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The WIZARDS Harvest Table

A demon's heart and that of man often beat moments apart.

“Efface that once celebrated blemish then be on your way, quick and quiet. Here is recompense matching the king’s pleasure. Have a care with your ladder. The tiles are polished to the point of becoming treacherous.”

The instructions, the warning, the overtone of censure, whispered around the weaver’s ears even after he had been left alone. He brushed away dust with his fingers and set to work with a ripper, looking back to a time when he was much younger and lighter on the swaying ladder.

In his youth he had completed the final stitches in the brocade border of the throne room tapestry and expected a bright future in the king’s favour. He had succeeded in a commission to surround the Lual throne from floor to ceiling with its historical battles, pennant draped castles and besieged fortifications crowded with courageous knights imbrued in glorious blood.

But now history offended, in the slightest detail. A slim silver capsule rocketed at the head of a long, fiery trajectory sewn into a concatenation of astrological icons. After many wars, when the crown could at last claim the rampant devils had been all but vanquished, it was not the voracious monsters and tortured figures in the tapestry they effaced but this single cryptic reference, an omen of the end times.

Imagine the master weaver about to pick out the unwanted thread. While he regarded the event he himself had sewn as a younger man, ambitious to serve his liege, eager to show the mastery of his craft, delighted by the historical conflict he was appointed to portray, whatever ran through his mind, his aged face showed little now except stoic detachment. Marvelled at during the battle by all, even astonishing the king, the bright dart burning so high aloft belittled the war-torn lands below. It was only a detail, close to the selvedge and not even the size of a hand, but it made the realm’s epic struggle to suppress the uproarious denizens of the underworld seem a local squabble in the mud while elsewhere an unfamiliar people pursued a loftier heavenly destiny.

The weaver finished undoing his work, declaring it done with a shake of his head. After he had descended his ladder, while he caught his breath due to his age, he inspected the results from the floor. In the making the tapestry had required painstaking labour. He had often despaired to finish, but the masterpiece had generated work for him all over Lual, one royal appointment opening the coffers of every noble under the crown. He had not seen it since, making it fresh to his eyes after so long.

An observant courtier, should they look up, might spot the absent feature where a lack of fading and dust produced a silhouette of the piece the weaver tucked into his satchel as he departed, folded in a white cloth. Of all the warring figures, it was not only the king, clad in bright armour, his helm open to show his goodly visage, who looked upward at the now empty spot on the edge of the sky but also the demon overlord Tseudon, whose upturned craven eyes expressed a dread and loss uncharacteristic in the mightiest of the dark few.

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For the weaver in the king of Lual's palace and for Balkan the wizard, dwelling far away in the remote mountain village of Dunedin, the night of the Demon Parade began in the usual hushed way. The deliberation and silence from house to house might easily have been mistaken for reverence, mounting terror suppressed by ceremony. Under Balkan's watchful eye, upon the fifth bell, everyone began to apply ash to their skin, to their face, their arms, their throats and wrists, in stripes, masks, warding symbols and thickly daubed circles. The smell of the ash called to mind the previous parade, so not a few moaned with trepidation. It was no festive night. The bells tolled were instead sombre, ritualistic, and bitter. Balkan went about the houses like a concerned hound to see that none were unready. The streets were about to fill with the worst of unwanted guests, demons banished from the world, suffered to return during the moon's eclipse, welcomed by customary gifts, feasts, decorations, and tokens of respect. The duty of the Demon Parade was to offer tribute to the dark world for one night, lest the rule of night stretch on for eternity. On this night shutters banged with spectral malice, doors strained their hinges, walls shook. No mirror went uncracked, no back alley untouched by disturbing shadows.

Given every house was boarded up and warded, the town fell silent soon after dark, breathlessly waiting. Entire streets were bare, motionless except for swinging lanterns lit on painted ropes and paper fireworks tied to effigies and cables of firecrackers, stirred by an icy breeze. After dark, nothing could keep the demons out. The citizens were protected only by white bone ash called Fellmark daubed on their faces. Fellmark was provided by the wizards, whose favour was highly prized. It came from the underworld itself, from the corpses of the very creatures the parade welcomed. If the local sage did not collect it, he traded for it with wandering mages who went far and wide in their missions and adventures.

