

The Witch Woman

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"Every man has his price." This is not true. But for every man there exists a bait which he cannot resist swallowing. To win over certain people to something, it is only necessary to give it a gloss of love of humanity, nobility, gentleness, self-sacrifice - and there is nothing you cannot get them to swallow. To their souls, these are the icing, the tidbit; other kinds of souls have others.

-Friedrich Nietzsche
German philosopher (1844 - 1900)

A tattered old man in long coat and breeches made his way slowly through the streets of Daran City in the place known as Carney Wharf. His left leg dragged behind him, some old war wound from times gone by. His face was ashen gray, his hair turning white with every revolution of the sun. Beneath bushy gray eyebrows, his steel blue eyes glittered dangerously as he watched the passers by.

All were anxious to be on their way. Night was coming, and with the fading of the sun came the appearance of the gangs and the guard. Nobody wanted to be caught out in a brawl between those two. Worst case they'd be dead, catching a stray - or perhaps intended - bullet from either side. With tensions high and blood pumping furiously through veins, it would be hard to distinguish gang member from the ragged, battered denizen of Carney. The best case was no better. The guard would haul them off as accomplices, and when you got hauled off by the guard there was every chance you would end up in Blackwater Gaol. Not a pretty place, to be sure, and people tended to come back changed. If they came back at all. To the guard, there was no difference between the denizens and the gang members. In Carney, it paid to look at everyone as if they were a criminal. That kind of thinking tended to save lives.

Besides, there was a killer on the loose. Over the past several months, several high-end clientele were found floating in the channel, all cut up and with looks of horror on their faces. Locals might consider themselves safe from the violent ministrations of such a killer seeing as his victims were mostly men and women from Mid-district and

across the Way, the king's road and main thoroughfare of the city. Except that every so often one of them would go missing and be found just like those highborn victims. But these, of course, tended to be lost in the evening newspapers, a side note or simple obituary near the end where most people never read.

So everyone hurried on home, eager to be behind locked doors. The old man tried to hurry, too, although the limp somewhat hindered his progress...

A hand shot out from the darkness as the old man limped past a dark alley between two buildings, grabbing him by the collar of his dirty shirt. He felt himself being dragged into the shadows, and grunted as his assailant slammed him against a wall and put a knife to his throat. It was dark so he couldn't see anything, but he could feel a hungry gaze on him. The blade of the knife glinted in the dim light from the main thoroughfare and bit into the skin of his neck. A thin line of blood trickled down his throat. He gulped, ignoring the sting of the small wound, and the blade followed the bob of his adam's apple.

"Gimme your purse, old gaffer, or I'll slit your throat," said the assailant.

By the sound of his voice, it was only a boy, and by the feel of his hand, a scrawny boy at that. The old man hesitated, suddenly unsure of his purpose here. The boy shook him roughly.

"Didn't you hear what I told you?" he growled. "Gimme your purse, or I'll gut you, don't think I won't."

There was fear as well as desperation in that voice, but given the way he wielded that blade, the old man had no doubt he meant what he said. The boy had experience.

The old man flicked his hand forward, too fast for the boy to even comprehend, and there was a metallic click as a knife blade appeared seemingly from nowhere. He tapped the inside of the boy's leg with the blade, who looked down in dismay and swallowed hard.

"If you want to have children one day, I suggest you let me go," he told his assailant in a surprisingly deep and cultured tongue.

The boy hastily dropped the knife and backed away, hands raised.

"I-I didn't mean nothin' by it, sir, honest! I-I gots family t'feed, an'..."

The old man strode forward, every trace of his previous limp suddenly gone. The boy scrambled backwards until he tripped and fell to the ground.

“So you decided to pull another starving man to the side and divest him of his right to live, is that it?” He bent forward to retrieve the fallen knife, hefting it in his free hand before slipping it into his belt and zeroing in on his prey. “Save the excuses, Briggs. I know you don’t have a family.”

Eyes wide, the boy stammered out, “H-how d’you know my name?”

The old man sighed and flipped the knife expertly in the air, catching it by the blade between his thumb and forefinger.

“That’s not the important thing right now, Briggs,” he said patronizingly. Then his expression grew serious. “The Witch Woman of Carney. I want to see her.”

“I don’t know what you’re on about,” the boy said.

But it was obvious from the way he clutched at the dark symbol dangling around his neck that he knew exactly what the man was talking about. The old man recognized the symbol and clicked his tongue in annoyance.

“That won’t help you boy. Not now. I know who you are, *Thomas Briggs*, and I know you know where she is. Rumor has it from the Black Dog that you run liquor to her. You know, when you’re not cutting throats and taking purses.”

“I never took one ghost in all me life. I swear, I never harmed no one!”

“That’s probably because they all did the smart thing and handed over their purses. But now you’re going to do the smart thing and take me to her.”

“I can’t,” Briggs blubbered. “She’ll kill me. She told me never to tell. She told me never to say nothin’! She’ll turn me into a frog an’ pin me on ‘er wall or something. Please, don’t make me.”

The old man stared at the little thief in consternation, weighing all of his options. Finally, he sighed and bent his head, lifted a hand to his temple and began to tug at his skin. The eyebrows were the first to go. The pale wrinkles and pockmarks over his aged face peeled away almost like - no, exactly like - a second skin. Briggs watched in horror as the old man discarded the skin, shook the ash from his hair and rubbed the paste from his hands. After what seemed like an eternity, Briggs finally looked up into the dark, brooding face of the stranger before him.

