

7 - Statues

The brick walls sucked all warmth from the room. Candles flickered along the walls, ivory-colored wax that dripped into their sconces. The only sound in the room was that of the cold wind that blew through the stone's cracks, the walls heaving as if breathing with each gust. His breath was lost to the wind's whistling. He rubbed his hands together, shuddered, staying fixated on the statue in front of him.

One of Her hands was broken—where once outstretched and inviting, it made Her appear more solitary, withdrawn, as if holding Herself in fear. Her alabaster robes no longer formed beautiful drapes, now a ragged edge of shattered rock and tarnished white. Her eyes, however, remained the same. Carved with a gentle touch, wielding a powerful gaze. It had been the triumph of a master sculptor, once; now reduced to a decaying memory in the back edge of the Aunolmeht¹ forest.

He was sitting on a stone immediately in front of the Goddess's throne, a small patch of moss acting as a natural cushion. It was odd to him, to be on such holy ground, yet see little reverence for the divine. He wondered how old this shrine was—long before the myths that surrounded the forest, where the only remnant of ancient society was their deity.

“How vain of you,” he chuckled, “to be the only memory of their home.”

The statue said nothing.

He wondered how the world had changed so much since then. How could the renowned Forest of the Beasts have once been worked by a small village? He shook his head. The village would have been quite big to have such a large statue, surely. Had the townspeople been driven out? Or had they simply fallen to time? Another lost city as the new age rolled in like a tide, washing away old and neglected traditions.

He thought of his Abbot. Cormach would love it here, to see the Goddess hold up through supposed eternity. He would probably go off on some tangent, reference something symbolic, declare a few proverbs, and scold the younger on deeds of his whole generation.

¹ “Forest of the Dead”, a dark forest shrouded in ancient curses. Supposed dwelling of demons.

“You’ve all lost your values,” Cormach would say, “the beauty of the world has fallen from you. You seek not to shepherd, not even to be the sheep, but to be the very dirt they walk on. You all frighten me, Caelis. You see not the worth Eoith² has blessed you with. You see not the sacrifice of her blood.”

But then, he imagined, Cormach would divulge into a rant about the alphabet and how it “has lost its divine quality.” Caelis would counter the elder: “And who is to say we have any right to transcribe the Holy Texts³ in anything other than the gods’ tongue?”

Cormach would pause, then laugh. “If I am to be banished to Ifrun-shúl⁴ for lacking the ability to write in a language removed from man then I shall renounce the Goddess entirely.”

Caelis would laugh with him.

He shook the fantasy away. He knew if he thought too long about it, he’d feel the warmth of the fireplace, taste the salt of the stew, smell the sheep’s hay, hear the soft crashing of waves on far-off cliffs. If he lingered on such fantasies for more than a minute, he’d see the worried look constantly etched into Cormach’s wrinkling face. “What’s happened, boy? You look feral.”

If he pretended for more than a second, he’d be whisked away to the days of the monastery, begrudging the mischief he’d wrought to get out of chores—of course, to be forced to do more and worse of them. He would lose himself in the Shym-Scaeb⁵, watching the Abbot closely in the windowless room as he rewrote the Leanhethi⁶. A brief image flashed in his mind: the broad strokes of an ink-dipped feather, the black liquid seeping into swirling letters on the page. The room was filled with absolute silence besides the scritchings of the pen and the tailored, deep inhales of the old monk.

² Goddess of Tineir; creator of all life and unliving. Every two hundred years, She births a prophet from the Earth to lead the kingdom of Tineir towards Her will and grace.

³ A collection of stories of the divine.

⁴ No direct translation, roughly “hell.” Ancient word used since the first Holy Texts; realm of the dead who do not follow the laws or teachings of Eoith.

⁵ Lit. “Scribes’ Room”, where monks go to transcribe the Holy Book. The room is windowless, as traditionally it was believed sunlight would taint the pages. Only light of Divine magic is allowed.

⁶ Lit. “Holy Book”; the definitive Law of Eoith. History of Tineir/the Earth, as well as the manual of how to live according to Eoith.

His eyes suddenly caught those of the statue. They were wide, and a shudder shot down his spine. It seemed as if Her head had leaned closer to him, as if Her arms had stretched even longer. She reminded Caelis of a falcon at the peak of its flight, ready to snatch him with Her talons.

