

The glow wanes. My armor chafes against what remains of my skin.

The light is weightless - I think - or I have simply grown numb to the lantern's heft. I know its blue faerie-fire better than I know the sun. I march forward, only able to see as far as the reach of the glow. There are times when I become blind to the fungus growing on the walls, the grim faces of the carved idols; there is only the light, an arm's length from my face. During these numb stretches I can forget the aches in my bones. I relax my sword-arm, and my blade rings against the stone steps. I do not know what day it is or how long it has been since I went below. I cannot recall the last time I knew.

I descend the stairs, and I can taste moisture on the air. I can hear the river flowing, here in the dark beneath the earth. Good, I think, *perhaps I can rest by the water*. Perhaps others have as well.

The lantern swings, and the shadows swim. I have the vaguest sense of being underwater, and I succumb to a sudden ungrounding. I remember the touch of water. I remember the silt-blooms underneath the lake, borne aloft by our footfalls. The sunlight broken on the surface dazzles our eyes. We must plunge beneath or lose their senses. Sting of water, like tears. And are those? Yes, the shapes of fish, and pond-grass, and shells? No, stones, worn smooth as eggs. We surface, breathless. The sunlight dazzles, and can only look at each other if we squint. I lay back, and I drift down, and the loneliness is oceanic.

I kneel at the riverbank, unhinge my helm. The water is cool against my hairless skull. The other bank is beyond my light's reach. I ponder my next move as I sit and watch the water go by, until I sense a movement in my periphery, and a voice shakes me from my reverie.

"Blade and lantern," it calls. "I was once such as you."

The creature my light finds is an old thing, robed in sackcloth and clutching a wooden stave. A long beard hangs from his face. Shards of glass nearby tell me that he dropped his light and has sat since, awaiting rescue - or at least witness. No telling for how long. It may have only been moments, but then I would have heard the crash. At least, I can tell myself I would have.

"Old sir," I say. "How come you by this path, with no armament to speak of?"

"I cast them off long ago. I have grown too weak to carry them. I am bound for the Citadel, to seek medicine for my son. There is a plague in our country. At least there was when I departed.

"What do you know of the Citadel? My lost love awaits me there, though I fear I will be forgotten by the time I reach its shores."

"I've heard only echoes. Seen only phantoms. You say your love is lost - to the plague?"

"No," I tell him. "Not to the plague."

"I will pry no further. Your lantern fades, brave knight."

"Have you any oil to spare?"

"I need it not. I trust you know how?"

"I do, if you are so resigned. But I have heard that those who lose their resolve in these ruins are driven mad by despair, and are thus transformed into beasts."

The old man chuckles. "All the more reason to snuff me out here. Please, take that which I offer freely."

I set down my sword and take the slender dagger from my belt. As I reach for my oil-flask, he stays my hand. His eyes are wide, and he gapes, open-mouthed, at some horror in the space behind me.

"I apologize," he says. "I have only now opened my eyes, and it is much darker than I imagined. Please, some light before the deed is done."

I offer him my lantern, and he warms himself by its dim glow. His hands caress the glass like he had known its curves for years. Minutes pass. Then, with a final sigh, he nods.

"If I reach the Citadel," I say. "I will inquire about a medicine for your son."

"Ah, brave knight. You have given me two mercies, then."

I undress him, and place a hand over his breastbone, between curls of white hair and two mud-colored nipples. I feel the last shudder of his lungs as I ease the dagger through his skin.

The oil lies beyond the two lowest ribs, and upwards. Cut away the fatless hide, and unmoor the pulsing vessel. I place the mouth of my flask to the wound, but still some spills over and is wasted.

The flask is made of horn, and has a grain like wood, which has been soaked with oil from previous harvests. I imagine it was white at some point, but the flame turns all colors false.

Flask filled, I set the old man adrift on the river. The unusable flesh flows past me as I continue upstream.

Plants grow here. Algae swirl on the river's surface and thin grasses sprout along the shore. Vines creep over the walls and hang from fractured eaves. There is a warmth in the air, the acid-tinge of vegetal breath. Would it remind you of the smell of rain, as it does me?

A sore has opened on the sole of my right foot. A toenail bends back, breaks. It swims in blood, and the smell draws a beast from the bridge's underside. Spined feed curl over the stone, a half-dozen legs heave its bulk over the railing.

In the swaying lantern-light I can only see fractions of its form at a time. A mossy shell repels my blade. Chitinous claws pummel my sides, dent my breastplate. A dripping maw beneath cave-blind eyes.

I am slowed by my injury, and my first thought must always be to preserve the lantern. I calculate every move in the half-moments I am afforded. The only reason I have survived thus far is because I am enrobed in steel. But this beast must have some unguarded place. *See the way it skitters sideways with lowered head. There must be softer flesh beneath.*

I probe. The beast allows no strikes to its abdomen. It is only when my foot buckles and rolls beneath my ankle that my chance reveals itself. I collapse, and scuttle backwards, crabwise. The creature hisses and pounces upon my prone form, and in that briefest window I tuck forward, place pommel to stone, blade raised to the forgotten sky. A crunch, and a deluge of colorless viscera. The beast's great weight collapses on me, and is still.

I spend an unknowable length of time struggling to free myself; most of my strength is used to keep the lantern from being crushed. But by its light, I see shadows move at the edge of my vision.

Voices. The passing of ragbound feet. Dozens of hands grope for purchase and heave. The beast's corpse teeters, stands on its edge for a moment, then crashes down.

