Author's Note: This chapter comes with a song! I think the best way to listen to it is to get to the part of the chapter with the song, then play it rather than just reading the lyrics. Note that this is an interpretation of the song in the story, rather than canonical, for a few reasons. Link here: https://soundcloud.com/alexanderwales/the-brave-knight-gave/

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Verity wouldn't have said that she was *happy* with the concerts, but she had definitely grown a bit more relaxed. The first one had been the worst, largely because she was being pulled around from place to place. She'd had her legs waxed, her eyebrows trimmed, been shoved into a dress, had her hair pulled into shape, her makeup done, all kinds of things that made her feel as though her body wasn't her own. All that was still going on, but this time she knew what to expect, and she was doing it on her own, without her mother, which made it feel better somehow, as though she'd deliberately elected to do all this. In a way, she had, and she kept that in mind. It was easy to be angry with her mother, to resent the intrusion, but it was much harder for Verity to be angry with something she'd chosen for herself. And when she was on her own, she was her own advocate, making her own decisions about what was good and what wasn't, how she should look for the concert, what image she wanted to present.

There had been, in some sense, more pressure when the party had been there. She cared more about those four people than about any of the two thousand some others in the theater, and it didn't seem to matter that they collectively knew next to nothing about music, nor that they had heard her practicing these same songs six hours a day for an entire week. She was glad that they'd come, but their presence had added something to the performance that was a bit unwelcome.

The second performance of the same concert should, in theory, have been the easier of the two, but the songs were of such a high level, and the lute so demanding, that having successfully performed the pieces for an audience once didn't result in much reduction in the stress of it all.

Verity had heard from career musicians who worked in the pits at plays or operas that after enough times playing the same song, you began to enter into a dissociative state, where your body went through the motions all on its own, as if you were *both* instruments, a machine like her father was still seeking to make, one which played what it was told to play, music as if from nowhere. Verity had never experienced that, but it was what she craved, flawless execution that came from rote memorization, rather than the bundle of nervous energy that sometimes seemed to have her holding onto the thread of the song with only a weak grasp.

Backstage, she couldn't stop tapping her feet. She could hear the crowd of two thousand people, possibly more, all of them talking amongst themselves to make a din of conversation. She couldn't hear the sounds of their clothes rustling or the way they moved in their seats, but she imagined that she could. All those small noises, multiplied by a thousand, could create a roar. The backstage itself was rather noisy, as there were what felt like far too many people moving around. There were half a dozen of them, which seemed like half a dozen more than there needed to be, but she didn't know the first thing about how a theater was actually run. There was someone, somewhere, in charge of the bright lights that shone down on her, and
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there were ushers to get people to and from their seats, and all sorts of others. She didn't know what the people backstage were for though. There was no curtain that needed to be pulled, no one to introduce her, nothing like that, but there were still half a dozen of these people, moving to and fro.

When it was time, the lights in the theater dimmed, all except the ones that were shining on the stage, and Verity walked out to applause. She put on her best beaming smile, walked with a clacking of heels on the stage floor, back straight, and took her seat, front and center. She sat there for a moment, smiling out at the audience, careful to not let that smile dip, as the applause spent some time rolling on. Outwardly, she was a happy, gracious performer, and she waited for the people to stop clapping, keeping that smile in place and focused on a point toward the center of the theater.

When the applause stopped, she touched a diadem around her neck, its chain and stone so thin that they would be invisible from all but the front row. The acoustics of the Ellusifé were phenomenal, but there was no way that her voice would reach to the back without assistance.

"Thank you all for joining me here tonight," said Verity. Her voice was smooth and practiced. She'd said this all out loud at the house, rehearsing it until it felt genuine and off-the-cuff. "I tend to prefer the music to speak for itself, but tonight I'll be performing one of my favorites, and I wanted to make sure that it had a proper introduction. Julia Celémen was one of the jewels of the Auserian music scene, both a composer and a music historian, and her works find their importance not just in their own beauty, but in the way they so deeply reflect the past. This first piece is Celémen's *Winter on the Water*, her take on the Frozen Fleet of the late Red Ages, when forty ships were frozen in ice, unable to move, halting their attack on what is now Dondrian."

She touched the diadem again, quieting it so no one would hear her swallow or breathe, then got into proper position, with posture perfect, and began to play.