“Who are you?” he asked in a small voice, and the stranger sighed again.

“I’m someone who wants to see the Witch Woman, and you’re going to take me there. And don’t worry. She’s expecting me.”

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Bram followed Briggs through the emptying streets of Carney, never more than two steps behind. He had put away his knife before leaving the alleyway. A blade attracted attention, which was the last thing he wanted right now. Besides, the boy was as demure as a lamb at the moment. He wouldn’t run. He obviously thought Bram was some sort of dark spirit who could trade skins or something equally ridiculous.

I really must remember to pay the troupe back for that mold, he thought to himself. Perhaps a keg of wine?

Actors were notorious drinkers, or at least, the ones he knew. Bram was the last sort of person to encourage that sort of thing - he never could hold with strong drink - but that mold - a sort of thin facial mask that instead of obscuring the face could accentuate certain features - had been the most absolutely perfect thing for him in the course of this investigation.

Not quite seven months past, Bram found himself in command of Blackwater Gaol, a guard post and prison situated in the slum town of Carney Wharf. After having risen quickly through the ranks and after having annoyed every other guard captain with his “rough and crafty ways” of dealing with certain assignments, he had been thrown to the wolves - almost quite literally, too - as a means to get rid of him. Corruption reigned supreme here in Blackwater until Bram had shown up. If it weren’t for a certain man asking certain favors, Bram would most certainly have found a way to weasel his way out of this particular obligation. But orders were orders and a certain man would not, and could not, be ignored.

The first few months had seen him cleaning up that mess of corrupted officials. He had recommended the whole post to be terminated save a few and for new men to be hired and trained, never thinking that such a request would be accepted. To his surprise, not only was the recommendation approved, he received several stalwart officers to help him on his way. After that, he quickly went about establishing a reputation among the people. It wasn’t hard. Those who abided by the law had nothing

to fear from him and those who didn't steer clear. Crime went down in a matter of weeks, and for a while, he was able to relax in his new captaincy.

It was because of this new and recent promotion that he found need of face molds. As the new captain of Blackwater and given his rather unorthodox methods, he tended to be the sole target of many people. It stood to reason that they would want a face to go along with the name Estis, and Bram determined very quickly not to let them have it. After a chance encounter and a night of revelry with an acting troupe, he had the means. Now, no one who ever saw his face gave the exact same description, letting Bram walk the streets freely whenever he felt like going on a jaunt.

Bram didn't much mind it out here, either. At least, it was better to spend a night out on the streets than in some fancy mansion up on the hill, talking with men and women who would smile to your face while planning on how to stab you in the back later. It was all a game to them, a game without real consequences. His friend, the man who would not be ignored, was an expert at such games having grown up his entire life in that world, but Bram preferred real life. Down here, the consequences were all too real, and meant the difference between life and death.

Bram was never sure if he liked to spend time in the gutter because he felt that he was making an actual difference or because he liked the thrill.

Usually, Bram would patrol the streets with a unit of men dressed in civvies and keep an eye out and an ear to the ground for trouble. There was hardly ever a night where there wasn't some sort of dispute going on or they didn't have to face down a number of street kids who thought they were all that with their blackmarket firearms and Cassian-steeled blades. But tonight was different. Tonight, it was just Bram. He had left the unit in the capable hands of his lieutenant and set off on his own. Briefly, he reached into his pocket and brushed the folded parchment that lay in there. He didn't take it out to read. He already knew exactly what it said:

You and I have much to discuss. I know who you are and where you come from. I know you are trying to find me. I can give you what you desire most. Come and find me.

-The Witch Woman

Bram had, of course, heard of the Witch Woman before, but he had purposely avoided her for the past several months, hoping that their paths would never cross. It seemed, however, that destiny had another plan in mind for him.

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“I want you to find the Witch Woman,” Alan told him over a cup of tea in Bram’s office late one night. “I think she may be the key to this whole trail of dead bodies.”

“And what makes you think that?” Bram asked, slightly bemused at his friend’s abrupt order.

Alan smiled grimly and pulled several small pieces of parchment and a small, leather string pouch. These he threw across the desk at Bram. The captain raised one eyebrow, a skill that he was very proud of and utilized in many a situation, and leaned forward to inspect them.

“This is Nemen writ,” Bram said in surprise, staring at the strange symbols scrawled over the parchment. “Where did you get this?”

Alan shook his head and set his tea cup aside.

“Nearly every victim had this in their possession,” he replied. Then, tapping his finger on the desk, he asked, “What do you make of the contents of the pouch?”

Bram cautiously picked it up and sniffed it. “Jasmine, foreign goods. Cassian, I would expect. They were always better with natural things.”

His fingers probed the bag before dumping the contents out onto the table. Tiny, white flowers all closed and all shriveled up from lack of water poured out onto the table along with several other herbs and two strange objects that immediately caught Bram’s attention. Alan picked up the first one, fingers closing around the iron medallion before Bram could say no. His thumb brushed over the back of medallion, tracing an odd symbol that looked to be an eye before flipping it over to stare at the back. A tiny sliver of crystal was bound to the center of the medallion, glowing dimly with a small, amber light.

“Is that...?” Alan began to ask in awe.

“Yes,” Bram replied before he might finish. “Yes, it is.”

The crystal glowed as if in response to the query. Alan stared at the tiny gem in wonder.