A wizard like Balkan was a most welcome sight as the Demon Parade drew nigh, however reclusive, mysterious, and cold he might be in return. Some wizards could hold a city to ransom for a sack of ash, but Balkan never charged, though he was stern in his instructions to apply it heavily.

Adorned with Fellmark, you could walk down the street at midnight surrounded by the terrors of the deep underworld and the ash would render you unsavoury to taste, or so the popular view went. There were other theories that it made the demons think you were one of them, disguised in their stink.

Such questions troubled Modest Dart as he sought Balkan out in the lower market. But the ash did what it said on the tin, and even if only wizards knew the reason why, Modest hoped it would last.

As most townsfolk did, Modest wore a scarf over his nose, not only for the cold but for fear the Fellmark's odour might make him ill, a bane to be washed off at

once when the sun rose. Until then, it was all that kept him safe. While surrounded by the contributors to the worst of his nightmares, he tested his nerve and endured the frightened cries from all directions. He gambled on staying awake, to ensure he did not rub the caked ash away and leave himself exposed, to be torn to pieces by invisible claws.

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Modest had known Balkan all his life. The wizard first came to Dunedin after the battles of Lual ended. He had had enough of warring. So, finding a place of repose, he meant to retire to the mountains. Arriving under the auspices of a long period comet, he built a homely tower in the waist of the Water of Leith, calm except when overrun by the snow wash. The river competed with the town wall to ring the city. It never ceased its flow, even when thick with ice. It did not seem long before the wizard had watched it steadily flow past his tower for nineteen Demon Parades. Stone at the base and wood on top, the tower stood higher than any other building, such that its steeped roof tiles, reflecting the sun, became a landmark for those approaching the town. Over the same time he built his tower, Balkan also built the respect and gradual admiration of the townsfolk, whose suspicion of strangers was eventually eclipsed by their appreciation of a wizard's utility, especially during the Demon Parade.

Balkan had completed his tower's construction on the same day Modest Dart was born, presenting a cheery, wide-eyed, and round face to the world. Grown up similar, garish and without guile, distinguished only by blond wiry facial hair, a stunned look, and a matted skull too large atop a lanky, ill-dressed frame, Modest resembled a fledgling bird. Dunedin was a bustling town in which the boy was hardly noticed, for all he was a product of its back streets and alleys. He capitalised on this when the going was good and suffered when his luck was bad. There wasn't a shadow or alcove he hadn't hid in, watching the world go by, untroubled by what he didn't know, celebrating opportunities which came his way as only the light-fingered can.

Warning bells pealed and Modest shivered. Out of breath he slipped from door to door as the parade began and the streets filled with morbid terrors. A man staggered along the middle of the market bridge, looking around aimlessly. His clothes were such a uniform white, though torn and begrimed from travel, that Modest assumed he must be a pilgrim seeking refuge. The men of the town tended to go about in dark garments, black, brown, and grey with little variation, like moths, their character and appearance produced from the wood and soil of the deep forest that surrounded Dunedin. Demons had not yet troubled him, but he seemed alarmed, suspecting something amiss but unsure how to proceed. Modest had never talked to a pilgrim and didn't mean to start. Pilgrims bought disease. Pilgrim

prayers invoked demons. Yet this man looked unaware of the parade, blind to the stretching shadows and guttering lights. Modest dashed over to check the wanderer wore ash. Seeing he had no mark, Modest grabbed him and applied a quick line from his hairline to the top of his nose. Custom demanded it, but he'd expended his supply and withal his curiosity. While he harboured no ill will towards the pilgrim, he was superstitious. He pointed to his own marked brow and ran on without a word. The man, silver-haired and stubbled, lagged behind like a drunk, unsure what was happening. He would find out soon enough, as winged shapes approached with a sound that wasn't natural from a living creature. Modest, having crossed the bridge, sought a place to escape the parade. It was only partly chance, he admitted, that he stopped to catch his breath not far from Balkan's tower.

