The Tales of the Bard

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The Tales of the Bard

by

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Date
The tavern doors slammed open to let in wind, rain, and a stranger wearing a wide-brimmed hat that was terribly unfashionable and entirely inappropriate for the weather. The hat’s straw body was cracked and misshapen, and fragments of it fluttered through the smoky air to the ground as the man strolled toward the bar. He flicked back the corner of his faded grey travelling cloak, carefully slipped the strap of a soft leather case off his shoulder, and sat down in one smooth motion. He looked at the menu for a few moments before calling over the bartender.

“I’ll have the number five, no pepper-garlic sauce, please. And a pint of ale,” he said to the short, steel-haired woman behind the counter.

As she walked away, he turned to his leather case and opened it to determine its contents were safe. His notebook, a small leather thing embossed with dragonflies, had some water on the outside, but nothing too harmful. His instrument, a cool-toned wooden zither with metal strings turned golden in the torch lit tavern, had mercifully escaped any harm the weather might have brought. His father had been right when he said that a traveler’s most important investment was his equipment.

The bartender looked the stranger over as she passed him his ale, from his hands nimbly tapping at the countertop to his worn boots and the instrument he had at his side.

“Meal is on the house if you can give a tale good enough to keep the customers here for the evening. Ale too.” She gave a small smile and passed him his plate. “Nights like tonight, people want to be home in bed, and that’s bad for business. Sound like a deal?”

“I’d be delighted,” said the stranger.

Shortly after finishing his meal, he moved to a low-backed chair by the fireplace. By that time, the tavern keeper had already made an announcement about the “spectacular entertainment
offered by the Jolly Bishop tonight, stick around, make sure to enjoy the show,” and a small group had gathered by the fire while the remaining patrons angled their chairs in that direction.

The stranger laid his instrument flat on his lap and gave a few experimental strums to check the tuning. When he spoke, his voice was like a river in the springtime, gentle but powerful, and it carried to the corners of the tavern, now silent but for the occasional scrape of tankards against tables.

“Welcome, all,” he said, plucking a simple rhythm. “Tonight, you will hear tales of heroes and beasts, of triumphs and defeats, old or new or somewhere in-between. The only question I have for you is,” he paused. “Where would you like to start?”

The tavern remained hushed until a young boy, one of two sitting on the floor by the fire started to speak up, only to be silenced by an elbow to the side from his companion.

“Do not,” said the second boy, who looked a little older than the first, “ask for the story of William of Ealsvair again. We’ve heard it a thousand times.”

“But Travis,” the first one whined, “he’s the greatest hero of all time. I want to hear about him.”

“He is. But you already have. I don’t want to hear the same story again Edwin.”

The stranger cut in before the bickering could continue. “I may have something to appease you both, if you’re interested in William of Ealsvair.”

The younger boy glanced up with as much excitement as the older one did derision.

“Not a story, I’m sure, that you’ve heard before. This story tells of William before he became the legendary hero known today.”

After a pleading look from the young boy and the interested whispers from about the tavern, the older boy gave an exasperated nod for the stranger to continue.
“Excellent,” he said, changing the rhythm on his zither. “Then settle in, all, for the tale of William Cantatius of Ealsvair, the greatest bard who ever lived. Although it may be unfamiliar I assure you, my story is true.
William Cantatius trudged across the moors a mile out of the port town fiddling with the set of reed pipes around his neck, unsure he was going the right direction. Normally a detour would not bother him, but the sky was dark far earlier in the day than it should have been and a strong scent of salt tinted the air. A storm had snuck over from the eastern horizon, and William was certain that if he had been in an area with trees he would shortly be in danger of one falling on him.

William checked that his cloak was properly covering his zither’s travelling case then stepped up his pace. His path curved around the base of a hill where, mercifully, there was a sign that read “Drendelhaven: 6 leagues.” He had planned to make camp tonight and stop at the third village he passed tomorrow (for three was always the lucky number when seeking adventure in the great tales) but that plan would be greatly hindered by the storm. If he did not want to be swept away his best option was returning to port for the night, but the idea of backtracking left a foul taste in his mouth.

“There could be a village soon,” he said to himself, for he was a talkative man even when lacking company. “Just around this bend. That’s all. If I see nothing, I’ll return to port. But,” he said, as optimistic as he was loquacious, “there has to be a village soon.”

There was no village. However, something else drew William’s attention. As he rounded the bend in the path, he saw a smaller dirt trail leading up the hill. His eye’s traced the winding path through the patches of heather and, as if Amlea herself, Goddess of Drama and the favored handmaiden of Fate had ordained it, lightning etched veins of light across the clouds as his eyes landed on the castle.

“Oho,” he said, grinning like a madman. “This will be interesting.”
The older boy, Travis, cut into the stranger’s story with a scoff. “No one actually says ‘oho.’ That’s not a thing normal people say.”

The stranger only smiled. “Maybe some do.”

Travis glared at him, and the stranger pretended not to notice.

“Shall we continue?”

The younger boy Edwin nodded enthusiastically.

Four round towers jutted out of the castle’s main building. The three closest to the large oaken doors at the end of the path were squat and crenelated while the fourth tower’s spindly base swayed with the mounting winds, its conical roof piercing through the greying clouds.

William stepped up to the wide oak doors, knocked a quick rhythm that a careful listener might identify as the bridge to *The Ballad of the Witty Griffin Tamer*, and waited. A few minutes passed in which William began to question if his journey to the Southern Archipelago was truly worth it. Yes, he had yearned for an adventure since he was a child at the Ealsvair Conservatory of Arts. Yes, a travelling bard could make enough coin to support the search for such an adventure, and yes, the countryside was beautiful. But the *humidity* in this region was atrocious. William contemplated the merits of changing his course west to Laleruthit or east to Clorvin. The west was a lawless land ruled only by the word of a ruthless bandit queen, and the east’s craftsmen only specialized in the creation and repair of woodwind instruments, which was frankly barbaric.

He had almost settled on changing course to Laleruthit when one of the doors swung out on its hinges with a low creak, deep and echoing like the doors to the realm of Death, from
which only three and a half mortals have ever returned, and only one and two halves returned with their minds intact—

The door skidded to a halt an arm’s length from the door frame, and with it William’s trail of thought. Had the rough scratch of damp wood on stone not been enough to distract him, the muffled yet distinctive cursing that came through the gap in the door would have. Half of an aged face belonging to an evidently short man peeked through the gap.

“I don’t suppose you could try giving the door a tug? It’s gotten stuck.”

As the bard pulled on the door the man went on. “It’s the moisture that’s done it you know. Warps the wood and,” he coughed a little with the exertion, “it’s especially bad when we get the weather we’ve been having. Never understood as a child why my gran cursed the rainy season but now, oh,” he laughed scornfully, “I haven’t a need to waste my breath on cursing it. My bones creak enough to speak my curses for me.” With a final shove, the door flew fully open, revealing a stocky man with silver hair.

“Well come on in before the rain catches up to you. The master is always willing to host travelers, and he especially loves having them for dinner.” After a few failed attempts at shutting the door, the two men headed down a hall lined with dark tapestries and weaponry that almost seemed to move in the flickering torchlight.

“My name is Miron. I’m the head, and only servant on the premises now that the twins are taking care of their old mum, the gardener’s gone to find himself, whatever that means, and Bertha the cleaning lady is out to have her baby.” William could believe it. Small clouds of dust puffed from the burgundy carpets as they walked and cobwebs hung thick and low from the ceiling like ghostly stalactites. “I, personally, am happy for your company. The master, Baron Verriksbane, gets…odd when he goes to long without anyone new to talk to. It’s good that Lady
Isola is here for a visit, and now you, traveler. You are a traveler, I assume, mister…?” Miron turned to see that William had stopped a few paces behind him.

“Hm?” William looked up from a suit of armor with a scarlet bat emblem painted on the breastplate. “Oh, my name is William.” He collected himself, as he believed in making a good first impression. “William Cantatius, travelling bard, recent graduate of Ealsvair Conservatory of Arts with a focus in zither playing, junior woodcrafter, and collector of heroic tales. I am very thankful for the hospitality that you have offered me on behalf of the castle’s master.” The two men continued walking, and William noticed the scarlet emblem also appeared on the tapestries in the hall and even in the carpet pattern.

“Speaking of the Baron,” said William. “Would that bat insignia be his family crest? I’d love to hear the history behind it.”

“Bat?” Miron said. “What bat?”

William looked at the man with thinly veiled incredulity, hidden only for propriety’s sake. Before he could question how anyone who stepped foot into this hall wouldn’t notice the bat, an icy voice spoke from behind him.

“I am afraid you are mistaken.” A tall, tall man with hair William couldn’t help but compare to coal, cliché as it might have been, stepped out of a narrow shadowed corridor and into the hall with a thin-lipped smile. “My crest is not a bat, but a wyvern. Plenty of people make the mistake, though.” His dark eyes bored into William, and his tight-lipped smile stretched into something that reminded William of the gourds he carved for the harvest festival with his brothers before he left for school.
“Right!” said Miron, interrupting his thoughts. “No bats here! Why would there be? Anyway, supper should be ready soon. Pheasant stew. I assume you like pheasant?” he asked William.

“Yes,” William said after a pause, looking suspiciously between the two men at the sudden change of subject. “I suppose I do.”