Celémen was not, in fact, one of Verity's favorites. There was probably some way of introducing the piece that would feel more authentic to Verity's own feelings, but it had been easier to just lie to the crowd. They didn't need to know that Verity found Celémen to be too technically demanding for her own good, or that the songs had been made into classics more by the weight of Celémen's relationships with her theater friends and a brief dalliance with Dondrian's then-mayor. The actual *history* of the musician-historian was one of nepotism, and the gimmick of the collected body of work was a weak one. There were all kinds of things to draw on through history, but the marriage of history and music was, as Celémen had done it, sub-par.

Verity focused on the music, of course. She was playing many instruments at once through the magic of the lute, instruments that she had only a passing knowledge of how to handle without the entad's heavy magic. There was no written music to guide her, only her memory of the pieces, which she'd done her best to burn into her brain. It was harder that way, to play without sheet music, but it was one of the demands of professional performance. She found it idiotic, personally, but the driving philosophy was that the only things present on the stage should be the musician and her instrument.

She was halfway through the song when she spotted her mother sitting in the front row. With the lights focused on the stage and the theater seats in darkness, it was hard to see anything. There was no time to process what it meant for her mother to be sitting there. The song was too demanding, so as Verity had learned to do, she pushed all other thoughts to the side and played on.

They hadn't spoken to each other since their fight, save for a simple letter her mother had sent with instructions for how to travel. Verity had sent back a letter saying that she would be finding other accommodations for the remaining concerts. Once Verity had arrived in Dondrian and seen that her mother wasn't waiting there, it had seemed like that would be that.

Verity tried to keep her emotions in check. That was something she tended to be good at. Still, the anger seemed to be rising all on its own, without much rumination to drive it, and by the time Verity had finished the three pieces by Celémen, she was practically boiling with it. Perhaps it was the helplessness of it, the way that she had no way to respond to this provocation — and it *was* a provocation, that she was sure of. Her mother had not come for the purposes of moral support, and *certainly* hadn't come because she actually wanted to hear the music. No, this was a statement of some kind, one of those opaque gestures that people of her ilk were always engaging in.

Verity delivered the second talk of the evening, this one about a different musician, Puwa Kigo, from Kiromo, and when she was finished with the polished presentation, she immediately forgot every word of it. It was prattle, her mother's words coming out of her mouth, and she hated it.

She stayed angry through the entirety of Kigo's long three-movement concerto. Her play wasn't as tight as it had been at the beginning, and she was certain that whatever trained musician her mother kept on hand would be whispering in her ear about it. There was nothing that a normal person would find fault with though. Verity had been molded into a consummate professional, which was just about the only thing she could say in favor of her mother's parenting style.

By the time the concerto was finished, Verity had come to a decision, one that was made without all that much real thought given that she played the whole way through without much for a break. The concert had no intermission, no chance to refresh. The decision she made wasn't entirely rash, it was something she'd been contemplating for weeks now, perhaps even longer.

"I was supposed to end this evening with a short, sweet song by Beruchald, but I'm afraid I've been bitten by a desire for something a bit offbeat, and you've been a lovely audience so far, so I'm hoping that you'll indulge me. In my off time, I'm a dungeoneer, and the songs I play for my party are quite a bit different from any of what I've played so far. I'd like to share one of them with you, and hopefully I'll put this lute through its paces."

It began with the trumpets, and Verity hoped that it was the jolt to the system that she'd written it as.

There once was a knight loyal to his king,
He was good and brave and kind,

For the lance of his lord he would give everything,
Wherever the path may wind.

And the brave knight gave of his shield that day,
And the brave knight gave of his shield,
With his head bowed down before that crown,
The brave knight gave of his shield.

And lo he traveled the twisting ways,
His sword sang its verdant song,
The monsters died to the righteous blade,
Lamenting he took so long.

And the brave knight gave of his sword that day,
And the brave knight gave of his sword,
With his head bowed down before the crown,
The brave knight gave of his sword.

With saddle set and lance in hand,
He rode out o'er the hills,
To-ward his work, he does not shirk,
To do as his good lord wills,

His horse ran on with a singular song,
Its hoofbeats true and sweet,
A beast so brave,
From birth to grave,
Thumping his steady beat.

And the brave knight gave of his steed that day,
And the brave knight gave of his steed,
With his head bowed down before the crown,
The brave knight gave of his steed.

