



THE BONE-SHAKER'S DAUGHTER

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BREILIG. CLOSE YOUR eyes and hold out your hands.”
“What kind of silliness is this, Tema? We are not children.
There is not time for such games.”

Tema laughed and it was the sound of freedom, of birds flying free through clear skies; nothing at all like their daily lives in Redoubt.

“You’re always so serious,” she teased. “We have nothing but time. Let’s live out our weak little lives here, shall we? Waiting for something to happen. From one day to the next, we wait and wait. Let’s fill those hours with a little bit of joy, yes? A little bit of shine. Now hold out your hands.”

Breilig did so. His hands were dark with the sun, scarred and calloused from daily work within the city walls. Not the graceful hands of an elf at all.

He scowled at them.

“Close your eyes, I said. You never listen.”

Breilig squeezed his eyes shut, and Tema laughed again.

“There, see? For one second, life isn’t so bad, is it? This feeling? It’s expectation. It’s knowing that something surprising and good waits just around the corner. This, my dear one, is how life is supposed to be.”

Tema took his dark hands in her pale ones, and slipped something inside his palms.

“Tell me what you’re holding. This glorious surprise.”

“I don’t know.”

“Keep your eyes closed and feel, Breilig. Let that brain of yours rest for a second. This isn’t about thinking at all. Keep that part out of it.”

She slipped her hands from his, sat down on a piece of rubble, and watched.

The city of Redoubt was high and walled, built as a sanctuary from the Dead that had obliterated everything around them. Breilig sprawled on the ground, his back to the wall. The sounds of the Dead below them rose and fell like waves from the oceans they had always read about.

Breilig turned his face to the sun like a blind man. He ran his fingers over the treasures in his hands.

“Smooth. Surprisingly cool. Very light.”

“Yes.”

“Are they beads?”

“No, they’re not.”

“Game pieces?”

“No. What do you think they’re made out of?”

Breilig felt the pieces between his thumb and forefinger.

“I’d guess wood.”

“You’d be wrong.”

He sighed.

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"Why do you make this so difficult, Tema? Why don't you just tell me?"

"Don't you dare open your eyes! What, and spoil the surprise? What else do you have to do today, except clear rubble out of the city streets and worry about your madness."

He snapped his eyes open and handed the pieces back to Tema. He stood up to go.

She grabbed his hands and pulled them to her.

"I'm so sorry. My friend, please forgive me. I didn't mean to bring something so dear up in such a callous manner. I just... please. I'm trying to help. I only want you to be happy."

The elf took a deep breath.

"I know you do. I know I spend time worrying when I could be spending it doing other things." He closed his eyes again and held out his hand. "Let's try it again, yes?"

Tema grinned and swept the tiny white pieces out of the dust. She dropped them into his palm.

"You know what these are. I want you to feel it. They'll call out to you. You'll feel it deep inside, darling. Let me know when you do."

Breilig held the small pieces of...

"Stone?"

"Not stone."

...*not* stone in one hand and caressed them with the other.

"You're an elf. You're in touch with all of this, deep inside. Just let yourself realize it."

Breilig took another breath and held the pieces. There was something to them.

"A deepness."

"Yes."

He hadn't realized he'd said it aloud, but there it was. A deepness. A sense of vitality. He held the pieces and knew they

were important somehow, in a way that all life was important, certainly, but...

All life. That was it. He had it.

"It's bone," he said, opening his eyes and grinning. "The pieces are made out of bone."

Tema smiled back at him.

"Yes! I knew you'd be able to tell. What do you think of them?"

His eyebrows furrowed immediately, his smile dropping away.

"Is that safe? You know, with the undead? Does it not invite danger to have their bones lying around?"

Tema shook her head and collected the small pieces from him.

"It's safe. Do you think I'd be messing around with something that wouldn't be? That I sometimes dare to leap onto the Corpsemen's cart and take whatever I can find? Of course not. Once the body is reduced to bone, and catches the sun, that soothes the soul. But these pieces are meant for music. Let me show you."

She took a small dried gourd from a pocket hidden somewhere inside her dress, and dropped the bits of bone inside.

"Now shake it," she said, and handed it to the elf.

He shook his head.

"No. I don't want to invite something."

Tema rolled her eyes.

"You won't invite anything except for a little amusement, and heavens knows you don't want *that* around."

She shook the gourd, and the rounded balls of bone rattled gently.