“Excellent,” said the Baron. “As I am certain Miron told you, we love having guests for dinner.”

That’s creepy,” Edwin said.

“It’s not that creepy,” Travis immediately disagreed.

“It is,” the younger boy insisted.

“It’s predictable, is what it is.”

“What do you mean? I’m not sure what’s going to happen next.”

Travis scoffed. “That’s because you’re st—”

“Are you boys having a good time listening to the nice man?” the bartender appeared beside the fireplace. Some people, the stranger thought, believed that certain animals can sense the approach of natural disasters. Whether or not this was true, those animals’ senses were infinitesimal compared to the ability of someone who raised children to sense and respond to trouble.

“…Yes, Nana” said Travis.

“That’s good, dear. Now, let our guest speak.”
The stew was delicious, though William and Miron were the only ones present who enjoyed it. Lady Isola, the Baron’s niece, spoke little and ate less, more focused on cleaning her nails with a dagger that looked quite old, maybe Aergonian era.

Baron Verriksbane ate nothing, claiming a sour stomach. He merely sipped from his wine goblet, occasionally offering one of his token thin smiles when Miron’s rambles amused him.

Miron just finished recounting how his father had lost his eye, a captivating story involving a croquet mallet, a set of shears, and a roasted ham, when William spoke up.

“I don’t suppose,” he said, pulling out a clean leather-bound notebook, “that you could tell me what sort of beings one might come across in this area? I’ve read that nixies are common here, and goblins are almost everywhere, but information from a local source would be invaluable.”

“You are a researcher in addition to a musician, then?” asked the Baron, finally speaking.

“Any bard worth his song is,” replied William. “Unfortunately, there are less of those now than there once was.” He gave a sigh that would put brooding young lovers to shame and went on. “Everyone else at the conservatory found retelling the old tales to be enough. And I obviously respect the legends, they live on for a reason. But how,” he said with sudden vehemence, “how can we be bards if we only repeat what we have heard, if we never see for ourselves? The bards of old, whose legends we still tell did not hide in a repository, memorizing the words of others! They sought and immortalized heroes. The forged legends! They—”

A rattling crack of thunder interrupted William’s tirade, much to the satisfaction of everyone else at the table, for whom a simple “yes” would have sufficed.

“Well,” said the Baron quickly, willing to speak if it meant not learning of the good old days of barddom, “as you said, nixies are fairly common here. It is very important to check the
rivers for signs of them before attempting to cross. There is also a colony of leprechauns not more than a few leagues west. They occasionally have representatives at the port market.”

“And the will o’wisps of course,” Miron put in. “but you won’t get any of those until you’re out of the hills.”

“Aren’t you forgetting an obvious one?” asked Isola, looking up from her dagger and smirking.

A heavy knocking echoed from the hall before William could ask Isola’s meaning to attempt to confirm his suspicions.

Though William offered to accompany him in case the door stuck again, Miron went to answer the door alone, claiming the stew had revitalized him. The dinner table was silent in his absence, the only sounds the soft sloshing of liquid in goblets and echoing cursing from the other end of the hall. Eventually, Miron stepped back into the room, soaked with rain and leading a man.

The eastern storm that encouraged William to find shelter had arrived, and with it another traveler. The figure was tall and lean. Rivulets of water traced their way down his black duster and shuddered onto the floor with every stalking step he took. A long, thin sword hung on his right side, and when he moved William could see a two belts around his waist, each stuffed with sheathed daggers. William could not help think of what an imposing figure the man would be were he not trying to walk while both hunched over and leaning backwards at the same time.

“Might it be possible,” the man choked out, “for someone to help me with this hood?”

William stood to help, confused as he was by the man’s meaning, only to see that his leather duster also had a leather hood. It was a long, wide hood, that William gathered was made more to look aesthetically pleasing while down than useful while up, and it was filled with water.
“Bloody—thing,” the man cursed. “This water—is—freezing.”

William, ever helpful, attempted to upend the hood onto the floor only to pour it over the man and the Baron, both of whom gave out high pierced shrieks at the chill before looking thoroughly embarrassed.

“Well,” said the Baron, standing and speaking in a voice nearly as icy as the water he had been doused with. “I think that is quite enough for dinner excitement. Maybe you,” he directed a glare at William that the bard either missed or chose not to notice. “Could play for us another time instead of tonight. I find it is past time for everyone to retire to their rooms. And you traveler,” he said in a milder voice, collecting himself. “We are happy to extend our hospitality to you, but given the hour will serve your dinner in your room. Who might you be?”

“Venlin,” said the man through gritted teeth. He flicked his sodden asymmetrical bangs out of his face and let his hand rest unconsciously on the hilt of his sword. “Venlin Volnus. Travelling handyman.”

And William was the Countess of Clebury.

William’s room was spacious, if barren. The only cover on the dark stone walls was a tapestry with the red bat—or wyvern, that is, emblem hanging over the bed. A small vanity was pushed into the corner, and William sat at it, speaking to himself as he scribbled in his notebook.

“This is,” he said, “significantly more excitement than I expected in my first week of travel. I thought running into sirens when crossing the channel was something but this,” William laughed hysterically, running an ink-stained hand through his hair. “This is something else.”

William closed his notebook and bounced it against his leg. “Vampires. There’s no way these people aren’t vampires. The bat, the refusal to eat, the ancient weaponry, probably
collected from an immortal life!” William stood and stared out the window. The only light he saw came from the frequent cracks of thunder, and they did not illuminate friendly terrain. He had nowhere to go. He was alone. Trapped. In a castle. With at least two vampires. Miron was a wild card, but he at the very least was complicit with the situation.

This was a dream come true.

William’s thoughts were often scrambling and prone to flying away from each other, but they caught up to him suddenly. His erratically enthusiastic smile turned more contemplative.

He wasn’t alone in the castle. There was another outsider here, someone who certainly was not allied with this family. And he had suspicions about Venlin Volnus.

■ ■ ■

William crashed through a bedroom door and said “Ah, Venlin Volnus, just the man I wanted to see,” for the third time in a row. He’d been certain that he saw the other man going into one of the first two rooms he checked, but only opened the doors to a broom closet and a latrine.

This time however, Venlin was there, sitting on his bed and sharpening a silver sword. He stood at William’s entrance, pointing the blade at the bard’s throat, then dropping the point when he realized who had entered.

“Oh, dear me. I’m sorry. It’s just, being a, um, a—”


“Yes! Thank you, a travelling handyman,” Venlin went on. “There’s always dangerous people wanting to uh, steal your tools.”
William decided to spare the man. He would normally be annoyed by someone who obviously put more effort into his weaponry than his backstory, but he unfortunately needed that kind of man to get out of this situation with a decent story. Escaping alive was well and good, but having something to show for it was better.

“Venlin. We weren’t properly introduced earlier, what with the water and all,” he said not noticing the way Venlin’s eyes darkened at mention of the incident. “My name is William Cantatius, travelling bard. To cut this short, I know you aren’t a travelling handyman.”

Venlin made a small noise of protest, so William raise his voice and carried on. “I know this because despite never travelling this region before I have studied it. I know what sort of creatures live here, and I know what kinds of brave people rise to the occasion to deal with them. In short, I know you’re a vampire slayer.”

Not that he would need to have studied that much to tell. Up close, William realized that the man’s belts were not stuffed with regular daggers as he had initially thought, but with wooden ones. And a silver sword? No one used such a thing except when dealing with species with an aversion to silver, otherwise you would end up chopped in half by someone with a real weapon.

“A what?” Venlin said. “A vampire slayer? Oh no, you must have me mistaken I—”

William was afraid he would have to put up with amateur storytelling for the rest of the night, but luckily he was saved by a high pitched scream.

Venlin pulled a wooden dagger from his belt and handed it to William. “Alright minstrel,” he said, dropping his atrocious act so suddenly that William hadn’t the thought to be offended by the term. “It’s us or them. The hunt has started. If you want to survive, stay close to me.” Venlin slid into the hall and William followed.
Dust swirled in the dancing torchlight as the two men made their way through the corridor to the dining room and then the base of northern tower. As they reached the tower’s entryway, they heard another shrill shriek, like a wounded animal, come through the door.

“Those monsters,” Venlin said, swearing under his breath before flicking his hair out of his eyes and staring toward the most recent flash of thunder. “Ever since my mother’s death I swore I would wreak vengeance upon their species, that I would make sure no one else—”

“Yes, yes,” William cut in. “Very noble. And I’m always a fan of speeches. But maybe,” he rammed his shoulder against the door. “We want to focus on helping the person inside,” he slammed against the door again, this time with help from a sheepish Venlin, “first.”

The door burst open and William, more adept at elaborate speaking than footwork, stumbled into the room and crashed into the side of an armchair. As he pulled himself from the ground, he saw Baron Verriksbane standing over a fallen Miron with a broadsword in his hands, blood splashed across the side of his face.

William shouted “Stop!” at the exact moment the Baron called “Behind you!”

