

Ezbon woke up without rest and stared into the dark. Nightmares he could not recall plagued him. It was raining. The thin walls creaked with expansion to the rhythmic drip-drip where the roof leaked onto the floor. He wondered how long it had been raining; how much water had invaded his home to destroy his research. "Not that it matters," he whispered to himself and turned over, hoping sleep or something more permanent would claim him. Another losing battle. Even the leaking roof was a badge of honour the universe held against him as a proof of his failures. He had tried to fix it back when he still cared about such things. The first step he took onto the roof gave way under his weight, revealing the abysmal state of the wood. It was rotten through, almost powdery. He placed an old square of wood over the new hole his foot had made and secured it with stones, heavy enough to keep it from moving while not doing any more damage — leaving the original leak with a larger, more insulting sibling. It was not waterproof nor was it meant to be permanent; keeping the winter cold at bay had been his main concern as he would have had a new home among the Chosen before the rainy season. That had been the plan. Ezbon dreamt.

He awoke a boy again. His little room was dark and the summer heat beat down on him. Sweat plastered his dark hair to his head. His light grey eyes seemed to glow. He got up into the silence like he had done many times. Without making a noise, he made his way to the water pot to quench his thirst. A soft wailing came from the bathroom and tiptoed closer to inspect the unfamiliar noise. It seemed a long way over the creaking floor planks, but his deft feet found the silent ones like a game. A soft light peeked through the bathroom door and the sounds became more audible, almost familiar. He peeked into the room and saw what remained of his mother. Tears oozed from her eyes and blood from her arms. He gasped and his mother turned to face him.

"Go back to bed my dear Ezbon, the nightmare will be over soon," she whispered.

The obedient little soldier bolted to his room, ignoring the quiet planks and forgetting his thirst. He leapt into his bed and flung the covers over himself, trying to shut the horrors from his senses. He cried until his tears deserted him and sleep overcame him.

A messenger had come in the night; stormy weather had destroyed half the fishing boats, his father among those lost to the sea.

Rolling thunder brought him back into his dying body. The stench of death filled the air. Ezbon lost count of the infinite days and nights he spent in bed. He barely drank any water and had become so accustomed to starvation he almost forgot what life was like without it. His bruised body could have died and no-one would have noticed. He could have — if he had not been too much of a coward to fling himself off a cliff like a real man. Soon though, that won't matter. The light suggested early

morning or late afternoon but the crying bugs and humidity suggested the latter. "Afternoon then," he decided. The second time he heard the thunder, he realised it came from the door — someone trying to break it down by the sound. Might as well let them; a gaping hole in a wall for the rain and night-cold to pour in might bring him a step or two closer in his death quest. He rolled over to face the door through his cloudy vision, ignoring the sharp stabs of pain from his body and waited.

The door flung open with a crack of wood revealing Cal, his apprentice. The man had short black hair and a stocky build. He always wondered what the boy had seen in him. Cal was a talented young man and popular among his peers. He did his reputation harm by being associated with Ezbon. Many times he had asked Cal why he didn't use one of his many other talents on a different apprenticeship. The boy always replied with the same rehearsed answer: "It's good work with an honest master. One should do what he loves and believes in, and I believe in our work." Good lad. He blinked his dry eyes to clear his vision, and the door was empty.

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Ezbon felt more than saw the man next to him, willing him to live. He opened his eyes to a robed figure standing over his corpse. Why. Why won't he let him die? He resisted the healing as best he could, but life seeped its way back into him. He tried to fight it, but it seemed like an endless onslaught from all angles. If he tried to stop the healing at one location, it would take flight somewhere else. Frustration and anger grew in him along with his life. A faint voice called out to him like a thread of cobweb he couldn't follow, then it grabbed him.

"Ezbon! Don't you dare give up! Not after all this time."

The voice sounded familiar. He opened his eyes to confirm, releasing his restraints on the healing. The surge of life coursing into him was dizzying. He blinked a few times trying to wet his painful eyes before he saw the outline he would recognise anywhere. Cal was there. He wondered if it was only the boy's spirit before Cal shook him.

"Wake up!" Cal shouted at his sensitive ears.

He tried to answer but found no voice nor saliva to wet his thick tongue. A moment later someone was at his mouth with a cloth of water. He swallowed what he could and moved his face from the cloth. "I'm sorry," was all he mustered before drifting into a dream.

Ezbon gave a deep sigh at the knock on the door. He got up from his newest procurement — a scroll depicting a smooth, green stone found on the beach at the mouth of a river. He flung the door open and barked "What?" A boy recoiled into the dark before approaching again.

"Calah, pleased to meet you, sir." The boy gave a short bow.

"I haven't any food," He answered, assuming him a beggar.

"Not here for food, sir. I'm looking for apprenticeship."

"It's the middle of the night. Knocking so late is the right way to get on the wrong side of people. Where're your parents, boy?"