His dark curls whipped against his face with another gust of wind. His cloak hugged his body tightly. He glanced down at his boots—the soles had begun to tear at the toes, and the leather buckled in odd rolls under the laces. They were stained with copper splashes; he couldn't tell which ones were stains of the earth or dried blood. He frowned. It was near time to get a new pair, but he hadn't walked through another town in weeks. The last one—the capital of Slíuní⁷—had given him plenty of opportunity for a free pair of well-cobbled shoes, but he hated to take free things. He knew the boys back home would tell him it was deserved—“You *do* wield the Goddess's sword.” But he hated that power. Out of the corner of his eye, that same blade gleamed, a tantalizing promise of prestige.

He quickly averted his gaze. He looked around himself once more. Some of the candles had blown out from the wind, only the few barricaded by half-erect walls still flickering. Beyond them, tall, black trunks of oaks loomed. If he focused, he could hear the harsh snapping of twigs, the screech of an owl; he could catch the glowing eyes of animals scurrying from the faint light. He could not see the night sky above him, the foliage was too thick and brooding. Some folks had skinned the Aunolmeaht to hell, others not even speaking of it. Even Cormach had forbidden him from stepping foot in the ebony tendrils of its property. He snorted.

“How stupid am I to sit right at its center?” he inquired aloud. He found himself directing his words once again to the marbled Goddess. His smile faded, and his hand flexed for the hilt of his sword. He wasn't sure why the statue harrowed him so. He convinced himself it was simply due to its unfamiliarity—he had rarely seen Her likeness with more than a scratch, much less shards missing from Her head.

⁷ The Eastern region of Tineir, known for its large mountain range. Inhabited by the Faumún tribe.

“You don’t look well,” Caelis said, his voice laced with a steely venom, “Am I wrong to speak to you in such an ill state?”

Of course, the statue remained still.

He could hear the leaves above tremble, the thick limbs of the trees creaking as they swayed. Had these same trees lived when the men of these ruins walked? Or were the oaks even younger than the greying marble that raptured his comfort?

“Do I amuse you, Eoith?” he grumbled. His fingers twitched. “Does it humor you to find your vessel hidden amongst the beasts?”

He stood from the small rock. His back ached from his hunched posture, a habit he had regretfully picked up from years on the road. He could have slept in the inns, but the grassy knolls and shadowy woods were quieter, simpler, and much less susceptible to the dotings of travellers. His brow furrowed. He hit his fist against his thigh. His fingers tingled in the cold, and his ears were nearly hot in their freeze.

He spun on his heel, dragged his hands through his hair.

“Is it wrong that I have avoided your people for so long, Eoith?” His voice was barely a whisper. There was a hoarseness to it that culminated from months of little use. “Do you ever hide away from them all? I don’t understand how you couldn’t. They get so... so repetitive, which is almost a blessing, because at least *then* I have a well-prepared answer. How dare you send me on this Goddess-forsaken journey so young? I was far too young to have any sort of wisdom about me. Cormach always told me I was beyond my years, and maybe I was, but as much as they all told me I knew what I was doing... I’m unsure if I could tell up from down. I’m only half convinced I can now!”

His sword glinted as if to taunt him. He snarled, and snatched it from the ground.

His feet pulled him back to the small rock, the moss patch flattened, and the Goddess’s broken arms a mere few inches from the seat. He lifted the sword, ignoring the guilt in his heart

as he laid it in the marble's embrace. The metal hit the rock with a *tink*, and Caelis pulled his hands to his sides. He stared at a flickering torch, watched it consume itself.

"How ridiculous would I be to leave this power here?" Caelis chuckled weakly. "Would you blame me, Eoith, for hiding myself from the kingdom? To leave this burden for another? Someone wiser? More worthy? For an all-knowing Goddess, it feels irrational that you gave a *twelve-year-old* an all-powerful sword, does it not?" he suddenly burst, gesturing angrily at the sword. "Do you not realize how detrimental that was? How wildly immature I was, am, and probably will be? I am stunted by your curse-disguised-as-blessing. I wish I—" he stopped. His mouth worked wordlessly as he tried to straighten his thoughts. The ruins were eerily quiet. "I wish I could cast it away and never look at it again. I hate all the attention. I hate all the whispers, all the pointing fingers and scornful eyes. Why did you create a savior who cannot handle more than one person at a time? Rather counter-productive, I feel, but *you're* the omnipotent one. Or maybe you've gone mad. How are any of us to know?"

He paced, hearing his voice reverb against the walls. He couldn't tell if the statue looked angry or pained; Her eyes reflected the cacophony of emotions evident on his own features.