William turned halfway to the doorway to see a grayish figure release its hold on the wall above the doorway and lunge toward him. The stone floor bit into his knees and palms as claws pricked into his shoulders. William tried to turn and throw the creature off him, but he only succeeded in shifting its weight. Before long it was atop him, pinning his back to the floor. He only saw a blur of dark red and a pair of bright blue eyes before the creature lunged for his neck, ready to send him to the gates of death without a single original epic to his name, or maybe a cursed life as a death-feasting creature with claws too long to play his zither without causing damage—
A flood of dark ichor burst from the creature’s forehead, coating William. Venlin Volnus had driven the point of his sword through the base of the vampire’s neck and out her forehead, stopping only a hair’s breadth, or maybe three, from William’s neck.

William stood shakily after rolling the thin figure off him and asked in a shakier voice, “Would you describe her eyes more like sapphire or cobalt?” he paused, took out his notebook, and said “It’s important for research purposes.”

The Baron, who had helped Miron from the floor and into the armchair by the time William stood, leaned his weight onto his broadsword and wiped a cut on his forehead. “I think,” he said after a moment, “that sapphire fits best. Which is odd. Since I remember Bertha’s eyes being brown.”

Miron shook his head at the Baron’s words while William, put off by the fact that the Baron was not, in fact, a vampire, turned a few pages back in his notebook.

“Bertha…the pregnant cleaning lady?” he asked. *The Vampire Cleaning Lady of the Southern Keep* did not have the same ring to it, the same sense of style as *The Vampire Baron*, but with some editing it might do.

“Well, yes,” said the Baron. “She was. But she wasn’t a vampire. At least,” he amended, looking at the fallen figure in the gray woolen dress. “She was no vampire when she went on leave six weeks ago.”

“This…” Venlin said after a pause. “Was not how I was expecting the night to go. But,” he stood up straighter. “The agents of light, such as myself, have triumphed over the darkness once ag—”
Apparently Fate looked kindly enough on William to save him from Venlin’s terrible speeches, for another scream rang out, this one unmistakably human and from a room in the tower above.

“Isola,” started the Baron, running up the tower stairs with Venlin on his heels before William could remark that another change to Bertha must have happened in the past few weeks. The woman slain before him did not appear to be pregnant.

After ascertaining Miron was not harmed in any obvious way, William followed the others up the stairs.

The first thing William determined upon entering Lady Isola’s room was that the dagger she used at dinner was in fact an Aergonian piece. The blades inlay, or what he could see of it, as it had sunk three inches into the wall, perfectly fit the style described in *The Epic of Dyobur*.

The second thing William determined was that there was, as he assumed, a vampire baby in the castle. A small bat fluttered around Isola’s head, swooping out of the way of Venlin’s sword as he tried to stab it, and he would have taken out Isola had the Baron not noticed and dragged him back at the last second.

The third thing William determined, to no one’s surprise, was that Venlin Volnus was an ass. He should have known better than to expect something else from an antihero type.

As William stepped into the room, the small bat, eager to avoid the overeager vampire slayer, flew from Isola’s head and crashed into a basket by the floor. A small flash occurred, like candle flickering to life but backwards, and a baby rolled out of the basket.
While the baby’s dark hair seemed to absorb the light in the room, his bright sapphire eyes and pale skin radiated it. He gurgled, toppled sideways, and giggled until a pale stocking got stuck on one of his fangs, after which he promptly began to cry.

Venlin shook of the Baron’s grip and started for the child on the floor, sword at the ready.

“What do you think you are doing?” William asked him, rushing from the doorway to stand between the slayer and the child.

Venlin shot him an irritated look. “I think it’s obvious what I’m doing. It’s a creature of the night.” He gestured to the other two people in the room, bloodied from their encounter. “Its mother almost killed all of us, you included, not even a moment ago and it will grow up to be just like her.” He pushed William aside, only for William to step back into his path.

“You do not know that. He is a child. He can’t even walk yet! In what world do heroes kill children?”

“In the real world, the heroes are the ones who do what is necessary.” Venlin gave the William a solid shove to the chest. “So pull your head out of the stories you have heard and be reasonable.”

The bard shook his unreasonable head and pushed the slayer back. “You will not touch him.”

Venlin took another step back and stared at William for a long moment. Lightning cracked yet again, and the child’s wailing became louder, warbled as it was with the sock in his mouth.

William slowly moved over to the toppled basket, only breaking eye contact with Venlin when he stooped to pick the child up. The wailing child started at his sudden removal from the ground and stared at William, suddenly silent, the sock still dangling from his tooth.
“Let’s get that fixed for you,” William said, gently tugging the cloth from the baby’s mouth. In all honesty, William had not been sure this was a good idea, but the little vampire looked just as much of a baby as William’s little nephew did. And they both seemed to like hiding in laundry baskets. William was contemplating if this was a habit of all babies when he turned around to find the point of Venlin’s sword leveled at his throat.

“I’m afraid,” he said, pausing for effect in a manner that William would have appreciated under different circumstances, “that I cannot let you endanger the lives of everyone here for one monster.”

“Monster is a bit harsh, don’t you think?” William said. The child started tugging on the reed pipes around his neck, and William took a step back to pull them from around his head and handed them to the child, who immediately threw them on the floor and giggled.

Venlin took a step closer, and William went on. “Maybe a little disrespectful to the art of music,” he gestured to the reed pipes on the floor, “but that respect is typically taught, so it can be forgiven for now.”

“You’re not taking this seriously,” Venlin said, face coloring.

“I’ve always thought that some situations are too serious for their own good.”

“Enough,” shouted Venlin, practically frothing with rage. “You will put that monster down and walk away, or I will put both of you down.”

It wasn’t the most original wordplay, but it certainly got Venlin’s point across.

“In case you’ve forgotten,” he continued, seething, “that thing is a creature of the night! A beast, a devil, a daemon! To suffer it to live is—”

William was very, very lucky that Lady Isola broke a vase over Venlin’s head at that moment, knocking him unconscious. William had been about to tell the slayer that devils and
daemons were a different classification of magical creatures than vampires, and had he done so he certainly would not have survived.

They buried Bertha the next morning and only allowed the slayer to stay long enough to perform the rites that would prevent her from rising again. After helping shovel the last of the dirt into the grave, William excused himself to the library to allow the castle’s inhabitants to grieve privately.

Two days later, The Baron found him once again in the library, examining three different books on vampire legends while rocking the baby in his bassinet.

The Baron cleared his throat. “You know, William, the baby has seemed rather attached to you ever since you, well, grabbed it, him I mean, from underneath a sword point, and—”

William interrupted without looking up from his book with an absentminded “Really? I thought it was from getting the sock out of his fang,” he looked up. “But I suppose you could be right.” He smiled at the baby. “He is an adorable little creature. I almost wish I could bring him with me.” He thought to earlier in the day when he and Miron had to lower a chandelier from the rafters to get the child down in time for his nap. That bat form let him get in all sort of troublesome places. “I can just tell he has an adventurer’s spirit.”

“Really?” said the Baron, trying to seize the opportunity. “Well, I’m glad to hear you say that. You see,” he paused. “Well you see, I don’t think we can properly take care of him here. Not that we wouldn’t love to of course. But I,” he hesitated. “I’ve never been good with children, and Isola’s fiancée has a child from a previous marriage. “I just worry that, well,” he trailed off, lost in a forest of excuses.
“That Venlin might come back for him?” suggested William, who had seen this conversation coming and resolved against leaving any child in a home where he was unwanted.

“Exactly! Exactly. So, I figured we could prepare you for your upcoming journey, arrange some supplies to help you care for it, I mean him, and then you can be on your merry way.”

“Your help would be much appreciated.”

After another day of preparations, William gathered his supplies with help from Miron. Daylight was precious so he wanted his goodbyes to be short and civil, but he couldn’t help asking Miron about the crest again.

“Oh,” Miron chuckled. “That. Well, it’s actually a funny story.” He went on in a conspiratorial whisper. “The Baron’s ancestor was a great warrior you know, slew the wretched Lord Aldred Verick. His troops were known as the shrieking wyverns, since they attacked out of nowhere, shrieking like daemons were on their heels. So the first Baron, when he formed his noble house, decided to honor the men who served him by making the family crest a wyvern. Problem is, he was a do it yourself kind of man. Need a sword? Forge one. Have an enemy? Kill him.” Miron made stabbing motions with his hand. “Need a crest? Paint it yourself. Unfortunately, he was not as good at painting canvases as he was painting the battlefield, if you get my meaning.”

“I think I do,” said William.

“Just don’t bring it up in front of this Baron. The other noblemen bully him for it.”

William smiled at the thought and the story. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

And so, with extra supplies, a tome on vampires, and Dr. Kirillan’s Guide to Parenting, William Cantatius set off.
The stranger changed the rhythm on his instrument to a lighter, passive tune with the end of his tale, and a smattering of applause tumbled through the tavern. He took a sip from the tankard on the table at his side then took off his awful hat for a moment to brush back the dark hair that had fallen into his face. He put the hat back on at a jaunty angle that only he found becoming and looked toward the two boys.

“Was that to your liking?”

Edwin’s nod was enthusiastic while Travis’s was begrudging, but neither boy could hide their interest.

“I don’t suppose anyone has an idea of what kind of tale they would like to hear next? We can go with some of the classics, or, if you interested,” he paused with a smile, “I do have some other lesser known tales of William.”

Edwin looked at his brother hopefully. Although badly feigning nonchalance, Travis didn’t even try to fake a sigh before asking if any of William’s stories had dragons.