Flairs, as the stones were more commonly known, were crystals mined deep in the northern mountains whose properties remained a slight mystery, even to the man who had discovered them. They seemed to contain a secret energy, a source of power that had shaped the modern world around them. Airships, locomotives, autocars and even warfare items including pistols had been invented using such power. Perhaps better men than he, learned men who spent their lifetimes studying this sort of thing, knew better what chemical reaction was cause to this miracle. All he knew was that it worked and worked well.

“I’ve long suspected that our flairs might have had some role in the affairs of the People, but I couldn’t ever have guessed this,” Alan said.

Bram grunted in silent agreement. He knew that such things very much existed. The men of the city had their own name for it. Science, they named it. Science with all of its impossibilities only explained by those few who studied and probed and wondered. Not so different but in name and materials. One man who convinced himself the power of science would solve all problems was not so different from a witch who believed in her herbs and signs. The first might call the other superstitious nonsense - a scientist believed in tangible things - but Bram couldn’t help but wonder what would happen if one of those “men of learning” happened to see a witch at work. After all, half magic was material, and half science was faith.

Bram didn’t need any sort of confirmation to know the reality of magic. He knew it was all real. Science notwithstanding its great potential, magic had always been a part of the land ever since the beginning. Before the kingdoms, before the conquerors and the conquered, there were just the People, and the People were well aware of the existence of magic. Stories passed down from generation to generation told wonderful stories, and dreadful, too, of the discovery of magic. Perhaps the only thing Bram’s father ever did right was teach him caution about magic.

“Don’t touch sorcery, boy, if you know what’s good for you,” he remembered the old man saying. “But if you do happen to run into one of those accursed fiends who practice, remember this: *Ashek, sha’a al duna. Tu wethen al fet e’ jodak.*”

Bram had no desire of translating that. The string of curses would cause even hardened men such as himself to blanch with disgust. Well, but what else was he ever to have expected from the man who abandoned him?

“Shall I take this to be a curse of some sort?” Alan ventured the query.

To Alan's surprise, Bram shook his head. “Ah, no. Actually, it's a blessing or good luck charm. This particular fellow wanted luck in...ah, certain pastimes.”

He cleared his throat and gave Alan a knowing look. Alan nodded in understanding. He was always quick on the uptake.

“Who was the victim for this one?” Bram asked, taking a pen and poking at the second item to have fallen from the pouch.

“A certain merchant. Holder, I think his name was, and if what you say is true, then the rumors make more sense now.” At Bram's prodding look, Alan grinned impishly and added, “There were rumors of impotency. Nothing concrete, but his wife has been seen with the grocer on many occasions, or so my network tells me.”

“Hmm,” Bram grunted, still poking at the second object.

His face was a mask of careful study as he prodded it with the tip of his pen. Alan raised both his eyebrows. The awkward tilt of his head told Bram that he was trying to imitate the one-brow raised look. Bram didn't have the heart to tell him that it looked slightly ridiculous on his boyish face.

“Well, are you going to tell me how it works?” he asked finally, a slightly exasperated sigh escaping his lips.

“I'm not an expert on magic,” Bram replied crossly.

“Right now, you're the best thing I've got. People are dying, if you haven't noticed.”

Bram shook his head. “I can tell you what I do know. The use of flairs is for energy transference, but the People believe that some sort of sacrifice is to be made for this sort of thing to work. It doesn't really matter what type of sacrifice, self or otherwise, is made. It is believed that the more that is sacrificed, the more powerful the spell.”

“What do you think was sacrificed here?” Alan asked, awed despite the gruesome picture Bram had just painted.

Bram set down his pen and picked up the second object, holding it between his thumb and forefinger. "This."

Eyes narrowed, Alan peered at the thing, trying to discern the origins of it.

"Is that...bone?" he asked after a moment.

"The tip of the pinky, to be more precise," Bram told him.

Alan's nose wrinkled in disgust, but he soon grew thoughtful as something occurred to him. "You know, that might make more sense of some things. When the bodies were found, they were mutilated. My investigators just assumed that it was part of the ritual, but there were always...ahem, er, *pieces* missing."

"All the same part? The little finger?"

"Ah, well, no. Sometimes it was several fingers and sometimes it was something else."

"This is definitely old ritual magic, then," Bram nodded, dropping the pinky bone back onto the desk. "I can see why you want the Witch Woman found. You think she might have had something to do with the deaths?"

"Yes," Alan nodded. "I don't know much about Nemen rituals, but I do know that if the price is not paid, things can turn ugly. Perhaps these men and women failed to pay that price."

"It makes sense," Bram mused.

Then, Alan waved a hand and said dismissively, "It's really just a theory, though, but I think one that deserves investigation. As far as we're concerned, she's the only Nemen we know of that practices magic in the city. We've been unable to locate her, but given your particular background, I thought...well, perhaps you might have a little more luck than the rest of us?"

Bram sat back in his chair. "Put it more delicately next time?"

Alan grinned. "I need your Nemen blood for my own silly whims? Or should I make it a royal decree? Would that make you feel better about it?"

"Not really," the guard captain admitted. "Besides, it would feel flat. You never invoke your bloodline, and it would be strange for you to start now."

Alan chuckled and rubbed his chin. "Perhaps I ought to start wearing my crown, then. Get you used to the idea of serving the king."

“I will only ever see the man I met in service,” Bram grinned.

The grin felt strange on his face. It was not a normal expression for him, but Alan always seemed to draw these sorts of things out of him. He made Bram feel normal. It was a good feeling. And an odd one.

“Pooh,” Alan pouted, but with the hint of a smile hovering about his lips. “Ah, well. It seems I must make you used to the invisible crown about my forehead.” Then he stood and looked pointedly at Bram. “I order you to find the Witch Woman and see what connections she might have to this case.”