Growing up, Modest owed a great deal to Balkan and hoped he could count on his welcome once again. The tall old wizard was an ungrudging benefactor without whom the winters would have proven too cold. Modest scratched out an existence in the lee of his stout tower, an urchin belonging to the brewer's granary and hops store. Matching his name in temperament, thin, with eyes like two moons, he would have melted hearts had he not been designated a vagrant, minor thief, and layabout. Every town guard knew to watch him.

During the demon-haunted night, as he cowered and held his breath in the bracken by the Leith, Modest watched an increasing swarm of demons infest the tower. They crawled over each other in a layer so thick upon the rooftop that it resembled a living spire of dark wings, smoky breath, and gleaming claws. He began to fear for the wizard's life until he spotted him, seated alongside the pier in his jolly boat, cloaked as usual in furs, in appearance more like a wolf hunter than a wizard. An imp jabbered at him from atop the mast then flew off to investigate whatever delights were drawing all the others into the vacant tower. Modest, as courageous as he could manage, approached along the snow-dusted jetty. He peered down at Balkan, his line of ash running from ear to ear. It did not surprise him that Balkan sought solitude after days of distributing Fellmark ahead of the parade.

"Looking for trouble?" Balkan queried, staring at him directly.

Modest knew, despite his dark look, that the wizard recognised him. He grinned. "It's only me."

"It's never only you though, is it? There's always a trail of inane daydreaming following you about like a mother duck's brood."

"Can I come down, Master Balkan?"

"Modest, I haven't any weed. You'd better go find some of your friends."

"Friends? In this rotten world? Well, I never!"

"I should know you better. Didn't you prepare for this night?"

Modest checked his ash by looking at his reflection floating in the river. Of course he had. Against the black of his unlit silhouette the streak of ash across his

brow was a pearly white arc. “Oh, you mean fortifications?” He held out a pouch of weed and smiled. “I’ve saved up.”

Balkan squinted, beckoning. “Well, if you’ve some spare, let’s drift across the river.” He glanced up at the boiling mass of menacing imps infesting his home. “We’ve a fair wait till dawn.” Modest settled into the boat and Balkan pushed off, his eye on Modest all the while. They listened to the unconstrained cacophony and Modest rubbed his cold hands, pretending not to notice the wizard was taking his measure. They hadn’t bumped into each other for a while. Perhaps Balkan was looking for signs of change. Whatever he decided, he asked, “You’re no longer afraid of the Demon Parade?”

Modest shook his head. “I wouldn’t catch an imp by its tail.”

The boat was both restful in its seclusion and uncomfortable in its exposure. He looked down into the night water, then said, “A splash would wash our ash away. Do you think, in the murk, perhaps more demons swim, away from the city lanterns, ready to emerge as we glide by?”

“Daydreaming,” muttered Balkan, “but, yes, it’s possible.”

Modest’s eyes widened in anxiety, but he shook it off and dug out papers for his weed. They each carried a pipe, but it was slower to prepare. He hunched over and rolled one up and passed it over to Balkan. Pressing the thin, perishable paper between his fingers always reminded him of his own fragility, the frittered away moment always tipping towards the future, always tricked into slipping into the past. He smiled.

“This’ll hit the spot,” he said. They smoked, holding it in to combat the cold and to get the most from it.

Balkan clamped the offering between his lips, already busy with the business of rowing, his sinewy arms hauling the oars back and forth. Casting a spell to ease them along seemed the last thing he’d incline towards. Still, once out in the middle of the river, the boat glided of its own accord with the current. Before their fingers froze, they would pass under the second bridge, then go ashore to sup in a tavern until dawn, demons be damned. By the time they arrived, frost would have fallen on their hair, making the smoky flicker of the hearth more restorative than anywhere in Heira’s after-world.

The tower diminished until only the tilted spire was visible above the roofs of the riverside houses. On the far side, Balkan ran the boat up on a reedy mud bank which skirted a small outcrop, half an island intersected by the city wall and topped by an unvisited copse of trees and bushes growing out into the water. A shrine reclaimed by nature teetered amongst the roots, directly over the boat. It was a mess of broken clay vessels and toppled figurines.