“Dragons? Of course. It’s been a little while since I told this one, though it’s one of my favorites. I heard it from my father when I was young. So let me see…” He took out a leather notebook with embossed dragonflies on the cover and flipped through the pages.

“Oh yes. Mhm. Right, yes.” He muttered, flipping through his notes. “I remember now.”

A loud harrumph came from the back of the tavern. In the back corner, half hidden by shadow, sat two men with bushy gray beards, each hunched over a pint of ale.

“Would you rather a different sort of story, grandad?” the stranger called out cheerfully. “I want to give the children something to enjoy before they get sent off to bed, but the night is still young. There is plenty of time for more tales after this one.”
The man gave another harrumph. “Don’t you ‘grandad’ me, sonny. I’m no grandad to you.”

“Wallace,” said the other bearded man sitting with him with a sigh. “Must you?”

“I’m just saying, and there’s no law against saying, if you know what I’m saying,” Wallace went on saying. “I’m just saying, in my time,” he gestured grandly. “In my time, bards knew their stories by heart. They didn’t use any of this notebook nonsense.”

The stranger didn’t look insulted, only amused. “Maybe so. But I am a great believer in accuracy. Although checking my notes may not paint me as impressive a bard as some others,” he smiled and patted his weathered notebook. “It lets me be sure my story is correct. And the story is far more important than my reputation.”

The man in the corner harrumphed again, but Travis looked on with more obvious approval, though nowhere near the level of his younger brother’s admiration.

The tune the stranger played changed again to be light and quick. “If you are ready, and I feel that you are, we shall begin the tale of William and the dragon.”
William Cantatius pushed open the scorched remnants of a door into a stone tavern that had seen better days. He threw off the hood of his cloak and, humming, wove his way through the chattering patrons up to the bar. On a typical Wednesday, heads would have turned to observe a stranger in the small farming village, especially one with a large instrument case on his back and a baby in a sling on his front. However, there were far more people than the usual crowd. It seemed like the entirety of the village was packed into this room, or at least, what was left of the village.

William pulled out a stool, only to feel the joints of the aged chair creak and shift beneath his hands. He went to the stool next to it and sat gingerly, then leaned on his arm and began drumming his fingers on the honey-toned bar, observing the rusted swords hanging on the wall above the splintering barrels of ale.

“Excuse me, good sir,” he said to the barman whose apron was as stained as the tavern’s furnishings were decrepit. “I don’t suppose you could give me directions to the butcher shop? I wanted to get some rations for my journey, you see—”

“Sorry pal but I’m gonna have to stop you right there. The butchers was torched almost a week ago. On the bright side, everything still smells like bacon, my absolute favorite. On the downside, no one’s seen Old Barry and his family since. They mighta left town like the others, or they mighta been inside when it happened.” The barman grimaced. “Here’s to hoping it’s bacon we’re smelling.”

“Ah,” said William after a moment. “Well never mind then. What have you got to eat here?”
“Today’s lamb chops and potatoes. Also, since you’re not from around here I should tell you the cook leaves the lamb pretty bloody.”

“Perfect.”

William paid him then turned his attention to the child he was holding.

“And how are you doing little Dante?” he cooed. “Are you hungry? Food will be here soon.”

The child looked up at him with round, bright eyes and gurgled. The man sitting next to them in a leather jerkin turned and spoke in a voice as soft as the arrows on his back looked sharp.

“I doubt a lad as young as that one could eat what you’re getting, friend. You’re better off bringing him to his mother to nurse.”

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“But his mother is dead!” Edwin remembered triumphantly.

Travis turned towards his brother with an incredulous look. “You shouldn’t sound so excited about someone’s mother being dead.”

“Oh, I’m not!” Edwin said. “It’s just, I remembered she was dead so—”

“So you had to shout it?”

“Well…”

“Shh. I’m trying to listen.”

#  #  #

William’s smile became slightly fixed. He liked providing people with necessary details, but the nature of his son’s adoption was probably better to avoid with strangers. After a pregnant pause, he said “His mother is no longer with us.”
The stranger looked as if he were about to say something but was saved from it by the start of the village meeting.

“Hello everyone,” said a large man with an even larger moustache. “Most of you know me, but for those of you who don’t, I’m the deputy mayor—well the mayor now—Hank.”

“Hi Hank,” the room chorused.

“Yes, yes,” he said, looking up towards the ceiling. “Anyway, we might as well discuss the elephant in the room. Or rather, the dragon on the mountain. As I’m sure all of you know, we have a dragon problem.

Obviously. That’s why William was here. When there were dragons, heroes arrived to slay them. And William needed a hero.

“Half the village is burned to a crisp and the livestock is slowly being carried off. We aren’t going to have a village for very much longer if we keep on like this. So,” Hank sighed. “I must ask for volunteers to go up the mountain and slay the beast for the…” he counted on his fingers for far longer than what should have been necessary. “The third time this week”

“Fourth, actually, Hank,” called the barman.

“Fourth? But we didn’t send anyone on Sunday. Oh, right, never mind, that was an especially bad Monday. Lots of screaming and burned flesh.” He paused, and then said with a forced brightness, “Anyway, do we have any volunteers?”

William doubted it after that sorry speech. A hush had fallen over the tavern the moment Hank said ‘burned flesh.’ Honestly, no one knew how to give a proper rallying call for morale these days. In the legends, like Huget Bouldermantle or Glorified Gerald and the Wyvern there was always a heroic speech ready to be recorded by an attentive bard. He was born in the wrong
William was proved incorrect in his doubt when the man two seats down from him stood, chainmail rattling against the bar as he did so. The warrior, for he was obviously a warrior with his large, kite shaped shield and a broadsword strapped to his back, spoke in a deep tenor.

“I, will go. Yes, it shall be a perilous journey, perhaps, yes, perhaps the most perilous that I,” he slapped his hand on the shoulder of the man with the arrows. “Or, my squire, Arawn, have ever, ever taken—”

“I’m not your squire, Beroldhus. We’ve been over this” the man muttered.

“But,” said the armored warrior. “We will. Not. Fail you. Our journey, it shall not be easy. But—”

The man with the arrows, or as William began to think of him, the not-squire, turned to William and spoke in a voice that was still quiet, but nowhere near as gentle as it had been before.

“He’s going to go on the rest of the night saying the exact same thing. ‘Perilous journey’ this and ‘my faithful squire’ that.” He gave a long-suffering sigh. “We’re partners. Equal spoils, equal say in what work we take. It’s in the contract.”

“Mmmhmm,” William grunted, scribbling the speech down in his notebook. “Very frustrating, people living in their own world like that, not paying attention to others’ feelings. Can you write down his speech for me? I need to cut up the meat for little Dante.”

Arawn looked at William for a moment. “I don’t write well. I had to start work on the farm a few years earlier than most. I can cut the meat for you, though I still think the lad’s too young to appreciate it.”
“He will, and thank you, you’re very kind. Is it Arawn with a ‘w’ or a ‘u’?”

“A ‘w,’ probably.”

“Wonderful, thank you. I am William Cantatius, travelling bard. I’ll be accompanying you tomorrow, assuming that is when you’ll be facing the dragon?”

“Well, it is, but—”

“Perfect. Oh you’ve finished with the food, wonderful.” William began feeding the baby little bloody pieces of nearly raw meat, occasionally eating a potato himself.

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“Does he need to eat bloody meat because he’s a vampire?”

“Obviously, Edwin.”

“I was just making sure!” Edwin turned back toward the storyteller. “What does William feed the baby—”

“Dante,” Travis interjected,

“Dante,” Edwin went on. “What does he feed Dante when he can’t reach a tavern? Does he...” his voice dropped to a stage whisper. “Does he eat people?”

“Eat people?” the storyteller gave an amused laugh. “Of course not. William would get animal’s blood from butcher shops when he travelled, and he always was sure to have enough stocked. Well,” he paused. “Except for that one time. But Dante Cantatius never drank the blood of a sentient being.”

“Oh, good.” Edwin said. “Because I never knew Dante was a vampire until now. And he’s always been my favorite member of William’s band of heroes. And if he ate people,” Edwin shuddered. “I wouldn’t want him to be my favorite anymore.”

“Well, he doesn’t,” Travis said. “So are you ready to get on with the story?”
Edwin rolled his eyes at his brother’s new interest in the storyteller. “Obviously, Travis.”

“Do you know if Hank is the mayor’s full name or if it’s short for Henry?” William asked, chewing on a potato. “The name ‘Hank’ is simply lacking style for the deliverer of such an important quest.”

“You want to come with us to face the dragon?” Arawn asked incredulously.

When William realized he would not receive an answer to his question, even though he asked it first, he responded. “Yes.”

“But you’re a bard!”

William paused. “Yes? And I need something to write about. Inspiration doesn’t simply grow on trees, and I find true tales, like those in the great epics, to be the most fascinating.”

Arawn looked to William like he was going to give his opinion on the validity of the epics, so the bard spoke again.

“If you need see if it’s okay with Beroldhus first I understand.”

Arawn didn’t say anything for a long moment. “Fine. If you want to come, I won’t stop you. But,” he said, “I feel the need to point out that you have a child. Be sure to make arrangements in case this journey does not go the way you plan.”

William gave him a long look. “Obviously, I will be making arrangements for my son.”