Bram also stood and bowed slightly in Alan’s direction. “I am at your majesty’s service.”

They both sat back down.

“Also, if you get yourself killed, I will ask the Witch Woman to bring you back to life just so I can kill you again myself,” Alan added quickly.

This surprised a laugh out of Bram.

“I’m not sure necromancy is up her alley, but I’ll keep that in mind,” he said.

“You’d better,” Alan said. “I’m not prepared to lose you yet. You’re much to valuable an asset to me.”

“Glad to know how much you care,” Bram replied drily, and it was then Alan’s turn to laugh.

Again, this made Bram smile. Anyone but him would have met resistance and downright hostility from Bram, but Alan was...different. They had been confidants for years, friends for more, and Bram had never known a man like Alan. The quiet resolve he showed and unwavering loyalty to his friends and his people. He had won Bram’s trust for life.

So began the long nights tracking down the Witch Woman, trying to find acquaintances. It took months for him to find Briggs, so well protected was he by the general populace. Not surprising, though. The Witch Woman’s reputation preceded her, and if she did not command silence by loyalty, then she did it with fear. Then, the invitation after finding out about Briggs. Strange timing, and stranger still the coincidence. Bram wasn’t a believer of coincidences, not when they happened to get

him exactly what he wanted, but with his approach being expected, he decided that the best way might be to accept the invitation.

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Now, as he followed his guide through the rat warren of narrow streets and darkened alleys, never more than a step or three behind, he couldn't help but feel a little apprehension at meeting this witch face to face. He'd heard the stories. He knew they called her witch out of fear and ignorance, but there was some truth behind that calling, too.

Truth be told, Bram didn't want to be here any more than Briggs wanted to be taking him. He had no idea what he was walking into. She knew of him, that much was clear from her note. She might also know about his past. The thought had crossed his mind that she, too, might be of his father's people. Both were very good reasons to steer clear away. But then he would be forsaking his promise to that wretched man, the friend whose desire turned him onto this path, and besides, once the note appeared in the hand of his lieutenant, there was really only ever one answer to begin with.

You didn't say no to a witch.

“ ‘S down there.”

Bram looked up to see the boy pointing down a dim path. They were near the docks as far as he could tell. He could smell brine and fish. The smell of it made his stomach feel queasy, but he forced it from his mind and turned to the boy.

“You'll take me all the way.”

But to his surprise, the boy shook his head adamantly. “I won't. Kill me if'n you want, but you can't make me go no further. I won't go no further. She'll turn me into something. I know she will.”

“And you think dying is a good alternative?”

“You don't know her, sir. I won't go no further. That's my word on that,” the boy said, his eyes wide with fear.

Bram pursed his lips. “Fine, go then.”

The boy looked up at him in surprise. “You won't kill me?”

“Not today,” Bram muttered, but he did so to empty air.

Without further prompting, the boy took off, leaving Bram standing at the opening of a very dark, very long street. He could smell the channel from here, one part ocean water and three parts sewage and river brine, and suddenly knew where he was. Of course. He didn't know why he hadn't thought about it earlier.

Temple Way. A perfect place for a witch to hide. It was the site of some explosion or some sort a decade or so ago when flairs were still new and their power was unknown. Old brick buildings lined the streets, seemingly abandoned for the most part. Or, mostly abandoned. Despite the broken windows and splintered frames, collapsed buildings and empty doorways, Bram had the sense that someone watched his approach. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up, and his skin tingled in apprehension and anticipation. He hated feeling vulnerable like this, but he had come this far. He could go a little bit further. He took one step forward and then another, hand unconsciously gripping the handle of his switchblade. He realized halfway through that he had no idea which one was the Witch Woman's home, but he determined that he would probably know which one was hers.

And indeed, when he saw the last building in the dead-end lane, he knew he had arrived at the right place. The top half of it had collapsed many years ago, leaving a hovel of a unit standing. It was overgrown with thick ivy. There was no door, only a thin, ragged cloth that might have been white once but was now a filthy brownish color. Bram decided he didn't want to know where the Witch Woman had gotten it from. The air was thick with the scent of wax, of herbs, and strangely of jasmine.

Bram approached the hovel cautiously. As he did so, he could hear voices inside. One was deep and full. The other was thin and high-pitched and very soft, a woman's unmistakably. Bram could barely make out what it was she was saying, but he could hear the Witch Woman's voice as clear as day.

"You poor dear. Here, take this twice a day and all your aches and pains will simply go away. What is this? Want to forget? I can do this...for a price. You don't care? Very well, then."

There was a snap and a cry. Bram's fingers clutched his blade handle harder, but his instincts told him not to move. Suddenly, the cloth was pushed aside and a dazed young woman staggered into the streets. Bram watched her with concern. She was so

young, not even fifteen, but she looked like a grandmother. Her face was drawn, her skin pale, and her hands thin. Her fingers were wrapped around an object that Bram couldn't see. He reached out a hand to touch her, but she simply shuffled past him, not even seeing him. He turned back to the hovel and swallowed hard before slipping inside.

There was a thin cackle and the shuffling of feet on a mat. Then the Witch Woman spoke again.

"I hear the rustle of wings, black wings. Raven is here. Raven has come."

Bram found himself in a small room lit with the hollow glow of firelight that flickered on the walls of the collapsed building. It was not at all what Bram had been expecting. Odd trinkets lined the walls, ornaments and dolls and woven tapestries. There were jars of strange looking things, things that Bram didn't want to know about.