"Softly," she said, and shook the gourd in a light rhythm. "Hear that? It's not conjuring up hordes of the Dead, is it? Are your elders coming after you for some unforgiven slight? No. It's music. Music, Breilig, and it's a wonderful thing! Do you feel your heart fly?"

He wanted to say he did. He wanted to say that her confidence gave him strength, that seeing her creating music out of old bones

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was the most meaningful experience of his life. She started to hum and dance, the delicate, elegant ways of her people, bending and weaving before him like a plant moving in the wind and stream.

But Breillig couldn't say these things. He felt the weight of his elven blood, of the grandeur they had experienced once. That greatness was there, deep inside, riding around his circulatory system like his familial madness, and then he was ashamed again, looking at his soft shoes covered in dust and scat and filthy puddles of water that made up the alleyways of Redoubt.

"We are nothing," he whispered, and the sheer starkness of it made him ball up his fists. "We were made for more than this."

Tema stopped dancing, and the sound and beauty of the morning was gone. She studied Breilig carefully before putting the gourd back into the folds of her robe.

"We escaped for a minute, didn't we," she said. It wasn't a question, but a fact. She pushed her fine hair out of her eyes and turned her lips up, but the smile wouldn't come. "For just a second, we were somewhere else, you and I. And then you were somewhere else, all alone."

"I was here," he said. He refused to look at her. "Always here. There's nowhere else for me to be. Nowhere to escape to."

He stood there, tall and broken. Scarred inside and out. Tema reached out and took his hand. She held it in hers, and then brought it to her lips.

"How long have we known each other?" she asked him. Her pale eyes were full of moons and stars and secrets. He had looked at those eyes his whole life, wondering what swam in them.

"Always," he answered. "We've known each other always. Since before time, I sometimes think."

"How many years have I sneaked away from my father to come visit you? To ask about your ways and run my fingers through your

dark hair and escape, however briefly, from the life of a bone-shaker's daughter?"

"Many."

"And you, Breilig. How many years have you crept away from your people, slipping through the alleyways and past the marketplace, in order to meet me? To sit on the walls of the city and watch the Dead howl outside, to talk about despair and beauty and all of the things that makes life worth living? How many?"

"Many."

"Many, and many, and many again. And, if the gods allow, even more years."

"Perhaps the gods will have pity and there will be no more years at all. The Dead will overcome all of us. It will be the end to a civilization that already ended years ago."

Tema's eyes, full of stars and moons earlier, began to fill with storms and lightning and the angry, shaking spears of her people. She slipped her hands from his and put them on her hips, standing upright and proud and strong, although she still only hit his shoulders.

"Breilig, son of Ca'arn, I will not hear you speak in such a manner! Cease feeling sorry for yourself! There is life here. It may not be a very easy life, but it's life and it is worth fighting for. Every morning I arise and see the sun. Yes, I see rats and refuse and children who have starved through the night. I see another loved one thrown on the Corpseman's cart to be taken away before she can rise and harm us all. I see the same things you see, and what's more, I see a wonderful, caring elf wallowing in his own sadness when he could be using his time to create something.

"Make something beautiful. Make life worth living for somebody else, if not for yourself. Make an effort for me. I spent time harvesting and grinding, breaking and polishing this bone to make music for you. For just a brief time, I wanted you to think of

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something besides the disgrace and shame of your people. I don't care about that. I defy my father and spend time with you because I see something of value inside of you. Don't you dare disrespect that! Don't tell me my time and my love is wasted because some silly, morose, straw-for-brains elf can't see outside of himself for one moment. Don't you dare!"

She turned and fled, the sounds of chiming bells and rattling bone fleeing with her. She disappeared into the shadows of the city.

Her time and her... love? Breilig thought. Never had she been so bold. Never had she spoken of something so blasphemous to her people. Yet, it was so thrilling to his heart. Words he thought he would never hear, and would certainly never dare speak first.

He turned back to the wall, watching a crowd of risen Dead clamoring and pushing their faces against each other. Such a sea of inhumanity, but he thought of Tema's tearful retreat, of her words, and he smiled.

TEMA STUMBLED THROUGH the crowded alleyway, pushing her way through the nameless, faceless people that blocked her path. That stupid elf. Stupid her for falling in love with him, years ago, when she knew so much better. Maybe finally saying something was the right thing to do, however. It would make him take her seriously for once. It would douse her in enough shame to leave him behind and focus on a future a bit more agreeable.