“A shrine, for the purity of the Snow Wash, I think. Who would have thought the town has already forgotten it is here!” Balkan dug in his robe to find a vial of oil to pour into a burner. He raised it up into a nook where a few old offerings

decayed, covered by leaves and bird skeletons. When he sat back down, he accepted Modest's weed again and they passed it back and forth, cloaking it with their hands.

"What draws the demons to your untended tower?" Modest ventured to ask.

"Oh, as a wizard I stock all kinds of things that would sate the cravings of an unleashed demon. Even Fellmark won't hold back an imp that has the scent of the concoctions I brew up in search of a cure to man's ills, or at least a palliative to the chill my old bones suffer on a long night."

Modest coughed. "Cravings and cures?"

"When a soldier is injured and the wound festers, or some briny old sailor succumbs to an invasive growth or rot, we give him a preparation to ease his passing. There are some who prefer their time to come quickly than to shrivel up in their deathbed, friend only to misery and pain. It's the same with demons. For them pain never ceases, so naturally they help themselves. Better that than they pester the locals."

Somewhere, distantly, a shriek peeled out across the city. It began again and was cut short. Balkan scowled. Modest gaped.

Balkan said softly, "I dare say we'll find out in the morning." They both knew there would be others.

"Have you ever seen someone eaten by one of them?" Modest asked once it had fallen quiet and their nerves had settled.

Balkan nodded, then look chagrined, reminded of dark times. "Many more than one," he answered, blowing a long gust of smoke into his beard.

Across the river, green lights glowed in the tower. Demons flew around it like moths around a lantern. They both watched. If Balkan felt any chagrin, he did not show it. Modest felt the mind-softening pall of the weed melting his tension. It was coming on late and gentle as a caress. "It's beautiful in a way, the way they fly around like that."

"From afar perhaps it is. It's only nature after all." Balkan looked up into the skies. Above a bank of drifting cloud, the stars glistened remotely. His eyes were also touched by sympathy for the larger cosmos. As a boy, this was one of the reasons Modest had liked keeping company with the old man, though other reasons were equally endearing. He hadn't forgotten that whenever Balkan sent him with some coin to buy a hot pie from the market, he'd meant a pie each.

Eventually Modest tired of craning his neck to look up. He sank down in the boat and clutched his knees. The river was a chilly spot to spend the night and drew a harsh tax for getting away from women's screams and weeping children.

"I only make this remark because you've yet to think of growing old," Balkan suddenly confided. "Now as I creep up towards the limits of my age, I seldom think of the time I was young except when a young person intrudes upon my solitary ways. Like you, I never imagined all my hair could go grey. Most men fought and died, lucky to raise a son. Back then the demons might come any night. In some

seasons they came night after night. Men warred with them, fending them off with what little magical arts we had. There was no rule to the ways of us all. Anarchy ruled by day and darkness ruled by night.”

“Thank the stars for the wizard’s table, eh?” Modest answered.

“Were it so simple. The wizard’s table was an astonishing stroke of luck. In nature we tend not to see the afflictions of cattle show up in horses. But from season to season the diseases of men change and even strong cures eventually become weak. So it is with the wizard’s table. Eventually the demonic forces will counter it, as nature wills, therefore it is something of a curse that we depend on it.”

“Is nature against us? You know you’re not so quiet when you smoke, but still impossible to fathom.”

“I am being clear enough, you just haven’t sufficient wits, my boy!” Balkan quipped. “Eventually the day will come when Fellmark’s virtuous effects shall wane. The protection this demon’s ash provides will be as soot and dust. Each rune on the harvest table loses its sound.” He appeared to listen for something, searching the shadows around the shrine. “Did you know, since the table was formulated, so few demons now break out into the upper world in which we prosper that we must send wizards down into the underworld to harvest Fellmark? You see, that is where the name Harvest Table comes from. One has to know the right patterns and sequences to hop around in such unforgiving lands.” He waved his finger around in the air like a conductor, finishing with a click of his fingers, a thunderclap that startled Modest. They both laughed, but Balkan shook his finger and wafted smoke above his head. “Hunting a demon is no joke. It is a barren task devoid of reward. Even if you get what you went looking for, you will return tainted, bruised, bewildered.” He tapped his head. “And not as many wizards return as undertake the journey.”