And the brave knight gave of his life that day,
And the brave knight gave of his life,
With his head bowed down before the crown,
The brave knight gave of his life.

Into the sun never went the knight,
He feared not death nor doom,
To give of himself was his right, that was right,
To give even to the tomb.

He wished for a life he could call his own,
For a child he might watch to grow,

For a woman or man to be by his side,
While his lord would never know.

And the brave knight gave to the grave that day,
And the brave knight gave to the grave,
With his head bowed down before the crown,
The brave knight gave to the grave.

She had meant not to look at her mother through the entire piece, but at the song's midway point, when the lute was producing unearthly sounds that no real instrument could produce, Verity snuck a peak. Her mother's face was set, a very slight frown the only sign of what she was thinking, and Verity couldn't help but smile. It was her mother who had pushed her, who had put her up on stage, and now the chickens were coming home to roost.

Verity hadn't expected the end of the song to be met with applause. She'd expected confused silence, or perhaps a murmur of conversation about what they'd just heard. If she'd thought that people would applaud the piece, she might have expected it to be a brief smattering out of politeness. Instead, it was deafening, more than anything she'd gotten before. She stood and bowed, a real smile on her face this time, and she touched the diadem to mute the happy sounds she was worried she might make.

Once she was safely backstage, she took the diadem off and handed it to one of the stagehands, who had a box to lock it within, and the lute was taken by a *different* stagehand, who carefully packed it up so it could go back to its owner. Verity stretched out, as she'd been sitting for quite some time, then took a glass of water that was waiting for her and swallowed it down in short order. She was done with her obligation, at least for a week, and there was something refreshing about that. She had also felt good about the song, in part because of the applause she'd gotten.

Verity's stated opinion, when it came to the audience, was that she didn't care for them. She liked to pretend that she made music for music's sake, that it was about art and beauty, and what appealed to her — but when the theater lit up with applause, the lie was laid bare, because it really did feel like the crowd was washing away her anxiety, rewarding her for the hours of practice, encouraging her to keep going. There was something different about a theater of people listening to her play, and something better about their response as compared to a tavern of people clapping when her set was done. A part of Verity really did like the adulations, if only there weren't such a risk that she'd be dismissed as untalented.

Verity was still shaking off the stress of the performance when her mother appeared backstage.

"Mother," said Verity. "How did you like the performance?" She was feeling bold, still high off the reaction of the audience. It felt like there was nothing her mother could say that would bring her down.

"That last song," said Edil. "It was about me?"

"Good lyrics can apply to many situations," said Verity. She folded her arms.

“You wrote that song yourself?” asked Edil. Her hands were clenched into fists, knuckles white.

“I did,” said Verity.

“What a waste of your time and talent,” said Edil. She shook her head. “It was so *common*, so *base*, a tavern song without meaning or import. It might be one thing to coach it in different language, to attempt elevating something simple, but these were just daft lyrics presented as though it was what you’d prefer to be playing the entire time. You skipped *Beruchald* for gods’ sake.”

Verity could feel her cheeks flushed. “I don’t believe I asked for your opinion.”

“Do you understand how it reflects on me?” asked Edil. “How it reflects on *you*?”

“I do,” said Verity. “And if it reflects on me, then at least it’s a true reflection of who I am.”

“Who you ‘are’?” asked Edil. “You’re eighteen, practically still a child. You don’t *know* who you are, and you’re throwing away the life I’ve helped build for you. You write this song about a knight who gives of himself for his king, and what have you actually given? All I’ve asked of you is to pay back what —”

“No,” said Verity. She was on the verge of using her bardic powers again, she could feel it like an itch. “No, I’m making money for you hand over fist, I know it’s hundreds of thousands of rings, maybe as much as a *million*, all to go toward making up for father’s dereliction of duty. Do you understand my life right now? I live in a house with my friends, I eat simple meals, and I’m *happy* there. That you can’t be happy without the material wealth you need to show off to your friends would be reason enough for me to keep my distance, but you’re *not* happy, and you never have been.” She was speaking fast, the words flowing out. Her heart was hammering in her chest. “I’m not doing the rest of the concerts. You can starve on the streets for all I care.”

Edil’s face was flushed. “You —”

“Fuck off,” said Verity.