She turned a corner and ran smack into a tall brick of a man the size of a doorway. The air flew out of her and she fell down into the filth of the street.

"Look where you're going," the man growled, but his face changed when he saw the young woman sprawled on the ground. He reached down and hauled her to her feet.

“Th-thank you,” she managed, still out of breath. She used the sleeve of her robe to wipe her tears away. She flushed and stared at the ground. “I’m sorry.”

“Watch where you’re going, miss. It’s dangerous.”

“I didn’t mean to run into you, erus. I wasn’t—”

“No, look,” he said, and pointed. Tema stood on her tiptoes to see what he meant.

“That old woman?” she asked.

“She refuses to give up her dead. She has hidden his body for two days already.”

“But she can’t do that!”

“No, she can’t.”

The man’s voice sounded heavy, tired and sorrowful like every other person’s in Redoubt. She wanted to shake him, tell him to fight for life, but after what had just happened with Breilig, she felt weary and sorrowful, as well.

An old woman whose face must have been gentle, once, was clinging to the body of a man. The way she curled her fingers into his clothing told her that he must have been her son.

“Don’t take him from me,” she screamed. “I can’t let him go like this!”

A slim man with scars across his face put his hand gently on her shoulder. She shook it off and spat at him.

“You know the ways, Hannah. You know this must be. We can’t allow him to stay. You have put us in grave danger already. He already starts to stink.”

“He’s all I have,” she wailed, and Tema’s heart hurt at the sound of it. “Don’t take away the only thing I have.”

“Hannah, he’s gone. He’s already dead. Now we just need—”

Tema heard the bells of the Undertaking. The Corpsemen as they came near. The sound was loud, jarring, painful, and unholy.

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"No," the old woman said, and threw herself atop her son's body again. "They're coming to take him!"

"They must take him. You know there is no other choice."

"He's a good boy. A sweet boy. He would never hurt anybody! That isn't his way."

The man shook his head.

"My wife was good, too. Never hurt a soul when she was alive. But after death, she wasn't herself anymore. None of them are. This thing, this curse, it's stronger than we are. If it was a matter of will, we wouldn't all be walled up in this filthy city, would we?"

Tema hid behind the tall man she had run into.

"Doesn't she know it's better to give the body willingly?"

"Love blinds us when it comes to our dead," he answered. "Common sense doesn't always prevail."

The first of the Takers came by. He was shaped like a barrel and most likely had just as much ale in him most nights. Who wouldn't, seeing what he had seen?

"Bring me your dead," he called, and his voice was hoarse and weary behind the words. He was a man who had said this phrase far too many times. "Bring me your dead."

"Here," the man called, and pulled the old woman away easily. Her scream sounded like death itself. "We have one here."

The rest of the Corpsemen arrived, big men with swords and long boar spears. A team of indentured dwarves dragged an iron cage behind them, with bodies flung inside.

Two of the men wordlessly grabbed the body and tossed it in with the others. It settled heavily, indiscreetly, its leg turning at an odd angle.

"My boy," shrieked the old woman as she was held back. "My son!"

"We all must deal with loss," the barrel-shaped man said, and turned. "Bring me your dead," he called, and the grim parade passed on.

“I feel sorry for her,” Tema whispered to the tall man, but he quickly held out his hand.

“Look,” he said, and something in his tone chilled her, made her shiver all the way down to her thin fabric slippers. A wrongness crept through the air, dug its way to her marrow, and she faintly wondered if she’d be sick.

The son’s body began to move.

Just a little, at first, so slowly that Tema wondered if she hadn’t really seen it at all. A curl of the fingers. A jostle of the leg.

But then the head turned, slowly, much farther than any neck should allow it, and the snap of bone didn’t sound clean, like her father’s work, but instead a dark, loathsome thing.

“Quickly!” shouted one of the Takers, and he roughly pushed the crowd aside while two other men rushed the cart.

The old woman screamed and stepped in front of them. They slowed, but only barely, shoving her out of their path. She was nothing more than sinew and linen. An ancient relic from old times. She stood between them and the thing that was now growing strong, now fighting its way from the cage with the unholy strength only seen in the depths of hell, now climbing the side of the building like a hissing lizard.

That’s the sight that would stay with Tema for all of her days. The man with his head turned around completely backwards, scaling the wall, his tongue hanging from his dislocated jaw.