But as odd as the room purported to be, it was surprisingly clean and very spacious. A table was set up in the middle of the room and on the table a steaming pot of tea and two cups very neatly arranged sat awaiting guests. At the fireplace stood a tall woman, her back turned to Bram. She was dressed all in black in a gown from times gone by. It framed her body, following the curves of her waist and hips before falling to the ground in a wave of silk. Bram swallowed again.

For a moment, she stared into the fire, dark eyes glittering as she watched the flames consume the wood. Then, she turned to Bram, a coy smile on her bronzed face.

"Welcome," she said warmly. "Will you join me for tea?"

She sat down at the table, carefully arranging her long, black hair so it fell over one shoulder and between her breasts. Bram steadfastly kept his gaze above her neck, although he admittedly found it difficult to maintain his determination. She was doing this on purpose, he knew. She wanted him to react to her, but he couldn't let himself. He sat obligingly in the proffered seat but kept his hand near the knife in his pocket.

"Welcome, Captain. I have been looking forward to this meeting for a long time."

Bram frowned.

"What did you do to that woman?" he asked.

It was the first thing that came to mind. The Witch Woman laughed softly.

"Nothing she did not consent to. She had a child."

“Had?”

The Witch Woman only smiled. “Please, you didn’t come all this way to ask me about women with whom you have no connection. Leave her. She will forget soon enough. They all want to in the end, and I am more than willing to help them.”

Bram felt a twinge of disgust and was relieved to find that he could still think properly. Beautiful woman. Beautiful witch. He had to be careful.

He considered his next question carefully. Although he was here for Alan’s investigation, something told him direct questions would get roundabout answers. So, he fell back on a question that had been burning inside of him ever since he received that note.

“Why did you ask me to come?” he asked.

“Getting right to the point. I like that about you,” the Witch Woman said. “I know who you are.”

“So you said. In your note.” He pulled it out and waved it in her face before he threw it on the table. “You were very eager to meet me. I want to know why.”

“All in due course. But please, have some tea first,” she said, indicating the pot. “If you would be so kind.”

Realizing that he was going to get nowhere with her, he sighed and reached for the pot. As the steam rose from the cup in front of the Witch Woman, he settled back and poured himself some tea, but he didn’t touch it until after she placed the cup to her lips and drank deeply.

“Ah, perfect.” She looked up at him. “You know, the best cup of tea in the world isn’t made with this blend or that. Ingredients mean little when the man has no idea what he is doing.”

She nodded to him, looking expectantly at his cup. Hesitantly, he raised the rim of the glass to his lips and sipped at the tea. It was very good, better than even the palace’s tea, and he drank it enough times to know. He swallowed it and set the cup back on the table, then looked up at the Witch Woman, who had never once stopped smiling.

“That’s better. Now we can talk. I know who you are, Bram Allard Estis. I know where you come from. You and I have a lot in common, I think.”

"We have nothing in common," Bram said crossly.

"Oh, but I believe that you'll find we do. You know what I am?"

Bram nodded reluctantly. "You're Nemen."

"I am of the People, yes," she said. "And so are you."

"No."

She cocked her head to one side, considering him for a moment before she continued. "Why are so reluctant to claim your birthright?"

"If you know so much, why don't you tell me?" Bram asked coldly.

The Witch Woman laughed. "Shall I then? But my you are insistent. Very well. I shall tell you." She stood and paced the room, coming to stand at the fire yet again. "Your father was of the People, your mother a fancy woman he bedded one night in a brothel. There was never any love between the two, but when you were born, your father took you and raised you himself. He told you grand stories, adventures of a world you will never see but something think about. How am I doing so far?"

Bram blinked. He did not like this one bit.

"How did you know?" he asked, then regretted it for revealing his ignorance of her methods.

"The same way I know that your father left you cold and destitute on the streets of a city that taught you to be even colder," she replied eagerly, whirling around to face him. "How you blame him for all that's happened to you. How even now a hatred burns in you for your father and everything he stood for. I can feel it there. I can see the fire of it in your eyes, in everything you do. You're angry at a man you barely knew, and at a people you've never known."

"A people who never claimed me," Bram said bitterly, disliking the way that the emotions were suddenly boiling up inside of him. "My father's people."

"Do not condemn us for the actions of one man. We are not all the same," the Witch Woman said sharply, all pretense of charm and flattery gone.

"Aren't you now?" his reply came swift and full of unbridled rage. "Clinging to the practices of an ancient time - it doesn't matter if those practices are fundamentally different; he *hated* magic, but it's still the same - and while the world moves on around you, growing and leading on and becoming something completely new, still you remain

obstinate in your realm of shadows, as if life itself would be ripped from your grasp should you even dare to consider the possibility of some other way.”

The Witch Woman sat back, and Bram’s cheeks flushed with a deep crimson. He didn’t know whether it was from shame or anger. At the moment, he didn’t care. She eyed him cautiously, staring at him like a scholar who had found a new problem from the ashes of an older one.

“You are a very angry young man,” she said finally.

“Not so young,” Bram snapped back.

“Oh, but to me, you are but a seedling on the wind,” she countered with a knowing glint in her eyes. “Young and headstrong and full of ideas and youthful arrogance.”

She smiled at him, a thin lipped smile that for some reason only intensified her beauty. He resisted the urge to stare at those lips and kept his eyes on hers.

“What do you want from me?” Bram asked.