Verity stormed off, though she didn’t really have anywhere to go. She had a dressing room, but she wasn’t going to go *there*, because it had only one entrance, and her mother could conceivably just wait outside.

Instead, having fulfilled her duty to the audience, Verity warped away, to the center of Dondrian’s largest hex. She slid down the slide, trying not to cry, and disembarked, walking toward the nearest corner where she could be by herself.

The song *had* been about her mother, which had been so clear that it couldn’t be missed even by someone who wasn’t inclined to see meaning in music. Verity hadn’t fully meant to play it for a crowd, but she’d been writing her songs down, and she had tested the limits of the lute and its ability to do new and interesting sounds. She had worked on the song, and she’d been thinking about her mother, and how she would inevitably be asked to divest herself of everything important to her. It was how it had been at home. The knight in the song was loyal and brave

though, and that was something that she'd never been. She'd run away from home, for a start, and then when she'd seen her mother again, had been a coward about the money troubles, agreeing to a concert that she really didn't want to do.

She sat and cried for a bit, back up against a wall. The proper thing to do would be to talk with the party, but she just wanted a moment to herself.

When she'd collected herself, she got up from the floor and shook out her limbs, then took a deep breath.

<Concert is over,> said Verity. <I'm heading back. The trip isn't until the morning, but I'd really like to get home quickly.>

<Did it go okay?> asked Hannah.

<Fine,> said Verity. <My mom showed up. We had a fight. Also, I played one of my own songs, which I hadn't been planning to do.> She had felt like people liked it, but it was always hard to tell in the moment, and sometimes opinion took a bit to shake out.

<Come find us then,> said Hannah. <Unless you want to talk over the channel. We're at Alfric's, in for a bit of a quiet night after havin' been out on the town.>

<Let me know if you need a pick up,> said Mizuki. <I've got the helm, and they seem cool with people flying around in the city, not like lame Plenarch.>

Verity took another deep breath. <I'll be fine,> she said. <I hate the helm.>

<You don't sound okay,> said Isra.

<I'm okay,> said Verity. <I just want to lay in bed for a few days. I want to not touch a lute.>

<Er, but you have two concerts left, don't you?> asked Mizuki.

<I canceled them,> said Verity. <My mother can hang herself in shame.> It was vitriol she didn't quite feel, but it felt good to be mean.

<Where are you right now?> asked Hannah. <We can come to you.>

<I don't need it,> said Verity. <I'll walk. I'll be fine.>

<Just tell us where you are and we'll be there in a flash,> said Hannah.

Verity found this unaccountably irritating, until she realized that it was just what her mother would have done. Hannah was like that sometimes, a little too pushy, a little too nosy, and too much of a cleric to be a close friend. Harsh words were almost out of Verity's mouth, but she took a moment to reconsider, and was grateful that she did. Hannah, at least, meant well, even if the overall approach sometimes rankled.

<I really don't want to have to say that I'm fine again,> said Verity. <Please?>

<Alright,> said Hannah. <I'll lay off, you take care though.>

<I will,> said Verity.

The party channel was silent after that, and Verity felt bad about it. They were only trying to help, after all. She didn't *want* help though, she didn't want to explain what had happened or try to recreate the conversation, or do all those other things that she would be expected to do. They would ask about the performance, and the song, and about her mother, and yes, they might accept her saying that she didn't want to talk about it, but they would still want to know, and she'd have to tell them eventually. What she *wanted* was to lay in Isra's arms and cry for a bit, and then somehow get back to Pucklechurch, where she could lay in her room for a few days.

Verity had spent eight months at the Fig and Gristle, and done pretty much nothing. It had been great. A part of her wanted to go back to that life. She liked dungeons well enough, and would rather do dungeons than do sets, but if she were given the option to do nothing at all, to have endless days of honey and fruit with Isra, that was what she would have picked with no question in her mind.

Verity did *like* music. In an imaginary world where she had absolutely nothing in the way of obligations, she would have still wanted to make up silly songs, and she'd have still practiced a bit each day in order to stay sharp. As she walked back to Alfric's house, she even began to hum to herself, composing a little funeral dirge for her relationship with her mother.

By the time she was back to Alfric's house, she was feeling better, and she was mildly surprised that no one asked any questions when she came in, though she got more than a few raised eyebrows. It was late in the day, well past dark, and her party was sitting around the Overguard living room, with Emperor and a few of Alfric's siblings there.