Arawn stood up to follow Beroldhus, who had gallivanted out the door to the mayor’s office in to discuss the manner of payment for his services.

“I’ll see you tomorrow then. Sunrise. We have one hell of a climb to reach the dragon’s lair.”
“I can’t believe you brought a baby on a dragon slaying quest!”

Beroldhus was scouting ahead of the other two men and clearing their path of low hanging branches with the vigor of an erratic windmill.

“It’s not safe for me to leave him with anyone else,” William said, feeding a thoroughly swaddled Dante from a clay bottle. “Anything could happen. At the very least, I know dragons are supposed to be noble creatures. I doubt one would attack a child unprovoked.” His expression turned dark. “The same does not go for the people down there.”

Arawn determined he wasn’t going to win this argument, so he changed the topic. “What is a bard doing on a quest like this? I thought you lads usually wander telling stories, not fighting monsters.”

“Well, like I said yesterday, I need inspiration. I’m from a country about three weeks travel north of here, and in a few years it will be the 150th anniversary of our founding. Our Queen is a great purveyor of arts—her grandmother even founded Ealsvair Conservatory where I learned my craft—so at the anniversary festival, there will be a competition amongst the bards. Whoever can recount the best story will receive great honors.” They started up an incline but Williams’s breathing remained even as he continued speaking. “I’ve always thought the true tales to be the best. So, I plan on following a hero accomplish great deeds and recording the heroism.”

“You said the competition is in a few years? Isn’t this a bit early of a start?”

“You can not rush art, Arawn. What, do you think I should write my entire piece the night before the competition?” William laughed. “Who would ever do something like that?”

“Look friend, I don’t do art. I kill the things that my companion doesn’t notice are preparing to kill him. I like you, strange as you are, but you’re probably better off finding
“Well, let’s see how he does with the dragon.”

Beroldhus did not do well with the dragon.

He doubted arrows could do much and told Arawn to leave it all to him, but Arawn still set up on a cliff overlooking the cave with muttered comments of how he didn’t take orders.

So, he had approached the dragon alone, climbing down the steep ridge encircling the cave, then striding toward the dark entrance of the beast’s lair with his golden, no, his wheat-colored hair blowing in the wind. Suddenly, all was quiet, quiet enough that William could hear Beroldhus speak, even from the edge of the cliff where he sat with Arawn.

“Beast! Monster! Dragon! Show yourself!”

The soft, leathery sound of wings on scales could be heard from the cave.

“I come to seek vengeance for the villagers you have slain. For the homes and lives you have destroyed. And though I stand here alone, I stand unafraid. I stand—”

“Well, that’s nice,” Arawn said from his perch on the cliff. “So noble of him to do this ‘alone’.”

“Shhh,” William said, writing in his notebook as Dante chewed on his spare quill. “I’m trying to hear.”

“---show yourself you coward!” Beroldhus bellowed.

The dragon did. It was large, thrice the height of the tavern. Its eyes gleamed with intelligence and bloodlust, and its scales shone the bright pinkish red found inside watermelons.
“Watermelons, William? Really?” Arawn said, looking at William. “I think, if you’re aiming for drama, blood would be better.”

“Well it isn’t blood colored. Though I may revise later. And how do you know what I’m writing?”

“You’ve been talking to yourself.”

Beroldhus flourished his sword and the light shone off of it in a beam so pure he must have been blessed by one of the gods of battle. Or at least, William thought that before the dragon took off Beroldhus’s head with one swift swipe of its claws before turning to go nap back in its cave.

It was…disappointing. William had thought there was so much potential with this one, but this was just another dud adventurer who wasn’t worthy of a limerick, much less a ballad.

He had heard about exploits like these in songs. Surely it couldn’t be that hard. You just had to be smarter than Beroldhus was and learn from the tales of the past.

— ■ — ■ —

“Excuse me. Mighty dragon?” William called into the cave.

He felt slightly off balance without the weight of his child. Arawn had insisted this was not the place for Dante, and he didn’t disagree. William was lucky Arawn had allowed him to go, even if it had taken an hour of bickering and assuring the archer that he did, in fact, know quite a lot about dragons from his time at the conservatory.

“I’m terribly sorry to bother you, but I was passing through and heard of a dragon this way. I’m quite lucky I found you. You see,” he said, raising his voice so it could be heard over the approaching dragon’s heavy footsteps. “I happen to love riddles. And everyone knows dragons love riddles, so I thought maybe you’d like to play a bout?”
The dragon let out a great roar that caused the birds in the surroundings to go quiet, then leaned its large angular head towards William.

“Human, we do not engage in the game of questions without a wager. What is yours?”

“Oh. Well. My life, I suppose?”

“That is worthless to me.”

“If that is so…” William took the instrument case off of his back to reveal a fine piece of carved wood strung with waxed horsehair. “Perhaps my life and this zither? It has beautiful sound quality and would fit well into any trove.”

The dragon stared at him for a long moment, then peered at the zither. “Is that crafted of Laearican spruce?”

William smiled. “Indeed it is! You have a craftsman eye.” He ran his fingers lightly over his instrument. “The wood was seasoned and allowed to mature for forty-seven years before carving. I inherited it from the Master of Tone in my second year at the conservatory after it had been in his possession for around another thirty years.” He plucked a string, smiling softly as the sound hit his ears. “Beautiful.”

“It truly is.” The sun was high when the dragon said “Then let us begin our game. I will even start simply. How does a crow resemble an abacus?”

The sun was nearly set when William asked his twenty-third riddle. “Through how many villages must a man pass before he can be a man?”

“Through as many as the wind leads him.” A pause, and a reptilian smirk, if such a thing were possible. “Velvet hair, emerald dress, drawing blood, drinking sky.”

“Hmmm. That one may take me a minute.”
After three minutes of silence in which only one bird had the courage to chirp, the dragon stretched out its leathery wings and sighed. “You have lasted far longer than any human before, so I must commend you before you die. For you will die, human. I possess the knowledge of centuries. None have bested me in this game.” William paused for a moment.

“Well, I know this was not part of the wager, but can you answer some questions for me first? I’ve always been very curious about dragons, and I would hate to die wondering.”

The dragon considered it. “Since you will soon be dead I do not see how this could be a problem. Ask away.”

The bard asked many things. Do all dragons breathe fire? *Only those of a warm color.* Do all dragons like riddles? *All who aren’t fools.* Do all red dragons breathe the same color fire as you?

The dragon snorted, fire curling around his nostrils.

“What? I am no red dragon, tiny human. Red dragons are absurd, belligerent creatures, constantly giving into rage. I am a *coral* dragon. We are much more powerful.”

“Really? In what ways?”

“Intelligence. Charisma. Strength. We can change sizes! It makes no sense, even within the laws of magic,” the dragon ranted. “But we can! Yet everyone always thinks ‘Red dragon’ when they think terror. It’s insulting.”

William nodded. “That must be very frustrating, but to bring up another point, you can really change size?”

“Of course I can” the dragon preened. “If I wished, I could become as large as this mountain or small enough to fit between the strings of that zither of yours, soon to be mine.”

“That is incredible. But, not to be rude, I honestly cannot believe it.”
“You cannot believe it? I can prove it to you, become as large as the mountain itself!”

“I would love that! If it were not for the fact that it would crush me and prevent us from continuing our game. Perhaps, if it were not too much trouble, you could show me how you fit between the strings of my zither?”

“Of course I will!” The dragon harrumphed, then began to shrink. Watching, William could make no sense of how it was happening, but within a few, gradually less dragon packed minutes, the dragon was small enough to wrap around William’s pinky like a ring. It perched in the palm of his hand, tiny claws pricking his skin like a mosquito bite, and spoke.

“See puny human, I am the great coral dragon! Nothing is as powerful as I! No one can best me! I am mighty! I am strength and wisdom personified! I am—”

William slapped the dragon between his hands. “You are vainer than you are wise. And the answer,” he paused, knowing it was dramatic, but unable to help himself, “is a rose.”

“I truly cannot believe that was the riddle he thought he would best me with.” William said to Arawn as they walked back to the village. “I mean, a rose? I had to take two courses on flower poetry, which was absolutely ridiculous I might add, but even without those it would have been too easy. I expected better from a dragon.” He snorted disdainfully.

“Maybe you’d have had more of a challenge with a red dragon.”

“I doubt it. Red dragons truly are nasty and belligerent creatures. Blue dragons though,” William grimaced. “We are quite lucky we didn’t face one of those.”

“I think the village is quite lucky someone with knowledge of dragons appeared.”
William sighed. “Lucky for the village, maybe, but terribly inconvenient for me. I’m glad to have helped with the dragon of course,” he added quickly. “But now I have to hunt for another hero. I’ve lost so much time already.”

Arawn sighed too, but William suspected it was at him rather than for his predicament. “At the very least, you’ve a tale for your lad when he’s older, even if you don’t use it for your competition. And you still have how many years until then?” William shifted Dante in his sling as to not jostle him on the downhill slope and chuckled nervously.

“…I feel you will make a rude comment if I tell you.” Arawn stopped moving and gave him one of the wry, unamused looks he seemed to be so fond of.

“Fine,” William said, and Arawn began walking next to him again. “Eight years. But,” he went on quickly, so his companion couldn’t criticize “I have to travel, find a hero, follow them, and write about it. And do not even get me started on choosing a title.” William pursed his lips. “The title is the worst part.”