The Witch Woman laughed, a lilting, musical quality in her voice. “Oh, my dear. That is not the question you should be asking. What you should be asking is what you want for yourself.”

Bram was taken aback. “What do I want for myself?”

“Come now,” the Witch Woman’s voice was silky smooth, and she stood and walked around the side of the table, running one finger across the surface of the table.

Her body curved seductively. The scent of jasmine filled his nostrils. He felt his muscles relaxing, his hand uncurling from around his knife handle. When he realized what was happening, however, Bram gritted his teeth, locked his jaw and forced his eyes to stay above her neckline, although it was harder to do this time around. She paused about a foot away, lips curling into a coy smile.

“You are a very rare kind of man, Bram Allard Estis,” the Witch Woman smiled. “Most men can’t resist my charms. I applaud you.”

“I’m not most men,” Bram said, and the Witch Woman laughed and pressed her fingers against his chest as she leaned in closer.

The smell of jasmine was stronger now. He shook his head to clear it.

“No, you’re not,” she said.

He reached up, he thought, to remove her hand from his chest, but before he might touch her she spun away from him, and his fingers followed as if on invisible strings. What was happening to him?

While he struggled internally with his unconscious desires, The Witch Woman breezed towards the fire, standing a little ways away. The outline of her body against the flames was mesmerizing. He locked one leg around his chair and gripped the edges of the seat with his hands. Was this some sort of witchcraft? Spell? He looked down at the tea. Had she laced the cup with something?

"I know why you're here," the Witch Woman said. "I know what you seek. Have you put it together yet? Do you know why they came?"

"The men and women," Bram said in a half-daze. "They came to you."

"With their desires, yes," she nodded, drawing closer and running her fingers across his grizzled chin.

He suddenly felt embarrassed for the state of himself, covered in grime from a night's investigation. Hardly a presentable state for such a lady.

"What are you doing to me?" Bram questioned.

"Do you desire me?" the Witch Woman countered. "Or do you desire something else? I can give it to you. Anything. *Everything.*"

"Is that why they came? You promised them...everything?"

"Everything their heart desired," she said, a note of hysterical glee catching in her voice. "And they gave me so much in return."

Suddenly, everything made sense to Bram. He closed his eyes, watching the pieces fall into place as her words echoed in his mind.

"They came to you and asked you to make their desires a reality," he said quietly. "And you made it happen. Holder died here because he was visiting the red-light district. I'm sure the others had their reasons - gambling, fun or maybe even what Holder died for. But those spells never last. It requires a continuous supply. They mutilated *themselves*. You ran them dry."

He opened his eyes and glared at the Witch Woman, mind clearing momentarily in the heat of his anger at the realization of what she had done.

"I don't like your tone," she frowned.

Even with her smile gone, somehow she still felt irresistible.

“Am I wrong?” he asked, feeling her grip on him slowly fading.

“With your assumption, yes,” she said, retreating again to the firelight. “I did not kill them. I would never sully my hands. I simply gave them what they desired most. In the end, they chose to sacrifice more. They tied their very lives to the magic and the magic took them in the end.”

She laughed a strange, humorless laugh. Bram found himself growing angry at her again for her callous words, but he held himself in check. He had discovered what happened to the victims, but there was still one mystery left to solve.

“That doesn’t explain what you wanted with me,” Bram told her, deciding he was finished with roundabout questions and roundabout answers.

The Witch Woman turned her hungry gaze on him once more.

“But doesn’t it?”

Bram thought for a moment, then began to chuckle.

“You think I will take your magic even now?” he asked as the realization hit him. “After everything, you think I would be that naive?”

With a quiet laugh, he stood, pushing his chair back in the process.

“I’m sorry for wasting your time,” he said. “Allow me to see myself out.”

The Witch Woman’s eyes widened in surprise. “What?”

“I was wrong,” Bram said. “You are right. You haven’t killed anyone. They died of their own hubris, sacrificing themselves piece by piece for their desires. They tore themselves apart. You hold some responsibility, but you didn’t kill them. So, there is no further need of my being here.”

He turned to go, his boots scraping across the cracked wooden floors.

“Wait!” she cried, flinging herself out of her chair.

Long fingers curled around his arm. He stopped despite himself and glanced back at her. Eyes wide, mouth trembling, she stood there, the picture of desperation. Something in him hesitated to leave this poor creature here alone, and so he stood there. When he didn’t make another move towards the exit, the woman smiled hesitantly.

“You will leave without even hearing my offer?” she asked.

“I don’t need to hear your offer to know it is a bad one,” Bram said, but he did not move.

“But you are different from all the others.”

“How? Because I am ‘of the People’? I don’t think that will change my mind,” Bram told her flatly before turning round again.

The Witch Woman quickly stepped in front of him, blocking his path to the exit.

“But surely,” she said desperately. “Surely there is something you desire?”

A thought flashed through Bram’s mind, but as quickly as it came, he stuffed it back into the deepest parts of his mind. Still, the Witch Woman must have seen something for her eyes flashed in victory.

“There is something, isn’t there?” she said, reaching up to stroke his chin once more.

“It is nothing you could ever hope to give me,” Bram snapped, stopping her movement by grabbing her wrist.

Suddenly, her other hand was grasping his tightly. Bram wanted to pull away, but he made the mistake of looking into her eyes. The deep, violet pools sucked him into a whirling world of color and scent and jasmine was strong in his nostrils once more. A trickle of fear crept coldly down his spine. It and his instincts were the only things keeping him grounded.