“You haven’t been out of town for a good while, I notice.”

Balkan’s flinty face made Modest repent his remark. “All week long I’ve been distributing ash on the bridge. Yesterday I was called upon to save the life of a printer’s child who drank green dye. Dye cheap to produce but poisonous. Did you know completely harmless green ink can be made from Way Willow oil and Fern Crab shell? Well, now the printer knows, and my prognostication is that his son will never forget it if he’s no duffer like you. Anyway, after all that, I didn’t have time to take stock of my study. There’ll be no end of cleaning to do.”

“I’d offer to help but you’ve never asked me to visit your laboratory before.”

“My laboratory is no place for the light-fingered, even if there’s nothing left of it.”

“Why hark back to that again? I’m straight as an arrow since I’m in honest employ.”

“Rolling oak caskets for a brewer who is always in his cups? High time you started looking up.”

Modest did so. Floating overhead, blotting out the stars, a whale of a demon basked. Luminous swathes of ectoplasm and ectenic slime trailed from its belly and dissipated off into bright, levitating ribbons that took flight of their own accord then fled, fading into the murk.

Modest clutched the sides of the boat. The fell creature seemed about to descend on them, regardless of the wizard's protection. "What is that? Can't you send it away?"

"No I can't. Not this night. It is not strictly speaking a demon, more of a wild beast. Intelligent, mind you. They dwell in the dark lands, so men associate them with panoply of demonkind. Indeed, they are apt to cause suffering, like a man treading heavily amongst beetles. When slain, though that is hard to achieve, much can be made useful from the giant's corpse, its fluids in particular, though you need to carry a lot of pots. Some have medicinal benefits. Some are poisonous. The bones and scales are worth more than most jewels."

The creature bellowed in an even, gong-like tone that sent a ripple spreading over the water.

"What is it called?" Modest asked.

"Wizards call it an Asporg, though indeed it called out its own name just now. Never approach one without an escape plan."

"Approach one?" Modest whispered. "That's the last barmy notion I'd entertain."

Fortunately, the creature curled and returned into the drifting clouds and both Modest and Balkan let out a long breath. For a while they discussed the history of demons and the divides between worlds, the deep magic no longer known even to wizards except in tales. Modest wasn't interested in Balkan's confusing mathematical geometries, diagrams, and formulations. Much that Balkan related was repeated in folk tales and legends Modest had grown up with. He liked all the more those that departed from the counting, plotting, and deciphering of wizardry into the realm of magical journeys. Things that followed according to plan made him uneasy. Life did not turn around a beautiful sequence of pivotal moments. Aimless and continuous accidents of chance and mischance shaped and skewed his life and influenced what he looked for in stories.

A great many stories about the Demon Parade revolved around Heira, who was in fact a goddess. A home truth. It was Heira who had created the demons, yet she also protected the dead. Her dominion was the Morning World, where dead souls fled, pursued by winged nightmares. Modest didn't dare mention it to Balkan now, but he recalled lessons the old man had imparted when he was still a boy: "Of these dead souls we can know nothing for sure, but the story goes, if you arrive on her borders, in her presence you will have no memory of the life you've led." How nice it would be, Modest thought, to lie in the arms of a goddess and forget the mendicant upbringing he'd endured. Balkan explained she was also known as Lee Tam Nol, with the heart of a sun. Men had once thought to invade heaven and take

it for themselves, building a tower to the stars. Demons first arose in the world of men to defend the child goddess, but their zeal turned to hatred, so she turned them away, destined to oblivion in between worlds, till pity stirred in her heart and she gave them a world under a spell of desolation. But a part of her lands, the most remote and wild, she kept for some of the demons, and for some of the men another part, for had they not sought fiercely to come there?

“Is the Morning World real?” Modest asked.

“It is supposed to be a place one never comes back from, with an extended glowing dawn and warm, gentle shores, though how can we know that if none have ever returned? One should never fully trust accounts of things no man has himself seen. It is not scientific.”

“I’m a sworn sceptic,” Modest agreed.