“I’m no bard, but I could believe that,” said Arawn, obviously holding back an eye roll. “On a different matter, I currently have no partner, and you’re heading off in search of an adventure. So I was thinking, only if you wanted to of course—”

“There is no need to dance around the matter, Arawn. I also think it would be reasonable for us to travel together.”

Arawn gave him a small smile. “Wonderful, I was thinking—”

“That we could find a new hero together, yes,” said William, beaming. “One you can work with and I can write about. It’s a perfect plan.”
Arawn didn’t seem able hold back the eye roll this time, though William wasn’t sure why. “Of course William. Perfect. That’s exactly what I was thinking.” He exhaled heavily. “Let’s stop at the tavern before we leave. We can see if they have anything Dante can eat.”

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“So he beat up a dragon…with words?” Edwin asked.

“Well,” said the stranger. “It was certainly more effective than with a sword. As I think Beroldhus learned.”

The bartender strode across the floorboards and stopped before the hearth, her steely hair glowing in the firelight. She let her hands brush against the two sitting boys’ hair, smiling. “I’ve always been of the opinion that little boys should learn about using their words properly.”

Edwin smiled at his grandmother while Travis scowled. “We’re not that little anymore Nana.”

“Of course not my dear. But it’s time for bed, so say goodnight to the nice man and head upstairs.”

The bartender stood solid as a lighthouse amidst the waves of protests from her grandsons. She managed to get them to their feet and herded them halfway to the stairs before the old man in the back of the tavern spoke up.

“Good riddance,” he said, tugging at his beard with one of his token harrumphs. “Maybe we’ll get to hear a decent tale, and without all the yammering.”

The bartender stopped suddenly at the base of the stairs and turned to glare at the old man. She opened her mouth as if she would speak, then stopped and instead smiled at her grandsons. “Boys, I’ve changed my mind. You can stay up a little bit later tonight.”
The boys, who were not accustomed to any leniency on the matter of their bedtime, scrambled back to the fireplace before their grandmother could change her mind again, Travis stumbling over his feet and Edwin with a high pitched squeal.

The two boys crashed into each other before the tavern’s hearth to the amusement of all the tavern-goers, excepting the old man in the back who mumbled something about foolish, spoiled children.

“Can we have another tale of William?”

The strangers blue eyes flashed with amusement at receiving that question from Travis rather than Edwin.

“I would be delighted to tell you more of him. But maybe,” he said with a falsely subtle nod to the old man in the back, winking at the boys. “Maybe we can make it through this tale with a few less interruptions.”
“And you say he was short?” William sat on the packed earth cottage floor and scribbled furiously in his notebook.

“Suppose he was,” said the woman, wringing her brown apron in her hands.

“And how would you say his eyes were shaped?”

“Round. Definitely round. And sort of evil, you know?”

“How can someone’s eyes look evil?” Edwin asked.

“So much for fewer interruptions,” called the old man in the back.

The stranger decided that the best way to mitigate this interaction was to make it as short as possible. “I don’t know, actually.”

William looked up from his notebook with a furrow in his brow. “I don’t know, actually.”

Arawn, who leaned against the small wooden table with Dante perched on his hip, chose this moment to interject. “Maybe we should focus less on physical description and more on going out to find the thief.”

William shot him a look. They had been travelling together for more than two seasons now, and even though they had established an effective working relationship there were still some points where they could never see eye to eye. It was like asking a dog to swim in the same manner as a fish, fins and all.

“How are we supposed to know who the thief is if we don’t compose an accurate description?”

Arawn sighed and massaged his temples with his free hand. “He’s a goblin, Will.”
“Well how would we know if we found the right goblin?”

“Because there would be a goblin holding a chicken?”

“It could be a different goblin holding their own chicken. You are being speciesist.”

Arawn let out a slow breath. “Perhaps you’re right. But I don’t see how your drawings will help us. Unless, of course, the goblin we’re searching for looks like a watermelon atop an arrangement of sticks.

William peered down at his drawing. He was a musician, not a painter. It was rather stick-like.

“He might have been kind of lean,” the woman said. “Or he might have had some meat on his bones, I can’t be certain.” A slight burning smell filled the air, making the small earthy cottage feel more cramped. “Oh, that’d be my bread!” The woman rushed to the oven on the other side of the room.

“That’s very helpful,” Arawn muttered. “Either lean or not lean and evil eyes.”

“You don’t have to be so pessimistic,” William said. “I’m certain we will be able to find this nice woman’s chicken for her.”

The aforementioned nice woman chose this moment to screech, “Helen!”

William and Arawn moved to the window where the woman stood, pointing toward the field behind her house. Even at the distance, William could make out a squat figure with grayish skin tinted the blue-green of winter shrubs. The figure wore a piece of cloth that gathered over their right shoulder and draped across the body. The cloth was fastened around the figure’s middle with a piece of rope and appeared to be made from a conglomeration of different fabrics stitched together.

In its arms sat a chicken.
“That’s her,” the woman wailed. “That’s my Helen. Look at her feathers, like polished copper, speckled white with the freshest, finest snow.” She sniffled. “And her sweet little crown that puts the reddest apples to shame.”

“You couldn’t have been that descriptive about the goblin?” Arawn asked.

William agreed with him, but he was too excited to meet his first goblin to say anything about it.

“Time to go,” he said, lifting Dante from Arawn’s arms and sitting him on his hip. The vampire child was growing at a faster rate than human children and had recently outgrown his sling to start toddling around. He had a tendency to wander if unsupervised, so William and Arawn always made certain that one of them had an eye on him. They had started calling him “dragonfly” since he dashed around as if his chubby baby feet had dominion over the winds.

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“Does Arawn know that Dante is a vampire?” Edwin asked.

“Oh, yes,” said the stranger. “He does by this point. William decided to tell him after their first quest together. At that point they were officially partners, and well,” he said with a small laugh. “It would be pretty bad for someone not to tell their partner that their son was a vampire.”

“And Arawn wasn’t mad? I know he’s a hero too, but he seems pretty grumpy.”

The stranger barely had time to chuckle before the old man in the back spoke up. “You know what, boy? I agree with you. He is pretty grumpy. Life for everyone might be a bit easier if their partners could lighten up.”

“I imagine that,” he muttered the other bearded man who sat beside him, glaring into his drink.
The stranger spoke again. “Arawn wasn’t mad. He already cared about Dante and William a lot. However, Arawn was angry that William decided to tell him this by running off in the night and leaving a letter that told him the truth and to meet him in a nearby meadow if he still wanted to travel together.”

“What’s wrong with that?” said Edwin while Travis gasped in realization.

“But Arawn can’t read!”

“Exactly.”

“I don’t suppose,” said the second old man, the one who spent his night trying to reign in his harrumphing companion, “that we could stop all the talk of grumpy partners and get on with the story?”

* * *

Arawn adjusted the quiver on his back and pulled the door open just in time for William to rush through it, then followed behind him, bow in hand.

The village they were planning on stopping at for a single night turned out to have a goblin problem, and despite the absence of any obvious heroes, at least in William’s mind, the opportunity to see a goblin up close was too enticing. Arawn, on the other hand, agreed to stay because the reward for stopping the raid was large enough to be worth his time without being so large that he felt he was robbing a small farming community.

* * *

“Wait,” said Edwin, interrupting again. “Goblins and humans used to not get along? But my godfather is a goblin.”

“Everyone knows that. We learned it in school,” his brother replied.

“Well I haven’t gotten to that part of school yet!”
“Maybe,” the stranger said with a tight smile and stopped playing his instrument. “It would be better to continue with fewer interruptions after all. As much as I love your questions, we’re getting far of the trail of the plot. I’ll continue but please, try to stay quiet until the end.”

Only after the boys nodded in agreement did he resume playing his zither, a deep and earthy tune that sang of rain and stone and forests a few days before the renewal of spring.

#  #  #

The two men stalked the goblin across the field and into a nearby forest made up of old growth trees. The trees’ branches draped the forest in shadows on an otherwise sunny day, and soft pine needles carpeted the ground, hiding the sound of their footsteps.

They followed the goblin to a craggy pile of stones at the base of a hill, which the goblin scaled. The goblin slipped into an opening near the top of the pile, pulling the chicken with him.

“Well,” said William, tightening the straps on his bag and instrument. “Let’s go explore a goblin cave.”

“You want to just walk in,” Arawn said tonelessly. “Without a plan. Or a babysitter.”

“You know what happened last time we tried to go out without Dante. The nanny retired after that night. And we weren’t even halfway through dinner when she sent for us. Beside,” he said. “Dante sees well in the dark. He’ll be helpful. Won’t you my little dragonfly,” he cooed at the baby.

Arawn sighed and didn’t argue. “I’m not relying on the lad’s vision. We’re using torches.”

#  #  #

The cave was dark, but not as dark as William or Arawn expected. Small flames lounged atop lanterns carved of a deep blue stone, tossing light across the walls. These lanterns littered
the cave, tucked atop rocky ledges, into alcoves, and at the bases of stalagmites, whose long
reach cast lazy shadows back towards the light.