“You desire a home,” she said finally, as if reading his very thoughts. “A place to call your own.”

“I have a home,” Bram told her, uneasy that she seemed to read him so thoroughly.

“Ah, but even there, you do not feel as if you belong,” she continued. “You feel so alone in all your experiences. Your father’s beatings. Leaving you on your own. The things you have done to survive. You feel you do not deserve your friend’s love and admiration and loyalty.”

“Leave Alan out of this,” Bram growled angrily, pushing her away.

Whatever spell she had cast broke as soon as her eyes left his. She stumbled a few steps, then turned to glare at him, rubbing her sore wrist.

“You are a fool, Raven,” she spat. “You think he is your friend? You think he *loves* you? You, a gutter rat, half-breed mongrel despised by his people and forgotten by mine. He uses you like a master uses his dog.”

Bram did not say a word. She straightened and took a tentative step towards him.

“You want a place to belong? I can give it to you. Power to make a place where you belong. Power to make anything you desire yours. And do not mock your bloodline by thinking you will end up as the others. You are of the People, mongrel though you be, and it is our blood that runs through your veins. Your father’s blood. The blood of warriors, of leaders, of politicians and principalities older and stronger and wiser than you could ever hope to understand. In the old days, the warriors ruled the People. It was their words that everyone hung on to. I can make it so for you again. Awaken the blood that lies within you. You will be more powerful than a...than a god!”

There was silence. Then, Bram began to chuckle. Then he began to laugh. The Witch Woman frowned.

“Don’t underestimate me, boy,” she frowned. “I am not someone to be trifled with.”

“Oh, but I think you are,” Bram taunted. “You are not as powerful or as all-seeing as you want people to think.”

“Do not anger me,” she hissed, a low and dangerous warning note in her voice, but Bram found himself caring little.

“You made a mistake in thinking that I cared if Alan used me. I do not. I know he uses me, and I give myself over to him willingly enough that I care little about his reasons. For if there are two universal truths in this world, it is that I am a wretch and Alan as best a man as this world has ever seen! You think I care about being a god? I will never let my king down. I would lay down my life for him in a heartbeat, because his life will always be worth more than mine. So don't you ever question him again!”

She snarled and her expression turned nasty, but it was still an unearthly beauty. Her fingers tightened around his arm, nails digging through the cloth and into his arm, but Bram ignored her and grabbed her arm with his free hand, staring hard into her

eyes. Something dark grew in her expression. She snatched her hand from his and backed away.

“Have it your way, boy! You will die for your precious friend, and then you will see that I am not someone to be trifled with!” she screamed at him and raised her hands.

A cold wind began to blow through the room. Bram shivered as the fire light flickered and then died, throwing the room into darkness. The only source of light came from the moon that filtered in through the tattered cloth that served as the door. Bram quickly backed towards the light, straining his senses to search for the Witch Woman. Her could hear voices in the dark. An awful, rotting stench assailed his nose. But he could not see her. He did not know where she was.

He froze, caught up in a wordless terror as he felt a bony hand creepy over his shoulder. Slowly, his eyes moved to the side and saw to his horror a hideous old hag standing two steps away from him. He cried out and stumbled backwards, only to bump into the table. There was the sound of something breaking, and he glanced down to find black sludge oozing over his hand while pieces of a broken teacup - his teacup - skittered over the surface. He gasped in recognition and turned back to the old hag, who cackled furiously.

“Do not underestimate me! I am older and more powerful than you can imagine!” she screamed at him.

Her elongated nose and narrowed eyes, warted face and misshapen chin seemed to warp in a mixture of outrage and fury. At her side, her arms hung limp, but slowly, surely, her fingers grew longer, her nails grew sharper, and when she raised them up to the light, they did not glint or glow but stood out against the moonlight as if shrouded in darkness.

She screamed again, darting across the space between them faster than Bram could follow. Her fingers dug into his shoulder, piercing his flesh as easily as any knife could. Pain lanced through his entire body. He cried out and tried to move. They rolled to the side together, toppling to the floor with the witch sitting on top.

“Mock me, would you? Think you better, would you? Think again, you half-breed, unnatural...mongrel!” she screeched in his ear, eyes wild with hatred and determination.

Bram could feel the fingers digging deeper into his skin. He grasped the witch's arm and tried to resist the pain. The fingers hit bone and kept on pushing. His vision began to blur. His mind began to shut down. Such pain to feel a bone being splintered and broken apart that slowly in your own body. Something was bound to break before long. Bram knew it couldn't be him.

Keeping one hand on her arm for resistance, he reached down with his other and slipped it into his coat pocket. His fingers brushed over the note. She leaned closer still, eyes fixed on his face as he struggled to keep her hands back. Her jaw yawned open, revealing a row of very sharp looking teeth. The breath was intolerable, and Bram suddenly knew where the scent of rot and decay was coming from. He turned his head as saliva dripped from her lips and onto his face, fingers scrambling even deeper into his pockets. She cackled again, a deep throaty gurgle as she set her teeth to his neck.

He found the knife handle of his switchblade just as her teeth punctured his skin. With a cry, he jammed his hand up, put the handle against her stomach and pressed the switch. Her gleeful cackle turned into a screech of pain as the blade suddenly thrust itself into her abdomen. Bram gave the knife a wicked twist, and she fell back, withdrawing her talons from his shoulder in the process.

