

Bindings of Blood and Marrow

K. L. S.

1. Oh no, a prologue without the protagonist

Deep within the ancient, haunted halls of Reaverhaven, a woman dressed in human skin and bones was pacing rapidly, murmuring angrily to herself. She was a pale, willowy sort of lady, perhaps beautiful if she was not a creature of nightmares, her vivid, curly red hair decorated with knuckle bones, a mask of human skin currently residing around her neck, and not covering her mouth, as it so typically was. She wore a tight scarlet dress made of demigod skin and muscle sinew, still red and fleshy and warm.

Her upper body was protected by an armor made of human ribcages. The bones bent around her breasts quite snugly, connected by a sternum, wrapping around her back to join with a spinal column that extended down her back. The front of the dress was quite conservative, but her back was completely exposed, covered only by the spinal column and the rib bones.

Her shoulders were similarly covered with leg and arm bones, but her own legs were quite undefended, exposed by long slits in the fabric up to her thighs. Bound tightly around her right leg was a thigh scabbard also made from a ribcage, although this one was much smaller, perhaps formerly belonging to a child or two. A long dagger was holstered within. Its handle glimmered with scarlet light as she moved.

The bones of her hair bounced spiritedly as she trampled the carpet, her footfalls so furious, they might set fire to it soon. The daggers tied around her waist clattered noisily, their bone hilts clambering together like teeth on a chilly winter evening. There were also human scalps hanging between the knives made of bones. They swished silently as she paced.

She sought an audience with her father, in the throne room of Reaverhaven, but she had not been allowed in yet. The doors were closed, and she did not understand why. Did Father not understand how serious this matter was? Did he not know how much valuable time they were wasting?

The traitor could be miles away by now!

But she dared not voice such thoughts aloud. Of course, Father knew what he was doing. He was Father. He was wise and all-knowing. He must know something she did not...how she longed to know what he knew. How she yearned for him to share all his secrets with her...but he had not chosen her.

He had chosen the *traitor*.

The woman of bone spit on the carpet, disgusted just by the thought of them.

“Enter,” Father called.

The woman jumped, her bones clattering loudlyjangling noisily. She pushed open the doors in an instant, overjoyed to be welcomed in at last. The throne room was as intimidating as always, the ceiling higher than a mountain, the floor as vast as a lake. Any human who entered would feel immensely small and insignificant. T, and that was the entire point.

At the far corner of the room sat her father. As tall as a castle himself, but far, far away. His skin was gray, almost black, hanging off him in rags. He wore a robe stitched out of darkness and human screams, which made far more noise than her bone ornaments, even at this distance. She could not see his face, only his terrible eyes, bright blue and

always staring. They were like twin stars, glimmering menacingly at her, warning her that they were much closer to earth than true stars. She only took a few steps inside, for she knew that she was not permitted any closer.

“Speak,” her father rumbled.

“My lord,” the woman said breathlessly, ecstatic to be in his presence at last. “The traitor has fled Reaverhaven. They have stolen the godcleavers and the bloodwidow. They also stole the clothes of last night’s sacrifice, still rotting in the Bellow. They traveled by foot; no reaper bats or vultures were stolen. If you would allow me to pursue them, I could catch up to them before they even cross the Defiled Forest. I could remove every inch of skin from their body, carve out every organ, pull them apart piece by piece while they were still alive and screaming and begging for mercy, and all before the morning-”

“Foolish child,” Father murmured. She recoiled, mortified and fearful. “They would destroy you. Still...if you so desire destruction...”

The woman’s face twisted with rage and desperation, her brow furrowed with old resentments.

“Let me prove to you that I am better than that...that vile defector. I will bring back their corpse, so that we may decorate this hall with their skin and bones and treacherous heart.”

Father made another noise, either a snort of derision or a mocking chuckle.

“Very well, Viscera...but you will not be the only one of my children to hunt them...even though I doubt any of your siblings is up for the challenge...I would still see you try...”

Viscera fumed inwardly, and outwardly, her red hair almost glowing, as if she was so angry, her head had caught on fire. But she said nothing, and her father laughed, a hollow echo without substance.

“Your temper. One of your many inadequacies,” Father said. “But no matter...you will all try...you will all fail...but they shall return to me.”

Viscera stiffened, her scowl apparent, despite her deference for her father. “How do you know, Father? They...they have...spent their entire life in Reaverhaven. They have never left these walls. And you once said so yourself, they have always dreamt of seeing the outside world. Why would they return?”

Her father’s eyes glowed brighter. She winced, shoulders shaking involuntarily.

“For this...”

She jumped, startled, as a demon appeared before her, a wicked little thing, pale skinned with bright blue eyes, pointed ears, horns, and nasty claws. It held a jar in its hands. A jar with something scarlet inside it...

Viscera’s mouth dropped open; she could not mask her reaction.

“That’s...you took out...”

The demon’s claws clacked against the lid of the jam jar. Its eyes glowed even more unpleasantly.

“Feel free to hunt, daughter, but do not underestimate your sibling,” Father said, his tone calm and amused. “A crippled beast is still a dangerous one.”

Viscera swallowed hard, and bowed deeply. She understood that she was dismissed. As she left the hall, the small demon grinned, its crooked teeth black and broken. It was honored to hold the jar, with pieces of its god's favorite within its confines. But the god waved it away, the jar levitating as the demon disappeared in a puff of smoke. He could crush it completely. Cripple his youngest child permanently. It didn't matter if he did or didn't. They would still return to him, because they had no choice. They had no other place in this world, but at his feet, the same as all their other siblings. But he was fond of this one. Unreasonably so. His only weakness.

When they came back, begging for forgiveness, he would be a most generous father. It wasn't fair, but fathers very rarely were. And every father has his favorite...