It took William a moment to realize the cave walls were not bare, nor were they merely
craggy. Small colorful stones and beads were stuck to every surface and carvings filled the
spaces between. Together, they traced patterns of roots, serpents, and smoke down a humid
passage. Mosaics depicted landscapes, arrays of food, and large, scaled beasts. As he walked
deeper into the cave, he saw more and more images of a violet serpent-creature.

“None of the books I’ve read ever mentioned goblin cave art.”

“That’s probably because people who go into goblin caves don’t tend to come back out.”

“That would explain it.” William paused at one of the mosaics and passed Dante to
Arawn. He tried to scribble down a few notes in the soft lamplight. Although William had been
taught to write in a large, clear script and still could when he tried, his notes tended to come out
in an intangible scrawl. It looked like a bramble bush going to war with itself, and the darkness
did not help. “We better try and remember how they look.”

William and Arawn reached a large, high ceilinged room with a stone platform at its
center. A clear pool lapped at the far edge of the room, and three different passages led off into
the darkness. William didn’t have time to remark upon them before two pinpricks of light that
did not come from the lamps appeared before him, the eyes of a figure that came up no higher
than his waist. The figure reached out a gnarled, bejeweled hand to him and spoke with a voice
of solemn melody.

“What have you brought as tribute?”
More goblins, for the figure before them was a goblin, entered the cave from the three passages into the room and circled the men. Some held baskets, some held trinkets, and some held spears. The latter group were the ones William and Arawn were most focused on.


William wanted to counter Arawn’s statement, but he had heard enough stories to know that being surrounded and asked for tribute did not often bode well.

“Tribute?” he stalled. “I’m afraid we were not informed of there being a required tribute. Perhaps we can leave and bring one back?”

“That’s the best excuse you can make?” Arawn whispered to him. “Aren’t you supposed to be a professional storyteller?”

“I usually have more time to prepare.”

The goblin ignored their conversation in favor of grabbing the coin purse off of Arawn’s belt. Arawn tried to snatch it back, but he was off balance from holding Dante and stumbled into another goblin, who held a chicken.

The collision sent the chicken flying out of the goblin’s hands and Arawn to one knee, hunched to one side to prevent Dante from hitting the ground. Arawn looked to the goblin, the fleeing chicken, and William in succession.

“That may not be the right goblin. But it’s definitely the right chicken.”

A faint clinking drew attention back to the goblin who had spoken, who was rummaging through Arawn’s purse. The goblin removed a single copper piece, twisted face shifting into some semblance of triumph, before dropping the bag onto the ground. The goblin then strode quickly through the crowd towards the raised platform in the room’s center.
“And now it’s chanting. Fantastic.”

“Actually, yes,” said William. “His vocal range is amazing.”

“How do you know the goblin’s a he?”

“Oh, his chants reference himself in relation to…a water god? Or some kind of food cleansing method. I’m not certain what he’s talking about exactly, but the pronouns he uses are male.”

The goblin reached the platform and knelt, chanting. He touched the copper piece to the ground, his head, and then his heart before moving down the other side of the platform towards the water.

“You speak goblin?”

“Oh, no.” Arawn had to stare at William for far longer than should have been necessary for William to realize his partner was waiting for an elaboration. “I’ve read some notes on the Uuvic goblin dialect. But that was me reading the way some age-old scholar wrote down a language that, at least as far as my knowledge goes, does not have a written form. And he recorded it in heroic Ionilic. It’s quite fascinating, really,” he said to Arawn, who found it not at all fascinating.

“How can you understand it?” Arawn asked.

“Phonetically. Though I only have a grasp of some basic words. I could write Uuvic goblin, but none of the goblins would be able to read it because I only know how to write it in an ancient human alphabet. Not that I’ll be able to understand anything soon with all that racket,” he said, glancing over his shoulder with a furrow in his brow.
A small group of goblins chased the escaped chicken around the cave. One would assume that catching a small animal would be easy for a large group. That assumption falls in the same category as the assumptions that it’s easy to leash a cat or to convert a wolf to vegetarianism.

While William was preoccupied with his linguistic dilemma, Arawn was concerned with the matter of his purse. After sighing at the panicked, clucking chicken he would have to catch if he wanted to get paid, he squatted where the goblin dropped his bag. The chicken sped by at the exact moment he set Dante gently on the floor to retie the bag to his belt.

The process took only seconds. In those seconds, Dante joined the cluster of shrieking goblins chasing an equally distressed chicken.

Arawn stood to chase him and immediately tripped over a goblin.

“William,” he shouted to the bard, who was taking notes while trying to decipher the goblin’s chant.

“Hmm?” William stuck his worn-down, featherless quill in the corner of his mouth and turned to see his partner on the ground and his son leading the pursuit for the chicken. A goblin tried to push ahead of Dante only for the toddler to ram into his ankles and retake the lead. It was not the best way to foster goodwill between the goblins and the travelers, but William couldn’t help being proud of how well Dante was running. His little dragonfly was growing up so fast.

The storyteller briefly paused his speech and played with only one hand to take a sip of his ale. In his pause, he heard the two bearded men at the back table speak.

“Wallace, are you crying?”
“Of course not!” The man who had previously been heckling the storyteller sniffled. I’ve just got something in my eye. And this food has onions in it. You know onions make my eyes water, um…”

“Arnold.”

“Yes, right, Arnold.”

“Wallace?”

“Yes?”

“You should be able to think up a better excuse than that.”

The heckling man sniffled again. “Kids always grow up to fast.”

His companion patted him on the back, sighing. “I can’t take you anywhere.”

The storyteller smiled slightly and went back to his tale.

#    #    #

William watched as Dante, along with a crowd of goblins, rushed after the chicken towards the water where the chanting goblin now knelt. The chicken was only a few paces away from the water’s edge when Dante crashed into it and grappled around its neck.

William’s sense of pride shifted to panic as the little vampire giggled and tilted his head back, preparing to clamp his fangs onto the chicken’s neck.

“No!” William said. He supplemented his son’s diet with blood, but never allowed him to hunt living creatures for his food for fear of what instincts might kick in. “Dante. Stop that right now young man.”

Dante, unaccustomed to being spoken to sternly, especially by his father, froze. His lower lip began to tremble and tears flooded the corners of his eyes.
William pulled Arawn to his feet and shoved through the crowd. He disentangled his son from the traumatized chicken and swept Dante’s dark hair out of his eyes.

“Shhh,” he said, handing the chicken to a disgruntled Arawn, who knew he was going to hear about letting Dante run off later that night. “Shhh, I’m sorry. Dad’s sorry, I shouldn’t have yelled at you.” He bounced Dante up and down gently. “Get his toy, will you?” he said to Arawn before making more shushing noises at the baby.

Arawn dug through his pack, pushing aside an assortment of knives, fletching tools, and a gauntlet to retrieve a plush toy that William had sewn from clean cloth into the shape of a frog. He passed it to Dante, who gnawed on its ear and quieted down.

The two men were so busy looking after Dante that they did not realize the chanting had stopped until the goblin who had been chanting approached them and laid a hand on Arawn’s elbow.

He spoke in goblin, and then switched languages. “Your tribute to Aspharlac is much appreciated.”

Arawn, who jumped at the goblin’s touch, spoke quickly. “Fantastic, we’ll just be going then—”

“However,” the goblin tugged slightly on Arawn’s arm. “You withhold the tribute of another.” He reached for the chicken in Arawn’s arm. This time when Arawn dodged he did not stumble.

William, true to form, interjected into the conversation. He said what he thought to be a goblin greeting, then went on in the common language. “What do you mean by tribute,” he said, trying to balance his notebook in the hand of the arm supporting Dante while writing with the
other. “And who is Aspharlac? Also, how did you come to speak the common tongue and would you mind explaining the cultural significance of the etchings on the walls here?”

The goblin stared at him for a long moment, but William, accustomed to Arawn’s stares, was unfazed.

“You speak many questions.”

“Strangely enough, you’re not the first person to tell me that.”

The goblin stared at him again, then gestured to the younger goblin beside him. “This one fetched a tribute for Aspharlac. She must give it to Aspharlac, else the land will revolt.” He pointed to the chicken. “Return the tribute.” The crowd of goblin’s shuffled closer, and William was abruptly aware that they were surrounded. Although he knew that there wasn’t a hero around, which was an important tool in getting out of impossible situations, he couldn’t help grinning. Things were getting interesting.

“Unfortunately, that is why we’ve come here. That hen belongs to a rather distressed woman, and she wants it back.”

“Ours will be dishonored if she does not provide tribute.”

William thought for a moment, then turned to Arawn. “Do you trust me?”

“Sometimes. Though less than usual when you ask if I trust you.”

“Good enough,” William said cheerfully. He handed his notebook to Dante, who started chewing on its corner and the frog toy’s ear at the same time, and used his newly freed hand to reach into Arawn’s coin purse.

“William.”

“What?” William said, handing a copper piece to the goblin who previously held the chicken “We want to bring Helen back, don’t we? If the copper worked as tribute before, surely
it would be an equally satisfying one now, in place of the chicken.” He directed the last part of the statement towards the goblin, who slowly nodded.

The other goblin, whom William was almost certain was the one who had stolen the chicken, snatched the copper piece from William’s outstretched hand and slowly backed away. She then made her way to the water’s edge, knelt, and gently tossed the copper piece into the water.

“Lovely,” Arawn grumbled. “That’s a great use for money.”

