

Thom sat in silence, praying that the sacrifice will be enough. He threw the last vial of goat's blood on the fire. The dying flames hissed, causing the shadows on the wall to dance across the cavern wall.

No response.

He held his wrinkled hand to his forehead. He began to chant. The pronunciation felt rusty and his voice was meek, but he persisted as the old memories flowed through him. It had been decades since he uttered a word in the Old Tongues and it felt even longer since he said the hymns. The chanting grew stronger with each verse.

Thom felt himself enter a trance, with each verse came a memory. Baptizing the Yerlins first born son. Corbin and Alistair seeking council over a land dispute. Officiating the wedding of his own son, Tristain and his sweetheart from the village across the hill. Sending Old Woman Eadith off to the next life.

He opened his eyes to darkness. The embers clinging to life in the cavern.

There was no answer. It's not possible. Ihclain, the Hearth-Father, the All-mighty, the Guardian of his Ancestors. My God.

"Dammit!"

He kicked the dying fire, the embers flew across the cavern, lighting up it's walls. The walls revealed old runes and carvings. A carving traced in charcoal showed dozens of people dancing around a pyre. A figure arose from the flames, extending its arms out towards the people.

Thom knelled at the carving's base. The scattered embers provided his worn eyes enough light to find it once more. He traced his wrinkled hands against the carving.

Has it really been that long?

All he could do is slump to the ground. Ihclain watches over us all, the other Gods may abandon us, but Ihclain never abandons a hearth, never a vow.

But others can and have. New Gods, from foreign lands and foreign tongues. Some even from his own neighbors, touting them around like they killed prized game. No more time for the old ways, the Old Gods.

Too many vow-breakers.

Thom felt pangs of guilt arising in his gut.

It's easy to call the unkempt dirty when you don't own a mirror yourself.

Thom leaned against the stone wall.

He brushed away any stray embers that were near him and pulled his traveling cloak over him.

Ihclain's silence pained him. To hear his voice, wisdom, and guidance one more time. But most of all, he yearned for the Hearth-God's forgiveness before the end.

His eyelids grew heavy and he drifted to sleep. The last thing on his mind was not only of Ihclain, but of Gilda.

He was standing in the doorway. Through the doorway revealed a kitchen, heavy with the smell of rosemary, sage, and goat. A woman cooked by a fire, cutting vegetables, and occasionally stirring a cast-iron pot.

The woman wore her coal colored hair high in a bun. Her face was aged and worn, but still retained her beauty. She was deep in thought and concentrated at the task at hand.

“Gilda.”

Gilda furrowed her eyebrows and ignored Thom, not taking her gaze off of her work.

“Gilda, please...”

She tossed in the carrots and began stirring the soup faster.

Thom sighed and walked towards a chair.

“Did I invite you in and allow you to sit down?”

“I just wanted to talk, like we used to,” He said.

She stopped stirring. “You think you can walk into my home and speak to me like nothing happened? To walk in here with honeyed words and pretend you’re right?” She charged towards Thom, meeting his gaze. Her once cheerful green eyes were puffed up and lifeless.

“I never said I was right, what I did, I did in the name of Ihcla-”

She raised a hand to him, but did not strike.

“Don’t use His name here, not after what you did.” Tears began to well up in her eyes. “Cedrick is our son, how could you justify it all in His name?”

“Tristain was our son, but I cannot let the outsiders corrupt our people, like he was corrupted by that she-witch.”

“I can’t believe what you’re saying, you gave them your blessing- our blessings. They married outside our very walls.”

“She was a heathen, she broke the vow.” Thom was trembling, why was she defending them? “Rather than telling me, he let it fester when those missionaries came and spoke with her. Instead of talking about his conflicted faith, he decided our Father’s Gods were false.”

“But-”

“He. Broke. The Vow.” He hissed out.

“Aye, he did.” She turned away and walked towards the fire.

A breeze entered from the window, the flames next to Gilda waving back and forth.

She looked at Thom once more and gave him a sad smile.

“As did you.”

The flames flickered back and forth, licking at her feet. Soon the fire spilled out of the hearth and began to singe the wooden floor. The fire caught Gilda’s skirt aflame and

continued to grow and grow. Thom tried running towards her, but couldn't move. Soon the smoke blurred his vision, burning his eyes. The room was engulfed with fire and all he could see was Gilda's smoldering outline. He wanted to save her, scream for help, anything, but couldn't move. He coughed as the smoke and embers burned at his lungs. All he could do was cough as the flames caught his own robes on fire, the smell of incense and blood filling his nostrils.

Thom collapsed to the floor and his eyesight became blurry. The world became dark and all he could hear was the crackle of flame.

His eyes shot wide-open to notice his traveling cloak had caught on fire. He pushed it off and stamped on it. Thom's head was covered with cold-sweat, his head ached, and was down one cloak.

But as he looked around, he saw that he was still in the cavern. Shadows casting around a flame that stood where the fire had been earlier.

He approached the fire with caution. There was no way the fire had re-ignited like that, not unless someone else was in the cave with him. But only the Priesthood of Ihclain knew the way and he was the last one who remembered the steps.

"Hello?" He said.

Even if someone were here, he was just a pathetic old man with no weapon besides the walking stick he had used as fuel for the fire. The knife he carried became too dull to be used as a weapon and he didn't trust his shaky hands with sharpening it.

Thom took a step closer to the fire. He couldn't look away from it, the fire looked so warm and comforting. He tried being alert, but the fire distracted him. The way it flickered, the way it looked, something was familiar about it.