The jar floated up through the air as if pulled by an invisible string. It stopped at his eye level, allowing him to inspect its contents better.

A still-beating red heart, slippery and wet, floated in the cool gel of the jar, quite damaged, as it had been wrestled roughly out of his child's chest. But it could still be easily repaired. Just so long as his favorite came home. Just so long as they apologized, and accepted that you cannot abandon your family. Just so long as they knew, the outside world was not theirs. They could never live there; they could never reject their destiny.

Their destiny was here, in the dark, with him always.

2. There they are.

The little boy couldn't stop staring at the passenger who had hitched a ride on his father's hay cart. It was a gloomy sort of day, the sky overcast, the air thick with anticipation of rain. He was wearing a thick jacket with the hood pulled up, shivering profusely, even though he wasn't even wet yet. Rather than hay, the two were sitting on boxes and crates. The wind was the penetrating kind, a blade piercing through armor, clothes, and ribs. And yet, their passenger didn't seem bothered at all.

They were a most peculiar traveler. First were the clothes. A ragged and filthy uniform, barely distinguishable as articles of clothing at all, but his father had recognized the emblem of the Razor Watch, an elite organization of assassins and bounty hunters who served the god of hunting. Indeed, he never would've picked up a hitchhiker if they were not wearing such a fearsome symbol, which promised retribution if its wearer was neglected or abandoned, and lived to tell the tale.

Second was the fact that they had no shoes, and had clearly walked barefoot through the Defiled Forest. Just walking through the Defiled Forest at all would've been bad enough, but barefoot? Not just unheard of. Impossible. It was thick with brambles, thorns, bushes that would reach out and strangle you with their razor-sharp vines. It was rumored that if one died in the Defiled Forest, their body and soul would be consumed by the roots of the trees, which ate flesh, drank blood, and swallowed souls.

No one wanted to be deprived of an eternity with their god of choice, no one, and the Defiled Forest was purgatory in waiting.

Third was the fact that they were wearing a blindfold. A thin black strip of cloth, tied around their white hair, which was a long, ragged, knotted mess. They had been wearing the blindfold when the boy and his father had found them, and they refused to take it off, even in the cart.

And fourth, and finally, was the fact that they had a nasty wound on the side of their throat. A symbol, carved into their flesh with jagged, jerky lines, as though it had been drawn while they were awake and wiggling. It was still bleeding, a fact which did not seem to bother the stranger, who merely scratched at it, skin and blood scraping under their nails.

Neither the little boy, nor his father would recognize it, but to any educated person, it would spell out danger in capital letters. But luckily for the stranger, the boy and his father were destitute and uninformed, and that was also the only reason they lived close enough to the Defiled Forest to even pass by it on accident.

"Is it bad?" the stranger asked, smiling oddly. Perhaps if the boy could see their eyes, the smile might be construed as friendly, but without it, the little boy just shuddered.

"Er...it's not so bad," the little boy lied, trying not to look at the wound and opting instead to stare at the rest of their body. They were a skinny little creature. Unimposing and slight, with long, spindly fingers and narrow hips and bony knees. It was lower on the list of bizarre and unsettling things about them, but he also wasn't entirely sure if he was speaking to a sir or a ma'am. He was leaning towards sir, but...their hair was so long and their face was very soft. "Did it happen...er, recently?"

"Yesterday. If twelve hours ago counts as yesterday," the stranger said. "Hey, is that person with the deep voice and the weak heart your parent?"

The little boy blinked. "Uh...yeah. My father."

"And he's human?"

The cart bumped on a rock. The stranger shook slightly, but didn't react otherwise, otherwise react, simply curious about the little boy's answer.

"Erm...yeah. I'm pretty sure."

The stranger nodded.

"Huh...imagine that. A human dad...how's that like? Is it fun?"

The little boy stared back at them- , not that they could tell.

"Um... it's ok...is your dad not human?"

"Not anymore. Hasn't been for a long time," the blindfolded stranger replied. "He's the god of blood and slaughter."

The little boy felt foreboding deep within his stomach. It was one of those gods, then. Gods who were formerly human...the unpredictable ones. The nastiest ones. Humans who were not content to live at peace with one another and the gods they were born under. Gods of calamity and destruction and great evil.

And he was sitting with a *demigod*. A child of the cruelest one.

"Hey...I have another question," the stranger said. "Have you ever wanted to kill your father? Like, is that a normal thing...?"

The boy's mouth dropped open in surprise. "Uh...no, but...I guess it happens..."

The stranger was nodding. The kid wasn't used to people asking for his opinion. Much less demigods.

"I guess I'm abnormal," they said. "You've never met someone like me, have you?"

The boy shook his head, then realized he was being silly, and said aloud: "No."

"Oh," the demigod said, seemingly disappointed. "I suppose everyone will stare at me...but then, stares can't bother you, if you can't see them, right? Heh heh."

They giggled some more to themselves, the little boy staring at them with discomfort in his eyes.

"Um...maybe you should..." The little boy thought about saying go, and then thought better of it. If they wanted to kill him, they could've. Besides, it didn't seem like a good play to make, when a demigod of blood and slaughter was sitting right across from you. "Go to...the city of Lieren..."

The stranger tilted their head again. "A city? Why should I go to a city?"

The little boy bit his lip, not sure why he'd suggested it. "Erm...well...where do you want to go?"

Their mouth dropped open. They seemed surprised, as if they hadn't even thought of it.

"I...I don't know any place," they said.

"Well...what do you want to do?" the boy asked.

The stranger bit their lip. "Kill my father, I suppose..."

"Well, what do you need to kill your father?"

