

Campfire

“The madness that spurs men on? Hard to put into words. But I suppose once we’ve wiped away the pretense, it comes down to fear. Fear that our time here counts for nothing. So, we build legacies, be they conquest, wealth, notoriety, or children, all in the hopes the memory of our existence might endure. But in the end, all shadows fade as they must. That, is the way of things.” He leaned back, settled the stem of his pipe between his lips, and drew deep. “Does that make you nervous?”

I rubbed the potion into the leather bindings of the totem in my lap. “I admit, it does.” Such a belief could prove problematic, if not dealt with quickly.

The rim of the wizard’s hat dipped low, mirroring the sway of the totem. “As it does all mortals. But why should this trouble you?”

My finger slipped. Wincing, I licked my finger, traced the outline of the straps, and wiped the thick black stain from the skull. “You suppose that I, being a necromancer, would see death differently.” He nodded, and I couldn’t resist a smile. It wasn’t many who knew what I was, and did not cower. “You assume, Wizard, that because we both meddle in the arcane, we are of similar nature. I assure you, nothing could be further from the truth.” I leveled a finger at the runes stitched along the hems of his robe. The talisman hung at his neck. “You see this world as you see magic, a rhythm to be lived. Hot coffee at dawn, work throughout the day, then, after sunset, rest. Day after day, year after year, until the ritual is complete. I do not fault you for this error. Indeed, it is as expected, my friend.”

“Error?” His eyes narrowed. “Then pray, enlighten me.”

I took in the swell of his knuckles, the translucent skin covering his hands, and dipped my finger into the little jar of bile resting beside my folded knee. Age, the inevitable price of experience, wisdom,

and knowledge. "Long has your river flowed, its channel runs deep, and its course will not change." Forcing open the totem's jaw, I let a single drip fall into its mouth and pressed its teeth closed. "But death is not the end. The soul journeys on, unless tethered here by some means... perhaps a necromancer's skill." Dull green flame flickered deep within the totem's eye sockets as the spell took hold. I corked the vial and held the leather-bound skull up beside the wizard. A fair likeness, not my best work, but good enough for its intended function.

His gaze drifted along the curve of the skull, and a smile tugged at my lips. They were always so addled in the beginning. "Do you not remember our battle at all?"

He jerked the pipe from his mouth, a spell already on his lips. But his voice fell silent. For he, his magic, his vast library of knowledge, was now mine.