A voice rang out. "Thom."

He stopped dead in his tracks and looked behind him. He didn't see anything, but the wall he rested against.

The cavern itself was empty besides the carvings and there was no one at the entrance.

His heart stopped.

"I-Ihclain?" He whispered.

"High Priest." It was coming from the fire. "Thom."

Thom sat next to the fire. It felt like the fire itself was inside him and for the first time in years, he felt young.

"Hearth-Father, is it really you?!"

A tendril of fire reached towards him, touching his bare hand. His hand didn't burn, but looked like the hand of a strapping lad, fresh into adulthood.

"Forgive me, Thom, for I was taking a nap."

Forgiveness. He felt speechless. Had anyone told him that Ihclain would ask for forgiveness from him of all people.

“I should be the one forgiving you, my Father, I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“Sleep for you and I mean two different things,” He said. “As we both grow older, we seem to sleep longer and deeper, wouldn’t you agree?”

He felt himself nod, but was puzzled by the statement.

“Ihclain, my Father, do you know why I asked to visit you?”

The flames flickered.

“You have questions, as you always have had.”

Thom smirked. “Yes, that’s true.” He stopped to think how he was going to approach him. He had never seen the God be so casual with him, it was like seeing an old friend.

“I guess to begin, why did you choose me?”

The flames seemed to hold still for a few moments before moving again.

“Thom, there are those who are born cunning, but allow that gift to make them blind. There are others who are dedicated, but let their zeal consume them. Finally there are those who are wise, but do not heed their own advice.”

He winced at that last phrase, but felt the tendril hold his hand tighter.

“When you entered my service you showed all of these characteristics, but showed the ability to learn past your faults.”

“But, I let them overtake me in the end,” Thom muttered.

“Know this, I do not regret making you my High Priest.”

Thom took a piece of burnt wood and placed it into Ihclain’s fire.

“I dreamed about what happened that day, with Gilda.”

“I know,” Ihclain responded.

“I really did break the vow didn’t I? Just as she said?”

The flames crackled and grew as it consumed the wood.

“Do you know why she cared for Tristain so dearly?”

Thom gave Ihclain a puzzled look.

“He was our son.”

“Yes, he was,” He said. “But when you first were married, she couldn’t bear a child, so she would pray every day and night. To me in the Mountains and in the moonlight to my wife.”

His eyes widened. “She never told me that, all she said was that she pleaded to you in my name.”

“I try to listen to all of my children, it wasn’t you that made me respond, but your patience and her perseverance. There had been gossip about her for years after you two were married. But you both waited and didn’t give up.”

Thom felt angry with himself. If he had done something else, thought of a better punishment than exile. Had he bargained with the Justiciar to let him judge Ethel too instead of just Tristain...

“You broke the vow the day you let your regret cloud your thinking.”

“They were scared and angry. I was scared and angry! I just tried doing what I thought you would’ve wanted!”

“You thought what was best for the Pantheon, but you ignored the vow that you pledged to me.”

To be kind, but firm in your punishments. To be selfless and understanding. To put the honor and security of the family first and to not let it’s foundation crumble.

“For the Family is the fire and you mustn’t let it burn out.” Thom recited.

“When you let her be executed was the moment you let that fire burn out. For Tristain’s passion died that day. A broken man with a broken family, far from home.”

“The village miles down the river had been put to the sword for refusing their gods and staying with the Pantheon.”

“And in an attempt to avoid that fate you only repeated their action and gave the doubtful their own resolve.”

They made her a Martyr, claiming this was what the Old Gods wanted to do to those who looked to other pastures. This only spread this new faith. Eventually the Pantheon stopped answering their calls, his calls. Ihclain was one of the last to stop, but was the first to stop answering his questions. Thom’s requests for guidance became quiet and others were asked in secret.

“The Missionaries flooded in eventually.” He told Ihclain.

His flames swayed, almost nodding.

“At one point we were all upstarts, your ancestors did not believe in us either.”

“Who did they believe in?”

“They believed the Sky and Stars were gods. Perhaps they were, but I never knew.”

“And this new God? Is it real?”

“As real as you or I.”

Thom couldn’t help but shutter. To think his people’s fate are now in the hands of a god unknown to him unnerved him. He sighed. At least they weren’t believing a lie.

He glanced over to notice the flame was becoming dimmer. Thom felt around for more wood, but couldn’t find any more.

“Ihclain?”

“Yes?”

“Why did you leave us?”

The flames flickered a couple of times.

“We didn’t mean to, but as the requests grew fewer and our numbers thinned, we grew tired. One by one, each of us entered a slumber. From time to time we woke up, but soon all of us grew quiet. I tried to keep awake, but even I may grow too tired to awaken.”

Thom felt his eyelids grow heavy at the thought of sleeping for eternity.

“I understand.”

Ihclain’s fire grew dimmer and dimmer. The light that shined through the cavern only covered just around Thom’s camp. The tendril that held onto Thom’s hand loosened it’s grip, but still held his hand close. His youthful hand grew aged once more.

Thom couldn’t help but lay down next to the flame, watching it sink lower and lower.

“Let us rest, Thom.” Ihclain said. “We must get ready for the morning ahead of us.”

Thom nodded and rested his head against his traveling cloak. He felt himself smile, as the last thing he saw before closing his eyes was Ihclain’s beautiful flames, flowing in the darkness.