They chuckled a little. "No idea. But I look forward to finding out."

The cart lurched to a stop. The stranger looked up, still smiling absently.

"We're here, boys! Time to get off!" the old man called.

The demigod's head turned around, as if they could see anything. The boy, feeling pity despite his fear, described where they were. It was a dull little village with squat white houses, dirt roads, and only one tavern. All the buildings were clustered together, as if for warmth, with a stone wall snugly wrapped around them. Smoke rose gently from their stubby, twisted chimneys. It was freezing, thanks to the drizzle that started as they entered the village, passing through its battered gates. Beyond the village, the boy could see a ring of mountains to the north, dotted with trees and snow, and a thin, mysterious silver coastline to the west.

"It's really not much," the boy concluded.

The stranger seemed thrilled, however, a wide smile on their face.

"A real village," they whispered. "With people in it...living people..."

The boy grimaced. He was quite glad they were leaving now. His dad had stopped the cart, and was approaching the back, prepared to help the stranger disembark. But his son was already there, helping them down. He then handed them their walking stick. It was an odd staff, made of red wood, a deep scarlet, which he had never seen before. It was lumpy too, perverse, carved to resemble flesh and muscles and tendons, all tightly intertwined. Touching it made his skin crawl.

"Thank you!" the stranger said. The old man scoffed, spitting at the ground.

"Don't need your thanks, unless you're also promising I won't have to see your kind knocking down my door any time soon," he said gruffly.

The stranger stared at him, head tilted, as the boy thrust their staff in their hand. "My kind?"

"The Razor Watch! You think I gave you a ride because I just wanted to be nice? I thought you'd slit my throat if I didn't offer."

The stranger's reaction was unsettling. They stared in the direction of his voice without moving an inch, their face quite frozen, blank, as if they were a burnt porcelain doll or a waxy melted mannequin. The old man squirmed under their nonexistent gaze. They continued to say nothing for far too long, until the boy, unable to stand the silence, grabbed their hand.

The reaction was quite unexpected. The stranger near leaped out of their skin, startling so violently that they whacked their hand against the cart, and upset the horses, which were already skirting away, having been uneasy about the stranger's smell from the start. The boy jumped too, flinching. His eyes drifted to the wood, horrified as he noticed they were bleeding, and their blood was now dripping down the wheels. It was inhumanly bright, as vivid as a red-hot poker.

"Sorry!" he squeaked. "I just wanted to say that I thought of a place you should go in Lieren. The Razor Watch temple. They specialize in arcana and magical knowledge, and they'll help you because they hate other gods. If you want to kill your father, you will probably need magic."

He held his breath as the demigod now turned towards them. But the scary silence was no more. They were smiling again. The symbol burnt in their throat glowed slightly brighter.

"Thank you," they said.

They began to hit the ground lightly with their walking stick, ambling off into a random direction. The old man sneered, but didn't say a word as he turned around to calm his horses. But the little boy watched them longer, as fascinated as he was afraid.

"Thank you," the stranger said again, their voice low, as if they didn't want his father to hear. "I was quite fortunate, to find people so kind."

The boy didn't expect that. Some of his fear abated for a moment, giving way to curiosity. They were nothing like any demigods he had heard of. Demigods were imposing, domineering, larger than life, great heroes or great villains. They could be as tempestuous as the gods that birthed them, slaying evil with the gusto of legends, or they could be as calm and quiet as a corpse, slicing your throat before you could even remember the name of your god.

This one...he wasn't sure about.

He wondered if even they knew if they were a hero or a villain yet. But no matter. They were gone now. He didn't know where they were going, but he hoped that it was nowhere near him or his father.

"Pah! The Razor Watch has lowered its standards. What a freak show," his father grumbled. "And what was with the blindfold? Some kind of training exercise? They've all gone barmy on the east coast. The kid will be lucky if they survive a day."

But the boy didn't say anything. Although the demigod was blindfolded, he seriously doubted they were harmless. But he didn't voice his thoughts aloud, knowing his father would ignore him or scoff.

They would all learn, he suspected. Anyone who had the misfortune of running into the demigod of blood and slaughter.

3. Why is it always a goddamn tavern

There weren't many people in the Hillside Tavern that day. Arlo Ren was only one of seven, and he was sitting as far from the others as possible. He was a tall young man, barely more than a lanky boy, really, his long body bent slightly over the table, his legs stretched beneath it, feet pushing up against the stone floor. Skinny and straight as a pencil, but able to bend easier. His dark hair was tied back into a messy ponytail, strands of it loose on his face, moving constantly, as he kept peering anxiously at the door. He had recently started growing a beard, to try and cover his round, babyish face and give him the appearance of a man much older than himself. It was only partially working, because he just didn't seem to grow much facial hair, just a thin mustache and a paltry stubble. His neck was covered by a black bandana, which he kept fiddling with impulsively, almost nervously. He also kept reaching down for his pack, as though constantly worried that it would suddenly vanish beneath him, his fingers brushing against the tarp rolled up and bound to the top.

His skin was darker than the average villager, his eyes round and hooded, unusual in this region, a fact which seemed to make the other bargoers suspicious, staring at him distrustfully from across the room, but none of them seemed anxious to talk, which he was glad about. He was waiting for nightfall, and there was nowhere else in town where he could loiter all day. The bartender kept throwing him irritated glares, not happy about him not buying any drinks, but he didn't say anything about it.

It was a filthy space, although not a terribly large one. Cobwebs clung to the cheap wooden chandeliers hanging overhead. There was a fireplace, but no fire, and the room was chilly, a draft constantly breezing past ankles. There were only four rectangular tables, lined up neatly beside one another, like the boards of a rope bridge, stretched over the yawning chasm that was the dirty stone floor. Arlo was seated near the back of the table closest to the southwest wall. The other six men were huddled on the northeast side, closest to the door. No one had spoken a word in over two hours. The atmosphere wasn't exactly tense, but it wasn't particularly friendly either.