I stand and behold my rescuers, hunched and craven. Eyes reflected like coins beneath their hoods and bandages. The tallest of them barely rise above my waist. They chitter amongst themselves. If what they speak is a language, I do not recognize it.

"Thank you."

Some are startled by the sound of my voice. Some cluster around me, while still others descend upon the beast. They worm their figures under the plates of its shell or pry at the joints of its many legs. The ones around me similarly poke and with great reverence - love, even. There is a furtive hunger in their movements, as if they are desperate to see what lies beneath the steel, but terrified of what it might be.

I scatter them with a shrug of my blade, and wade through their clinging hands to continue on my way. They scream at my parting, and rush to accompany me. I am limping now, and my breathing is ragged. After an hour - perhaps - of travel, I stop resisting them. They range behind me in a line. The slowest disappear beyond the reach of my lantern, while those closest to the glow occasionally scamper forward to reach for its warmth, and, finding it unbearable to touch, hoot like apes as they retreat. A small one - a child perhaps - climbs up my back to sit astride my shoulders and picks at the rivets in my helm as though they were scabs. His weight is negligible, and even the constant *tick-tick-ticking* of his fingernails becomes bearable with time. The bridge is long. The things I grow used to continue to surprise me.

We continue forward, crosswise to the current, for an unknowable length of time. Did I tell you, before you had gone, that I was composing a poem for you? A sonnet. The meter helps me to remember. Remember what? The contours of your face seem to me like something viewed through old glass. The iambs fall in time with my uneven step. If you could see me, and hear me, you would think me a drunk, and you might laugh. But even a drunk finds his way home most nights. The poem - the sonnet, I mean - is no great work composed by some bardic master in his gilded college. Still, I repeat it to myself, again and again. By the time I get to you, I will have it perfected.

Things slither beneath the river's surface. Their barnacled backs breach the water. If they could turn their sightless eyes upwards, they would see the limping knight, the hangers-on, and the less bold shuffling along behind. If they drew their slick and ponderous bulk ashore, would they smell the blood pooling beneath my steel? Would they devour the strange procession? And have they swam through unlit rivers to the fonts of the Citadel? Have they tasted the waters that wash away all wounds? Perhaps the temples are long-since collapsed, slumped into the mud, and these leviathans carry pieces within themselves. The balustrade of a grand archive, the frontispiece of an alabaster ziggurat - rolling around in their gullets like the pebbles swallowed by birds.

The bridge too, has crumbled away, and the water laughs at its broken edge. Beyond the stones, I can see the half-sunk wreckage, a few struts standing like bouys in the river. Still, the far bank evades sight. I and my strange menagerie stand beneath an archway, where a long hempen rope hangs down from a massive bell. In the cruel half-light, I can swear that it is made from the smelted-together armaments of pilgrims past.

But bells are for ringing.

The stentorian note trembles the water, and sends the raggedy scavengers scattering into the darkness. Even the child upon my back flees with fevered alacrity.

For a long moment, I am alone in the silence that fills in around the echo. A light comes drifting over the water. The lantern hangs from a black barge poled by a black-clad boatman. Even with a hunch, he looms above me. Pale hands wrapped around his punting-pole, and his face unmoving, his black eyes gazing down, empty as the unseen expanse of the water.

His voice matches the timbre of the iron bell. "What do you seek in crossing?"

"To reach the gates of the Citadel, where my love awaits my arrival."

"And what reason have you to believe the Citadel lies ahead?"

"Because if it were not, my journey would have all been for nothing."

"What will you pay for passage?"

"I offer my sword. Its edge is broken, but it is still sharp."

"But what is a knight without a sword? Will the one that awaits know you when you arrive?"

I am silent as the Boatman extends his hands and takes the sword, and folds it into the darkness of his robes as easily as one would fold paper. He steps aside, and I board. Grateful to sit and still be moving, I tug loose the straps of my helmet, the bonds of my gauntlets. I run my phalanges through the black water, and one breaks off and sinks. My breastplate lands with a splash behind the boat. I have no need for anything now.

What time is it, where you are?

You once told me you admired birds because they never seem to meet for the first time.

You always wake up with your own hair in your teeth.

Did I tell you that I'm writing a poem?

There once were days when we said nothing save for what could be said with a look. I once had hands that perfectly fit the curve where your neck meets the back of your head. I once had lips to kiss the soft place between your collarbones. I once had a body. And that body was yours.

"How much further have we to go?" I ask.

"How much further are you willing to go?" the Boatman says.

"As long as it takes to reach the far shore."

"Then we have a ways to go, yet."

We continue on in silence. If not for the rippling sound of the water, I would think that we were scarcely moving at all.

"Have you ferried many pilgrims across, Boatman?"

"Yes. Though not all find what they seek, all journeys end."

Nothing ahead but darkness, and only darkness behind. My lantern grows dim, while the light hanging from the prow of the boat sways like a will o' wisp, so close - yet I have not the strength to

grasp for it. I feel sleep drawing tight around me. If I were to close my eyes, would I have the strength to open them?

"Boatman, I fear that upon reaching the shore, I will be unable to find my way. Have you any oil to spare?"

"Not a drop, I'm afraid."

"I wonder then, how you keep your light so strong."

For the first time in our voyage, I see a change in his face. The thinnest of grins twists beneath his black hood, possessing neither mirth nor malice.

"How indeed?"