"It's not my fault you waited so long to create another vessel. It feels almost cruel that you finally decided to conjure me up after *five hundred years*. Do you realize how many beasts and demons have been born, or found the confidence to attack the lowly? I am one man, if you can even call me that. I can only handle so many at a time, Eoith, even with your silly magic sword. I cannot begin to imagine the number of beasts that lay outside these walls in order to devour me. Cormach has told me over and over that you will provide and take care of me, but I have yet to witness such mercy. I understand, *logically* I *do*, that you will only give me trials I can handle, but I don't know how many more tests I can power through."

Caelis paused. He slumped to his haunches, pressed his palms to his eyes. His voice grew lower and more unfounded, like a stray sapling weeded from the ground.

“I want to help them, Goddess. I don’t know how. Nothing *works*. I give them my blessing, I give them my advice, I teach the same preachings of Cormach, and yet they’re still so, so unhappy. Am I a hypocrite for being so depressed despite following your path? I’m *your vessel*, for Goddess’s sake. I’m *your* flesh and blood. How can I call myself the Child of the Sun when I can’t even fix all the chaos in my own head? It feels almost offensive that you give me such responsibility without any instruction. You made me of man so that I may lead man, but then I fall victim to the *sins* of man. It feels so pathetic. I feel so weak and ridiculous, Eoith. The Queen’s servants have more agency to you than I. It’s stupid that you think I can be your great prophet when you won’t even respond. I mean not to offend Eoith, nor doubt, but do you see how absolutely lost I am? I have no record of the past prophet cycles, only the faint memory that they existed. Even the Laehadonn⁸ have no records of them! No wonder men fall so short!”

The wind shook his bones. He wrapped himself tighter in his cloak and hid his hands near his chest. “Is this blasphemy, Eoith?”

He decided at this point he had no reason to continue speaking. He quietly laughed at himself, imagining how ridiculous he must look screaming at a broken statue. He thought, if there truly were beasts waiting outside for him, that they must be driven off by his insanity. Or, maybe they felt sorry for him, and left in pity. He sighed. Maybe he wouldn’t mind being eaten alive. At least it would seem more heroic than running from a village and getting lost in the woods. Maybe a new legend would come of it: the Savior that died fighting all the beasts in the Aunolmeaht, then they’d forget the one that died lost in the dark.

He walked back to his sword, saw it glow in the dim firelight. He dragged his gaze back to the steel, the ethereal weapon that balanced flat in Her arms. Gingerly, he slid it from Her grasp. He raised it high and twirled it in the open air. It was light and fluid, bending with his movements as if only an extension of his arm. His dark eyes traced the intricate embellishments on the sword and noted the grime caked into its engraving. He rubbed it away with the hem of

⁸ “Twilight”; the first created humanoid creatures of Eoith. Expert record-keepers.

his cloak. He held the blade directly in front of him while his tongue made odd shapes to mimic the gods' language. Instantly, the sword burst into fire.

Caelis moved with the sword as if it were a paintbrush. He drew glimmering red shapes into the Aunolmeah't's black canvas, writing out the names of old villagers and random words that came to his mind. The flame danced with the harsh wind, yet never once diminishing its ferocity.

"Cormach would've killed me to use your fire so unabashedly," he grinned, "He always told me that if I lit it too many times, I would be reduced to dust. Suspiciously, he denied that tale when I got older. I think he just said it so I wouldn't burn down the monastery. Are you aware that the Abbot you gave me to was quite the avid liar?"

He turned the sword again in his hand. He slashed it towards the ground, spoke a verse, and the flame went out. There was a pang of regret that shot through him as he fixated on the blade. His mind whirled.

Caelis's eyes met once more with the marbled ones of the Goddess. They mimicked those of a hawk, with piercing ferocity that shot him still. Her lips were sculpted into a thin line, unlike the smiles so often represented in modern statues. He opened his mouth to speak, felt the need to stand his ground, but the pressure inside him whirled.

"Eoith, if this is truly my purpose, why does it feel so daunting?" he asked softly.

But of course, the marble remained quiet.

A proverb, one he had written and re-written a hundred times, came to the forefront of his mind. He grimaced, threw his eyes to the sky. The night seemed so haunting, the abyss above him so consuming. He wondered what the stars looked like above the invisible canopy; wondered if they taunted him, too.

He drew in a low breath, and without a word, he sheathed the sword, and walked away from the shrine.