This was the scene that the demigod of blood and slaughter walked in on.

They pushed the door open with a soft creak that might as well have been a gunshot with how silent the room was when they entered it. They also brought with them a soft chatter, as they were thanking someone for being kind enough to guide them towards the door. A soft-spoken woman murmured something in response, but she left rather abruptly, as though fearful of entering the bar. The door slammed shut behind the stranger as they limped in.

Arlo looked up, as did the other six men. They all took in the odd appearance of the stranger. The filthy clothes. The lack of shoes. The messy white hair, which was so dirty, it was only white in patches and clumps. The stranger's hand shot out, grasping at the wall to help guide themselves in, the other hand on a peculiar red staff, which ambled across the stone, tapping softly. It took Arlo a moment or two to figure out they couldn't see, a blindfold pulled over their eyes. He also realized that they were not limping; they were relying on a staff to help them move about, tapping the floor for obstacles.

"Hello?" they called.

Arlo saw the other men in the tavern exchanging meaningful looks that he didn't like at all. He didn't say a word though, and neither did the men, as the stranger kept ambling across the room, stopping as they bumped into the counter.

"Hello," the bartender said unenthusiastically, eyes narrowed with dislike and discomfort, taking in their filthy appearance and their cane. "What can I get you?"

"Uhhh...well...I guess I'd like directions," the stranger said.

"You're in-"

"Oops, don't tell me where we are," they said. "Just tell me if we're anywhere close to Lieren."

"Lieren," the bartender said, his tone clearly indicating that he thought the customer was a complete moron. One of the men listening in scoffed. "We're nowhere near Lieren."

The stranger smiled, as if delighted to hear it. "A shame. How far away is it?"

"Lieren is a one-month trip by land mount," the bartender said irritably. "Three weeks by water. Two weeks by air."

"Oh my...that's quite some time," the stranger said, although their tone was still rather cheerful. "I don't suppose you'd know how I could get to Lieren?"

"By land, water, or air," the bartender said.

The men behind the stranger couldn't resist chuckling to themselves. The stranger startled, having not realized they were not alone in the room.

"Oh, hello," they said, head only turned slightly, curiously. "Nice weather out, huh?"

Arlo glanced behind him, out the window. It was raining.

"You aren't from around here, huh?" the leader of the group said, standing up.

"No, unfortunately," the stranger chirped.

"Where are you from, girl?"

Arlo frowned. Girl? He thought they sounded male. Maybe he wasn't close enough.

"Uh...it's called Reaverhaven, but I don't know where it actually is...it's nearby. Sort of. Or maybe not. Depends on what you consider near...or far. Or wherever. But really. It's somewhere," the stranger said, shrugging.

Arlo scoffed quietly to himself. This guy sounded like an idiot.

"You blind or something?" one of the men asked. "Missing your eyes?"

"Oh, no," the stranger said. "I have eyes. They can see."

"So why are you covering your eyes?" the leader asked. "Makes it hard to get around, doesn't it?"

The stranger smiled, shrugging. "Because I never know who'll see me."

Arlo frowned, as confused by that statement as the group of men, who were stunned into silence for a good minute or two. But eventually, their leader recovered, smiling unpleasantly. "We could show you around," he said, as one of his friends whistled, and the others chuckled. "Give you a little tour...for a price."

"What's a price?" the stranger asked.

Arlo couldn't stop himself from looking at them oddly. They couldn't be serious?

The other men looked baffled too. “Um...it’s something you’d have to give us...in exchange for our help.”

“Oh...ok. Not sure what I could give you,” the stranger said.

Arlo grimaced, as predictably, the leader snorted, and said, “I can think of a few things.”

He tensed, feeling his stomach roiling, as the leader approached the stranger, and grasped their shoulder. Even though he didn’t know this person at all, it still felt a little wrong, to just sit here and do nothing as they were taken advantage of. It’d be one thing if they were just stupid, but they couldn’t *see*. He would normally mind his own business...he should mind his own business...

But before he could make up his mind, which could’ve gone either way, the leader of the other men flinched, letting go of the stranger as if he’d been burned.

“What the hell is that symbol on your neck, girl?”

The stranger turned to look at the man, and Arlo’s brow furrowed. He hadn’t been able to see it before, from this distance, but now he could just barely glean the symbol, dug into their throat. He couldn’t quite see the finer details, though. Perhaps a rival clan or religious order?

“How would I know?” the stranger said, smiling politely, tapping their blindfold.

“You getting smart with me?” the man snarled.

The stranger’s mouth twitched mischievously. “I doubt it.”

The other men sprang up. Arlo tensed, head snapping towards them, no longer pretending he wasn’t paying attention. Before, he had hesitated, but now, it was just pure instinct. The kid was outnumbered.

“I know your kind, *monster*. That’s an evil mark, that is. You’re in league with one of the unholy!”

The stranger tilted their head, their long white hair swinging as they considered the six men. The bartender was stepping away from the counter, quite alarmed.

“Unholy?” they asked.

“The false gods,” the leader snarled.

“No such thing as a false god,” the stranger said, laughing lightly, but their grip had tightened on their walking stick, their hand raising slightly, as the men began to crowd around them. “There are only gods and not-gods.”

Arlo stood up as the stranger was grabbed and thrust against the wall.

“You aren’t welcome in this town,” the leader growled.