"Did you need me to reset the day?" asked Alfric in a low voice. "I could give you forewarning."

"No," said Verity. "Thank you."

Alfric nodded.

A silence hung over the gathering for a moment, then Mizuki began talking, and Verity's problems were, for a moment, set to the side. She drank a full glass of wine and began to feel a bit better, and the feeling grew when Isra cuddled with her. Verity didn't want to talk about the concert, but she *did* want to have her hair stroked. She was horribly overdressed and out of place among the others, but she tried not to let that bother her. She listened much more than she talked — one of Alfric's older brothers had apparently taken up a job as a sailor — and settled in, trying not to feel sorrow or anger or anything else unpleasant. What she really wanted was some of whatever Alfric's aunt had smoked, something that would mellow her out and let her temporarily forget.

Isra and Verity were sharing a room, though the bed didn't feel quite big enough for the both of them. Once they had washed up and were alone, Verity expected that Isra would ask about the

concert. That never happened though, so as they lay together, Verity found herself talking, unprompted.

“I do hate her,” said Verity. “But I hate her because I can see something good in her. I can imagine a way in which she wasn’t awful, if she was exacting but fair, if she was doing it out of love rather than sheer narcissism. I do *like* that I’m a very good lute player, that I have this skill at a young age that will stay with me through my life. I like that I was taught certain things, that I know more than the average girl my age. I like the person I *am*, and a part of that is because of my mother. And … she did care for me. Does, maybe.”

“I don’t think you should speak to her again,” said Isra.

“I — I don’t know,” said Verity. “It depends on how it happens.”

Isra was silent, and the silence seemed to stretch out so long that it felt like maybe their conversation was simply done.

“Do you think you’ll be happy once this is done?” asked Isra.

“Once what is done?” asked Verity.

“This,” said Isra. “Everything with your family. Do you think that there will come a time when it’s passed by, when you don’t think about it anymore? And do you think you’ll be happy then?”

“I don’t know,” said Verity. It felt like an odd question. “Maybe.”

“I’m worried this is just how it’s going to be,” said Isra. “I’m worried that you’ll find some way to be unhappy, even if your mother were to die tomorrow.”

Verity pulled back. Her skin felt cool where they’d been pressed together. “What are you saying?”

“I don’t know,” said Isra. She shook her head. “Let’s just go to sleep.”

“I’m not *constantly* unhappy,” said Verity. She narrowed her eyes. “That’s not my natural condition.”

“I didn’t say that,” said Isra. “It’s just difficult, sometimes, to try to help you and not have anything I say work. I’m tired of it.”

Verity stared at her. “I’ve had a bad day and you’re telling me that you’re tired of me having bad days?”

“*I* said we should go to sleep,” said Isra.

“I’m going to get my own guest room,” said Verity.

“Don’t be like that,” said Isra. She folded her arms. “I just — I don’t think it’s supposed to be like this. I don’t know about how people are, I don’t know *anything*, but you’ve been doing these

concerts for a month now. Your mother's been back in your life for longer than that. It's been weighing on you, which means that it's been weighing on me, and — I didn't even get to *know* my mother. I'm an orphan. It hurts, sometimes, that you seem to forget that."

"I didn't," said Verity, but she'd been going to say 'I didn't think of that', which seemed like a horrible thing to admit out loud. Whether or not she said it though, it was true. It did sometimes slip her mind. That Isra was an orphan, not some free spirit who had decided of her own volition to go live with the animals in the woods … well, Verity had preferred not to think about it.

"I can be the one to move," said Isra. She got up from the bed and gathered her clothes. "We'll talk about this later, I guess."

Verity felt her heart sink. "Stay," she said. "We can talk about it."

"I'm tired," said Isra. "We can talk about it in the morning."

Verity felt like there was something that she should have said, something that could have made Isra still be with her. She was worried that a night apart would lead to two nights apart, and that all the warmth and comfort of their relationship would be sapped away as they slept. But if there had been magic words that would have healed things, Verity wasn't able to find them.

With Isra gone, the room felt unexpectedly cold, though Verity was certain that it was nearly optimal for human comfort. She had trouble getting to sleep, and kept going over her relationship with Isra, trying to tease at where it had gone wrong. Her dreams were of songs, and regrets.