“Move, girl!” The tall man pushed her back toward the way she had come, when she had fled Breilig. “Run!”

She couldn’t move. She couldn’t do anything more than stand and stare as the now-alive dead thing zipped toward her. How it moved so fast, she didn’t know. What unholy arcana made it stick to the walls like that, she would never be able to say, but right now all that mattered was that she was screaming at her feet to run and they simply couldn’t do so.

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She closed her eyes, covered her face so the last thing she saw would be her bone-shaker's fingers instead of some crazy woman's dead son.

There were roars and shouts. Thuds and the sound of steel against stone. The old woman shrieking again until suddenly her voice cut off in a way that made Tema drop a hand to her throat without thinking.

"Look," the tall man said, and grabbed Tema roughly by the shoulders. "They subdued it. Hacked it apart. Next they'll burn what remains before it has a chance to do anything again."

"Move!" shouted the head Corpseman, and the cart jangled and clanged unmusically as it rolled forward. Tema turned her face away from the dismembered limbs on the rusty iron gate and the shine of fresh blood on the Taker's weapons.

Corpses didn't bleed. She knew that. She continued to look away from the carnage, but instead looked at where the old woman had been standing.

"It's a shame," the tall man said, "but she needed to let him go. We have to release the dead."

"And remember the living," Tema said, but the man had already moved on. She heard the sounds of chickens and running feet, vendors hawking their wares and the Corpsemen's bells fading into the distance. Just another day in the city, trying to find a reason to stay alive.

"Tema."

She heard her name and turned. There stood her reason, right in front of her.

"Are you all right?" Breilig asked. He dusted the dirt from her clothes and briefly took her hand before pulling away. "I saw what happened. I couldn't get here fast enough."

"Do you ever feel," she asked him a bit dazedly, "that maybe we spend our time on trivial things when something very important is right in front of us?"

“I do,” he said, and this time when he took her hand, he didn’t let go.

BREILIG SPENT THAT night, and several after, with Tema. They had been together since they were children, but only covertly, and never in such an intimate way.

“A human and an elf?” he mused, tracing ancient elven words on her bare shoulder with his finger. “Father wouldn’t stand for it, of course. How am I to,” he deepened his voice to impersonate his father, “restore the former glory of our race without a proper heir?”

Tema shrugged.

“I would like children, too. I always thought I would have them. But in the end I need to choose what is best for me, Breilig, and that is you. Children would be a joy. But they would also be a concern and a heartache. I want more than anything to be yours and have your child, but that cannot be. So do I choose you, without children, or life without you? It’s no choice, really.”

She kissed him, and her mouth was a wonder. He wondered why he had taken so long to sample it.

Fear. Shame. All of the heavy words he loathed to think of.

“Darling, I’m losing you. Where are you going?”

“I’m here,” he said, and smiled. “I’m right here.”

“Exactly where you’re supposed to be, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Stay with me,” she said, and wrapped her arms around his neck. She laced her fingers in his dark hair. “Promise me that, my brooding elf. Can you?”

“I will,” he said. “There’s nothing I want more.”

When he returned home, he crept into the scant wooden hovel like a child who had done something wrong.

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"Where have you been?" his father demanded. "You've been gone for days!"

"I think I have discovered love, father," Breilig said, but his father turned away.

"We have no time for such silly trivialities. You were with that whore, weren't you? The human girl."

"She is no such thing, and you will never speak of her in such a way again."

"My son," his father said, and his eyes shone with an intensity that belied his sanity, "you know what you must do. Bring honor to this once-proud race. We can be great again!"

"Father."

"And not just for me. For all of your brothers and sisters. All of your people who are forced to bear the humiliation of our fall."

"I love Tema. That won't change. She's always understood me."

"A human woman cannot bear an elf child. You would provide no heir. Our line would end."

"I want to marry her."

His father glared at him.

"I won't begrudge you a dalliance with this human girl. But you will marry one of your own, and sire a leader for our people. We are not meant to live scrubbing filth off the streets. We were destined for greatness, and you will make that possible, my son. A bride has already been chosen for you."

Breilig opened his mouth to argue, but his father was already walking away, leaning heavily on his staff for support.

"She'll be presented to you this evening. I suggest you... clean up. Your bride won't want to smell another woman on you, no matter how base this human may be."

Breilig went about his day, scavenging for food while thinking about Tema's soft, white hands. No other fingers could ever compare.