“Ok...I’ll leave...but you’re holding on to me,” the stranger said cheerfully, still not sounding too bothered, despite the hand squeezed around their neck. Their right hand patted his hand, as though trying to urge it away from them. But he squeezed tighter, and they grunted in pain, their voice more breathless now. “That is the *opposite* of letting go.”

“Your god is responsible for the mutilation and deaths of hundreds, maybe thousands,” the leader spat in their face. “Followers of false gods spread blasphemy and destruction like a plague. Your sacrilege ends here.”

He was reaching for the scabbard on his belt, a sword hanging by his side. Arlo approached quickly, almost there, reaching for his own dagger. But he paused, as the man

howled, staggering back, almost knocking two of his friends over. The stranger had jammed their staff into his foot, to force him off balance. They fumbled their way along the bar, escaping the corner they'd been trapped in. But Arlo wanted to tell them that they should be going the opposite direction, towards the door, and not further into the tavern.

"No one can help what god they're born under," the stranger said quietly. "I don't mind leaving, but I really mind having to hurt you. I'd rather not."

The leader wasn't listening to their soft words, however. With a yell, he swung his sword at the blindfolded stranger. Arlo charged towards them, even though he knew he wouldn't make it in time. But he was once again astonished, and halted in his tracks, by another unexpected development.

The stranger had blocked the swing with their staff. But the staff was...

Arlo blinked, rubbing at his eyes, and looked again to make sure his eyes weren't just playing tricks on him.

The staff seemed to be...*alive*. As the hunter stopped, gaze transfixed, he realized that it was made up of some kind of rubbery substance that looked impossibly, and repulsively, like muscles, gnarled and fleshy and disturbingly wet. And they were writhing, twisting and churning, making a horrible squelching sound. The man with the sword yelped, letting go of it, as the staff *wrapped around the blade*, the strands choking the metal.

The blindfolded stranger threw the sword away from them. It clunked against the wooden floor with a dull thud. The man looked stunned. His friends were as frozen as he was, staring uneasily at the staff, which was still *moving*.

"We can still be polite," the blindfolded stranger said.

But at the sound of their voice, even though it was only mildly threatening, the leader's resolve seemed to strengthen.

He charged at his sword, as his friends, realizing what he was doing, followed his lead, withdrawing their weapons and rushing the stranger. Arlo, after a moment of hesitation, continued on his previous path.

But he lurched back, once again taken off guard. One of the men tried to jab a short sword into their gut, but the stranger spun their staff quite widely. As it hit the blade, it once again writhed, seizing the sword tightly in its grasp. As the stranger twisted the staff, they not only disarmed the man, but also sent the other end of their staff slamming into the side of his head, as it apparently wasn't nearly as soft.

But before he could careen too far away, he did an odd sort of lurch as the stranger's staff reached out for him, and seized his head in a flailing, writhing mass of fleshy tendrils. They yanked him forward, and past them, slamming his head into the table and knocking him out instantly.

The staff recoiled, releasing his body, letting it slump onto the ground. But it was soon spinning again, as they twirled it, this time knocking aside two blades thrust at them.

Arlo watched, completely nonplussed, as their staff reached out, gripping the two attackers by the face. The blindfolded stranger stepped backwards rapidly, their staff bending in their hands, like a rubber band. The two men let out grunts of pain as they

were slammed into one another. What he was seeing seemed impossible, and yet, he couldn't deny his own eyes.

They were blindfolded, but how did they seem to know...? Could it be some form of magic? It had to be, and yet, it wasn't like any magic he'd ever seen before...

And then Arlo's mouth dropped open.

One of the still conscious men was swinging an axe at the stranger, whose staff was still crammed between the two unconscious men, as limp as a noodle. They stepped back clumsily, not fast enough this time. The axe glanced off their shoulder, although it would've done more damage, had the stranger not stumbled into a chair, tripping and falling over, their staff no longer in hand.

Now Arlo charged forward, because they were looking around wildly, as though they had just now realized they were blindfolded. The man tried to sink his axe into their chest, but he howled instead, as Arlo's dagger bit into his knuckles. He dropped the weapon, cursing, and the blindfolded stranger let out a yelp of surprise, flinching even though they weren't that close when it clattered on the floor.

"Walk away!" Arlo said sharply, as the man's eyes darted to his fallen axe. "Or I'll—"

"Look out!" the stranger called. The hunter caught a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye, and he dove to the side. But he wasn't fast enough. The leader of the men had retrieved his sword, and swung at his back while he wasn't looking.

Arlo stumbled, seizing the table for balance.

But as he turned quickly, trying to understand why he wasn't dead, he found himself nose to nose with something quite terrifying.

It was some kind of red blade, only, it was warm, exuding pure heat, and wriggling. A scarlet snake, dancing in the pale morning light. It had blocked the blade, had bit into its metal with sharp fangs, and was now wrenching the sword free from its owner's grip, flinging it aside. But it was no snake.

It was...*blood*. Blood that was trickling from the stranger's shoulder, which was bleeding quite profusely, leaking like a lazy red river through the air. And yet, it couldn't be blood, because it was strong, hard enough to stop metal.

The leader of the group stumbled back, looking horrified. The man who'd had the axe was already sprinting towards the door; he quickly followed in his wake, neither of them taking even a second glance at their comrades, lying unconscious on the floor.

The blindfolded stranger let out a huff. Their head fell, as they raised their hand. Arlo watched, mesmerized, as the scarlet – whip? tendril? snake?- hung lazily in the air. It was a miasma of red, composed of life vapor and shadow, not quite human, but not quite inhuman either. It began to retract, dutifully returning to its owner's body. Arlo frowned as he stared at the injury. He hadn't thought the axe had done so much damage. It was like their arm had almost been cleaved off. But as he watched, the split between their neck and shoulder was already narrowing, skin and sinew grasping for one another and reconnecting. The stranger rolled their shoulder, wincing, their body now good as new, although there was still a tear in their clothes.