"At home, sir."

"Then go back to them and ask them for proper directions. You came to the wrong door." He turned to close the door.

"I'm not lost, sir. You're Ezbon. Linguist and archaeologist. The claimed Chosen. I wish to study under your guidance." The boy bowed again.

"You don't know what you ask. I'm sure your parents warned you about me, heed their words and run along." Interested, he waited for a response.

"My interest lies with ancient civilisations, but I'm the firstborn of a priest family." The boy admitted.

"Oh." Ezbon understood. After a moment he added: "Come out of the cold and warm yourself."

The stiff boy became relaxed and his story flowed from him. Both of Cal's parents were priests. When a person swears themselves into priesthood, they also pledge their firstborn to the cause. They already took Cal's older half-sister into the priesthood. His father imagined his firstborn safe as his wife already gave her firstborn, but he too made the pledge and the council saw he keep it. Cal was to become a priest. The boy tried all he could to become a priest to please his parents but his heart was elsewhere. He loved old artefacts and stories of people long lost to the secrets of the earth. When Cal told them of this and his plans of leaving the priesthood, his parents banished him. The boy had little care left for his reputation. He had nought but the clothes on his back and a heart for the work. Ezbon understood.

He became aware of himself, but the pain and discomfort left his body. "This is death," he decided, embracing it at once and woke up instead. The smell of the room made him cough and belch. He forgot everything else and knew only the pain of hunger. A rough hand touched his shoulder.

"You're all right."

He recognised Cal's voice. He was a man now. Sunlight poured through the window and open door, warming his body and burning his eyes. He tried sitting up and found his body working if stiff. Cal helped him. He rubbed his eyes and tried adjusting them to the room. Somehow it seemed worse

than the mess he remembered. Curled up in the floor's corner, was the healer. Sleeping. Cal must have run all the way to the healers after he had seen Ezbon's state. Shame flooded him. The clinic was on the edge between the inner- and outer-city, strategically placed to help both Chosen and not. The Chosen were leagues better at healing; they had magical gifts of Uthos. Surgeries and more serious cases fell to them while the non-chosen helped everyone else. A few people demanded that the Chosen also treat their minor ailments, those people could take their cases to the council. In all those incidents the council supported the assessment that non-chosen healers would be more than adequate. These processes seemed a waste of time to him, but he would not deny their abilities. To prevent the possibility of oppression, they used mixed groups comprising Chosen and non-chosen in all areas possible — including the council itself. The Hall of Order raised all the Chosen children and schooled them in humility and peace. They were powerful, yes, but they were far too few to do everything themselves. The Chosen needed the non-chosen, and they, in turn, enjoyed the prosperities the Chosen brought. In a perfect world that would be the case. Of late, however, the truth was far from it. Most of the Chosen were at an unknown remote location to do "Uthos' work" as the council called it. The remaining few didn't question that, but as weeks turned into months, and months turned into years — the non-chosen weren't so understanding. Work the Chosen could've done in an afternoon took teams of people weeks to complete, neglecting other work already waiting for them. All the Chosen healers remained in the city, but as food grew scarcer and normal utilities like clean running water were dwindling, their work too multiplied.

Cal followed his gaze and spoke. "He worked all night. He saved you."

"You're alive," Ezbon observed.

Cal wasn't sure if Ezbon had spoken to him or himself, but he answered anyway. "Of course I'm alive. It's you we were worried about."

"Water."

Cal complied and he drank deeply, feeling the liquid satisfy him. "I thought you dead, boy. When you didn't come back..."

"Me?" Cal accused him. "You're the one that didn't come back!"

"The council wouldn't grant me funding. A fools' errand, they called it. I tried to explain that you were still out there and I wanted to bring you back. They didn't believe me." He took another sip. "I came home to sell my father's ring, but I was robbed of that option as well. I had nothing left to sell of my inheritance. At first, I begged for money to return but that soon turned into begging for food. I watched the air-ferry every day, hoping you'd return on your own. After about two weeks, I

lost hope. I feared you dead and I couldn't live with myself. I gave up." his last words becoming a whisper.

Cal replied: "We're both here now, and alive."

"That we are." He tried smiling.

"We found it," Cal said into the silence.

His eyes shot to Cal, and he dropped his thing of water, waking the healer.

They both watched the healer get up and straighten himself. The man looked worn and hollow. It had taken a lot to heal him. Ezbon tried to stand to thank the healer but his strength left him.

"You need to eat. A little at a time, and slowly." The healer said. He gave Cal a nod, and the boy left. The healer started for the door but stopped at Ezbon's words.

"Thank you." The words didn't seem enough to him, but he knew he had nothing else to offer.

"Cal would go to worlds' end and back for you. Don't abandon him again." The healer left.

After a while, Cal returned with a dry piece of bread and cold soup, the best food he had had in a long time.