The way she created music this morning in order to move his soul... he washed the stench of Redoubt from his skin and dressed into clean linens with a sigh. His father was old and it would not harm him to please the old man and at least meet the girl.

She smelled of sunlight. She stood tall and slim, her dark hair pulled back and pinned with vines and flowers somehow found within the city walls. She had black eyes full of secrets that he found himself wanting to learn. Her eyes matched his own.

“My name is Pristlin,” she said, and dipped her head briefly. He did the same. Stood. Didn’t know what to say.

Pristlin licked her lips.

“Your father told me... he said that...” She took a deep breath. “Your father told me that you are to be my groom. If this pleases you, of course.”

Still, Breilig stared.

“I know how strange this must be for you,” she continued on. “It’s certainly strange for me. But I believe in this race, and in our strength. I believe we can band together and achieve our former glory. Be powerful again! I believe we can do this, you and I.”

She took his hand in both of hers. Her fingers were long and tan. They intertwined beautifully within his. She held them to her breast and her eyes glowed with a passion that made him catch his breath. Something moved within his soul.

“Will you accept me, Breilig, son of Ca’an? Allow me to be your wife, and together we will raise the new elven King of Redoubt?”

She was slim where Tema was round. Lean where Tema was soft. Elegant where Tema now seemed like a clumsy colt, frolicking through the streets without a care. Pristlin was a woman, concerned about the resurgence of their people. She wouldn’t tell him not to worry. She wouldn’t think he was being far too serious.

“Do you really believe we can raise our child to greatness?” he asked.

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Her beautiful eyes shone, and Breilig swallowed hard.

“Oh, I do! There’s no doubt in my mind that we will. I hope this isn’t too forward, but when I see you like this, and hold your hands in mine, I feel so much hope. Hope, Breilig. Here. Isn’t that exquisite? Isn’t it a thing of wonder?”

“It is, indeed,” he agreed, and then he smiled at her. A full smile, unchecked.

She smiled back, and he laughed.

“What’s so funny?” she asked him, her wonderful eyes searching his, her beautiful smile not faltering in the least.

“I think this must be that feeling you mentioned, my dear. This might be hope.”

Her smile grew even wider, but then color touched her cheeks. She charmed him. It was the loveliest thing he had ever seen. He desired to see it a hundred times. A hundred times a hundred.

“Then, do you think that, just perhaps, you might choose to take me as your wife?”

He clasped her hands and brought them to his lips.

“With pleasure,” he murmured. He saw their future together. Their children, playing in a clean land with trees and flowers and no city walls ever to be seen. “I will give you anything you desire.”

She lowered her eyelids, shyly.

“I hope that in time, sir, you would give me your heart.”

Breilig tipped her face back so she would meet his eyes.

“My love,” he said truthfully, “I think that you already have it.”

Their wedding date came quickly. Tema stole away with several pieces of beautiful cloth her father wouldn’t miss. She gave it to the elves, who made it into a dress that suited Pristlin’s tall, delicate frame and golden coloring.

“What a dear you are to do this for me!” Pristlin exclaimed, and kissed Tema on the cheek.

“Yes, well, anything for Breilig. He’s my best friend,” Tema said. Her white fingers twisted around in her dress.

“Yes, he told me all about how you two were sweet little childhood friends. I’m so glad he had you while growing up.”

“So was I,” Tema said, and then she excused herself to run to the city wall. Breilig and his new bride wrapped their hands together and said their vows in the old Elven tongue. Tema sat on the filthy stone wall and cried, her tears falling on her short, pasty human hands.

Time is a wicked thing, uncaring and forlorn, and it stops for no one. Years passed and Breilig, his eyes sparking with madness, conceived his first child with pretty Pristlin. He was a boy, a strong, healthy heir, and from the day of his birth he was the crowning glory of the elves.

He was dark and quick, sensitive and strong. He was taught manners, skills, and just enough ruthlessness to ensure his success. His black curls licked around his ears, just like his father’s.

His smile? That was his mother’s, and it tore Tema apart every time she saw it.

Breilig bedded her occasionally, when he was upset or tired or the weight of his responsibility became too much to bear.

“Shhh,” Tema would say, brushing his hair out as they hid away. “You are not Breilig, son of Ca’an, husband of Pristlin, father of an elven heir to me. You are only my dear friend, my only love, and always have been. Peace. Think of us tonight, and nothing more.”

