar was his weakest point. The Empty Ones had automatically moved in on the place where their kind had wounded him before.

"Why don't you magic it better?" Hask wondered, leaning his head back against the high priest's chest.

"The inner flame is not limitless, Haska. When you're getting on in years, you realize you might want to conserve it."

"You're still planning on teaching me, right? 'Cuz I don't think I could do that again. And, uh," he scrunched up his round face in concern, "I don't think I want to get into a spot where I need to."

"Of course, Haska. Of course."

The darkness settled over them, filmy and tranquil. "I'm sorry I let the Empty Ones in." Hask still felt tired, but he kept finding more things to say and he couldn't exactly let them float away forgotten.

"I know. I forgive you."

"Grandfather?" a nervous voice rang through the wood of the door (Hask couldn't even remember when it had been closed) along with some timid rapping. "Are you alright in there?"

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"Dasek," the high priest remarked, recognizing the master of this shaky voice.

"We heard some loud noises," Father Dasek continued. He sounded like he was too afraid to open the door unless he received an answer. What did he fear he might find there?

"Dasek, it's okay, you can open the door," Grandfather reassured him. "It was really nothing at all. I hurt myself and Hask here was going by and came in to see what it was."

The door slid open to reveal Dasek, Gerra, and three acolytes. Based on the high priest's description of what had happened, the scene before them was something more than they had expected, but no one was going to argue with Grandfather, so they accepted his bleeding knuckles and the blown-about papers and Hask looking like he could use a full day of sleep without much comment.

Father Gerra carried Hask back to his bunk, and the next day the temple buzzed with its usual activity. There was no sign of the Empty Ones. At least for the time being, the counterattack had chastened them. As far as the other priests were concerned, the only thing of note in the weeks, and eventually years, that followed was the continued connection between Grandfather and Hask. The next high priest had already been chosen, the rumors said. For good or for ill, it was far too early to say.

Hask wandered the grounds at Oxa carrying a strange cube of metal, running his fingers over it constantly, slipping it into his pocket during lessons. No one knew what it meant, but he had long since gained a reputation for being odd. "My training's not done until I can make Grandfather his own," he explained enigmatically, holding up his strange-twisted pendant for

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comparison. "I think it's going to take a long time," he laughed, but privately added, "...And if it happens too soon, I'll pretend I'm not finished, just so these days can go on forever."