And the odd injury on their throat wasn't healing...

Arlo stared at the symbol that had so aggravated the men. It seemed familiar, but he wasn't sure why. It was certainly a new god, since it lacked the sigils of ancients, but how new, he could not be sure. The men's reaction to it was hardly surprising. Only urban dwellers tolerated new gods with any consistency. Small towns, rural villages, tight-knit communities like this one were superstitious, paranoid, very traditional. They didn't care for new gods, at best, and were openly hostile to worshippers of new gods at absolute worst.

The stranger looked around. "Hello? Is anyone still conscious?"

Arlo said nothing, but he gazed around the room too. It didn't seem like anyone was.

"But you...you're conscious," the stranger said suddenly. They began to walk towards him...and immediately tripped on one of the weapons on the floor. Arlo had to lunge forward, and catch them by the shoulder. "Oops!"

"Uh...forgive me for asking...but if you can't see...how did you do all that?" the hunter asked.

The stranger tilted their head at him, the blindfold dark and impenetrable.

"Er...it's personal?" they said.

Arlo blinked, a small, neutral smile on his lips. "Ok...do you need me to lead you out of here?"

The stranger smiled, sighing in relief. "Oh, thank the gods. Yes. But first, help me find my...my..."

They dropped to the ground, groping around on all fours, fingers skating over unconscious bodies distractedly.

"Your...er...what is it?" Arlo reached for the staff, which had become hard and wooden again. "Staff?"

When he touched it, the stranger flinched.

Which was strange. How did they know he'd touched it? He offered it to them, not sure if they could see it or not, but they seemed to know exactly where it was now, almost snatching it back, their mouth frowning uneasily.

"So you don't mind new gods?" the stranger asked.

"Mine is new too," Arlo said, throwing a charming smile at them out of habit more than necessity. "You have nothing to fear from me...I was coming to help you, but...you didn't seem to need it."

The stranger suddenly giggled. Arlo had to admit he was curious about this person. Who wouldn't be, right? A blindfolded traveler...where had they come from? How had they gotten so far like this? What was that staff, anyway? And which god did that symbol carved into their skin belong to? He had at least four hours until his contact was supposed to meet him here. He had some time to waste, and who knows? Maybe this stranger could be useful in the future. Or at least, of use.

"You should bum a pair of shoes off one of these guys," Arlo suggested as the stranger said nothing more, turning vaguely around, as if searching for the door. "Where are you from, and how did you get so far without shoes?"

The stranger tilted their head at him.

“It’s... a long story,” they said.

Arlo nodded, then realized he was being silly. “I have time if you do...but we should leave this particular area. Because. You know.”

He gestured quite uselessly around. The stranger nodded. “Ok.”

The staff was retracting in length, becoming more of a cane again. They tapped at bodies and wooden floor, until they were standing in the middle of the room. But Arlo stepped forward to assist them, reaching for their arm. He was quite alarmed as they nearly jumped out of their skin, not expecting it.

“I’m sorry,” the hunter said quickly. “But I know somewhere we can go. I travel through here a lot. I can guide us there.”

The stranger’s grip tightened ever so slightly on their staff. But only for a second. Their mouth quirked into a small frown first, and then turned back up, into an easygoing smile. “Ok.”

“Hold on,” Arlo said, staring at their throat. “The people of this village aren’t going to like that scar on your throat any more than these guys did. It might be wise to...er...”

He looked around for something to cover it. But then, he realized he had the solution, tied around his own neck. He loosened the knot of his bandana.

“Hey...can I...wrap something around your neck?” he asked.

They tilted their head.

“Sure?”

He walked slowly forward, making as much noise as possible, so they wouldn’t be surprised, as he stood behind them. He carefully extended his hands out, peering around their neck to make sure the bandana was properly placed, before lightly pulling the fabric over their throat. They shook slightly, but didn’t make any other move, didn’t seem to even be breathing, as he tightened it around their throat, feeling as though he was tying a noose around their neck. It also felt oddly intimate, his fingers brushing against the sides of their pale neck, although he shook that ridiculous notion off quickly, as it would’ve been truly foolish to entertain after what he’d seen them do to the last lascivious strangers they’d come across.

“Thanks,” they said. He nodded, then once again realized his folly, and said aloud:

“No problem...do you want to take my arm?”

They extended their arm, and he took it. They still tensed up, as though he had hurt them, and without thinking at all, he touched their arm again, patting them reassuringly. They were trembling slightly, as if they didn’t like the sensation. But they didn’t move, didn’t protest. Just stood still, like a petrified deer.

“Don’t worry. I’m not nearly as strong as you. I couldn’t hurt you if I tried,” Arlo said.

To his surprise, the stranger laughed at that.

“You could,” they rasped, their voice soft and soothingly deep. “I know you could.”

Arlo felt a cold shiver running down his spine. He was dying to know what the scars and the symbol meant, and who this stranger truly was, but he doubted he'd learn much. More likely, they'd tell him a few half-truths and bald-faced lies, before continuing on their merry way. But he was used to that. He rather enjoyed that part of his job, actually. He never had to linger anywhere long, and never had to worry too much about people or their lives. He could gather tidbits and morsels of everyone he had ever met, and if they bored him, he could simply move on and never have to worry about them again. But Arlo thought this one might have interesting lies, at the very least.

“What's your name?” he asked.

They gripped his arm tighter. “Marrow.”

“Cool name,” he said, as he steered them out of the room, skirting around bodies, only pausing to drop a few coins on the counter top, for the terrified bartender, who was cowering behind the bar. “Not very subtle, though.”