But he couldn’t think of Tema without thinking of her father and his arrogance. Of his finery and the fact that he unknowingly provided scraps to clothe Breilig’s bride on their wedding day. He lost himself in this arrogant man’s daughter, and quietly delighted in the horror he knew it would bring if Tema’s father ever found out.

One afternoon Tema was sitting on the one of the walls protecting Redoubt. She was humming, using a small knife to carve holes in a bleached piece of bone.

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"Hello, Tema," Pristlin said quietly. She gathered the dangling folds of her dress around her and peered over the wall. "Oh, it's certainly high. Aren't you ever afraid you'll fall?"

"Not at all," Tema answered. She didn't look up, but continued carving. "And if I did, what of it?"

Pristlin brought her finger to her lips, chewing her nail. It wasn't something that Tema had ever seen her do, so she put her carving down.

"Is something bothering you, Pristlin?"

"No. Well, yes. Yes, it is."

Tema patted the wall beside her.

"Sit and talk with me. Would you like to carve? I have another piece of bone."

Pristlin cautiously climbed onto the wall, holding Tema's hand. After she was settled, Tema handed her a second piece of bone and a small knife.

"What shall I do with it?" Pristlin asked.

"Whatever your soul sings to you. Feel the life that used to be there. Draw it out. It's its own form of arcana."

Pristlin chipped away at the bone.

"I want to talk to you about my husband."

"I suppose you do."

"I want to know what he means to you, Tema."

Tema looked out at the clear sky over the crowded undead that seethed below.

"He means everything to me,," she said. "He was my sun. His light touched my life like the sun touches the trees outside, the frightening allies, even the Dead below. He made things bearable."

"And now that you no longer feel his light?"

Tema shrugged, smiling bitterly down at the instrument she carved.

“Perhaps life isn’t quite as bearable as it was before. But we survive. Now, listen to this.”

She put the newly created bone flute to her lips and blew. It created a haunting sound that moved the very blood around in her veins.

“Mournful,” Pristlin said.

“Bone flutes usually are. But they’re strong, too.” She turned to Pristlin. “I’m the bone-shaker’s daughter. Do you know what that means?”

“I’m not that familiar with human culture, no. Tell me.”

Tema’s pale eyes, so different from Pristlin’s dark ones, filled with tears.

“It means that we take scraps, pieces of others. We take their bones before they are rendered or burned, and we make something of them. Instruments, mostly, but sometimes knives. Beads. Pieces for our hair. Useful things. Beautiful things. I polish these bones until my fingers bleed, to change them from a thing of horrors to something that brings joy. Even a second of joy is worth all the work.”

“It sounds selfless.”

“It is,” Tema said, and realized her voice was rising. She lowered it. “It is. All of my life has been spent trying to give others a chance at peace. Like Breilig. I don’t know if you’ve seen what you’ve done to him.”

“What I’ve done to him?” Pristlin was taken aback. “What have I *done* to him?”

Tema stood on the wall and began to pace.

“You’ve changed him into something darker than he was before. He seldom smiles, and when he does, it’s an ugly thing. He’s so obsessed with your son and his pure blood—”

“Don’t you mention our son.”

“—that he’s forgotten who he used to be. He’s forgotten about anyone but himself.”

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"That's untrue!" Pristlin cried. Her hands shook in her lap, holding far too hard to the bone and knife. "He thinks of our people all of the time. But do you know who he doesn't think about? He doesn't think about you, Tema. I know it hurts, but you must accept it. You only hold him back. Let him go."

"I can't let him go. Don't you see he's all that I have? The only thing I ever wanted for myself."

Pristlin's eyes sparked. "You will let him go or I will make you. Do you understand? You don't know what I'm capable of."

With one quick pull, Tema ran her knife across Pristlin's throat and then pushed her from the wall. The elf didn't make a single sound as she fell. The wandering Dead fell upon her body, tearing and raking and feasting.

Tema turned away and cleaned her knife.

"You don't know what I'm capable of, either," she said aloud. She tossed the bone flute down to Pristlin's ravaged body.

BREILIG MOURNED THE disappearance of his wife. He didn't eat or sleep, but searched Redoubt by foot, walking for days as he searched the Inner City, the orchards, asking clan after clan, race after race, if they had perhaps seen a beautiful elf maiden pass by.

"Must have been killed if she's missing," a dwarf told him, his mustache drooping in sorrow. "Sorry to hear it."