“In between worlds. Wouldn’t that be a place to find oneself?” Balkan often inserted into his speech stray asides, digressions, and details, as though dredging up facts from tomes left too long in a dim inner library, surface details he might offer up to other souls to see if they were dismayed or credulous. His look was so far away that were his mind a library it must be composed of many halls. How dustily they must be stacked, with volumes human hands could not lift alone, a place for reclusive, cerebral monks bound to scholarly vows all their lives. It took a while before he spoke up. “Demons escaped the underworld, led by Tseudon the Usurper. Heira did not intervene. Tseudon would have long since conquered all and sundry, had he not fallen in love, not with Heira but with a mortal princess, Simnem of Lual. Yes, a princess of this realm. He was enchanted, struck to the core, and though he captured and defiled her, it was she who broke him. To this day Tseudon wanders the farthest underworld reaches, lost in a dream, powerless as a worm trapped in a jar, still under her enchantment. All that was long ago. Other demons have risen to take his place.”

Whatever shifts of power wracked the underworld, Heira looked down on them all. Believers undertook long pilgrimages to the edge of the known world in the hope of finding themselves closer to Heira when they died. Modest had met such pilgrims as came through the town square, but they tended to be far too aloof to treat with the likes of him. Pilgrims entered the town seldom and usually travelled together, like droves of goats. Their mission lent gravity to their steps, not lightness. This puzzled him as he watched them travel off to follow their dream. They extolled the belief that if a dead soul failed to reach Heira it would become a victim of hell, preyed upon by demons then reborn as an imp, a violent, blathering mad monster flapping its wings for all time. Helpless to recover its lost soul, it would seek to damage and ruin those of others. He’d seen enough imps to take that as a bald fact. He suspected pilgrimages would solve nothing, but he reserved final judgement as he himself had never been anywhere. He asked Balkan if he believed the pilgrims, but the wizard didn’t hear him, spluttering and coughing around his blunt. Modest

elected not to press him with more questions. The pilgrim in white on the bridge hadn't looked like he had any answers.

Balkan fussed with the mess of tackle and rope in the bottom of the boat, looking for something and inspecting everything else. Their amiable conversation had run out, like the night. Chilly pre-dawn fog drifted in over the city wall and rose off the river. The shapes it created were more pleasant than the shapes it concealed. Bent forward, Balkan threw some rusted chain links into the water without looking. He looked just like a drizzled fisher stuck in the reeds. Curiously absent-minded, Balkan lifted a jar filled with river ooze. "Oh, I'd forgotten all about you." It had been wedged in a coil of rope, even Balkan couldn't remember how long. He held the green glass up to the light and peered at it. After a moment, something stirred in the half-frozen muck. He fished it out with two fingers and clutched it as it struggled.

"Look Modest, a creature with no teeth, no eyes, no bones, no belly, no blood, no brain. Granted it should never suffer a dearth of mud to get about in, it eats mud and shits mud and lives forever, until eaten. Inevitably that is always the case." He tipped the jar overboard to let the worm go. It coiled over the side of the boat blindly, without a splash.

Modest yawned from being up all night and relit his smoke.

"But for that they may cover the world," Balkan muttered to himself.

Behind them the bushes shook and branches cracked. Modest's heart leapt in his mouth. Balkan turned fluidly and stood in the boat. "Trouble us not for we are protected, demon," he announced. "Do not linger here."

He was about to push the boat off from the rock, the parted reeds below waiting till they departed, ready to rise back up. Modest shrank back, but from behind the shrine, with unconcerned ease, a fox emerged, a type whose large ears tapered up into drifting whiskers and whose chin was similarly bearded white. At eye level with Balkan it merely lowered its beautiful head then turned and paced back into the copse of trees.

"What a rare specimen. It can't live here," Balkan said. "There must be a hole in the wall." He grabbed an oar and jabbed it into the river bank to help him climb ashore.

"A fox hole? Why are we going there?" Modest gripped the sides of the rocking jolly boat.

"Tonight was Demon Parade. Now it's near on dawn. An auspicious time." Throwing a rope around a stone to tether the boat, Balkan climbed up to the shrine. A broken sculpted figurine leered up at him, and he grimaced back at it, then found his feet.

"Dawn?" Modest complained. "It's never so early." He followed for fear of being left alone in the boat.