4. Don't leave me alone with fresh beef

They could feel rain on their skin, and it made their entire body stiff, tingling with discomforting chills. They could feel a strong wind on their face, passing through their clothes and flesh like a ghost, freezing right to the bone. Their feet ached from their shoeless romp through the Defiled Forest. They had never had so much exercise in their entire life, and it felt like every muscle was screaming with exhaustion. Their lungs shrieked with agony every time they took in or exhaled a breath.

And they were having the time of their life.

The demigod couldn't stop smiling, feeling as though they were glowing and everyone could see it. They clutched the arm of their new friend like a life preserver, yet they couldn't resist inspecting everything they heard, partially dragging him with them. The plopping sound of rain hitting a barrel. The clatter of wagons passing and the clapping of hooves. The pitter patter of some kind of furry animal, about waist-high, passing by them. Children, splashing about in the mud, soaking their boots with water and dirt. They would've stopped and joined them, if their new friend wasn't so controlling, guiding them forcibly away from everything. Their arm ached almost pleasantly when they pulled away from him; it was more of a gentle agony when he exerted more strength, steering them in the direction he wanted to go.

"Let's keep moving, please. It's cold," he said. "Let's get to the barn."

Barn? They had a faint idea of what that word meant, and what it entailed, and it was thrilling too. They'd always wanted to touch an animal (without slicing it from anus to throat). The rain stopped falling on them; they must've entered the "barn." It wasn't warmer in here, but it was at least sheltered.

There weren't many animals in the barn, or at least, if there were, Marrow couldn't hear them. They tugged away from the stranger, wanting to touch everything until they found an animal, but he was already dropping his arm, shuffling somewhere else.

"What's your name?" they asked curiously, realizing they'd never asked for it. Perhaps they would need to get in the habit of doing that?

"Arlo. Arlo Ren," he said.

There was something beneath their feet other than dirt. Something that felt odd. They knelt, feeling the ground interestedly. It felt hard, yet soft. It pricked at their fingers, but it was also easy to bend. They lifted it to their face, intending to sniff it.

"Oi! Don't eat that! That's hay, it's for the animals! And- and for bedding," the stranger exclaimed.

They tilted their head, holding the strand between their fingers. "I wasn't going to eat it."

"You said you were from someplace called...Reaverhaven?"

"Yes."

"I've never heard of it..."

"It's nearby," Marrow said. "Maybe."

They winced, having gotten a splinter from running their hands along something wooden, some kind of small wall. They pulled it out and sucked on their finger morosely.

“What exactly is it?”

“A castle.”

“Have you been...anywhere else?”

“No,” Marrow said. “This is my first time out. It’s been my home for...um...”

They thought about it hard, but could not recall how long they had been alive. It didn’t feel very long, but long was subjective. It certainly felt long, in their cold, empty, miserable bedroom. But they didn’t want to think about their bedroom. They’d spent their entire life rotting in it, their body dissolving away, bit by bit. They had paid for their freedom with their heart. No reason to leave behind their mind as well, lingering within its musty walls.

“How did you get here?”

“Someone gave me a lift. They thought I was part of...um. Something. A group? It had to do with my clothes...but these aren’t mine,” Marrow said, pulling at them. The man they’d stolen them from had been much larger than them. He’d also been dead. But luckily not in pieces yet.

“Razor Watch,” Arlo said, his voice changing ever so slightly. Marrow looked around, wishing they could see (but of course, that would defeat the purpose). “But where did you get those clothes? You aren’t with the Razor Watch.”

“Off a corpse,” Marrow said. “He must’ve been with them.”

Arlo didn’t say anything. If Marrow knew more about people, they would’ve known they’d made a critical misstep. But they didn’t know much about people.

“What are you, exactly?” Arlo asked suddenly.

Marrow tilted their head at him, mouth grimacing with confusion. “How do you mean?”

“You’re not...well. You’re something,” Arlo said. “How can you see with your eyes covered?”

Marrow smiled. They couldn’t help it. “I can’t see things. I’m blindfolded.”

“But you *can* see somehow,” Arlo accused them. “You couldn’t fight like that if you were really blind.”

Marrow shrugged. They weren’t sure how to explain it, and they didn’t think they should explain it. Maybe it was because they’d just been attacked for worshipping the wrong god. Or maybe it was because they didn’t want to scare away a potential friend. Or perhaps it was because there was a little voice inside their head telling them not to, the same voice that sometimes whispered to them, when they were bored or lonely or sad, locked away in Reaverhaven.

“Ok, fine,” Arlo said begrudgingly as Marrow was not forthcoming. They kept searching the barn as he watched. They sniffed the air interestedly, as it was rank with animal musk and feces. It was foul, but they’d never smelled anything like it before, and they felt they needed to really breathe it in to appreciate it. “Why did you have access to a Razor Watch corpse? Whom do you worship?”

Marrow hesitated again, the little voice whispering in their ear more urgently than before.

“Erm...I...the corpse was a sacrifice...and the god...well...”

He might attack you too if he knew...quiet!

“Listen,” Arlo said. He sounded closer. Marrow could feel his breath on their face. It was unpleasant. He smelled funny. But then, they didn’t know how humans were supposed to smell. They wondered if they smelled. Was it a good smell? Bad smell? What made a smell bad anyway? Maybe something they thought smelled good, smelled bad to everyone else...maybe they should ask everyone they met about smells they found good and smells they found bad...but only after they asked for their names first. “You don’t have to tell me, I was just curious. I’m with the Razor Watch myself.”

Ah. Perhaps that was why he sounded so odd when they mentioned it before. Marrow backed away from him, and stepped into something. A stool? They had knocked something off it. They felt for the item until they found it. It was made of metal, cold and thin, not very thick, or expertly made.