Tema stopped by his ratty room with a bone bowl full of hot broth.

"You need to eat something," she told him. Her voice was soft as she placed the bowl before him. "If not for yourself, then for your son. He needs you."

"He needs his mother."

Tema's pale eyes normally held the moon and stars. Today they held worry.

“He doesn’t have his mother. She left, for whatever reason. He needs you, darling. You have to be strong for him.”

“I can’t.” His eyes nearly pinwheeled in his head as he looked at her. “You do it, Tema. Pretend he’s our child, yours and mine. Remember when we thought we had to choose? Each other or a child?” He laughed and the sound was far too wild, much too loud. Tema drew back from him.

“I don’t like seeing you this way,” she said, and Breilig howled again in response.

“Be strong.’ Be a father.’ Be a leader.’ Calm down.’ Everybody wants something from me,” he growled. “Leave me alone!” He hurled the soup and the bowl crashed against the wall. “Leave me be!”

Tema turned and fled into the night.



BREILIG SLIPPED INTO a fever that wouldn’t loosen its grasp on him. He saw his wife bending over his bed, speaking to him. She told him stories of the old ways, of their former glory.

“It will come again, my husband,” she whispered to him. Her voice was like rain on parched roots. “You and our son will raise our people to glory again.”

After the fever broke, he lay weak and stinking upon the rags he used for a bed. He called feebly for his son, but nobody came to his door.

“Pristlin? Tema?”

He stood and stumbled, catching himself on a rough piece of wood that he used for a table. A too-soft apple was there, and he took a bite. Another. Realized the flesh was delicious and the juice was heaven on his tongue.

Breilig staggered into the alleyway. Life flowed around him, almost as perceptible as death usually was. A woman walked by with

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flowers in her hair. A child pranced past with a crudely carved toy.

He followed the woman and child, slowly and for no particular reason. It felt good to be awake, to wander. The air was full of dust and smoke, brick and sewage. The elf tasted traces of honey and freshly baked bread, sweat of the laborers and the galley girls.

He found himself near the wall where he used to meet Tema, and it was no surprise to him that she was there.

"Tema," he breathed, and set down heavily next to her. "It has been days since I saw you last."

"Weeks," she said. She didn't face him, but stared out into the desolate lands beyond the city.

"I'm sorry for how I was to you. You didn't deserve it. You've done nothing but be a friend."

"Friend," she repeated, and the way she said the word, high and tuneless, made Breilig give her a second glance.

"Are you well, my dear one?" He asked her.

She laughed, and it reminded him of the Undertaking's bells, such a cacophony of sound. The wrongness made his stomach tighten, and he reached for her.

"Don't touch me," she hissed, and Breilig drew his hand back in surprise.

"You aren't well," he said, and he wondered briefly what he should do. If his family's madness had managed to touch his lover, or if she had been touched by the unholy and undead. He wondered briefly if he should call for help or perhaps flee, but then he saw the tears on her cheeks and he was immediately ashamed.

"I have wronged you," he said quietly, "and for that I am—"

"Does your every sentence begin with the word *I*, Breilig? Is that all you can think of? Yourself?"

Her words were cutting. The voice didn't even sound like hers, but shrill and dead, choked out of her throat by emotions not of

her own.

“I didn’t mean—”

“And there you go again. It’s always about you. Your honor, your people. Your wife, your child. But what about me? I always loved you, and you never saw. Then, when I told you, you threw me away as soon as an elf maiden came along.”

“It wasn’t right.”

“No, it wasn’t. But I forgave you, because that’s what you do for the ones you love. *Love*, Brielig. Not tolerate or use. Those are different things entirely.”

The wailing of the undead grew louder. They were gathered together at the base of the wall, pushing against the stone. Tema looked down at them with pity.

“They are my children,” she said sadly. “They are the ones we will join. I will, you will. All of us, eventually. Whether the walls fall or the Dead overrun us from the inside out, this is how it will be. You must see it as surely as I do.”

“But what is it that you always say? Every second of hope or joy is worth it? Have you forgotten that?”

“You never believed it,” she said. “Don’t pretend to believe it now.”

She pulled a long bone flute from her billowing sleeve. It shone in the last rays of the sun, so beautiful and intricately carved that he gasped.

“You like it?” She asked and smiled. Her smile was sweet and genuine and reminded him of all the smiles they had shared since Tema was a child. “It’s my greatest treasure. A true thing of beauty. Shall I play for you?”