“Well know that we’ve gotten that out of the way,” said William, delicately trying to remove his notebook from Dante’s grasp. “Would you mind answering some questions for me?”

The elder goblin nodded. “I have business to attend first. Farewell.” He waved a different goblin forward, one with a crown of blue stones, who moved towards William and began speaking in goblin.

William listened as the goblin spoke, nodding and smiling when she paused. He then turned to Arawn and said brightly “I have no idea what she is saying.”

William sat down on the cave floor and put Dante in his lap. He started writing in his notebook, muttering under his breath.

“What are you doing?” said Arawn. “I thought you said they wouldn’t be able to read your writing.”

“Oh, they won’t.”

Arawn took a deep breath, neither the first nor last he would take due to William’s antics. “Then why are you writing?”

“I’m hoping,” William said. “That writing out what I want to say will help me say it, and that by writing the sounds of her voice I’ll be able to decipher her meaning.”
The crowned goblin waited patiently as William wrote in his book. He then slowly spoke in a tongue that sounded like a tree being uprooted.

The goblin looked at William in the kindly yet bewildered manner that an adult looks upon a babbling child who believes they are speaking words, then whispered in the ear of the goblin next to her, who laughed.

“Oh dear,” said William, who did not look the slightest bit upset. “This might be more difficult than I thought.”

“So,” said William a few hours later, happy to be speaking to the elder goblin who knew the common tongue. “Aspharlac is a water monster?”

“A water god,” the goblin corrected. “He strengthens the land and protects all upon it. He is the great provider.”

“Interesting,” William said. “And have you ever seen him?”

“Not I,”” said the goblin. “But my father’s father’s mother once saw him. She said he was the most beautiful sight to behold. Her crop grew tenfold in size the season she saw him.”

The goblins grew mushrooms and root vegetables that they preserved for the winter.

The goblin smiled at the memory of his ancestor. “She is responsible for the waterside carving of Aspharlac.”

That was the carving William was most interested in. All the carvings and mosaics of the violet serpent were similar, but this one depicted the ear shape and tail spines that led William to believe a water drake had once inhabited this cave, though it was obviously long gone by now.

The goblin went on. “Aspharlac provides, but he must also be appeased. He desires tribute of bone and ore. If it is not delivered, the land falls into decay.”
“Ah. Well, you see, the villagers need the things you have taken from them. Especially
the livestock, though I’m sure Aspharlac enjoys their bones. It’s important to their livelihood.”

“Our taking gives. Without it, their crops would die under the wrath of Aspharlac.”

William had learned his lesson about entering ideological debates when unarmed back
when he first adopted Dante, so he kept silent for a moment, until an idea slithered into his brain,

“Maybe we could come to an arrangement.”

■ ■ ■

One week later, William, Arawn, and Dante sat near the edge of the water in the cave’s
ceremonial chamber eating preserved beets out of a clay jar.

“I still don’t understand how this happened,” Arawn said.

“What do you mean? It’s simple, really.”

“I don’t think most people think that introducing a system of exchanging money to a
species that has spent the last few centuries either raiding or bartering when you barely
understand their language is simple.”

William shrugged and picked another beet out of the jar. “It wasn’t hard for them to
understand, they’re very smart. It was difficult to communicate though. The elder goblin could
not act as my translator constantly. They also speak a different dialect than what I learned, and
my grammar is apparently terrible.”

“I didn’t notice,” said Arawn sarcastically.

“Well, you give me too much credit,” William said modestly, either unaware of or
unwilling to acknowledge Arawn’s jab. “Besides, they liked the idea. Goblins are great believers
in efficiency. And if they can use the money they make in town to buy food while saving enough
coin to provide tribute for Aspharlac, they’re happy.”
“Oh no, I understood that part. What I don’t understand is how you convinced the villagers to let them set up a stall in the market.”

William merely hummed a noncommittal response.

“Well… I may have brought them a sample of preserves. And told them a provider wanted to set up a stall. And didn’t mention that they were goblins.”

“William. If a group of goblins shows up at the village unannounced, they’re going to think a raiding party is coming. It’ll be a massacre.”

“Of course it won’t. We’re going to be escorting them. The villagers wouldn’t attack if they saw us with them. They like us.”

Arawn sighed and made sure his bow was strung. As fond as he was of his partner, he always got them into trouble. “We better leave soon if we want to avoid bloodshed.”

“I don’t think you’re giving the villagers enough credit.”

Arawn was certain that he was.

William patted the ground besides him, looking around. “Where’s my notebook?”

Arawn pulled it from his pocket and passed it to William.

“Thank you. I just want to note down a few more things about this room before we—”

William stopped speaking as he opened his notebook to what should have been the next blank page. “What’s this?”

“Hmm?” Arawn said.
“What’s this?” William said with delight. The waterside carving of Aspharlac was replicated in his notebook, so accurately that it appeared to have slithered off the wall and into the book.

“A drawing,” said Arawn tonelessly.

“A very good drawing!”

“Hmph.”

“Arawn—”

“Don’t make anything of it. I just didn’t want to see you waste paper with your awful stick figures again. You go through enough notebooks as it is, and they’re expensive.”

The two men bickered the rest of the way out of the cave. They were so focused on this that they did not hear the soft shifts in the water lapping at the cave’s edge. Dante, however, did, and he looked over his father’s shoulder to see a flash of violet scales brush the surface of the water. He waved at the once again still pool of water until he left the cave.

#  #  #

The storyteller stopped playing his zither, and the bearded man in the back spoke up.

“Are you honestly trying to tell me,” he called, “That William Cantatius was not only a bard, but a bard who started GoblinCorp, the most successful trading post company to have existed?”

“Of course not,” replied the storyteller. “That’s absurd. The goblins started GoblinCorp. William just had a discussion that reinforced what a lot of the goblins already knew: raiding villages was not sustainable. Really, William didn’t do much. He just showed that there were humans willing to speak to goblins without trying to kill them on sight, which is what we needed back then.”

Travis spoke up. “But what about the Asf-, Asp-, the aserphr-”
“Aspharlac?” the storyteller provided.

“Yes, that,” the boy said, unwilling to mispronounce the creature’s name again. “How do you know Dante saw it? He was only a little kid. How could he remember?”

“I remember things from when I was that little.” Edwin said.

“No you don’t,” Travis said. “You just think you remember things because you’ve heard about them so many times. And even if he could remember, how would you know about it?” he asked the storyteller. “You’d have to have met him.”

The storyteller paused for a moment. “Well, technically, I would only have to have met someone who had met him.”

“Then how would you know it was true? I thought you said every part of your stories would be true.”

“He did say that,” said the man in the back. “Right at the beginning of the night he said that.”

“My stories,” said the storyteller, with a slight edge to his voice, “are true. However, the time it would take for me to explain all my sources would take the length of another tale, and I believe our night is coming to an end. I hardly have the voice left to speak.”

With that, he stood and gave a little bow. A smattering of applause came from the tired but enthusiastic crowd, who slowly got to their feet to say their goodbyes and pay their tab.

The storyteller spoke again, directing his voice to the boys. “I hope you enjoyed the tales, despite the fact that I can’t give you all the answers. But, in the words of one of the most incredible men I know, how can we know anything if we never go out and see for ourselves?”

He tipped his hat to the boys, then gathered up his bags. “Maybe you’ll have an adventure someday, and you’ll find all your answers.”
The storyteller went to the bartender and rented a room for the night, and the taverns patrons went home.

Edwin woke up at the crack of dawn to the rooster’s crow and the murmur of voices outside. He pulled himself blearily from bed to prepare for the morning’s chores, then looked the window. It wasn’t often that the tavern’s guests were up before him, and he wanted to see who was outside.

He peeked out the peeling frame of the window to look down on the storyteller, for no one else could have such an awful hat, speaking to two men.

“Your performance last night was splendid, “ said the first man, whose voice Edwin thought he recognized, though his face was unfamiliar. “You did not miss a note, and you paused for effect in all the right places.” Edwin noticed that this man was also carrying an instrument case.

“Do you think so?” said the storyteller with a grin. “I had a few hecklers last night, one in particular who wasn’t concerned about giving me a piece of his mind.”

“Well,” the first man responded. “It’s important for a bard to learn how to play in any sort of environment, and dealing with hecklers is an important part of the learning experience.”

“Of course,” said the storyteller. “And, I suppose it was good that the heckler spoke up in all the right places to excite the children listening? And that he was just rude enough for their grandmother to let them stay up late?”

The second man clapped the storyteller on the shoulder with a small laugh. “Come on lad, give your dad a break. He needs it. Hearing about you as a little lad and seeing your first unaccompanied performance in one night made him very emotional.”
“That’s my boy,” said the man with the instrument, tearing up a little “His style is so compelling.”

The second man rolled his eyes at him, the grabbed the storyteller’s pack from him and slung it over his own shoulder. “Come on. If we want to meet the others in time to reach the manticore’s den as a group, we have to stop meandering.”

He strode off, the first man close behind him.

The storyteller adjusted the strap on his bag and strode after them, then paused a few paces from the tavern and looked back at it. As he did, the storyteller slid his gaze from the red and gold-painted “Jolly Bishop” sign to the window, where he met Edwin’s rounded eyes. He gave a pointed grin and winked before setting off down the dusty village road.