“What is this?” they asked.

“A bucket,” Arlo said.

“Oh...”

They knew buckets. They had a bucket in their room, for piss and shit. Boring. They threw it aside.

“What is the Razor Watch?” they asked.

“An organization of bounty hunters that worship the god of hunting,” Arlo said, with a tinge of pride in his voice. He seemed to have leaned back, sounding further away. “We’re the best of the best.”

“The old man who helped me get here seemed scared of them,” Marrow said thoughtfully. “Is that why?”

“Yes. The Razor Watch doesn’t mess around. People tend to give us a wide berth. But we’re not like other worshippers of new gods. We value order. We follow strict rituals. We have a hierarchy. We also have a code of conduct,” Arlo said. “We take hits against worshippers of evil gods...the most powerful among us even take hits against demigods.”

Marrow’s stomach jolted unpleasantly. That was concerning, maybe. Should they be concerned?

“Have you ever killed a demigod?” they asked Arlo.

“Me? No,” Arlo said, a hint of bitterness in his tone. “I’m not that good, at least not yet. Although, technically, I know you’re supposed to capture, not kill. It’s considered a testament of skill. Plus, a living sacrifice to the goddess is always preferred over a dead one.”

Marrow nodded thoughtfully. They supposed they should be more worried to have met a demigod hunter on their first trip outside of their home. But he seemed nice. He also didn’t know they were a demigod, so, not a problem, right?

“What are you wearing?” they asked Arlo.

There was surprise in his voice as he answered, “A shirt and pants? Why do you ask?”

“The same as me?”

“Oh. You mean the uniform...no. Razor Watch members don't wear the uniform when they're on these kinds of missions...”

“You're on a mission?” Marrow asked.

“Yeah. Gotta meet a client in a few hours,” Arlo said. “He's giving me details about his bounty.”

“What is a bounty?”

“It's a mission I get paid to do.”

“What kind of missions do you do? And what kind of mission is this?”

“Uh...boring stuff. Finding lost pets. Lost heirlooms. Lost people, sometimes, like your senile old grandma or children who wandered off the path. But I only have the Third-arrow rating. The more arrows you have, the more people will trust you with. Seven is the highest, and they're the ones who do demigod hunting...”

Arlo sighed. Marrow could hear his feet digging into the dirt. But they were distracted from him as they finally felt something that wasn't inanimate.

“Oh, OH!” they squealed as something warm and wet stuck itself on their hand. It was alive! They reached out and were delighted to feel something hard, yet soft, under their fingers. An animal! And a huge one, based on the size of its head. “What is this?”

Arlo snorted. “A cow.”

“Oh, oh, it's so big! It's so soft!”

It felt so very alive. They rubbed its forehead, amazed. It was nice to hold it between their hands...it was so trusting...so sweet, nuzzling against them...how easy it would be...to peel its flesh from its face, plunge their hands into its soft, warm insides, and feel the blood gushing-

Marrow let go of the cow, their fingers trembling.

“You never seen a cow before?” Arlo asked behind them.

They forced a smile on their face as they turned their back, and promptly sat down, not trusting themselves to find any other animals.

“No, and I still haven't,” they said, laughing, tugging at their blindfold.

Arlo snorted again. “So you've heard enough about me...what about you? What are you doing here?”

Marrow pulled their knees to their chest, wrapping their arms around their legs, trying not to think about the cow.

“Um...not sure. This was just the closest place I could find.”

“But why did you leave Reaverhaven?” Arlo pressed curiously.

Marrow bit their lip, thinking about why. Because it was dark and cold. It was dull and dreary. They hated their bedroom. They had run out of chalk and charcoal. No one had visited them in years. It was too quiet and empty. They hadn't cried in a long time.

“Reaverhaven...made me sad,” they said simply. “And there was...something I needed to find.”

Arlo shifted uneasily then. They suddenly realized they could feel his stare on them. It was like a tingle. A little wriggly feeling on the back of their neck. How curious.

“Something? Like what?” he asked.

Marrow shrugged.

“Do you know where you can find it?”

“Um...no. But I’ll look,” Marrow said. Maybe in Lieren, like that child said?

Arlo sniffed. “Well...I have to get going. I like to keep an eye out for my contacts. Good to get a look at them before they get a look at you. You...just stay here. I still want to talk. I might be able to help you.”

Marrow smiled. “Oh! Thank you... I’ll wait here, then, I guess.”

He left then, very quietly. They could barely hear him. He was a crafty little fellow. They’d barely noticed him earlier, at the bar. They wondered what he looked like. If he looked like...well, no. He seemed human. It was doubtful that he looked like Father. They hoped he didn’t look like Father. They just hadn’t ever seen anyone other than Father.

He didn’t act like Father, though. None of the few people they had met had acted like Father. That was a good thing. They hadn’t been sure of what to expect, entering the human world. But so far, they liked humans. Both kind and violent. A refreshing change of pace.

They crawled across the floor, to get as far from the cow as possible. If they could just control themselves...if they didn’t scare anyone...maybe they could stay in this world. Maybe they wouldn’t have to return home more than once. Maybe Arlo could help them. Maybe other humans would help them too. They pressed their head into their knees and smiled to themselves.

“Maybe humans will help me kill you, Father,” they murmured.

They could feel him rumbling, deep within Reaverhaven, fuming and glowering. He could speak to them, if he wanted to. But he was refusing to utter a word. It didn’t bother them much. It might’ve bothered them more if he was speaking, in fact.

He couldn’t do anything to them from Reaverhaven. They were free. They could do anything they want. Except, of course...

They touched the blindfold around their eyes. Not today. But someday.