“Yes,” he breathed.

She yelled down at the frenzied masses outside of the walls.

“I’ll play for you, too, shall I?”

Her song was soft, sweet. The clearness through the flute of

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bone filled Breilig with joy and loss. Sorrow and whimsy. He wanted to weep and sing and dance.

"Your wife is down there," Tema said, and put the flute back to her lips.

"What is that?" he asked her. "I must have heard you incorrectly."

"I see her sometimes. A flash of her hair, a bit of fabric from her clothes. Of course it could be my mind playing tricks on me, but I like to think it's her. I play for her, you know."

The song she played was more melancholy. He remembered binding hands with his bride and promising to be by her side forever.

"Is this what forever means?" he wondered aloud.

"Do you know what else I can do?"

She stood on the wall, her back against the blazing sunset as it turned the clouds orange. She was a thing of glory, then. The Bone-Shaker's Daughter. Creator of magic and unifier of souls. Breilig had never seen anything so wondrous, or so terrifying. Her hair turned orange in the fading light. She was aflame.

"What else can you do?" He was almost afraid to ask.

She bared her teeth in what might have passed for a smile, but Breilig realized with a coldness that reached into his belly that she wasn't really there at all. Her eyes took in nothing and everything. Instead of moonbeams, they held shattered pottery and slinking things with sharp teeth. They held the madness he had always feared in himself. Was he mad and she now reflected it back, or was she mad and he drew it into himself?

"How would you like not to be alone, anymore? To be a family again. With me, with your wife, your son, or whoever you choose. Your father, perhaps? The man down the alley who sells trinkets and false gems? Or your mother, long dead. How would that be?"

"I don't understand what you're saying."

"I can make them come."

She put the flute to her lips, a long, straight flute, something so very precious and dear about it, and she played. Her fingers moved quickly, stirring the blood in his body until it moved faster, cleaner. He wanted to get up. He wanted to snap a bone in half with his jaws, wanted to leap off the wall into the melee below, wanted to succumb to love and lust and murder all in one moment.

The Dead below howled and surged, a frenzy of motion. Lightning cracked down among them, zipping from body to body. Some cried out with voices that sounded strangely human. Others had scales as though they were fish.

“They’re attracted to the music,” Breilig realized. He leaned over and saw the masses were starting to hurl themselves more forcefully against the wall.

“No!” he shouted. “You mustn’t stir them up!”

The sun came out of the clouds and silhouetted Tema so sharply that Breilig threw his hand up to shield his face.

“They come. They climb. I call, and they listen,” Tema said between notes. Riled undead began to scale the walls, piling over top each other in order to ascend. Unholy screams and hisses rose from the city around them as corpses reanimated. He heard men calling each other to arms, screaming for their weapons and begging the Corpsemen to aid them.

“The dead call to the dead,” Tema said, and laughed. She laughed and wiped away tears, and Breilig saw madness as he had always feared it.

“It isn’t time for us to all be dead,” he said. “Please, stop this. We can still fight.”

“There’s nothing left to fight for,” she screamed, and she let the flute fall limply at her side. “Nothing, Breilig. You were what I lived for. You were my sunlight.”

“I can still be your sunlight, if that’s what you want,” he pleaded. “Stay with me. Help me raise my son. I know you feel despair now,

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but we can change it.”

Tema closed her eyes.

“Your son. Such a beautiful boy.”

“He is. And he’s probably scared. He lost his mother and probably thought he was losing his father, too. But he can have both of us, you and me. We can take care of him. But first I need to find him. Will you help me?”

“I know where he is.”

She held her hand out, and Breilig took it. Instead of helping her off the wall, she pulled him up on to it.

“He’s free,” she said, and pulled him to face the sunset together. “Free and happy, without burden or sorrow. He’s with his mother, and soon with his father and Tema.”

Breilig’s golden skin paled. Tema nodded.

“You... you saw him go?” He asked.

Tema laced her white fingers with his dark ones.

“He went quietly and without pain. Afterward, I did as my father would have me do. I turned his tragedy into a thing of joy. And for a moment, we all felt that joy... didn’t we?”

She smiled brokenly and handed him the flute. The bone was warm and beautiful and heartbreakingly familiar.

“Oh, gods,” he whispered.

She pressed her mouth to his and spoke against his lips:

“They don’t exist.”

She wrapped her arms around him and let both of them fall.