Breathing hard, Bram propped himself up onto his elbow and rolled away from writhing body. When he got his bearings, he hefted the knife in his hand once more and approached the Witch Woman. He was not thinking that he had only a knife and what sort of man thought he could kill a witch with a knife, but that this dangerous creature needed to be put down. Seeing the murderous intent in his eyes, the Witch Woman whimpered slightly and then snapped her fingers.

Suddenly, the firelight flickered back to life. Bram blinked and looked around. The hovel was back to the way it had been when he had walked in, but now the teapot lay on its side, the teacup lay broken in pieces with tea dripping through cracks of the wood, and now the Witch Woman and her beautiful form lay huddled on the ground with a growing patch of red on her dress.

"Wait!" she cried, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Even distressed she was beautiful, and even knowing the truth, Bram hesitated to do the deed.

“Perhaps you are being overhasty,” she said, searching for a way out. “Do not kill me. I-I could be of service to you.”

“I already told you I don’t want your services,” Bram snarled and took another step forward.

“But what of your king?” she said quickly before the knife blade could fall.

Bram hesitated again. “What do you mean?”

“You would deny him this chance? This power? If you are so loyal, why would you deny him this?”

“Because I am so loyal, I will keep this temptation away from him,” Bram said, and he drove the knife through her heart.

She gasped in surprise and pain, clutching at the handle of the blade in her chest. Turning her violet gaze on him, she sunk to the floor and began to...melt? Bram scrambled away from her, wincing at the sharp pain that flared through his wounded shoulder as he got as far away from her as possible. Her skin turned to sludge, the same black ooze that he had seen in the moonlight in his broken teacup, and quickly melted into the ground. The knife thumped to the dirt floor. The fire went out a second time and this time it stayed out. Bram was left in darkness once more.

He stood shakily. Then, retrieving the knife blade, he turned tail and ran as fast as he could from the Witch Woman’s hovel.

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“So she’s dead then?” Alan asked as he poured two cups of tea while Bram adjusted the sling about his arm.

The two of them were sitting in Bram’s office once more. The desk in the corner held the remains of the healer’s work who was attending Bram’s wounds when Alan appeared at his door. He had abandoned his tools rather quickly at the sight of the king. Right now, he was probably loitering outside the door, waiting for the two men to stop talking so he could collect his things. Bram felt a bit sorry for him. He would be waiting awhile.

“I don’t know,” Bram admitted. “She’s powerful, that much I do know, and it is possible that she isn’t actually dead. I mean, I don’t know much about killing witches,

but I feel as if a knife blade to the heart is not exactly the best way of going about things. And the melting seemed a bit dramatic.”

He blanched as Alan place the tea in front of him and shook his head.

“I’m sorry. I’m not sure I could stomach that,” he told the king.

Alan looked at him askance. “I’m not sure I’ve ever heard you admit a weakness before.”

“I haven’t?” Bram asked, closing his eyes and leaning back in his chair. “Then you must remind me to do it more often.”

Alan’s expression only grew darker.

“Bram,” he said, a note of concern creeping into his voice.

“Yes?” Bram opened one eye and quirked his brow in question.

“Are you absolutely certain you are alright?” Alan asked.

The guard captain’s lips curled into a grin and he found himself laughing darkly at the query. Alan frowned, not understanding.

“What? I am genuinely concerned for your health at the moment,” he said.

“I know you are, which is why it’s funny,” Bram chuckled. “I’m sorry, Alan. It’s something you might understand if you had been there.”

Alan shook his head. “I should have known you left out something or other. Did she say something to you? Something I should know about?”

Bram, for his part, had actually left out quite a bit of his and the Witch Woman’s conversation. Most of it he felt was irrelevant (like their discussion of his father; that was his burden alone to bear) or not worth repeating (like their discussion of Alan).

“Alan, do you trust me?” Bram asked him.

“Not a bit,” Alan said, then before Bram could say anything he replied more sincerely, “Yes, of course I do. What sort of stupid question is that?”

“Then trust me when I say that some things are best left unsaid, and some temptations are better left unknown.”

Alan pursed his lips, then nodded. “Alright, I shan’t ask again, then. At least,” he added after a moment’s deliberation. “At least we know what happened and why.”

Bram nodded as well. “Whatever happened they did to themselves, although that doesn’t excuse the Witch Woman’s actions. She is in part to blame for their deaths.”

“Ah, but I can’t say that she is more to blame than the people themselves,” Alan argued.

“Are you...are you defending her?” Bram sat up to ask, incredulous.

“Well, think about it,” Alan said. “They put themselves in that position. They sacrificed themselves to gain the desires, and for what in the end really? It makes me shudder to think about it - they tore themselves apart you say? Mutilated their own bodies in the pursuit of this desire? I’m not sure I could ever make that deal, *but* I can’t say that I wouldn’t either. At least you had the strength to say no.”

“It was different for me,” Bram said quietly, flashes of his memory going back over the encounter. “I was angry for other reasons. I’m not sure if I had been anyone else that I *wouldn’t* have fallen into the temptation myself. But, I had my reasons for refusing, and they are far more important to me than being given my desires.”

A small smile formed on Alan’s face. “I’m starting to understand what those things you left out might be, even if I don’t know for sure. Thank you, Bram.”

“You’re my friend, and you’re my king. I would do anything for you,” Bram replied with no hint of apology in his voice.

“Anything?” Alan asked, raising his eyebrows. “Because...there was this *other* thing that I wanted to mention...”

Bram closed his eyes and laughed deeply.

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“Don’t underestimate the power of friendship. Those bonds are tight stitches that close up the holes you might otherwise fall through.”

— **Richelle E. Goodrich, Smile Anyway**